

# The Journal of the Georgia Philological Association

Volume 8

## **philology** noun

phi·lol·o·gy | \ f-lä-l-j also f- \

Definition of philology

1: the study of literature and of disciplines relevant to literature or to language as used in literature

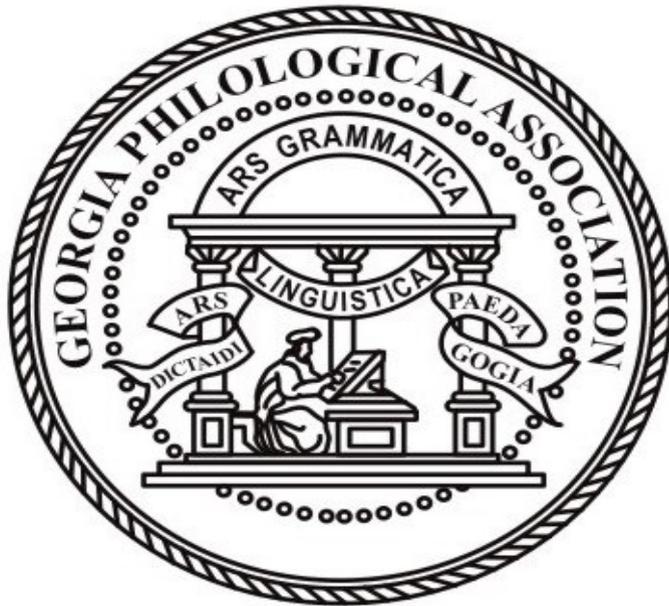
2a: LINGUISTICS

especially : historical and comparative linguistics

b: the study of human speech especially as the vehicle of literature and as a field of study that sheds light on cultural history (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary*)

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## Foreword

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*From the GPA President...*

I am honored to once again be serving as president of the Georgia Philological Association (GPA) for the 2018-2019 academic year and to be writing the forward to the latest edition of our peer-reviewed journal. That my colleagues chose to elect me to this office for an unprecedented third term is deeply humbling and a challenge to me as president to reflect on the ways in which the GPA is serving its membership and the academy at large. That desire to understand the role of the GPA in both the regional and national academic communities inspires me to refer back to the framework created by our founding members.

According to the 2006 Constitution of the GPA: “The Georgia Philological Association exists for the purposes of exploring and exchanging ideas within the field of philological studies,” and “membership shall be open to students, teachers, scholars, and creative artists in the field of philological studies.” These mandates in the founding documents of the GPA define us as an organization devoted to high-quality scholarship within a broad category of interests; they also establish our commitment to creating opportunities for social and professional networking as well as opportunities to mentor the next generation of scholars. What sets the GPA apart from many other academic organizations in the humanities (outside of the affordability and accessibility of our conference for Georgia teachers and scholars) are the rigorous, blind peer review all submissions to our journal undergo and our willingness to showcase the voices of burgeoning scholars.

Many of our long-time members use the GPA as an avenue for teaching their undergraduate and graduate students about the conventions of scholarship: How do I write an abstract? A conference paper? How do I correspond with a conference organizer or the editor of a journal? How do I present my ideas successfully to a body of my academic peers? How do I revise a conference paper for publication? How do I submit that revised piece for publication, and how do I handle the gamut of responses I might receive from an editorial board regarding my work? These are questions that many graduate students

don't begin to address until they are entering the job market, and many undergraduate students don't address them at all in the course of their undergraduate studies. The GPA is relatively unique in that it accepts conference presentation and article submissions from the entire spectrum of the academy—from those students who are just beginning their scholarly journeys to seasoned, full professors at prestigious institutions.

Although I think the benefits to emerging scholars of this aspect of our organizational mission are very evident, I also think the positive effects on those of us whose positions in the academy are firmly established cannot be ignored. Students bring fresh perspectives to texts with long histories in the canon; they don't know how these texts are “supposed” to be read, and so can offer novel ways of interpreting them. Students also clamor for the scholarly treatment of more recently published and more diverse texts, leading to the expansion of the canon. Perhaps more importantly, when we teach students how to navigate the academy, we come to understand more fully the professional and theoretical foundations of our own scholarly work. I am proud that the GPA includes students in our definition of scholar and look forward to more contributions from undergraduate and graduate students to the conference and journal.

The thirteenth annual conference of the GPA was held on May 18, 2018, at the Conference Center on the Macon campus of Middle Georgia State University. At this meeting, we awarded Sara Selby a lifetime membership in the GPA for her role in founding the organization and her continued support of GPA's scholarly enterprise. We also awarded the Vicki Hill Memorial Graduate Recognition Award to Daniel Pendleton for his paper “Objectification and the Cost of Being Exotic in Aphra Behn's ‘Oroonoko.’” Presentations covered a wide range of topics, including race, pedagogy, class, gender, and setting; they investigated a variety of genres, including poetry and prose, and they took the audience all over the globe and throughout time—from Victorian England to the Andes Mountains to France during the Napoleonic Wars. These presentations represent the superior scholarship currently conducted in Georgia and in the surrounding Southern states. Many of these presentations have been expanded and now appear in this volume of the *Journal of the Georgia Philological Association*.

As I write this foreword, I am making conference preparations for 2019. I am eagerly anticipating reuniting with old friends and meeting new acquaintances at our fourteenth annual meeting. I am excited to discover what our membership has been researching this past year and to hear innovative, new analyses of literature, film, and language. I predict that 2019 will usher in a year of continued growth, collegiality, and intellectual productivity for the members of the GPA. I am grateful to be taking part in it.

Dr. Lorraine Dubuisson  
President  
Georgia Philological Association

## Introduction

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*From the Editor ...*

This year's edition of the *JGPA* (Vol. 8) shows the growth of the Georgia Philological Association, as it is the largest volume published in recent years. The volume is also laudable for the breadth of topics covered – from Hemingway and Paganism to Dickinson and Theodicy, and from the medieval beginnings of science fiction to a digital, post-humanist connection to *The Pilgrim's Progress*. The articles within this issue offer new perspectives to some classic literature and familiar literary giants and bring needed light to some less-heralded works.

Beyond the breadth of this volume of the *Journal*, many of the articles included here recall Freud's definition of the "uncanny": making the familiar strange. In fact, Anca Garcia, author of the first article, "*Beowulf* and the Idealization of the Comitatus," quotes Andrew Bennet and Nicholas Royle as stating, "Great works call to be read and reread while never ceasing to be *strange* [emphasis mine], to resist reading, interpretation, and translation." This sets the stage well for the rest of the articles in this iteration of the *JGPA*.

In addition to Garcia, Eric Sterling also explores the familiar *Beowulf* tale in his "Slaying Monstrosity: The Undermining of the Heroic Ideal and the Monstrous in the *Beowulf* Legend," which demonstrates that the last word regarding this ancient verse narrative has yet to be written.

Further, a veritable roll call of celebrated (and "familiar") authors are discussed in new (and maybe strange) ways in several of the articles. For instance, Lay Sion Ng takes an unconventional look at Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Vicki Collins discusses the insatiable appetites of Tennessee Williams, Matthew Sivils looks deeper at Whitman, Mark DeStephano investigates Dickinson, and Josh Temples critiques the concept of "womanish" behavior in Shakespeare's *Henry IV*.

Other articles connect modern concepts to past times and bring to critical light some less-familiar works. Kathleen Burt looks at connections between science fiction and medieval genres, Dave Buehrer discusses neo-realism in Russell Banks's recent novel *Lost*

*Memory of Skin*, and Jason Huddleston highlights the not-as-canonical fictions of Native American author N. Scott Momaday in “At the Edge of the Void: An Existential Reading of Mixedblood Identity in Momaday’s *House Made of Dawn* and *The Ancient Child*.”

We are pleased with the breadth, depth, “uncanniness,” and especially the overall quality of this publication, and would like to thank both our contributors for their tireless research and writing toward perfecting these articles, and our membership for sponsoring our print run of the journal. It is continually our sincere hope, endeavor, and belief that the research preserved here adds to the body of literary criticism on the respective authors, works, and genres covered in meaningful and insightful ways.

Dr. Farrah R. Senn

Editor-in-Chief

*Journal of the Georgia Philological Association*

# Beowulf and the Idealization of the *Comitatus*

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Anca Garcia

University of South Florida

## The Difficulties of Interpretation

*Beowulf* has long been, as Hugh Magennis describes it, “the most celebrated Old English poem,” a permanent part of the Western canon (qtd. in Saunders 93). That is why it “has prompted, by far, the most intensive study” and continues to be read fervently by new generations of readers (Fulk and Cain 194). Its unique fascination comes from the fact that, as Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle observe, masterpieces in general and *Beowulf* in particular “are works that give a sense of having been spirited up, of working by themselves. Great works call to be read and reread while never ceasing to be strange, to resist reading, interpretation, and translation” (186).

However, this strangeness and resistance against one-sided interpretations has led to some categorization problems and to many controversies. Dorothy Whitelock, for example, decries the complex problems that arise because the poem was written such a long time ago. She considers that the poem “is far removed from us in time, so that we are not entitled to assume without investigation that the audience in the poet’s day would be moved by the same things as we are” (280). In addition, Whitelock asserts, other difficulties emerge because “much of the poem is composed through a subtle technique of allusion, reminder, and suggestion,” and we cannot guess the meanings behind them unless “we know something of the meaning and associations [the poet’s] hints and allusions carried to those for whom he composed his poem” (280). In turn, James B. Kelley believes that “part of the challenge for the modern reader comes from the works having been written over a thousand years ago in an early, very different form of English,” and he considers that poetic conventions such as alliterative verse or kennings contribute to the impression of strangeness the poem often instills in its readers (132). Following this same line, in her article “*Beowulf*: A Poem in Our Time,” Gillian R. Overing claims that it is almost impossible to

respond to what she calls “the challenges of [the poem’s] multivalence,” and she explains that many “beginning students of *Beowulf* are frequently puzzled [...] by the coexistence of so many disparate elements” of meaning (310-11).

Connected to the multivalence of meaning and language difficulties caused by the passing of time, several other aspects of the poem have made the center of critical disputes over the years. One is the problem of its dating – *Beowulf* survived in a manuscript believed to be written about the year 1000, but, as Daniel Anlezark affirms, “there is no doubt that the poem was composed well before this copy, though there is considerable debate as to *how* long before” (qtd. in Saunders 142). In addition, Anlezark continues, “it also appears that *Beowulf* may have gone through some revisions in the process of transmission, leaving us with evidence variously dating the poem anywhere between 700 and 950” (142). This difficulty of dating the original poem is important when we take into consideration another source of polemic among scholars: the coexistence in the text of the Germanic heroic code with Christian elements. While earlier scholars used to deem the latter as inconsequential additions, recent critics have acknowledged their importance in the society that created or performed the earliest versions of the poem. Fulk and Cain believe, for instance, that this coexistence of two contrasting strains – the “military culture of the Germanic peoples who invaded Britain in the fifth century and the Mediterranean learning introduced by Christian missionaries from the end of the sixth” – is a more general characteristic of the entire Anglo-Saxon culture (Fulk and Cain 2). Peggy A. Knapp, Holly M. Wendt, and Dorothy Whitelock also refuse to speak in terms of contrasts. Knapp in her turn writes that the “fracture between its [i.e., the poem’s] Germanic/heroic spine and Christian evocativeness” does not truly exist (84). In fact, “the hero’s courage and wisdom pre-figures the courage and wisdom of Christ” (Knapp 84). Wendt uses Gayatri Spivak’s terms to argue that in *Beowulf* the Christian element is seen as “appropriating and colonizing the values of the pagan *comitatus* for its own goals, and drawing strength from deliberately embracing – and subverting – the disadvantaged position” (40). Whitelock goes further and declares that, although we cannot disprove with certitude the existence of a heathen *Beowulf*, “the author who was responsible for giving the poem the general shape and tone in which it has survived” and his intended audience were definitely Christian (280). It is very clear,

therefore, Whitelock goes on, that “the Christian element is not merely superimposed,” and that “it permeates the poem” in its entirety – from its imagery to its metaphors (281).

Finally, among the multitude of problematic aspects usually discussed in connection with *Beowulf*, another important one is represented by its classification. Some classify it as a “historical poem (due to the incorporation of many real-world events into the narrative)” (Kelley 133). Others, like Stanley B. Greenfield, consider it a “combination of the heroic and elegiac,” and note that passages such as “The Lament of the Last Survivor” create a contrast between the “former days of earthly wealth and glory with the present decline of the speaker’s nation” (227-29). W. P. Ker decides to abandon the heroic dimension completely and writes instead that “the impression of reality and weight [...] makes *Beowulf* a true *epic* poem – that is, a narrative poem of the most stately and serious kind” (26). Ker’s opinion is shared by one of the most important translators of the poem, Kevin Crossley-Holland, who also labels it as “epic” in his 2009 anthology *The Anglo-Saxon World*. Finally, Kelley regards it as a quest narrative, while critics such as Corinne Saunders and Scott Gwara admit the impossibility of categorization. As Gwara notes:

*Sui generis* in length, structure, action, versification, and diction, the work confounds standards that attend most readings of Old English poetry and figuratively straddles every conceivable generic classification, as folktale, heroic verse, epic, elegy, saga, and the like. In other words, few native literary parallels can illuminate so distinctive of a poem. (1).

### **The Comitatus**

Despite these controversies, there seems to be a general consensus among critics that *Beowulf* is an exemplary character of exceptional strength and generosity, and, although his description is mostly fictional, the poem as a whole includes historical references that appear in other poems or chronicles of the time. As Fulk and Cain, among others, observe, the poem depicts what Cornelius Tacitus described once as the culture of the *comitatus*, in which Germanic kings or aristocrats are supported by a “war-band of retainers” who help them in battles, but who also pay them tribute in cattle or grain (3). In their turn, these leaders have to provide the

retainers with gifts – horses, arms, and feasts. This culture, Fulk and Cain continue, values loyalty and fame above all, and “it is the duty of the *comitatus* to glorify their lord by their deeds” (3).

Another interesting aspect of this world that Tacitus records is the treatment of women. Unlike Roman women who were considered second-class citizens, Germanic women play an important role in their society. As Tacitus observes, as cited by Fulk and Cain, these women are held in high esteem: they are “close at hand in warfare, and their presence serves to deter cowardice, making men conscious of their honor” (6). Women are *freothu-webbe*, or “peace-weavers,<sup>1</sup>” as many times marriages bring peace between rival tribes. They are valued for their advice or their prescience and, opposite to Roman customs, in marriage it is the man who has to bring a dowry to the wife. Therefore, examples in Old English poetry reveal that the model “wife should be generous with gifts, kind to those under her care, cheerful, trustworthy with secrets, courteous in the distribution of mead, and she should advise her husband well” (6).

Loyalty and good advice, however, do not always ensure peace. In times of war, the members of the *comitatus* have to fight assiduously and make sure that their lord is protected. Two of the basic tenets of the code, John M. Hill notes, are “revenge obligation regarding injury or death, on behalf of kinsmen as well as for one’s lord; and fame assuring battle courage, especially if a successful outcome – battlefield victory – seems impossible” (qtd. in Wendt 39). In the same fashion, as many Old English poems reveal, there is no higher disgrace for a warrior than allowing his lord to die before him, and such events are usually followed by the dreadful experience of exile.

Moreover, as Tacitus describes, death within the *comitatus* intervenes even in times of peace, during the feasts that the community frequently shares. Many times the feasts are long and, as the participants consume “a fermented drink made from barley and wheat,” they sometimes end in quarrels and manslaughter (Fulk and Cain 3). These feuds are not taken lightly, and they are always a matter of honor. The family of the slain can seek vengeance, or the killer can pay compensation to the victim’s family, a compensation called *wergild*. As many critics observe, the majority of these *comitatus* customs, including the *wergild*, are recorded in *Beowulf*, making its meanings more difficult to decipher from a modern

perspective due to the fact that these customs are no longer practiced today.

However, this glimpse in a world that is now accessible only through literature does not explain *Beowulf's* longstanding appeal, no matter how much the poem would emphasize the exceptionality of the main character as a *comitatus* leader and king. Moreover, as seen above, some critics agree that *Beowulf* is probably written for an audience of aristocratic Christians, an audience that would normally reject the rules of the *comitatus* as pagan beliefs. Indeed, there are parts in the poem that refer directly to the “hellish things” or heathen customs Hrothgar’s men perform in their attempt to make Grendel disappear (*Beowulf* 78). What, then, is the reason behind the fascination the poem still elicits in its audience, a fascination that has helped it survive centuries of an often very strict and religious Christian society? One possible answer could be that the *comitatus* has the characteristics of an ideal world, a world in which courageous lords do everything possible to protect the weak, and a world based on loyalty in which people are almost equal. In addition, this world can be found at all levels of the poem – from style and tropes to its imagery and themes – and it resembles what Gregory Claeys calls “proto-utopia,” a genre mostly present in the writings of the Greek and Roman Classical Age that glorifies a past golden era of virtue (18). Essentially, through the recreation of the Golden Age every time *Beowulf* was performed, the austere pre-Enlightenment Christian audience would have had access to an age of honor that did not contradict thematically their religious beliefs, while the modern reader is drawn to it by the heroic and the egalitarian principles constituting the foundation of the text.

## Utopia

One common feature in many utopias is their plausibility, because, as Howard P. Segal writes, “genuine utopias frequently seek not to escape from the real world, but to make the real world better” (7). Segal’s opinion is supported by Jean Servier, who notes in his seminal study *Histoire de l’utopie* that most of the times in literature, utopias take the form of social reactions promising peaceful, bright<sup>2</sup>, and planned societies. They do not attempt to shatter completely the world of their time but to offer alternatives for improvement. Moreover, Servier asserts, an analysis of the literary utopias

throughout history reveals an astonishing fact – they usually resemble the culture of the traditional citadel. They proclaim the maternal peacefulness of a world in which the individual is, paradoxically, “liberated” from her own free-will, in which she becomes again, like her ancestors in the traditional society, the prisoner of an entire array of rules and interdictions meant to protect her and keep her happy. As Servier further discusses, one reason for this resemblance is the fact that traditional society in its turn has constantly strived to build itself as a copy of the mythical plan of the universe. Hence, utopia itself, if it desires to depict what I would call a “meta-society” -- an improved version of a historical society -- needs to establish the same pattern, only this time centered almost exclusively on the achievements of humankind. Utopia is, George Claeys observes, “a harmonious society where rules enforce justice, subjects pay taxes, authority and age are revered, and ritual observance of the principles of order and the will of heaven binds society together” (5).

Another important aspect rigorously organized in ideal worlds refers to their chronology and their topography. In the most famous example of such a world, Thomas More’s *Utopia*, time and space are clearly delineated and segmented. Time becomes some sort of permanent present because it is mostly spent in leisure and, as Claeys notes, “instructive amusements, such as public lectures, frequently occupy several hours a day” (64). Moreover, its world located on an island<sup>3</sup> resembles England of the time as it is divided into fifty-four citadels, just as England was then divided into fifty-four regions. All the citadels are similar in appearance, they are “all spacious and magnificent,” and they all contain a population equally distributed (Claeys 61). The capital, obviously designed to mirror London, is fortified and serves as the *axis mundi* for the whole complex. Each city has wide streets, and it is organized into four quarters, the most important one being the shared dining hall.

Finally, since the laws of men are so important in utopias, ideal citadels share the promise of an egalitarian model, in which everyone can have access to resources. That is why in More’s *Utopia*, the social system is generally democratic, and men and women are mostly equal, everything is shared, especially meals, and mealtimes are followed by music, conversation, games, and reading. Gold and wealth are seen as unnecessary and often lose their value. Women do the cooking, assisted by slaves and children, and everyone receives plentiful supplies. The leader of *Utopia*, Claeys notes, is fully

committed to upholding simplicity and to mitigating any type of scarcity. An interesting part of this system is, however, its fundamental imperfection – crime and criminals still exist because, Claeys further remarks, Utopia “recognizes, but resists, the possibility of decadence and moral degeneration [...] [it] is not about perfectibility [...] [but] remains attainable, indeed has in some senses been attained, though the price enacted may be one many are unwilling to pay” (59). The only fear Utopians have is to be excluded or separated from this collective being. If the separation ever takes place, it is described as a reason for terrible suffering, and the individual affected by it sometimes manifests violent tendencies against the society that rejected him. Many of these characteristics can be found in *Beowulf* as well, including the fact that, similar to More’s *Utopia*, *Beowulf* also uses historical background and transforms it into art.

### **An Ideal World**

In a manner comparable to the ordered utopian meta-space, the beginning of *Beowulf* marks the entrance into the territory of literature through the abrupt and metatextual “Listen!” (or in other versions “Lo!”) addressed to the audience (*Beowulf* 74). The formula is obviously meant to direct the listener or the reader towards the stories of the famous Danish kings in Hrothgar’s lineage, especially of the noble Scyld Scefing, whose honorable deeds ensured his long-lasting recognition within his community. It might seem that we are in front of a common historical saga in which the heroic time of the Danish kings is brought back to the memory of the audience, yet the text proves anything but conventional even at this incipient point. Although one would expect a heroic poem depicting Scyld Scefing’s struggle to conquer his rivals, there is almost no description of an actual battle in this part. The text only mentions that Scefing “terrified his foes,” but otherwise he

Prospered under heaven, won praise and honor,  
until the men of every neighboring tribe,  
across the whale’s way, were obliged to obey him  
and pay him tribute. He was a noble king! (*Beowulf* 74)

Scefing’s lineage, all the way to Hrothgar, is described in an identical way – Beow of Denmark was “a beloved king, / [who] ruled long in the stronghold, famed / amongst men,” and Healfdene is

“brave [...] redoubtable, [and] ruled the noble Danes” (75). Similar to what Evelyn Reynolds observes regarding Beowulf’s journey to the mere in a later episode, “the emphasis rests [here] not on activity but on existence,” and the text consists mainly of static verbs and descriptors (46). In other words, from its very beginning, the poem transgresses the limits of a heroic or epic saga, as its focus does not revolve solely around the intense adventures of the heroes, instead becoming a philosophical meditation on the features of an ideal leader. The text transcends the limits of a historical account and acquires ideological dimensions. As the portraits of Scyld, Beow, and Healfdene prove, a hero’s fame is his most important attribute, and it is not dictated by his action, but by his honorable and noble deeds towards his society and the *comitatus*.

The first truly actional character in the text is in fact Hrothgar, who after he “won honour in war, / glory in battle, and so ensured / his followers’ support,” decides to “build a hall, / a large and noble feasting-hall” (75). On closer look, Hrothgar’s hall has many common characteristics with the geometric architecture in *Utopia*: it aims to become the center of the kingdom, the shared place that everyone – “tribes without a number, even / to the ends of the earth, were given orders / to decorate the hall” – helps to build (75). Moreover, its importance is suggested by the fact that it is even given a name, Heorot, and by the ascensional referents – “the hall towered high, / lofty and wide-gabled” – which give it the structure of an *axis mundi* (76). Thus, similar in function and structure with the dining-halls in More’s later text, Heorot is intended to be a place of communal feasting, of “merry-making,” of poetry, and of songs (76). Its entire description converges in many ways with all the ideals of community and egalitarianism in human history.

However, a problem arises at this point: as we have previously been informed, in the strict society of the *comitatus* in which common people are gift and treasure loving, the rulers establish their fame in different ways, such as through *noble deeds* that secure the protection of the citizens. The golden, decorated Heorot is, therefore, a *violation* of this rule. In fact, the hall also violates at a more general level the rules of ideal societies that usually frown upon the unnecessary display of richness. Heorot thus represents Hrothgar’s pride and his modality to gain fame to an extent illicitly. In addition, it contradicts if not a fully egalitarian model, then the rules of fair play in general.

There could be several reasons for this violation. One might be the fact that Hrothgar has aged, and he feels that his strength is abandoning him, so he can no longer fight honorably. Another could be excessive self-importance: the high tower could be perceived as an attempt to gain quick exceptionality among the Danish tribes. We can never know, but, as Peggy A. Knapp observes, the elevation of Heorot and what it ultimately symbolizes “can be appropriated by Christian thought [as well]: men build civilizations with huge beams and towering gables decorated with finely wrought gold, and their pride in accomplishment is the cause of their eventual fall” (90). Thus, the construction is destined from the very beginning, both from a Christian or egalitarian perspective and from the perspective of the *comitatus*, to create animosity among the Danes and between the Danes and forces exterior to their community, and to attract the deviant, as it is suggested in premonitory lines such as:

[...] fierce tongues and loathsome fire  
had not yet attacked it, nor was the time yet near  
when a mortal feud should flare between father-  
and son-in-law, sparked off by deeds of deadly enmity. (76)

The scene that follows is probably one of the most commented on in the poem. Grendel, “the brutish demon who lived in the darkness / [and] impatiently endured a time of frustration,” becomes attracted by the beauty and power of the hall and begins “to perpetrate base crimes” in it (76). Although some commentators, such as Leonard Neirdof, invoke metrical ambiguities and claim that the expression “seed of Cain” / “Cāīnes cynne” should be replaced with “Came cynne” – which would make Grendel the descendant of another biblical villain, Ham, son of Noah – the majority of the critics agree with the choice of the manuscript. Cain is a much more appropriate figure in the context, representative for the poem’s target audience of a more suggestive image of evil. As Dorothy Whitelock asserts, the allusion to Cain reflects the type of audience the poet had in mind from the beginning: “he was composing for Christians whose conversion was neither partial, nor superficial. He expects them to understand his allusions to biblical events without his troubling to be explicit about them” (281). In fact, the text openly indicates a recurrent theme found in many medieval works: the position of Cain as the first biblical fiend after the fall of man, making him the symbolic source for all the other monsters and exiles in literature:

He could no longer  
approach the throne of grace, that precious place  
in God's presence, nor did he feel God's love.  
In him all evil-doers find their origin,  
monsters and elves and spiteful spirits of the dead,  
also the giants who grappled with God  
for a long while; the Lord gave them their deserts. (76-77)

The incidental mention of the giants here has nothing to do with the Flood, but simply describes a lineage since, as we have seen in the case of Hrothgar and we are about to witness in the case of Beowulf, lineage carries with it the implication of belonging to a category of characters. That is, Grendel needed one, too.

The monster, therefore, is assimilated to an entire line of evil doers. On a more allegorical level, however, as Fulk and Cain note citing Jane Chance, Grendel embodies the very idea of envy, while his mother and the dragon personify pride and avarice. In other words, all the monsters in the text defy the cooperative dream of the ideal world. Nevertheless, Grendel's frustration and consequent punishment cannot be attributed entirely to his greed or temptation for treasures. After all, Hrothgar demonstrates the same characteristics, but he is not exiled as a consequence of them. Thus, what makes Grendel different from Hrothgar is the fact that he unquestionably aspires to transgress his marginality, his borderline state, and insert himself in the community of the "warrior Danes [who] lived [such] joyful lives / in complete harmony," although he was previously excluded from it (76). Similar to Cain, whom God banishes from society for his crimes, and to the exiled of *Utopia* who (as Servier suggests above) react violently when they are separated from the rest of the society, the monstrous Grendel illustrates the outcast, the "notorious prowler of the borderland, ranger of the moors," as the text stresses, who attempts to find a way back into the community in spite of his crimes (76). Hrothgar's deviation from the rules of the *comitatus*, his crime in the order of the ideal society, offers Grendel the perfect location and reason, and he is willing to take this opportunity. Hrothgar's transgression makes both of them, in a sense, consubstantial: that is why they start from now on to take turns ruling over the hall, Hrothgar during the day and Grendel during the night.

Yet, once back in the community, Grendel does not know how to behave, as the rules of the ideal citadel are foreign to him, and he becomes, as Ali Meghdadi asserts, "an affront to their collective [...]"

the proverbial individual, a consummate loner; who threatens the union of humanity” (91). As the poem further emphasizes, the community does not know how to cope with him, since his “enmity was utterly one-sided, too repulsive, / too long-lasting” (77). We witness Grendel desperately trying to surround himself with others, seizing “thirty thanes” to take to his lair, but killing them on the way (77). The same idea is present in the reference to the *wergild* that follows: “he had no wish for peace / with any of the Danes, would not desist / from his deadly malice or pay *wergild*” (79). Grendel simply refuses to follow the laws of the ideal city, and installs instead the tyranny of the unpredictable<sup>4</sup>:

But the cruel monster constantly *terrified*  
young and old, the dark death-shadow  
*lurked in ambush*; he prowled the misty moors,  
at the dead of the night; men *do not know*  
where such hell-whisperers shrith in their wanderings.  
Such were the many and outrageous injuries  
that *fearful solitary, foe of all men*,  
endlessly inflicted. (78, emphasis mine)

Even though, as we’ve seen, crime and criminals still exist in Utopia, and later Unferth is another clear example of an accepted criminal, Grendel’s behavior is too anomalous to be tolerated. Hrothgar, however, a trespasser of codes himself, is too weak or too guilty to exile him again. Hence, the necessity of an exemplary hero, one that can follow the societal codes, becomes at this point an urgency. In addition, similar to the majority of utopias, as Jean Servier notes above, this hero will come to the rescue by sea, another sign that contributes to the configuration of the poem as an ideal citadel.

Some critics have discussed Beowulf’s apparent imperfection: the fact that he seems at times, while boasting about his heroic achievements, “to succumb to pride (or its Germanic equivalent), a notorious vice inimical to Christian humility” (Gwara 1). Moreover, Scott Gwara observes, as “both a hero and a king, the potentially reckless Beowulf coexists in the same text, and often in the same verses, as the potentially generous and wise Beowulf. Judgments of the Geat’s motivation are [therefore] a matter of perspective” (2). In fact, many times in the text it appears as if Hrothgar warns the protagonist against this type of behavior in his speeches, in an effort

to appease his arrogance and “thymos” – “a quality associated with one’s personal ambition for honor and a touchy regard for its public acknowledgment,” as Gwara puts it (23). The critic goes further and compares Beowulf with a mercenary, affirming that Wulfgar, Unferth, and Beowulf belong to the category of *wrecca*, “warriors ‘forced out’ or exiled from their homelands, mostly because of rivalrous dispositions and impetuous violence” (Gwara 16).

Gwara’s theory, however, ignores the fact that Beowulf is by no means excluded from his community. In reality, part of this community, his *comitatus*, decides to follow him and fight to save Hrothgar’s citadel from Grendel’s oppression. Although he is their ruler, he treats them from the beginning as equals, asking them to follow him as a traveling team and not as his subjects, while he welcomes their encouragement and advice: “Dear to them though he was, they encouraged / the warrior and consulted the omens” (79). Moreover, when Beowulf enters Hrothgar’s kingdom, he does it, as the Danish watchman points out, in a very “open manner,” following diligently, in other words, the rules of Danish society. This idea is also clear upon the arrival at the court when, in a modest fashion, Beowulf does not flaunt the fact that he has come to save Heorot, but asks Hrothgar for guidance instead: “We have sailed across the sea to seek your lord, / Healfdene’s son, protector of the people, / with most honorable intentions; give us guidance!” (80). This is why, towards the end of his arrival ceremony, it becomes very obvious that he has earned everyone’s trust, including that of Wulfgar, Hrothgar’s closest counselor.

Beowulf’s civility is reflected not only in the modality by which he introduces himself, but also in his fights. What has again been viewed as a manifestation of his condescension – his refusal to use weapons during the battles – is in fact a more profound understanding and respect for his rivals. Beowulf *knows* that Grendel does not adhere to the societal rules because he has never learned them: “despite his fame for deadly deeds, / he is *ignorant of these noble arts*” (91, emphasis mine). He does not want to create an unfair advantage for himself. Moreover, he only kills the monster during a second encounter, after the fight with Grendel’s mother, the text suggesting to some extent that the exile at the beginning would represent a fair punishment in an ideal society that wants to be tolerant even with its outcasts. The only principled reasons to proceed to a more definitive solution from the beginning would be persistence

in malice, as in the case of Grendel's mother, or someone's attempt to endanger the ideal society, as happens with the dragon.

Another proof that Beowulf and his men embody the citizens of the "solar-ideal" citadel described by Servier is that they are seen in many of the passages in the text as carriers of light. Even if the poem does not contain any physical descriptions of the protagonist and of his *comitatus*, it repeatedly reiterates their luminous nature in relation to their armor. For example, as the poet records, they wear "gleaming armor" and "flashing shields," with "the boar crest, brightly gleaming," adorning their helmets, which in turn "are plated with glowing gold." So is "the shining chain-mail" of their corslets gleaming (79-82). The brightness traverses the entire text and never abandons the hero: sometimes it follows him -- "light came from the east, [as] God's bright beacon" -- while other times it guides him, as is the case during the fight with Grendel's mother when "his head was guarded by the gleaming helmet, / which was to explore the churning waters," or even comes to his aid, as we see in the last episode during the slaying of the dragon, when Wiglaf's sword is described as "gleaming and adorned" (88, 110, and 142). Sometimes this light emphasizes the dimension of the hero as a warrior of God: after Grendel's mother is killed, her den is transformed in a celebration of light: "a light gleamed; the chamber was illumined as if the sky's bright candle were shining from heaven" (113). The detail is not incidental because, Jean Servier notes, light is a suggestion of the ideal city's superior organization, of its solar<sup>5</sup> and positive nature. Therefore, as long as he continues to represent this light, Beowulf will remain an exemplary figure, defying any critical attempt to categorize him otherwise.

On the other hand, the text contains references to another type of light which, in contrast with the brightness of the first, represents the malignant light of evil and greed. Evil is the gleaming of gold in Heorot defying the Christian or utopian self-restraint, and that is why it attracts Grendel's envy. Grendel himself, a monstrous creature of darkness who hates the light of day, has "a horrible light, / like a lurid flame" flickering in his eyes (92). The same light catches the hero's eye in the mother's lair, when it is unclear whether this light belongs to her or to her son: "a light caught his eye, / a lurid flame flickering brightly" (11). Finally, when the dragon emerges from his cave, we

are told that he can make the light of day disappear in order to replace it with his own:

Then daylight failed  
as the dragon desired; he could no longer  
confine himself to the cave but flew in a ball  
of flame, burning for vengeance. (132)

Light seems to represent for the monsters in the poem a threat and an aspiration at the same time; it develops into a symbol of power or wealth they unsuccessfully attempt to control.

Certainly, Beowulf's civility at his arrival, the respect he has for his opponents, and the motif of light do not fully resolve his apparent candid arrogance in other episodes. Lines such as the ones describing how Beowulf was advised to help Hrothgar by men who knew of his "great strength" and of the way he once "destroyed five, / a family of giants" seem to indicate, as some critics have noted, his resemblance with the "ambivalent personality of the Germanic 'hero'" who is "always glorious, fearless, and solitary on the one hand; [and] potentially spiteful, vain, barbaric, even murderous, on the other" (Gwara 22). This Germanic notion would contradict, therefore, not only his image as an egalitarian leader, but also the Christian ideal of humility, and would transform the hero into an imperfect character, more heathen than Christian, and a negative example for the Christian audience. However, many elements in the text stand against such an interpretation, especially the fact that, apart from a few formulas that connect the idea of fate with God's will, and the episode in which the poet decries the "sacrifices to the idols" performed by Hrothgar's men, the poem does not seem to be especially devoted to any religious theme (78). Its didacticism refers to something else – to the literary recreation of a better world which has already vanished, set as an example for the poet's contemporaneity. Moreover, Beowulf's boasts are interestingly enough not voiced post-battle, when in fact he is usually very reserved about his achievements, as the story he tells Hygelac upon his return suggests. Far from being centered on the self, the version of the story his "prince" hears contains digressions, such as the one involving Hrothgar's daughter, Freawaru, and Ingeld of the Heathobards, or the description of Hondscio's terrible death. When Beowulf finally talks about the actual fight, he hesitates to portray himself as a hero, and offers Hygelac the credit for the outcome:

It would take too long to tell you how I repaid

that enemy of men for all his outrages;  
but there, my prince, I *ennobled your people*  
with my deeds. Grendel escaped,  
and lived a little longer; but he left  
behind at Heorot his right hand; and, in utter  
wretchedness, sank to the bottom of the lake. (126)

It is then safe to say, then, that Beowulf's so-called "boasts" / *beot* reflect something different than pure arrogance. As Peggy A. Knapp observes following John M. Hill, these boasts exhibit "a public, almost ritualistic tone" that resembles "a culturally sanctioned legal promise" (92). They do not indicate hubris or personal instability, "but a solemn vow to enact in battle the strength and courage being claimed" (92). Earl R. Anderson further attributes the boasting to what he calls "symbolic politics" and concludes that, together with gestures such as gift-giving, drinks being served by queens, and the funeral customs at the beginning and the end of the poem, they belong to the demonstrative behavior associated with such politics. They are marks of the court protocol, signs once again that Beowulf follows the societal laws. Such "demonstrative behaviors," adds Anderson, "are often negotiated or planned in advance, especially in political contexts" (201). In Anglo-Saxon times, they "were staged in public settings, but the negotiations that preceded them took place in council, or in private meetings. An example of that is Wulfgar's advice to Hrothgar" and their common decision to receive Beowulf at the court (204). Therefore, the hero's boasting becomes in this context a symbolic gesture, one meant to promise that the hero will do everything in his power to help. His claim, after all, does not come with the guaranty of victory. Beowulf is well-aware that he might die. His only demand, in the context of this symbolic politics, is that if he dies in battle, his "coat of mail" and the corslet that protects his chest and that once belonged to Hrethel be sent to Hygelac, his lord, as an ultimate token of his loyalty. From the perspective of the *comitatus*, there cannot be a more honorable gesture than this. In other words, as paradoxically as it may seem in the light of the humility topos, these "boasts" prove once more the nobility of the protagonist.

Beowulf and his warriors are not the only ones in the text that follow the strict rules of traditional courtesy. Wealhtheow represents such a character, too. Her role, although allegedly minor, proves to be

of extreme importance from both the perspective of the *comitatus* in which women were “peace-weavers” and advisers, and from the perspective of the egalitarian model in ideal societies. As two of the key moments in the text demonstrate, she is not just an adviser: she is at a deeper level the defender of the rules of the citadel. She is Hrothgar’s equal and, in a subtler sense, the one who establishes the hierarchies in the Danish society by carrying the cup to the warriors. First, in the moment when the hero finishes his politically-symbolic promise, we see Hrothgar’s queen majestically coming forward and sealing an agreement between the Danes and the hero that would not dishonor her husband:

Wealththeow came forward,  
mindful of the ceremonial – she was Hrothgar’s queen;  
adorned with gold, that proud woman  
greeted the men in the hall, then offered the cup  
to the Danish king first of all. (89)

She also plays a role, however, in what could have become Hrothgar’s second deviation from the strict rules of traditional society: the moment when, after the battle against Grendel, Hrothgar recklessly decides to make Beowulf his son. As we have seen in the case of the monster, the second transgression is considered a mark of evil; it is equivalent to a moment of hubris. It seems that in order to avoid any future dangers to his power, Hrothgar is capable of breaking Scyld Scefing’s lineage and of transforming his sons into commoners. Beowulf does not reply in the heat of the moment – he knows that the laws of civility would prevent him from either rejecting or accepting the offer. We witness instead his account of the battle, an ingenious way to avoid any definite answer. The true answer belongs to Wealththeow, who comes and defends her sons, reminding her husband that they are the true descendants of the Danish kings. She speaks frankly to Hrothgar in front of all the participants at the feast, in a fashion which leaves no doubt over their relative equality:

I am told you intend to adopt this warrior,  
take him for your son. This resplendent ring-hall,  
Heorot, has been cleansed; give any rewards  
while you may, but leave this land and the Danish people  
to your own descendants when the day comes  
for you to die. (103)

As the poem further hints, Hrothgar’s second mistake foreshadows the destruction of his line and Hrothulf’s betrayal, but from the

perspective of the ideal society, it allows the hero and Wealhtheow to prove once more their exemplarity.

In the context of the ideal society of the *comitatus*, gifts also acquire meta-signification because they are no longer simple objects: they become demonstrative behavior themselves, tokens of the giver's generosity. Gift-giving appears, Earl R. Anderson asserts, seven times in *Beowulf*: it begins with the feast after Grendel's renewed exile, when both Hrothgar and Wealhtheow present Beowulf with treasures. It continues with the "gift" Beowulf offers Hrothgar upon his return from the fight with Grendel's mother – the head of the monster. The gesture is reciprocated in the form of the twelve treasures Hrothgar gives Beowulf before he leaves Denmark. The fifth time gifts are exchanged in the text occurs on the way back to the ship when Beowulf offers "a sword round with gold / to the ship's watchman," and this moment is followed by his magnanimous renunciation of almost all the gifts he received from Hrothgar, which he presents to Hygelac and his queen, receiving lands in return (*Beowulf* 121). Finally, the seventh gift-giving moment, Anderson remarks, occurs when "mortally wounded by the dragon, Beowulf gave his war-gear and torque to Wiglaf, his only living relative" (219). Most of these exchanges have political implications – the ones involving Hrothgar and Hygelac consolidate the protagonist's position in the wider structure of the *comitatus*. Two, however, have a special significance. One of them is the moment involving the watchman, which demonstrates, Anderson notes, Beowulf's genuine benevolent nature, as the action is not dictated by any custom. The other is the one at the end of the poem, which in Anderson's opinion represents a new allusion to the position of a king as a "ring-giver" or a "gold giver" (220). However, the part of the text preceding the offering suggests that the gift represents more than that:

And now that I have bartered my old life  
for this treasure hoard, *you must serve*  
*and inspire our people*. I will not long be with you.  
Command the battle-warriors, after the funeral fire,  
to build a fine barrow overlooking the sea;  
let it tower high on Whaleness  
as a reminder to my people.  
And let it be known as Beowulf's barrow  
to all seafarers, to men who steer their ships

from all over the swell and the saltspray. (144-45, emphasis mine)

Some would say that this scene has to do with the trope of glory as well as with its variant in the poem, “fame,” the true commodity in the world of the *comitatus*. Indeed, fame is a very important motif throughout the whole poem. Nonetheless, what is interesting about it is that it relies on story-telling, on people reflecting on the actions of other people; in other words, similarly to utopia, which involves the betterment of another world, fame is metatextual, too. It implies reflection, so it becomes the story of another story. It completes the signified represented here by a history that is only partially known. The biblical references discussed earlier in the case of the Grendelkin are also, *sui generis*, metatextual. So is the presence of Unferth, who, Ali Meghdadi believes, although “a seemingly minor character within the narrative, takes on a great significance in light of his effect upon the metanarrative that traces Beowulf’s identification as a Christian hero” (94). Unferth only speaks once in the entire poem, Meghdadi continues, but to some extent “indelibly incarnates the symbolic monster attacking Beowulf’s ego and identity” (94).

However, the most obvious metatextual episodes are the various digressions, Beowulf’s journeys, and the funeral descriptions. On one hand, they represent at times poetry about poetry, creating a *mise-en-abyme*, a textual mirror-like experience, extremely revolutionary in a text written during the first millennium, as it is the case with the moment of entertainment in the aftermath of the fight against Grendel. On the other hand, the *mise-en-abyme* persists at a more profound level – at the level of history. In *Beowulf*, the history of the Danish people is intricately woven into the texture of the poem, and both representations combined seem to determine the hero’s actions. If the digressions are suggestive for the later events in the poem or in history--for example, “the surprise attack” in the Finn digression lays the foundation for the vengeful moment orchestrated by Grendel’s mother; and, the episode with Freawaru, as Adrien Bonjour notes, is representative for “the leitmotiv of the precarious peace” (324), inexorably linked with the later downfall of the Geatish people--the funeral description at the beginning and at the end of the poem, combined with the hero’s *nostos* back to Hygelac’s court, creates an impression of repetitiveness that ultimately renders (and more than once) circularity to the poem (324). Beowulf leaves

Hrothgar's cleansed and friendly court only to become, eventually, through his own merits and fame, the ruler of his own kingdom, following figuratively, in another land, the lineage of the great Danish kings evoked in the first part of the text. The image of the barrow containing the protagonist's ashes together with "rings and brooches" and other adornments, surrounded by mourning warriors, also echoes perfectly Scyld Scefing's funeral in the beginning of the poem. In fact, the only major difference is the modality in which the lineage is perpetuated: since Beowulf does not have an heir, he entrusts his kingdom in his final moments to Wiglaf, as seen in the suggestive episode cited above. Wiglaf is, therefore, supposed to continue "to serve and inspire" the people because this is the only way the now-idealized world of the *comitatus* will survive in the collective memory (*Beowulf* 144).

What is, however, the more profound significance of this circularity? Why does the text assure us that the lineage of the famous but childless hero is perpetuated? How does this continuation adhere to the beliefs of the Christian audience? It seems that this is the point where the talent of the Beowulf poet becomes the most manifest. He manages to create a world that speaks to any type of audience at any time because it values morality, generosity, nobility, equality, and fame above all else. These values create an ideal ethos that remains vivid over time. Moreover, the world contained in *Beowulf* is never subversive, as it is not preoccupied with an escape from the real world, but with the possibility to improve it by returning to an idealized past. Additionally, Beowulf and Wiglaf are plausible characters, preoccupied with the prosperity and protection of their lord and of their subjects, and, therefore, possible role models across time. This suggests that whenever the poem is performed, their exemplary status will provide the audience with a sense of historical stability in an otherwise fragmented world.

The circularity of the poem thus acquires a deeper signification: it is a sign that the poem encompasses a world that would be otherwise lost if it were not for the art that preserves it and revives it every time the poem is performed or read. The *comitatus* lives on, and, as long as its posterity is ensured symbolically through Wiglaf, it becomes accessible again. As Evelyn Reynolds asserts: "[T]he poem raises us from normal sequential time into suspension, giving the illusion of an escape from transience and participation in

*permanence*” (55, emphasis mine). This permanence exemplifies, at a more general level, the trope of time in ideal societies.

Although aspects such as classification, dating, and interpretation have frequently allowed scholars to claim that *Beowulf* is a difficult poem, too complex for modern readers because of the cultural differences created by time, the text’s difficulty resides in its metatextual character, in its capacity to incorporate elements of history, features of the Germanic code of honor, and Christian beliefs and to transform them into a more general image of an ideal society that manages to fascinate readers across eras. Following the lineage of the ancient utopias decrying the loss of a golden age and preceding the modern ones hoping for the betterment of the world, *Beowulf* represents the constant human nostalgia for an idealized traditional world, with just laws and honorable heroes protecting the community in a fair and open manner. With every reading we become part of that world, we appropriate the values of its hero, and we participate in a *mise-en-abyme* of meaning that connects us with the original function of literature: the ritualistic creation of worlds.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>The term *freothu-webbe* used by Fulk and Cain represents an object of dispute among critics. However, as the dispute does not constitute an important aspect of my thesis, I decided to use it in this context.

<sup>2</sup>In fact, Servier calls Utopia a “city of the Sun” (116).

<sup>3</sup>That is why, Servier asserts elsewhere, almost all utopias involve sea traveling (249).

<sup>4</sup>Which contrasts not only the Christian element in which the sense of recurring morality dictates human life, or the *comitatus* code of behavior that requires rulers to protect their subjects, but also the strictly organized ideal society.

<sup>5</sup>As mentioned above, Servier notes that many early utopias were “solar-centric.”

<sup>6</sup>The French first edition was published in 1979 and the second in 1991. It can be found at: <https://www.amazon.fr/Histoire-lutopie-Jean-Servier/dp/2070326470>.

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# Harmonious Relationships in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*: A Pagan Spiritual Approach

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## 1. Introduction

Pagan spirituality serves as one of the central themes in Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. However, this aspect has not been fully explored.<sup>1</sup> Focusing on this, this paper encourages the reader to see androgyny as an archetype<sup>2</sup> in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. In the novel, this aspect reveals itself in the androgynous characterization of Maria, Pilar, and Jordan, and also in the spiritual androgynization of Maria and Jordan at the end of the novel. Furthermore, this paper argues that keywords such as sexual-spiritual union, harmony, as well as androgynous wholeness are crucial to the theme as these represent the ultimate goal of all forms of relationships in the novel.

In "Androgyny: The Pagan Sexual Ideal," Peter Jones analyzes ancient pagan notions all over the world and concludes that androgyne represents the pagan sexual ideal (443).<sup>3</sup> As to the meaning of androgyny, a common definition in terms of gender and sexuality is "the embodiment of an identity defined through usually same-sex sexual orientation and/or cross-gender identification, an emblem (or fantasy) of a behavior where positive traits, identified as masculine and feminine, work harmoniously in a single individual" (Hargreaves 3). Similarly, Sakenya McDonald regards androgyny "as a way of embracing change, eliminating conflict, and defining identity" (1). Moreover, Lyman Allen claims that "androgynous balance is an unrecognized, basic drive common to all mankind," as it means "the balancing of the mental and feeling energies that are common to all" (72). Hence, in a spiritual sense, androgyny is constructed with the harmonization of masculine-feminine energies.

The association between Hemingway and androgyny can be traced back to Hemingway's androgynous childhood experiences. The young Hemingway was dressed like his older sister Marcelline by his mother Grace Hall Hemingway when he was a toddler.<sup>4</sup> Following this, Mark Spilka in *Hemingway's Quarrel with Androgyny* claims

that the cross-gender as well as the cross-sexing experiments in *The Garden of Eden* represent Hemingway's psychic "wound of androgyny" during his childhood (222). However, from a postmodernist viewpoint, this background serves as a way to deconstruct the oppressive heterosexual normativity and the dualistic masculine-feminine dichotomy in Western society and offers an alternative to it. For instance, Mauricio D. Aguilera Linde argues that Hemingway's biography collapses his image as an "icon of monolithic masculinity" and allows critics to "read his texts as containing a plurality of constructing gender identities" (15). Here, "plurality" stands for "the fluidity of values and practices which cannot be nailed down in a dual system" (Aguilera Linde 22).

Drawing on the arguments above, the first section of this paper explores the love relationship between Jordan and Maria, suggesting that through multi-layered forms of meditation, Jordan and Maria become fully cultivated in terms of spirituality. This leads to the conclusion that the couple's symbiotic state of spiritual androgynization serves as a means to transcend the destructiveness of war and death. The second part of the paper proposes that the androgynous Pilar represents the embodiment of pagan spirituality. Her androgynous qualities, shamanistic ability, and power in using storytelling exercise insightful influences on Jordan's perceptions toward the natural principle and human condition in this world.

## **2. Jordan and Maria as the Embodiment of Spiritual Androgyne**

Set in a compressed version of psychological time, the whole four-hundred-seventy-one pages of Hemingway's text cover only three-and-a-half days, following the American Robert Jordan, a Spanish professor from the University of Montana, who receives a mission from the Spanish Republican side to blow up a Fascist-controlled bridge with the assistance of Spanish guerrillas hiding in the mountains at the height of the Spanish Civil War. The novel unfolds with the development of a sexual-spiritual unity between Jordan and Maria, a young Spanish woman who cooks for the band of guerrillas. The story then ends with the couple's realization of the spiritual values of love, life, and death. During this process, the couple has engaged deeply in multi-dimensional forms of meditation. These include three instances of sexual-spiritual interactions, the

recollection of Maria's traumatic past, and utopian talk regarding the couple's future married life in Madrid.

Prior to this process, Jordan is first attracted by Maria's androgynous qualities, as the reader realizes that it is not only Maria's feminine "up-tilted breasts," but also her "handsome brown hands," her "brown face," and her "golden tawny brown" eyes that attract Jordan (*FWTBT* 22). Referring to Maria's androgynous representation, Florica Bodistean claims, "[s]he is a solar being, having both the warmth and the power of the sun. She is delicate but strong, sensitive but determined" (289). This description thus highlights Maria's androgynous traits as having both the energies of masculine-solar and feminine-earth. Furthermore, Maria's association with spirituality is emphasized through Jordan's calling her his "rabbit" (70). As Lawrence R. Broer notes, a rabbit is the totem animal of Spain, wherein the country itself is seen as the "land of rabbits" (20). Calling Maria "rabbit" thus signifies the inherent Spanish spirituality Maria has within her. Similar to Bodistean's allusion to Maria as "Mary Magdalene," here Maria is referred to as an androgynous spiritual being (289).

Another possible reason why Jordan is aroused by Maria's androgynous characteristics is that Maria serves as the projection of Jordan's suppressed femininity. More specifically, through Maria, Jordan comes to awaken his own unconscious feminine side that is entangled within his conscious masculinity. According to Carl Jung, each individual possesses an "unconscious opposite" side: for the male it is anima or unconscious feminine, and for the female it is animus or unconscious feminine (Stevens 71). When one is incapable of recognizing one's unconscious "other half" (Stevens 71), one becomes disconnected from one's "truly divine self," which results in a state of "spiritual slumber from which one must be awakened either spiritually or psychologically" (McDonald 12). Given the couple's contradictory sexual expressions, Jung's psychological idea seems to be a coherent explanation. During their second sexual interaction, Jordan notes:

[...] all his life he would remember the curve of her throat with her head pushed back into the heather roots and her lips that moved smally and by themselves and the fluttering of the lashes on the eyes tight closed against the sun and against everything, and for her everything was red, orange, gold-red from the sun on the closed eyes, and it all was that color, all in

a blindness of that color. For him it was a dark passage which led to nowhere [...] once again to nowhere, always and forever to nowhere [...] suddenly, scaldingly, holdingly all nowhere gone and time absolutely still and they were both there, time having stopped and he felt the earth move out and away from under them. Then he was lying on his side, his head deep in the heather, smelling it and the smell of the roots and the earth and the sun came through it. (*FWTBT* 159)

Jordan's descriptions, like "the curve of her throat" and "the fluttering of the lashes," highlight Maria's sensual feminine elements (*FWTBT* 159). When these feminine elements encounter Jordan and the sunlight, they are cultivated by Jordan's and the solar energy. This instance enables Maria to explore her own unconscious masculinity, resulting in a colorful form of sexual ecstasy. On the other hand, Jordan's experience of going through a "dark passage" indicates his discovery of his own unconscious femininity (159). Through the adoption of Maria's feminine elements and the cosmic energy from the earth, Jordan arrives at a "dark," immortal state of "forever and nowhere," whereby he feels as though he has been transported off the earth (159). Here, the couple's depiction of "the earth moved" suggests that they achieved harmony through the dynamic interchanges of masculine and feminine energies (160). "Harmony," as Roger T. Ames notes, "is the art of combining and blending two or more [elements] so that they mutually enhance one another without losing their distinctive flavors" (65). The opposition between Jordan's monotone sexual expression and Maria's colorful sexual ecstasy highlights this aspect. Furthermore, through this dynamic process Jordan comes to realize that Maria is "all of life" (204). She has the "magic" to abolish his "loneliness" by simply "touching" him, as Jordan remarks (204).

Beside the blending of feminine and masculine energies through their sexual/spiritual harmonization, Jordan and Maria further enhance their interdependency through the cultivation of air. As Raven Kaldera explains, "air is the element of mind, of ideas, of words and communication, and of stories" (3). "Relationships, too," Kaldera continues, "go through the elemental round, and they start with air" (3). In fact, the couple's exchange of ideas about their future married life in Madrid represents the appropriation of air, pushing them closer to each other, leading them toward the state of symbiosis:

“I [Jordan] am thee and thou art me and all of one is the other. [...] I will be thee when thou are not there” (*FWTBT* 262-63). They call their discussion “[t]he luxury of going into unreality” (342), and utopian conversation plays an important role in making them believe that there is still hope, especially at this particular time, whereas Pilar foresees that “we would all die tomorrow” (345). Moreover, Maria’s sharing of her gang-rape history to Jordan strengthens not only the intimacy between the couple, but also her inner confidence. This sharing of their past and future through words (cultivation of air), as well as their bodies through sexual interactions, leads Maria and Jordan to understand that they have now become “one.” As Jordan claims, “[m]aybe I have had all my life in three days” (355).

Through the cultivation of air, the couple further experiences a mystical sexual-spiritual “oneness” with their third sexual encounter, as opposed to their contradictory sexual expressions in their second act of sexual intercourse. During their third encounter, Jordan comments as follows:

They were having now and before and always and now and now and now. Oh, now, now, now, the only now. [...] Now and forever now [...] for now always one new; one only one, there is no other one but one now, soaring one, is one, is one, is one, is still one, is still one, is one descendingly, is one softly, is one longingly, is one kindly, is one happily, is one in goodness, is one to cherish, is one now on earth with elbows against the cut and slept-on branches of the pine tree with the smell of the morning of the day to come. [...] “Oh, Maria, I love thee and I thank you for this.” (*FWTBT* 379)

The repetition of keywords such as “now” and “one” in the description above indicates that what Jordan and Maria experience at the moment exists far beyond a rational explanation. From the lens of pagan spirituality, these key words are associated with the ultimate metaphysical experience of oneness, whereby “the mind-soul [is] disconnected from the limitations of the body and [...] in direct contact with cosmic spiritual unity” (Jones 447). Reflecting this notion, the description of “one only one” above implies the achievement of spiritual unity between the couple through their transcendence of the boundaries of time and space. This experience of oneness further represents a form of spiritual meditation toward self-realization. In accordance with pagan esoterism, spiritual meditation is the only path to such self-realization, a process in which all

distinctions are eliminated, “a non-rational, mystical experience of seeing oneself as the center of a circle that has no boundaries” (Jones 447). Likewise, one can argue that the sexual-spiritual union between Jordan and Maria serves as a meditative tool for what Earl Rovit calls “complete self-realization” (134). In the novel, this complete self-realization is presented through the symbolic form of spiritual androgynization, which is evidenced in the episode of final separation whereby a wounded Jordan tells Maria:

Now I thank thee for it. Now you are going well and fast and far and we both go in thee. Now put thy hand here. Now put thy head down. Nay, put it down. That is right. Now I put my hand there. Good. Thou art good. Now do not think more. Now art thou doing what thou should. Now thou art obeying. Not me but us both. The me in thee. Now you go for us both. Truly. We both go in thee now. This I have promised thee. Thou art very good to go and very kind. (*FWTBT* 464)

Even though Jordan’s main purpose is to make Maria leave him, the description above shows that Jordan has promised to give his soul to Maria and that from now on, Maria is not just Maria, but “Maria-Jordan.” As Rovit claims, “Maria [is] the vessel of Jordan’s complete self-realization; in his mergence with her, he has achieved the immortality of becoming ‘other’” (134). Symbolically, Jordan’s final self-realization is achieved through his sacrifice of his own life for the Spanish Republican cause and his rescuing of Maria from feeling guilty for leaving him behind. As for Maria, her complete self-realization is achieved through her promise to live as/for two persons for the rest of her life. In this regard, the novel does not end with the death of Jordan, but the birth of the spiritual androgyne Maria-Jordan as a psychic whole.

The creation of the Maria-Jordan androgyne is significant for two reasons. First, symbolizing the monistic quest, the model serves as a symbolic force of renewal that is opposed to the chaotic force of war, and thereby foregrounds the destructiveness of man-made war. Secondly, this androgynous creation, resulting from the harmonization of masculine and feminine qualities within each individual, can be regarded as an alternative model to the patriarchal worldview, or one which destabilizes it. In the patriarchal model, masculine form/activity is superior to feminine form/passivity. Similarly, Bodistean comments, “[t]he prevailing intimacy in

Hemingway's war novel breaks with the traditional misogynistic vision of the genre, re-creating male and female identities for which it suggests new forms of experience that differ completely from the classic forms such as activity vs. passivity" (290). Likewise, Marc Hewson concludes his analysis by claiming, "Hemingway makes a step forward in this book that indicates an increasing unease with the gender and sexual definitions available to men and women in a patriarchal society and suggests a desire to find an alternate means of self-identification through openness, commitment and love" (183). These ideas lead to the conclusion that the Maria-Jordan androgyne serves as a pagan sexual ideal that not only deconstructs the traditional gender and sexual norms, but also constructs new norms that are based on fluidity, harmony, and spirituality.

### **3. The Androgynous Pilar as the Embodiment of Pagan Spirituality**

Besides the spiritual formation of the Jordan-Maria androgyne, the androgynous archetype also serves as the reference for the creation of Pilar as character. In the novel, Pilar's androgynous characteristics are pronounced. For instance, she is "barbarous" (*FWTBT* 26) and yet "civilized" (168); she is "ugly" outside while "beautiful" inside (97); she is both a masculine "man" and "all woman" (97). Moreover, Pilar claims to have a deep connection with the primitive forces of fate. Her shamanistic abilities enable her to foresee and smell death, divine events from the palm, and interpret sexual experiences. These traits lead to the implication that Pilar embodies the earthiness, strength, and wisdom of pagan spirituality. While Pilar's feminine earthiness provides a ground for the band of guerrilla fighters to unite and for the couple to cultivate their love relationship, her insistence on the act of killing as a necessity to win the war reflects her masculine, destructive strength. In this respect, Pilar represents the androgynous archetype that causes both the creative and destructive forces underlying many of the events of the novel.

Drawing on Jones' comment that the androgynous shaman is "the embodiment of pagan spirituality," Pilar's androgynous traits and her shamanistic abilities make her a model of such (448). In the novel, Pilar's supernatural power in foreseeing deaths and other events causes Anselmo, Rafael, Maria, and Pablo to become believers in her. Even the rational Jordan, who "do[es] not believe in ogres, nor

soothsayers, not in the supernatural things,” is impressed by Pilar’s notion of time (*FWTBT* 250). This aspect is shown by Jordan’s description that “as for Pilar pushing her onto you, all Pilar did was be an intelligent woman,” followed by his realization that it is Pilar who “made things easier so that there was last night and this afternoon. She is a damned sight more civilized than you are and [...] she has certain notions about the value of time” (168). He then concludes by claiming, “[w]hen you get through with this war you might take up the study of [...] Pilar” (176). Here, Jordan wants to “study” Pilar because it is her concept of time and her pagan belief in love, represented through her pushing of Maria toward him, that change his perception toward the value of life and love, as reflected in his descriptions below:

I would like to have it [the love with Maria] for my whole life. You will, the other part of him said. You will. You have it *now* and that is all your whole life is. [...] And if you stop complaining and asking for what you never will get, you will have a good life. A good life is not measured by any biblical span. (*FWTBT* 169)

What you have with Maria, whether it lasts just through today and a part of tomorrow, or whether it lasts for a long life is the most important thing that can happen to a human being. There will always be people who say it does not exist because they cannot have it. But I tell you it is true and that you have it and that you are lucky even if you die tomorrow. (*FWTBT* 305)

Drawing on Jordan’s monologue, a good life is not determined by its length, but by the realization that nothing is permanent in this world and by the appreciation for and satisfaction of what one can now realize: love. This change in attitude in perceiving the world provides Jordan with a purpose to keep on living and exploring life. As he notes, “I find life very interesting” (*FWTBT* 381). In this sense, Jordan’s new interpretation regarding “a good life” is derived from Pilar’s pagan wisdom. Another instance of Pilar’s supernatural power can be found in her oral narration of a story. After listening to Pilar’s story about the massacre, Jordan thinks:

You only heard the statement of the loss. You did not see the father fall as Pilar made him see the fascists die in that story she had told by the stream [...] You did not see the mother

shot, nor the sister, nor the brother. You heard about it; You heard the shots; and you saw the bodies.

Pilar had made him see it in that town.

[...] God, how she could tell a story. (*FWTBT* 134)

Besides Jordan's own imaginative power, it is Pilar's strength in using fiction, in recreating the massacre through her voice, which allows Jordan to "see" and experience the events for himself. As Milton A. Cohen explains, "Pilar's story [...] becomes a testament to the power of fiction to make events more real than historical narrative can" (53). This notion expresses Pilar's shamanistic power in implanting "spirituality" into the fictional tale, making the fiction come alive.

The impact of Pilar's Loyalist massacre story on Jordan is remarkable in the sense that it provides a new insight for Jordan to perceive the war through a more unbiased perspective. As Jordan comes to realize, "[b]ecause [of] our mobility and because we did not have to stay afterwards to take the punishment we never knew how anything really ended" (*FWTBT* 135). Jordan continues: "I've always known it and hated it and I have heard it mentioned shamelessly and shamefully, bragged of, boasted of, defended, explained and denied. But that damned woman made me see it as though I had been there" (135). That is to say, through Pilar, Jordan is forced to ponder the brutality of both Loyalists and Republicans in the war: while fascists torture, rape, and kill the Republicans, they too are murdered by the Loyalists, townspeople, and landowners. This acknowledgement of both sides of the story "complicate[s] the meaning of the Spanish Civil War and remove[s] it from the simplistic realm of good (Loyalists) versus bad (fascists) and right versus wrong" (Cohen 59). This recognition further urges Jordan to wonder about the immoral paradox of war, in which he asks himself, "how many of those you have killed have been real fascists?" and answers, "[v]ery few," accepting that the rationalization of murder for the necessity of war is actually an immoral behavior based on the notion that "no man has a right to take another man's life," or that every human life is equal in value (*FWTBT* 304). Nevertheless, Jordan's responsibility as a soldier forces him to kill even if he does not want to. As a result, Jordan is stuck in the paradoxical position between human ethics and political responsibility.

Struggling with these issues, Jordan decides that he is going to write a war story that shows its many complicated sides, just as Pilar has shown him through her narrative, which indicates that it is Pilar's

oral narration of a story that provides the catalyst for Jordan's own. In a metaphorical sense, the novel itself represents a product of the cross-fertilization between Pilar, Jordan, and Maria, in that both the androgynous Pilar and Maria cultivate Jordan's creativity and sensibility. In real life, the author Hemingway gained his inspiration from several strong women, including "Gertrude Stein, Pastora Imperio, Martha Gellhorn, and even Grace Hemingway" (Guill 11). Thus, *For Whom the Bell Tolls* can be regarded as a symbolic product of Hemingway's cross-fertilization with and cultivation of these women.

Another instance that foregrounds Pilar's and Maria's impact on Jordan is the use of emotional language in their stories, as opposed to the oppressive military language used by Jordan. Pilar's statement that talking "is the only civilized thing we have" indicates that because of the war, the language of emotions is being suppressed into nothing but mechanical orders (*FWTBT* 98). This aspect is reflected in Jordan's position as a soldier, in which he claims, "[i]n war one cannot say what one feels" (301); and, "[t]here is no way to talk. Even if they [soldiers] accomplish their mission they are doing more harm than good, talking that sort of stuff talk" (*FWTBT* 21). As Jennifer Lester suggests, this desire of wanting to talk but being unable to, accompanied by the suspension of thought and the repression of feelings, depicts "war as an inhuman and mechanical construct," or an oppressive system (123). And, where there is oppression, there will be resistance. Jordan's longing for "small and regular things" (for instance, to be able to put eggs under a hen and see the chicks of the partridge in his own courtyard) serves as a lament about the war's destructiveness and the depriving of the basic happiness one can experience in daily life (*FWTBT* 367). After all, without the enlightenment of Pilar, Jordan probably would not have realized how much he had been dehumanized by this war. Pilar's androgynous sexuality, her pagan beliefs as well as her shamanistic power, along with her ability to include emotional language in storytelling, make her the ultimate embodiment of pagan spirituality in the novel.

With the instance of Jordan's death, as Rod Romesburg suggests, "[t]here is a sense of nature-inspired peace in the passage, with the stimuli of nature overwhelming his senses to the point that his heartbeat itself becomes a part of the earth" (149). However, Romesburg also notes that "though Robert Jordan reaches an

integration with the natural environment in the text's final scene, even this attempt at joining the two worlds in a harmonious order is rendered problematic;" that is, Jordan's integration "is not himself into the order of nature but an assimilation of that order into the chaos of human society," indicating that Jordan's unity with nature is incomplete since that natural order remains unconnected with the chaotic human society (139). Opposed to this is Cecilia Konchar Farr's view of Jordan's integration with nature as "unambiguous and complete" (qtd. in Meier 467). As Farr notes, "by the end of the novel, a dying Jordan has a different relationship to the land. Again lying prone, his elbows on the pine needles, this time he 'was completely integrated.' [...] And when his heart beats, it beats against the floor of the forest, mingling his life with the life of the earth" (155). For this paper, I take the death of Jordan to imply multiple layers of meaning. On one hand, Jordan's death serves as a personal redemption, whereby it aims not only for the spiritual return to "wholeness," but also for the purification of his negative feelings (guilt toward Pilar's group, hatred toward fascists, the sense of immorality derived from murdering others) that were generated as a result of the devastations of war. However, on a deeper level, Jordan's self-sacrifice for the welfare of others resembles a selfless form of salvation, seen in his fearless attitude toward death and his gratitude toward nature and for those, like Pilar's group, who have assisted and cared for him (*FWTBT* 466). It is this act of self-sacrifice that converts Jordan's death into a form of spiritual rebirth, which is reflected in the most vital scene in the novel, as his heart is beating against the floor of the forest, juxtaposed with his imminent death.

This androgynous metaphysics<sup>5</sup> resembles Lawrence R. Broer's suggestion of "Hemingway's 'doctrine of plentitude,'" the knowledge that "for every rapture there is an offsetting dread" (204). Broer explains this by underlining the creative energy (Eros) and destructive energy (Thanatos) of fire in the novel: "the creative fire of sex, food, drink, love, art – is counterposed with the killing fire of war and of loss, grief, and flux" (204). Indeed, this androgynous metaphysics serves not only as a reference to the theme, but also the character archetype of Jordan, Maria, and Pilar. While it is the androgynous Maria who guides Jordan toward the path of self-realization, that path is made accessible through the machinations of the androgynous Pilar. In this respect, Pilar serves as a more qualified embodiment of pagan spirituality when compared to Maria.

Nevertheless, without both Pilar and Maria, it is impossible for Jordan to go through self-realization and achieve salvation through the eventual spiritual unity with Maria and the earth. This leads finally to the idea that it is for the spiritual androgyne that the bell tolls.

#### 4. Conclusion

After reviewing Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, the magazine *TIME* published an article claiming, "[t]here was a feeling abroad that Hemingway was a little too obsessed with sex, a little too obsessed with blood for the sake of blood, killing for the sake of killing" (qtd. in Rothman). Certainly, without further considering the hidden reasons behind the author's obsession with sex, massacre, and death, one could have agreed with the magazine. However, if one looks at the novel in the light of the metaphysics of androgyny, one could realize that underneath these obsessive themes lies the sense of paradoxes, the blending of these paradoxical elements, and the cultivation of an androgynous wholeness. In the novel, these aspects can be found in the relationship between Jordan and Maria. Because of the war, both Jordan and Maria find themselves suffering mental distress. It is only through the mystical force of Pilar that both find the courage to form a three-and-a-half-day and yet still-lifelong relationship. Beginning from the oppositional sexual expression and ending with the creation of a spiritual androgyne, Maria and Jordan serve as living proof of androgynous wholeness, whereby one works harmoniously with another's oppositional elements, as they both embrace the plurality of identities. This celebration of spiritual androgynization, which is characterized by fluidity, harmony, and spirituality, symbolizes not only an alternative model to destabilize the patriarchal gender and sexual norms in the West, but also a force of renewal that is opposed to the chaotic force of war.

Both in the promotion of the love relationship between Maria and Jordan and the development of many other important events, Pilar serves as the one who takes control throughout the novel. In this respect, Pilar stands as the "pillar," the "spirit," or the archetype of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. In the novel, Pilar's androgynous qualities, shamanistic abilities, and her power using fiction make her the living embodiment of pagan spirituality. This interpretation can be supported through several examples: Pilar's massacre story serves as a spark for Jordan to ponder the immorality and complexity of the

war, whereby neither the Loyalists nor the Republicans are innocent of murder, and thus there is no right or wrong sides in this case; Pilar's pushing of Maria toward Jordan leads Jordan to realize that "a good life" is not defined by its actual time span, but one's appreciation and satisfaction of what one has at the present moment; and through Pilar, Jordan comes to realize that to be a soldier is to be inhuman based on the fact that emotions and expression (language, sensual thoughts, feelings) are being suppressed by the war. These realizations gained through his interactions with Pilar and Maria eventually lead Jordan toward spiritual enlightenment at the end of the novel. Encountering his own death, Jordan has no more fear, as his spirit has merged with Maria and his body with the earth. It is this fearless and selfless attitude that enables Jordan to convert death to rebirth metaphorically.

Finally, Jordan's realization of the spiritual value of love and life, as opposed to the dehumanization of the war, can only be achieved through the cultivation of Maria's androgynous traits. As to the formation of their symbiotic spiritual androgyne, Pilar's pagan spiritual influences contribute greatly to it. This leads to the understanding that an androgynous metaphysics serves as the "spirit" or the spinal cord of the novel: it not only governs the flow and fluidity of the novel's events (plot), but also juxtaposes the notions of life, love, and humanity within the context of war and death (theme) through the characterization of Jordan, Maria, and Pilar (character).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Recent works that are or can be linked to pagan spirituality include the following: Marc Hewson's "A Matter of Love or Death"; Jennifer Lester's emphasis on the natural aesthetic writings in "Reading *For Whom The Bell Tolls* with Barthes, Bakhtin and Shapiro"; Florica Bodistean's interpretation of the Jordan-Pablo-Pilar-Maria reunion in biblical terms in "Heroic and Erotic in Hemingway's War Novel"; Stacey Guill's "Pilar and Maria"; Milton A. Cohen's "Robert Jordan's (and Hemingway's) 'True Book'"; Lawrence R. Broer's "Bulls and Bells"; María DeGuzmán's "Hemingway in the Dirt of a Blood and Soil Myth"; Rod Romesburg's "Shifting Order"; Lisa Tyler's "Dead Rabbit, Bad Milk, Lost Eggs"; and Cecelia Knoch Farr's "Moving Earth," among others (see Works Cited).

<sup>2</sup>The term "archetype" is defined by Northrup Frye as "a symbol, usually an image, which recurs often enough in literature to be recognizable as an element of one's literary experience as a whole" (qtd. in McDonald 5).

<sup>3</sup>The concept of androgyny can be found in most of the ancient myths and religions. For instance, the Siberian shamans (*Chukchi*) and the shamans of Central Asia dress as androgynes during ritual activities (Jones 454); the Hindu spiritual Tantric Yogins believe that the androgyne is the highest form of transformation and it can be achieved through powerful techniques of sexual-spiritual meditation (Jones 455); in Buddhism, the archetype of "true human" is referred to as androgynous (Jones 455); and in Christian sacred texts, androgyny is associated with "divinity" based on "the ability to transcend the material and mortal" (McDonald 7).

<sup>4</sup>As presented in Jefferey Meyer's *Hemingway: A Biography*, Hemingway's father, Clarence Edmonds Hemingway, appears to be a masculine sportsman, but he is "nervous, weak, cowardly and insecure" when it comes to decision making; his mother, Grace, who partly sacrificed her career for the sake of child rearing, not only earns more than her husband, but also appears to be "firm, strong, daring and domineering" (qtd. in Aguilera Linde 20).

<sup>5</sup>Here, androgynous metaphysics can be traced back to the philosophy of yin-yang in classical Chinese philosophy. In the original notion of yin-yang, nature is regarded as the macrocosm, while humans are the microcosm; therefore, the harmony of the human world can be achieved through the observation of the flowing of yin and yang energies in the natural world (Wang 213). The key to construct harmonious relationships is the cultivation of harmony, which is the art of combining "two or more elements [such as yin and yang] into a harmonious whole without sacrificing their particular identities" (Wang 215). This way of thinking is similar to the Western pagan spiritual worldview, whereby human-(non)human relationships are regarded as an "ecosystem" and the art of harmony lies in the "constant readjustment of this factor and that factor" (Kaldera 181).

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# Table, Bottle, and Bed: The Insatiable Southern Appetite of Tennessee Williams

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American writer Tennessee Williams' dialectic essence and "milieu" (Leavitt and Holditch 3) was the South—for the comfort that the environs afforded him, even its decadence and corruption. During his lifetime, he was increasingly drawn to the sustenance of comestibles, intoxicants, and eroticism of the South, particularly in his favorite city of New Orleans, a respite from his stifled and detested surroundings of St. Louis, which he called "St. Pollution." Williams' literary works "are always imbued with sex, [combining] that motif with food and drink" (Gilbert and Piccolo 92). Like other Southern writers, Williams offered readers a chance to sample the "rich intermingling of culture and cuisine" (Titus 281) pervasive to Southern literature. He wrote of what he knew and enjoyed, and Williams, one of the most celebrated authors of the American South, was passionate in his "devotion to good food [...], good drink" (Gilbert and Piccolo 21), and good sex. Personal connections to his work are found in cultural fundamentals embraced by the characters in his major plays: Tom Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie*, Blanche DuBois and Stanley Kowalski in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and Big Daddy and Brick Pollitt from *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. These characters, like their fecund creator, cannot reconcile the body with the soul and are unable to satisfy pleasures of the flesh because of their self-destructive behaviors. Williams' plays were structured around his protagonists, many of them internally tortured individuals, who spoke for him nascent possibilities and temporary fulfillment, but also eventual loss. They become a *pastiche* whereby boundaries blur among his fictional personages, his family and friends, and himself.

Williams' formative years in the Mississippi Delta included meals prepared by either Grand, his grandmother Dakin, or Ossie, a woman who worked for the family. Fresh garden vegetables, casseroles, Southern meat dishes, rich desserts, and sweetened ice tea or lemonade most likely graced the table and provided the Southern comfort needed by young Tom, which Williams' family called him

during his youth. Similarly, in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, servants Sookey and Lacey prepare hot buttered biscuits, “Hoppin’ John,” cornbread, and candied yams for the pretentious birthday celebration in honor of Big Daddy, who is dying of cancer. Big Daddy’s purposely cruel words in his bellowing voice and his lascivious affinities for women of the evening mimic the nature of Cornelius Williams, Tennessee’s father, who was a bombastic, poker-playing, hard-drinking womanizer who terrorized his wife and children when he was home on weekends. As Big Daddy savors the meal set before him, his wife Big Mama points out that his normal appetite has returned when she remarks, “Did you notice the supper he put away? Why he ate like a hawss [...] ate a huge piece of cawn-bread with molasses on it. Helped himself twice to hoppin’ john” (*Cat* 955). Big Daddy’s birthday party menu lists the usual fare at country dinner gatherings where Southerners share opinions about delectable food—who prepared it, how it was prepared, and how it tasted. Throughout Williams’ life, repeated and often extended visits to his maternal grandparents in Clarksdale, Mississippi, or Memphis, Tennessee, confirm the family members he felt most accepted by and with whom he felt most at home. This is not so for Blanche DuBois, who encounters nothing but hostility from her brother-in-law, Stanley Kowalski, when she suddenly appears at his home in New Orleans. Blanche’s sister Stella attempts to intervene and play peacemaker, but she is too weak emotionally to halt her husband Stanley’s aggression. From the moment Blanche meets Stanley, he recognizes her as an individual who, like the playwright himself, “finds consolation in indiscriminate sex and alcohol” (“Tennessee Williams,” *Authors*). Sexual tension immediately begins between Stanley and Blanche and eventually develops to the highest level of passion and violence by the end of the play.

Interspersed between time in New York, Hollywood, and Key West, Williams spent much of his adult life in New Orleans, where the “faint redolences of bananas and coffee” also surrounded Blanche while she spent the summer with the Kowalskis (*Streetcar* 469). Mississippi river boats mingled with the texture of a veritable smorgasbord of dishes—shrimp, lobster, crawfish etouffee, jambalaya, and beignets—traditional staples of the French, Spanish, Cajun, Creole, African and Caribbean people in the cosmopolitan city. Naturally, many of Williams’ plays are set in the Deep South,

mainly in New Orleans or the Mississippi Delta. Author Julie Reed writes, “When Southerners are not cooking or eating, we’re talking about food, arguing about it, going to get it, taking it somewhere, or inviting people over to have it” (qtd. in Gilbert and Pico 153). Our foodstuff facilitates conversation and is a segue to “social, racial, regional reconciliation and cohesion” (Latshaw 122). John Egerton, an American journalist known for his writing about Southern culture, observed that in most endearing and enduring memories recounted by Southerners of family gatherings or community get-togethers at home, school, or church, food is there to pique sensory images and taste buds. At Big Daddy’s birthday dinner, a diverse number of guests are invited, such as the family’s minister and several local politicians. Unfortunately, the celebration is underscored by the guests’ intentions to subtly separate Big Daddy from his wallet before his demise. Dissimilarly, a somber atmosphere is pervasive during Blanche DuBois’ birthday dinner when she is stood up by her beau Mitch, who has discovered the truth about the virginal smoke- screen Blanche has hidden behind all summer.

In *The Glass Menagerie*, Amanda Wingfield admonishes her son Tom, “Chew---chew [...] human beings are supposed to chew their food before they swallow it down. Eat food leisurely, Son, and really enjoy it. A well-cooked meal has lots of delicious flavors that have to be held in the mouth for appreciation. So chew your food and give your salivary glands a chance to function!” (401-02). In this quote, one might hear the echo of Tennessee’s mother Edwina Williams’ reproving voice as she speaks to her own son. Once when Tennessee was home for a short visit, his mother, a Regent in the D.A.R. who would tolerate nothing less than cultivated manners, heard his “smacking noises” while relishing a home-cooked meal and promptly directed him downstairs to the kitchen trough (Williams and Mead 95).

When he lived in New Orleans, the culinary palate that Williams enjoyed, decidedly Louisiana Creole, is evidenced by his tendency to frequent coffee stands, bistros, and restaurants such as Victor’s, a popular bar and restaurant where he drank Brandy Alexanders. He also loved Galatoire’s, which offered some of Williams’ favorite meals, such as trout meuniere. This Bourbon Street restaurant, symbolic of excess, is where a white-gloved Stella Kowalski takes her sister Blanche DuBois to dine in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Stella’s gloves are a holdover from her life on Belle

Reve, the DuBois family's Mississippi plantation, for Stella and Stanley's usual haunt is The Four Deuces, a honky-tonk dive that offers beer, poker games, and prostitutes on the second floor.

Williams enjoyed Restaurant Jonathan on Rampart Street; The Acme and The Pearl oyster bars; Antoine's for its Oysters Rockefeller; Brennan's for the grillades and grits, eggs Sardou, and bananas foster flambé; the Court of Two Sisters, where a spiral staircase joined the street with the kitchen, and whose aroma perhaps beckoned passersby; and Arnaud's for its remoulade, and where Williams dined with his grandfather Dakin, who also had a hearty appetite. He was a man

of the cloth who visited often and supported his grandson even during the conservative decades of the 1940s-50s. At the Creole restaurant Maylie's, Williams had a reserved table and ordered the house specialty, a boiled beef dinner. He preferred the dark roast coffee at Morning Call in the Market and the signature muffuletta at Central Grocery (Rodbard 3). His favorite was Marti's, which catered to his desire for home cooked Southern dishes such as bread pudding, "greens with pickled pork and Andouille sausage" (Gilbert and Picolo 13), as well as country-style mustard and turnip greens, peas, and butter beans "seasoned with bacon fat" (Holditch, "Southern Comfort" 55). Williams especially loved the glazed double pork chops, the same meat Stanley Kowalski, a character named for Williams' co-worker at International Shoe Company but fashioned after Williams' father Cornelius, devours with his greasy fingers during Blanche's birthday dinner. After Stella calls Stanley a pig, he throws his dishes on the floor and offers to help the women clear their places at the table in the same fashion. Stanley proves his alpha male status in his home with brute force, much like Cornelius Williams did in the family's St. Louis apartment where Tennessee's brother Dakin alluded to the continuous donnybrooks caused by his father.

"Southern food is evocative" (Castle 3), and these mouth-watering dishes would tempt even the most seasoned Southern eater in the Crescent City. Meals in the French Quarter were reasonable: breakfast might cost a dime, lunch and dinner, half a dollar. Tennessee's mother Edwina recalls that he was often satisfying his appetite for seafood (Holditch, *Last Frontier* 7). The proprietor of one of the boarding houses where Tennessee lived opened a Toulouse Street restaurant where he briefly worked by waiting tables. He also

promoted the restaurant by giving patrons cards imprinted with his own creative expression: “Meals in the Quarter for a Quarter” (7). At Gluck’s German Restaurant, Williams waited tables, ran the cash register, and washed dishes during his second stay in New Orleans. Being employed in these eateries most likely afforded him at least one good meal per day, crucial when he struggled against financial hardship. Interesting to note is that when he cooked for himself and friends, he served spaghetti, one dish he felt confident to make, and the food most often mentioned in his plays (Gilbert and Picolo 151).

Found in Williams’ work, especially in his dramas, are the indulgences of food and drink. In *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, while Brick Pollitt acknowledges his own alcoholism, his father has just proven his gluttony during his birthday dinner, and although he knows his death is imminent, Big Daddy continues to enjoy both his cigar and whiskey. Arguably one of Williams’ most well-known characters, Blanche DuBois takes hot baths in an attempt to cleanse herself of her indiscriminate past, but she relies on liquor to calm her increasingly frayed nerves. Although Blanche denies her alcoholism, Stanley is keenly aware of her “lapping” up his liquor all summer (*Streetcar* 544).

Tennessee Williams wrote of the front-porch pleasure of lemonade, served “in a cut-glass pitcher [...] with cherries and orange slices in it, like a little aquarium of tropical fish” (*Summer* 615), and sweetened iced tea to stave off a hot, humid Southern day. However, he was interested in a stronger brand of Southern hospitality to burn away the heat and sins of the summer—potent potables that were gateways to his gratification. He claimed that his first alcoholic drink, a green crème de menthe, was from the bar on the *Homeric*, the ship he and his grandfather Dakin sailed on to Europe. During the trip, Williams also sampled Manhattan cocktails, Rye-Ginger Ales, and French champagne. Other drinks Williams fancied were “Jack Daniels, martinis, and the Italian wine Valpolicella” (Holditch, “Southern Comfort” 58). The playwright frequented patio bars such as Pat O’Brien’s, the Napoleon House, the Bourbon House (where he drank Ramos gin fizzes), the “underground” Starlight Lounge, Club Rendezvous, Tony Bacino’s, Lafitte in Exile (reported to be one of the oldest bars in the country), the Twilight Lounge, and La Casa de Marinos, a bar that “attracted foreign sailors” (Holditch, *Last Frontier* 25). He haunted other gay bars, too, such as Dixie’s Bar of Music, and on Exchange Alley, Ivan’s, Society Page, and Monkey Wrench

Corner, another location where sailors often gathered (Holditch and Leavitt, *Tennessee Williams* 75). Tennessee was so well known in these establishments that his drinks were often on the house. To defy sterility of his creative mind, he began to chase Secondals with martinis (Williams, *Memoirs* 169). On the other hand, this wounded genius welcomed the numbness alcohol provided to allay his fear of losing mental acuity and to obliterate painful memories of rejection by his father.

Williams' character Brick Pollitt in *Cat* has a similar inclination toward Echo Springs bourbon, which allows him to disavow facing the truth about his relationship with Skipper, a former collegiate football teammate. Brick's sexual nature seems ambiguous—he is a former gridiron star who is reluctant or unable to make love to his wife Maggie. His best friend Skipper was a homosexual, and rumors abound about the two men's relationship and the reason for Skipper's suicide, so Brick needs the numbness of the alcohol to continue to deny self-doubts. Southern Comfort is the peach-flavored bourbon liqueur preferred by *Streetcar's* Blanche DuBois. She uses the liqueur to assuage her Southern *discomfort*, which originated from the sexual indiscretions of male relatives and caused the loss of Belle Reve plantation. Blanche's inability to maintain the plantation "reflects the image of her generation that Southern belles were intended to be ornamental, not practical" (Holditch, "Southern Comfort" 55). For Blanche, the liquor is a means to purge her mind of a sordid past in order to survive an unstable present. Blanche is symbolic of the Old South, an era of propriety and refinement that Tennessee Williams mourned was collapsing due to the dirt and noise of industrialization.

Williams lamented that in 1955, he experienced an unusual writer's block, but it was freed with his use of artificial stimulants; as he explained, "martinis and barbiturates [...] liberated my unconscious" (qtd. in Gussow 49). Dependence on alcohol, in an attempt to exist in a world saturated with noise from The French Quarter, facilitated his consumption. In Key West, he often ate at home on his patio table where he would not be accosted by people asking him "to autograph a catsup-stained paper napkin," and where he drank imported wines, like an entire crate once from his friend Bob Fosse (Williams, *Where I Live* 167). When he appeared in public, his world seemed "full of mad hatters and crazy queens; they were

always after him, they would never leave him alone” (Williams and Mead 174). This scene was in ironic contrast to his childhood, which was “marked by loneliness and social alienation” until his mother presented him with a typewriter and he found emotional freedom in writing (Fong 35).

In New Orleans, Williams embraced the unconventional, bohemian lifestyle and acceptance he so badly desired; he made friends with fellow intellectuals, such as writers, artists, and musicians, but also with societal outcasts and fellow isolates like sailors, prostitutes, beggars, and vagrants. Thus, his work was often a plea to understand the sensitive, non-conformist individual (see *Biography: Tennessee Williams, Wounded Genius*). He referred to the Dionysian French Quarter as a “sanctuary for the defeated [...], the victimized” (Wolter 167), and the mutilated. These descriptors are fitting for Blanche DuBois, as they are for many of the female protagonists in Williams’ plays. Blanche is defeated by the loss of her home Belle Reve and the loss of her job as a high school English teacher, both due to her sexual overindulgence, and she is victimized when Stanley rapes her. Eventually, her mind is mutilated by the constant attack on her fragile emotions. Although Blanche finds nothing but sorrow in New Orleans, Tennessee “found the city’s eroticism both shocking and fascinating [...], the moral laissez-faire of the French Quarter” (Wolter 165) a stark contrast to his early years in a parsonage in bucolic Mississippi where his home life was steeped in rigid Victorian morality.

The contradictions between the values of Williams’ grandfather Dakin and his father Cornelius influenced both his work and his life. In fact, he used characters and their behavior to “illustrate dichotomies and conflicts” in his own existence: appearance vs. reality, failure vs. success, and the potential of “sexuality to both destroy and redeem” (“Tennessee Williams,” *American* 2). Although Blanche DuBois is only twenty-five years old, she fears losing her striking physical features. She is obsessed with the security she needs by being wanted by men, so she refuses to go out during the day and appears only in darkly-lit rooms. Her beauty and pretentious purity nearly win the heart of beau Mitch, but because of her previous sexual indiscretions, he regards Blanche as soiled goods and rescinds his marriage proposal when he explains, “You’re not clean enough to bring in the house with my mother” (*Streetcar* 547). Like the playwright, Tom Wingfield considers himself a failure, as he spends

his days working in a shoe warehouse instead of writing poetry, but he hesitates to leave his family as his father has already done. Brick Pollitt delighted in his past athleticism on the football field, but is certain he has failed everyone around him—Big Daddy, his successful brother Gooper, and especially his wife Maggie—for he is paralyzed by apprehension to acknowledge and act on his desires. His trepidation is caused by “rigid gender stereotypes, a well-defined part of the southern landscape,” and like other males in Tennessee Williams’ literary works, Brick renounces his “masculinity rather than compete with the southern macho prototypes” (King 234).

The broad social intolerance regarding the author’s sexual proclivities and nonconformist lifestyle fueled the fires of Williams’ abuse of alcohol. The catalyst was a lifetime of judgment and rejection from his father Cornelius. Williams’ brother Dakin claims that in his later years, Tennessee felt “more pity than hatred” (Williams and Mead 212) for Cornelius. Asked in an interview about any changes he would make in his life if he could, Tennessee responded, “If I had the power, I would try to win the admiration of my father” (qtd. in Osgood 34). In *Cat*, Brick Pollitt desperately wants approval from his father Big Daddy. During an extensive and frank discussion, father and son run the gamut of issues, such as marriage, mendacity, and mortality. In *Menagerie*, Tom Wingfield explains the absence of his father, who “fell in love with long distances [...] and skipped the light fantastic out of town” (401). Leaving his mother Amanda and sister Laura to fend for themselves, Tom Wingfield eventually also skips town to chase his own dreams. Likewise, Tennessee quit his job at a shoe factory and left home as soon as he was able to pursue a writing career.

The daring lack of secrecy about his sexual preference to a conservative 1940s-50s America won him neither public endearment nor endorsement. His lifestyle was never “deemed politically correct,” as conservatives impugned Williams and his literary works as “immoral and corrupt” (Clum 78). He began to seek fulfillment of his sexual urges in bars and nightclubs (Bak 72), adamantly claiming that he was not a fanatic, but that sex was merely basic to his nature. He also alleged that he could not enjoy sex without the complement of romanticism (Gussow 49); however, that statement would belie his many one-night stands. His early dalliance with strangers caused a rash of “the seven-year itch,” and while under the care of a doctor, he

spent several days “greased and in long underwear” (Williams and Mead 96). He rarely indulged in shame (Bak x) about his homosexuality, and although he admitted his prurient tendencies led to a life of promiscuity, he nevertheless said, “Promiscuity is better than nothing” (qtd. in Gussow 49).

The trauma of Tennessee Williams’ odious past caused the breakdown of nearly all relationships he attempted to cultivate. Even though he seemed to make friends easily, he was, at times, unable to sustain those friendships. Williams suffered from bacchanalian impulses, including intense sexual cravings that preceded multiple intimacies with men, oftentimes random strangers. Likewise, Blanche Dubois, who depends on the “kindness of strangers” (*Menagerie* 563), loses her teaching job because of inappropriate behavior with a seventeen-year-old student and is exiled from her hometown for a brisk business with soldiers from a nearby army base; in fact, she is labeled “Out-of-Bounds” (531) by the town officials. Williams struggled to find any congruency between his homosexual desires, the tenets of the Episcopal faith, and his mother’s mantra about sexual abstinence. He was conflicted between “moral inhibition and sexual passion” (Wolter 168), and New Orleans allowed him the freedom to indulge in his indiscriminate sexual rendezvous. Southern belle Blanche Dubois, too, embodies the conflicting Madonna/whore syndrome, as she changes from her symbolic virginal white clothing to her red, seductive robe.

One of Williams’ early male lovers was Eloi Bordelon, a Creole whom he met at the New Orleans Athletic Club and shared a room with on Toulouse Street. Their stormy relationship “ended violently, according to Williams, who claimed the young man was jealous of his attentions to other men” (O’Connor 17). Tennessee lived with Paul Bigelow, who became exasperated from trying to take care of the haphazard playwright. Donald Windham, whose code name was “Dreamy Eyes” (Williams and Mead 192), was also reported to be his lover. Neither man, according to Dakin Williams, verified it, although they experienced a forceful night in a hotel with two sailors. In *Streetcar*, a cultural lifestyle in New Orleans includes violence before sex. Throughout the play, many of the sexual encounters are preceded by violent acts—men beating up their wives and the struggle between Stanley and Blanche before he rapes her.

Tennessee was an avid letter writer, and a “gay referent” about sexual fulfillment was revealed in many of the letters he wrote to Windham (Devlin 48). He had an intense affair in New York with Canadian Kip Kiernan, a part-time dancer and model (Leverich 361-62). Williams said Kiernan did not get much sleep with him, “but that’s his own fault for being so beautiful” (Hayman 69). Williams, who was “accustomed to transitory attachments” (Williams, *Memoirs* 156), displayed in his work the “impossibility of true intimacy [...] against the dreams men and women have of a meaningful emotional and spiritual connection” (Clum 77). In *Streetcar*, Blanche DuBois identifies with the Virgin Mary. Although Blanche was married, unbeknownst to her, her husband was a homosexual, so perhaps the marriage was never consummated. The many soldiers from the army base she allowed in her bed were purely physical encounters and a means to her financial survival, for she declares she never loved them.

Tennessee was unfaithful to his lovers with faithful regularity (*Biography*). When *He Touched Me*, the play Williams co-wrote with Donald Windham, closed in 1946, Williams returned to New Orleans, where he enjoyed a love affair with local clothing salesman Pancho Rodriguez y Gonzalez, a young man Tennessee called Santo (Williams, *Memoirs* 254) and who was a “dangerous influence” (Williams and Mead 133) on the playwright. There were volatile moments between them, but Santo’s initial threats to leave Tennessee were empty words, for their relationship continued through numerous trips when they spent time with other writers, producers, and actors. On one occasion when Tennessee was away, Santo tried to elicit an invitation into bed with Tennessee’s brother Dakin. Ultimately, Santo’s days were over once Tennessee met Sicilian Frank Phillip Merlo, a twenty-six-year-old former sailor (Williams and Mead 105-46).

Frank was the love of his life for almost fourteen years. Once when Williams and Frank, whom Tennessee dubbed his “Little Horse,” were in Los Angeles, Jack Warner of Warner Brothers mistook Frank for Tennessee. When he discovered his mistake, Jack asked Merlo what he did. Frank quickly replied that he “slept with Mr. Williams” (174). As the writer’s personal secretary, Frank took care of all the minute details of Williams’ daily routine so that he could devote his time to writing, but “Tennessee could neither understand nor accept Merlo’s love” (*Biography*). Frank yearned for a

reputable middle-class existence, but Williams did not want to be restricted by any social status. Their relationship began to fade when Tennessee became infatuated with Frederick Nicklaus, nicknamed Angel, a poet he met in Tangier (Williams and Mead 242). While Frank's health was in decline, Tennessee did not hide the fact that he was sleeping with Angel, with whom he said he "could barely communicate [...] except in bed" (Bak 198). However, when Merlo died of lung cancer, Williams' emotional state, in spite of injections from Max Jacobson, aka "Dr. Feelgood," took a deep and prolonged plunge. Later, Tennessee self-injected amphetamines provided by the good doctor on a regular basis.

After Merlo, Tennessee and Bill Glavin, whom Tennessee referred to as Ryan in the playwright's *Memoirs*, became intimate companions (257). Williams also enjoyed the company of an Italian teenager named Rafaello while he lived in Rome. Other relationships were brief encounters and one-night stands with men such as those at the Y where he lived: a hotel bellhop, a theater usher, a part-Indian youth from Mexico, a marine he "screwed" seven times one night (111), and a New Orleans blond nicknamed the "Dixie Doxy" who had "creamy skin and a very seductive backside which he was eager to offer" (Williams, *Memoirs* 183). Williams wrote facetiously to Paul Bigelow that sailors "come in occasionally to discuss literature with me" (qtd. in Holditch and Leavitt 73), most likely so that he could get his "ashes hauled" (Bak 80). In 1973, his final long-term relationship was a turbulent one with Robert Carroll, a twenty-five-year-old Vietnam veteran and writer from Virginia, but the two men were ultimately incompatible (Hayman 217).

In *Biography: Tennessee Williams, Wounded Genius*, Donald Windham, close friend and literary collaborator, stated that Tennessee "thought the day was lost if he didn't get into bed with someone." His brother Dakin added that Williams "could not endure one day without sex; he always had an eye open for some good-looking young man, and the younger the better" (qtd. in *Biography*). His obsession with pederasty, sexual encounters between a man and a male minor, is mentioned in his *Memoirs*, as he notes his preference for active mastery over his lovers who were often described as passive (Fong 40-41). Blanche Dubois, who also cannot keep her hands off of young boys, replicates a similar inclination. After her initial and archetypal fall from grace caused by sex with one of her students, while in New Orleans she is tempted to toy with a young newspaper collector, but

stops herself after one tender kiss. She tells the young man, “Now run along, now quickly! It would be nice to keep you, but I’ve got to be good—and keep my hands off children” (*Streetcar* 520). Tennessee’s desires caused him to worry that young men would no longer be attracted to him as he aged, but his money prevented them from losing interest (Fong 80), and he acknowledged that the “cost of his own epic fornications was excessive” (Fong 146). His fears were a reality for Blanche, who decries the loss of her youthful appearance and the financial loss of Belle Reve plantation caused by the philandering of the DuBois men.

Director George Keathley, who visited an intoxicated Williams in Key West one morning, asked the playwright why he drank profusely. Nursing a tumbler of bourbon—his personal ambrosia—Williams remarked that he would always retain the ability to drink in the event that he finally became unable to write successfully (*Biography*). Williams’ liberal imbibing has been speculated as a means to block out his painful past, to aid in battling his self-loathing and self-presumed mental illness, and to end his problems with paranoia, as with his apprehension that someone wanted to kill him or that he was simply dying of an assortment of illnesses. During an angst-filled moment, Tennessee called Dakin to inform him that an attempt would be made on his life that very night. Dakin explained that he could not arrive that evening, but he would be there the next day, which placated Tennessee (*Biography*). However, all of his despair was exacerbated by the large quantity of liquor he consumed daily, trying to drown the memories of past failures and disappointments. His brother Dakin talked him into a superficial Catholic unction and baptism and later committed him to a St. Louis mental facility for months of treatment for acute alcohol poisoning, but his demons were not as easily put to bed as were his lovers. However, Williams told a psychiatrist “if he got rid of his demons, he would lose his angels” (Williams and Mead 215). At the end of *Streetcar*, Stella and Stanley send Blanche to a mental asylum, for after the rape, her mental state takes a rapid nosedive.

In childhood, Williams was stricken with diphtheria for which his mother packed his throat in ice to keep him from choking to death. The disease “left him with a growing fear of suffocation” (Leverich 42), ironic since his death has been attributed to choking on a medicine bottle cap when he lived in the New York Hotel Elysee,

which he referred to as the “easy lay.” Alcohol was his fortress against the stigma and condemnation of his homosexuality, considered by the general public as a form of perversion and listed as a form of mental illness by the psychological community (and the APA) until 1971 (*Biography*).

Audrey Wood, his loyal literary agent for many years, was suddenly dismissed with his unfounded accusations when he called her a “bitch” during a rehearsal, his mercurial temperament stunning everyone in the theatre. Although his actor friends were often shocked by his unprovoked, hurtful words, these negative, sporadic bursts were trademarks of his father Cornelius; however, for Tennessee they were exacerbated by his paranoia and intoxicated condition. His fame and critical success did not lessen his abject self-esteem, and he confessed during a television interview with David Frost that he was surprised to learn that some people actually liked him (*Biography*).

The literary world that had hailed Williams for so long quickly turned its back on him when his once-fertile mind, body, and talent began to decline. The rejection sent him “on the one-way track of his own Cemeteries car” (qtd. in Bak 189), for it was another blow to the former frail, introverted boy who found it difficult to navigate the harsh world of a St. Louis tenement building, the ridicule of classmates, and the scorn of his harsh, disapproving father, who nicknamed young Tom “Miss Nancy” because of his effeminate tendencies (Hale 13). Cornelius Williams, embarrassed that his son could not pass ROTC, yanked Tennessee out of college and forced him to work. As a result, he found comfort in his writing, but also in a sedating triad of alcohol, drugs, and sex. The last decade of his life was “littered with [...] one mishap too often, one pinky and scotch too many, and one dramatic line too few” (Bak 193). Finally, his battle fatigue against homophobic New York theater critics caused him to turn inward and “surround himself with sycophants” (Bak 208).

Tennessee Williams made a concerted effort to imbed into his literary canon the “drama of human anguish” (Wolter 167) with characters such as Tom Wingfield, Brick Pollitt, and Blanche DuBois, who could never recover from the “wounds and desolation” (Leavitt and Holditch 4) of their past, reflective of some of his own spirit and lifestyle which were most often deemed loathsome by society. Williams was a “devourer, a predator” who used the narrative of his own existence and the legacy of his literary colleagues to foster and sustain his ingenuity (Roudane 7). Literary critic Robert Bray notes

that a touchstone of Williams' characters is their vulnerability and their inability or unwillingness to exist within the norms of the mainstream: "Williams own autobiography is stamped impressionistically on every page of his writing, and it is easy to see how his artistic disposition and homosexuality in a homophobic age compelled him to write the part of the psychological misfit" (964).

Like the Southern Agrarian writers, Williams acknowledged a preference for the Old South (Andrews 390) and its mores of gentility. His work features Southern dishes, alcoholic libation, and imprudent carnal desires—indispensable to his characters and their lifestyles of intemperance. His love of Southern hospitality in its many connotations and excesses—edible, imbibed, and sexual—is intimately inscribed in the playwright's canonical works that "link sexual hunger and food" (Clum 74). The complexity of his internal conflict, especially acceptance of his epicene nature in spite of his repressive childhood, compelled him to seek fellowship at the table, friendship with the bottle, and companionship in the bed. However, his greatest hunger was to write.

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# The Medieval Beginnings of Science Fiction

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There is plenty of discussion on the medieval influence on some of the major sub-genres of modern fantasy, but much less on fantasy in medieval period literature, and even less than that on science-fiction connections to medieval literature. Traditional high fantasy like Tolkien's has been the subject of scholarly attention for decades, as has fantasy by writers who invoke folkloric or mythological elements in their story worlds, like Terry Pratchett or Neil Gaiman. The idea of science fiction having connections to medieval writers and ideas might seem like an oxymoron, since science is often perceived as based more on projections into the future, not the past, but the Middle Ages marks the beginnings of science fiction as we now know it.

## Part I: Definitions and Genre

There are debates concerning the origins of science fiction, although the 19th century and the 1930s are most commonly cited as the starting points of the genre. One of the more popular starting points for the genre is 1818 with the publication of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Scholes and Rabkin note that the 19th century presented "fantastic possibilities suddenly made available by new scientific ideas and technological discovery" (8), which were taken up in fiction by writers such as Jules Verne, Edgar Allan Poe, and Edgar Rice Burroughs. The other traditional starting point is in 1929, when publisher Hugo Gernsback of the 3-year-old *Amazing Stories* magazine coined the term "science fiction" to replace his previous label of "scientifiction." *Amazing* was the first publication to both limit its contents to "stories of scientific extrapolation and out-space adventure" and "to attempt to define the genre" (Attenby 33).

The second problem that science fiction presents is that of genre definition. Definitions of the genre of "science fiction" vary widely but can be categorized in two general types. The first is the definition by Gernsback from 1926 that science fiction is "a

charming romance intermingled with scientific fact and prophetic vision” (qtd. in Stableford et al.). Others who profess similar descriptive definitions include John Campbell, Jr., Robert Heinlein, and Judith Merrill. The second type of definition is broader and dates from the 1970s. Suvin in 1972 defined the genre as requiring “the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author’s empirical environment” (ibid.). Other similar definitions that require a more prescriptive frame include Toffler and Aldiss. The one consistent factor is some basis on contemporary scientific, empirical knowledge.

My argument is made from the basic definition that if the theory or practice of a type of knowledge exists or has found a degree of acceptance in general culture and knowledge, and is extended beyond the realms of probability of realization in the near future, then it qualifies as science fiction. We have no theoretical or practical scientific basis for the potential existence of scenarios like people transforming into animals, being able to fly on a broomstick, or sharing our planet with elves or faeries. This is why the likes of J.R.R. Tolkien and J.K. Rowling are called fantasy writers. However, there are scientific theories that predict the potential for life on other planets and the ability to find and communicate with their inhabitants, as well as theories of multiple or parallel universes. This is why *Dr. Who* and *Star Trek* are science fiction.

The problem with most genre definitions is that they limit science fiction to the knowledge of a particular time and place, or after the scientific method as we now know it had been established. Stableford argues that “speculative fictions about new discoveries and technologies that the applications of the scientific method might bring about” started only in the 17th century (15), while Scholes and Rabin claim that science fiction must be based on scientific realism, and thus “prototypes of modern science fiction appeared” after the time of Galileo, but the first true work of science fiction was Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (6). Roberts is somewhat more charitable towards the potential for older science fiction, allowing that some of the tropes might have developed in earlier times, but that much of the writing was too theologically or allegorically based to qualify as science fiction until the Protestant Reformation (26, 28, 33-40). Such definitions ignore the times when a method of understanding the world was developing, and this development of possibility is crucial

to modern science fiction. For example, theoretical physicist Michio Kaku deals both with the facts as we currently recognize them and extends them as far as possible using the limitations of scientific and mathematical reasoning. Going beyond those limits is science fiction. Dr. Kaku notes that he receives emails from science fiction writers and screenwriters asking about the limits of the laws of physics to help build their stories (xi). Kaku himself goes on to address a handful of ideas common in science fiction that he believes have the potential to become more realistic as our knowledge of science might expand in the future, including time travel, teleportation, and extraterrestrials. My central question is if a form of fiction is based around a realm of scientific practice and knowledge, then why are times during which such knowledge and practices were being established in Western Europe not considered part of that tradition?

A recognized feature of science fiction which is evident from medieval Europe onwards is anxiety about the potential of new forms of knowledge to result in harm to society or the environment. Carl Kears and James Paz make the connection between Chaucer's Canon's Yeoman in the *Canterbury Tales* and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. They suggest that both Victor Frankenstein and the alchemists in the Canon's Yeoman's "Prologue" and "Tale" are attempting to change Nature through experimentation and the scientific method, which has disastrous or at least disheartening consequences for most all involved (13-14). Chaucer clearly had some interest in science, since he wrote *Treatise on the Astrolabe*, a scientific instruction manual on how to use a device designed to help figure out calendar dates based on astronomical information.<sup>1</sup> The problem with alchemy in Chaucer's story is that the source, the Canon's Yeoman, gets a lot of his interpretation wrong or is clearly quoting from a standard text, and he also makes frequent claims about the trouble with alchemy and his own lack of success. His tale about a dishonest alchemist who dupes a local priest out of a substantial amount of money reflects the distrust that the public may have had in what has sometimes been labeled as the predecessor of modern chemistry.

This use of a current scientific practice that is either just being implemented or close enough to imagine as reality and the problems it causes individuals and society in general is a theme in many modern science fiction stories and novels, from Isaac Asimov's *I, Robot*

(1950) to William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) to Emma Newman's *Planetfall* (2015). Science fiction focusing on social problems resulting from technological human creations has a longer history than it might seem, since in between Chaucer and Newman, writers such as Francis Bacon and Louis-Sebastian Mercier were writing stories like *New Atlantis* (1627) and *The Year 2440* (1770), respectively. Roberts points to the trend of adapting the genre of travel literature and combining "factual account and speculation" (48) in the sixteenth century, but discounts it as a minority movement (49). Some of the texts he reviews include Sebastian Münster's *Cosmographia* (1544) and *Monstrum in Oceano* (Monster in the Ocean) by Antonio Blado (1537), both of which Roberts notes were popular with their audiences. Both *Cosmographia* and *Monstrum in Oceano* contain descriptions of creatures that are not human nor do they resemble anything known in nature, which Roberts connects with the eventual figure of the alien in science fiction. The problem with Roberts' discounting of such works as not belonging to the development of science fiction is that he seemingly contradicts himself by labelling these texts and others like them both "little read" and yet "popular." His other objection, particularly in reference to Blado's text, is that there is too much religious allegory present in it for true science fiction (48-9). By this reasoning, Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land* should not be classified as a work of science fiction, yet Roberts calls Heinlein "a sort of archetype of what SF should be" and *Stranger* "Heinlein's biggest success and masterpiece" (293). In addition to the contradiction inherent in accepting Heinlein but rejecting Blado, issues of faith and religion constitute fundamental social structures especially for medieval Europe, and rejecting a text that otherwise would qualify on the grounds of too much religion would then discount social anxiety over new knowledge as science fiction, which would then disqualify Asimov, Gibson, and many other writers and texts considered canonical examples of science fiction.

Medieval concepts of genre were also more fluid than we often take the idea of genre in modern times, a situation which strongly parallels debates over definition in science fiction. Paul Strohm points out the general lack of a clear critical vocabulary in Middle English, and he notes that many descriptive terms like "storie," "fable," "tale," "romauce," "geste," and even "tragedie" could be interchangeable or overlap in application (348). In terms of actual practice, Elaine Treharne explains that adding poetic,

ecclesiastical, fictional and legendary elements was perfectly acceptable in medieval history writing. She suggests, “This amalgamation of different kinds of source materials of originally varying perspectives and intended function illustrates something very interesting about medieval literature; namely, the permeability of genres and the flexibility of composition” (45). The only defined and recognized medieval genres of fictional writing in terms of critical theory were tragedy and comedy, and even these presented some variation, more so with comedy, which lacked the detailed definition of tragedy in the Aristotelian texts.<sup>2</sup> In discussing one of the more common medieval forms of comedy, the *fabliau*, Cooke notes that “most [genre] definitions are by nature attempts to delineate the ideal of a type” (15), and argues that there is little evidence that theorists influenced the writers of these comic tales (19). Both in theory and practice, medieval literature was not much concerned with the details of genre requirements. It falls to modern scholars who need the vocabulary in retrospect to develop that vocabulary and to apply it to literary works.

Even some of the most recent scholarly considerations of science fiction must both recognize the fluidity of the genre and establish definitions in order to analyze the literature. Adam Roberts, who argues that the genre got its start during the Protestant Reformation in Europe (vi), points out that the *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* presents a total of 16 different possible definitions (2). Roberts offers his own parameters for the genre, which he labels as follows: “a specific and dominant version of *fantasy* (rather than *realist*) literature; texts that adduce qualities that are not to be found in the real world in order to reflect certain effects back upon that world” (3). His distinction between fantasy and science fiction lies in the central dialectic between theology, magic, and mysticism (fantasy), and rationalist post-Copernican science (science fiction). He also argues that science fiction is “technology fiction,” using “technology” in the broader sense of a mode of framing or enframing the world (19). A final component about the genre according to Roberts is that it is frequently disregarded as a form of serious “literature” (3).

While Roberts makes a compelling case for the presence of science fiction in the seventeenth century, his definitions and argument don't give enough credit to the centuries preceding his

focus time span. He acknowledges the fantastical elements in ancient Greek and Roman texts have some similar tropes to modern science fiction (26-29), but argues that Lucian (2<sup>nd</sup> century CE) is better read as “anti-sci-fi rather than proto-sci-fi” (34) due to the religious nature of the context of the stories. Roberts also argues that the 1200-year gap or period between Lucian and the Protestant Reformation had fantastic texts, but these were too religious to qualify as science fiction (39). While issues of faith and religion were critical to the medieval mindset, there is clear evidence for the rise in scientific curiosity among scholars both religious and secular, including Thomas Aquinas, Robert Grosseteste, and Roger Bacon. Their work shows that the scholars and clergy of the Middle Ages were beginning to explore the interactions between the two modes of understanding the world, which remains a key factor in science fiction today. Modern science fiction can be based on religious ideas, because as Seed points out, C.S. Lewis’ *Space Trilogy* and Frank Herbert’s *Dune* are often counted as science fiction (122-3).

There was tension between the medieval Church and the rise of scientific explorations, which provides foundations for the conflict between concerns of faith and science in later works of scholarship and fiction. For example, in the 1330s, the Pope had decreed against alchemy as an un-Christian practice, and in 1403, this pseudo-science was outlawed in England (Hussey 10). Also around this time, people were noticing problems in the Church, and its hierarchal organization was not meeting spiritual needs; as a result, the power of the Church over secular lives was weakening.<sup>3</sup> Keyes shows how this distancing from faith created the need for a substitute in which to put their faith by arguing that one place people looked was to the hero of the romance, a genre in European literature which has connections to science fiction via its establishing of the journey and hero archetypes (28).

And while there is some truth to Roberts’ last point concerning the literary reputation of science fiction, some medieval science fiction texts were not regarded as *unliterary*, such as the works of Chaucer, just as some modern works of science fiction are part of the traditional literary canon, including *Frankenstein* and *The Left Hand of Darkness*. Chaucer, who presents a medieval example, was recognized almost immediately after his death and still today as the Father of English Literature. Around 1410, Thomas Hoccleve, in *The Regiment of Princes*, mourns the recently deceased poet by

calling him “the firste fyndere of our fair langage” (ll.4978). Still in the seventeenth century, John Dryden says of Chaucer, “as he is the Father of English Poetry, so I hold him in the same Degree of Veneration as the Grecians held Homer, or the Romans Virgil.” As I will shortly show, Chaucer is a key figure in the history of science fiction writing, particularly with the Canon’s Yeoman’s “Prologue” and “Tale” in the *Canterbury Tales*.

## **Part II: Medieval Science**

One of the cornerstones to the argument that there was science fiction in medieval literature is that the Middle Ages were aware of the theoretical and in some cases early applications of many of the foundations of modern sci-fi tropes, including astronomy, automata or engines and clockwork, computus and charts,<sup>4</sup> and the scientific method, including alchemy and optics.<sup>5</sup> For the scientific method, Aristotle (4<sup>th</sup> c. BCE) was the primary source. His works, including both *Prior* and *Posterior Analytics*, *Nichomachean Ethics*, *Physics*, *De Caelo*, *Meteorologia*, *History of Animals* and *Parts of Animals*, cover not only the basis of theorizing, experimentation, and observation, but also influential ideas about physics, biology, meteorology, and mathematics (required for theorizing). While his works were more readily available in Latin translation than the original Greek, Aristotle was certainly known in the Middle Ages, as demonstrated by his presence in textbook lists for recommended courses of study at medieval universities, as well as in plentiful references to him in publications of various sorts. Aristotle is cited by St. Augustine (5-6<sup>th</sup> c. CE), Boethius (6<sup>th</sup> c. CE) translated some of the philosophical works, and Gerard of Cermona (12<sup>th</sup> c. CE) translated many of the scientific works. Many of the textbook lists dating from the 12<sup>th</sup> c. onward, when universities began working on institutionalization, include works by Aristotle. By the late 13<sup>th</sup> century, the *Physics* was a key textbook as well as a commonly commented upon text which made up the foundation for the “scientific” curriculum, along with the *De Caelo* and *Metaphysics*, at Oxford.<sup>6</sup> Even before Oxford was founded, Aristotle is listed as a key author to know by Alcuin in his late 8<sup>th</sup>-century *Poem on the Bishops, Kings, and Saints of the Church of York* (l.1550) in a section addressing the fine education available through the library founded at York in the 530s CE by King Ælthbert.

Medieval astronomy relied heavily on Aristotelian theories as well, but was further developed in Ptolemy's *Almagest* (1<sup>st</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> c.), Johannes de Sacrobosco's *De Sphaera* (13<sup>th</sup> c.), and works by Nicole Oresme (14<sup>th</sup> c.). Oresme considered the possibility of the existence of planets beyond the known cosmos and even the possibility of life thereon. In *Le Livre du ciel et du monde*, he claimed, against Aristotle, that there were three ways to argue in favor of the existence of multiple worlds. Oresme suggested, citing St. Jerome and Origen, the possibility of a cycle from disorder to the creation of a world and order, followed by destruction of order and a return to disorder, which would then cycle to the creation of another world (35d). The second possibility considers the thought experiment that worlds exist within each other; towards the center of our world, there would exist another world, including cosmos (36a). His third option comes from Anaxagoras, and argues that "one world should be [conceived] entirely outside the other in space imagined to exist" (37b). He notes that because humans depend on their senses, "we cannot comprehend nor conceive this incorporeal space which exists beyond the heavens. Reason and Truth, however, inform us that it exists. Therefore, I conclude that God can and could in His omnipotence make another world besides this one or several like or unlike it" (39b). Oresme later contends that if God created other worlds, then God would have to be present in those other worlds (68a-c), an argument which could consider the possibility for life on those other worlds, as well. He also made the at-the-time radical suggestion that Aristotle was wrong about Earth being a stationary object, and that other beings, which Oresme called "intelligences" or "angels," are responsible for its movement (69d-72d). Oresme also considered what may be an early possibility of a theory of gravity in his analysis of heaviness and lightness (Book 4). This work and others like it founded the basis for the Renaissance developments of Copernicus, Galileo, Kepler, and Newton.

Robots and computers were not unknown then as theories and/or applications, too. Automata are effectively early robots, devices which are capable of moving via mechanism with little to no human assistance. In terms of literature, their existence is documented in travelogues, encyclopedias, chronicles, romances, and songs (Truitt 1). The term "automaton" is more of an Early Modern label; the Middle Ages used terms like "engine" (French) or "inventio" (Latin). Their physical existence in Europe is documented beyond the literary

in the form of plans concerning the Park of Hesdin in France, dating from the late 13th century. The park included a castle and garden full of these devices, including mechanical monkeys, elaborate fountains, and prank booby-traps designed to squirt water at unsuspecting viewers.<sup>7</sup> Physical examples survive as well, including a 14th-century water powered fountain automaton, now housed at the Cleveland Museum of Art. While most of the concrete evidence that survives comes from the later medieval periods, evidence of automata going as far back as the ancient world does survive. The Antikythera Mechanism (c.80 BCE) is essentially a very early analog computing device likely intended for astronomical calculations, powered by a hand crank (Truitt 4-5); what's left of it is now in the National Museum of Athens. Calculation devices like astrolabes, which serve as astronomical and navigation guides, and calendars from the Middle Ages survive in multiple examples.

The Park of Hesdin illustrates more than the existence of mechanical knowledge in the Middle Ages; it also highlights the connections between the romance genre and science fiction. This link between gardens and romance literature has been made before. Van Buren points to the parallels between the literary descriptions of gardens in medieval romances, including the *Roman de la Rose* and *Cleomadès*, and argues that Hesdin's gardens and others like it were modeled on such literary examples (130-133). Truitt points out that by the 12th century, automata were making appearances in romances and *chansons des geste* (5-6), and that by the 13th century, western Europeans were designing and creating their own devices (6). The general timeline for the realization of automata in medieval Europe, including in England and France, parallels the appearance of works like John Mandeville's travelogue and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Besides bringing to light the possibility that some of the fantastic-seeming elements of romance literature had a basis in science, the romance also provides a second connection between science fiction and the travel narrative. Since many romances involved a journey, the main difference is that the romance was accepted as largely fictional, while the travel narrative was, at least theoretically, considered non-fiction.<sup>8</sup>

The travel to a strange place is a very common and early trope in both fantasy and science fiction; historically, it's also highly suited to the 14th and 15th centuries, times of travel and discovery by

explorers from many Western European nations. Marco Polo was active between about 1269-1293, and Simon FitzSimon was exploring in the 1320s. John Cabot, Bartolomeu Dias, Christopher Columbus, Amerigo Vespucci, Juan Ponce de Leon, Pedro Alvares Cabral, and Vasco de Gama were all active in the latter half of the 15th century. The letters, journals, and stories they recorded were based on observation in a manner similar to the scientific methods and practices of the times, and although the interpretations may not be viewed as accurate today, their writings paved the way for texts more intentionally fictional. For example, Marco Polo describes unicorns nearly the size of elephants that “delight much to abide in mire and mud. ‘Tis a passingly ugly beast to look upon, and is not in the least like that which our stories tell of as being caught in the lap of a virgin; in fact, ‘tis altogether different from what we fancied” (qtd. in Nigg 190). Polo emphasizes the difference between the fantasy folk tradition and the reality of what we now recognize as the Indian rhinoceros, a confusion which Nigg traces back to Ctesias in late 5<sup>th</sup>-century Greece (186). This attention to the difference between reality and fantasy suggests that Polo believed that what he was describing was *not* fiction, albeit composed in terms derived from fiction.

The genre of the romance is one of the most recognized forms of medieval fiction, and it provides some of the strongest foundations of the modern science fiction genre. Many histories of science fiction point to the travel or journey trope as one of the founding elements of science fiction. Roberts calls it the “ur form” (ix-x), and Seed suggests that “one of the first images we associate with science fiction is the spaceship; one of the first plotlines we expect is the journey into space” (6). Keyes notices many parallels between the medieval era and the 20th century, which might help explain the importance of science fiction to both eras. She argues for the connections between the romance and science fiction based on similarities in general definitions, parallels in historical and cultural backgrounds, and shared use of the archetypes of the journey plot, hero protagonist, and other characters. She points out that both W.R.J. Barron’s definition of “romance” and Thomas Clareson’s definition of American “science fiction” take note of their respective genre’s focus on rejecting realism and projecting into the past or future to consider ideas of a perfected humanity (6-7). She labels both the medieval period and the 20th century as “times of ‘collective distress’” and connects the latter to the Jungian idea of archetypes as a solution to relieve distress

arising from the unconscious (21-22). Keyes further argues for similarities in the use of the journey and character archetypes and patterns Karl Jung and Vladimir Propp describe in both fantasy and science fiction of the twentieth century (75-100).

The Middle Ages was the time of the development of the romance genre as well as its heyday in Europe, which helps explain why it is so fundamental to the development of science fiction. Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* (History of the Kings of Britain) and Robert Wace's *Geste des Bretons* (Deeds of the Britons) provide the foundation for many English romances, along with Chrétien de Troyes, who wrote early French Arthurian romances, and all during the early to mid-12th century. By the 14th century, texts including *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* show that the genre was not only still present, but also being adapted into other settings and styles. The use of the journey as frame for both chivalric and non-chivalric stories came to Chaucer through Giovanni Boccaccio in the mid-14th century, and it was continued by Marguerite of Navarre in the mid-16th century; furthermore, the traditional chivalric romance was passed down through Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* in the late-15<sup>th</sup> century to today. In addition to the romance as a plot and character influence, its focus on natural magic provides the cornerstone of what becomes known as science fiction. "Natural magic" is a medieval term for magic that can be learned (Saunders 147), which includes medical practices and cures like herbal remedies, potions, and charms, magical stones and alchemy, and magical technology including weapons and automata. While Saunders examines mostly romance texts, she does note the adaptation of actual knowledge and practices including medical practices (118-24), magic stones (124-30), the problem of love magic (130-34), and magical technology (134-44) as documented in other sources. While she frames her discussion largely in terms of magic, many of the specific areas of study relate to current scientific knowledge of the medieval time period, and thus could be used as forms of science fiction if framed as genuine knowledge instead of as magic or miracle. While more fantasy-type stories were certainly common in the romance genre, the trope of the journey was also beginning to be used in stories contextualized as scientific knowledge.

### Part III: Medieval Fiction with Science

Two texts belonging to the 1300s are occasionally noted in histories of science fiction; however, while both are recognized as having some tropes in common with established science fiction texts, neither is typically treated as a part of the main evolution of science fiction writing. *The Book of John Mandeville* is a travelogue to other lands, but not entirely based on known facts about real places. It was probably written in 1356-57, and framed as a travel guide to the Holy Land. While some of the details might be simple misunderstanding, like the depiction of Greek Christian practices (ll.249-74), others are generally accurate observations, like the description of the Dead Sea (ll.902-09).<sup>9</sup> Some elements are obviously fantastic, including the claim to have found the Fountain of Youth, meeting men with dog heads, and seeing Blemmyae (ll. 1597, 1854-85), while other parts cover current scientific thinking, such as a discussion of the shape of the world as a globe (ll.1687-1778). The combination of accepted Aristotelian science and the visit to Aristotle's tomb (ll.210-13) with attempts to explain the fantastic represents the developing "softer" side of science fiction. Much like the definition of the science fiction genre in general, the lines between hard and soft science fiction are not always clear. Max Gladstone defines "hard" sci-fi as "SF where the math works," and Aliette de Bodard defines "soft sci-fi" as focusing more on "more on sociology, societies and the interaction between characters" (qtd. in Wilde).

Mandeville also borrows from other texts (largely uncited), but some of the fantastic details are treated as factual in the borrowed text and may represent its author trying to describe something real but unfamiliar in terms of something recognized as fantasy. For example, Mandeville describes a large gourd-like plant which, when open, produces lamb-like animals (ll.2338-51); this is very similar to a passage describing the exact same thing in the journal of Friar Odoric, a Franciscan who travelled through India, China, Tibet, and Malaysia around the same time as Marco Polo (see Nigg 191-92 and 197-98). The plant in the friar's journal is now identified as *cibotium barometz*, a type of tree fern (Nigg 192; Feigenbaum). Another example of the use of genuine scientific material comes with the text's reference to Sacrobosto's *De Sphera* (Khansky and Benson, "Appendix"). While establishing authorial intent is all the more difficult due to the uncertainty around the authorship of the text,<sup>10</sup> *The Book of John*

*Mandeville* is a combination of both fact and fiction, often of a scientific nature.

The fictional elements of the travelogue would continue to develop, and eventually intentionally and fully fictional texts appear. Lochrie argues that *The Book of John Mandeville* is a utopian text of sorts (593ff.), which would make it a direct ancestor of one of the most famous early examples of utopian literature, Thomas More's 1516 *Utopia*. More's text retains the shape of a travelogue, except that the place itself as described is no longer factual, and the interpretations of socio-political details are intentionally satiric. Lochrie also makes the connection with More, and does so in a way that sounds similar to many modern definitions of science fiction, labeling utopia as presented in both texts as "a deliberate imagining of alternative worlds and the critical reflection such imagining precipitates on the presumed world of the author and readership" (593). Utopian and dystopian tropes remain influential in science fiction today, including in texts like Emma Newman's *Planetfall* and Hannu Rajaniemi's *Summerland* (2018).

The second late-14<sup>th</sup> century text that directly combines scientific fact or understanding with fiction is Geoffrey Chaucer's "The Canon's Yeoman's Prologue and Tale," a skeptical portrayal of both "fictional" and "real" alchemists at work that takes place within *The Canterbury Tales*. Alchemy is now often labeled as a predecessor to modern chemistry, and its practitioners included recognized scientists like Isaac Newton and Robert Boyle (Linden 16-17). Chaucer, in fact, has been credited with the first alchemist (scientist) character in Western literature (Benson 20). He began *The Canterbury Tales* in the 1390s, and the multi-part work remained unfinished at his death in 1400. What Chaucer did was take what was viewed as a fairly new area of knowledge and brought it into his poetry, and he does so in a way that shows the beginnings of the more realistic branches of science fiction.

The "Canon's Yeoman's Prologue and Tale" is important to the history of science fiction because it is one of the first vernacular texts to intentionally use real scientific knowledge and practice in a decidedly fictional context. Following tradition, the text is divided into three parts.<sup>11</sup> In the first part, the prologue, the Yeoman and his Canon catch up to the pilgrimage which is well underway and ask to join the group. Under increasing scrutiny from the Host about who

these two are and their intentions, the Yeoman is forced to admit that he and his master are not successful alchemists as they had claimed, and the Canon then leaves the group in shame and fear that his Yeoman will reveal his trade's secrets. The second part, *pars prima* of the tale, has the Yeoman describing alchemy and listing off its ingredients and processes. The realism in using information that matches what was in some popular texts of the time has led to speculation over whether or not Chaucer himself may have been a practicing alchemist.<sup>12</sup> *Pars prima* ends with the Yeoman describing a failed experiment in which he and his master participated. The third section, sometimes called the tale proper or *secunda pars*, is the story of a dishonest alchemist who uses sleight-of-hand to sell an alchemic recipe (which does not work ultimately) to a gullible and greedy priest for forty pounds. The villainous alchemist-canon uses three tricks which are described in detail. First, he pretends to turn mercury into silver by placing a hollow piece of coal with silver placed inside, sealed with wax. When the fire melts the wax, the silver is released. Second, he uses a hollow stick, filled with silver and plugged by wax, to stir the fire, with similar result. Lastly, he uses sleight-of-hand again to switch a copper piece with a silver piece. The priest, now convinced that the canon can turn mercury into silver, takes out a very large loan to purchase the recipe, which the priest finally discovers is fraudulent.

In terms of the science, alchemy has a history stretching back to ancient societies, and that history provided a source of authority and inspiration for the medieval alchemist (Linden 39-40). Often under the labels of "natural philosophy" or "natural magic," practices were developing that became the predecessors to many of the modern scientific disciplines, including astronomy, chemistry, and medicine. Many of these disciplines were being discovered or rediscovered in the 12th century, derived from Latin translations of Arabic and Greek texts, particularly those connected with recognized, long-standing subjects of the *quadrivium* (math, geometry, astronomy, and music) and medicine. In England, Robert Grosseteste and Roger Bacon, both early 13<sup>th</sup> century theologians and mathematicians, worked to convince the world that mathematics, theology, and other branches of knowledge, including astronomy, were the best methods for understanding the physical world around them (Kibre I.176-79, 185, 188-91). Thomas Aquinas went further by arguing that natural philosophy should follow mathematics in the curriculum, and that the

study of the physical world through natural philosophy should be conducted through experiment and experience (Kibre I.181). Aquinas also reasoned that if it were possible to make genuine gold via alchemy, it should be accepted as legitimate, since “nothing prevents art from employing certain natural causes for the production of natural and true effects” (qtd. in Minnis 109-10). Astronomy and alchemy also connect through Albertus Magnus, who wrote on both subjects, and Chaucer also reveals this link in his work, given his probable knowledge of these fields. Albertus Magnus (13<sup>th</sup> c.) is understood to have used Latin translations of several Arabic philosophers’ works, including those of Avicenna and Aristotle (Kibre III.188-90). Albertus also noted the importance of experimentation for both alchemy and medicine in his *Liber Mineralium* (Kibre III.191-93). Like Chaucer’s Canon’s Yeoman would later do, Albertus had to admit that although he recognized the potential of the theories of alchemy, he was unaware of an example of successful complete execution of the alchemic process (Kibre III.193-95). Albertus’ ideas also included the necessity of observation and experiment, and the acceptance of findings through reproduced experimental results (ibid.).

#### **Part IV: From the Middle Ages through the Renaissance (and beyond)**

Medieval literature starts trends which would develop into science fiction, such as the use of the journey and the use of science (theoretical and practical) of the day, and that progress into later literary periods. In the early Early Modern age, authors would continue to explore the possibilities of science fiction, but would also test the boundaries between sci-fi and fantasy. Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* (1590) Book 5 features Talus, the metal man servant of a star, who is given to the knight Artegall as his helper. This text raises questions about the line between fantasy and sci-fi, and in an otherwise standard fantasy with wizards, faeries, and magical creatures, Book 5 really stands out. As a gift from a star, Talus represents a mechanical creation that was recognized as a scientific reality (automata) and associated with the foreign and exotic.<sup>13</sup> The common interpretation of this part of the allegory is that it refers to Ireland, most evident in the figure of Eirena, whose kingdom has been

stolen, as she asks Artegal to help return it to her<sup>14</sup>, and this reading helps support the element of otherness that Talus represents. While Talus may also be a literary descendant of Talos, the mythological bronze guardian of Crete (V.105, n.10), his qualities of being “Immoveable, resistlesse, without end” (V.106) mirror the reputation of his material composition: iron. In Spencer’s time, Ireland was regarded as a mystical “other” by most English, and automata were a known phenomenon in mechanical, physical forms by this time in England, as well (Hyman). Book V of the *Faerie Queene* in particular illustrates an example of science fiction being woven into another genre--in this case, allegorical fantasy.

The early decades of the 17th century show more scientific advances and the continuation of science in fiction. Johannes Kepler’s *Somnium* (c.1625; pub. 1634) describes what life on the Earth’s moon is like. This might pass as fantasy of his day, save that Kepler was an astronomer and mathematician, and he believed in the possibility of what he was considering. In addition to providing footnotes explaining the science behind the ideas in *Somnium*, Kepler was elsewhere on record as arguing for the possibility of life on other planets (Nicolson 27-28). Similarly, Francis Godwin’s “The Man in the Moone” considers a possible civilization on the moon, although with a utopian emphasis. Taking a slightly different approach, Francis Bacon’s *New Atlantis* (c.1626-27) is a scientifically-based fictional world grounded in experimentation and the scientific method, although it also adopts a potentially utopian perspective. Godwin was a clergyman, but his travel- to-the-moon story suggests that he wonders whether some ideas from Copernicus may be accurate (Nicholls and Kinkaid), which means the author may have favored at least some of the scientific theory. Bacon was known both for his philosophy and for his advancement of mathematics and the scientific method, which raises the likelihood that he may have believed in some of the theoretical possibilities as well.

In the late Renaissance, many of the sci-fi themes continue as more are added with advances in science and the rise of the Enlightenment in Western Europe. In 1726, Jonathan Swift published *Gulliver’s Travels*, which features in Book 3 a section exploring the flying island of Laputa, inhabited by a bunch of science-obsessed philosophers. A similar approach is taken in Louis-Sebastian Mercier’s *The Year 2440* (1771), the story of a science-worshipping society in which science *is* the religion and plays a role in all aspects

of life. A reverse of the travelogue in which a European observes something foreign appears in *Micromegas* by Voltaire (1752); here, visitors from Saturn and Sirius are bemused about Earthling customs. While humorous and satiric in intent, this may also be the first “alien visitation” story. There are some criticisms about these kinds of tales that they are either too soft or satiric to be science fiction per se; Stableford and Attenby represent this position, with Stableford calling *Gulliver’s Travels* an early form of “anti-science fiction” (15). Attenby’s position is less direct, as he cites critic Arthur Kestler, who claimed that because Swift’s novel was canonical literature, it could not be considered part of the science fiction genre (45), and Attenby agrees with this assessment. Seed, Roberts, and Scholes and Rabkin defend Swift’s novel as sci-fi on the basis that it included real scientific theory, uses a standard sci-fi theme of estrangement, and features both exploration and re-envisioning of the universe. Scholes and Rabkin point out that Swift’s reference to the two moons of Mars was not physically observed until 1877 (161), and they argue that in the case of *Gulliver’s Travels*, the only distinction from traditional science fiction is that this text seems to argue that the problems in society are more the fault of people, and not technology (31). Seed raises the issue of estrangement (74-75), and Roberts notes the presence of the alien in Swift’s novel and “seeing the universe anew in terms of the very large and the very small” (86-87). Thus, the arguments that science fiction cannot be satirical or literary are in the minority, and these views do not take into account the historical precedents of Chaucer and Thomas More, either.

In the 1800s, the era of what is traditionally recognized as science fiction begins with Mary Shelley, Jules Verne, and H. G. Wells. Looking back at the tracing of various tropes of science fiction, the inclusion of current scientific theory, often before any concrete discovery, is consistent throughout the literature, and from the medieval to the modern period. The earliest stories are travel narratives, a popular historical practice and genre at the time, and while satire might apply in some cases, it does not change the fact that such stories remain plausible within the realm of then-accepted knowledge. Next comes stories based on the rise of various scientific disciplines, including astronomy and physics which develops into space travel and alien civilizations, with mechanisms such as clockwork and automata evolving into robots. These are followed by

biology (*Frankenstein* or Hawthorne's "Rappaccini's Daughter"), then computers and concepts like artificial intelligence and virtual reality, which brings science fiction the rest of the way into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Kears and Paz make this observation as well, and point out that in addition to astronomy and alchemy, Chaucer also had interests in natural philosophy, medicine, and mechanical devices (12).

<sup>2</sup>Shields presents a concise review of the Aristotelian definition of tragedy and its relevant terms (section 13). See Golden for a discussion of the clues and scholarship concerning Aristotle's definition of comedy.

<sup>3</sup>Keyes traces the problems from the Gregorian reforms, participation of the Church in secular affairs, and corruption (22-28).

<sup>4</sup>"Computus" is "the art of reckoning time or a book containing knowledge of this art (narrowing the word's original meaning of an enumeration, computation, or account)" (Jones 509). Computus involved knowledge of mathematics and astronomy, and it became a standard school subject in the Carolingian period.

<sup>5</sup>Scholes and Rabkin list and discuss the following "sciences of science fiction": scientific method, physics and astronomy, computers, thermodynamics, biology, psychology, and pseudoscience (114-59).

<sup>6</sup>Details concerning the importance of Aristotle at the University of Oxford are from North (66-83).

<sup>7</sup>The records of the park, its history, and mechanisms are described in the most depth by Van Buren.

<sup>8</sup>Truitt argues that while the medieval writer acknowledged and observed the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction, the boundaries themselves do not necessarily match with modern definitions of the genres (6-7).

<sup>9</sup>References from *The Book of John Mandeville* are from Kohansky and Benson's edition.

<sup>10</sup>Kohansky and Benson review the problems and theories surrounding the authorship of the text, with categories such as "Author, Date Of Composition, And Original Language."

<sup>11</sup>Divisions and labels are from Benson's edition, *The Riverside Chaucer*.

<sup>12</sup>Damon Foster makes one of the earliest arguments in favor of Chaucer being an alchemist; he cites Elias Ashmole's idea that Chaucer was an adept, and explains the errors in the Canon's Yeoman's text as Chaucer trying to quote from memory. On the other side, Pauline Aiken points out that Chaucer need only have had access to texts with information about alchemy such as the *Speculum Naturale* and the *Speculum Doctrinale* of Vincent of Beauvais. Most recently, Dorothee Metlitzki argues that Chaucer knew the science, but was most likely being allegorical in his use of it.

<sup>13</sup>Truitt argues that automata were viewed as foreign because they arrived in the Latin West as gifts from the Islamicate, Mongol, and Byzantine worlds (8-9).

<sup>14</sup>Stoll reviews the history and scholarship of Spencer in Ireland and the allegorical interpretations of the text (xiv-xv).

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## “Lusty as Nature”: Whitman’s Environmental Eroticism

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The hairy wild-bee that murmurs and hankers up and down, that  
gripes the full-grown lady-flower, curves upon her with  
amorous firm legs, takes his will of her, and holds himself  
tremulous and tight till he is satisfied

— Walt Whitman, “Spontaneous Me” (17)

Despite American squeamishness when it comes to discussing the particulars of sex, environmental eroticism has an extended cultural history. In his study of the idea of pornography in America, Joseph W. Slade writes that the “Puritans were not quite the prudes” we think, because while “they enforced stern morality, the protocols of community life merely shunted sexual expression to taverns and stables, fields and forests” (50–51). In other words, the Puritan tradition that so heavily influenced the nation’s early literary culture did not so much eliminate the erotic as relegate it to those corners of the human experience outside the home, and few areas were better for this purpose than America’s “fields and forests.” Decades of hiding the culture’s erotic and sexual inclinations within environmental metaphors and non-human stand-ins resulted in a rich, if shrouded, ecological sensuality. Walt Whitman, however, rejects this veiled approach, and with imagery like that of his “hairy wild-bee,” as quoted above in “Spontaneous Me,” he offers up a powerful vision of a sensualized natural world, one that lifts the veil of innuendo while retaining the allure of the Romantic aesthetic. Indeed, such references to human sensuality bound within, or set in motion by, elements of the natural realm are found throughout Whitman’s work, which often depicts sexuality as a component of the larger ecological system.

In one of the few literary studies to address the erotics of environmental literature, Stacy Alaimo argues that an understanding of this trans-corporeality (the natural intermingling of human bodies and the larger non-human environment) must accommodate the “startling portrayal of erotic, corporeal natures” (22). Alaimo, in

reading Meridel Le Sueur's poems "Nests" and "Corn Village," contends that the poet "relishes positive, even erotic, relations between landscapes and laborers" (45). Juxtaposing the portrayals of human/environmental permeability found in the poetry of Le Sueur and Muriel Rukeyser, Alaimo concludes that "both writers attempt to write bodies and natures in ways that emphasize their palpable interrelations; in so doing, they forge a sense of environment that counters the early twentieth-century conservationist and preservationist model of nature as a world apart" (32). At issue in her study is the recognition of the complexities inherent in various portrayals of the mingling of the human and the non-human. The sensuality of such late-twentieth-century texts highlights a growing cultural understanding of ecological imbrication and its implications across a range of environmental justice issues.

Likewise, Whitman, whose verse repeatedly addresses the material connection between human bodies and the non-human environment, anticipates the push-back against simplistic preservationist ideas that Alaimo recognizes in those later poets. His consciousness of the intermingling between humanity and the non-human has its roots deeply buried in the Romantic concept of a spiritual link between the two entities. As such, his trans-corporeal imagination stops short of modern ecology's scientifically-based understanding of the literal material oneness of humanity's existence with our surroundings. That is, while Whitman lacks a contemporary understanding of environmental networks—a twentieth century development—he nevertheless infuses his writing with its Romantic precursor.

Several of Whitman's poems display these characteristics in a pronounced way and often go well beyond the conceits of earlier texts in which the natural world and its components merely stand in for erotic references that were largely forbidden at the time. Referencing Whitman's work, Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson write that "[c]onnections, assemblages, and becomings form central concerns for many queer and nature writers" (39). In this essay, I pay particular attention to how Whitman's nature poetry not only incorporates characteristics of human sexuality within the non-human realm, but also, through such environmentally "queer" meldings, highlights the connections and "becomings" that emerge from this process. Ultimately, I argue that while Whitman's work bears a

Romanticized view, his combining of human and non-human sexuality creates an environmental eroticism that functions not only as an anthropomorphized sexual surrogate, but also as a reminder of our species' trans-corporeality, our literal physical connection to the larger ecosystem.

### **“the pent-up rivers of myself”**

Whitman did not invent an American erotic natural world as much as he rescued it from its inherent obscurity, saving it from half-masked innuendos and intimations of prurience, from the black-box titillation of Indian captivity narratives and the didactic tease of the novel of seduction. In a gesture as aggressive as his voice, Whitman wrenched America's sexuality from the corners of the national mind, pulled back its oblique veils, dusted off its layers of coyness, and placed it squarely in the light of his revelatory verse. He shouts this ethos in the opening line of “To a Common Prostitute,” when he proclaims, “Be composed—be at ease with me—I am Walt Whitman, liberal and lusty as Nature” (1), and it arises again and again, across the landscape of his work, as when the same lusty poet describes the mating of two eagles as “a living, fierce, gyrating wheel, / Four beating wings, two beaks, a swirling mass tight grappling” (“The Dalliance of the Eagles,” 4–5). As these examples suggest, Whitman presents both his own human sexuality and that of nature's floral and faunal denizens, who in their intimacy figure simultaneously for the plants and animals they represent and for the sensuality they exude.

Whitman's invocation of an erotic connection to the natural world emerges throughout *Leaves of Grass*, such as near the beginning of “Song of Myself,” where the poet's voice proclaims, “Houses and rooms are full of perfumes, the shelves are crowded with perfumes, / I breathe the fragrance myself and know it and like it, / The distillation would intoxicate me also, but I shall not let it” (14–16). Rather, having admitted the charms of these perfume-filled rooms, Whitman's persona leaves these habitations behind in favor of the natural world, where “The atmosphere is not a perfume, it has no taste of the distillation, it is odorless, / It is for my mouth forever, I am in love with it, / I will go to the bank by the wood and become undisguised and naked, / I am mad for it to be in contact with me” (16–20). Whitman makes it clear that this contact between his persona and the natural world transcends some mere Romantic conceit, taking on instead a powerfully intimate connection between the human and

the non-human. In discussing the erotics of this and subsequent passages associated with Whitman's "erotically deprived twenty-ninth bather," Vivian R. Pollak writes, "In each instance, lovemaking occurs in a pastoral setting which liberates [these personae] from a home-bound life. Both personae select fantasy lovers who are unaware of their presence. [...] Whitman claims to be in love with the atmosphere; analogically, he implies the boundlessness of his love for human beings undifferentiated by gender" (87). Pollak's observation that the persona of the poem actively loves an entity incapable of recognizing his presence helps illuminate the complexity of Whitman's concept of making love to the nonhuman environment.

In fact, when considered from a trans-corporeal view, the elements of the natural world are figuratively aware of Whitman's persona to the extent that they become—through his encounter with them—literally part of his being. As that persona addresses his movement from the perfumed rooms to the woods, he proclaims an intense desire to encounter the natural atmosphere ("I am mad for it to be in contact with me"). In selecting the atmosphere of the woods as his natural love, Whitman's persona chooses an entity that despite its ethereal form nevertheless supplies one of the deepest examples of physical "contact"—breathing: "The smoke of my own breath, / Echoes, ripples, buzz'd whispers, love-root, silk-thread, crotch and vine, / My respiration and inspiration, the beating of my heart, the passing of blood and air through my lungs" (21–23). Here Whitman aligns a Romantic tableau of pastoral imagery with a more clinically physiological recognition of how the process of respiration might itself constitute a type of love-making, one no less intimate, absorptive, or life-generating as sex between two humans. As he puts it: "The sound of the belch'd words of my voice loos'd to the eddies of the wind, / A few light kisses, a few embraces, a reaching around of arms" (25–26). Whitman's persona takes the atmosphere into himself and embraces it just as one might a human lover.

In "A Woman Waits for Me," Whitman's persona boasts of the animalistic nature of his sexuality. He writes, "I draw you close to me, you women, / [...] I pour the stuff to start sons and daughters fit for these States, I press with slow rude muscle" (20, 28), and then, in lines that not so much deny Western culture's sexual inhibitions as toss them into a ditch outright, he exclaims: "I dare not withdraw till I deposit what has so long accumulated within me. / Through you I

drain the pent-up rivers of myself, / [...] On you I graft the grafts of the best-beloved of me and America. / The drops I distil upon you shall grow fierce and athletic girls, new artists, musicians, and singers” (30–31, 33–34). He concludes by melding his lusty proclamations about his “seminal milk” with his signature prophetic gaze:

I shall demand perfect men and women out of my love-  
spendings,  
I shall expect them to interpenetrate with others, as I and you  
interpenetrate now,  
I shall count on the fruits of the gushing showers of them, as I  
count on the fruits of the gushing showers I give now,  
I shall look for loving crops from the birth, life, death,  
immortality, I plant so lovingly now. (36–39)

Whitman’s “A Woman Waits for Me” presents a visceral description of male sexuality, and indeed, of the material reality of human reproduction in general, all while eschewing the innuendo and biological deflection so common in the love poetry of the era. Camille Paglia argues that “Whitman must overemphasize his maleness to retain his own sex in the surging female nature of his poetry” and that “masculinity is the feeblest of Whitman’s personae,” and as such his “lust for women is merely mimed” (605). However, while Whitman’s poetry certainly celebrates gay and bisexual desire, in “A Woman Waits for Me,” the poet does not “mime” a lust for women so much as boast of his love for them. Whitman portrays human reproduction as a patriotic duty, and as such he celebrates the role of women, as well as men, in that process. Mark Maslan argues, “the marginality of Whitman’s women results from the centrality he grants to the desire for them. If these poems are not about being possessed by a *beloved*, they are nevertheless very much about being possessed by *love*” (47, italics in original).

This love, when coupled with Whitman’s ecological imagination, becomes something decidedly more than gendered or even human. He presents a hydrological, agricultural eroticism, one in which the speaker of the poem charts the flow of his seminal “rivers” through a triumphant litany of sexual imagery, from his “gushing showers” of “love-spendings” to the “loving crops” of future Americans who constitute a never-ending harvest of copulatory generations springing forth from what he “plant[s] so lovingly.” This gesture of equating Americans with plants is at least as old as J.

Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782), in which he writes: "Men are like plants; the goodness and flavour of the fruit proceeds from the peculiar soil and exposition in which they grow" (71); and "Every industrious European who transports himself here may be compared to a sprout growing at the foot of a great tree [...] transplant it and it will become a tree bearing fruit also" (80). Whitman, however, offers a more sophisticated literary equation. Like Crèvecoeur, he transmutes Americans into the very crops they so dutifully sow, tend, reap, and consume, but unlike Crèvecoeur, he also argues that such a transmutation is hardly necessary because humanity is already a component of the non-human environment that we—literally and figuratively—feed with our blood and sweat, until our decomposing bodies fertilize the same soil upon which future generations subsist.

### **"the body of the man, the body of the earth"**

Nowhere does Whitman more powerfully convey his notion of a sexual intimacy between humanity and the more-than-human environment than in "Spontaneous Me," a poem in which he aligns the concepts of pollination and copulation, poems and penises, semen and sap. Opening with the lines, "Spontaneous me, Nature, / The loving day, the mounting sun, the friend I am happy with" (1–2), this poem unfolds as a conjoined celebration of both a Romanticized natural world and of a specifically masculine eroticism. He acclaims the concept of erotic desire between men and women and also exclusively between men, repeatedly referencing same-sex intimacy and love. Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson, discussing the role of the environment in queer literature, write that "natural settings have been important sites for the exploration of male homosexuality as a natural practice. Rural spaces in particular have served, in a wide range of literatures, as places of freedom for male homoerotic encounters" (23). This questioning of heteronormativity and other socially-constructed ideas about what counts as so-called "natural" versus unnatural sexuality strikes to the core of Whitman's eroticism, which he unleashes in "Spontaneous Me" in a whirlwind of sensual imagery that confounds then-established sexual boundaries. He begins with images of a pastoral landscape: "The rich coverlet of the grass, animals and birds, the private untrimm'd bank, the primitive apples, the pebble-stones" (6); he then follows with a swirl of imagery related

to a masculine human nature marked by explicitly phallic and seminal references that unabashedly confront male sexuality. Melding the idea of a poem with that of the human penis itself, Whitman's voice asserts: "The poems of the privacy of the night, and of men like me, / This poem drooping shy and unseen that I always carry, and that all men carry, / (Know once for all, avow'd on purpose, wherever are men like me, are our lusty lurking masculine poems)" (9–11). He further extends the conceit, linking human nature with that of the plants and insects, writing of "Love-thoughts, love-juice, love-odor, love-yielding, love-climbers, and the climbing sap, / [...] The body of my love, the body of the woman I love, the body of the man, the body of the earth" (12, 14).

Discussing Whitman's erotics as well as his portrayal of the natural world in "Spontaneous Me," M. Jimmie Killingsworth illuminates the larger literary tradition that includes Whitman's tendency to join the natural world to an overtly human erotic aesthetic. Killingsworth notes that Whitman's lusty bee constitutes "a trope that conflates feeding and sex—the suggestiveness of which has become a convention in American ecopoetics, among writers as different as Emily Dickinson and Zora Neale Hurston" (93). Killingsworth continues by highlighting that in this poem Whitman's "catalog of images continues through a number of earthly scenes, arriving finally back where it began, at the poet's contemplation of his own genitals" (93). This recognition of Whitman's conflation of "feeding and sex"—both in "Spontaneous Me" and other poems—drives home the concept of a material intermingling of these two biological systems. While this observation does not fully incorporate the implications of Whitman's combined sexual and natural imagery, it does come close to recognizing a fledgling trans-corporeal imagination on the part of the poet, one distinct from merely tired Romantic tropes highlighting alternative forms of physical intimacy.

"Spontaneous Me," with its vignette of erotic pollination, exemplifies Whitman's sensual anthropomorphism, but it also serves as an example of an all-too-common problem in nineteenth-century American poetry—that of privileging a masculine self over a feminine one. Contrasting the poetry of Emily Dickinson with that of Whitman, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar note a pronounced "pattern of female self-effacement and male self-assertion" (554). Whitman's poetry, famous for his boisterous proclamations and sundry boasts, certainly conveys this trend and, in the end, highly influences the way

he constructs the concept of human sensuality. His bee, with its personified phallic sexuality, embodies human masculinity in both appearance and posture, and the “full-grown lady-flower” takes on an equally human feminine, yonic, yet passive form. Whitman’s poetry does not need to be feminist to be environmental, but it is instructive to note how despite the freshness of his verse, he too falls into a tired phallogocentric view of the land that portrays natural elements as a set of passive and feminine entities upon which to assert the masculine self. Furthermore, the eroticism of these lines conveys an overtly sexualized dynamic of dominance and submission in that the bee mounts the passive flower with his “firm” legs and “takes his will of her [...] till he is satisfied.” Melding the traditionally innocuous pastoral imagery of a bee upon a flower with that of human (or at least animal) sexual intercourse, Whitman joins the realities of human and non-human desire while highlighting the ubiquitous—at least for his verse—sensitivity woven into even his most traditionally mild scenes.

In a calculus of interspecies intimacy, the survival of the flower relies upon pollination by the bee, and the bee relies upon the flower’s pollen. Wrapping these two, the bee and the flower, in human-like garb, Whitman reminds us of our dependence upon others (whether human or not) for our needs while also underscoring the nature of erotic desire. Predictably for Whitman, scientific veracity takes a distant second to the demands of his Romanticized aesthetic. After all, in reality the vast majority of individual bees visiting flowers are *female* worker bees, and the pollen-rich stamen is the male portion of a flower. Whitman’s reversal of these gender roles – which itself might invoke a form of sexual violence in which the passive female is violated by an aggressively dominant male—seems engineered to further his anthropomorphized eroticism, and such liberties align with a parenthetical “caution” he includes in *Specimen Days*:

(You must not know too much, or be too precise or scientific about birds and trees and flowers and water-craft; a certain free margin, and even vagueness—perhaps ignorance, credulity—helps your enjoyment of these things, and of the sentiment of feather’d, wooded, river, or marine Nature generally. [...] My own notes have been written off-hand. [...] Though they describe what I saw—what appear’d to me—I

dare say the expert ornithologist, botanist or entomologist will detect more than one slip in them). (929)

These remarks echo the sentiments of his well-known poem, “When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer,” in which the speaker, made “tired and sick” by an astronomy lecture, takes a walk “In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time, / Look’d up in perfect silence at the stars” (5, 7–8). Taken together, these statements serve as reminders not only of Whitman’s unapologetic lack of concern about adhering to scientific fact over a Romantic, “mystical” approach to the natural world, but also of the importance he assigns in his nature writing to the concept of aesthetic “enjoyment.” In fact, enjoyment and the kindred concept of satisfaction (as demonstrated by the bee who couples with the flower “till he is satisfied”) factor heavily into Whitman’s work, which—though tainted by the privileging of male procreation with a passive and subservient female—might still be read as an affirmation of the joy and rightness of human sexuality, in its many forms, that joins person to person, generation to generation, and—in a lover’s embrace—humanity to the land.

Throughout Whitman’s oeuvre we find passages that lend further support to Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson’s contention that queer authors employ “an ecology that embraces deviation and strangeness as a necessary part of biophilia, sexual pleasure and transgression as foundational to environmental ethics and politics” (39). Along with the previously discussed poems, these moments appear in a host of Whitman’s other environmentally-focused works, such as “The Prairie-Grass Dividing,” in which he again embraces the potential for nature poetry to address human sexuality, and often a gay sexuality, by conjuring a prairie ecosystem that fosters “the most copious and close companionship of men” who “go their own gait, erect, stepping with freedom” and “with sweet and lusty flesh” (3, 6–7). Whitman takes on a slightly different approach to human sexuality in “I Saw in Louisiana a Live-Oak Growing,” a poem in which he adopts a more subdued tone than that found in “Spontaneous Me” or “A Woman Waits for Me.” Nevertheless, in this poem he still conveys his hallmark environmental sensuality, communicating a trans-corporeal intimacy, one highlighting the connections between one species and another, even between a species and the land itself. Here Whitman presents such a kinship that incorporates his poetic persona and a live-oak tree growing alone in a vague Louisiana landscape.

As he opens "I Saw in Louisiana a Live-Oak Growing," Whitman establishes his anthropomorphized tree as an admirably Romantic figure, one that manages to convey an exuberance despite its solitary placement. He writes: "All alone stood it and the moss hung down from the branches, / Without any companion it grew there uttering joyous leaves of dark green, / And its look, rude, unbending, lusty, made me think of myself, / But I wonder'd how it could utter joyous leaves standing alone there without its friend near, for I knew I could not" (1-5). Whitman's "lusty" live-oak, given to "uttering joyous leaves," recalls the seminal, "pent-up rivers of myself" found in "A Woman Waits for Me," and the no-less-redolent "climbing sap" and "limpid liquid" of "Spontaneous Me." Whitman again crafts a poem evoking the hallmarks of human sexuality in association with a natural element that comes to figure for human sexual desire, resulting in an effusion of hybridized erotic imagery. Unlike those other poems, however, "I Saw in Louisiana a Live-Oak Growing" features a less boastful persona, one more introspective and marked by a vulnerability missing from Whitman's other environmentally-erotic works. This vulnerability comes across most emphatically in the passage where the speaker relates that he broke a twig from the tree and placed it in his room, proclaiming: "It is not needed to remind me as of my own dear friends, / (For I believe lately I think of little else than of them,) / Yet it remains to me a curious token, it makes me think of manly love" (8-10). Despite his insistence to the contrary, the speaker's gesture of removing a twig from the symbolically-charged tree and placing it within his room as a "token" of "manly love" conveys his urge to break past the barriers of humanity and to share an intimacy with the tree he openly envies for its ability to go on "Uttering joyous leaves all its life without a friend or lover near" (12). The tree's leaves, an effusive product of biological reality akin to Whitman's seminal references in "Spontaneous Me," represent two conjoined facets of Whitman's identity: his poetry and his sexuality. Like the tree, he utters his leaves to the world around him, and, as we know from "Spontaneous Me," he associates the penis with that "poem drooping shy and unseen that I always carry, and that all men carry." Ultimately, the poem's persona identifies with the tree not so much to invoke the masculine and gay sensuality prevalent in Whitman's other erotic works, but to

engage in an introspective examination of the human need to seek out love and affection.

## **Conclusion**

We are only beginning to address the question of how to recognize, interpret, and appreciate the sexuality (human and otherwise) that emerges in environmental literature, and we ignore this cultural relationship between human sexuality and the environment at our own risk.

Since its inception in the early 1990s, ecocriticism has progressed from a largely exclusive study of traditional works of nature writing to a more inclusive practice spanning a range of literary texts and requiring an increasingly interdisciplinary and sophisticated approach to viewing human culture as a product of, and commentary on, the natural world. Environmental critics continue to make progress, for example, in the exploration of how literary portrayals of race, class, and gender factor into, and are themselves impacted by, the environment. Yet the role of sex and erotic desire in environmental literature remains underappreciated. A handful of critics have started to take notice of how select literary texts portray thought-provoking connections between the material environment and human bodies, but critical discourse—perhaps as a result of Western culture’s reluctance to engage in discussions of sexuality—remains sparse.

“Sex is a subset to nature,” writes Camille Paglia: “Sexuality and eroticism are the intricate intersection of nature and culture. [...] We cannot hope to understand sex and gender until we clarify our attitude toward nature” (1). The reverse of this statement is likewise true, and not simply because we cannot claim to understand nature unless we understand sex and gender, but because sex and gender are inseparable components of the natural system of life. And if, as Nancy Easterlin contends, “biological and cultural evolution together highlight the centrality of meaning-making processes for our species” (6), then the literary nexus between the realms of human sexuality and the more-than-human environment represents an auspicious point of departure for much-needed interpretation. Whitman’s sexually-charged nature poetry represents merely one example of a far larger body of understudied environmentally-erotic literature. Critics should more deliberately focus on how eroticism emerges in a variety of environmental texts, whether they are what we might categorize as

traditional nature writing (for example, the maritime sensuality of Rachel Carson's *The Sea Around Us*); represent clinical approaches to biological sexuality (such as in William Bartram's account in *Travels of the mayfly lifecycle*); or take the form of literary prose examinations of the likewise natural condition of human erotic desire within a pronounced environmental context (as Zora Neale Hurston presents through her nature-infused portrayal of Janie Woods's adolescent sexual yearning in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*). Simply put, by failing to recognize the sensuality inherent to the environmental literary mind, we hazard a dangerously impoverished reading, one that misses not only the full picture of the larger holistic ecosystem, but also humanity's enmeshment within that ecosystem.

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# Encounters with Suffering and the Almighty: Theodicy and Rhetoric in the Poetry of Rosalía de Castro and Emily Dickinson

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Critics of the poetry of Rosalía de Castro and Emily Dickinson have frequently emphasized the ethical, philosophical, and religious preoccupations of both poets (for examples of this in Castro, see Balbontín 17, 29, and Montero 89; for instances in Dickinson, see Lundin [2004], Rupp 129, and Wells 34-35). In 1981, Martha LaFollette Miller called attention to the resemblances between Castro and Dickinson and outlined various similarities between the biographies and poetic concerns of both young women. The intriguing parallels between the lives and works of Castro and Dickinson prompt one to identify what common elements underlie their concerns. This would seem to be a straightforward task, yet, as Catherine Davies (1985) has demonstrated in the case of Rosalía de Castro, and Richard Rupp (1977) and Paula Bernat Bennett (2002) in that of Emily Dickinson, the evaluation and appreciation of women poets of the second-half of the nineteenth century has proven more involved than one might imagine.

Davies affirms that, “Arguably, the lifetime work of an author should be considered as a complex structure of forms and themes closely related to its context” (211). This paper will show that the common element shared by Castro and Dickinson which most clearly joins their experience with their poetic art is theodicy, which the poets explore in four principal themes: (1) anguish and suffering; (2) loneliness (*saudade*); (3) death and immortality; and (4) the nature of God. Theodicy performs four functions in the works of the two poets: (1) it links their ethical, philosophical, and religious concerns; (2) it explains the presence of numerous theological questions and biblical allusions in their poetic works; (3) it addresses common concerns of readers during the mid to late nineteenth century; and (4) it demonstrates that, despite certain opinions expressed during their lifetimes, the works of these poets are not purely sentimental, but

rather possess a profoundly cultured and intellectual dimension as well, especially in questions of fundamental theology.

Through the study of representative poetic works, which reveal many of the numerous rhetorical devices that Castro and Dickinson employ, this essay will analyze the development of the theme of theodicy in their works. It will not attempt to reconstruct the biography of the writers on the basis of their works, nor will it seek to explain the psychological factors that contributed to their poetic production. As Davies warns, “The danger lies in the temptation to deduce personality from poetry and then to judge poetry according to personality” (212).

The term “theodicy” has its origin in the Greek expression *Theou dikaiia*, which may be translated as “the cause of God.” While theology is based on the data of revelation provided by the Divinity, theodicy is based on the ordinary facts of human experience, which are found in creation (Benedetto 5). What we learn about God in theodicy is deduced from the relationship between what we experience in the world and the manner in which we experience God. Theodicy neither explains nor can explain the existence of God, but it can lead one to the acceptance of the Divinity as the “Prime Mover” of everything. In its most controversial form, theodicy attempts to demonstrate that the evil and suffering that are evident in the world do not contradict the perfection and goodness of the Divinity. As we shall see, the process of questioning through the lens of theodicy is frequently operative in the poetry of Castro and Dickinson.

Dickinson’s poetic *opus* includes more than 1,800 poems, most of which do not have titles (Dickinson 1:1; see the table following the bibliography for tabulation). She never ordered her poems into titled books, and the latest studies show that she likely published only ten poems during her lifetime (Dickinson 3: 1531-32). Although scholarly opinion long held that Dickinson did not write poems on the basis of any premeditated themes or organizational patterns, recent studies reveal that the poet may have followed deep structural and thematic patterns which are not readily discernible. As Sharon Cameron (1992) has demonstrated with regard to the ordering of the fascicles, and as Dorothy Huff Oberhaus (1995) has shown with the unity and poetic sequence of the fortieth fascicle, Dickinson’s poetry may be far more complex than scholars had

previously believed, especially in the realm of the poet's religious meditations, as Roger Lundin (1998) has so convincingly demonstrated. Dickinson's compilation of poems throughout her life leaves us with a diversity of themes, many of which are related to her concerns about the meaning of life, especially as this involves the question of theodicy.

Research by Oberhaus (1995) examines the complexities surrounding the organization, editing, and publication of Dickinson's work. From 1858 to 1864, the poet made copies of more than eight hundred of her poems and organized them into forty groups (now called fascicles), each of which she bound with string (Oberhaus 1). Dickinson had willed all of her possessions to her sister Lavinia, and, upon the poet's death in 1886, Lavinia took control of her poetic *corpus*. Until Emily's death, Lavinia had had no idea of the extent of her sister's creative activity. Not only did she find the forty packages of poems bound in string, but she also discovered some four hundred other poems, arranged in the form of unbound booklets (1). What is more, Lavinia found countless works in progress: poems or parts of them scrawled on the backs of envelopes, on pieces of scrap paper, on discarded letters, on bits of wrapping paper, and even on the edges of newspapers (Oberhaus 1). Determined that all the poems be collected, edited, and published, Lavinia employed the services of her sister-in-law, Susan Gilbert Dickinson, who had long been intimately involved with Emily's process of poetic creation. Emily had sent Susan more poems and letters than she had to anyone else, and she had been in the practice of discussing literature with Susan. It seemed natural that Lavinia should turn to Susan for help in gathering together Emily's works.

For some unexplained reason, Susan failed to act promptly on Lavinia's request, so her sister, anxious to proceed with the project as soon as possible, repossessed the poems. She next gave them to Mabel Loomis Todd, the wife of an astronomy professor at Amherst College, who agreed to undertake the enormous task of editing Dickinson's works. Lavinia also engaged the services of T.W. Higginson, a literary figure who had also corresponded with Emily on various occasions. Todd selected several hundred poems from the collection, edited them, and had them published in three editions, which appeared in the 1890s (Oberhaus 2).

According to Oberhaus, the editions of Dickinson's poems that were published in the first eighty years after her death bear witness to the organizational patterns and poetic choices of the editors, rather than those of the poet herself (2). In 1955, Thomas H. Johnson published the first work to attempt to make a faithful ordering of the poetry as Dickinson herself had intended the poems to be arranged. Ralph W. Franklin continued this Herculean task in his *The Editing of Emily Dickinson: A Reconsideration* (1967), in which he corrected and expanded the work done by Johnson. As Oberhaus notes, Franklin's scholarship paid great attention to the physical aspects of the manuscripts, as well as to Dickinson's arrangement of her fascicles: "Guided by such evidence as stationery imperfections, smudge patterns, and puncture marks where the poet's needle had pierced the paper to bind them, Franklin returned the fascicles to their original state. For the first time, facsimiles of the forty fascicles were made available to readers in the form Dickinson had assembled them" (2).

Suzanne Wilson, following Johnson's 1955 ordering of Dickinson's poetry, has established the following chronological distribution of her works, which is useful when considering the concomitant events of her life: (1) two groups of poems written before 1862, one preserved in packages gathered together after 1858, and the other composed of poems written before Emily's compilation of her works in 1858; (2) poems written in 1862; (3) poems composed between 1863 and 1865; and (4) poems written during the last twenty years of her life (1866 to 1886) (67). According to Franklin, Dickinson wrote numerous poems before 1862, among which are some of her most significant works (Dickinson 3:1533-34). In particular, the poetry of this period focuses on the treatment of ethical, philosophical, and religious themes.

Wilson explains that Dickinson's poetry follows a general structure that, although similar to that of a sermon, has important rhetorical variations. The structure commonly found in sermons consists of an exposition of the theme at the beginning, the elaboration of that theme, and then a conclusion. Wilson believes that the poet followed this model according to three basic patterns. In the first pattern, Dickinson announces the theme of the poem in the first verse without the use of rhetorical devices. In the second, and most

common, she uses a rhetorical device to express the theme. And in a third pattern, the poet presents the theme in the first verse and then repeats it various times in the poem before reaching the conclusion (63). The poems that correspond to the last twenty years of her life represent a consolidation of Dickinson's poetic experimentation. In this final stage, she tends to employ the first model of presentation, which most resembles the basic structure of the sermon: exposition, elaboration, and conclusion (Wilson 67). According to Wilson, the poet's following of this basic pattern "contributes to the 'quasi-homiletic' quality apparent to most students of Emily Dickinson's work" (63).

As Martha La Follette observes, Rosalía de Castro, unlike Dickinson, divides her poetic work into titled collections (4). Yet Castro oftentimes does not title her poems, and, like Dickinson, her poems frequently seem spontaneous and show few signs of planning. La Follette tells us that "The unassuming attitude that underlies these characteristics can also be linked to vital postures adopted by the speakers in many of their poems, who frequently convey a telling sense of insignificance and smallness" (4). As we shall see, this self-effacing attitude – this "diffidence" to the poetic vocation, as La Follette phrases it – is also related to the search for God that constitutes the theodicy of both poets (4). Above all, in the collections *La flor* [*The Flower*] (1857), *A mi madre* [*To My Mother*] (1863), and *En las orillas del Sar* [*On the Banks of the Sar*] (1884), we encounter a Castro who is very concerned with the meaning of life and with the question of theodicy, as these are made vivid in so many of the sufferings she experienced. My analysis will focus on these collections, so as to establish how Castro forged the connection between the rhetorical form of her poetry and its content focused on the theme of theodicy, which was the center of intense concern for her during the years of her greatest poetic creativity.

The expression of anguish and suffering is one of the most notable characteristics of the works of both Castro and Dickinson. Each woman gives voice to an anguish that cannot be categorized as a physical suffering, but rather as a spiritual suffering that penetrates one's entire being. In one of her best-known poems, Dickinson declares her preference for agony, because it cannot be feigned:

I like a look of Agony,  
Because I know it's true –

Men do not sham Convulsion,  
Nor simulate, a Throe –

The Eyes glaze once – and that is Death –  
Impossible to feign  
The Beads upon the Forehead  
By homely Anguish strung. [Franklin #339]<sup>1</sup>

The poet observes the relation between anguish and death, both of which, in this instance, she associates with the establishment of truth. Death cannot be feigned, nor can agony. Thus, Dickinson insinuates that agony, death, and anguish can have a positive value.

From the Dickinsonian point of view, one of the most disagreeable aspects of life is the frequent recognition that one possesses neither certitude nor the absolute sincerity of others. This provokes a search for truth, a theme that Castro also explores:

De este mundo en la comedia  
eterna, vienen y van  
bajo un mismo velo envueltas  
la mentira y la verdad;  
por eso al verlas el hombre  
tras del mágico cendal  
que vela la faz de entrambas,  
nunca puede adivinar  
con certeza cuál es de ellas  
la mentira o la verdad.

[From this world in the eternal comedy,  
they come and go,  
wrapped up in the same veil,  
the lie and the truth;  
therefore, when man sees them  
through the magic gauze  
that covers the face of both,  
he can never guess  
with certainty which of them is  
the lie or the truth.]  
(All translations are my own, unless otherwise noted)

Dickinson establishes a link between the anguish and death that lead to truth, while Castro describes the world as part of the “eternal play” because of its lack of certitude. These elements raise a consideration of the connection between anguish, death, certainty, truth, and eternity.

Dickinson uses the image of sweat as “Beads [...] by homely Anguish strung,” which conjures the vision of some women who decorate themselves elaborately so as to produce admiration in those who see them. For the poet, personal adornments represented the vanity of an uncertain life that was replete with deceit and unrequited love. Following Dickinson’s death, her relatives commented that she had been accustomed to dressing in white, and she only adorned herself with a flower (Wells 4). She did not like jewels, and, for this reason, her use of the image of decorative pearls catches our attention.

One of Dickinson’s finest techniques is that of contrast. The strength of the active verbs jolts us -- “sham,” “simulate,” “glaze,” and “feign” – as they help us to construct an ascending chain of sufferings: “Agony,” “Convulsion,” “Throe,” and “Death.” The “Beads,” which are droplets of sweat, are the principal decorations of agony, and their combined effect results in death. The poet presents a contrast between the adornments of death, which seem grotesque to us, and the fine jewels of an elegant woman which, for Dickinson, represent a “feigned” or false life.

The identification of agony and death with what is true demonstrates the hierarchy of values the poet establishes between life and death. For Dickinson, agony is true because it leads to death. Anguish is not only the vehicle that transports us towards and culminates in death; it also marks the transition from life to death. As we shall see, in Dickinson’s thought, the value of life can only be measured when it is viewed from the vantage point of death. Theodicy is the hinge between life and death that imbues both with meaning and emotion.

Dickinson was particularly interested in the theme of relationships with others because she shut herself up in her Amherst home and hid from other people, above all during her mature years. Her sister observed that the poet greeted her visitors, and while they were speaking with her father and sister in the living room, she would sit alone in the hallway. However, she frequently did not return to these visits (Wells 4). In her letters, we meet an emotionally

tormented young woman who loved others but who did not know how to express her feelings in their presence (Rupp 30). Dickinson not only experienced deep feelings of anguish because of her shyness and existential loneliness at the time of her meetings, but she relived these moments in her poetry through her constant use of ellipsis and suspension points instead of periods. The sense of mystery that shrouds Dickinson's works is due, in great measure, to the tentative character of her poems, which raise questions but do not offer solutions. Moreover, the omnipresence of the pronoun "I," above all in the first verses of her poems, reiterates the intimacy of Dickinson's verses, as she molded language to reveal her innermost being. Many of her poems, as Brita Lindberg-Seyersted has observed, are composed of short verses which seem more like informal monologues than formal artistic works (qtd. in Small 7). But, as Judy Jo Small (1990) has so admirably demonstrated, Dickinson's use of numerous forms of rhyme – and, at times, its absence – has enthralled generations of readers and critics as they have thrilled to the endless heuristic possibilities of her artistic creations.

One of the greatest sources of Castro's anguish, which she expresses in her poem "¡Cuán tristes pasan los días! ..." ["How Sadly the Days Pass! ..."], was that of living in a world without her loved ones who had died. The poet not only describes the fleetingness of nature, but also tells us how human life reflects this impermanence:

¡Cuán tristes pasan los días! ...  
 ¡Cuán breves, ... cuán largos son! ...  
 Cómo van unos despacio  
 y otros con paso veloz...  
 Mas siempre cual vaga sombra  
 atropellándose en pos,  
     ninguno de cuantos fueros  
     un débil rastro dejó

.....

    ¡Cuán triste se ha vuelto el mundo!  
     ¡Ah!, por do quiera que voy  
     sólo amarguras contemplo  
     que infunden negro pavor,  
     sólo llantos y gemidos  
     que no encuentran compasión ...

¡Cuán triste se ha vuelto el mundo!  
¡Qué triste le encuentro yo! ...

[How Sadly the Days Pass! ...  
How brief, ... how long they are! ...  
How some go slowly  
and others fly quickly by ...  
But always like a restless shadow  
hastening close behind;  
none of so many statutes  
left behind the least vestige

---

How sad the world has become!  
Oh, wherever I go  
only sadness do I contemplate  
that fills one with black fear,  
only cries and moans  
that find no compassion ...  
How sad the world has become!  
How sad I find it!]

The passage of time and the corruption and death that overtake all creation leave it without a “trace” (*rastro*). In order to produce the effect of fugacity and the lack of a response to these mourning cries, Castro employs ellipsis and exclamation points. Furthermore, we see that she, like Dickinson, speaks in the first person singular so as to express the terrible burden of the anguish in her life.

Still, Dickinson also tells us that anguish gives way to moments of joy. She is accustomed to anguish, but the intrusion of a moment of happiness causes an imbalance. Dickinson explains how this sudden change has caught her unawares:

I can wade Grief –  
Whole Pools of it –  
I’m used to that –  
But the least push of Joy  
Breaks up my feet –  
Let no Pebble – smile –  
‘Twas the New Liquor –  
That was all! [Franklin #312]

In Castro's and Dickinson's works, and particularly in their poems which express anguish, the use of ellipsis and frequent hyphenation creates the sensation of an interrupted, almost spontaneous reflection. As if stammering, each poet explains that life is a time of almost constant suffering. Yet in spite of this suffering, Dickinson adopts an optimistic stance in the face of anguish and travail. Her positive thought owes to her Christian faith and to her conviction that everything will one day be explained:

I shall know why – when Time is over –  
And I have ceased to wonder why –  
Christ will explain each separate anguish  
In the fair schoolroom of the sky –  
He will tell me what “Peter” promised –  
And I – for wonder at his woe –  
I shall forget the drop of Anguish

That scalds me now – that scalds me now! [Franklin #215]

Dickinson's Christian confidence catches our attention as she employs the image of Christ as the “teacher” of the heavenly class whose object of study will be anguish. Humankind's preoccupation with the meaning of life, with suffering, and with the cosmic order, until there is an explanation for everything, characterizes the fundamental concern of theodicy. We find that, in her poetry, Dickinson enters profoundly into the most difficult questions of theological analysis.

If we find suffering and anguish in the lives of these poets, we also discover the diverse causes that produce them. The same is true of loneliness, which manifests itself in various forms in Castro's and Dickinson's poetry. For her part, Castro experienced genuine tragedies in her life, such as the deaths of several of her children and the violence that frequently erupted in her beloved Galicia, and these events offer possible explanations for the strong presence of loneliness in her life and poetry (see chapter one of Kulp-Hill for full details). It should not surprise us that a strong sense of *saudade* permeates Castro's poetic production, above all as an expression of the suffering of the entire Galician people (González Montes 127-33). Scholars of Dickinson have often attributed her loneliness to the poet's supposedly shy and reclusive disposition. This stance has been refuted by critics such as Conrad Aiken, who posited that Dickinson's

isolation as a hermit was a “deliberate and conscious choice,” and by Allen Tate, who theorized that her withdrawal was an act of protest against the “ravages of industrialism” (qtd. in Benfey 37).

Dickinson was affected by numerous calamitous events in her life, such as the destabilization of her home and relationships due to what Robert Doherty has termed the “astounding frequency with which Americans moved from one place to another” (qtd. in Mitchell 59). Taking a much deeper toll on the poet were the afflictions of numerous family members and friends, such as the severe stroke sustained by her mother and the deaths of a childhood tutor, her cousin Sophia Holland, her mother, her Aunt Lavinia and Uncle Loring, and the many victims of the Civil War (Lundin 25-30, 240+; Kirk 68, 84 ). As a result of these personal losses, the theme of loneliness appears in numerous poems of both Castro and Dickinson.

In her earliest poetic collection, *La flor*, Castro’s poem “El fragmento” [“The Fragment”] narrates the sadness and loneliness that accompanied her in her youth. What she describes is also the existential anguish that manifests itself in her somewhat pessimistic outlook during this period of her life (*La flor* was published when Castro was twenty years old). Kulp-Hill comments that *La flor* reveals a tension in Castro as to whether religion is a consolation or a source of anguish in her life (72). This almost philosophical stance of the poet, even at the youthful age of twenty, reveals the specter of theodicy in Castro’s early ruminations. Here, Castro adopts a deterministic position as a reaction to the loneliness of life:

Cuando miré de soledad vestida  
la senda que el destino me trazó,  
sentí en un punto aniquilar mi vida.

---

Y la nada contemplé que me cercaba,  
y ... al presentir mi aterrador quebranto,  
miré que solitaria me anegaba  
en un mar de dolores y de llanto.  
Nadie ni amor ni compasión cantaba,  
ni un ángel me cubrió bajo su manto;  
¡sólo la voz mi corazón oía  
de la última visión que se perdía! ...

---

[When I saw, robed with loneliness,

the path that destiny had laid out for me,  
I felt my life annihilated in a second.

.....  
And I contemplated the nothingness that surrounded me  
and ... upon foreseeing my terrible destruction,  
I saw that, alone,  
a sea of pain and tears drowned me.  
No one sang either love or compassion,  
not even an angel hid me beneath his cloak;  
only did my heart hear the voice  
of the final vision that was being lost!]

In the face of this determinism of destiny, the young woman experiences the destruction of her own existence and contemplates the fullness of annihilation. Castro employs octosyllables (*octavas reales*) to describe the crisis that is not only intellectual, but also spiritual, of one who truly feels abandoned. She creates the image of life as a path, which, because of destiny, ends at a specific point. The poet emphasizes this concept by concluding verse 3 with a period – something that she avoids in the most of the poem. Castro follows verse 3 with a line of suspension points. By employing this technique, Castro returns to her penchant for using ellipsis, which we so frequently find in her works. The ellipsis following verse 3 not only communicates the “end” of the verse – the “end” of her life – but graphically demonstrates the transition between her present existence and the void. Castro’s solitary speaker submerges herself in a “sea” of tears and pain, alone and without the help of anyone.

The young woman recognizes the terrible power of the loneliness that begins in the everyday life of this world, but which extends into eternity. This realization not only provokes a reflection on the “mortal melancholy” of this world, but also ends in an existential crying out to God:

La soledad ... cuando en la vida un día  
circunda nuestra frente su fulgor,  
un mundo de mortal melancolía  
nos presenta un fantasma aterrador  
quitándoles a las aves su armonía,  
cubriendo de la luz el resplandor:  
noche sin fin al porvenir avanza

ahuyentando el amor y la esperanza.

Por eso, ¡ay, Dios!, al caminar aún pura  
entre inmundicias mil que tropecé,  
llenaron de dolor y desventura  
la hermosa realidad con que soñé:  
terrible asolación, esencia impura  
lanzaron al Edén que acaricié;  
y aquel Edén se convirtió en infierno,  
¡triste ilusión de mi dolor eterno!

[Loneliness ... when one day in life  
its resplendence surrounds our face,  
a world of mortal melancholy  
presents us a frightful phantom,  
taking harmony away from the birds,  
covering the resplendence of the light:  
night without end heads into the future,  
putting love and hope to flight.

That's why, oh, God, still pure, walking  
amidst a thousand impurities over which I stumbled,  
they filled with pain and misfortune  
the beautiful reality about which I dreamed:  
terrible destruction, impure essence  
they threw into Eden, which I embraced;  
and that Eden became a hell,  
sad illusion of my eternal pain!]

The loneliness of the present becomes a contemplation of eternity and of the life that awaits us after death. Even Eden, Paradise, has become a place of loneliness and suffering. It is evident that, in the very flower of her youth, and before the tribulations of her married life, Castro already meditated on the connection between suffering, loneliness, death, and the nature of God.

In the penultimate strophe of the poem, Castro reveals the root of her feelings of loneliness, sadness, and confusion to us. It is nothing less than a tortured confession of a woman who is experiencing a spiritual crisis:

Y perdida la fe, ... la fe perdida, ...  
roto el cristal de esa belleza oculta,  
el cielo encantador de nuestra vida  
entre pálidas nubes se sepulta ...  
Su luz tan celestial queda escondida,  
muestra la faz aterradora e inculta,  
y atmósfera infernal, monte de plomo,  
pesa en el alma, sin saberse el cómo ...

.....  
.....  
[And, with faith lost, ... faith, lost, ...  
the broken glass of that hidden beauty,  
the beautiful sky of our life  
is buried among pale clouds ...  
Its light, so celestial, stays hidden,  
shows a fearful and uncivilized face,  
and a hellish atmosphere, a hill of lead,  
weighs upon the soul, without knowing how ...

.....  
.....]

The “sad thought” (“*pensamiento triste*”) that cries out of these verses to the young woman seems to question the value of life without faith. The poet comes face-to-face with the disconcerting reality of theodicy, which leaves her confused and disconsolate.

For Dickinson, loneliness is an immense reality whose extent in our lives she would prefer to ignore. The poet says that she does not want to measure a tomb (*her* tomb?) to know its dimensions, nor does she want to know how much loneliness infects her life. She does not want to seek it out, nor does she even care to consider the effects that it has had on her life. It is better to presume the presence of loneliness in our existence instead of having a precise knowledge of it. According to Dickinson, we should only confront loneliness in the darkness, when we are not fully conscious:

The Loneliness One dare not sound –  
And would as soon surmise  
As in the Grave go plumbing  
To ascertain the size –

The Loneliness whose worst alarm  
Is lest itself should see –  
And perish from before itself  
For just a scrutiny –

The Horror not to be surveyed --  
But skirted in the Dark –  
With Consciousness suspended –  
And Being under Lock --

I fear this – is Loneliness –  
The Maker of the soul  
Its Caverns and its Corridors  
Illuminate – or seal – [Franklin #877]

Loneliness provokes “horror” in the poet, but, at the same time, it guides her to an unexpected hypothesis: the creator of the soul either has to “illuminate its caverns and hallways” or “seal them.” Dickinson also introduces the theme of theodicy, which this time relates loneliness to the nature of God. According to this poem, God can only give meaning to loneliness in three ways. If God Himself “seals its corridors,” loneliness comes to have the transcendental value of being the bridge between human existence and the reality of the Divine. On the other hand, if one experiences loneliness with the presence of the Divinity, then God, in effect, “seals the corridors” without giving such loneliness a positive or transcendental value. Finally, God can “seal the corridors” through the action of removing one’s loneliness.

Likewise, critics have long recognized various types of loneliness that are represented in Castro’s works. Especially in her poems written in Galician, we often find the word “*saudade*,” which unites many dimensions of loneliness. According to Ramón Piñeiro, “*saudade*” is a “feeling of loneliness, an emotional living out of loneliness” (qtd. in Mayoral 200). What is more, Piñeiro has determined that *saudade* is a hungering, a nostalgia, and, above all, an ontological loneliness (qtd. in Mayoral 200). As we have seen, Castro experienced that same ontological suffering from the time of her youth.

However, Castro and Dickinson approach the theme of death from very different perspectives. Their poems evoke concrete moments in the life of each woman, but they also voice universal

sentiments. For Castro, death is a barrier between departed loved ones and the living, and a condition which does not necessarily lead to immortality. In Dickinson's thought, on the contrary, death is often the bridge between the present reality and perfect immortality with God. In this sense, death is not only indispensable, it is also good.

In her collection *A mi madre (To My Mother)*, we find the tears of the young Castro shed over her mother's death, an intimate but almost universal theme:

¡Ay!, cuando los hijos mueren,  
rosas tempranas de abril,  
de la madre el tierno llanto  
vela su eterno dormir.

Ni van solas a la tumba,  
¡ay!, que el eterno sufrir  
de la madre sigue al hijo  
a las regiones sin fin.

Mas cuando muere una madre,  
único amor que hay aquí,  
¡ay!, cuando una madre muere  
debiera un hijo morir.

[Oh, when children die,  
early April roses,  
the tender crying of the mother  
covers their eternal sleep.

Nor do they go alone to the tomb,  
alas, for the eternal suffering  
of the mother follows the child  
to the endless regions.

But when a mother dies,  
the only love that there is here,  
alas, when a mother dies,  
a child ought to die.]

The poem not only expresses a tender sentiment of affection between a mother and her child, but also explains that their shared relationship continues into eternity. The “eternal sleep” (“*eterno dormir*”) of the child contrasts with the “eternal suffering” (“*eterno sufrir*”) of the mother, who goes into the “endless regions” (“*regiones sin fin*”). Castro repeats the interjection “*¡ay!*” in the second verse of the first three strophes, and she uses many commas to slow the rhythm of the verses. Moreover, the poet ends each strophe with a word that highlights the aspect of finality that death possesses: “sleep” (“*dormir*”), “end,” and “die.”

In spite of the poet’s sadness and of her struggle with eternity, she completes the poem with several religious considerations. Castro describes for us the presence of “Our Lady of Mercies,” who seems to help her to accept the effects of death’s devastation on her life:

La Virgen de las Mercedes  
estaba junto a mi lecho ...  
Tengo otra madre en lo alto ...  
¡Por eso yo no me he muerto!

[Our Lady of Mercies  
was next to my bed ...  
I have another mother on high ...  
That’s why I haven’t died!]

At this moment, despite her previous religious crisis, the poet professes a firm faith in the Virgin Mary, who becomes her “mother on high” (“*madre en lo alto*”). Castro uses ellipsis precisely in the two verses that evoke the moments of faith which are rooted in the concrete facts of her life in this world. Again, we see Castro’s concern with theodicy, which this time she explores from the point of view of faith through the figure of Our Lady of Mercies. Contemplation of immortality was quite difficult for Castro, especially in the mature years of her life. In spite of her faith in God, the poet still experiences profound doubts about what awaits us after death. She expresses these fears with great emotion in her poem “De la noche en el vago silencio” (“Of the Night in Restless Silence”), from her collection *En las orillas del Sar*:

Goza aquél de la vida, y se ríe  
y peca sin miedo del hoy y el mañana,  
mientras tú con ayunos y rezos

y negros terrores tus horas amargas.  
Si del hombre la vida en la tumba  
¡oh, bella!, se acaba,  
qué profundo y cruel desengaño,  
¡qué chanza pesada  
te juega la suerte,  
le espera a tu alma!

[That one enjoys life, and laughs  
and sins without fear of what will happen today and tomorrow,  
while you, with fasting and prayers  
and black fears embitter your hours.

If the life of man, so beautiful,  
ends in the tomb,  
what a profound and cruel disillusionment,  
what a mean joke  
fate is playing on you,  
awaits your soul!]

These words, which are addressed by Mephistopheles (Satan) to the poet, reference the person who lives an unbridled life, while the poet sacrifices herself in “fasting and prayers” (“*ayunos y rezos*”). What most worries her is Satan’s astute, and apparently correct, line of reasoning, which simply observes the reality of death and which raises the specter of doubt at the prospect of immortality. The question of theodicy is very evident here, above all in light of Mephistopheles’ searing affirmation that all human life ends with the tomb. Castro closes the poem without offering a solution to the enigma, underscoring the disturbing nature of theodicy.

Dickinson’s vision of immortality is religious and Christian, although the searing doubt of theodicy penetrates so many of her poetic discussions. A possible remedy to this painful uncertainty can be found in the figure of Jesus, and one of the poet’s favorite themes is that of the Incarnation of Christ as the union between the eternal and the finite, between the “Divinity” and the human:

Two – were immortal twice –  
The privilege of few –  
Eternity – obtained – in Time –  
Reversed Divinity –

That our ignoble Eyes  
The quality conceive  
Of Paradise superlative –  
Through their Comparative. [Franklin #855]

We see that Dickinson refers to the immortal made mortal by employing two interesting examples, Christ and Lazarus. The fact that Dickinson uses the figure of Lazarus, who is purely human, and who, according to Christian theology, can only attain immortality through the power of God, insinuates that immortality is attainable for all people. Dickinson knows the objections of those who say that only Christ, the Son of God, can attain immortality. Thus, she shows us that eternity, “obtained in time,” is the same as “topsy-turvy” divinity. What makes her example come alive is the way in which she presents her ideas: a comparison, not only between Jesus and Lazarus, but also between them and all other human beings.

Having been deeply in love with Judge Otis Phillips Lord, and, perhaps, close to marriage with him in the final decade of her life, death seems to have robbed Dickinson of her desired goal (Lundin 242-48). As had happened so often in her life, death had once again brought sadness, loneliness, confusion, and religious doubt. In her frustration, Dickinson begrudgingly recognizes that only the Trinity’s “wife” can overcome death:

Given in Marriage unto Thee  
Oh thou Celestial Host –  
Bride of the Father and the Son  
Bride of the Holy Ghost.

Other Betrothal shall dissolve –  
Wedlock of Will, decay –  
Only the Keeper of this Ring  
Conquer Mortality. [Franklin #818]

It is not by means of the “matrimony of the will,” which is to say human matrimony, that immortality is attained, but rather by means of a “marriage” with the Trinity. Although she is not named, we understand that the “wife” that is described in the poem could be Dickinson herself.

It is evident that the poet meditated on various aspects of the question of theodicy, such as the nature of the Trinity, the Incarnation of Christ, the loss of life, and attainment of immortality.

For Dickinson, death is the culmination of a lifelong search for God. Her poems about death tend to avoid hair-raising descriptions that were more appropriate for the sufferings and pain of the present existence. In Dickinson's estimation, death is an act of a merciful God who frees us from worldly anguish:

There is a Languor of the Life  
More imminent than Pain –  
'Tis Pain's Successor – When the Soul  
Has suffered all it can –  
A Drowsiness – diffuses –  
A Dimness like a Fog  
Envelops Consciousness –  
As Mists – obliterate a Crag.

The Surgeon – does not blanch – at pain –  
His Habit – is severe –  
But tell him that it ceased to feel –  
The Creature lying there –  
And he will tell you – skill is late –  
A Mightier than He –  
Has ministered before Him –  
There's no Vitality. [Franklin #552]

The pain of this life, which Dickinson sees as necessary to reach heaven, ends with the arrival of death, which is its "successor." The poet describes death as a "languishing" of life. The "crisis" of death cannot be avoided because the Divinity has already "ministered" to the person who is dying and has taken away his or her suffering. At the moment of death, only the Divinity can serve as minister, and "He" alone determines the end of the pain of this life.

Thus, both Castro and Dickinson frequently discuss various aspects of the nature of God. For both poets, God reveals Himself in the difficult experiences of life, such as in times of anguish, suffering, and death. Still, there is a difference in the thinking of the two women. While Castro tends to see the presence of God in the sadness of human existence, Dickinson senses that presence in the beauty of

nature. That is, Dickinson plays with God and considers Him enigmatic. While she affirms God's existence, the poet wonders aloud about the cost of believing in Him. Life is trying for human beings, and to Dickinson, it is something of a mischievous game of hide-and-seek that the Divinity forces us to play:

I know that He exists.  
Somewhere – in Silence –  
He has hid his rare life  
From our gross eyes.

'Tis an instant's play.  
'Tis a fond Ambush—  
Just to make Bliss  
Earn her own surprise!

But – should the play  
Prove piercing in earnest –  
Should the glee – glaze –  
In Death's – stiff – stare --

Would not the fun  
Look too expensive!  
Would not the jest –  
Have crawled too far! [Franklin #365]

Dickinson wonders here whether Paradise, which seemingly must be “won” in the game of present life, is actually attainable. God is not malicious, but “plays” hard with human beings, who only have “gross eyes.” For Dickinson, life is an amusing “jest” that has its difficult moments and often hurts, and, true to theodicy, she questions the price that must be paid for the “fun” of joining the game.

For Dickinson as well, God desires the salvation of all people and is aware of the fear that human beings have of the transition between this world and eternity. Life is a journey towards God that culminates in our meeting with Him:

Our journey had advanced –  
Our feet were almost come  
To that odd Fork in Being's Road –  
Eternity – by Term –

Our pace took sudden awe –  
Our feet – reluctant – led –  
Before – were Cities – but Between –  
The Forest of the Dead –

Retreat – was out of Hope –  
Behind – a Sealed Route –  
Eternity's White Flag – Before –  
And God – at every Gate – [Franklin #453]

It is impossible to avoid either death or the encounter with God. In Dickinson's view, human beings are hesitant to pass on to eternity, yet we know that God waits for us there, at every door. Dickinson suggests here that God desires this meeting so much that He blocks our exits so that we must cross "the Forest of the Dead" in order to come to Him.

In one of her best-known poems, "Santa Escolástica" ("Saint Scholastica"), Castro describes a religious experience that she has had in the chapel of San Martín Pinario. While she is walking through the streets of Santiago de Compostela, Castro poses a question that is nothing less than the thesis of theodicy:

¡La gloria es humo! El cielo está tan alto y tan bajos nosotros,  
que la tierra que nos ha  
dado volverá a absorbernos. ¡Afanarse y luchar, cuando es el  
hombre mortal ingrato y  
nula la victoria! ¿Por qué, aunque haya Dios, vence el  
infierno?

[Glory is smoke! The sky is so high and we are so low  
that the earth that He has given us  
will swallow us up. To toil and to fight, when  
mortal man is ungrateful and  
victory is nil! Why, although there is a God, does hell win  
out?]

The poet reiterates her ontological anguish in the face of the difficulties of life. Not only does she proclaim her insignificance, but she also questions the efficaciousness of the power of God. Apparently, the forces of evil are overcoming the forces of good in the world. Then, in an almost mystical moment, Castro contemplates

the sculpture entitled, “The Transport of Saint Scholastica,” whose beauty inspires her to confess her faith in God and in His creation:

Y orando y bendiciendo al que es todo hermosura,  
se dobló mi rodilla, mi frente se inclinó  
ante El, y conturbada, exclamé de repente:  
“¡Hay arte! ¡Hay poesía ...! Debe haber cielo.  
¡Hay Dios!”

[And praying and blessing Him, who is all beauty,  
my knee bent, my head bowed  
before Him, and anxious, I suddenly exclaimed:  
“There is art! There is poetry! There must be a heaven.  
There is a God!]

With this exclamation, we learn that art and poetry are, for Castro, expressions of the nature of God. God is the source of beauty and incarnates beauty in His own being. The poet at last reaches a conclusion in her investigation of theodicy, but only in her mature years.

This analysis is not intended to be definitive, but only claims to note some similarities between the poetic works of Rosalía de Castro and Emily Dickinson in the light of their encounter with the Almighty and the problem of theodicy. Each of the women treats the theme of theodicy in many poems, but their approaches are distinct. Anguish, for Dickinson, is a token of what is true, and it is a proof that we are only passing through our earthly existence. Although it is harsh, anguish makes sense in the divine plan, and, after death, Christ will explain the significance of every anguish-filled moment. Dickinson believes that if we do not experience anguish and suffering, we cannot have the security of knowing that we are living honestly. For her, anguish is the only state of being that cannot be feigned. Likewise, Castro feels the strong presence of anguish in the lies of a cruel world, even to the point that we cannot know if truth is a lie or if lies are the truth. From her perspective, the greatest anguish in life is that of having to live without loved ones who have died, and the very fleetingness of life is also a source of great sufferings that have no remedy.

Each poet experiences the power of loneliness in her life, but Castro and Dickinson do not accept it in the same fashion. Dickinson prefers to ignore loneliness, since she is afraid to recognize to what

extent it influences her life. Loneliness is malignant, and, for this reason, the poet leaves its meaning to God, who alone is able to fill its emptiness. The sense of the immensity of loneliness is also expressed in Castro's works, as she believes that it is a contemplation of nothingness. Castro's vision is more pessimistic because the poet suggests that eternity and/or immortality are also going to be solitary. Castro's attitude towards loneliness would seem to spring from a lack of faith. Still, critics have recognized the poet's *saudade* – her ontological longing – in many of her poems, especially in those of her works that are written in Galician.

In their expression of the theme of death, the two poets manifest great differences that reveal their attitude towards life and God. For Castro, death is completely evil because it constructs an insurmountable barrier in this life between her and her loved ones. Faith brings some consolation in the midst of the sufferings of this life, but theology alone fails to resolve the enigma of death for Castro. While Castro only views death from a negative perspective, Dickinson sees it as the only means of possibly reaching eternity. More important, in Dickinson's thought, death is that creation of God that brings us to immortality. For her, Christian immortality is intellectually problematic but ultimately undeniable. Castro, however, despite her belief in God, expresses a deep uncertainty in the face of immortality, which is the origin of an abiding fear.

Dickinson's and Castro's positions regarding theodicy may be reduced to their perceptions of the nature of God. Dickinson entrusts herself to an omnipotent God who constructs human reality in the form of an ironic game. Yet God's game has a very clear goal: that all should be saved and that God Himself should gather all peoples together into the love of Christ. Although His ways oftentimes lead the poet to question God about His existence and to complain about His way of proceeding in the world, Dickinson's faith is ultimately strong. Castro, however, believes in the existence of God because she experiences the effects of His kindness, above all, in beauty. As she tells us, if poetry and art exist, heaven must exist, and therefore God must exist as well. Unfortunately, Castro also experiences great doubts about the power and benevolence of God. Her fear of death leads her to doubt God's magnanimity and His designs. Interestingly,

then, both Castro and Dickinson use poetry to confront the dilemma of theodicy.

Analysis of the poetry of Castro and Dickinson demonstrates each poet's depth of thought. More importantly, this consideration of their works from the point of view of Christian theodicy reveals yet another facet of the women's genius. Castro and Dickinson were not simply women with deep-seated emotions: they were also religious thinkers who expressed their truths in and through a poetry of theodicy that is both sophisticated and elegantly developed.

## Note

<sup>1</sup>In this paper, I refer to Dickinson's poems by the number assigned to each by Ralph Franklin in his 1998 variorum edition of them. Below, the number of Dickinson's poems is tabulated by year, with the earliest known manuscript of a poem determining the year in which the poem is counted:

<b>Year</b>	<b>Numbers (#s)</b>	<b>Total</b>
1850	1	1
1852	2	1
1853	3	1
1854	4	1
1858	5-47	43
1859	48-129	82
1860	130-183	54
1861	184-271	88
1862	272-498	227
1863	499-793	295
1864	794-891	98
1865	892-1120	229
1866	1121-1130	10
1867	1131-1142	12
1868	1143-1153	11
1869	1154-1164	11
1870	1165-1192	28
1871	1193-1240	48
1872	1241-1275	35
1873	1276-1313	38
1874	1314-1351	38
1875	1352-1385	34
1876	1386-1416	31
1877	1417-1458	42
1878	1459-1481	23
1879	1482-1516	35
1880	1517-1542	26
1881	1543-1567	25
1882	1568-1594	27
1883	1595-1628	34
1884	1629-1670	42
1885	1671-1683	13
1886	1684-1685	2
Undated	1686-1789	104
<b>Total</b>		<b>1,789</b>

(Dickinson 3: 1533-34)

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# The Naturalness and Arbitrariness of Rustic Language: Reconsidering Wordsworth's Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*

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In 1785, Francis Grose, an antiquarian, published *A Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue*, the first important assemblage of dialect in the history of English. The title of this dictionary is provoking because of its odd mixture of two seemingly incompatible words: “classical” and “vulgar.” In the Preface to his work, Grose writes:

[T]he freedom of thought and speech arising from, and privileged by, our constitution, gives a force and poignancy to the expressions of our common people, not to be found under arbitrary governments, where the ebullitions of vulgar wit are checked by the fear of the bastinado, or of a lodging during pleasure in some gaol or castle. (ix)

The author praises vernacular English for enunciating the principles of liberty enshrined in the English constitution. According to him, the “vulgar wit” couched in the vulgar language with “a force and poignancy” attests to the extension of individual liberty in the country. This became possible, Grose implies, by the fall of arbitrary government, by which he seems to mean with the Glorious Revolution of 1688. The freedom of expression achieved in vulgar English presupposes that the English people broke free from despotic rule—or, at least Grose thinks so. Not only does he celebrate provincial speech as embodying the spirit of English liberty, but he also goes on to boldly claim that he collected non-standard words from “the most *classical* authorities; such as soldiers on the long march, seamen at the capstern, ladies disposing of their fish, and the colloquies of a Gravesend boat” (xiv, emphasis added). This statement directly challenges the whole basis on which the concept of “classical” was framed in the last half of the eighteenth century. Here Grose calls into question the conventional distinction between “classical” and “vulgar”—a distinction already erased visually in the

title—drawn by the standardizers of English, especially Samuel Johnson.

Grose's defense of regional dialects represents an oppositional stance against Johnson's exclusion of them from standard vocabulary, an exclusion that seems to the antiquary arbitrary along the lines of arbitrary governmental regulation. Grose suggests that this arbitrary linguistic exclusion, for which he holds Johnson responsible, should come at an end, given that the nation no longer remains under an arbitrary government. In the Preface to his *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755), Johnson denounces "cant" (words used by a particular group) and "low terms" as "the spawn of folly or affectation, which arise from no just principles of speech, and of which, therefore, no legitimate derivation can be shown" (10). As illustrated by etymologies provided for almost all of the words in the *Dictionary*, he considers only words of "legitimate" origin worthy of record. In contrast, "cant" terms used by "the laborious and mercantile part of the people" do not count as "the *durable* materials of a language" because many of those words "are formed for some temporary or local convenience, and though current at certain times and places, are in others utterly unknown" (37, emphasis added). Johnson insists that the "mutable" (or "fugitive") nature of cant makes its omission from his dictionary reasonable (37). By dismissing the language of the masses (e.g., laborers and merchants) as unworthy of inclusion in his lexicon, he establishes the criteria of linguistic politeness that reinforce class divisions. According to Olivia Smith, the *Dictionary* was principally accountable, due to its wide distribution, for making "the demarcation of pure and corrupt usage along class lines" a general assumption about language in the late eighteenth century (16). This demarcation of class differences is made evident in the following passage from the Preface: "illiterate writers will at one time or other, by publick infatuation, rise into renown, who, not knowing the original import of words, will use them with colloquial licentiousness, confound distinction, and forget propriety" (39). As Smith indicates, "illiterate writers" here refer to those who lack knowledge of the *classical* languages, i.e., Latin and Greek, the learning of which was an exclusive privilege of the upper classes (13). Hence, this statement is based on the assumption that only classically-educated elites are capable of giving careful thought to how to express

their ideas in correct English. Johnson remarks disparagingly that the fame of “illiterate” authors rests solely on “publick infatuation”—the changing tastes of the common people who supposedly speak “fugitive cant.” From his point of view, these authors of colloquial language are to blame for obscuring class distinctions and breaking the rules of propriety.

In rejecting this elitist view of language that confirms a disparity between the privileged few and the less privileged, Grose redefines the parameters for the concept of the “classical.” His sense of “classical” derives not from ancient Greece and Rome, but from a notion of *genuine* English—that is, actual English idioms used by a specific group or in a specific area. For this reason, Grose refers to those from whom he collected a vast body of vulgar usages as “classical authorities.” The real value of the dictionary he compiled lies in his in-person interviews with these authorities on the vernacular. Whereas Johnson’s lexicography drew on his reading of the English literary canon, Grose’s is grounded solidly in his extensive fieldwork.<sup>1</sup> How Grose conceives a radically new idea of “classical” in opposition to Johnsonian lexicographical principles is also illustrated by his reference to “those burlesque phrases, quaint allusions, and nick-names for persons, things, and places, which, from long uninterrupted usage, are made *classical* by *prescription*” (xi, emphasis added). This prescription by which non-standard expressions are labeled “classical” is markedly different from the prescriptions promoted by English’s standardizers. The standardizers often based their judgments about language usage on class-bound notions of propriety. In Grose’s view, however, many coarse terms have been elevated to classical status due to their “long uninterrupted usage.” They, according to him, “so frequently occur in our common conversation and periodical publications” that the making of a canting dictionary like his “is extremely useful [...] not only to foreigners, but even to natives” (x). However, Johnson would still have regarded such vulgar terms as not belonging to standard vocabulary because their usage (albeit “long uninterrupted”) has no precedent in the works by prominent authors. Johnson and other standardizers prescribed language on the basis of the books of old writers, while Grose insists that prescription be a fair reflection of the language of the living.

My objective in this essay is to provide new insight into Wordsworth's theory of poetic language especially in terms of his relationship to John Locke, whose philosophy of language was the most dominant influence at work in eighteenth-century linguistic thought.<sup>2</sup> Grose's *Classical Dictionary* serves as a useful starting point for my reading of Wordsworth. Although Wordsworth follows the example of Grose in praising the language of rural classes in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, he—unlike the antiquarian—ascribes to it durability, which has been thought of an important feature of standardized English. Yet linguistic durability in Wordsworth's theory does not spring from the same source as the standardizers' language. I will locate this source in Wordsworth's texts, and then demonstrate how his idea of durable language being used in a rural village links the poet to Locke's linguistic principles as regards the arbitrary relation of words to thoughts. Then I will argue that Wordsworth's longing for poetic diction to be natural is concomitant with a desire to arbitrarily privatize the language of rustics—a desire to capitalize on Locke's concept of arbitrary private language.

### **Francis Grose and Wordsworth: The Question of a Durable Language**

*A Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* has special significance for my discussion of Wordsworth in two respects. In the first place, Grose's careful recording of the vulgar language sets a precedent for Wordsworth's celebration of the language of rustics. Despite no mention of Grose in his work, it is highly likely that Wordsworth knew the *Classical Dictionary*, which was a bestseller of the time. Moreover, Grose's dictionary was the largest-ever collection of its kind, containing more terms (about 9000) than any previous vulgar dictionary. And most important, according to Janet Sorensen, the *Classical Dictionary* differed significantly from its predecessors in that it made no effort to criminalize substandard English (see 437, 446-50). Whereas collections of cant of the early to mid-eighteenth century attributed cant language in a deprecating way to outsider groups such as criminals, beggars, or gypsies, Grose renames it simply as the "vulgar tongue" and associates it with the "common people" of Britain, all of whom are entitled to enjoy British liberty, which distinguishes the country from *anciens régimes* on the

Continent. His lexicographical project aims to revalue cant words—which became representative of the vulgar population in general, and no longer of just social outsiders—as “part of a free national-popular culture” (Sorensen 437). This attempt to advance a broader concept of national culture to include the vulgar, a culture in which class boundaries are blurred, profoundly influenced Wordsworth.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that Wordsworth vindicated the vulgar language in the same way as Grose had done. As indicated above, Grose embraces the “fugitive” character of vulgar terms, against which Johnson fulminated. Such terms, as Grose himself observes, “generally originate from some trifling event, or temporary circumstance, on falling into disuse, or being superseded by new ones, vanish without leaving a trace behind” (x). On the grounds of this observation did Johnson omit vulgarisms from his dictionary, but it is on the same grounds that Grose legitimizes his recording of those words, i.e., leaving traces of them. As a collector of antiquities, Grose showed a lifetime commitment, to quote from the article on him in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, to “mak[ing] the remains of the past more intelligible and accessible to his lay readers.” With this aim in view, Grose wants to demonstrate, as Sorensen has pointed out, that cant and vulgar languages “have histories that must be preserved” and be made available to modern readers, arguing against Johnson’s dismissal of them as having no legitimate history (449).

For example, Grose’s entry for “Carvel’s Ring” illustrates what kind of history he thought worth preserving:

Carvel’s Ring. The private parts of a woman. Hans Carvel, a jealous old doctor, being in bed with his wife, dreamed that the Devil gave him a ring, which, so long as he had it on his finger, would prevent his being made a cuckold: waking, he found he had got his finger the Lord knows where.

Grose here presents etymological research that is not in accordance with Johnson’s lexicographical standards. “Carvel’s Ring” has its roots in a folk tale, an unreliable source from Johnson’s perspective. Grose suggests that the legitimate history of a word can be traced not only by the scholarly study of etymology, but also in folklore and legends. Though “Carvel’s Ring” fell into disuse, the recording of it has value for Grose in that such a vulgar expression deriving from regional folklore reveals something about the minds of local people. Furthermore, as Jon Mee has similarly noted, the mutability of slangy

usages for Grose renders them fit for freedom of speech and expression (373-74). The unique strength of the language of the vulgar comes, Grose implies, from what Johnson saw as its major defect, i.e., its lack of durability. A mutable aspect of the common people's language makes it a "forceful" and "poignant" vehicle for "vulgar wit," as Grose puts it.

Wordsworth, however, does not share with Grose this new appreciation of the mutability of vulgar English. In the Preface to the third, expanded edition of *Lyrical Ballads* (1802), Wordsworth remarks that rustic language proceeding from the " *durable* [...] manners of rural life"—as the poet himself paraphrases, from "repeated experience and regular feelings" in rural communities—is a "*more permanent*" language than that which is used by neoclassical authors who are "indulg[ing] in arbitrary and capricious habits of expression, in order to furnish food for fickle tastes, and fickle appetites, of their own creation" (60-61, emphasis added). In other words, the speech of rustics he envisages consists, to quote Johnson's phrase again, of "durable materials," which in turn display the simple lifestyle of rustic people. At this moment, Wordsworth seems to bring himself surprisingly close to Johnson—whose ideas about language and prose style, in his view, contributed enormously to the forming of later writers' *arbitrary* habits of expression—in that they both attribute durability to their idioms. As will be illustrated, however, there are a number of significant differences in the way that Wordsworth and Johnson each conceives of linguistic durability. Yet Wordsworth's craving for durable language certainly distances him from Grose, with whom he appears initially to align himself in the revaluation of the language of the middle and lower classes. This poses something of a paradox to Wordsworth. He praises a rustic's language, a language *really* spoken by his contemporaries in the English countryside, as the paradigmatic form of natural poetic language. Nevertheless, this real language, as Johnson and Grose both pointed out, lacks durability that is usually ascribed to standardized English—i.e., much of that rustic diction will fall into disuse sooner or later. Grose transforms this mutable nature of vernacular forms of English into a source of freedom of expression, whereas Wordsworth wants his new poetic diction to be even "more permanent" than the refined language of the educated class. How can he make the

language of rural classes, which is potentially liable to change, more durable than the standard literary language which, in its fixed form, appears to have little room for further change?

I will address this question by exploring the complex relationship that Wordsworth cultivated with the arbitrariness of language. To this end, it is necessary to examine his response to linguistic prescription in the eighteenth century. Wordsworth and other Romantic authors largely embraced the codification of English.<sup>3</sup> They did not model themselves, therefore, after some late eighteenth-century poets who, frustrated with linguistic standardization, invented a pseudo-archaic English in order to revive the supposed vigor and originality of a primitive language.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, they thought that English had deteriorated to the point of being totally unsuited to poetry due to the arbitrary standards of the refined language that the standardizers laid down. For these poets, English appeared to have been deprived of its original poetic properties. As Smith has noted, critics and readers at the turn of the eighteenth century did not find the poems of the *Lyrical Ballads* “exceptionally challenging,” for many of them shared a “desire for a simpler poetic language” in the belief that “artificiality was detrimental to the writing of good poetry” (208). Richard M. Turley also points out that from the standpoint of many Romantics, “the misguided attempts of grammarians” to Latinize English—along with their “classical rules of grammar and literary composition”—produced an “artificial and contrived idiom” (5).

“Arbitrary” was a derogatory term that Wordsworth often applied to these artificial qualities of late eighteenth-century literary styles. The 1802 Preface of *Lyrical Ballads* contains several occurrences of the word “arbitrary.” Wordsworth criticizes his neoclassical predecessors for having fallen into “arbitrary and capricious habits of expression” as well as into “false refinement or arbitrary innovation” (61-62). Their poetic diction, he continues disapprovingly, is “arbitrary and subject to infinite caprices” (79). At the back of his mind, however, is a nagging worry that his language, too, may have been affected by “arbitrary connections of feelings and ideas with particular words and phrases” (84). In the Appendix of the 1802 edition, Wordsworth again attacks neoclassical poetic diction for lacking “natural connection[s]” with thoughts and feelings, and thus for “differing materially from the real language of men in *any situation*” (88, emphasis in original). Contrary to the poets of this

unnatural language, “[t]he earliest Poets of all nations,” he claims, “generally wrote from passion excited by real events; they wrote *naturally*” (88, emphasis added). As these statements illustrate, “arbitrary” in Wordsworth’s texts refers to not only a general tendency towards artificial diction, but also to an individual writer’s norms of correctness, which Wordsworth dismisses as capricious. In both cases, arbitrary language prevents writers from accessing the “elementary feelings” of ordinary people (Preface 60). Wordsworth derides these writers, saying that they erroneously “think that they are conferring honour upon themselves and their art, in proportion as they separate themselves from the sympathies of men” (61). Besides weakening English’s kinship with genuine passion and thereby making it unfit for the composition of poetry, the highly elaborate diction as practiced by neoclassicists built a linguistic barrier between them and less educated people. In protest of this arbitrary and undemocratic language, Wordsworth’s linguistic project aspires to an egalitarian vision based on the assumption, to quote Smith, that “‘mere native English’ is the basis of everyone’s language” (217). As she correctly phrases, “arbitrary” in Wordsworth’s theory of language denotes “what is socially imposed and socially divisive” (214). Summing up, neither nostalgic about the mythic past nor happy with the intense prescriptions of professional grammarians, Wordsworth aims to create the literariness of his work in the language that is in accord with the real world and the commonness of humanity. In other words, his goal is to produce a *natural* literary language, as opposed to the *arbitrary* (i.e., unnatural) diction of mid to late eighteenth-century literature.

Now let us delve more deeply into Wordsworth’s idea of linguistic durability as presented in the Preface. Frances Ferguson explains this idea in terms of Wordsworth’s use of figures. She maintains that for Wordsworth, the durability of poetic diction is achieved by “the persistence of figural language itself at all levels and in all varieties of speech”; and that figures in his poetry “are seen as figures only through the temporal changes which repeated experience reveals in them” (20). This argument by Ferguson is not entirely clear, since she does not illustrate her point with examples drawn from the poems of *Lyrical Ballads*. But it is obvious that Ferguson understands linguistic durability as being achieved by the texture of figurative

language. Although her argument is valid in its own right, I see Wordsworth's pursuit of a durable idiom in the context of English's standardization that had reached completion by the time he prepared *Lyrical Ballads* for publication.<sup>5</sup> He asserts that the common language of English peasants is "more permanent" than classically-based English, for the former arises out of "the sameness and narrow circle of their intercourse"—in short, from their "durable" way of life (60-61). The word "permanent" or "durable" was often associated with aspirations towards correcting and improving language in the prescriptive tradition. Johnson expressed in the Preface to his *Dictionary* the hope that his "signs might be permanent, like the things which they denote" (24). That is, his lexicon was meant to include only "durable materials."

### **The Durability of Rustic Language and Its Claim to Naturalness**

As we have seen, Wordsworth's conception of linguistic durability derived from prescriptive expectations. It should be noted, however, that what renders the vulgar language of the poor durable in his philological theories is not a received set of rules as for prescriptivists but the communal homogeneity that rustic settings supply. This is made explicit in the familiar passage from the Preface where he raises a spirited defense of the ordinary language of rural workers:

Low and rustic life was generally chosen, because in that condition the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language; [...] and lastly, because in that condition the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature. The language, too, of these men is adopted (purified indeed from what appears to be its real defects, from all lasting and rational causes of dislike or disgust) because such men hourly communicate with the best objects from which the best part of language is originally derived; and because, from their rank in society and the sameness and narrow circle of their intercourse, being less under the influence of social vanity they convey their feelings and notions in simple and unelaborated expressions. Accordingly, such a language, arising out of repeated experience and regular feelings, is a

more permanent, and a far more philosophical language. (60-61)

This line of thought leads to the conclusion that a close-knit community in the country which Wordsworth pictures has a durable language as long as its members continually (or “hourly”) check whether their language usage successfully conveys the everyday realities of their communal life. To put it another way, the durability of a language peculiar to a specific rural area is to be attained as its inhabitants fit their words continually to their “repeated experience and regular feelings.” This communal homogeneity, which for Wordsworth forms the basis of linguistic durability, results from those people’s low social-class status and the simplicity of their lifestyle—living conditions under which “our elementary feelings [...] may be more accurately contemplated, and more forcibly communicated” in a language that is “plainer and more emphatic” than the one of learned people (60). Another contributing factor in the formation of a durable language in a rural town is the immediacy of a natural landscape. A diction of peasants and shepherds is made durable by their exposure to “the beautiful and permanent forms of nature.” To elaborate further, the unchangeability of natural features in the immediate vicinity makes it easier for rustic peasants to reach agreement about the particular expressions to be imposed on their first-hand, shared experience of those features. When Wordsworth says that rural inhabitants have talked “hourly” with the forms of nature around them into which their “essential passions” are incorporated, he refers to their constant effort to stabilize (and thereby make durable) the language on the basis of their “regular [i.e., genuine] feelings” about their immediate surroundings. This point seems to be highlighted in the following remark by Ferguson: “[Rustic language] is not a language which sprang forth fully formed and without check, but is instead one which has refined itself from within—by bringing its words to the test of ‘repeated experience’” (19).

In sum, Wordsworth argues that the language of the people in a rural community is plain and truthful (thus suitable to express real human passion), and has achieved its stability, and durability as well, by general agreement among community members, not by the arbitrary standards set by a group of self-proclaimed experts on language. In other words, the rustic speaks a *natural* language. For

this reason, the poet should closely examine the language of rural dwellers in order to “write naturally,” as he presumes the earliest poets did. In particular, Wordsworth calls for investigation into how workers in rural occupations have been in communication with “the best objects from which the best part of language [i.e., the language of those workers] is originally derived.” This statement appears to affirm the poet’s commitment to the doctrine of natural language; it also seems a polemic against Locke’s linguistics, founded on the propositions that words signify only ideas, not things, and that these word-idea connections are purely arbitrary, or by no means natural or essential. In Locke’s system, therefore, words stand for things only indirectly.

For instance, in the third book of his 1690 *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke affirms:

Words in their primary or immediate Signification, stand for nothing, but the Ideas in the Mind of him that uses them, how imperfectly soever, or carelessly those Ideas are collected from the Things, which they are supposed to represent. (Chapter 2, 405).<sup>6</sup>

In this reasoning, the relation between words and ideas takes priority over that between words and things. Locke points out again in the same chapter that “[Men] often suppose their Words to stand also for the reality of Things,” and then dismisses outright this optimistic supposition as responsible for “perverting the use of Words” and “bring[ing] unavoidable Obscurity and Confusion into their Signification” (407). Human beings take words to stand for the reality of things, contends Locke, owing to our erroneous assumptions of a “double Conformity” (386). We bring our ideas into conformity with the things from which they derive, as well as with the words used to signify those ideas. To put it differently, we make a habit of establishing correspondences between idea and thing and between word and idea. This double conformity of ideas becomes a prime target for Locke. As stated in the above quotation, Locke contends that ideas often represent objects in the world “imperfectly” or, to make matters worse, “carelessly.” And when it comes to the word-idea connection, in which Locke takes a closer interest, a tendency to ensure the conformity between them in turn leads to a mistaken assumption that “Words [are] Marks of the Ideas in the Minds also of other Men, with whom they communicate” (406). That is, it is often

the case that our ideas do not coincide with the ideas that others have. Locke underlines this point again, saying, “[Words] often fail to excite in others (even that use the same Language) the same Ideas” (408). As he recurrently asserts throughout chapter two, words *primarily* or *immediately* signify ideas in the mind of the speaker—ideas that are “all within his own Breast, invisible, and hidden from others” (405). In Locke’s semantic theory, ideas occur in complete subjectivity, with the result that the act of conveying one’s ideas to others through words is likely to fail more often than not.

Besides, Locke postulates the signifying relation of words to ideas to be entirely arbitrary. A word is tied “arbitrarily” to the idea it stands for “not by any natural connexion [...] but by a voluntary Imposition” of the speaker (405). It is worthy of note here that, as William Keach emphasizes, this arbitrary process of signification in its original context had nothing to do with collective acts, although Locke’s disciples often saw that process as being involved in “convention,” “compact,” or “custom” (*Arbitrary Power* 5). What seems of further attention in the above proposition is the word “voluntary,” which appears almost synonymous with “arbitrary.” This synonymity is made explicit in Locke’s similar statement that “[Words] signify only Men’s peculiar Ideas [...] by a perfectly arbitrary Imposition” (408). This replacing of “voluntary” with “arbitrary” as a descriptive term for “imposition” points to a deep congruity between the two terms in Locke’s mind. “Arbitrary” in Locke’s linguistic discourse was meant to be perceived as a term referring to the individual’s voluntary act of building links between words and ideas. Elsewhere in the chapter, too, words are defined as “voluntary Signs,” the meaning of each word being determined by the individual speaker’s choice (405). Towards the end of the chapter, Locke places stronger emphasis on each man’s freedom to impose, voluntarily, “external sensible Signs” on his “invisible Ideas” (405):

[E]very Man has so inviolable a Liberty to make Words stand for what Ideas he pleases, that no one hath the Power to make others have the same Ideas in their Minds, that he has, when they use the same Words, that he does. (408)

Locke here argues that the speaker has an “inviolable” liberty to create “arbitrary” word-idea dyads as he or she pleases. To put it another way, he regards the voluntary (and arbitrary) act of assigning

a name to a given idea as an exercise of one's natural right. Many commentators of Locke have indicated that he deemed privacy, or subjectivity, to be the fundamental aspect of language. Hans Aarsleff, a prominent scholar in the studies of language, observes in his important book *From Locke to Saussure* (1982) that "the impenetrable subjectivity of ideas," a central premise of Locke's semantics, makes each speaker's language "radically private" (27). And according to Stephen K. Land, the "most striking originality" of Locke's thought on language lies in his notion of meaning as "a private mental act" (10).

Having developed this understanding of language as the private act of conveying one's thoughts through words, Locke then explores the possibilities of rendering language a reliable means of communication between individuals. For him, words turn out to be inadequate tools for sharing and advancing knowledge because of their inherent privacy. In another chapter of Book III, he states that "the very nature of Words"—their arbitrary referential ties to subjective experience—"makes it almost unavoidable, for many of them to be doubtful and uncertain in their significations" (476). Besides these imperfections that are inherent in the nature of language, what makes things worse in verbal communication is "wilful Faults and Neglects, which Men are guilty of [...] whereby they render these signs less clear and distinct" (490). In spite of this skepticism about our ability to express ourselves in words, however, Locke takes them to be the sole vehicle for "the recording of our own Thoughts" as well as for "the communicating of our Thoughts to others" (476). And, according to him, the fulfillment of this dual function of language depends upon making words "excite in the Hearer, the same Idea which it stands for in the Mind of the Speaker"—or, put differently, upon ensuring that the speaker's and the hearer's definition of a given word are identical (476-77). The remedies that Locke suggests for the failings of language that are attributable to its arbitrary signifying processes—processes that are intelligible only to the speaker and thus a "hindrance of Knowledge amongst Mankind"—lie, therefore, in having clearly and precisely defined terms (510).

This insistence by Locke that the meanings of words be clarified and determined for communicative purposes generated the necessary motivation in later lexicographers to ascertain and fix the

language in their dictionaries. According to Roy Harris and Talbot J. Taylor, Locke's understanding of definition paved the way, at least to some degree, for the flourishing of linguistic prescriptivism (117). In this regard, the prescriptive practice of lexicography is justified on the grounds of Locke's emphasis on definition as crucial to the successful communication of thoughts. Moreover, English's standardization in general offers itself as an affirmative response to Locke's reflections on the privacy of linguistic meaning. The prescriptivists agreed to rectify the defects of language that are due to its privative qualities; they thought that these defects put up barriers to both the spread of knowledge and the attainment of the nationalist ideal. Johnson's lexicographic work can be also seen as his reaction to Locke's discourse on the arbitrariness of usage in the *Essay*. The *Dictionary* is the most ambitious and concentrated effort to rectify the problems arising from the arbitrary nature of language as it was elucidated by Locke.

Turning back to the earlier discussion of Wordsworth, his rustic does not suffer from the gap between words and things, a gap that became unbridgeable as Locke assigned priority to the arbitrary ties between words and ideas. As Keach notes, the natural world into which the rustic's words and passions are directly incorporated "exists beyond or outside language and can therefore legitimize authentic references to it" (*Cambridge Companion* 108). Of crucial importance in representing nature authentically, accordingly, is the intimate familiarity with the thought and language of the poor living in close proximity to such natural phenomena as lakes and mountains. In this sense, the real language of countrymen serves as a focal point of reference in measuring the authenticity (i.e., naturalness) of poetic utterance. This implies that the profound influence of nature on the human mind can be demonstrated only through the native idiom of a rustic locale.

### **The Arbitrary Quality of Natural Language**

Wordsworth's presentation of the rustic as opposing Locke's doctrine of linguistic arbitrariness appears to be problematic, however. He states that the rustic's conversation with nature takes place hourly, the implication being that rustic language held up as a model for natural poetic diction has in fact arbitrary properties. His

belief in the durability of rustic dialect is posited on the premise that a rural community provides an ideal environment for the meaning of words to be decided on by common consent. According to James C. McKusick, what truly attracted Wordsworth to the language of “[l]ow and rustic” people is the apparent ease of linguistic “rectification” that a rural environment brings, i.e., a constant process of “determin[ing] the referents of arbitrary signs by establishing shared conventions” (112). A country village, in Wordsworth’s view, is likely to be a perfect setting for rectifying language on a communal basis by virtue of “the sameness of narrow circle of [the villagers’] intercourse” (61). Aarsleff, whose study of language influenced McKusick considerably, also explains that rectification occurs “within the communal context of shared experience” (376). In particular, “[n]ature and the simple tasks of rural living,” Aarsleff goes on to indicate, create the communal context in which “the best referents for the rectification [are] afford[ed]” (377). A rural town in this respect turns out to be a place where the stabilization of language by voluntary, mutual consent is taking place most successfully. The homogeneity of rural life and the plain language of lowly speakers cause linguistic rectification to proceed in a smooth way—more smoothly than in urban centers where grammatical and lexical rules drawn up by linguists at best merely reflect models of right usage, not exactly actual usage of language. Accordingly, rural settings offer an outsider like Wordsworth a good opportunity to observe clearly how the people of a particular region have absorbed beautiful natural scenery into their language.

In short, he conceives of the task of rectification as being fulfilled most effectively in a country town. But at the same time, this process is assumed to take place regularly in rural areas. Why does Wordsworth postulate that rustic language, which appears to have already been successfully rectified, needs further rectification at regular intervals? It is because of his implicit acceptance of the theory of linguistic arbitrariness as it was formulated by Locke. The arbitrariness of all linguistic signs requires that those living in a rustic locale keep checking whether they are designating the same things using particular signs. Consequently, Wordsworth’s rural village proves to be a place where the arbitrary quality of the Lockean sign is displayed in an exemplary fashion, and all the more exemplary given his presupposition that the process of rectification in rustic settings

occurs without intervention from outside—since, to recall what Ferguson said, rustic language “has refined itself from within,” unaffected by external factors. To state this argument again, the idealized community in the countryside serves as a vivid illustration of the way the arbitrary power of language performs. The hourly communication of peasants with their natural surroundings confirms that their shared words, whose meanings have been determined by reference to those things, are innately arbitrary. Actually, Aarsleff and McKusick following suit have already pointed out Wordsworth’s subscription to Locke’s theory of language. Aarsleff claims that “Wordsworth’s critical defence is deeply indebted to the dominant eighteenth-century philosophy,” which, under the influence of Locke, put forward as its basis the arbitrariness of language (380). McKusick, in agreement with Aarsleff’s view, emphasizes that Wordsworth’s reflections on language are not opposed to, but rather “entirely within the mainstream of Lockean linguistics” (118). Building on these discussions, I contend that Wordsworth’s idea of the language of humble life as being rectified on a regular basis comes from his recognition that the signs of that language, despite their supposedly vital links with the material world, cannot escape being arbitrary. That is, rustic language, which he considers naturalistic, turns out to be composed of arbitrary signs.

Let us consider again his contention that the vulgar language of peasantry is more permanent than the artificial diction of neoclassical poets—a bold assertion even from the standpoint of Grose, who unabashedly vindicated such provincial speech. What Wordsworth intends to convey here is not that the simple language of rustic speakers is to be lastingly fixed once it undergoes the process of rectification, but rather that they always ensure conformity between their words and the objects represented by means of continual rectification. To put it simply, they never fail to communicate successfully. No misuse of language attributable to its ineluctable arbitrariness is found in their language. Moreover, their linking of word-forms to referents avoids all kinds of rhetorical and stylistic excess. The presence of the immovable forms of nature and the homogenized community of rural laborers guarantee that their language remains “plainer and more emphatic” all the time, as opposed to that of metropolitan speakers who have long fallen “under

the influence of social vanity” (60, 61). Wordsworth’s concept of linguistic durability is therefore related less to the fixing of language than to the genuineness, or authenticity, of language—that is, how closely its words are connected with “the passions produced by real events,” as he puts it elsewhere in the Preface (71).

In consequence, the durableness of language in Wordsworth’s philology differed significantly from that of prescriptive writers, although the former was derived from the latter. As noted earlier, linguistic prescriptivism in the eighteenth century was motivated, at least partly, by Locke’s warnings against the likely failings of language that are due to its arbitrary aspect. Prescribers of English, especially lexicographers, sought to assure its reliability by fixing the meaning of idioms permanently. But Wordsworth responds somewhat differently to Locke’s doubts about adequate communication between speakers. He envisions “the durable materials of a language” (Johnson’s phrase) being produced by a constant process of validating the usage on a communal basis. The rustic language emerging out of this process is believed to be natural, entirely free of all the defects that Locke pointed out could spring from linguistic arbitrariness. The meaning of a rustic’s word is not supposed to be distorted at personal whim. Hence, the language of rustic men functions flawlessly, to borrow Locke’s wording, as the “common Tye of Society” (402). Wordsworth describes the words of rural language as not being fraught with the problems arising from their inherent arbitrariness. The regular occurring of rectification within a communal context seems to counter the undesirable effects of arbitrary language. Nonetheless, the very fact that this act of clarifying meaning should be regularly called for indicates how acutely Wordsworth is conscious of the arbitrary nature of all linguistic signs. Furthermore, the fundamental prerequisites specified by him for the continuous rectification—i.e., a beautiful landscape in the vicinity, a tight-knit local community, and villagers with deep sensitivity to natural features—betray his anxiety about rustic language being vulnerable to the arbitrary abuse of words against which Locke warned. But to qualify as a Wordsworthian community in rural surroundings is far from easy. The common language of peasants and shepherds seems to be redeemed from its arbitrariness only under strictly controlled conditions.

In summary, Wordsworth's celebration of a diction of rustic people reveals its arbitrary nature and the resulting vulnerability to the capricious habits of expression. The natural poetic language he aspires to, which arises out of "[l]ow and rustic life," proves to have already possessed inherently arbitrary qualities. Not only this, but the ways that Wordsworth assimilates the language of ordinary people in conversation into his poetic practice are also arbitrary in the same sense that he attacks eighteenth-century diction. In the lengthy passage from the Preface cited earlier, he says that the real language of country folk has been "purified indeed from what appears to be its real defects, from all lasting and rational causes of dislike or disgust." This statement instantly poses two questions: What standards does the poet apply when labeling some of the vulgar expressions of a farm worker as "real defects" and "causes of disgust"? Furthermore, if he does not adopt the vulgar language of rural laborers in its original form (just like Grose did), but rather normalizes its peculiarities so as to make it readily intelligible to the general public, what big differences would there be between that vulgar language and the typical language of the educated class? Wordsworth begins the Preface by announcing that the principal aim of his poetic program is to fit "a selection of the real language of men [...] to metrical arrangement" (56-57). Elsewhere in the Preface, again, he maintains that "this selection, wherever it is made with true taste and feeling [...] will entirely separate the composition from the vulgarity and meanness of ordinary life" (69-70). And "if selected truly and judiciously," he quickly adds, rural language "must necessarily be dignified and variegated, and alive with metaphors and figures" (70). What these remarks suggest is Wordsworth's voluntary privatization of rustic language, which he praises for faithfully reflecting common human nature. This act of privatizing a language draws him close to Locke, who premised that language has an inherently private nature.

Wordsworth's editing of the vulgar language depends primarily upon his preconceived notion about linguistic propriety. His acts of selecting rustic diction or purifying its defects are potentially subject to his own caprices—to put it in one word, *arbitrary*, a pejorative term he himself applied to the stylistic paradigm of neoclassicists. As Keach has noted, these acts constitute the exercise of "an arbitrary compositional power" (*Arbitrary Power* 15). They

therefore differ little from the prescriptive tasks that involved purging English of colloquialisms and regionalisms, even though there were conflicting opinions regarding proper usage. In consequence, the stress Wordsworth places on the need for selection and modification severely reduces the polemical strength of his own argument for the “real” language of rustic men. His actual poetic practice undermines the foundations of his theory, rendering the existence of the real language virtually meaningless. Susan Manly provides an illuminating insight into this disturbing aspect of the selection procedure outlined in the Preface. According to her, Wordsworth adopts “a code of exclusion [...] that imposes a limit on the kind of language which can properly be called ‘real’ in his view” (125). And this exclusionary principle, she goes on to comment, negates “the potential for a democratic linguistic and political inclusiveness” that he promotes elsewhere in the document (126). In this respect, Wordsworth’s setting up of the conversational speech of rural folk as an ideal that poetic diction should attain seems modest, especially when compared to Grose’s paean to provincial dialects in the *Classical Dictionary*. It is Grose who plainly shows the potential for linguistic and political inclusiveness of the non-standard idiom, considering it part of national linguistic inheritance deserving of study as well as the embodiment of the English virtues of liberty. Wordsworth exercises “arbitrary power,” as Keach puts it, in the course of developing a new kind of poetic diction characterized by naturalness. The naturalism of poetic diction Wordsworth upholds is achieved by the poet’s active privatization of the language used in a rural village, a language distinguished by its naturalness yet already consisting of arbitrary signs (words) of ideas. In this way, he subscribes, though not openly, to the central doctrine of Locke’s linguistic philosophy.

In sum, Wordsworth aligns himself with Grose in appreciating the value of vulgar English, but for different reasons. For Grose, the value of non-standard terms lies in their mutable nature; the mutability of those terms makes them suited to the exercise of freedom of expression. Wordsworth, however, claims that the language of rustics is “more permanent” than the formal language of the elite class. This is an astonishingly ironic claim, given that such permanency, or durability, was a defining trait of the standardizers’ English. But the durability of rustic language does not come from the

imposition of linguistic norms as in the case of the standardization project, but rather from the homogeneity of a rural community, whose members continually rectify their language on the basis of their “repeated experience and regular feelings.” Wordsworth’s account of how the language spoken in a country village becomes durable thus betrays his deep awareness of all linguistic signs being arbitrary, which indicates his acquiescence of Locke’s principle of arbitrariness. The supposedly pure language characterized by its vital links with the forms of nature consists of arbitrary signs. For Wordsworth, natural poetic language arises from the poet’s voluntary privatization of the language of rustic life, and this notion is bound up with Locke’s proposition that language is inescapably subjective or private.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> A man of lifelong passion for relics of the past and a fellow of the Society of Antiquarians, Grose conducted during his lifetime an extensive fieldwork on British antiquities, such as dialect, folklore, and military music. This research produced the following publications: *A Provincial Glossary, with a Collection of Local Proverbs, and Popular Superstitions* (1787); *Military Antiquities* and *A Treatise on Ancient Armour* (1786); *The Antiquities of Scotland* (1791); and *The Antiquities of Ireland* (posthumous, 1796).

<sup>2</sup> Linguistic scholars acknowledge Locke as the first important thinker to recognize the key role of language in human understanding. He advocated a view that language and mind are inseparable, and this view prompted eighteenth-century theorists to believe that language exercises a constitutive function in the formation of thoughts.

<sup>3</sup> One of the excellent references on the standardization of English (or linguistic prescriptivism) in the mid- to late-eighteenth century is Andrew Elfenbein's *Romanticism and the Rise of English* (2009). See especially Introduction and Chapter 1.

<sup>4</sup> For example, Thomas Chatterton, Thomas Percy, and James Macpherson. Coleridge purposefully used archaic spelling in "The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere," too, which he contributed to the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads*.

<sup>5</sup> All the important texts of linguistic standardization had been published by the last decade of the eighteenth century: Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1755); Robert Lowth, *A Short Introduction to English Grammar* (1762); Thomas Sheridan, *A Course of Lectures on Elocution* (1762); George Campbell, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1776); Hugh Blair, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1783); Robert Nares, *Elements of Orthoepy* (1784); John Walker, *Critical Pronouncing Dictionary* (1791); and Lindley Murray, *English Grammar* (1795). According to Elfenbein, Murray's *English Grammar* sold three million copies in the first half of the nineteenth century, and Blair's *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* had sales of approximately 18,500 during the decades around the turn of the century (26-27). Elfenbein writes: "The works that literary scholars have come to think of as major publications of the early nineteenth century were, for the most part, small drops in a flood of works disseminating pure English" (35).

<sup>6</sup> I removed all italics from Locke's original text.

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# *A Pilgrim's Progress* for the Digital, Post-Human(ist) Age?: Neo-Realism and Allegorical Representation in Russell Banks's *Lost Memory of Skin*

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In “After the Post: American Fiction from the 1970s to the 1990s,” the closing chapter from his comprehensive study *The Modern American Novel* (1992), literary historian Malcolm Bradbury complains that the “more recent” forms of what has come to be labeled “neo-realism” in American fiction—that “plural realism that ha[d] grown over the Eighties as an understandable response to the times” (273)—have “tended toward an ironic or ostensibly neutral report on contemporary [...] American life. It’s rarely a fiction of felt authenticity nor moral humanism” (272). In response to such a trend, Bradbury seems to be seeking, as he further voices in the essay “Writing Fiction in the 90s” from another edited anthology of the same period, a kind of neo-humanistic or “moral” realism for contemporary American fiction at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and into the early 21<sup>st</sup>. What we are left with now, Bradbury contends, is instead “an anxious trace of humanism itself. [...] For I still consider that close to the heart of realism is a moral conception of humanism. Realism, still, has much to do with the representation of felt human experience and the sentient character in the realm of narrative art” (“Writing” 24).

Such is the clarion call that American novelist Russell Banks hears and then responds to in much of his fiction, including his 2011 novel *Lost Memory of Skin* which, after Bradbury’s lament, seems expressive not just of a “new,” or return to, or “re-emergence of realism,” as it has been heralded by several critics, Bradbury included (see *Modern* 264), but of “a new *humanism*, or a rejection of or movement away from the ‘post-human,’ as well” (Buehrer 35). In *Lost Memory of Skin*, his twelfth novel and seventeenth work of

fiction in a career spanning nearly fifty years, Banks continues to explore the dark underbelly of American society—here, the moral wilderness of a group of convicted sex offenders exiled to living beneath a concrete causeway in the south Florida city of Calusa, a fictionalized version of contemporary Miami.<sup>1</sup>

Banks has long been, as Helen Schulman of the *New York Times Book Review* contends, “our premier chronicler of the doomed and forgotten American male” (8), from Bob DuBois in *Continental Drift* (1985) to Wade Whitehouse in *Affliction* (1989) to Billy Ansel in *The Sweet Hereafter* (1991), and in this regard *Lost Memory of Skin* is little different. The narrative concerns a twenty-two-year-old parolee—he was caught in a sting after propositioning an underage girl online and subsequently setting-up an assignation with her—who is referred to throughout only as “The Kid.” However, this protagonist is presented not as a monstrous sexual predator nor as a victim of an overzealous judicial system, but as something or someone ambiguously in between, and perhaps all-too-typical, at that. In fact, there is a cast of other typologically-dubbed characters in the book, such as “The Professor,” who sees in the Kid a subject for a sociological experiment or “research project”<sup>2</sup> (*LM* 131), as he calls it, and “The Writer” who, at the end, in partially telling the Kid’s story, also serves as a self-reflexive figure, if ironically so, for Russell Banks himself. Much like Billy Pilgrim in Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), “The Kid” represents a sort of spiritual innocent, despite being a perpetrator, on a quest for meaning or an emotional connection beyond the depersonalized, systemic, and, in this character’s case, cyber reality that has managed to engulf or incorporate him. In this light, then, there exists a parable-like, even allegorical thrust to *Lost Memory of Skin*, as the novelist “plot[s] key moments in [our] cultural devolution” in a story that shows just how far we have “fallen,” and how “redemption, in Banks’s America, is harder won than ever” (Schulman 8).

In a bio-critical essay on the novelist, Anthony Hutchison describes Banks’s milieu as “the modern invisible republic of the Northern [and increasingly Southern, if *Lost* and his 2013 collection *A Permanent Member of the Family* are any indication] poor eking out existences in isolated trailer parks and decaying family homes[....] These are men and women whose American dreams have been eroded by long, unrelenting processes of generational attrition.” Banks

employs in much of his work, and in contradistinction to many of his postmodernist counterparts, what Robert Seguin terms “a (sometimes deceptively) traditional realism” in order to “explore[ ] the conjuncture of America’s racial stain and the injuries of class society with unflagging determination.” In novels such as *The Sweet Hereafter* (1991), which was adapted into an award-winning film by Canadian director Atom Egoyan in 1998, and *The Darling* (2004), Banks resolves to “stay[ ] true to the fundamental impulse of realism [in] bring[ing] unexplored social spaces and subjects into the realm of narrative representation” (Seguin), and that drive is nowhere better realized than in *Lost Memory of Skin*. Moreover, Banks remains adept at linking this kind of traditional fictional realism to a psychological portrayal of his characters’ “[highly] circumscribed” (Selden 154) social and economic positions, as with the Kid’s condition in *Lost*, which often reads like a case-study in naturalistic determinism. Still, Banks manages to convey compassion for even the darkest of his characters, since “we are coaxed,” as a reviewer for *The New Yorker* explains Banks’s technique in the novel, “into a wary affection for the alienated inhabitants of this world, and alarm over the plagues besetting them: the predations of the surveillance state, the despoliation of Florida, the nation’s enslavement to instant gratification” (81).

But if Banks’s novels and short stories are recognized “for their realistic portrayals of disenfranchised, marginalized subjects, living on the fringes of history and along the back roads of American society,” there remains, as Patrick O’Donnell asserts in his 2010 book *The American Novel Now: Reading Contemporary American Fiction Since 1980*, the “larger question that informs much of [Banks’s] work: who is responsible for all of the lost children of 1980s and 1990s America, the runaways and the impoverished, those addicted to drugs”— or, in the Kid’s case, online porn—“or dead from lack of adequate care?” To this should be added “the corollary question— what has losing them done to us” (O’Donnell 41) as a national community? Such questions are certainly germane to the Kid’s plight, although now with the additional pressures of a new millennium wherein the individual’s search for freedom or identity seems more fraught with pitfalls than ever. In a conversation with Charles McGrath, a contributing editor to *The New York Times*, in late 2011 at

his second home in Miami Beach where he spends his winters,<sup>3</sup> Banks spoke of just such an individual vs. society conflict playing out in the novel. On the relationship between the Kid and the Professor, for instance, Banks acknowledges its mythological narrative precedents: “[...] I realized this was part of a very classical pattern. [...] The younger person on a journey towards self-awareness, and the older figure perhaps not as pure as he first seems” (qtd. in McGrath C.1). From a broader cultural perspective, moreover, Banks goes on to suggest that this “fear of sex crimes” has “become a national preoccupation. [...] It’s almost like the Salem witch trials. But where is this fear coming from? I don’t think it’s about sex so much as some deep-seated sense that we’ve failed to protect our children” (qtd. in McGrath C.1). Interestingly, this statement echoes one that his character Mitchell Stephens, Esq., the hot-shot New York City lawyer from *The Sweet Hereafter*, expresses in reference both to the children of Sam Dent, New York, killed in a bus accident, and whose families he represents in a negligence suit, and his own daughter Zoe, who is revealed to be an HIV-infected addict in that earlier novel:

We’ve all lost our children. It’s like all the children of America are dead to us. [...] In my lifetime something terrible happened that took our children away from us. I don’t know if it was [...] the sexual colonization of kids by industry, or drugs, or TV, or divorce, or what the hell it was [...] but the children are gone, that I know. (*SH* 99)

To Banks as well, “the responsibility for this loss [...] belongs to us all; in the social allegory offered by [his novels], the reasons are to be found in the culpabilities of an avaricious contemporaneity in post-1980s America and the spawning of a new lost generation” (O’Donnell 42). The Kid’s life-story in *Lost*, with its economic and class determinants, surely attests to such as loss.

To begin, and in terms of the allegorical character-types mentioned previously, there is much in the Kid of Chappie, the adolescent narrator of Banks’s 1995 novel *Rule of the Bone*: both are products of broken homes and willfully “neglectful” (*LM* 199), if not physically or sexually abusive, parents, and so take what little comfort they can find in the cheap substitutes for attention their cultures readily provide them. For the Kid, abandoned by his father and uncared for by his single and promiscuous mother--“Adele” is more concerned about the various “*beaus*” (*LM* 148), as she calls them, she

brings home and has sex with in front of her young son--“it is no wonder that as a preteen without friends—except for his giant pet iguana, Iggy—[he] fell into the dark Oz of online porn to assuage his isolation and boredom” (Schulman 8). Early on, the book’s third-person limited narrator summarizes the mother’s behavior in harsh terms:

She had boyfriends pretty constantly who lived in her house with her and the Kid for up to six months on a few occasions but none of them stuck around long enough to claim the Kid as his own or take responsibility for educating or protecting him. Adele needs men to want her but she doesn’t want men to need her. In fact, she doesn’t want anyone to need her—not even the Kid, although she does not know that and would deny it if asked. (*LM* 13-14)

That is, even here, the Kid may be a mere adolescent, but he is portrayed as far more introspective and self-conscious than most of the adults surrounding him, as well as painfully aware that “he had no friends—only acquaintances—and no girlfriends and essentially no family either” (*LM* 39). As the narrator puts it, “He might not have been raised by wolves exactly but he was a feral child” (*LM* 30) nonetheless. Ultimately, in the novel’s present, the Kid recognizes that “He’s [just] a white guy in his early twenties. Otherwise he’s almost invisible” (*LM* 57). The Kid’s slow, anti-social advancement includes essentially isolating himself at first in a make-shift room behind his mother’s house, maxing-out her credit cards to access hardcore Web sites, and for years viewing Internet porn as the protective layer to his vulnerable inner self, both before and even after he is discharged dishonorably from the Army at age twenty for planning to distribute pornography to fellow soldiers at Fort Drum in an effort to win their favor. As that intimate narrator again summarizes, the Kid’s nearly-complete absorption into cyberspace

[...] kept him from loneliness and dismay and the explosive desperation that often follows hard upon. His computer kept him from turning violent and he was self-medicating with an addiction to pornography to the point where he was no longer using it to get high or hard but merely not to be bored or harmful to others. (*LM* 182)

The Kid manages, in fact, to survive his upbringing through a “usual compliant docility,” since “his old tried-and-true personality [was] like a turtle into his shell” (182). Again like Iggy (who meets a terrible end), the Kid is described as more reptilian than not, having “lost touch with” (*LM* 148) the memory of skin (after the book’s title) and the more broadly human somehow and somewhere along the way. But unlike Iggy, pitifully the Kid “doesn’t even know what his natural self is” (*LM* 68). Later, the Professor (and perhaps Banks himself just behind him) will also come to see in the Kid a kind of “cultural canary: a harbinger of how the Internet has warped and disconnected us, as the title suggests, from genuine sensual experience” (McGrath C.1).

For the Kid, however, all this self-imposed (or enclosed) safety ends when he meets a 14-year-old girl with the handle of “*brandi18*” in an online chat room, escalates their sexual banter, eventually shows-up for a date with her toting a backpack full of beer, condoms, and K-Y jelly, and is confronted by her father and then a SWAT team that takes him down before any “real” or actual sex crime can occur. He explains this all to the Professor in a later interview, but the narrator foreshadows here the Kid’s conflict in telling terms: in meeting the girl, “He’d be dealing with reality this time. Not illusion. [...] He was about to bump up against and break through an invisible *membrane* [emph. mine] between the perfectly controlled world locked inside his head and the endlessly overflowing unpredictable, dangerous world outside” (*LM* 222). So, even as the narrative begins, the Kid’s existing “reality” as a convicted sex offender on parole--ironically, he is still a virgin, “yet another way Banks underscores his [protagonist’s] innocence (to use a loaded word)” (Schulman 8)—consists of being tracked by a GPS unit attached to his ankle for the next 10 years, and he is also forbidden, by state law,<sup>4</sup> to leave the area or live within 2500 feet of anywhere children might gather or reside.

Practically-speaking, the Kid is left with few options but the dry spot beneath “The Causeway,” a veritable “leper colony” (*LM* 178) of other rag-tag sex offenders, like Rabbit, Paco, and The Shyster (another allegorically-tagged character<sup>5</sup>), a former prominent state senator convicted of child sex crimes. This last pathetic excuse for a man is a “baby banger” (178), as the Kid calls such offenders. Yet it is the Shyster’s Bible that the Kid borrows and begins reading

for the first time the story of Genesis and the birth of sin in the world. This moment marks as well Banks's most blatant insertion of the element of religious allegory into the narrative. As the Kid begins to discover, there is a marked difference between man's and "God's law" (*LM* 73), and the "distinction" between good and evil (75) becomes ever more apparent to the Kid as he reads of the serpent's temptation of our human parents in The Garden and the subsequent shame that invokes in them. As one reviewer puts it, "Banks introduces the novel's richest motif when the Kid reads the Adam and Eve story from the state senator's Bible. His first reaction is to wonder whether 'the whole tree of knowledge of good and evil thing was a set up by God as a kind of pre-historic sex-sting with the Snake as the decoy [*LM* 76-77].' He himself is abjectly fallen, yet he retains a strange prelapsarian innocence and honesty" (Sacks C.7). But later, as the Kid "drift[s] toward sleep," we are informed that "his theological and philosophical speculations are starting to shape and misshape his reading," which concludes with this revelation: "[...] because Adam listened to the woman and ate of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil he [i.e., the Kid] is condemned to homelessness living in a tent somewhere east of Eden until he turns back into the dust from whence he came" (*LM* 77). It turns out the Kid is a quick learner, as he even apes the language of the King James Version of the Bible in mulling over his fallen condition. So, by end of Part 1, when he first meets the Professor, he mistakes him for God, who has "come down from heaven to the Causeway to tell him in person [...] that the Kid is evil [...] and reveal the nature of his punishment" (78). However, as he begins to tell his story to the Professor and thus to himself, the Kid seems typical, and not abnormal, even a modern-day "Everyman" in his ignorance, as the narrator later formulates his character: "The Kid is one of those people who have made up the mass of mankind since the species first appeared on the plains of East Africa two or three million years ago" (*LM* 225).

He and the rest of these "other men" (*LM* 46), of all ages, ethnicities, and sexual orientations, end up "consigned to [a kind of] 'social death'" (Courteau) there beneath the Causeway until the police, bowing to public pressure, bust up the camp, and then a subsequent hurricane washes most of the rest of it away. Yet over the

course of his time with them there, the Kid begins to think that these men, like black people did with their slave names, have been forced to shed

[...their] old names, their real names, [as there is] something shameful about them [...] so that a new name like Kid or Paco [...] can be liberating in a small way. For a minute or at least for as long as you're under the Causeway you're almost off the registry of sex offenders. You're almost somebody else and not anonymous either but a real person. Or almost real. As real as a character in a book anyhow. (*LM* 170)

This process of renaming connects with Banks's allegorical, self-reflexive, and metafictional thrust in the novel, but it also suggests that fundamental loss of self or identity that has burdened the Kid from the start. For instance, the Kid cannot decide if "The Professor" is indeed "a real professor because you can't be sure that anybody is what he says he is. Or she [...]. / That's the main thing the Kid has learned since the night he got busted and became a sex offender. Nobody's who he says he is" (*LM* 170-71). Besides the Causeway, however, and at the farthest reaches of the county, there lies the "Great Panzacola Swamp" (*LM* 303)—a fictionalized Florida Everglades Park—into which the Kid does escape, at least temporarily, toward the novel's conclusion, and after his strange encounters with the Professor. There, he meets, in a bit of "self-intertextual[ity]"<sup>67</sup> (Collado Rodríguez 25), Dolores Driscoll, the school-bus-driver-become-town-scapegoat from Banks's novel *The Sweet Hereafter*. Dolores is another pariah who has been cast out by her community, and thus she empathizes with the Kid and his loner status. She sees in him something of the poor white boys of Sam Dent, New York, she used to pick up in her bus but whom she recognized were "born to lose" (*LM* 326), as she puts it to her old Vietnam-veteran boyfriend Cat: "He's [i.e., the Kid's] just one of those born-to-lose kids who probably lives most of the time in his head because he hasn't got any friends" (*LM* 328). For a short time, nevertheless, the swamp appears to be less a terrible "trip into the heart of darkness," as Schulman describes it (8), than Edenic refuge, or pre-lapsarian "paradise" (*LM* 334) before *The Fall*, as Banks images it, into human society and hence moral degradation. In many ways, therefore, and despite his crime, subsequent punishment, and then physical isolation, the Kid is depicted as something of a religious

pilgrim in a profane, fallen world, trying to get back that original “lost touch” (*LM* 148) of skin that has been co-opted by a contemporary culture that has broken down the “demarcations,” as critic N. Katherine Hayles explains the phenomenon, “between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism” (3).

Hence, with the Kid’s characterization and the language used to convey it in the novel, Banks may be commenting, at least satirically, on what some critics, like Hayles and Patrick O’Donnell, have called a movement “toward the posthuman” (O’Donnell 115) in contemporary American fiction, “so pervasive has the portrayal of human identity in relation to technology become [...] on narratives produced in the Age of the Internet that portray the interface between the human and the technological as a ‘fact’ of a larger, omnipresent reality” (O’Donnell 116). Perhaps, too, this portrayal helps to explain the use of the book’s epigraph, from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*: “Now I am ready to tell how bodies changed into different bodies” (i). As the Kid is continually depicted throughout *Lost Memory of Skin*, it appears as if the human membrane (body, skin) has become both encrypted *and* encrusted (again, like the hard outer “shell” or scales of the Kid’s beloved iguana, Iggy), and ultimately incorporated by a cyberspace that cannot feel or touch, since it exists beyond such a physiological human sensibility. At one point early on in his interview with the Professor, the Kid even recognizes, for instance, the irony of calling such pornography, online or not, “skin mags” or “skin flicks,” since “*they’re not really skin, they’re just pictures of skin. The only skin they get you touching is your own*” (*LM* 205; *emph. Banks’s*), he says. But the Professor responds, “I don’t understand,” revealing that for all the intellectual theory he spews concerning sex offenders and their various motivations, he is essentially ignorant to their often real, physical needs and desires. More to the point, the sociological arguments,<sup>7</sup> like the Professor’s, and the by-now passé anti-porn feminist ones, such as Catherine MacKinnon’s and Andrea Dworkin’s,<sup>8</sup> are far too reductive and simplistic, Banks’s novel would seem to advocate. Pornography, especially easy access to Internet versions of it, is not just about power and authority, or men’s need to dominate women or, in the case of pedophilia (the “Chomos,” or child molesters, in the Kid’s symbolic lexicon), both female *and* male

children. Instead, there stands the malingered fear that human nature itself has changed, so that the cause/effect analyses or ascribing of blame to social forces per se fail to answer completely for this current phenomenon.<sup>9</sup>

In essence, and to paraphrase from Virginia Woolf's famous maxim, if on or about December 1910, human nature changed, then some one hundred years later, in the first decades of the new millennium, perhaps it has "changed" again--a side-effect, if not direct result, of the technological innovation that has consumed our daily lives. As one minor character of Banks's *Lost Memory of Skin* muses while contemplating the strange lack of empathy she witnesses in the Professor: "In her lifetime, the world has changed, and human beings have changed too," particularly in "this new [or 21<sup>st</sup>] century" (*LM* 263). "[But] [h]ow can that be?," she asks perplexedly: "She always believed that human nature was permanent, unchangeable, that human beings were the same always and everywhere, for better or worse" (*LM* 263). In 2008's *Dreaming Up America*, his first book of non-fiction, Banks claims that "novelists and writers are [just] beginning to sort out the implications of [the] huge [...] technological changes" (108) that have taken place in the last thirty years, including how that technology, particularly "sensory input" from television and the Internet, may actually "chemically alter[ ]" (108) children's brains. Banks is seemingly more pessimistic here concerning such technology and its detrimental psychological and physical effects upon our human nature than his character Mitchell Stephens (from *The Sweet Hereafter*) referenced earlier. "We've colonized our own children. [...] We're engaged in a process of auto-colonization" (*Dreaming* 110), Banks contends, whereby that Manifest Destiny Americans had used to justify colonizing the geographical expanse of the continent has now been directed inward, and destructively so, by the younger generation toward their cell phone and computer screens, and with the adult population's passive complicity in that process.

Consequently, as *Lost*'s narrative with its multiple perspectives unfolds, we are led to believe there is indeed a virus (following the cybernetic terminology) loose in contemporary society, making the Kid's own insights into the prevalence of sex offenders, and for all his seeming naivety—he has always seen himself as "borderline retarded" (*LM* 72)--appear closer to the mark than the pompous Professor's. The Kid speculates at one point if he and the

other “Bridge People,” as the newspapers have labeled the men like him beneath the Causeway, might have

[...] eventually [...] evolved into normal human beings if it weren't for their DNA having got scrambled somehow making them *forget* [emph. mine] how they're supposed to act when it comes to sex so what seems natural to them seems unnatural to everyone else even though everyone else has the same DNA. [...] The Kid wonders if all across America there is some kind of strange invisible radioactive leakage like from high-tension wires or cell phones [or computer terminals] [...] that is turning thousands of American men young and old of all races into sex offenders so that instead of being attracted to grown women their own age they're attracted to young girls and little children. He worries that it's an environmentally caused degenerative disease. (LM 66)

Or, the Kid may be “fucked up in the head” (LM 161), as he so brazenly admits, but he hasn't *always* been that way; thus, there may be some dim hope for his recovery, if and when that virus can be suppressed in his system, as his biological and ethical self is figured here.

The Professor also seems to recognize such a change in human nature, even if his intellectualizations of such may be self-serving and duplicitous, especially when it comes to studying the Kid and sexual predation in general. That is, he does adopt, unlike Banks, a *strictly* sociological, rather than moral or broadly humanistic, approach to the problem of sex offenders in contemporary society. As he explains to his wife Gloria early on, but also ostensibly to himself:

They [i.e., sex offenders] were pariahs of the most extreme sort, American untouchables, a caste of men ranked far below the merely alcoholic, addicted, or deranged homeless. They were men *beyond redemption* [emph. mine], care, or cure, both despicable and impossible to remove and thus by most people simply wished out of existence. (LM 90)

He also claims to adopt a “professional” attitude toward that problem's “causes and possible solutions” (90). Gloria, however, who doesn't understand his obsession, professional or not, with sex offenders, thinks they may be “*just programmed*” or “*hardwired*” that

way (125; *emph. Banks's*), to which the Professor pontificates, and rather condescendingly:

There's something in the wider culture itself that has changed in recent years, and these men are [...] the first among us to respond to that change, as if their social and ethical immune systems, the controls over their behavior, have been somehow damaged or compromised. And if we don't identify the specific changes in our culture that are attacking our social and ethical immune systems, which are usually referred to as taboos, then before long we'll succumb. We'll all become sex offenders. [...] Perhaps in a sense we already have. (*LM* 125-26)

The Professor thus wants to believe, as “a sociologist,” that the Kid's behavior is “socially determined,” since “[f]or him, social forces are the primary determinants of human behavior” (*LM* 153). Moreover, his “disease” model of sexual predation is of a different kind and more self-fulfilling or aggrandizing than not: the Professor hopes “to cure him [the Kid] of his pedophilia. And he needs to cure the Kid in order to prove his theory that pedophilia is the result of social forces, a sexual malfunction shaped by a malfunctioning society” (*LM* 165)--or so he reasons and hence excuses his own, as well as the Kid's, perverse actions. “It's not a mystery, it's not even a psychological disorder. Because if it is a mental illness, then the entire society is to one degree or another sick with it. Which makes it normal” (165), he argues in circular fashion.

Of course, this may all be a sophisticated dodge or way of projecting--despite his air of scholarly detachment from the problem he purports to be studying--his own bizarre psycho-sexual proclivities onto other subjects, and therefore justifying his own neuroses or “appetites” (*LM* 121), for want of a better word. The Professor is “a mystery man of astonishing physical bulk and gluttony,” and he can literally “eat for pages [at a time]” (Schulman 8) and around the clock, at least until he passes out from the effort, only to wake up and start all over again (see *LM* 119-21). As to his normal sexual behaviors: he has not had intercourse with his wife for years—his enormous girth prevents it in many ways--but instead regularly masturbates on a “forest green leather Barcalounger” while Gloria poses naked for him (*LM* 122). Then there is his even more sketchy background: in a turning of the tables toward the novel's end, he has

the Kid interview *him*, convinced he is about to be assassinated by members of the same “black-box agencies,” or “agencies that are off the books” (*LM* 290), he supposedly worked for secretly (his “previous employers” [292], as he cryptically calls them) as spy and double agent some decades earlier. The Professor even pays the Kid a vast sum to deliver the recorded DVD to Gloria after his body is found so she can collect from the life insurance companies who might otherwise deny her payment, claiming his death was suicide. “[*T*]he world is digitalized now and interconnected,” the Professor tells the Kid, so there is no way to “flee” or “change [... one’s] identity” (*LM* 294; *emph.* Banks’s) in any case and hence elude those dark forces he is convinced have finally tracked him down. It all remains a bit murky here, just like the dank water of the drainage canal out of which the state troopers *do* pull the Professor’s body near the end (see *LM* 364), leaving the Kid, and readers, with more questions than answers concerning the Professor’s “unfathomable character” (Schulman 8).<sup>10</sup>

However, when he first begins his investigations, the Professor sees the Kid as “Huckleberry Finn<sup>[11]</sup> somehow,” only now that man-child is

[...] as deep into the territory as you can go, camped out alone where the continent and all the rivers meet the sea and there’s no further place to run to.<sup>[12]</sup> The Professor wants to know what happened to that ignorant, abused, honest American boy between the end of the book and now. After he ran from Aunt Sally and her “sivilizin’,” how did he come years later to have “no money, no job, no legal squat”? In twenty-first-century America. (*LM* 105-06)

When the Kid thus decides to “light out” for the swamp after the initial dispersal of the camp and to act like “a regular Huckleberry Finn” (*LM* 398), he views the move as selfishly liberating: “The Kid’s got to [...] [l]ook out only for himself. Forget communal living, collaboration, cooperation. Forget community completely. [...] [Y]ou’re on your own now, Kid” (*LM* 303). He certainly has no desire to go “back to civilization” (*LM* 306) at this point, again much like his predecessor Huck, reflecting a common motif throughout Banks’s oeuvre: the individual beyond the communal, or the sense that the contemporary American social community no longer sustains the individual—that is, if it ever really did.

Therefore, Banks seems to imply through this novel that in a global, electronic culture, there are no distinct communal societies remaining; hence, the oxymoronic nature of the so-called social media platforms, which often create a false or artificial sense of community, or one that does not exist in quotidian reality, but only in some amorphous and uncharted cyberspace. In his recent book *Messing With the Enemy*, Clint Watts explains how “[u]sers’ social media preferences and the desire of social media companies to fulfill those preferences create an entirely false reality” (247). Even more troubling, Watts concludes, is the degree to which Internet addiction, especially among younger people,<sup>13</sup> leads to depression and this tragic paradox: “In social media, it seems, the more we learn about one another, the less we like one another” (250). Still, it is only much later, and with the growth of his own ethical principles, that the Kid will wonder if he can continue living isolated from others out in the swamp “at the edge of Paradise” (LM 394) on his rented “houseboat like Huckleberry Finn” (395), not caring if the Professor’s own complicated story is “true” or not—since, as the sophisticated Writer explains to him, “you can never know the truth of anything [anyway]” (LM 396). But the Kid, a social and spiritual innocent much like his prototype Huck, does in fact care, or is developing a moral sensibility, despite the endemic uncertainty of his current predicament. That is, and quite counter to what we will see as the Writer’s facile philosophy, the Kid realizes in the end he can’t in “good conscience” keep the money the Professor had given him prior to his disappearance, stay in the safety of the swamp (which has no Internet much less cell phone access that could serve as a temptation for him), “and [continue to] live like” (398) a modern-day Huck Finn for long. But again, perhaps this is the case because, as opposed to Huck, there exists no more unspoiled territory, real or imagined, for the Kid to light out *to*, finally. And with no Celestial City awaiting this pilgrim in his progress back to humanity, the Kid is instead obliged to return to that merely simulated, liminal space between truth and fiction, good and evil, and innocence and guilt that he has occupied before. Such a space is represented in the novel by “the Causeway” (400), a limbo or Purgatory at least, if not “Slough of Despond”—after Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678), that original fictional allegory of man’s fall and ultimate redemption with the coming of Christ—or what many would view as our own post-humanistic age.

Finally, with the introduction of The Writer (the last major allegorical figure presented in this crew of characters) and the self-reflexive turn the novel takes in its closing section, Banks seems to engage in a bit of self-parody concerning his own profession, or the creative writer's stereotypical conflation of fiction and reality, since "the Writer explains that in a sense everything we read is mostly made up" (*LM* 396). Supposedly at the swamp-park on assignment with his nature magazine, the Writer--a "guy" who The Kid thinks "looks like the famous writer Ernest Hemingway whose books [he] has never read of course but he's seen his picture in magazines and on TV" (350), and a "big bearded white-haired man" (*LM* 384), like Russell Banks himself--proposes a cynical brand of behavioral psychology for the Kid to emulate in his quest for the truth, moral or otherwise. He contends that it hardly matters what underlies our actions and beliefs, since how we act determines who we are: as he glibly explains, "Your actions define you. If you don't believe anything is true simply because you can't logically prove what's true, you won't do anything. You won't believe anything" (*LM* 398). While the Kid is holding out on a houseboat in the swamp, where he feels "sort of like a pioneer" (*LM* 310) and which is "kinda primitive" (360), and trying to come to terms with the mystery behind the Professor's life and death, as well as the nature of man and the problem of good and evil in "a fallen world" (*LM* 344), as he comes to see it, the Writer instead "cheerfully and peculiarly extract[s] the best from a hideous situation and an unsettling ending" (Schulman 8). Here is what he leaves us and the Kid with, if ingenuously: "What you've got to do, Kid, is forget logic, admit its limitations, suspend your disbelief and believe!" (*LM* 394). Well, of course for most, that proposition is easier said than done, and such moral relativism, like the Professor's version of it articulated earlier—"If everything is a lie, then nothing is. Just as, if everything is true, nothing is," as he "tells himself" (*LM* 235)--is certainly no solution to the larger legal, social, and ethical quandaries posed by Bank's novel, either. Then again, it is those "unanswerable questions the Writer likes so much" (*LM* 373), the Kid concludes, that will go on nagging in any case this young protagonist well into the future, questions he cannot sweep aside so casually.

This encounter with the Writer may thus help to explain the Kid's final return to the Causeway, which after the storm is described as little more than "flotsam and jetsam, a jumbled mix of building materials, trash, cardboard boxes, torn sheets of polyethylene. A tidal dump" (*LM* 404). In Banks's symbolic representation, the underpass is where the dregs and outcasts of American society wash-up, and it is thus an appropriate metaphor for Banks's typical fictional "locale[ ] [..., which] lies in the debris field of American affluence" (Camp 4). Despite the Writer's incredulity at his decision to abandon the relative safety of the swamp in the novel's final pages, the Kid can only reply, "*It's where I live*" (400; emph. Banks's). He is simply right, since "[t]here's no escape from under the Causeway" (407), which signifies a true no-man's-land for someone like the Kid, who exists not "beyond good and evil" (*LM* 375)—to quote the Writer's clichéd Nietzschean philosophy—but *between* it, as he does between those other binary oppositions, like truth versus lie or fiction. Both structurally and thematically, "Banks's [...] insistence on border crossings as a means of intercultural, interracial and interclass understanding" (Parker 297) is evidenced here at the book's close and in the Kid's choice to return to this marginal urban interspace. And he lives there, as it turns out, come hell or high water, with the Kid having experienced a good deal of both in this tale of allegorical and biblical proportions.

In effect, then, *Lost Memory of Skin* both incorporates and moves from the "social allegory" (O'Donnell 42) of Banks's earlier fictions, like *The Book of Jamaica* (1980) and *Continental Drift* (1985), to a more religious one which asks the question with the Kid's circumstance: just how *do* we regain the visceral, human, and moral in a digital, post-human, and amoral world? But, unlike his caricature of the Writer in *Lost*, Banks ultimately "still defines himself as a humanist and [...] rejects the poststructuralist notion of the dissolution of the self" (Collado Rodríguez 20) or the death of the liberal human subject presumed by many postmodern and post-humanist critics. He also intimates through the Kid's quest and eventual transformation at the end—he moves from constant shame at just "being alive" (*LM* 48) to guilt<sup>14</sup> for his actions, and from "his digital self" (*LM* 390) back to a more natural one—that recovering the human *is* possible, if premised upon a recognition of the limits of that postmodern relativism embodied by the likes of the narcissistic

Professor and the cheerfully nihilistic Writer, neither of whom can answer for the Kid's current condition. For all the intellectualizations of the Professor and the Writer, the Kid is both "honest" with himself and "imaginative" (*LM* 296), and for those social "lepers" (273), or "[f]or the men who live beneath the Causeway, [...] there is no private or public shelter from the storm" (*LM* 275), a state or situation which plays out quite literally as well as figuratively in Banks's novel.

Moreover, the process of becoming a human being "with three-dimensions" again "has to be done mentally, from the inside out, [the Kid] knows that much" (*LM* 415)—that is, he must undergo a process of both biological and psychological evolution or metamorphosis through which "will emerge flesh, bone, blood wrapped in skin" (415). But the Kid also "knows" at this moment that to become fully human, he will need "to move fast" and "stay synchronized and ready because the pace of change is picking up. He can feel it spreading out from inside his body in the general direction of his skin" (*LM* 415). Thus, we return to Banks's title, with the Kid, much like a chronic amnesiac, finally awakening from that stupor and regaining a long "lost memory" of the human, of "how bodies change[ ] into different bodies" (i), to quote again the book's epigraph from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Here is produced, then, a kind of reverse metamorphosis or complete transformation necessary to the Kid's progress, from the post-human to a "postvirtual three-dimensional subjectivity" (Harkins 743) and thus restoration of the human self, feeling and all: "And now it's suddenly all come full circle" (*LM* 388), he realizes. The Kid's recognition, too, that he is "not a victim" (*LM* 416) at the close may be Banks's way of showing "the only one heroic enough to save the Kid is the Kid himself" (Schulman 8), even if transcendence from his very *real* social and thus human condition is never fully achieved, as of course it cannot be.

Ultimately, and to borrow from communications theorist and the father of modern cybernetics Norbert Wiener, how does Banks in *Lost Memory of Skin* call for or endorse a return to "the human use of human beings"? Wiener, for one, realized at an early stage in their development the danger of dehumanization that can occur with the increasing relationship between computers, especially as those "machines impact the limits of communication within and among

individuals” (Wiener 14), and the human nervous system, and long before something like the interconnected World Wide Web would have even been a twinkle in his or any other cultural critic’s eye. In spite of the plot’s entanglements in *Lost*, Banks would seem to argue that “the slow growth of the Kid’s self-knowledge and his empathy for others is the real story, offering [a] ray of hope in an otherwise bleak consideration of a broken society and the damaged people it breeds” (Rev. of *Lost*, *Kirkus*). Beginning with the Shyster, for instance, the Kid begins to contemplate the “subjective lives” of others for the first time: “What crossed his [i.e., the Shyster’s] wires and when so that he couldn’t recognize evil when he saw it in himself? What’s going on inside the Shyster?” (*LM* 226). Once more, Banks employs in the Kid’s description a metaphor of a system-failure in the machinery of the human organism, and thus the sense that such a change, as mentioned previously, is not necessarily irrevocable.

Over the course of the novel, furthermore, the Kid’s moral growth or evolution reveals his progression from feeling “[a]s if he were an object, a thing instead of a human being [...] / with a will and a goal, [...] only capable of reacting, not acting” (*LM* 282-83), to his epiphanic point of self-revelation: “This is the moment when the serpent enters Paradise.[...] [H]e knows today that he’s not living in Paradise [i.e., the swamp as allegorical Garden of Eden] like he thought he was [...] but in a fallen world” (*LM* 340, 344). Again ironically, the Kid possesses the only legitimate moral position among this bunch of typological characters, as he is able to assess first the Professor’s and subsequently the Writer’s “competing versions of reality” (*LM* 410) and arrive in the end at his own hard-won truth:

Because once you’re born a human being and the Snake talks you into doing something that you have to lie about you’re no longer innocent. That’s when you start making up stories that proclaim your innocence like Adam and Eve did after they ate the forbidden fruit.[...] He wonders when it happened to him, when he got talked into doing something that he had to lie about and as a result no longer had an innocent soul. (*LM* 411)

In this very self-reflexive sense, Banks as fiction writer would seem to also acknowledge that this process of making up stories is equated with our fall from grace, as well. The Kid’s condition is thus unlike that of his companions Einstein the parrot and Annie the dog, who as

animals lie blessedly outside of this essentially moral world view. And the Kid's concluding analysis is revealing for our own "intimately connected" (*LM* 402) technological age: "Maybe the Internet is the Snake and pornography is the forbidden fruit because watching porn on the Internet is the first thing the Kid remembers lying about" (*LM* 411). Perhaps, but in Banks's allegorical representation the Internet seems less the direct cause of his loss of innocence than the initial spur to The Kid's self-delusion: he had not lied to his mother about the porn, but "[h]e had lied to himself" (*LM* 412), admitting such being the first measure of his possible salvation or redemption.<sup>15</sup> For the Kid, that transition from shame to guilt produces a moral metamorphosis in him by which "[h]e had been made human again" (413). Thus, when the Kid, an odd Odysseus-figure, chooses resettlement under the Causeway—"a collection of hovels that he initially thought was just trash and tide—and storm-tossed wreckage.[...] It's [now] the squalid remnants of the old colony. And the remnants of the colonists" (*LM* 406)—he does so as the

[...] disillusioned hero [who] accept[s] his fate. He's not as sad and beaten down as he looks however. Heroes never are. Otherwise they'd be victims and the Kid is not a victim.[...] He will make his home here among the other men. He is after all like them: a convicted sex offender. (*LM* 416)

As a final point, and to return briefly to this paper's introduction, one might ask if this new or moral humanism in recent American fiction, advocated for by Malcolm Bradbury and others (see, for instance, John Gardner's 1978 work *On Moral Fiction*<sup>16</sup>), is really all that new, at least as applied to a contemporary realist ("neo-" or otherwise) writer such as Russell Banks and his novel *Lost Memory of Skin*. After all, as early as 1962 in the inaugural issue of the *Michigan Quarterly Review*, the Jewish-American novelist Saul Bellow was calling on his peers not to abandon a belief in humanity but to continue the search for some "real self," as yet "unknown, [...] hidden, a sunken power in us, [...] a quaintly organized chaos of instinct and spirit," a "true identity" that "lies deep—very deep" ("Where" 27),<sup>17</sup> and has barely begun to be plumbed in our literature. In similar fashion, Bellow in his 1976 Nobel Prize address claims that if "much is disintegrating" in post-war American society in particular,

“we are also experiencing an odd kind of refining process” (“The Nobel” 321) whereby that cultural cliché of dehumanization can be modified and appropriated as “*re*-humanization.” That process seems well under way in the works of Russell Banks, as evidenced in his close identification with and ultimately “compassionate” (Seaman 36) attitude towards his all-too-human characters, even those individuals we often try hard not to notice, such as the Kid and his “Bridge people” companions in *Lost Memory of Skin*.

Perhaps discussions of “a new humanism” (Harkins 754) for the novel, of which I would argue Banks’s interest given his recent fictional productions, appear regressive or beside the point, anyway. This would seem especially so in a post-critical era like our own, dubbed by some the “Anthropocene,” since fields such as eco-criticism and animal studies now dominate, with their concomitant belief in the inherently corruptive influence of humans and humanism upon the natural world at large. That said, a contemporary American writer like Russell Banks, following Bellow, reminds us of the need for an empathic connection to human characters that has always figured in the novelist’s creations throughout the history of the genre. Banks has long been our leading “chronicler of American untouchables,” with *Lost Memory of Skin* “his boldest imaginative leap yet into the invisible margins of society”; as quintessential “outsider,” the Kid may be “guilty of a heinous offense, but his status as a pariah gives him a striking purity of vision” (Sacks C.7). As Banks himself explains in conversation with French sociologist Loïc Wacquant, he views his goal as a novelist “to lay bare so as to understand the hidden structures of the social groups [I] identify with.[...] Of necessity, a writer has to identify with his characters” (148). For this novelist, moreover, such empathy for those “pariahs” of American society, or for what he calls “the world of misfits and rejects” (qtd. in Wacquant 150), stems from his own hard-scrabble upbringing in blue-collar New Hampshire: “I have always felt like an outsider, even within my own family” (qtd. in Wacquant 150). Still, despite that identification with the misfit or outsider-figure in his fictions, Banks retains an old-school humanistic faith: “My books are based on historical and social realities, but what really interests me is the moral and psychological meaning of life. If I were unable to find the moral dimension in a life like any other, I wouldn’t be able to find one in my own” (qtd. in Wacquant 155). Ultimately, for Banks, as a

neo-compassionate humanist, it is that moral and psychological voice and perspective that motivates him, which he finds among those outcasts of society such as the Kid who, far from being “not normal” (*LM* 179), as he keeps saying, may be an all-too-typical representation of that broader humanity, despite having been written off by the criminologists and legal authorities alike.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>The genesis for Banks's novel was a series of articles by Julie Brown in *The Miami Herald* in 2007 that detailed the plight of a colony of homeless sex offenders squatting under the Julia Tuttle Causeway, the highway linking the mainland to Miami Beach. The squatters were finally evicted in 2010 after they became too visible and embarrassing to local authorities and politicians. As Brown said later, in a sentiment with which Banks would seemingly concur: "You had to see it to appreciate the juxtaposition of this horrible poverty—shanties with signs saying 'Help'—right under the bridge on the way to glamorous Miami Beach" (qtd.in McGrath C.1).

<sup>2</sup>All page references to *Lost Memory of Skin* are to the first edition (Echo/HarperCollins, 2011), hereafter cited parenthetically by page number and abbreviated *LM*.

<sup>3</sup>Banks lives the other half of the year in Keene, NY, not far from the Canadian border: "I guess I just like the extremes," he quipped. "Not the middle" (qtd. in McGrath C.1).

<sup>4</sup>The narrator informs us that Florida state "laws [...] prohibit anyone convicted as a sex offender from living within 2,500 feet which is almost half a mile from a school or daycare center or playground or wherever children are known to gather together or from living in a home where anyone under the age of eighteen happens to reside. Which means pretty much the entire city and its suburbs are off limits" (*LM* 65).

<sup>5</sup>There are other such characters mentioned throughout the novel, including "The Cop" (156), the Kid's dykeish parole officer, as well as Gloria, or "The Wife," and even though he knows her by her name, "To the Kid [...] she's [still] the Wife so that's what he calls her" (*LM* 386).

<sup>6</sup>Besides intertextual references to his own works in *LM*, like *Continental Drift* (1985) and *The Sweet Hereafter* (1991), Banks's novel, as Gillian Harkins contends, "takes up at various points *Blood Meridian* (1985), *Their Eyes Are Watching God* (1937), *The Things They Carried* (1990), *Huckleberry Finn* (1884), *Treasure Island* (1883), and *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), [...] in ways that overcome and elaborate them [...] into a mode of listening to literary history" (756). I would add as well at least Homer's *Odyssey* and Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902) as more obvious intertextual literary references employed by Banks in *LM*, certainly in terms of the Kid's spiritual quest or archetypal journey.

<sup>7</sup>Reviewer Jennifer Schuessler (see Works Cited) as well would probably agree that the Kid is one of those "white working-class American male protagonists" Banks often includes in his fiction "who refuse to be pinned down by sociological cliché or to keep their inner lives within the stark outlines of their actual situation" (4, 6).

<sup>8</sup>In her essay "(Male) Desire and (Female) Disgust: Reading *Hustler*" (in Works Cited), cultural critic Laura Kipnis argues that "[t]he vast majority of porn represents sex, not physical violence" (1493, n.22), whereas for anti-porn feminists like Dworkin and MacKinnon, "all heterosexuality is violence" (Kipnis 1493).

<sup>9</sup>A phenomenon Banks may have even ripped right out of then-recent headlines, it should be noted: consider the case of Jerry Sandusky and the Penn

State scandal, for instance. Sandusky, a long-time assistant football coach under Penn State's Joe Paterno, was arrested and charged with 52 counts of sexual abuse of young boys over a 15-year period from 1994 to 2009. He was eventually found guilty in June of 2012 on 45 counts and sentenced that October to 30-60 years in prison.

<sup>10</sup>Besides Schulman, other reviewers of Banks's novel have also had problems with the Professor as a full-fledged or completely convincing character. For instance, book critic Maureen Corrigan on Terry Gross's program *Fresh Air* (NPR), in a somewhat mixed review, sees *Lost* as "an uneven effort to excavate and redeem the dregs of modern society" that would have been "even more powerful and more daring if [Banks] had told it straight, without subplots and second bananas" such as "the Professor," whom Corrigan feels "all but wrecks the spare, blasted, end-of-world mood" Banks establishes in the first half of his novel (see "'*Lost Memory of Skin*' Goes Where Most Fiction Won't" in Works Cited).

<sup>11</sup>Other critics have also recognized Banks's debt to Twain's Huck Finn as a prototype for characters such as the Kid in *Lost* and Chappie in *Rule of the Bone* (1995): see, for instance, Jim O'Loughlin's "The Whiteness of Bone: Russell Banks' *Rule of the Bone* and the Contradictory Legacy of *Huckleberry Finn*," *Modern Language Studies*, vol. 32, no.1, 2002, pp. 31-42. Commenting upon his fictional characters' desire for isolation and "retreat," Banks himself has also acknowledged Twain's classic novel as a model: "[M]y vision of the human personality is based on redemption. The only 'American dream' I believe in is that of evasion, escape. That's why in my view *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is the greatest book in American literature. It ends when Huck leaves the American territory to escape from slavery and injustice" (qtd. in Wacquant 153).

<sup>12</sup>In his interview with Charles McGrath, Banks talks about South Florida and what it represents for him: "You know that you've come to the bottom of the continent here [i.e., Miami Beach and Virginia Key, the two principal settings of *Lost Memory of Skin*][....] If you think about it, all of Miami is artificial.[...] The whole place is one big work of fiction" (qtd. in McGrath C.1). This analogy is one Banks exploits for formal, self-reflexive, and thematic purposes as well, as with the Professor and the Writer and their respective commentaries, throughout this novel.

<sup>13</sup>As with Banks in *Dreaming Up America*, who has also bemoaned the "colonizing" function of the new media upon our "children" (*Dreaming* 110), Watts is particularly "concerned about the next generation, who now enter adolescence with a digital device strapped to their body[....] The next generation will have more virtual experiences than real-world ones. They will write more than they will read, take so many photos that they will never look at again, and possibly talk more to artificial intelligence than to other humans[....] It's quite possible that they will trust technology and artificial relationships more than real-world ones" (Watts 250).

<sup>14</sup>Harkins, however, posits an opposite progression for the Kid: "At the start of the novel, the Kid struggles with a constant feeling of both guilt and shame," but "the first he considers more social; the second, existential" (751). Conversely, I read the Kid's acceptance of guilt as less a social than a moral state or condition he has

achieved at the end, and, at least by the premises of Christian allegory, it represents a “Fortunate Fall” for him, at that.

<sup>15</sup>For a contrary assessment of this character’s final condition, see James Camp’s review “Mostly Hoping, Not Planning” (in *Works Cited*), which argues that Banks’s “prose style” in *Lost Memory of Skin* is “ill-suited to the task of orchestrating redemption for a character [i.e., the Kid] who is so far gone” (Camp 45).

<sup>16</sup>In the context of his debates with postmodern American novelists like William Gass, Gardner argues for a moral fiction that “attempts to test human values, not for the purpose of preaching or peddling a particular ideology, but in a truly honest and open-minded effort to find out which best promotes human fulfillment” (16).

<sup>17</sup>This search for an essential self even disturbs the protagonist of Bellow’s first novel, *Dangling Man* (1944), as well. As he awaits his call from the draft board, Joseph expresses his “desire for pure freedom”: “We are all drawn toward the same craters of the spirit—to know what we are for, to know our purpose, to seek grace” (154), he muses.

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# The Representation of Women and the Concept of “Womanish” Behavior in *Henry IV, Part I*

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In Shakespeare’s *Henry IV, Part I*, the representation of women, though female characters of consequence are few and far between, is notable for its differences in depictions. But, in order to explain these representations, background must be given regarding the attitudes towards women and their behavior during the fifteenth century, the era in which the story is set, and the Renaissance. On one hand, Lady Mortimer appears to be the ideal medieval gentlewomen, and on the other is Kate, Lady Percy, who is the complete opposite of Lady Mortimer by virtue of her witty, fiery nature. Even the question of how men *think* women act is evoked in certain scenes, such as Hal in his impersonation of Kate as an admiring supporter of Hotspur’s military exploits and his exaggeration of Hotspur’s accomplishments in battle. Moreover, what is perceived to be “womanish” behavior is a constant presence and is condemned in men, especially by Hotspur. However, he is ironically one of the most vocal exhibitors of such behavior. For example, he hates romance and has a paradoxical idea that women constantly talk despite his own love for long-winded, impassioned speeches. In essence, then, *Henry IV, Part I*, delineates the misogyny present in late medieval and early modern culture and then challenges gender prejudices by showing that an idealized male embodies some of these so-called “womanish” qualities.

To effectively explain to a twenty-first century reader the significance of female characterization in the play, the cultural context regarding women and public attitudes towards them must be explained. Throughout the late medieval period and the Renaissance, women were expected to be meek and submissive, while at the same time serving as examples of chastity. They were expected to be, more or less, personifications of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Thomas More, offering a refreshingly positive viewpoint, defends this assumption and even disparages men for *their* sexual natures, stating, “Women are ryght honest [both truthful and simple] and men are very lewede”

(qtd. in Henderson and McManus 49). Furthermore, in Jane Anger's *Protection for Women*, published in 1589, she maintains that remaining chaste and having an agreeable countenance is really all a woman needs to be successful: "Thinke this sufficient commendation for a Woman, if shee bee a Virgin for chastite, with Virginitie vertuous, of condition courteous" (qtd. in Woodbridge 70). To give a final primary account, Mary Tattlewell furthers Anger's assertions by positing that a desire for virtue is an inherently female quality, particularly in marriage: "[Women marry] more for the propagation of Children than for any carnal delight or pleasure" (qtd. in Henderson and McManus 49). Of course, this is based on the popular idea, promulgated mostly by men and the Church, that women who enjoyed sex were wanton and sinful, but the fact that authors had to routinely write defenses of women shows the general attitudes towards them in the early modern period.

But women were mostly viewed negatively, and that view is amply documented in contemporary publications. Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century publishers offer descriptions of women as indiscreet, stubborn, wayward, and temperamental creatures. Essentially, all of the less attractive qualities of humankind were thought to be present in women, though that is a contradictory assumption in relation to the images of virtuosity and meekness. A.C. Pyrrye, in *The Praise and Dispraise of Women*, published in 1569, viciously attacks women and lists their faults: "Pride, cruelty, lack of foresight, intemperance [...], 'wandering wit,' inconstancy, talkativeness, vanity [...], drunkenness, lust, [and] deceit" (qtd. in Woodbridge 60). For the purpose of this argument, the talkative element is particularly important in relation to *Henry IV, Part I*, regarding women and "womanish" behavior. The list of faults goes on and on, but Pyrrye then contradicts himself, insisting that misogynists—excluding himself, of course—attack women with impunity because "women are too [weak-minded] to counterattack" (qtd. in Woodbridge 60). An unclear image of women is gleaned from such an assessment. They are either simple and docile or manipulative and lustful, but both theories are undermined in some manner.

According to contemporary publishers, though, the worst of the charges against women is their desire to be men so that they may rule by rising up and supplanting the governing elite, which is a

questionable assumption, considering the stereotypes of female weakness and ineffectiveness. In Thomas Hoby's translation of Castiglione's *The Courtier*, this controversial belief is discussed at length, with the misogynistic character of Gaspar declaring, "Generallye everye woman wisheth she were a man, by a certain provocation [deviation] of nature that teacheth her to wishe for her perfection" (qtd. in Woodbridge 56). Whether Gaspar's charge is true or not is immaterial, but it does illustrate the public hostility shown to independent, self-possessed women and toward the wielding of feminine power. Shakespeare terms these willful women "she wolves," and he presented them in plays like *Titus Andronicus* and the *Henry VI* trilogy, reflecting the resentment and even fear of female challenges to the male-dominated order (Mann 157).

Applied to some of Shakespeare's history plays, public attitudes toward women are indicated by the fact that female characters are typically very scarce: "Women of the histories are of no very great interest, as they are in most cases mere puppets. Now and again they flash into life through a few lines of fine verse [...] but in the main they are unimportant" (Davies 91). But one must keep in mind the surrounding cultural contexts, and the reality that history was almost wholly written by men, thus the prominence of a phallogocentric historiography: "Renaissance historiography constituted a masculine tradition, written by men, devoted to the deeds of men, glorifying the masculine virtues of courage, honor, and patriotism, and dedicated to preserving the names of past heroes" (Levine 20). Essentially, most historical chronicles were lessons in masculine worship. In response, concerning *Henry IV, Parts I and II*, Mrs. Elizabeth Inchbald, in an early nineteenth-century publication, declared the play one "which all men admire and which most women dislike" (qtd. in Kastan 73). The absence of women and the glorification of men is not only a historical trend, but also an ideological one endorsed in *Henry IV, Part I*. In it, "his [Shakespeare's] vision of 'the happy breed of men' that was his England" is more or less realized and exalted (Humphreys 29). In fact, the lack of viable source material regarding the women depicted in the play reflects how little they factor into the plot. However, women are clearly not totally excluded from Shakespeare's other histories, as evidenced in *Richard III* with the Duchess of York and the *Henry VI* trilogy with Queen Margaret. But cultural contexts

surrounding the histories aside, the representations and characterizations of women in *Henry IV, Part I*, are still worthy of analysis.

As mentioned previously, the female characters of consequence in the play vary in their depictions, with Shakespeare fashioning one as the ideal medieval gentlewoman and the other a lively source of acidic wit. Lady Mortimer, wife of Mortimer and daughter of Glendower, is meek, agreeable, doting, and rarely speaks. She, as a noblewoman of Welsh blood, knows no English, which is stated by Mortimer in Act III: “This is the deadly spite that angers me: / My wife can speak no English, I no Welsh” (III.i.190-91). Because of this linguistic hindrance, Lady Mortimer inadvertently becomes the ideal for a medieval noblewoman by exhibiting the most attractive quality of all to a prospective husband: silence, a vital component to the behavioral model of the medieval upper-class lady. The fact that her father speaks for her to Mortimer increases her subordination. However desirable her silence makes her, Lady Mortimer’s inability to communicate works against her, which leaves her “excluded from a ‘linguistic community’ to which all of the male characters and other female characters belong” (Christy 56). She is quite literally shut out from the group and pushed to the margins of the play due to her verbal inadequacies. In concurrence with this ostracism, Hotspur openly scorns Lady Mortimer’s Welsh tongue before her song in Act III, stating that it is a language with ties to Satan because of its pagan, Celtic origin: “Now I perceive the Devil understands Welsh” (III.i.229). In addition to disparaging Lady Mortimer, Hotspur’s statement shows England’s feelings towards Welshmen and the Welsh language in this period of growing English hegemony.

Lady Mortimer is and will continue to be a devoted, loving wife, according to what Glendower, still speaking for her, states in the first scene of Act III. This speech brings to light another central aspect of medieval and Renaissance womanhood: honoring and remaining loyal to one’s husband. In his very first line of dialogue, Glendower wastes no time in assuring Mortimer of his daughter’s devotion by referencing his imminent departure for battle and her desire to remain by Mortimer’s side: “My daughter weeps, she’ll not part with you, / She’ll be a soldier too, she’ll to the wars” (III.i.192-194). The obvious feminist imagery of a female warrior aside, this is a figurative

example of her role as a dutiful wife instead of a literal claim. Lady Mortimer's devotion is such that she will follow her husband into battle, risk notwithstanding, which, to him, is a quality of both good men *and* women. This line raises significant questions, though. Regardless of its sentimentality, Glendower's statement is improper in the eyes of contemporary publishers, as stated before. According to them, a woman's worst transgression is "masculine" or domineering behavior, which complicates Glendower's lauds.

Her father goes further in describing his daughter's skills as a wife, expounding upon the comfort and serenity that she will bring to Mortimer:

And rest your gentle head upon her lap,  
And she will sing the song that pleaseth you,  
And on your eyelids crown the god of sleep,  
Charming your blood with pleasing heaviness [i.e.,  
drowsiness]. [...] (III.i.212-15)

So, not only is Lady Mortimer meek and dutiful in addition to being a pretty songbird, but she also has the power to relieve her husband of his stress and "charm his blood" with her kind and tranquil countenance. Because Lady Mortimer speaks so rarely, readers and audience members know nothing different of her. To relate the character to contemporary publications, Lady Mortimer embodies all of the good qualities illustrated in More and Tattlewell, what with her pleasant disposition and what is assumed to be her genuine devotion to Mortimer. On the other hand, her counterpart, Kate, Lady Percy, embodies all of the less flattering qualities described by writers of the time, for reasons that make themselves immediately apparent.

Like Lady Mortimer, Kate is not an especially important character, but Lady Percy makes her lively, witty, and combative personality known the minute she steps on stage. She is the total opposite of what a medieval lady should be in that society's estimation, what with her inability to be silent, her apparent dislike of loving affection, and her refusal to submit to men without the use of force. For all intents and purposes, she is the female version of Hotspur. For example, in the scene in which the rebels meet, Hotspur not only makes a lewd joke suggesting she is only good for sex, but he also suggests that they copy the supine positions of the happy Mortimers. She rebuffs Hotspur:

HOT. Come, Kate, thou art perfect for lying down.

Come, quick, quick, that I may lay my head in thy lap.

LADY P. Go, ye giddy goose. (III.i.226-28).

Read in a certain way, the exchange can be seen as playful, but it reveals a possible reticence on Kate's part to perform the duties of a doting, loving, and sexually submissive wife. This is not to say that she is a bad wife or is an unpleasant character--quite the contrary, because she and Hotspur provide comic relief--but her perceived failings as a stereotypical medieval wife are apparent. In the same scene, Kate further displays her prickly disposition when Hotspur makes yet another questionable joke: "I had rather hear Lady, my brach [bitch], howl in Irish" (III.i.235-36). As any woman would respond to being called a "bitch" in reference to subservience, Kate replies, "Wouldst thou have thy head broken?" (III.I.237). Once again, such an exchange can be seen as playful banter, but Kate's fiery personality shines through. This is my own idiosyncratic interpretation of the text in question, and other critics may see Kate as solely a comedic, witty character. In comparison to other Shakespeare works, though, the interactions between Kate and Hotspur are reminiscent of those between Beatrice and Benedick in *Much Ado About Nothing*. The combative nature of Kate and Hotspur's relationship is what is portrayed most often, but there is still a strong bond of personality between the two of them that transcends their ill tempers.

Despite her bold temperament, Kate is put in her place by Hotspur by his refusal to include her in his plans for rebellion against King Henry. As a woman and an aristocratic wife, she is largely shut out of political and military policy. A few scenes prior, Kate displays her unflinchingly brash manner, demanding to know what is troubling Hotspur. If he does not tell her, then he must not love her: "Some heavy business hath my lord in hand, / And I must know it, else he loves me not" (II.iii.64-65). After he dodges her questions, Kate grows angry and barks orders, stating, "I'll know your business, Harry, that I will" (II.iii.80), and claims that she will "break thy little finger, Harry, / And if thou wilt not tell me all things true" (II.iii.87-88). In her hunger for knowledge and her attempts to strongarm Hotspur into divulging his secrets, Kate becomes what Castiglione describes disparagingly in *The Courtier*—a masculine, unnatural woman who seeks to subjugate her husband. In response to Kate's

threats, Hotspur frankly tells her that she will know none of his plans because she is a woman and therefore talkative and untrustworthy. She will blab all of the conspirators' plans eventually, so she cannot be trusted with such secret machinations. Hotspur does concede and acknowledge that Kate is as wise as any woman can be, but this is a small admission and his mind remains unchanged:

Constant you are,  
But yet a woman, and for secrecy,  
No lady closer, for I well believe  
Thou wilt not utter what thou dost not know,  
And so far will I trust thee, gentle Kate. (II.iii.108-12)

Additionally, an alternate view may be that Hotspur is threatened by Kate's insistence and abrasiveness, which prompts his belittling response. As one critic sees it, "The very fact that Kate speaks, and then, at that, that she speaks so 'masculinely' is almost too much for Hotspur to handle" (Christy 60). This passage shows that even a strong female character such as Kate is subject to men, especially her husband. Also, despite the fact that she and Hotspur are well matched, she will always come second in the eyes of medieval society and, in Shakespeare's portrayal, those who represent her.

As a side note, there is an instance in *Henry IV, Part I*, of women being depicted through a male point of view, which is shown in the scene where the Prince of Wales, drunkenly reveling with his motley crew in the Eastcheap tavern, imitates Lady Percy. He imagines her as a worshipper of Hotspur and his military prowess. Though Hal is incorrect in stating that Hotspur kills "some six or seven dozen Scots as a breakfast" (II.iv.103), he does accurately sum up Hotspur's restlessness and generally active personality: "[He] washes his hands, and says to his wife, 'Fie upon this quiet life! I want work'" (II.iv.104-105). Hotspur is said to have cut a very wide path through the Scottish army prior to the contemporaneous events of the play, but the number of those he has killed is exaggerated, even for Hal. The most interesting part of this passage is Hal's representation of Kate, which is blatantly incorrect. Hal, playing Kate, mimics, "'Oh my sweet Harry,' says she, 'how many hast thou kill'd to-day?'" (II.iv.105-06). Hal and his group of friends assume that she supports Hotspur's military exploits as a wife would, which shows how warped the images of women are in the minds of the male

characters, and this assumption also reinforces traditional gender dynamics of the era.

A central element to the text of *Henry IV, Part I*, is the concept of “womanish” behavior and, especially on the part of Hotspur, men’s condemnation of such behavior. Since Hotspur is the one who most often rails against these notions, with his hatred of romance, poetry, and effeminacy, he is the male character on whom the focus is placed. Oddly enough, the play questions these negative stereotypes as applied to women by having Hotspur embody all of them with his long-winded speeches and his reckless passion in general. At the same time, though, he is the epitome of medieval chivalry, a point that is mentioned by nearly every character in the play. To contextualize Hotspur’s condemnation of such “womanish” behavior, the views of masculinity in late medieval and early modern society, which are much less complicated than those of women, must be discussed. As one can gather from reading the medieval romantic works of Marie de France, Edmund Spenser, and Arthurian legend, men, or at least *noblemen*, were expected to be chivalrous, yet at the same time ruthless and victory-oriented in times of war. With his defeat of the Scots, Hotspur fulfills this latter requirement and then some, making him the shining example of what a noble knight should be. He wishes desperately to attain the brand of honor that he believes is essential—something that Harold Bloom interestingly terms “Hotspurian honour” (304)—despite the contrasting views of more pragmatic characters like Falstaff.

The other male characters praise Hotspur for his heroic qualities, especially King Henry, who refers to him as “Mars in swathing clothes” (III.ii.112). However, this expression could be seen as a backhanded compliment. King Henry is both praising Hotspur and commenting upon his youth, perhaps insinuating that he is still green about the ears despite his martial skill. Hal sees Hotspur as a rival, though, because he is everything that a prince should be, whereas Hal is initially a drunken disappointment. The constant competition between them is finally resolved in Act V, when Hal confirms their rivalry before slaying Hotspur:

I am the Prince of Wales, and think not, Percy,  
To share with me in glory anymore.  
Two stars keep not their motion in one sphere,

Nor can one England brook a double reign

Of Harry Percy and the Prince of Wales. (V.iv.63-67)

The Kingdom of England is not big enough for the two of them, much less the small, isolated world of the aristocracy. Their respective “stars” cannot orbit one another without colliding. But after Hal kills Hotspur, he reaffirms his admiration for the fallen warrior. Hal states that the world contains no man comparable to Hotspur in bravery: “This earth that bears [thee] dead / Bears not alive so stout [i.e., brave] a gentleman” (V.iv.92-93). With Hotspur’s chivalry still entrancing the readers and the audience, Hal’s remarks are duly applauded: “Hotspur is so dazzling and bewitching that we endorse Hal’s tribute to his fallen foe” (Baker 887). Though Hal sees Hotspur as an adversary, the former’s admiration for the latter is obvious, even though Hal develops his own “Hotspurian” code of honor by the time of the events of *Henry V*.

Noble and honorable though he may be, Hotspur professes to have an intense hatred for all things feminine and non-masculine, including “womanish” behavior in other men. A perfect example of this is his description of the Scottish lord in Act I, who was “neat and trimly dress’d” (I.iii.33) and “perfumed like a milliner” (I.iii.36), he says. Hotspur not only dislikes the lord’s vanity, seeing it as a vice of womanhood because a man should be blood-soaked and battered in battle, but he is also angered by the mere suggestion of effeminacy in men: “Hotspur’s anger towards this man comes not from the man’s questioning [of Hotspur’s authority regarding the prisoners] [...] but rather from his effeminacy” (Christy 61). This hatred of all things that can be even loosely perceived as feminine is further displayed in Hotspur’s dislike of poetry, which is odd considering its prominence in medieval chivalry: “And that would set my teeth on edge, / Nothing so much as mincing [dainty] poetry” (III.i.131-32). From the evidence available, Hotspur only acknowledges the military side of chivalry and totally ignores the vital contributions of romance and art. His disdain for affection is apparent as well, especially in his interactions with Kate. After she threatens him to gain information, Hotspur disavows all romantic feelings for her: “Away, you trifler! Love, I love thee not, / I care not for thee, Kate” (II.iii.90-91). It is almost as if he sees love, or even emotion itself, as a hindrance during times of war, when men must possess strong stomachs in order to “have bloody noses and crack’d crowns” (II.iii.93-94). In addition, Hotspur

condemns his father's "womanish" behavior and fails to heed his advice, comparing him to "a railing wife" (III.i.158), which goes along with the contemporary view of women as shrews. Other male characters denounce the presence of womanish behavior as well, such as Northumberland. Hotspur's father, in one of his characteristic fits of temper, contemptuously declares his son to be in a "woman's mood" (I.iii.237) early on in the play.

In an odd change of characterization, the play, or even Shakespeare himself, questions and disproves the aforementioned female stereotypes by having Hotspur embody them completely. For example, there is a consistent theme in the play of women as creatures of verbosity while men are creatures of action. Hotspur is often given to fears that his wife will tell the martial and political secrets he shares with her, as women are supposedly wont to do. Kate's statements that she will break his finger and crack his head open work against this theory, as the reader knows of Kate's temperament, but it is clear that these are idle threats, or merely barbed words pointed at Hotspur. Ultimately, that is what they are: words. That the men of the play are creatures of action is obvious, what with the numerous scenes of war strategy and battles that take place. Hal explicitly states his beliefs of women to Francis in Act II in the tavern before their impromptu role-play: "That ever this fellow should have fewer words than a parrot, and yet the son of a woman!" (II.iv.98-99). This passage is strange, though, because it sets up a paradox that men, being born of women, who are talkative and inefficient, have these qualities naturally. However, as remarked previously, the presence of extreme loquaciousness is inherent to Hotspur's character, which undermines such stereotypes. Hotspur's speeches go on for multiple lines at a time, so much so that in Act I, after a monologue spanning some thirty lines, Worcester finally attempts to silence his cousin: "Peace, cousin, say no more" (I.iii.188). Both the audience and his fellow characters have heard enough of Hotspur's bellowing by this point, surely.

Thus, the male hatred of emotion, which is again counted as a womanish quality, is undermined in the play by Hotspur's emotional and even volatile nature. According to Raymond H. Reno, "The source of Hotspur's logic, in other words, is not in the head but in the heart" (238). This is not to say that Hotspur weeps and rages, nor is he

necessarily a creature of sentiment, but he gives impassioned, rousing speeches, which also happen to be very long. His heart rules him, but not the in the same way as a supposedly weak-minded woman. Before the rebel faction engages in battle with King Henry's forces, Hotspur passionately declares his intention to slaughter as many foes as possible. His rage is implacable:

Let each man do his best; and here draw I  
A sword, whose temper I intend to stain  
With the best blood that I can meet withal  
In the adventure of this perilous day. (V.ii.92-95)

Furthermore, in the same speech, after the "lofty instruments of war" (V.ii.97) have been sounded, he encourages his soldiers to embrace one another: "For, heaven to earth, some of us never shall / A second time do such a courtesy" (V.ii.99-100). Though this speech is just one example, Hotspur has many similar scenes in which he is equally passionate, whether in anger or zeal. He even encourages the men to show their affection for one another, again a supposedly womanish action.

But these monologues, with their length, also seem to wear on Hotspur's contemporaries, especially in Act I. After vowing to hold the Scottish prisoners through an assault launched by the devil himself, Northumberland states that Hotspur is "drunk with choler" (I.iii.129) and that he should be silent. Women were usually deemed "choleric," meaning bad-tempered or irritable. This was supposed to be a reaction that came from the spleen, which was then seen as the source of human emotion. Northumberland's use of the term in relation to Hotspur raises questions regarding these female stereotypes. Granted, other male characters in the play make impassioned, lengthy speeches, but, since Hotspur is so opposed to all things emotional and the male characters see verbosity as a female quality despite its presence in him, such views are especially called into question and disproven through Hotspur's own words and actions.

In summary, although female characters are scarce in *Henry IV, Part I*, the depictions of the two ladies of substance are startling in their opposition. On one hand, there is Lady Mortimer, who embodies the ideals of the medieval noblewoman with her sweet, meek, and silent behavior, while at the same time there is Kate, Lady Percy, who is the complete opposite, but serves as a source of sharp wit in her

interactions with Hotspur. Another central element to the plot of *Henry IV, Part I*, is the concept of so-called “womanish” behavior and its presence in other men, which is met with contempt and condemnation, especially by Hotspur. But the play, and Shakespeare himself, seems to question these ideas of womanish behavior by making said conduct inherent to Hotspur’s character. He loves long, fervent speeches and has a general inability to remain silent, much like his wife. Needless to say, the Percys, like the Mortimers, are very evenly matched. The public attitude towards women in the early modern era, which still exists in part in the present day, was so ingrained into the patriarchal mindset that stereotypes were taken as facts. But one must applaud Shakespeare for breaking these largely misogynistic conventions in *Henry IV, Part I*. With the playwright’s vast menagerie of strong-willed, self-possessed female characters—Cleopatra, Portia, Lady Macbeth, and Marguerite d’Anjou, to name a few—one would expect nothing less from the women of the second play of the *Henriad*.

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# Slaying Monstrosity: The Undermining of the Heroic Ideal and the Monstrous in the Beowulf Legend

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The film *Beowulf & Grendel* (2005), directed by Sturla Gunnarsson, creatively dramatizes the epic poem *Beowulf*, taking several significant but discerning liberties with the anonymous Old English text. The film is a thought-provoking and insightful adaptation that interprets rather than blindly follows the text, making purposeful choices regarding the characterizations and major themes, particularly heroism and monstrosity. Through the change in the narrative perspective and the demystification of religion and the heroic ideal, the movie deviates markedly from the Old English text. The film takes great pains to portray Grendel as human, not monstrous. By providing Grendel with a motive for his bloody deeds, the film transforms him from a hellish, monstrous villain into an avenger who kills justifiably and according to the traditions of his society. The humanizing of Grendel begins with the film's title. Unlike the title of the written text, which focuses exclusively on Beowulf, *Beowulf & Grendel* gives the two main characters equal billing, as if they are similar and equal beings. The film, influenced by John Gardner's sympathetic portrayal of the antagonist in his novel *Grendel*, characterizes Grendel not as an evil, one-dimensional, doomed monster, but rather as a sympathetic, three-dimensional being with human traits and feelings who controls his own destiny. Grendel's devotion to his father's memory, for instance, clearly indicates that he possesses human, as opposed to monstrous, qualities. These alterations from the written text result in markedly different views of religion, heroism, monstrosity, and social outcasts in the film as opposed to the poem. The director and screenwriter of the film portray Grendel sympathetically to deconstruct perspectives on heroism and monstrosity in order to focus on contemporary societal

concerns such as racism, misogyny, and xenophobic responses to Muslim immigration in Northern European countries and North America following the terrorist attacks of 9/11.

To begin, the film presents a sympathetic and human Grendel (Ingvar Eggert Sigurðsson), a characterization that deviates greatly from the monstrous, demonic, and God-cursed villain in the epic poem. Monstrosity must be one of the primary themes addressed in *Beowulf*, for the original text is included in the Nowell Codex in the Cotton Vitellius A.xv “manuscript [,which] is devoted to narratives about monsters” (Fulk, *Beowulf Manuscript* x). The portrayal of Grendel in the written text, furthermore, correlates with the “medieval tradition that all monsters are descended from Cain and that both Cain and his descendants were marked by a fantastic appearance [...], as the exegetical tradition borrowed from local cultural traditions of monsters and spirits” (Williams 20). Cain’s kin were believed to exhibit animalistic behavior, such as blood-lust. Grendel’s blood-lust includes imbibing the blood of the Danes he murders, which is unquestionably monstrous. Given that the Old Testament clearly forbids the drinking of human blood, and the prohibition exists “in a range of Anglo-Saxon authors including Bede, Alfred, Ælfric, and Wulfstan, a Christian Anglo-Saxon audience would have found the description of Grendel’s eating-habits particularly loathsome” (Orchard, *Critical Companion* 140-41). This cruel sin of Grendel renders him monstrous in the eyes of the Danes, for it seems inhumane and cannibalistic, particularly given that the victims were their kinsmen. This sin separates him from the Danes, causing them to consider him an outsider, “the Other.”

When introducing Grendel to the readers, the narrator of the Old English poem immediately characterizes him negatively, inhibiting readers from reaching their own conclusions as to the antagonist’s motivation for wreaking pain and suffering at Heorot. In Seamus Heaney’s award-winning translation, the narrator employs the following phrases to describe Grendel: “a fiend out of hell” (line 100), “grim demon” (line 102), “God-cursed brute” (line 121), and “[t]he captain of evil” (line 749) who “ruled in defiance of right” (line 144). In short, the narrator portrays Grendel as a monstrous villain who must be destroyed to save the Danes. Grendel is powerful, deadly, and seemingly unstoppable, which traits render Beowulf heroic and glorious when he slays the monster. Grendel is a formidable opponent

who must be stopped to save the nation; as J.R.R. Tolkien notes, the monsters “give it [i.e., the poem] its lofty tone and high seriousness” (68). This formidability coupled with the narrator’s bias against Grendel cause readers to dislike the antagonist immediately—even before the character appears—and sympathize with the Danes, who are being attacked apparently without provocation. This negative characterization of Grendel presents him as non-human, “the Other” who must be halted, just as Old English tribes considered those outside their clan to be dangerous, invasive threats that had to be neutralized.

Furthermore, the text indicates that Grendel, a descendant of God-cursed Cain, cannot receive treasure nor have his own offerings accepted: “the treasure-seat, / he was kept from approaching; he was the Lord’s outcast” (lines 168-69). During the Old English period, treasure was obtained through bravery during battle: “Wealth was to the Germanic people ordinarily a positive value, a symbolic measure of a man’s worth” (Irving 124), yet Grendel seeks to steal from the treasure-seat out of apparent avarice and jealousy. But greed is not an adequate or logical motive for Grendel, for as a monster living apart from the human culture, gold and treasure have no monetary value or social significance for him. Robert Fulk claims that Grendel acts out of jealousy because God does not love him as He does the Danes and denies him the happiness that they enjoy: “It is precisely because they [i.e., the Danes] live so contentedly in their new hall, however, that they are hated by God’s enemies [i.e., the kin of Cain]” (Introduction lxxi). The textual reference to Cain reminds readers of the Grendel-Cain connection, since Cain slew his brother Abel in anger because God refused his sacrifice, yet Grendel is not even allowed to make a sacrifice or approach the treasure-seat because he is shunned as a pariah. Cain was punished by God because he committed an evil act, the first murder (and fratricide, at that), yet Grendel is punished by God before he performs any cruel act—in fact, before he is born. Grendel is condemned not because of his behavior, but rather because of the actions of his infamous ancestor—i.e., he is guilty by association. Perhaps Grendel commits evil actions simply because God created him to be a monster whose lack of humanity prevents him from approaching the treasure-seat or participating in civilized society. Tolkien, for instance, notes that Grendel is a “physical

monster whose main function is hostility to humanity” (90). Despite being the descendant of the God-cursed Cain, Grendel, unlike Cain, has no choice or free will: his evil is predetermined and inevitable, as it is his *wyrd*, or fate. Grendel simply cannot control his actions, for he is cursed by God with monstrosity because of an atrocity committed long before his birth. Although Cain was human, the Danes and the *Beowulf*-poet believe that because of the curse, his descendants are not. Convincing themselves that Grendel is non-human, the Danes thus justify ostracizing him from their society.

The written text indicates that Grendel’s actions are fixed and predetermined, for God has already woven the tapestry of the monster’s life and shaped his destiny. John Hill notes that “[t]he poet’s statements about God’s rule apply to fateful moments, to life and death decisions” (55). God’s shaping of the monster’s destiny is significant in that the word *wyrd* originated from the Old English word meaning “to shape.” Simone Weil claims that the “motif of *wyrd* as the implacable arbiter of men’s struggles resounds throughout the Anglo-Saxon canon like a perpetual minor chord” (81) because the people firmly believed that higher beings controlled their fate. The narrator clearly exhibits a belief in fate, and the text reveals no sympathy for Grendel because he is the ostracized “Other,” both cruel and cursed.

One might argue, however, that it is actually the Danes who are cursed and that God uses Grendel to punish them as His monstrous scourge. The narrator, speaking retrospectively about action occurring a few centuries earlier, contends that the Danes are heathens who do not know—or who have forgotten—God: “at pagan shrines they vowed / Offerings to idols, swore oaths / that the killer of souls [i.e., the devil] might come to their aid” (lines 175-77). Perhaps God punishes them for not worshipping or relying upon Him. But Larry Benson believes that the tone of the passage seems compassionate, which suggests that the Danes are ignorant of God’s existence, not defiant of God’s authority: “[A] return to idolatry is a sin for which compassion is not the appropriate emotion.[...] It is to those who have not had a chance to know of God, *ne wiston hīe Drihten God*, that one can be compassionate” (41). Edward Irving, Jr. notes the complexity concerning whether the Danes are guilty of ignorance or idolatry, observing that “the poet roundly condemns them [for praying to heathen gods], though realizing with some

sympathy that they cannot help their ignorance” (122). Thus, because of their ignorance of God’s existence and reliance upon heathen deities, the Lord God sends the monstrous Grendel to punish the Danes.

However, Benson’s and Irving’s claim that the Danes do not know of God’s existence is flawed since the Danes pray to His enemy, Satan, “the killer of souls” (line 177), for relief from Grendel. That is, initially the Danes are characterized as worthy people, with Grendel as an evil adversary, but this perspective changes when the builders of Heorot panic, turn from God, and swear oaths to Satan and heathen idols. This sin of the Danes is heinous, so they are punished, arguably, by being terrorized by a monstrous force. The poem’s narrator, in describing the pagan characters of a much earlier era, echoes the thoughts of the Christian *Beowulf*-poet by expressing disappointment in the Danes for committing the mortal sin of despair and failing to recognize God’s authority. Andy Orchard notes that “the heathen warriors and monster-slayers [...] have themselves become monsters in Christian eyes” (*Pride* 169). God thus punishes the Danes for their faithlessness by sending His scourge, Grendel, to destroy these people who refuse to have faith in their Creator. It is the same heavenly Creator that the *scop* had glorified in song twelve years earlier upon the completion of Heorot, their mead hall that is subsequently left desolate because of Grendel’s misdeeds.

Because the narrator of the poem portrays Grendel as a hellish monster who is descended from beings who warred against God, hearing the *scop* sing about God’s Creation would anger him. Battling a creature whose ancestors vied against God serves to embellish Beowulf’s heroism, as when he slays the monster and protects the innocent Danes. Fulk observes, “When the Danish court singer consecrates the hall with his song of Creation [...], the Danes are thereby decisively characterized as a people worthy of God’s protection” (Introduction lxxi). Fulk’s interpretation of the Danes as a nation protected by God is problematic, however, because God allows the monster to kill the Danes for twelve years before Beowulf arrives. The Danes lose their faith and are no longer worthy, apparently, of divine protection. Whether Grendel embodies evil incarnate or the scourge of God, his murders of the Danes at Heorot lack direct motivation, rendering his carnage even more monstrous. The same

cannot be said, however, in the film because from the onset, Grendel's motivation for attacking the Danes at Heorot is abundantly clear: he has seen them murder his father. Unlike in the poem, the movie shows action from Grendel's perspective and provides him with a justifiable motivation—i.e., revenge—for his attacks. His loving devotion to his father's memory, symbolized by his preservation and adoration of the skull, humanizes him and allows the audience to sympathize with him.

The film thus begins with the savage and unprovoked murder of Grendel's father, played by Spencer Wilding. Nickolas Haydock claims that the "prologue entitled 'A Hate is Born' could just as accurately have been called 'A Monster is Born,' though this monster is made[,] not born" (91) because Grendel acts in a manner that the Danes consider monstrous after witnessing the cruel murder of his father. But he is not a monster, only perceived as one. Filmgoers "are all but asked: 'Just who are the monsters here?'" (Haydock 92), since the alleged monster is the victim while the bloodthirsty killers are respected members of their society. Again, with the inclusion of the murder of Grendel's father, the film humanizes Grendel by creating a motivation for his crimes—revenge for the death of a loved one. Vengeance is unquestionably an acceptable and even heroic motive in an era that is governed, to some extent, by feuds and *wergild* (man-price). Present-day viewers recognize that Grendel has no recourse to justice in his era because he is a despised outcast. Audiences discern the film's correlation between honor and revenge and note as well the lack of provocation for the murder. Thus, they can more readily sympathize with Grendel's quest for revenge. The film stresses that Grendel hurts only those responsible for slaying his father. The Old English text, in contrast, indicates that Grendel murders people indiscriminately and thirty at a time—and without cause. Consequently, viewers of the film can understand Grendel's desire to seek vengeance upon those who murdered his father, provided that Grendel also spares those who did not participate in his father's death.

Grendel's father is attacked primarily because the Danes consider him an alien outcast who looks different from them. They dehumanize and kill him, devaluing him because he is an outsider and thus, in their minds, inferior. Why does the film portray this animosity toward "the Other"? The characters' prejudice parallels contemporary occurrences and irrational fears toward outsiders in Iceland, Sweden,

Canada, and other countries at the time the film was created. For instance, a controversy arose in 2000 (five years before the movie's release) in Iceland, where director Sturla Gunnarsson was born and *Beowulf & Grendel* was filmed. Although the Association for Muslims in Iceland made numerous requests in 2000 for a permit to build the first Icelandic mosque, the Reykjavík City Council declined to respond or grant approval. The European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) claimed in their Human Rights Report on Iceland that the City Council repeatedly neglected to help the Muslim group because of racial prejudice (Loftsdóttir 47). The land permit was finally granted on July 6, 2013, 13 years after the original request was made. Icelandic officials had feared building a mosque following the events of 9/11. Even though the statements below were made after the film's release, they demonstrate that Islamophobia has endured in Iceland for some time. Reykjavík mayor Ólafur F. Magnússon spoke out against Muslims building a mosque for the absurd and xenophobic reason that his Icelandic ancestors were attacked by invading Arabs in 1627 (Tulinius). Icelandic President Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson claimed he was "shocked to the point of paralysis" upon learning that the Saudi Arabian government was financing the Reykjavík mosque, for Saudi involvement would, he believed, quickly lead to religious extremism and Muslim terrorist attacks (Helgason). In addition, after 9/11, hate crimes against Muslims and Islamophobic sentiment increased in Canada, where screenwriter Andrew Rai Berzins and Gunnarsson live. Furthermore, Stellan Skarsgård and Ingvar Eggert Sigurðsson's home country of Sweden saw a dramatic increase in anti-Muslim sentiment in the years leading up to the film's debut because of the rise of Swedish nationalism, public disapproval of Islamic women wearing the hijab, paranoid fears of Islamic fundamentalism, the mistaken belief that most Muslims are violent extremists (particularly after 9/11), and false accusations that Muslims harmed the Swedish economy. These Swedish misconceptions against Muslims led to violence committed against such immigrants and their property, just as Danish prejudice against Grendel's father in the film leads to his undeserved destruction. In Sweden, the Malmö Mosque and its Islamic building complex were almost destroyed by arson in 2003 and then again in

two purposely set fires in 2005. No one was ever punished for these hate crimes.

It is clear that in the years preceding the release of *Beowulf & Grendel*, the director, screenwriter, and actors witnessed xenophobia, Islamophobia, and racism perpetrated against outsiders in their respective societies. They realized that people in their native countries hated and feared Muslims, even considering them monsters (fundamentalist terrorists) simply because they looked different, practiced different customs, and came from a foreign place. The fear-mongering and paranoid feelings toward outsiders increased after 9/11 and with the advent of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Many peaceful Muslims in Europe and North America were unfairly hated, shunned, denied employment, and discriminated against simply because they were perceived to be different, which led the director, screenwriter, and actors to counter this prejudice by depicting the outsider characters (like Grendel and his father) as sympathetic victims who are harmed and misjudged without cause. One prominent way to change public opinion and call attention to the dangers of prejudice and xenophobia is through the arts, such as film. *Beowulf & Grendel* does this successfully, starting at the beginning of the film with the senseless killing of Grendel's father in front of his young son.

The murder of Grendel's father in the film is poignant because he clearly loves his son. He plays with young Grendel ([Hringur Ingvarsson](#)) like a loving father and, when confronted by dangerous Danish thanes on horseback, altruistically privileges his son's life over his own. The father paternally cradles young Grendel in his arms and flees with him, despite knowing that he decreases his own odds of survival by carrying the child. To save his boy's life, the father hides Grendel on a ledge that overhangs a cliff and then sacrifices his life by offering up himself for death as a distraction. His actions provide him and his son Grendel with human traits, for the two social outcasts act humanely, not cruelly like the Danes, who murder the father for no legitimate reason, merely because he looks unusual. When Beowulf asks Hrothgar ([Stellan Skarsgård](#)) how Grendel's father has provoked the slaying, the Danish king is so embarrassed that he initially declines to answer. Then he shamefully confesses that he had no reasonable motive to murder Grendel's father and killed him merely because the peculiar-looking being "crossed our [i.e., the

Danes'] path." He then attempts to justify the slaying by falsely claiming that the father "took a fish." But Berzins' subsequent personal stage directions in the screenplay clearly indicate the lack of a plausible motive: "The pathetic pettiness of Hrothgar's answer sweeps over him before he speaks it" (96). Hrothgar truthfully says that he "crossed paths" with Grendel's father, but fails to inform Beowulf that the Danes' aggressive attack occurred because the person he encountered was an odd-looking outsider.

Hrothgar and his men kill him because they encounter him on their turf. When they see Grendel's father walking on the outskirts of their border, they consider him a threat who is invading their land. Perceiving that he exists outside their tribe and is physically deformed, he is instinctively deemed an alien danger that must be quashed. This undeserved belief that all outsiders are threats might remind viewers of similar prejudices after 9/11 when hate crimes were perpetuated against Muslims, civil rights were compromised, and Muslims were unfairly considered violent extremists who could harm the "rightful" inhabitants of the land. When those in power wish to legitimize their authority, they can identify a danger (real or imagined), and then justify their power by destroying the supposed threat. Hrothgar comes across Grendel's father, a large, powerful, and strange-looking adult, on the border of his land and decides that this alien creature must die. Grendel later satirizes Hrothgar's territorial defense of Danish borders by marking his own territory on their beloved mead hall: "Grendel travesties the Danes' earlier attempts to enforce and extend their borders" (Haydock 93) by urinating on the doors of Heorot, sickening the Geat soldiers with the horrible and pungent smell. The stink of Grendel's urine is shocking because his genetic makeup differs from that of the Danes and Geats.

When Grendel grows up, his distinct physical attributes and his isolation from society frighten the Danes, as their imagination constructs a monstrous identity for him. In the film, as in the poem, "[o]utcasts and scapegoats are transformed into supernatural beings, their seemingly malevolent powers created by the very rituals of abjection that mark them as different—and therefore fearsome—in the first place" (Haydock 94). Because of ignorance and prejudice, unique beings in the film such as Grendel, his father, and Selma the sibyl are feared and unwelcome in Danish society; to convince their

people to vanquish these strange beings, the Danes label them as supernatural figures or monsters and thus as threats to their society. Grendel and his father, who look different than the Danes, live peacefully until they are viciously attacked—the exact reversal of the situation in the Old English text in which the Danes are at peace until cruelly victimized by the bloodthirsty monster Grendel. The attacks by Grendel in the epic poem and by the Danes in the movie are both unsuspected and unprovoked, indicating that the Danes are the innocent victims in the text, yet Grendel and his father are the guiltless prey in the film. In the poem, heroism and defeating perceived monsters and outsiders were the primary themes because of the cultural context: Old English tribes wanted to stress to their thanes the importance of bravery in battle when fighting other clans. However, when the film was being created in 2005, racism, xenophobia, and Muslim immigration had supplanted heroism and bravery as the prevalent cultural issues. Hrothgar manifests his authority by depicting Grendel's father, “the Other,” as a dangerous threat that the Danes must neutralize for the benefit of society, just as those in power in Europe and North America made similar arguments after 9/11 when they scapegoated Muslims, contributing to Islamophobic fears.

The presence of Grendel's father in the film is significant because it demonstrates the humanity of Grendel *and* his father, while manifesting to the audience that Grendel is loved, as well. The existence of Grendel's father not only demystifies the claim that the antagonist Grendel descends from the Devil, but also that he is somehow related to Cain. His concern for Grendel humanizes the son by signifying that Grendel must have derived from another being who loves him and is not monstrous. The humanizing of Grendel reflects the filmmakers' use of parallelism with peaceful Muslim immigrants and those living in Iraq, Afghanistan, and other nations with Arab populations after 9/11, many of whom were unfairly demonized by governments, media outlets, and xenophobes as violent extremists.

Thus, the film challenges the myth that the antagonist is a parentless, demonic creature. The loving father-son relationship expressed in the film surprises both the Danes and the Geats, who consider Grendel to be a subhuman, blood-lusting monster incapable of experiencing human feelings. Grendel clearly begins the film as a bereaved son who honors and loves his father. When Hondscio (Tony

Curran) invades Grendel's cave and discovers the desiccated head of the father, he expresses surprise that the antagonist had a parent and feels nostalgic toward the deceased father.<sup>1</sup> Hondscio remarks to Beowulf, "Look! Our friend Grendel doesn't come from mist and shit alone" (95). Hondscio manifests his cruel disdain for Grendel's feelings by crushing the father's skull, a mean and gratuitous act given the outsider's love of his parent.

The audience's sympathy for Grendel in the film reflects a significant difference from the epic poem. In the poem, when Grendel is denied entrance into Heorot, contemporary Old English listeners and present-day readers lack sympathy partly because the story is told solely from the Danes' perspective (not Grendel's) and because Grendel apparently has no progenitors and does not seem to be loved by anyone. In Old English culture, people are judged partly by the reputation of their kin, yet Grendel seems to have appeared out of nowhere, since initially it is believed that he has no family and is not an offspring of any creature. In the written text, Hrothgar informs Beowulf that Grendel is the product of "an unnatural birth [...] / [descended from] *fatherless* creatures" (lines 1353, 1355, my italics). In contrast to the viewer of the film, then, the reader of *Beowulf* is led to believe that Grendel had no father and thus had an unnatural and monstrous entrance into the world. Only after Grendel's death—after his actions have been detailed and readers have firmly established their disdain for him—does the narrator reveal to readers that Grendel has a mother. When first introducing Grendel in the written text, had the narrator mentioned that Grendel has a parent who loves him, the information would have somewhat mitigated the hatred the readers harbor for the antagonist. He would then have seemed less monstrous, despite having killed Danes.

In the poem, when the Danes are murdered, the people become bitter, arguably not so much because of the murders but rather for the lack of respect from Grendel, who has violated their social code by neglecting to pay financial reparations—as if monsters have money:

Malignant by nature, he [Grendel] never showed remorse [. . .]  
nor [would he] stop his death-dealing nor pay the death-price.  
No counsellor could ever expect  
fair reparation from those rabid hands. (lines 137, 156-58)

The Danes are rightfully incensed that Grendel has murdered their kinsmen. The passage manifests the Danes' feelings of anger and vengeance, not sadness for the loss of a friend. The Danes ostracize Grendel and bar his entrance to Heorot and to every sphere of society because they consider him a monster; nonetheless, they expect him to pay the *wergild*, as if he must obey the laws of the culture that shuns him completely. Because of their prejudice against the outcast, they fail to discern this obvious contradiction. They employ different rules for him than for themselves. The Danes stress the importance of honor in their culture, but this demand for payment seems like a capitalistic critique of their society, as if financial compensation would somehow atone for his sin and restore their honor after they are unable to kill him.

The Danes and Geats assert the right to kill Grendel because of the feudal codes of revenge and *wergild*, yet do not consider it permissible for Grendel's mother to exact her revenge by slaying Hrothgar's friend Aeschere, for they label her a monster and a social outcast. In fact, the poetic text suggests that Grendel's mother represents "a perversion of the Anglo-Saxon ideal of the woman as *fridowebbe* or 'peace weaver.' She battles heroes, pursues vengeance like a warrior, and places no stock in peace. [...] She is both masculine and monstrous" (Williamson 604). The Danes believe that because she is monstrous and alien, she is not entitled to participate in the socially-acceptable practice of blood feuds. Yet by killing Grendel's mother, Beowulf commits the same type of vengeance that she does when she slays Aeschere. Thus, in the poem, Grendel's mother and Beowulf both kill for revenge, yet her killing of the thane is characterized by the narrator, the Danes, and Geats as monstrous, while Beowulf's slaying of Grendel is considered heroic. The distinction lies in the act of "Othering" and prejudice. The Danes believe that they have the right to act vengefully because their lives have value, but they convince themselves that the outcasts are monsters. Thus, dehumanizing their victims allows them to legitimize their killing. Because they assume that Grendel and his mother are non-human, their lives are worthless and thus their deaths are not worth avenging. Although Orchard believes that Grendel's mother is a "monster who initially is the aggrieved party [...] and is] driven to avenge the killing of her son by motives which would tug at the hearts of any Germanic audience" ("Psychology" 93), the Danes and Geats

do not sympathize with her for her loss. Orchard incorrectly suggests that the vengeance exacted by Grendel's mother would affect the hearts and sympathy of an Old English audience because he doesn't take into account that the dead son is considered a monster and the person committing the revenge killing is female.

Ironically, however, Grendel's mother does attempt to follow the cultural rules of *wergild*. Although she possesses the capacity to slay many Danes at once, she kills only one thane because only one family member of hers has been murdered as well. But such cultural traditions in this misogynistic society are reserved exclusively for men, so the Danes are outraged that a female has participated in their customs. The Danes consider her inferior because of her gender, overlooking the fact that she possesses superior physical strength. They believe that only men should be allowed to participate in rituals such as revenge killings, because theirs is a patriarchal society and allowing women the same rights and privileges as men would threaten male hegemony.

Furthermore, the Danes and Geats are furious when Grendel's mother removes her son's shoulder from the rafters of Heorot, as if the monster's shoulder belongs to them. She takes her son's shoulder because his life and honor are meaningful to her; she does not want her son to suffer any more public humiliation. They are cultural pariahs who want nothing to do with the Danes' civilization, yet his shoulder would always be displayed ritualistically in the society's most popular building. Although the Danes have no regard for Grendel's life, the monster has a mother, and even monsters' mothers love their children. For loving her child, she might have been considered human, except that the Danes hate outcasts and have dehumanized her and Grendel, who is ultimately killed by Beowulf.

Although the poet portrays Beowulf as a hero when he defeats Grendel, the victor's behavior in Heorot is troubling. The Geat passively allows one of his kinsmen, Hondscio, to be murdered during Grendel's last visit to the mead hall. Grendel greedily and stealthily advances upon Heorot, anticipating murder, dismemberment, and cannibalism. Michael Lapidge claims that "it is because the monster lies beyond our comprehension, because we cannot visualise it at all, that its approach is one of the most terrifying moments in English literature" (384). The poet does in fact portray Grendel's entrance as

scary because the reader does not know what to expect, and the adversary at this point has yet to be described physically and is thus formless and unknown. Perhaps this creature who defies description, along with his bloody past, has even frightened Beowulf, despite his boasts. It is disturbing that Beowulf seems stunned by fear when Grendel approaches and thus fails to aid Hondscio when he is attacked. The narrator reports the scene in a matter-of-fact tone, without questioning Beowulf's motives for failing to help his kinsman. When Grendel arrives at Heorot and murders a sleeping Geat, Beowulf merely lies on his bench and observes—choosing not to rescue him. The narrator reports, “Mighty and canny, / Hygelac's kinsman [i.e., Beowulf] was keenly watching / for the first move the monster would make” (lines 735-37). The narrator praises Beowulf as an alert hero, even though the Geat passively observes Grendel murder his countryman—a thane who has come across the sea on Beowulf's behalf to protect him as part of the Anglo Saxon *comitatus* relationship. *Comitatus* loyalty signified the reciprocal bond between the thane and his people (mostly his kinsmen), with the people fighting loyally for the thane in exchange for his protection and financial rewards. When Beowulf neglects to save Hondscio, he violates this reciprocal bond. Yet the narrator, surprisingly, praises the Geat for being “canny” (line 735), or for employing strategy and caution. Why would a great hero—the strongest human being, one with the strength of sixty men (thirty in each hand)—resort to surprise or strategy to slay a monster? Ruth Johnston Staver, however, supports the sense of Beowulf's heroism in this passage, defending the protagonist's failure to act: “Grendel makes a lightning strike before Beowulf is ready.[...] Beowulf has not even had time to react. Perhaps he instantly realizes that it is too late to save his friend” (55). Staver accepts the narrator's perspective that heroes are flawless and that Beowulf cannot help his kinsman; she fails to consider, though, the possibility that Beowulf might be afraid and that he freezes when Grendel appears. The critic thus overlooks the subtext that indicates that Beowulf is a flawed man who watches his kinsman be killed since she accepts the narrator's perspective that Beowulf is somehow a perfect hero.

Beowulf claims to adhere to the Old English ideals of heroism, bravery, and fair fights. He even declines to use weapons in his battle

with Grendel, declaring to his kinsmen that brave warriors should shun the use of stealth or an advantage over an opponent:

He has no idea of the arts of war,  
of shield or sword-play, although he does possess  
a wild strength. No weapons, therefore,  
for either this night: unarmed me shall face me  
if face me he dares. (lines 681-85)

Beowulf's request for a fair fight and refusal to gain an advantage makes him seem heroic. It is noteworthy, however, that the hero in the poem comes across the border into Daneland, where he and his kinsmen are initially considered a threat by the coast guard before being welcomed after his past connection with Hrothgar and his intention to slay the monster are made clear. Unlike in the film, where Grendel's father is attacked when reaching the outskirts of the border, symbolizing prejudice against Muslims after 9/11, in the poem, a hero entering the land manifests the value of tribal alliances made during the Old English period against a common enemy. *Beowulf* suggests the need for clans and nations (which consisted of various tribes) to bond together strategically when they were outnumbered or could not vanquish an enemy, such as the Viking marauders who went from village to village, pillaging and burning down all they could. In the poem, Beowulf, although not a Dane, can be a hero because the Geats and the Danes are of the same race and look similar. Grendel, however, is perceived as a monster because he is physically deformed and alien. In the poem, therefore, heroes share the same race and bond together to fight a rival. A monster, however, could represent someone who is physically different, such as an Arab. During the Middle Ages, Arabs sometimes came to northern Europe, where they were treated with suspicion. One example is Ahmad ibn Fadlan, an Arab Muslim who traveled through northern Europe to meet the Varangians (Vikings). Ibn Fadlan, born in Baghdad in the ninth century, was considered an outsider during his time in Europe and was not well received by the Vikings. Monsters often represent those outside the clan who look different and have unique customs. One should not, however, accept that the monsters in *Beowulf* are meant to be taken literally. Monsters can symbolize a terrifying, formidable enemy, such as a rival tribe or nation that threatens the homeland. In the poem, a bitter foe or a marauding group of Vikings can be

embodied by a monster, such as Grendel. Conversely, those who die fighting the monster are heroes and given respectful funerals for protecting the tribe.

Furthermore, honoring the dead and having a noble burial were important customs in Old English culture. Consequently, the written text begins and ends with honorable funerals, the last rites of Shield Sheafson and Beowulf, respectively. However, because Grendel is considered a monster, he is denied this benefit that is available to others in the culture. By desecrating Grendel's body, Beowulf also prevents him from ever having a proper burial. A despised outsider, Grendel is not believed worthy of a funeral or any respect usually offered to the dead. The story of the desecration of Grendel's head in the Old English text, however, is refashioned in the film's episode of the aforementioned desiccated skull in Grendel's cave. Nonetheless, a huge distinction exists because the poem seems to laud Beowulf for beheading the lifeless Grendel, yet the film version unequivocally characterizes the destruction of the father's head as a shameful deed—an unnecessary and horrific act that violates the moral ethos of the era. The stunned silence and looks of shame of the Geats in the cave, along with Grendel's subsequent emotional anguish upon finding the remnants of the skull, render this cultural violation in the film unmistakable. The humanization of the alleged monster reflects a cultural shift in that the director and screenwriter want their audience to shun malicious stereotypes of recent immigrants, such as Muslims, and to perceive them as human beings who are just like them, with feelings and dreams for a better life. Filmgoers see the pain from the outcast's perspective; Gunnarsson and Berzins seem to want their viewers to look from the immigrants' point of view. The juxtaposition occurs because the film inspires sympathy for beings that are considered monstrous, but the Old English text does not.

Moreover, the poem does not inspire sympathy for Grendel's mother, portraying her, like her son, as a demonic monster, a cowardly but sinister descendant of Cain who attacks in the dead of night while her victims sleep. Sympathy for the monsters slain by Beowulf would be problematic to an Old English audience because the poet depicts him as a hero who saves the people from monstrous societal outcasts in an era when heroism was an integral part of the culture. As outsiders and beings who never speak, Grendel and his

mother can't present the reader with their perspective, which renders it difficult for the reader to sympathize with their situation. Furthermore, any sympathy for Beowulf's adversaries, such as pity for Grendel's mother as a justified avenger and a grieving parent, would detract from the protagonist's heroism, which is why Grendel and his mother are portrayed as hellish and monstrous creatures in the epic text.

In the film, however, Grendel, his father, and his son are humanized, evoking sympathy from the audience. Grendel's mother ([Elva Ósk Ólafsdóttir](#)) strives to maintain her family's honor and to exact revenge by slaying Aeschere ([Gunnar Eyjólfsson](#)), and even wielding Grendel's shoulder as a weapon. She wants to hurt people with the same object they employed to humiliate her son. The revenge humanizes both son and mother, demonstrating that even those beings labeled as monsters experience pain when their loved ones are murdered. The filmmakers correlate this sorrow metaphorically with the suffering felt by Muslim immigrants when they have been persecuted or despised in the aftermath of 9/11. In the film, when Grendel and his mother grieve—and exact revenge—after the murder of their loved one, they exhibit human emotions, thereby inspiring compassion from the audience. Consequently, the two scenes in the film that arguably incite the most pathos for any character involve, for one, the death of Grendel's father (a supposed monster), not the demise of any Dane or Geat (a human being). The prologue shows the adolescent Grendel's grief as he witnesses and mourns the death of his father. The second—and related—scene that evokes pathos occurs when Hondscio finds and destroys the desiccated head. The description in the screenplay states that Hondscio “looks up and finds Beowulf's troubled gaze. There's something terrible in what he's done—and they are both terribly aware” (95). When Hondscio sadistically destroys the skull, the viewer might wonder whether Grendel or the Geat warrior is the actual monster and where one's sympathy should lie. The film's audience can readily discern Grendel's pain as he discovers the shameful desecration of the head and howls in anger. His suffering is so overwhelming that his cries and gestures become more animalistic than before, indicating the trauma he experiences. Hearing the painful cries, filmgoers might wonder if the cruelty of the Danes and Geats has really rendered

Grendel monstrous. That is, Grendel is not portrayed monstrously here, even though his vengeance and status as an outsider cause the Danes to consider him that way. Grendel feels pain from loss like a human being does, yet he never kills gratuitously. When he seeks revenge on Hondscio, he smells the Geats until he finds him because he wants to kill only the man responsible for crushing his father's skull. Unlike a monster, he never slays an innocent person. The audience recognizes that the loss of Grendel's father hurts him more than the death of Hondscio harms Beowulf or that of Aeschere saddens Hrothgar.

Thus, the film transfigures Grendel from a hellish monster into a sympathetic human being so that the audience will learn to be more tolerant toward outcasts and those whom are different in terms of their race, ethnicity, or religion. Selma the Witch, for example, gives Beowulf details from Grendel's perspective. She informs Beowulf that Grendel was given his name, which means "grinder," because Grendel "was born with bad dreams" and thus used to grind his teeth (75). Yet Thorkel (played by Ronan Vibert), the *scop*, purposely misuses this information to characterize Grendel as a subhuman monster in order to make his Geat leader Beowulf, by contrast, a hero. One of the *scop*'s major objectives was to inspire heroic action in his listeners. Taking a postmodern turn, the film here self-consciously acknowledges how the poem itself was first created. On the return to Geatland, Thorkel begins to compose the oral text that will evolve one day into the epic poem we know as *Beowulf*, but his story is immediately called into question. The scene is self-reflexive and postmodern in that Thorkel is supposedly re-creating in the poem the story about the exploits of Beowulf, but he is also introducing his own prejudice against outsiders. It is metapoetic/dramatic in that the film demonstrates the initial construction of the poem upon which it is based, and the audience discerns how the *scop* knows the truth, but willfully transforms the victim into a monster. Wearing a cross from his newly-adopted conversion to Christianity, Thorkel makes a false claim about Grendel's name in the poem that he is in the process of composing:

Thorkel: born of scum and swampy things  
Lurking in his mother's moss.  
The mark of Cain came to his brow  
Of evil and a sea-hag born

Grendel, grinder of lost men's bones  
Felt hate toward the happy Danes.[...]  
Thorfinn (played by Martin Delaney): What's Cain got to do  
with Grendel?  
Grendel killed his own brother too?  
Breca (played by Rory McCann): No, I think Thorkel's saying  
that Grendel's  
just like Cain—a killer.  
Thorfinn: We all are.  
[. . .]

Thorfinn: Thorkel's tale is shit. (149)

Thorfinn's concern regarding Thorkel's tale is thus well founded. Thorkel changes the meaning of Grendel's name from a grinder of teeth, someone who has nightmares or premonitions of evil, to a monster who cruelly grinds the bones of the people he slays. This postmodern narrative device demonstrates the importance of perspective, with Thorkel employing the Danes' prejudiced view of Grendel to defame him, but Thorfinn questioning Thorkel's motives for dehumanizing Grendel and implying that the adversary is really no different than the Danes or Geats. With this self-conscious alteration, the *scop* transforms Grendel into a villain far crueler and monstrous—and much less sympathetic—than is actually the case, therefore. Such a transformation also has the concomitant effect of embellishing the fame of Grendel's adversary, Beowulf.

When Grendel is characterized as a hellish monster, his counterpart, Beowulf, in turn, becomes a greater hero. The more Grendel represents a dangerous threat to the Danes, the more courageous and heroic Beowulf becomes as their defender. In the film, however, the more human and less monstrous Grendel appears, the more Beowulf's heroism is challenged, by characters and audience alike. Furthermore, both protagonists father a child with Selma, a human female, suggesting that both males must belong to the same species. And although Grendel comes uninvited to Selma's hut to sleep with her, she never screams or complains; when Grendel has sex with her, she seems not angry but curious. If Grendel had violated her sexually, that would detract from the audience's sympathy for him and would justify Beowulf's killing of him. After the sexual act, Grendel and Selma become parents and friends; in fact, the woman

fosters a stronger bond with Grendel than with Beowulf. One should also remember that it is Beowulf who kidnaps Selma and threatens to hit her, yet Grendel serves as her protector from the Danish men, who previously raped her at will. Thus, in *Beowulf & Grendel*, Grendel, not Beowulf, serves as the protector of a woman. Berzins' choice to have Grendel safeguard a woman from the Danes makes filmgoers consider him all-the-more human and the Danes as animalistic, inverting the portrayals in the poem.

Ultimately, Beowulf slays Grendel, Selma's protector and the father of her son. Yet he spares the son, just as Hrothgar spares young Grendel after slaying the father. Pointing to the lifeless body of Grendel, Beowulf tells Grendel's son, "Your father [...] then you can be proud" (139-40). The film, like the written text, thus comes full circle. The poem begins and ends with a funeral, but the film begins and ends with mercy, the sparing of the life of an innocent child. *Beowulf & Grendel* presents a more optimistic perspective than the written text, for Beowulf spares the life of Grendel's son, who looks human and is thus less likely than his allegedly monstrous father and grandfather to be senselessly slaughtered. Furthermore, Hrothgar probably will avoid a feud with the son because Beowulf and Grendel have taught him a valuable lesson regarding the horrific ramifications of unprovoked violence against "the Other." The existence and preservation of the innocent child in the film manifests hope for the future. In the film, the Danes learn the futility of violence against outcasts and the need to respect and coexist with beings they consider monstrous. This rewriting of the legend is crucial because it seems to reflect post-9/11 Islamophobic and anti-immigration attitudes and symbolizes how viewpoints have changed after this major terrorist attack.

## Note

<sup>1</sup> The name of Hondscio is spelled differently in the movie credits from that in Heaney's translation of the anonymous written text.

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## At “the Edge of the Void”: An Existential Reading of Mixedblood Identity in Momaday’s *House Made of Dawn* and *The Ancient Child*

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In *Other Destinies*, Louis Owens contends that N. Scott “Momaday’s writing illustrates a process of becoming” (25), and that it is “out of the search for an identity that Momaday’s writing grows” (92). It is Momaday’s incorporation of this archetypal, “recognizably modernist” (Owens 91) theme (the search for Self) that allows for an existential reading of his work. Momaday’s use of this modern literary motif is primarily rooted in the protagonist’s struggle for cultural authenticity--a struggle traditionally reliant upon a centered relationship with both the landscape and his Native heritage. Yet the protagonist’s fight to create meaning for his own existence can be interpreted in an existential context. This is best demonstrated by Abel in *House Made of Dawn* and Set in *The Ancient Child*--protagonists whose mixedblood identities are fraught with existential anguish and meaninglessness, whose unique quests for identity throughout these narratives ultimately reveal their existential framework.

In *House Made of Dawn*, Momaday places Abel within what Owens calls “the anarchy and futility of modern existence” (91). Existentially, this seems to be an appropriate placement, for Abel is both alienated and deracinated--a man whose quest for identity becomes not only cultural but also individual. *House Made of Dawn* is, as Owens contends, “recognizably modernist and thus deceptively easy fare for a New Critical approach,” having a “dependence upon mythic structure to provide a way of ordering” (91) its primary themes. This modernist aspect, then, particularly its focus on the existential “futility,” or meaninglessness, “of modern existence,” not only allows *House Made of Dawn* to be considered as a text “assimilable into the modernist canon” (91), but demonstrative of the existential struggle for meaning in the world.

Abel's search for identity is complicated by the absence of his father, the early deaths of his mother and brother, and his alcohol abuse upon returning from the war. Abel seems to have more of a harmonious (centered) relationship with the landscape before the war than upon his return. Through numerous flashbacks, we learn of his youth and his ability to sense his grandfather's age and his mother's impending death, just as "he knew already the motion of the sun and the seasons" (15; pt. 1, "July 21"). We learn of his involvement in the distinguished ceremonial organization known as The Eagle Watchers Society and how, during one of their excursions, he makes all the necessary preparations for trapping an eagle: "He went to the river and washed his head in order to purify himself [...], placed a prayer offering" at a stone shrine, and "began to sing" (23). Yet even here he begins to demonstrate alienation from his heritage, for when he removes the eagle from the sack, "bound and helpless," he notes how it appears "drab and shapeless in the moonlight, too large and ungainly for flight," which fills him with such "shame and disgust" that he takes the eagle by the throat and "cut[s] off its breath" (24-25). After the war, this alienation becomes even more evident. As he walks in the canyon one day, he tries "to pray, to sing, to enter into the old rhythm of the tongue," but he realizes that he is "no longer attuned to it" (57; pt. 1, "July 28"). He lacks centeredness, for though the rhythm is "there still," it is more "like memory" (57)--something from which he is now distanced. Abel's postwar alienation can be designated as a "divided selfhood in which one is distanced from one's true being" (Palmer 147). As the novel progresses, Abel's sense of alienation from the customs of his Native heritage only deepens and leads him to an existential anguish that forces him to pursue an authentic mode of existence.

After killing the albino man in an alley, Abel wakes in his jail cell, coughing from the "blood in his throat and mouth," and looks into the "indifferent and serene" night (95; pt. 2, "January 26"), where he sees men running toward him, "runners after evil" who "venture out" to confront the evil that is "abroad in the night." Abel is at once overwhelmed by a "longing and loneliness" that leaves him aware of his lack of centeredness: "Now, here, the world was at his back. He had lost his place. He had been long ago at the center, had known where he was, had lost his way, had wandered to the end of the earth,

was even now reeling on the edge of the void” (96). That is, Abel is experiencing anguish in the face of the Nothing, the “void.” The “edge” upon which he is “reeling” is the extremity of his identity crisis, the place where he becomes keenly aware of his disconnection from his Native heritage. Existentially, this void is Abel’s own sense of anguish in the face of nothingness--a sense that, as Paul Tillich explains, is “aroused by the loss of a spiritual center, of an answer, however symbolic and indirect, to the question of the meaning of existence” (47). In *Being and Nothingness*, Jean-Paul Sartre describes the Nothing as that which creates a void, which in turn separates the present Self from its future or intended Self, and one’s awareness of this void, this separation, creates this sense of anguish (73). It is at this “edge of the void” that Abel begins to realize that he must choose to create for himself a new identity by regaining his centeredness. Part of this void, too, is represented by the sea, which Abel hears (but cannot see) beyond the alleyway and in which dwell the “fishes” that enter his mind. A fish may represent Abel himself, who, like a fish, now dwells in the void and struggles to avoid “falling off forever in the abyss” (96; pt. 2, “January 26”).

Immediately after coming to this realization of the choice he must now make, Abel, having “no real insight into his situation” but admitting to the “trouble” in which he now finds himself, “want[s] a drink; he want[s] to be drunk” (97). For Sartre, this desire demonstrates bad faith, for Abel uses alcohol to escape the responsibility of choosing to create a new identity for himself by not only reverting to the stereotype of the “drunken Indian” (becoming inauthentic by subscribing to the expectations of the “They,” the non-Indian culture in which he lives), but also existing in a mode of being-in-itself, as an object in relation to the Other.

There is further evidence of Abel’s anguish as he sits in jail, observing the ceiling. As a child, Abel had the ability to see “beyond,” to “see beyond the landscape, beyond every shape and shadow and color,” and thus “be free and finished, complete, spiritual” (38; pt. 1, “July 24”). Yet he is now unable to do so:

The walls of his cell were white, or perhaps they were gray or green; he could not remember. After a while he could not imagine anything beyond the walls except the yard outside, the lavatory and the dining hall--or even the walls, really. They were abstractions beyond the reach of his understanding,

not in themselves confinement but symbols of confinement. The essential character of the walls consisted not in their substance but in their appearance, the bare one-dimensional surface that was white, perhaps, or gray, or green. (97; pt. 2, "January 26")

In this moment, he is as alienated from his own sense of Native identity as Angela St. John, who is non-Indian but who also observes the landscape as mere "abstractions." He then begins to sense (while in his cell) his body "shaking violently, tossing and whipping, flopping like a fish," and realizes that "beyond the pain of his broken body he [is] cold, colder than he [has] ever been before"--all of this as the "fog," the Nothing, "thicken[s] about him" (106).

As he remains in anguish, he finds encouragement from his friend Benally. In Part 3, "The Night Chanter," Ben assumes the role of narrator and relates his own perceptions of Abel's struggle. For Ben, healing comes not only from traditional prayers and chants but also from alcohol. In fact, on several occasions, Ben takes Abel "up there on the hill," where they, along with Tosamah and Cruz, get drunk and eventually "forget about everything up there" (132). Although he tells Abel about "those old ways, the stories and the sings, Beautyway and Night Chant" (133), his advice to him is "to forget about the way it was"--particularly how he "grew up and all" (135). Here Ben demonstrates bad faith; for while he knows what needs to be done--through "the stories and the sings"--to regain centeredness, he can only suggest (for himself and for Abel) a form of retreat from that sense of individual responsibility. Ben also seems to conform to the will of the They--represented here by the non-Indian culture which, as Tosamah argues, "gave [Abel] every advantage" (135). Ben hopelessly admits that Indians like himself and Abel find themselves torn between wanting to be a part of the non-Indian culture and trying to return to the traditions of their Native culture: "You see the way it is [in the non-Indian society], how everything is going on without you, and you start to worry about it. You wonder how you can get yourself into the swing of it, you know? And you don't know how, but you've got to do it because there's nothing else" (144). What he is implying here is that they live an inauthentic mode of existence, which is part of bad faith. Still, Ben continues:

You've got to put a lot of things out of your mind, or you're going to get all mixed up. You think about getting out [in this case, out of Los Angeles] and going home. You go up there on the hill and you hear the singing and the talk and you think about going home. But the next day you know it's no use; you know that if you went home there would be nothing there, just the empty land and a lot of old people, going noplac and dying off. And you've got to forget about that, too. (144-145)

Although Ben is acting (and encouraging Abel to act) in bad faith, Abel nonetheless leaves Los Angeles to return home. Yet, prior to Abel departing for Walatowa, Ben notes the marked change in Abel. Before Abel's hands were crushed by Martinez in an alley, Ben recalls how "[Abel] used to get drunk and happy, and we would laugh and kid around a lot, but after that night it was different" (159). The difference, however, is perhaps more complex than the incident with Martinez. Ben notes that

[...] after a while, after that night when Martinez [...] or maybe it was before that; I don't know. Maybe it was Tosamah, too, and that white woman, everything. But it wasn't fun anymore. The liquor didn't seem to make any difference; he was just the same, sitting around and looking down like he hated everything, like he hated himself and hated being drunk and hated Milly and me, and I couldn't talk to him. (165-166)

Although bitter and full of despair, Abel seems to be at a point of directing his own path toward a new identity by leaving behind the old path (and all who kept him there), embarking on what Sartre calls the existential project. Yet, before he leaves them, he returns with Ben to the hill one last time. Whereas the scenes from atop the hill had always been either clouded by rain or a drunken haze, their last night together there is "cool and clear." As they walk along, moved by the sounds of the singing and the drums and the sight of the stars in the sky, they notice "a faint yellow glare like smoke on the sky, but the sky was too much for it, and at the center we could see the stars, how small and still they were" (171-172). This image reinforces the earlier message of Tosamah's sermon:

You look up sometimes in the night and there are stars; you can see all the way to the stars. And you begin to know the universe, how awful and great it is. The stars lie out against

the sky and do not fill it. A single star, flickering out in the universe, is enough to fill the mind, but it is nothing in the night sky. The darkness looms around it. The darkness flows among the stars, and beyond them forever. (91; pt. 2, “January 26”)

This passage illustrates his initial point in the sermon, that the Word was “in the beginning” the “Truth.” Mircea Eliade argues that, for the believer, “Myth teaches him the primordial ‘stories’ that have constituted him existentially; and everything connected with his existence and his legitimate mode of existence in the Cosmos concerns him directly” (qtd. in Ruppert 40). Thus, as James Ruppert concludes, Abel, to create a new identity for himself, “must learn to return to the stories and to connection with the cosmos” (40). It is the center of the sky, then, that represents not only the spiritual centeredness that he now seeks, but also the “Truth,” which lies in his return home.

Upon returning to Walatowa, Abel remains with his dying grandfather, Francisco. Although he hears the words of his grandfather, they are “random” and have “no meaning” for him (175; pt. 4, “February 27”). Abel, therefore, is not yet restored to centeredness. Uncertain of how to care for his grandfather, he acts again in bad faith, getting drunk the first few days of his visit. This period is followed by a deep sense of anguish: “[Abel’s] mind was borne upon the dying words, but they carried him nowhere. His own sickness had settled into despair. [...] The room enclosed him, as it always had, as if the small dark interior, in which [Francisco’s] voice and other voices rose and remained forever at the walls, were all of infinity that he had ever known.[...] [H]e had no memory of being outside of it” (175-176). The following day, with the eventual death of Francisco, Abel begins to run. This action seems to be a realization of the vision he has earlier in the novel, where he sees “the old men running after evil” and ultimately is given “perspective, proportion, design in the universe [...], [m]eaning” (95; pt. 2, “January 26”). He now joins the runners who are “standing away in the distance,” and who “[hold] their eyes” upon the “clear pool of eternity,” a “void” that begins to “deepen and to change” (190-191; pt. 4, “February 27”). In *N. Scott Momaday: The Cultural and Literary Background*, Matthais Schubnell observes that this is “a race for identity, both

personal and communal” (137). As he runs, Abel’s body is racked with pain at the exertion; and although he stumbles and falls into the snow, he rises and continues the race. It is in this running that he begins to sense his new identity forming: “He was alone and running on. All of his being was concentrated in the sheer motion of running on, and he was past caring about the pain” (191). Abel also becomes attuned to the landscape around him as he continues to run: “He could see the canyon and the mountains and the sky. He could see the rain and the river and the fields beyond. He could see the dark hills at dawn. He was running, and under his breath he began to sing.[...] And he went running on the rise of the song” (191; pt. 4, “February 27”). His new vision, as Robert Nelson suggests, is similar to the ones described by Tosamah and St. John, a “vision of ‘the Truth’ of the innate wholeness of the land that, seen, has the power to heal” (89). Here, then, Abel has chosen to embrace his Native identity, his authentic Self, that which restores his connection with the landscape and thereby centers him. And just as “[a]ll of his being [is] concentrated in the sheer motion of running on” (191; pt. 4, “February 27”), Abel’s journey--his existential project--will go on as long as he continues to exist as a being-for-itself, as an individual in a state of perpetual transcendence, whose being is always “indefinable and incomplete” (Palmer 86).

Through Locke Setman, one of the half-Kiowa protagonists of *The Ancient Child* (Grey being the other half-Kiowa, but her hybridity is inter-cultural), Momaday perhaps explores his own struggles with being a mixedblood. The son of a Kiowa father and a white American mother, Locke “Set” Setman is raised far from the reservation by Bent Sandridge, a white man who adopts him after both his mother and father are killed. Although he is raised in an intellectual environment and becomes a popular artist within the non-Indian community, Set is eventually overwhelmed by a desire to know his Kiowa heritage--a heritage from which he is almost completely estranged.

Set’s success as an artist--the “first rank of American artists” at the age of forty--has also placed him “in danger of losing his soul” (36; bk. 1, ch. 13). Although at this point in his life and career he is not compelled to explore his Kiowa heritage, he continually faces pressures from within his non-Indian society “to compromise his art or himself in one way or another, and more often than not he did so” (36). Here, Set demonstrates Heidegger’s idea of a Dasein’s “thrown-

ness.” The art world in which he works--a world largely comprised of and proliferated by non-Indians--acts as the They, the “other Dasein whose presence creates the world in which an individual Dasein can act” (Lemay and Pitts 49). Up until this point, then, Set has been in an undifferentiated mode of being, where a Dasein “never question[s] the meaning of [his] own life, never recognize[s] [his] thrown-ness” (Lemay and Pitts 54). Set always “went along” with the demands of his public (the They), who not only “praised and purchased” his art, but also “began to determine it” (36; bk. 1, ch. 13). Thus, Set “has blindly accepted the existence that the [They] [...] has given to [him]” (Lemay and Pitts 54). He also demonstrates what Sartre calls a mode of being-in-itself, for he only identifies himself in terms of the Other. This perhaps is best illustrated by the compromises he has made as an artist:

But he had committed his time and his work [that which served to create a sense of identity for him], virtually all of it, to his public.[...] [H]e had ceased to grow in his work. He wanted to paint a tree, but he was obliged to paint a house; he wanted to paint small, but he obliged to paint large; he wanted to do something he had never done, but he was obliged to do the same thing again and again, without end. (38; bk. 1, ch. 13)

What is important here is that Set identifies himself through his paintings. While he wants to be free to create a new identity for himself by painting “something he had never done,” he is yet always “obliged” to do the bidding of his “public,” to submit to the determining force of the Other, the They. This mode will change as Set “recovers [him]self as subject [...], recovering [his] freedom from its entrapment by the Other” (Palmer 96). In fact, it is also at this point in the novel that Set has feelings of “conviction” and a “commitment to be his own man” (37; bk. 1, ch. 13). It is here that he begins to reclaim his freedom to create his own sense of identity, as opposed to living through the expectations and demands of his public.

After receiving a telegram that informs him of the near death of his grandmother (his father’s mother), Set returns to the reservation in Saddle Mountain, Oklahoma--only to miss his grandmother’s funeral. Yet, before returning, Set begins to reflect upon his own fragmented sense of identity: “All that he had of his forebears was a

sediment in his memory, the memory of words his father had spoken long ago--the stories his father had told him.[...] It was Set's nature to wonder, until the wonder became pain, who he was. He had an incomplete idea of himself" (52-53; bk. 1, ch. 16). It is through painting that he comes closest to understanding his own sense of being. He recalls a lesson-- one that expresses Sartre's basic principle of existentialism, that existence precedes essence--on the affirmation of art from Cole Blessing, one of his instructors at the art academy:

You have to be always aware of the boundaries of the plane, and you have to make use of them; they define your limits, and they enable you to determine scale, proportion, juxtaposition, depth, design, symmetry correctly. You see, you can make something, a line, a form, an image. But you have to proceed from what is already there--defined space, a plane. You can make something, but you cannot make something out of nothing. (55)

The idea of proceeding "from what is already there--defined space, a plane," reflects Sartre's idea that one first is born, or exists, and must thereafter create meaning, or essence, for oneself. This "scale, proportion, juxtaposition, depth, design, symmetry" of the painting is a metaphor for Set's own identity. Set remembers Blessing's advice on capturing the essence of his subject: "You can look at this model, and you can look again, and you can keep on looking until you have seen her more clearly and completely than you have ever seen anything before, and then you can--maybe--conform your hand to your eye in such a way as to affirm her being on the picture plane" (55). This idea of intensely studying the subject may be applied to self-study as well, for it is in this mode of reflection that one experiences the existential anguish necessary to create meaning for one's existence.

Set's anguish comes after receiving a telegram from Milo Mottledmare, alerting him to the near death of his grandmother Kope'mah. It is here that we are told of Set's "nature to wonder, until the wonder became a pain, who he was," and that he has "an incomplete idea of himself" (54). Set experiences the "pain," or anguish, when he becomes more fully aware of his Native heritage, even though he is yet unwilling to embrace it. In fact, despite his willingness to visit Kope'mah, he spends the remainder of that day (the day he receives the telegram) brooding, "pacing the studio,

working sporadically at the easel” (52). If his sense of identity through painting seemed unbalanced by his public before this, it seems even more in flux now, for he becomes distracted by the possibilities of his own identity: i.e., he is experiencing existential anguish. Once he arrives in Oklahoma and discovers that Kope'mah has already died, he questions his motives for coming to the reservation to begin with: “For the first time in his life, it seemed, he could not bring the world into perspective. Why had he come here? What in God’s name had compelled him, and what was he doing?” As he further questions the circumstances surrounding his grandmother’s death, as well as his own place within these matters, a “kind of nausea [comes] upon him” (61; bk. 1, ch. 16). This “nausea” is quite similar to the one experienced by the character Roquentin in Sartre’s novel *Nausea*. Roquentin’s recognition of this nausea is profound: “The words had vanished and with them the significance of things, their methods of use, and the feeble points of reference which men have traced on their surface” (127; “6.00 p.m.”). What Roquentin comes to call “the Nausea” is his own realization that being is not abstract but concrete, whereby things are divorced from their names. His response to this radical perception of existence, then, is one of disgust. In *The Ancient Child*, Set’s inability to “bring the world into perspective” causes his own nausea, which could represent the slow recognition of his Native identity--a part of himself that he has not been prepared to confront: “He had a strange feeling there, as if some ancestral intelligence had been awakened in him for the first time. There in the wild growth and the soft glowing of the earth, in the muddy water at his feet, was something profoundly original.[...] It was itself genesis [...], his genesis” (64; bk. 1, ch. 16). This “genesis,” however, is not what he understands to be his true identity, but is simply another part of his existence--a part that has only now been “awakened.” The boy whom Set observes “in the black interior of a lean-to,” for example, also helps to awaken his consciousness of his Native heritage. Louis Owens notes that the boy represents “Set’s transformational self, the boy of the Kiowa myth.” The boy, the other part of Set’s self, “is in conflict with the authoritative self Set has brought with him from non-Indian culture” (Owens 124). In his anguish, Set begins to recognize, and even be disgusted by, the possibilities presented by this “strange

feeling,” this chance of becoming something other than what he has always known.

Sartre contends that it is in this experience of anguish that one becomes aware of the separation of oneself from his or her past, present, and even future selves: “I am in the self which I will be, in the mode of not being it” (*Being and Nothingness* 68). Set seems to recognize this nothingness clearly: “The night in its Plains vastness overwhelmed him, and just then a cool, fresh wind lifted from the Washita, and he wanted to give himself up to the deepest sleep. He wanted there to be nothing; he wanted to enter wholly into the deep element of the Plains night in which he imagined nothing was” (71; bk. 1, ch. 16). If the “nothing” here--represented by the vastness of the night sky, a void--that Set both imagines and desires is indeed what Sartre suggests, “a space of non-existence whose very ‘being’ allows for possibility” (Palmer 150), then Set seems to be longing for the freedom to create his own identity. He is Set, a mixedblood whose identity primarily has been defined by others, and mainly by non-Indians, at that. Here in the Oklahoma Plains, where he is beginning to understand more of the Indian heritage that is also part of him, he faces the Nothingness that “allows for possibility,” and that will allow him, in his freedom, to discover an authentic (Native) identity.

As Set spends more time on the reservation and becomes more conscious of his own hybridity, the longing to paint--to find himself through his art--becomes overwhelming: “He felt now a keen urgency to paint. His coming away from his work had been to no purpose, and he had nothing to show for it. He had stepped out of bounds. He was out of place in this severe red landscape, among the graves of strangers” (104; bk. 1, ch. 20). It is in his anguish that he senses this urgency, for he desperately seeks to find his “place” again--hence, his longing to recover his identity through painting. This urgent desire perhaps is also caused by a lack of centeredness with the landscape, an imbalance that would have a significant effect on him as a mixedblood. Feeling “out of bounds,” he must seek to regain his center; however, such centeredness for Set can only be achieved by embracing his Native heritage, his authentic mode of being, and it is through painting that he comes closest to discovering a sense of “purpose.”

The painting that best seems to reflect this existential struggle is the one entitled *Night Window Man*:

It was a strange piece, even to Set, and it was powerful. It was a bright green frame, a window, in which was a roiling blue and gray background, a thick ominous depth; and from this there emerged a figure, a grotesque man with red hair and red dress, approaching. Set had begun it with nothing but color in mind; it had taken form quickly and of itself, as it were. (106; bk. 1, ch. 21)

Matthais Schubnell, in his article “Locke Setman, Emil Nolde and the Search for Expression in N. Scott Momaday’s *The Ancient Child*,” suggests that, through this painting, Set has “unconsciously entered a new artistic phase in which he is able to reconcile his art and self” (471). Lola Bourne, Set’s non-Indian lover, is determined to buy the painting and comments on its “deeply disturbing” qualities (106; bk. 1, ch. 21). The central focus of *Night Window Man*--apart from its cryptic title--is, as Lola indicates, the “little man, the dwarf,” whose physical expression is “intent in the extreme,” and whose “profound energy and excitement” suggests that he is “about to be transformed” (107). The dwarf represents Set, who seems unconscious of painting *Night Window Man* as in fact a self-portrait. Yet the “blue and gray background” of “thick, ominous depth” reflects Set’s anguish. The “grotesque man” who emerges from this background, who appears to be on the verge of a transformation, must also represent Set, for it is in his anguish that Set will experience his own transformation, a radical sense of freedom that will compel him to contend with his Native identity.

Set confronts himself more directly as he later speaks to his own reflection in the mirror. He asks, in a rather humorous but existential musing, “Are you Set?”, but there is no answer, only the “hard, luminous, translucent” image of himself “fixed deep within like a fossil,” silently staring back at him (132; bk. 2, ch. 2). Yet “there, on the other side of the glass, is a hallway” (133). Although this image would seem to be merely the reflection of the hallway directly behind Set, it can also serve to symbolize transcendence. The glass of the mirror, “fixed like a fossil,” is what Sartre calls facticity, “those features of reality that resist freedom’s desire to transform them into possibilities” (Palmer 149). In fact, Set turns from the mirror at one point to feel “a resistance in the dank air” (133; bk. 2, ch. 2). However, while facticity may be “those features of the being-

in-itself about which being-for-itself can do nothing” (Palmer 149), such as one’s birthplace or race, facticity cannot determine one’s future Self, which gives new significance to the hallway that Set sees “on the other side.” As a passageway between the entrance and interior of a room, the hallway can represent for Set an opportunity to transcend the glass--the mode of being-in-itself--that reflects the face staring back at him.

Set’s sense of anguish and fear of nothingness are more explicitly expressed as he later relates the images from one of his dreams:

I dreamed of woods. There was darkness beyond successive planes of tangled growth. I was a boy, and I was alone.[...] I was drawn to the dark interior. I felt myself moving inexorably toward a black point, the very center of darkness. “Loki!” I heard my name. It was a frantic cry, and strangely the voice was mine, I believe; I could not be certain, and that was what frightened me so. I wasn’t in control; I didn’t know clearly who or where I was. It seemed that I was trying to find myself, that I had lost my *self!* There was a terrible urgency in me. At last the black destiny of that place was too much for me. I began to suffocate. And I awoke. (140; bk. 2, ch. 3)

The Nothing that he faces, which brings a sense of urgency, is figured here by the “darkness beyond successive planes” into which he is drawn and moves “inexorably toward a black point, the very center of the darkness.” From within this void he hears a voice that he believes is his own, the voice of “Loki” (his childhood nickname), whose “frantic cry” seems to reflect Set’s own fear and uncertainty. Although it is only a dream that he relates, it is within this center of the darkness-- within the Nothing that separates him from his present and future selves -- that Set feels out of control. The dream itself, then, reveals his present struggle: “I wasn’t in control; I didn’t know clearly who or where I was. It seemed that I was trying to find myself, that I had lost my *self!*”, as he again says. Thus, the anguish of being uncertain of his identity overwhelms him.

As he resumes painting, he confesses to Lola that a darker theme has come into his work--a theme that, as he has come to realize, not only seems to have begun with *Night Window Man*, but also reflects his continuing inner turmoil:

There were so many dark figures in my work now. I didn’t know how to account for them. They were a kind of

fascination to me. They seemed endlessly vital and mysterious. And they *were* self-portraits in a sense for they expressed a certain reality in me. I didn't know what it was, but I knew *that* it was, and I knew that it mattered greatly to me in some way. And it was coming closer to the surface of my thoughts; I was going to recognize and understand it sooner or later, and that act of understanding or recognition was going to be of the deepest importance to me. (144; bk. 2, ch. 3)

The “dark figures” are, as Set admits, self-portraits, and it is his understanding of this “certain reality” that conveys the anguish he faces. Set’s self-expressions as a “dark figure” are his attempts to represent through art his own existential crisis, for it is through his paintings that he has and will come to understand his own identity. Although he still seems overwhelmed by anguish, he admits to himself that the reality expressed by the paintings “mattered greatly” to him and that he would “recognize and understand” this reality “sooner or later.” Because of his bad faith, Set initially attempts to avoid facing this reality, grounding himself in his non-Indian world: painting, dining at restaurants, calling on Bent, partying and sleeping with Lola, and visiting his galleries, doing “all the things that were expected” of him (144). Yet, as he later reflects upon his years of autonomy, he is reminded of the reality with which he must reckon:

Always, from the time I was adopted, I had been responsible for myself--Bent had given me that sense of responsibility, that confidence. I determined my actions. I *chose* what to do and what not to do. I did not let the unknown define my existence, intrude upon my purpose, if I could help it. But now there was an intrusion that I could not identify and could not resist. Something seemed to be taking possession of me. It was a subtle and pernicious thing; I wasn't myself. (145)

This unnamable “something” that seems to possess him is the Indianness from which he has been long estranged, the part of himself he has attempted to bury but can no longer deny. Yet in recognizing this “subtle and pernicious thing,” he demonstrates the existential anguish that forces him to examine the tension between his authentic and inauthentic modes of being. The freedom he claims to have determined for himself--from his sense of responsibility given to him

by his white stepfather, to his dealings within the art world—has been little more than a series of concessions to the They. The “intrusion” is “subtle,” almost uncanny, in that it too has been an undeniable part of his being that is only now beginning to take “possession” of him; it is “pernicious” in that it threatens to expose the inauthentic existence he has lived since being adopted and upon which he has built his career. Upon further reflection, he admits, “I had not felt helpless in a long time, but I began to feel helpless now” (145). It is this helplessness that reveals his existential anxiety as he faces the possibilities of his existence.

One of Set’s paintings--again with a darker theme--is a watercolor of “the likeness of a man on a horse, but the image was indistinct, subliminal,” entitled *Venture Beyond Time*. In his description of the painting, Set posits his own interpretation of its meaning: a “horseman passing from time into timelessness” (159; bk. 2, ch. 3). This idea of a man moving from time to timelessness could stand for Set’s own movement from non-Indian culture, where the concept of time is linear, to American Indian culture, where it is cyclical. Yet Set’s impression of the painting’s spatiality--reflected in the placement of a receding image within “swirling colors”—might also represent his own existential experience with the nothingness of existence, where the sense of timelessness is illustrated by the fact that a nothingness separates one’s past from his present. In Set’s conversation with Alais Sancerre about the painting, Alais notes its uncanny resemblance to Franz Kafka’s short story “Wunsch, Indianer zu Werden” (“Desire to Become Indian”), which, as Alais interprets it, “describes what must be the sensation of the Red Indian riding his horse very fast, so fast and free that the earth becomes a blur and the horse’s head dissolves away. And surely this means that the Red Indian becomes one with the horse [...], a transformation. Kafka wrote *The Metamorphosis*, you know” (161). Alais’ allusion to Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis*, itself an existential work, is particularly fitting, but her overall observation that the image of the man in Set’s own painting is transforming relates directly to Set himself, whom the man in the painting signifies: “It was as if Alais Sancerre saw very clearly something in me that I failed to see myself” (161). Set realizes that, like himself, the man within his painting--after Kafka’s centaur, which is neither horse nor man exclusively, but a fusion of both--is

not so much dissolving from one form to another but merging both forms: in Set's case, his Native and non-Indian heritages.

After Bent's death, and as Set becomes more immersed in his paintings, Set's friends come to believe that he is suffering from a nervous breakdown. Instead, he is coming closer to his Native identity, now represented by a bear: "And, perhaps by virtue of the medicine bundle, there was insinuated upon his consciousness and subconsciousness the power of the bear." Although it is "*his* bear power [...], he did not yet have real knowledge of it, only a vague, instinctive awareness, a sense he could neither own nor dispel" (213; bk. 2, ch. 5). Here again is the anguish, the Nothing he faces that is now leading him to choose an authentic identity for himself. Similar to Sartre's Roquentin, Set is "afflicted" with "a sickness of the mind and soul" (214). And while his agent, Jason, and Lola fear that affliction is due to Bent's death, Set himself recognizes that it is "only part of a larger disorder" that is caused by recurring visions in his head of "a dark, impending shape" (214-215) approaching him--the shape of a bear, which symbolizes his Native identity. What he is terrified by is the possibility of becoming "one with this beast" (215), of embracing the Native culture to which he authentically belongs but from which he has elected to remain estranged. It would seem to him that the metamorphosis to which Alais referred earlier is being slowly realized, for Set becomes "steadily more self-destructive" and feels that there is "no longer a design to his existence," that his life is "coming apart, disintegrating" (215).

It is at this point of disintegration that he begins to demonstrate the mode of being-for-itself. He chooses what Sartre calls a "project," the For-itself's "choice of its way of being" that is "expressed by action in the light of a future end" (*Being and Nothingness* 806). While Set's body seems to suffer from a "numbness, a kind of paralysis" (215; bk. 2, ch. 5), perhaps because of his heavy drinking, hunger, and fatigue, he nevertheless experiences "times of profound lucidity" whereby his life is "filled with purpose and confidence" (216). As he begins to immerse himself in his paintings, which have become "true to his vision and his capacities," the paintings themselves begin to reflect "a great and true story of the world [...] as personal to him as thought." It is his story, reflected in the

paintings, that is Set's existential project: "Yes, he believed, there is only one story, after all, [...] and it is about a man who ventures out to the edge of the world, and it is about his holy quest [...], and it is about the hunting of a great beast. In his paintings, others might have seen confusion and chaos, but Set saw the pure elements of the story" (216). These "pure elements" are those that help to create Set's project, his own true story. It is his commitment to this project that allows him (in the mode of being-for-itself) to deliberately move toward his "future end," which, from a Sartrean perspective, may be "recreated at each moment through the choices we make and the actions we perform" (Palmer 107). For Set, the story, which is his original project, must be followed faithfully and diligently, for "[t]o fail in this would be to lose himself forever. He must be true to the story. *He must be true to the story*" (216; bk. 2, ch. 5; italics original).

Set's original project is later referred to as a journey, from which he takes "a kind of strength" (274; bk. 3, ch. 2). In his conversation with Grey, Set tries to find some meaning to the anguish he is experiencing, which is his struggle with his Native identity, embodied by the approaching shape he initially feared: the bear. Although Grey is an authoritative figure (being the primary healer), her reply seems more deterministic than existential: "Don't imagine that you have a choice in the matter, in what is going on.[...] You are *Set*; you are the bear; you will be the bear, no matter what. You will act accordingly, in the proper way, because there is no other way to act" (271). Yet this sort of inauthentic existence, of substituting "one life made possible by the [They] for another" (Lemay and Pitts 55), is not what Set seems to demonstrate. He is content in this mode of being-for-itself, for he feels that he is at last creating his own identity: "There was exhilaration just in the going; motion was a principle expression of his life, had he known it, and in it there were properties of healing" (274). Sartre compares the journey taken by the For-itself to a rendezvous one makes with oneself: "I await myself in the future, where I 'make an appointment with myself on the other side of that hour, of that day, or of that month'" (*Being and Nothingness* 73). And while angst initially came to Set when he was, as Sartre puts it, "afraid of not finding [him]self at that appointment," he now discovers himself "engaged in acts [i.e., his painting] which reveal [his] possibilities" (73). For Set, what matters is not the appointment itself--"not that he was going *toward* something, to a destination, to

an appointment, though indeed he was and that was all right”—but, like Abel’s final race with the dawn runners, “the sheer act of going, the blind conviction of purpose and meaning in the simple act of going” (274; bk.3, ch. 2). Therefore, it is acting on freedom in the mode of being-for-itself that now has the most significance for Set in his journey toward embracing his Native identity.

*The Ancient Child* thus ends with Set becoming a bear—a realization of the transformation represented in his self-portrait *Night Window Man*. Louis Owens suggests that, from the time he receives the medicine bundle to the end of the novel, Set struggles “with the bear within him, coming to terms with its overwhelming spiritual power and, in doing so, coming to terms with himself” (122). In fact, by becoming the bear, “Set’s identity quest is complete; he has meaning and significance because he is part of a story that is ancient and essential, experienced within a space that is free of historic and entropic time” (Owens 126-27). Yet it is his choice to create this new identity for himself. Throughout the story, and at any time, Set could have chosen to remain as he had been: a mixedblood whose identity was ultimately determined by the non-Indian culture in which he lived. And although Grey warns him that his identity essentially has been determined for him by the American Indian culture, Set demonstrates—in his anguish and through his freedom—a deliberate process of choosing ultimately to accept his Kiowa heritage.

Momaday, in his flexibility as an American Indian writer and scholar (particularly his use of modernist themes and his unwillingness to restrict literature to cultural categories), not only engenders a significant dialogue between implied American Indian and non-Indian readers, but also enables his own literature to be considered beyond Native contexts. And while cultural ideas are neither compromised nor forsaken in his works, these texts, *House Made of Dawn* and *The Ancient Child*, also explore the existential nature of the identity quest.

Moreover, Momaday’s focus on the mixedblood’s struggle to create an authentic identity for himself in both *House Made of Dawn* and *The Ancient Child* has both cultural and existential significance. Each protagonist’s identity quest is one that leads him not only to a restored sense of connectedness with his Native community and its landscape, but to a more complete sense of Self. And while Abel and Set

ultimately find their place within their respective Native communities, each embarks upon a journey that relies upon his recognition of his own freedom to choose an authentic mode of being. This authentic identity is only made possible by the protagonist's willingness to transcend his alienated sense of hybridity--intensified by his immersion in non-Indian culture--and to create, in his freedom, a new sense of Self wherein he embraces rather than rejects his Native heritage. It is this aspect of these works by Momaday that allows for an existential interpretation, for the search for Self--as both an archetypal literary theme and a recovery of spiritual centeredness--closely aligns itself with the fundamental ideas of existential thought.

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