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# CRITERION

A JOURNAL OF LITERARY CRITICISM



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*"If you compare several representative passages of the greatest poetry you see how great is the variety of types of combination, and also how completely any semi-ethical criterion of 'sublimity' misses the mark. For it is not the 'greatness,' the intensity, of the emotions, the components, but the intensity of the artistic process, the pressure, so to speak, under which the fusion takes place, that counts."*

❖ T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent"

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# CRITERION

A JOURNAL OF LITERARY CRITICISM

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# Editors' Note

*Criterion* is a volunteer student journal of literary criticism sponsored by Brigham Young University's English Department which has, in the past year, transitioned from an annual to a semi-annual journal. We are so proud of our staff who have dedicated so much of their time and talents to help us put this issue together. As a journal, we like to give our staff hands-on experience, and we can say with confidence that through the efforts of our invaluable staff, we have been able to compose a quality issue for our readers. Our staff has worked tirelessly through an extensive editing and design process, and with that in mind we are proud to present our Fall 2015 issue of *Criterion*.

The papers for our Fall 2015 issue come directly from the BYU English Symposium held earlier this year. We are grateful for our partnership with the symposium as it has given us access to several insightful works. The theme of this year's symposium was "englishx" and was meant to showcase works that spoke to the future of our discipline. With this in mind, this semester's issue boasts a diversity of topics ranging from criticism of both Anne and Charlotte Brontë to an analysis of Kierkegaard's influence on contemporary music. We are truly excited to present such a dynamic mixture of articles.

It is difficult to provide the necessary thanks to all those affiliated with a student journal. We would like to especially thank our faculty advisor, Emron Esplin, for his continued interest and support of our journal. Dr. Esplin has provided formative advice and guidance, and we could not have created such a quality journal without his direction. We would also like to express gratitude for the many great submissions we had to our design contest, with a special regard

to Stephen Davis whose winning design is featured on the cover of this issue. We are also grateful to our authors, who have devoted so much of their time to the editing process, for allowing us to publish their work. We are truly grateful for everyone's interest in giving this journal new life—and we are especially thankful for Mandy Oscarson and her staff at the Harold B. Lee Library for helping us with the transition to a new website. The new site looks great, and we could not be more pleased with how things turned out. Finally, we thank Brigham Young University and the English Department for their continued support. We sincerely hope you enjoy this issue of *Criterion*.

*Kristen Soelberg and Chelsea Lee*



# Eve Transcending Demeaned

## The Construct of Female Gender in *Paradise Lost*

Jillie Orth Reimer

Milton's *Paradise Lost* presents Adam and Eve as the first man and woman to live on the Earth. Essentially, Adam and Eve are Milton's archetypes of the male and female genders. A closer inspection of Eve's womanhood within *Paradise Lost* reveals a contradiction in the poem's depiction of the female gender—Eve, and her gender, are portrayed as characters simultaneously esteemed and demeaned. Book eight of *Paradise Lost* presents this contradiction most directly to the reader. Adam explains his newfound joy at the fact that he has been given a helpmate but degrades Eve in the process:

For well I understand in the prime end  
Of nature her th'inferior, in the mind  
And inward faculties, which most excel,  
In outward also her resembling less  
His image who made both, and less expressing  
The character of that dominion giv'n. (8.540–545)

Here, Adam relates the inferior nature of Eve in both mind and body. First, Eve does not resemble God as much as Adam does, and second, she does not have

the equal capacity to perform that Adam possesses. Yet, the contradiction lies in the lines that immediately follow as Adam esteems Eve above others:

Her loveliness, so absolute she seems  
And in herself complete, so well to know  
Her own, that what she wills to do or say,  
Seems wisest, virtuousest, discreetest, best;  
All higher knowledge in her presence falls  
Degraded, wisdom in discourse with her  
Looses discount'nanced, and like folly shows. (8.547-553)

The issue of Eve being simultaneously demeaned and esteemed throughout *Paradise Lost* creates a space in which Milton plays with the constructs of gender—more specifically, the female gender. Throughout the poem, there is an underlying call for equality between Adam and Eve yet a pervading theme of patriarchy.

*Paradise Lost* has been quite thoroughly explored and examined from a feminist perspective. Most critics tend to argue that the character of Eve is an example of the oppression that women experience in light of living within a patriarchal system. One feminist critic, Elspeth Graham, explains that because of Milton's political background and "As prime defender of an all-powerful God-the-Father he [Milton] becomes the ultimate spokesman for a misogynistic western culture" (134). Graham further states the notion that, today, "Milton is currently either reaffirmed as the archetypal misogynist, or, at the other extreme, presented as some sort of proto-feminist" (134). Although Graham, at times, sides with the idea that Eve is an oppressed woman, she ceases to focus on Eve in her analysis and does not forcefully commit to either side of the critical spectrum. This seems to be a common occurrence in recent criticism of gender in *Paradise Lost*. Patrick J. McGrath, like Graham, is another critic who does not explicitly take a side on the matter; instead, he examines the differences in the language and prosody between the speeches of Adam and Eve to gain more clarity as to whether Eve is being oppressed by a form of patriarchy or not. McGrath seems to reach a point in which he concludes that Eve is not as demeaned as some feminist critics may make her out to be, but he still remains somewhat undetermined in his stance toward the treatment of gender in *Paradise Lost*.

Unlike the more recent critical analysis of Milton's poem, I wish to explore the construct of Eve's gender through the language in the narration of the poem,

not entirely through the speeches made between Adam and Eve, as McGrath has done. Gender is not simply male or female in *Paradise Lost*, as is related near the beginning of the poem: “For spirits when they please / Can either sex assume, or both” (1.423–424). And spirits and human beings are not the only things that take on a gender. In this paper, I argue that the personification of female-gendered characters, such as Paradise, Reason, Earth, and Sin, serve as vital constituents that construct the female gender in the poem and transcend Milton’s Eve from “a mouthpiece for patriarchy” to a beacon of the powerful feminine gender that moves and creates throughout the poem (McGrath 73). By exploring the ways that the female gender is first personified and then edified by Eve’s own actions, the poem can then foster a space in which Eve transcends popular feminist theory.

The construct of gender in *Paradise Lost* cannot merely be understood by examining Adam and Eve as the quintessential male and female beings. Instead, the poem presents a complex treatment of gender in which entities apart from humans are ascribed as being either male or female. Aside from Eve, there are other individuals that establish the female gender in the poem. The Garden of Eden, also called Paradise, is gendered as female: “A Heav’n on Earth, for blissful Paradise / Of God the Garden was, by him in the east / Of Eden planted; Eden stretched *her* line” (emphasis added, 4.208–210). In Paradise, there is “a fresh fountain, and with many a rill / Watered the Garden” (4.229–230), and the trees therein “Ran nectar, visiting each plant, and fed / Flow’rs worthy of Paradise” (4.240–241). These descriptions of female Paradise present a beautiful place of nurturing, creating, and feeding. Paradise is a holy site, representing the foundation of creationism. Milton’s gendering of Paradise as female places Eve, and her sex, in a space of creative power as the bearers of new life.

However, the title of the work, *Paradise Lost*, could seem to contradict this idea if we apply the construct of gender to the title. “Losing” the female Paradise could support the notion that the feminine is being lost from Milton’s poem or that Eve’s womanhood is playing a less-than-vital role. But what I believe is truly being “lost” in Milton’s poem is the recurring notion of femininity as a negative attribute. In the world today, the character of Eve has been negatively associated with the Fall, and yet Milton’s poem does not represent the Fall as a negative occurrence. Thus, Paradise “Lost” may more closely be aligned with the notion of the negative view of femininity being replaced by a positive one. Ultimately, both Adam and Eve are tilling and protecting a feminine entity in

Paradise—one in which God places extreme importance, as it is the place where reason can be reached for mankind.

The concept of Reason is also called female throughout the poem, creating a space where the female gender is the source of cause and purpose rather than blind choice:

But God left free the will, for what obeys  
Reason, is free, and reason he made right,  
But bid *her* well beware, and still erect,  
Least by some fair appearing good surprised  
She dictate false, and misinform the will  
To do what God expressly hath forbid. (emphasis added, 9.351–356)

To further explain this concept we must remember that throughout *Paradise Lost*, the role of agency is viewed as paramount to God's plan for his children. When Eve is deciding whether to eat of the fruit, she hears the words of the serpent, and is "impregn'd / With reason...and with truth," (9.737–738). Eve's fall is a rational one, wherein she reasons with her own thoughts once both the serpent and God converse with her. Her choice to eat of the fruit is not merely a simple reaction to the serpent's speech, but rather a mindful decision after all she has encountered. Despite the foreshadowing in this passage that Eve will eat the forbidden fruit and thus bring about the Fall, it is vital to recognize that, because Reason is gendered as feminine, we are able to see that Eve's choice to eat of the fruit was an act of awareness and understanding and actually advocates femininity as a positive attribute. Milton gendering Reason as female places Eve in a space outside of the patriarchy. In this space, Eve reasons on her own without first consulting man, and independently acts on the agency that God has given to both her and Adam.

The Earth and nature are the final feminine entities in the poem that dignify the female gender and place it in the same realm as the Creator. During the creation scene in the poem, it is explained, "the earth obeyed, and straight / Op'ning *her* fertile womb teemed at a birth / Innumerable living creatures, perfect forms" (emphasis added, 7.453–455). The Earth serves as the vessel of creation in Milton's poem. By assigning the Earth a female gender, Eve's gender is thus tied to the position of creator with God. Furthermore, nature is gendered as female in the poem: "The womb of Nature and perhaps *her* grave," (emphasis added, 2.911). Together with the Earth, nature acts as another participant in the creative experience. According to feminist critic Christine Froula, Milton

succeeds in his poem at the “silencing and voiding of female creativity” (338). However, I argue that the Earth and nature are proof of the feminine creative ability that Milton portrays throughout *Paradise Lost*. Although, conventionally, the male and female act together in the creation experience, the mother alone nurtures and tends to her children while they are in the womb. Through these gendered entities, the highest power—creation—is associated with the feminine, enabling Eve to break from the confines of patriarchy. She has partaken of the fruit and transitions from an innocent state in which she is unable to create to a state in which she can co-create, both with God and with Adam.

Sin is arguably the most oppressed female character in the poem, yet Sin’s necessary act of creation aligns her with God and establishes motherhood as an important aspect of the female gender. In book two, Sin is produced out of Satan’s head, and then, through incest, gives birth to Death (2.752–798). Again, we could argue here against Froula’s stance that Milton silences female creativity. Sin, the character who is oppressed by the oppressed (Satan), can actually be compared to Milton’s God in the function of creativity. Sin’s existence as a feminine body capable of motherhood results in the creation of Death. Despite her oppression, Sin still succeeds in the act of creation, which affirms the idea that the feminine is closely associated with God as Creator. Sin’s creation becomes so vital in Milton’s poem that Death is referred to as “the gate of life” (12.571). Thus, the character of Sin and her motherhood over Death form a link with God. Without the creation of Death by Sin there exists no vital connection between Adam and Eve’s mortal life and the immortal life they can attain through Death.

Aside from the non-human feminine characters, analysis of the male and female genders through the lens of Milton’s Adam and Eve is evidence that Eve transcends the oppressed role that feminist critics place upon her. The first description of Adam and Eve relates:

And worthy seemed, for in their looks divine  
 The image of their glorious Maker shone,  
 Truth, wisdom, sanctitude severe and pure,  
 Severe but in true filial freedom placed;  
 Whence true authority in men; though both  
 Not equal, as their sex not equal seemed;  
 For contemplation he and valor formed,  
 For softness she and sweet attractive grace,  
 He for God only, she for God in him. (4.291–299).

The first half of this description places the male and female gender in an equal position because both embody the image of their Maker. However, the second half of this passage seems to convey the notion that Adam and Eve are not equal because of their genders. The word “seemed” here is important—Adam and Eve did not “seem” equal because, outwardly, Adam exhibited valor while Eve showed grace. Yet, throughout the text, we are constantly bombarded with the equality of the sexes. Eve is referred to as the “dearer half” (5.95), “thy consort” (7.529), meaning partner or companion (*Oxford English Dictionary*), “thy likeness, thy fit help, thy other self” (8.450), and, together, Adam and Eve form “one flesh, one heart, one soul” (8.499).

The other component of the passage above that complicates meaning refers to Adam being created for God only, but Eve for “God in him.” Literally, this could refer to the creative powers at work in Adam’s body, “God in him,” so that, together, the two beings can successfully procreate. However, the phrase “God in him” could also refer to the fact that Eve was created “in him,” or from Adam’s rib. Most likely, though, this phrase could allude to the critical idea that Adam only has to obey God, but Eve must obey both Adam and God. Kent R. Lehnof explains the idea that “Eve is required to obey Adam not because he is ontologically superior but because God has arbitrarily ordained that this be so.” Lehnof’s point, in conjunction with the passage, shows that it is not gender that is “not equal” in the eyes of God; rather, it is simply that God has prepared different tasks for the genders. Eve does not serve God and Adam because she is an inferior sex, for she is not; she serves them both because it is simply what God requires of her.

Some critics, such as Shari A. Zimmerman, argue that the contrast between the new birth scenes of Adam and Eve could portray Eve as a lesser being simply because she is unable to distinguish her own self like Adam does. However, looking more closely into these two scenes actually reveals how similar Adam and Eve’s experiences are, and how Eve transcends this contradiction through her first earthly interaction with God. In book four, when Eve awakens, her first thoughts are, “much wond’ring where / And what I was, whence thither brought, and how” (4.451–452). Most critics seem to miss the point that both Adam and Eve are unsure of who or what they are when they awaken. Adam explains, “But who I was, or where, or from what cause, / Knew not” (8.270–271). Eve then looks into the pool of water and is unable to understand that the person looking back at her is herself, whereas Adam states, “Myself I then perused” (8.267). Zimmerman explains at this point, “Although Eve’s self-involvement is

rather beautiful and inviting, it all too quickly is given a negative valence by a divine voice” (249). While Eve is examining the figure in the water, God speaks to her and tells her who she is. On the other hand, Adam does not have direct speech with God, but instead “answer none returned” and he is given a vision (8.285). McGrath is able to aid us in this discussion when he explains, “As a means of revealing prophecy, though, dreams have been found to be at the bottom of the prophetic hierarchy” (79). Instead of viewing Eve’s experience speaking with God as a submission to patriarchy, her experience could actually be viewed as a prominent example of her divine nature. God speaks directly to Eve and informs her of her importance as first woman and first mother in his plan, while Adam receives simply a dream.

The loss of “Paradise” or a false concept of femininity is visible when Milton intertwines the relations of Eve and Mary. Raphael, a heavenly messenger, introduces this concept when he visits Adam and Eve in Paradise and states, “Mary, second Eve” (5.387). This connection between Eve and Mary is important because it shows just how holy and divine Eve is as the first woman and first mother on the Earth. Many religions worship Mary as the virgin mother of Christ. In the world today, Eve tends to represent sin, while Mary represents virtue. Yet, the fact that Milton refers to Mary as a “second Eve” completely shifts this paradigm. Mary is the mother of Christ, but Eve is the “Mother of all things living,” and through her genealogical line came Mary and Jesus, among every other person who has lived on the Earth (11.160). By connecting Eve and Mary, Milton strays from the traditional demonization of Eve, instead placing her in a holier space and acknowledging her divine feminine status.

Milton’s *Paradise Lost* provides much space for the discussion of Eve’s status in Paradise, and by closely analyzing the portrayal of the female gender we are able to understand how Eve goes beyond her stereotype and becomes a representation of the power and importance of womanhood in Milton’s poem and in Christian theology. In book ten, Adam laments the Fall and the choice that Eve made to partake of the fruit:

O why did God,  
 Creator wise, that peopled highest Heav’n  
 With spirits masculine, create at last  
 This novelty on Earth, this fair defect  
 Of nature, and not fill the world at once  
 With men as angels without feminine,  
 Or find some other way to generate  
 Mankind? (10.888-895)

This is a passage that many feminist critics identify as conveying the oppression of the female gender in Milton's poem. Froula even goes so far as to state in her argument, "Eve is not a self, a subject, at all; she is rather a substanceless image, a mere 'shadow' without object" (328).

Conversely, Adam relates to Eve "O woman, best are all things as the will / Of God ordained them, his creating hand / Nothing imperfect or deficient left" (9.343-345). This short passage identifies Eve as God's creation. She is a subject as Adam refers to her as "woman." She has a self because she is able to have independent reason apart from her co-partner and co-creator, Adam. She has substance because Adam states that God does not create the "imperfect" or the "deficient." Adam and Eve stand together. They work together in the Garden of Eden, and when it is time to leave, they go "hand in hand" (12.648-649). Truly, the female gender in *Paradise Lost* transcends critical evaluation through the analysis of female-gendered entities, and through the reanalysis of Eve's representation. Ultimately, Milton's Eve is not a shadow; she is a divine woman who remains closely linked to God through the gift of creation. Eve's equality with Adam is inherent, yet she is still able to reason on her own, and make choices as an individual and as a female.

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# "I Could Do with Less Caressing"

Sexual Abuse in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*

Andrew Doub

Anne Brontë's 1848 novel, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, has long been called a seminal text in the feminist literary canon for its scathing portrayal of marital dysfunction. Lisa SurrIDGE, who has written extensively on this work, extols it as "[forming] part of an emergent feminist critique of marriage and marital violence that arose in the late 1840s," one which anticipated issues that would rise to prominence during the second-half of the nineteenth century (*Bleak Houses* 83). Although *Tenant* has received much less critical attention than the novels written by Anne's sisters, scholars seeking to codify and define early fictional accounts of spousal abuse have cited heavily from it. Unlike other writers, who situated wife battery as a problem of the lower-classes, Brontë used *Tenant* as a place to imaginatively record domestic violence in an upper-class setting.

Previous explorations into the abuse of Helen Huntingdon at the hands of her detestable husband Arthur have mostly focused on symbolic interpretations. For instance, both SurrIDGE and Maggie Berg have delved deeply into Brontë's association of animals with women and the parallels between male maltreatment of both in the story. This animal substitution is as far as they are willing to go because, as SurrIDGE notes, "the text stops short of depicting violence between Helen and her husband," in the same physical way that it

does with Millicent and Ralph Hattersley (“Dogs’/Bodies” 5). After all, even in their most angered and intense moments, the novel describes a door slammed in Arthur’s face and a book thrown at a dog near Helen at the extreme end of acts committed. Making a claim of actual physical assault would go beyond the textual evidence Brontë provided.

However, in limiting themselves to physically injurious spousal abuse, previous scholars have glanced over what I propose is truly the most “controversial and provocative” aspect of the novel, one which has yet to be the subject of serious study: the descriptions of sexual assault and sexual harassment found within *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. This type of physical abuse, suffered by Helen at Arthur’s hands, is, in fact, explicitly stated in her personal narrative. I contend here that accounts from Helen’s diary clearly indicate that a non-consensual sexual relationship exists between herself and her husband. In it she describes a number of situations in which Arthur’s sexual advances are seen by her as a violation of her body and of her rights as an individual. This makes *Tenant* an early definer of the crime of spousal sexual abuse, long before that term or its meaning were recognized by Victorian society.

First, the cultural space into which *Tenant*’s depictions of sexual abuse entered should be described. Research conducted into this area reveals that discussions on sexuality and marital violence were expanding as a direct result of the narratives being published about these subjects. In *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault observes that, contrary to misconceptions about Victorian prudishness, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a “discursive explosion” took place on the subject of sex (38). Standards of acceptable sexual behavior were undergoing modification in public discourses, including a “setting apart of the ‘unnatural’ as a specific dimension in the field of sexuality” (39). “Rather than a massive censorship” of discussions on sexual issues, “what was involved was a regulated and polymorphous incitement to discourse” (34). Foucault notes that rape was always on a cultural list of “grave sins,” but as broadening discussions about sex provided new conceptual definitions, the idea of what constitutes sexual abuse and who could commit it evolved likewise.

It is true that at the time Anne Brontë penned *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, the term “marital sexual abuse” did not exist. Perhaps this is why previous scholarship has been reluctant to address this aspect of the novel. Marital rape and sexual abuse within marriage were not recognized as “unnatural” crimes in British law until long after *Tenant*’s publication, and in the years prior to this debate, many judicial scholars argued that they could never occur. The

origins of this standard date back to 1736, when prominent legal theoretician Sir Matthew Hale wrote in his *Historia Placitorum Coronæ* that after a marriage is consummated, “the husband cannot be guilty of a rape committed by himself upon his lawful wife, for by their mutual matrimonial consent and contract the wife hath given herself up in this kind unto her husband, which she cannot retract” (628). This legal precedent carried well into the Victorian period, reinforced by the law principles of coverture, which “explicitly subordinated wives to husbands” in both material and physical spheres (Hasday 1389). By initially assenting to marriage, a wife had “given up her body to her husband” for his sexual use (Hale 628).

As a result of the legal ignorance of this offense, Jill Elaine Hasday writes in “Contest And Consent: A Legal History of Marital Rape” that “scholars have frequently assumed that marital rape was a private concern that nineteenth-century feminists feared discussing in any public or systematic way” (1378). On the contrary, she claims that “the historical record makes clear that these advocates not only publicly demanded the right to sexual self-possession in marriage, they pressed the issue constantly, at length, and in plain language” (1378–9). In other words, the terms used to describe sexual abuse within marriage were the only thing absent from Victorian consciousness at the time of *Tenant’s* publication; the acts themselves were present in the proliferation of discourses on sexual matters described by Foucault, moving Western culture closer to the legal and moral challenges that would take place in the late-1800s.

The definitions of sexual abuse and harassment were being constructed by writers throughout the nineteenth-century. Brontë’s inclusion of sexual abuse in a fictional narrative may have been fairly unique at the time, but the idea that wives could be sexually violated by their own husbands was not. In his historical inquiry into the sexual experiences of women in the nineteenth century, Jesse F. Battan notes that from the 1850s to the early 1900s, “the vivid portrayal of passive, innocent wives who were sexually brutalized by their husbands . . . was a staple of the literature written by feminists and moral reformers who attacked the patriarchal ideal of marriage” (168). Advocacy groups like the Free Lovers published “story after story, and letter after letter” in pamphlets and newspapers written by women who were documenting “a lifetime of [sexual] mistreatment” starting in the 1850s (Battan 169). Wives were confiding their distress in these matters to “traveling lecturers, counselors, physicians, midwives, legal advisers, and confessors” who published their accounts of sexual trauma in a variety of public fora (Battan 167–8).

Finding the right to sexual self-possession addressed in Brontë's fictional work places it at the vanguard of this discussion. The idea that Brontë would be in the avant-garde on such an issue at a time when few others were fits with Jessica Cox's estimation that *Tenant* has much more in common with the radical New Woman fiction of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries than it does with the feminist literature of the 1840s (31). She cites a number of patriarchal issues addressed in *Tenant* that are in line with much later challenges to male sexuality in feminist fiction (31). Thus, adding sexual assault into her novel would not be out of place considering Brontë's broad vision.

After acknowledging this, readers only have to become aware of how Brontë described the issue. As Joanna Bourke suggests, these early definitions simply "have to be made visible in order to [analyze them] historically" (419). Like sexual harassment, the term "domestic violence" was also absent from the Victorian vocabulary, yet its culturally understood definitions were being written in abundance by both male and female authors in period literature. *The Oxford English Dictionary* identifies Mary Russell Mitford's collection, *Our Village: Sketches of Rural Character and Scenery* (1830), as responsible for originating the colloquial term "wife beating" in one of its short stories, thirty to forty years before its common use among feminist activists (Lawson and Shakinovsky 159). Early Victorian fictional narratives were instrumental in moving the public discourse on the abuse of women, and although *Tenant* did not supply its audience with a specific term, it certainly provided the situations, actions, and violations women endured in their marital relationships.

Having established the context in which *Tenant* was published and the cultural awareness of the act, I will now examine the textual evidence of marital sexual assault that Helen's diary provides. Each explicit instance of abuse and their attendant descriptions anticipate those accounts that would be discussed more openly in later nineteenth century dialog, and other symbolic representations reinforce the concept of female sexual violation. A study of *Tenant* through this lens shows that Helen's initial reaction in the weeks after her marriage, Arthur's expectation of sexual satisfaction on demand, and Helen's eventual assertion to the right to control her own body are all reflective of accounts given by Victorian women who suffered from sexual abuse.

In Helen's initial diary entry following her marriage, entitled "First Weeks of Matrimony," she reveals that her physical relationship with Arthur includes, at least, unwanted physical contact. The early disappointments both Helen and Arthur share about their physical and emotional evolution were common at the

time Brontë wrote *Tenant*. The change in relationship from chaste courtship to the intimacy of marriage could be an uncomfortable one for the bride, and the bridegroom was often frustrated by his wife's trepidations. Mary Roberts Coolidge describes the lack of preparation a young Victorian couple had before their wedding night and the resultant complications. She writes:

To many a man there must have been a shock of astonishment, if not dismay, on discovering that his wife was afraid of him, and had only the vaguest notion of their inevitable marital relation. The convention of absolute ignorance in which the young girl had usually been brought up, made of the sex relation an experience scarcely less terrible than bodily assault. (qtd. in Battan 176)

Helen's thoughts on this event do not specifically indicate what her wedding night experience was, but she does suggest that she dislikes certain developmental aspects of their early physical relationship:

He is very fond of me, almost too fond. I could do with less caressing and more rationality. I should like to be less of a pet and more of a friend, if I might choose; but I won't complain of that: I am only afraid his affection loses in depth where it gains in ardour. I sometimes liken it to a fire of dry twigs and branches compared with one of solid coal, very bright and hot; but if it should burn itself out and leave nothing but ashes behind, what shall I do? (Brontë 188)

Here, Arthur's deficits in emotional engagement are reported along with his "ardour" for fiery passionate embrace, something commonly reported as an issue by new wives of Victorian husbands. Feminist-anarchist Voltairine de Cleyre blamed the post-wedding remorse of women like Helen on the "inconsiderate brutality" of new husbands who, by their lack balance between physical desires and intellectual and emotional assurance, "spoiled more honeymoons than it would be easy to count" (qtd. in Battan 169). For Arthur's part, he indicates that he is "not quite satisfied" with his wife's attempts to return his sustained affections (Brontë 189).

As Helen continues to consider her new situation, she grapples with her disappointment at Arthur's behavior but concludes with a statement of marital duty:

But Arthur is selfish; I am constrained to acknowledge that; and, indeed, the admission gives me less pain than might be expected, for, since I love him so much, I can easily forgive him for loving himself: he likes to be pleased, and it is my delight to please him. (Brontë 188–9)

Jesse F. Battan's study of marital sexual dysfunction in the Victorian period includes numerous mentions of this concept of "wifely duty" and how women saw submitting to their husbands' most extreme sexual needs as a marital obligation, regardless of their own emotional or sexual desires (166). Battan suggests that the Victorian male's ability to lovingly court and wed an eligible woman did not extend into the bedroom, where he saw himself as exercising his marital rights with his wife and her performing what was required of her (176). Helen's thoughts are congruent with this view.

Helen's second diary entry, written about one month after the first, contains the most convincing and blatant example of Arthur's transition from husband to sexual abuser. This comes in her description of his behavior when he attempts to resolve their quarrels which contains clear instances of emotional and physical sexual assault. Helen reports that Arthur's "favorite amusement" in his leisure time "is to sit or loll beside me on the sofa and tell me stories of his former amours," revealing the details of his numerous sexual exploits (Brontë 193). When Helen "[expresses her] horror and indignation" about these forced conversations, Arthur "laughs till the tears run down his cheeks" and "delights" in her discomfort. Then, Helen explicitly indicates that Arthur compels her to engage in involuntary physical intimacy in an attempt to resolve their arguments: "[When fears of my displeasure] become too serious for his comfort, he tries to kiss and soothe me into smiles again—never were his caresses so little welcome as then!" At this point, Arthur crosses a boundary in the relationship with his wife, the fact of which she tries to suppress in true, dutiful Victorian fashion: "I well know I have no right to complain. And I don't and won't complain. I do and will love him still." Indeed, in the eyes of the law and by cultural norms, she had no right to complain about Arthur's use of emotional and sexual coercion. The extent of his "caresses" is not clear, but Arthur's actions at least included forced kissing, physical contact, and intimate advances at inappropriate or unwanted times. All of these acts are signature traits of a sexual assault.

After establishing this as a problem in their marriage, Brontë's feminist statement on sexual assault begins to develop, declaring that women have the right to sexual self-possession. This is another point where Cox begins to see

Helen as a character who “pre-empts” the much later responses to male sexuality and sexual domination found in New Woman literature (31). In her book, *Bleak Houses: Marital Violence in Victorian Fiction*, Lisa SurrIDGE writes that, after this incident, “Helen’s diary records a series of challenges to her husband’s legal, moral, and sexual control over her mind and body” (92). SurrIDGE finds, “in defiance of the law of coverture,” that “Helen asserts what she perceives as her right to make moral decisions on her own behalf” (92). This begins about a month later in Helen’s diary with the infamous door-locking episode. When Arthur attempts to engage his wife in yet another forced sexual discussion about his previous affairs, instead of allowing him to smother her with caresses and undesired kisses, Helen writes: “Without another word, I left the room, and locked myself up in my own chamber” (Brontë 194). In doing this, SurrIDGE writes that Helen “effectively denies Arthur his conjugal rights” by refusing to sleep in the same bed (*Bleak Houses* 92). SurrIDGE omits, however, that Helen has already pointed out that any intimacy shown to her after arguments like these would be nonconsensual. By locking the door, Helen separates herself from the sexual abuse Arthur typically committed to conclude their arguments. She refuses to submit to further harassment.

In Helen’s final statement on the sexual relationship between herself and Arthur, she totally denies him any sexual rights to her body, even though, by law, “a woman was obligated by her marriage vows to accept sexual relations with her husband” (92). After discovering his philandering with Lady Lowborough, she declares to Arthur that their own sexual relationship has ended:

So you need not trouble yourself any longer to feign the love you cannot feel:  
I will exact no more heartless caresses from you—nor offer—nor endure them  
either—I will not be mocked with the empty husk of conjugal endearments,  
when you have given the substance to another! (Brontë 268)

Brontë’s word choice here is of particular interest. Not only are Arthur’s caresses described as “heartless,” but Helen indicates that she is forced to “endure” them (268). She has come to perceive her husband’s physical intimacy as a “mockery” of love. Any further contact between the two, she asserts, would be a violation of her moral and individual rights, whether he admitted it or not. SurrIDGE suggests that this violation of coverture and conjugal rights causes Arthur to perceive Helen as a marital outlaw, which is why he cries “My wife! What wife? I have no wife” when Helen returns to care for him (*Bleak Houses* 90).

Aside from these explicit depictions of sexual abuse between Arthur and Helen, Brontë reiterates the concept of rape or violation symbolically as well. One scholar has even gone so far to say that Arthur's "'assault' on Helen's diary and the vandalizing of her painting equipment is rape-like" (qtd. in Berg 31). One of the most interesting statements Brontë makes about masculine sexual ownership comes through Arthur's dialog, however. Right after his aforementioned disavowal of his wife, Arthur loudly announces to the members of his party: "any one among you, that can fancy her, may have her" (Brontë 302). Since Helen would undoubtedly object to being given away to Arthur's male friends, any sexual relationship that would result from this transfer would be initiated without Helen's consent. Essentially, Arthur offers Helen up for his friends to rape.

As these examples have demonstrated, Helen's lived experience of sexual abuse evolves from her recognition of unwanted physical and intimate contact shortly after her wedding to her eventual assertion of ownership of her own body. She identifies herself as an individual with rights, rather than a woman who concedes to her husband's continuous physical desires. Regardless of her subordinate position in their household, Helen's steadfast principle and willingness to break free prevented her from being further abused by Arthur, and in that same spirit she also refused the sexual advances of Arthur's guests. It is this aspect of Helen's character and Brontë's daring willingness to challenge prevalent concepts of sexual ownership that make *Tenant* an important record of feminist resistance. Far from being a simple novel of didacticism, Brontë's text not only shows what sexual abuse looks like, but she also provides her readers with a role model for feminine resistance to it.

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# Kierkegaard's Aesthetic Life View in Elliott Smith's *Either/Or*

Camille Richey

When people write about Elliott Smith's music, they cannot help but delve into the angst, hopelessness, and depression of his deceptively poppy choruses. When it comes to discussing the title of Smith's third album *Either/Or*, a title lifted straight from Søren Kierkegaard's published work from 150 years earlier, it is no surprise that what mainly gets compared between Smith and Kierkegaard are their melancholic dispositions—once referred to by Kierkegaard as his “faithful mistress” (Schultz 163). Nelson Gary, a friend of Smith, generally explains the title by saying, “Elliott, having a philosophy degree, lived and breathed the melancholy-saturated work of Søren Kierkegaard to the degree that he named an album after one of his books.” *Magnet Magazine* says the intriguing title reminds us, “Kierkegaard believed life is a cosmic joke and then you die” (Davis). In other words, the only statements out there that attempt to explain the connection between Smith's *Either/Or* and Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* essentially conclude with: Smith was depressed, he read Kierkegaard—who was also depressed—which made him even more depressed.

By comparing the actual themes laid out in Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* to Smith's *Either/Or*, the album reveals itself to be much more than a vague reference to general reflections on melancholy; in fact, this melancholy is only one aspect in an entire work replete with various Kierkegaardian concepts. More specifically, in the book *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard sets up the idea of the aesthetic life view (in contrast to the ethical and the religious life views he proposes throughout his writings). Speaking through a rather unusual collection of advice, journals, and discourses written by fictitious authors like Author A and Johannes the Seducer (who are aesthetes themselves), Kierkegaard exposes the aesthete's core characteristics: a desire for passion, concern with time, and indecision. Unbeknownst to many Elliott Smith fans, the album *Either/Or* revolves very much around these exact characteristics. By closely examining the lyrics and taking into account how they are emphasized by song form and instrumentation, this paper demonstrates exactly how these aesthetic qualities—the desire for passion, concern with time, and indecision—shape Smith's *Either/Or*. Surely the album is not simply a nod to Kierkegaard's depression, but the product of an artist who resonated deeply with the philosopher's expression of the aesthete's world.

## The Concept of Irony

Before diving into the characteristics of the aesthete, one thing needs to be understood: That is, the foundation for any of these life views, or the very thing that makes an individual's subjectivity possible, comes from the awareness of what Kierkegaard calls irony. In *The Concept of Irony*, Kierkegaard holds up Socrates as the poster child for irony because Socrates always questions, and ultimately negates, strongly held assumptions; in fact, Socrates is apt to deconstruct none other than the whole substantial world (Hong 31). By nullifying everything that once seemed established or obvious, Socrates the ironic subject, comes to the conclusion that he is ignorant; he knows nothing: "Actuality has lost its validity entirely" (28). What Socrates thought was concrete is nothing but artificial construction. To him "the whole of existence has become alien" (27), and the recognition that nothing is knowable is like a black abyss as wide as eternity, an "infinite absolute negativity" (27). It assures us that there is no objective reality, only perceptions; there is no univocal, authoritative purpose, only subjective decision.

Instead of wallowing away at the nothingness of the world (which certainly contributes to the melancholy felt both by Kierkegaard and Smith), Kierkegaard posits that becoming conscious of irony is actually freeing. It qualifies individuals to be true subjects (24), meaning individuals who are aware of their ability to make life-changing decisions. Because Socrates “grasps the nothing,” he is “free . . . of earnestness about anything” (35). He now “genuinely feels quite liberated” (35). In other words, irony may negate objective truth, but it gives people the ultimate freedom to choose for themselves. Because of irony, one is no longer bound by “civic commitments and obligations marking normal daily existence” (Khan 71), but only bound by what he or she wants to be. Simply put, irony reveals that there is no inherent meaning to the world (a realization that is both terrifying and liberating), but through it one can comprehend his or her own power to create meaning. Throughout the rest of his writings, Kierkegaard ultimately suggests that one creates meaning through three possible lenses: the religious, the ethical, and the aesthetic. That aesthetic life view is precisely what Smith seems to be most interested in.

In Smith’s album, irony rears its negative head most obviously in “Ballad of Big Nothing.” In fact, the message is so Kierkegaardian that it makes talk about the similar melancholy between Smith and Kierkegaard seem especially superficial. Again, Smith appears to be consumed by Kierkegaard’s own ideas, not just vaguely referencing them. This “Ballad of Big Nothing” starts with a simple double-tracked guitar riff, a repeating, descending open-fourth slide that immediately introduces us to a yearning, pessimistic emptiness. Yet, Smith manages to fill in some of the loneliness with a catchy bass line, peppy rhythm guitar chords, drums that don’t skimp on cymbals or upbeat snare punches, and a poppy chorus. Unlike some of his completely acoustic haunting numbers, this comes across more as a power ballad, an anthem even. While the upbeat instrumentals sound positive, they cannot completely overshadow his weighty lyrics about superficiality, subjectivity, and irony. After building up the melody to a climactic chorus, he confidently sings, “You can do what you want to whenever you want to / You can do what you want to there’s no one to stop you” (Smith). It’s a line that makes Smith into an ironic subject, one who understands the arbitrariness of the known world. There is no true authority except the individual. Each is free to make his or her own decisions. That first line “You can do what you want to whenever you want to” gets sung three more times by the end of the song. He croons the line higher, then lower, then over a different chord until adding, “Though it doesn’t mean a thing.” Ultimately it

funnels into his grand and final statement, “Big nothing.” These last two words are dynamically his loudest lyric, perhaps the one with the most assurance behind it—and maybe the most disdain as well. After all the searching, after all the observing and the philosophizing, there is only “infinite absolute negativity.” While Kierkegaard talks about this unfortunate realization as a necessary “qualification of subjectivity” (Hong 24), Smith seems less content with the process. Instead of arriving at subjectivity from meaninglessness, Smith flips it. He starts off knowing he is a free and active agent and then ends up at the black hole of nothingness, while the instrumentals couldn’t be more flauntingly final. Smith’s confrontation with the “big nothing” is not one of regret, intimidation, or defeat. Rather, it is a resolute belief, an emphatic acceptance of our existential situation. The only truth one can ever know is that there is no truth. This “anti-anthem or ironic anthem” (Nugent 97) suggests the final moment should be a good one. That message not only resonates with Kierkegaard’s concept of irony, but it also foreshadows the aesthete’s concern with time, a characteristic that will be discussed later in the paper.

## Desire for Passion

Smith’s album often personifies the aesthetic life view, which incorporates the aesthete’s desire for passion. The “Ballad of Big Nothing” not only encounters life’s meaninglessness, but it also describes a passionless world. The people are “dragging,” “sitting,” “waiting,” “tired,” “waiting to be taken away,” and “watching” the parade, which are all passive verbs—sedentary situations. Although this song takes place at a parade (usually a lively, crowded, even moving experience), Smith seems somewhat detached or disappointed, as do all of the other characters for that matter. All the commotion does not amount to any deeply felt purpose or meaning. This description of apathy is all too familiar to Kierkegaard’s aesthetes. It’s not that they are always disinterested, but that they are continually searching for palpable passion and therefore unsatisfied when they do not find it. For characters like Author A and Johannes the Seducer, passion is clearly the goal in life. Author A complains that “the times . . . are wretched, for they are without passion” (Hong 40) and that boredom is in fact “the root of all evil” (51). In “The Rotation of Crops,” Author A advises us to regularly adjust our daily schedules, living situations, and unenthusiastic habits in order to amuse ourselves more. He describes how entertaining a fly can be if

there are no other interesting objects available and how sweat dripping down a boring speaker's nose can turn a potentially terrible moment into a pleasurable one (60). Some of these descriptions may seem a little trite (as if the aesthete is only looking for superficial hedonistic fulfillment), but the aesthete may not necessarily be limited to a taste for pleasure. Rather, C. Stephen Evans, one of the U.S.'s leading Kierkegaardian experts at Baylor University, explains, "Kierkegaard places the emphasis on desire itself. What the aesthete wants is simply to have what he or she wants, whatever that might be" (71). In other words, the aesthetes' passion may vary from person to person. Some may want pleasure, others may want pain (72), but collectively they all want that passion to be fulfilled.

Kierkegaard's Johannes the Seducer has his own specific passion: that is seducing young girls, which he does in a so-called "spiritual" sense. In his diary, he describes in detail his thought out plans for deceiving Cordelia, a young impressionable urban woman; he describes it in a curious way, hinting that he is bringing out Cordelia's aesthetic qualities. He is turning her into a type of interesting, poetic work of art. The pleasure that comes from bringing out her artistic nature, and indeed causing her to fall in love with him, is equivalent to "splash[ing] up and down on a stormy lake" (Hannay 37). It is "enjoyable to be stirred in oneself" (37). Although Johannes concerns himself with different desires, there is still that longing to feel strong emotion. He works towards his moment deliberately, purposefully. While different in their specific interests and personalities, Author A and Johannes are examples of the aesthetic life view, in which the individual personally, and often selfishly, satiates their own passionate desires.

Returning once again to Elliott Smith, not only does his "Ballad of Big Nothing" express a kind of aesthetic disappointment with the lack of passion in the world, but other songs in the *Either/Or* album like "Speed Trials," "Pictures of Me," and "Rose Parade" present this sentiment as well. "Speed Trials" begins the album with a quiet, sinister march. His frustrations come out in lyrics that talk about "running back" to a past experience: "running speed trials standing in place." He also references a socket that does not give "a shock enough." Here is a world where electric jolts can't make a person care or feel deeply and where racers only run in the preliminaries without ever getting to the real event. In fact, this character runs the speed trial without actually moving anywhere. If speed trials already felt pointless, surely running one in the same spot makes it even more so. William Todd Schultz, writer of the psychobiography

*Torment Saint: The Life of Elliott Smith*, sums up the song by saying, “Life’s a speed trial—all preparation and qualification, no race” (88). In “Pictures of Me,” Smith complains about his growing fame, a superficial situation that lacks any real meaning or passion for him. The introductory lines “Start, stop, and start / Stupid acting smart / Flirting with the flicks / Say it’s just for kicks” immediately articulate his disillusionment with people who only act at a surface level. They flirt for fun without anything substantial. When the chorus comes along, Smith switches into a higher tonal key, bringing greater tension and more emotion: “So sick and tired of all these pictures of me / Completely wrong / Totally wrong.” To see his picture around the city (to know that he has gotten more popular) does not by any means fulfill his deep-seated desires. Everyone else is “dying just to get the disease,” which Schultz calls “the big blue screen of fame,” but Smith finds it revolting.

In “Rose Parade” we see even more examples of shallowness. At the parade, a metaphor that for Smith exhibited much ado about nothing, he is asked to “march down the street like the Duracell bunny” and “throw . . . out candy that looks like money.” Like running a speed trial in place, the Duracell bunny has no real point. He uses energy just to use energy. There is no underlying meaning to his existence. And then Smith’s use of candy (one time here and twice in “Ballad of Big Nothing”) is telling as well. Like the bunny or the parade, candy gets a lot of attention, but it hardly sustains a person. It has all the trappings of a lie, of pretending like it is everything you want while hardly offering anything substantial. Interestingly enough, while he listens to the “ridiculous marching band,” he finds himself actually “singing along / With some half-hearted victory song.” Afterwards he asks the listener, “So won’t you follow me down to the Rose Parade?” Smith complains about a world that lacks real and true emotion, deep purpose and passion, but he still finds himself taking part in that lackluster world. He is not only asked to come to the parade, but he asks the listener to follow him there, fully acknowledging his own involvement. Even though he calls the marching band ridiculous, he still ends up singing with them.

Though complaining about the passionless age and involving oneself in it are rather contradictory, that attitude fits firmly within the aesthete’s worldview. At the beginning of the book *Either/Or*, Author A tells us, “I don’t feel like doing anything. I don’t feel like riding—the motion is too powerful; I don’t feel like walking—it is too tiring; I don’t feel like lying down . . . I don’t feel like doing anything” (Hong 38). For someone who complains about others not having passion, he certainly lacks some. Later he laments that there is never any real

purpose in his situation and that such is always the case. “Before me is continually an empty space, and I am propelled by a consequence that lies behind me” (Hong 39). Like Smith, Author A wishes there were some meaning to grasp onto, but is always only confronted with “big nothing,”—which is simply the human condition. He also suggests that maybe frivolity really is the answer to life. If nothingness is one’s lot in life, then nothingness is what one should embrace. “Arbitrariness is the whole secret. It is popularly believed that there is no art to being arbitrary, and yet it takes profound study to be arbitrary in such a way that a person does not himself run wild in it but himself has pleasure from it” (60-61). Like Evans points out, the aesthete is not simply a hedonist, but a very complex personality. The aesthete is often disappointed that there is not more passion, but sometimes takes part in lethargy, or seemingly meaningless activities. The particular desire can take different forms, but whatever the desire is, the aesthete wants it to be fulfilled immediately.

## Concern With Time

The second characteristic of the aesthete is his or her concern with time. Since the aesthete mainly focuses on immediately satisfying desire, he or she is also very aware that those fulfilling moments are fleeting. About the aesthete and time, Evans says, “The aesthete lives in and for ‘the moment.’ It is not hard to see why this should be so, for immediate desires have just this momentary character, and to live for the satisfaction of such desires is to seek to make one’s life a series of satisfying moments” (72). Like living for passion, living for the moment has its problems, and the aesthete is all too aware of this. Author A says, “Pleasure disappoints; possibility does not.” Furthermore, if he made one wish, it would not be “for wealth or power but for the passion as possibility, for the eye, eternally young, eternally ardent, that sees possibility everywhere” (43). In other words, possibility is the fountain of eternity. Unlike pleasure, which has an expiration date, possibility never closes. It never limits. It is always available. If Author A could harness that power, he could theoretically reap passion endlessly. However, as it is, his passion-filled moments will only be momentary. Johannes the Seducer also understands the transience of time, which is one of the reasons why he writes his journal at all. Author A, the editor who discovers Johannes’ letters on accident, describes the tone of the diary this way: “Although of course the experience was recorded after it happened--sometimes perhaps

even a considerable time after--it was often described as if taking place at the very moment, so dramatically vivid that sometimes it was as though it was all taking place before one's very eyes" ("Diary" 11). Evidently, Johannes is not just interested in living his moment in the first place, but also wants to "savour . . . his own person aesthetically" in the future. For him, the diary is a way to freeze time. In theory, the future is the fountain of potentiality. The problem of temporality surfaces once again because even the secondary experience expires and like Plato's "mimesis" is still twice removed from the ideal. In the second part of the literary work *Either/Or*, Judge Wilhelm talks about the aesthete's life as one of despair. Alastair Hannay, the British scholar who has provided extensive translations and explanations of Kierkegaard's works, elaborates:

Wilhelm does not mean that the life of the aesthete is especially exposed to disappointment, frustration, and in the end despair [though there certainly is disappointment and frustration, but those qualities can also be found in the other two life stages]; he means that the aesthete is already in despair because he makes so much depend on the moment that life can offer. The aesthete's life is one of despair even when, by the aesthete's lights, everything is going swimmingly. ("Biography" 179)

Wilhelm's point is what the aesthete already knows: life is made meaningful by possessing the moment, but even in possessing it, it is already fading. This attitude is perfectly expressed at the end of *Diary of a Seducer* when Johannes asks, "Why can't a night like that be longer?" (184) He finally got to the moment, and then suddenly it was gone.

This obsession over time, this awareness of our transitory condition, is seen in Smith's songs as well—especially "Speed Trials," "Alameda," and "No Name No. 5." Not only does the chorus of "Speed Trials" talk about meaningless races akin to a hamster spinning in its wheel, he also says, "It's just a brief smile crossing your face." This line is not only sung once, but three times; the repetition of the lyric is not so much quaint as it is grinding. His voice is both quiet, but gravelly—pretty, but coarse. Clearly, this supreme moment has a catch to it: it doesn't last. The smile in "No Name No. 5" doesn't either. "A sweet, sweet smile" is worth singing about, is worth remembering, but it's "fading fast." That fading is completely expected. He does not get "upset about it / No, not anymore / There's nothing wrong / That wasn't wrong before." He has become conditioned to accept that things, moments, and people leave. In fact, at the end of the song he chants, "Everybody's gone at last." For this introvert, the temporality of life

also brings respite. Furthermore, “Alameda” makes a point of singing about a girl who liked you “for one or two minutes”, but then “the fix is in / You’re all pretension.” The disappointment behind the bridge is unmistakable. Not only does it contain the lowest notes melodically, but Smith also incorporates a brief pause where all instruments are silenced for a beat—and just like that the moment is gone. Like the moment-chasing aesthete, Smith longs for the temporary fulfillment of something he knows will dissolve.

## Indecision

The last aesthetic characteristic that makes its way into Smith’s album is the lack of real decision-making. The namesake for both works is most directly talked about in “Either/Or: An Ecstatic Discourse” located in the literary work *Either/Or*. The aesthete also loves the artistic consciousness of frames within frames within frames: an “Either/Or” within an Either/Or which contains many more “eithers” and “ors.” In the “Ecstatic Discourse,” Author A wisely expounds, “Marry, and you will regret it. Do not marry, and you will also regret it. Marry or do not marry, you will regret it either way. Whether you marry or you do not marry, you will regret it either way” (Hong 43-44). This comical logical sequence is not only talked about with marriage, but also with “laugh[ing] at the stupidities of the world” (43), “trust[ing] a girl,” and “hang[ing] yourself” (44). With this pessimistic view of the world, this passage insists that all decisions will cause disappointment. There is also no preference for one choice over another. No side is good, none better or worse. Each option is equal because both will equally cause regret. If all decisions are equal, then there is no true decision-making.

Kierkegaard’s Johannes seems to feel the same way. Although Johannes certainly schemes about how to ensnare Cordelia, he is not so specifically concerned with her. Rather, she is one option among many, a means to fulfilling his contorted desire. One of his philosophies about love follows thus: “The trick [to deluding the god of love] is to be as receptive in regard to impressions as possible, to know the impression you are making and the impression each girl makes on you. In this way you can even be in love with many at the same time, because with each particular girl you are differently in love. Loving just one is too little” (“Diary” 84). He admits to maintaining multiple options here, to not actually committing to any one person. His actions towards Cordelia certainly

display his belief in keeping the relationship open, distanced, abstract. He makes her “interesting” without fostering a true respect for her as a valued individual. He says their affiliation “amounts to nothing at all” because “it is purely spiritual” (72). He says she is a work of art, a sculpture (151). She is a “woman [who] is the man’s dream” (165). In other words, to him she is a young virgin ready to be manipulated aesthetically just like any other young virgin is ready to be manipulated. If it were not Cordelia, it would be the actress he met at the theater. Judge Wilhelm will even go so far as to say that the aesthete’s nonchalance equates to not making decisions at all. “The esthetic choice is either altogether immediate, and thus no choice, or it loses itself in a great multiplicity... If one does not choose absolutely, one chooses only for the moment and for that reason can choose something else the next moment” (Hong 73). While the aesthete obviously makes some choices, like what he should write in a letter or how he should talk to his lover’s aunt, he is ultimately ambivalent.

Not surprisingly, the aesthete’s “either/or” mentality weaves in and out of Smith’s album as well. Smith exhibits his own ambivalence and not just others’. This is most notable in “Alameda,” “Pictures of Me,” and “Say Yes.” “Alameda” may sound the most like Johannes, as Smith reassures himself that “Nobody broke your heart / You broke your own because you can’t finish what you start / Nobody broke your heart / If you’re alone it must be you that wants to be apart.” Just as Johannes decides to emotionally distance himself from Cordelia by insisting the dissolution of their engagement was his plan all along (175), Smith takes full responsibility for the break up. Smith and the girl he’s singing about can be together or not together. He could choose either way, and in the end he is resolved to accept whatever happens with equal emotion. In “Pictures of Me” Smith asks, after seeing his image on television, “I’m not surprised at all and really why should I be? / See nothing wrong / See nothing wrong.” Then moments later he complains, “So sick and tired of all these pictures of me / Completely wrong / Totally wrong.” The lyrics reveal his attempt to straddle two different attitudes. On the one hand, fame is not necessarily a bad thing; maybe it is simply to be expected. On the other hand, fame is not the answer to his problems, and he feels very uncomfortable embracing the popularity anyway. In the end, his conclusion remains ambiguous. He presents an either/or dilemma, one that will most likely cause regret on both sides.

“Say Yes” also shows Smith’s inability to make decisions. Interestingly, the song starts with the lyrics, “I’m in love with the world through the eyes of a girl.” Instead of saying he is in love with the girl, he sings that he is in love with

the world; she is the one who provides that perspective for him. In a similar vein Johannes writes to Cordelia: “Behind every tree I see a womanly being that resembles you . . . Is not loving you to love a world?” (“Diary” 129). And again he states, “It is my love for you casting its reflection over the whole of life” (138). Being in love is not only a personal experience, but an abstract, aesthetic one as well. Any girl could stir up these thoughts, to turn the whole world into a metaphor. Smith also clearly sets up a dialectic; the girl will choose to be in a relationship with him or she won’t. “It’s always been wait and see,” “She’ll decide what she wants / I’ll probably be the last to know / No one says until it shows and you see how it is / They want your or they don’t / Say yes” (Smith). He is not begging her, convincing her, or proving which choice is better. Although we assume he genuinely wants this girl (the instrumentals are stripped, revealing, and the melody is optimistic), he is prepared to accept either possibility. In fact, his allusion to “they” instead of a specific girl generalizes the situation. Similarly, Johannes will often discuss girls or women, rather than individuals. Of course, this is not to say that Elliott Smith is Johannes. Many people can attest to the fact that Smith was a likeable figure, an authentic, deeply caring person (Nugent 7). After pouring over the lyrics of *Either/Or* and the diapsalmata of Kierkegaard’s *Either/Or*, clearly there is a great deal of philosophical overlap.

Finally, whether Smith meant to deliberately engage Kierkegaard’s version of the aesthete in this album is questionable. Smith only mentions in interviews where the title came from and never elaborates on why he chose it. However, the philosophical work seems to have deeply resonated with Smith on multiple levels, which is evident through the many similarities in his songs. Certainly he admired Kierkegaard; this may simply be a tribute to those angsty, anxiety-laden works. Or, perhaps it was more personal. While reading *Either/Or*, Smith saw the aesthete in himself. If so, then he was doing exactly what Kierkegaard wanted him to do: to struggle, to find his own meaning, to read himself into the works. Perhaps Smith not only saw himself in Author A or Johannes, but also in Kierkegaard, who was after all a literary, poetic writer—in truth, an aesthete. Surely Elliott Smith was not, as some seem to suggest, admiring Kierkegaard from afar, but seriously engaging in these existentialist philosophies. By recognizing the influence of Kierkegaard’s *Either/Or*, we more fully understand Smith’s vision of modernity—a frustrated glance into his passionless, temporal, ambiguous world.

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# “My Wonderful and Less Than”

The Inadequacy and Necessity of Metaphor  
in Szybist’s *Incarnadine*

*Katherine Snow Nelson*

In an interview with *The Paris Review*, Mary Szybist explained that while in Italy, she became “overwhelmed by how many paintings depicted the same scenes, particularly religious scenes—the Nativity, the Madonna, the Crucifixion, the Assumption, and so on” (Dueben). Although at first she found something restrictive about such subject limitations, she went on to say, “[It later occurred] to me that many of the paintings I love most—Annunciation scenes by Fra Angelico, Simone Martini, Leonardo da Vinci, Sandro Botticelli—were made within these subject limitations, and I started to wonder if the limitations themselves had played a role in engendering the art” (Dueben). Szybist’s 2013 National Book Award–winning poetry collection, *Incarnadine*, frequently draws on the subject limitations of the Annunciation tradition. Her poems re-envision the encounter between Mary and the angel Gabriel, representing it variously as the Lewinsky scandal, as an act of sexual violence, as an interaction between butterfly and flower, and so on. Despite such modifications to the major figures and events, the poems enter the same thematic space that early Annunciation artwork did. As Szybist put it in her interview for the National Book Award, the Annunciation—and, we might add,

her collection—“portrays a human encountering something not human; it suggests that it is possible for us to perceive and communicate with something or someone not like us” (Lessley).

Szybist is only the latest in a long line of artists who have explored this space in which the human encounters knowledge so different from itself as to defy understanding. Throughout the history of Annunciation artwork, artists played with biblical subject limitations to make seemingly modest innovations that nevertheless unlocked a profusion of possible interpretations of the Annunciation narrative and Marian theology. The invention of perspective is one such traditional element that opened to artists new vehicles of representing and metaphorizing such encounters.

Hanneke Grootenboer explains in her article “Reading the Annunciation: The Navel of the Painting” that previous to the invention of perspective, in viewing Annunciation artwork, the viewer’s eye remained caught in the tension between the Virgin and the angel. Perspective, however, allowed the eye to run beyond them, toward the vanishing point that became an “insurmountable threshold” (257)—sometimes a closed door but also a glass window which only light could penetrate.

Grootenboer argues that “perspective provided artists with a powerful means to create various spatial metaphors of passage that revealed the mystery [of Incarnation] as secret without disclosing the content” (357)—that is, without fully answering Mary’s question, “How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?” (Luke 1:34). In *Incarnadine*, symbol systems—particularly metaphor and sometimes language itself—serve as the “insurmountable threshold” that allow the speaker to approach understanding without full comprehension, rendering such systems ultimately inadequate. In reexamining, rupturing, and recombining traditional elements of Annunciation representations and the respective tenets of Marian theology they signified, the poems in *Incarnadine* point to the persistent inadequacy but inescapable necessity of metaphor in the process of meaning-making. After briefly describing the history of Annunciation artwork and detailing its traditional iconography, I will explore Szybist’s feminist critique of Marian theology. I will also show that the collection remains invested in its critique of Marian theology by means of appropriated symbols despite its awareness that it is therefore always also dependent on metaphor—a medium it finds unreliable but ultimately indispensable in approaching the unknown.

Few depictions of the Annunciation existed before the Council of the Greek Bishops at Ephesus in 431. In an effort to respond to sectarian perspectives that

contradicted the orthodox view of Christ as both truly human and truly divine, as Rosemary Muir Wright explains in her book *Sacred Distance: Representing the Virgin*, the Council “inevitably drew the mother of Jesus into the Christological arguments by virtue of the fact that, as his mother, Mary was the guarantor of the true humanity of Christ” (22). She was given the Greek title *Theotokos*, Mother of God. Following this Council, increased interest surrounding Mary’s role in Christ’s mortality was expressed in a rise in the number of depictions of the Annunciation, since that narrative often features the Incarnation of Christ and therefore calls into question Mary’s role in Christian theology. Portrayals of Mary Annunciate thus dovetailed closely with the evolution of Marian theology and Mary’s increasing prestige within Christianity. As Don Denny notes in his *The Annunciation from the Right from Early Christian Times to the Sixteenth Century*, “In liturgical prayers the story of the Annunciation became a cause for the exaltation of Mary” (5). So too Annunciation artwork encapsulated the emergent cult of the Virgin’s exaltation in Mary’s salvific role, her divinity or sainthood, and her particularly feminine virtues (chastity, humility, obedience, among others).

By the end of the medieval period, Annunciation artwork had developed a fixed iconography, often to stress Mary’s virginity and offset the sexual implications of the narrative as well as to highlight her humility and piety. Mary was often portrayed as having been interrupted by Gabriel during a devout activity; in earliest representations this activity was spinning yarn, a task alluded to in the apocryphal Protoevangelium of James, but in later representations, she was more often shown reading a prayer book or the Bible, which when depicted was usually opened to Isaiah 45:8, wherein Isaiah prophesies that “the skies [will] pour forth righteousness”—a prophecy that in Catholic tradition was believed to have been fulfilled in the Holy Spirit overshadowing Mary and causing her to conceive. Indeed, a dove, representative of the Holy Spirit and its role in the Incarnation, was often present. Almost as frequently appeared lilies, emblematic of Mary’s virginity and purity, sometimes offered as a gift to Mary by Gabriel. Mary was typically robed in blue and red, symbolic of royalty, maternity, and fertility; Gabriel was often clothed or outlined in gold. Their interaction usually took place in Mary’s chambers, a loggia, enclosed garden, or antechamber outside the chambers, often with a door or window in view, to reinforce Mary’s virginity or unbroken hymen. Adherence to the prescribed iconography ensured that, as Wright explains, “discrete Marian imagery, appropriate to private devotion or public display, articulated the Church’s teaching

about Mary” (56), especially her state of virginity at the time of the angelic hail, her redemption from Original Sin at the moment of Incarnation, and even the intactness of the hymen following the birth of Christ. The images persistently remind viewers that Mary’s encounter with the divine left her permanently altered; she became nearly divine herself.

Szybist’s poems are critical of the traditional interpretation of the Annunciation as the site of Mary’s transformation from ordinary (albeit immaculately conceived) girl to *Theotokos*, suspicious of Catholic tradition’s lauding of Mary’s passive willingness to bear the Son of God, and frustrated by Mary’s incomprehensible and inaccessible status as paradoxically Virgin and Mother. “Girls Overheard While Assembling a Puzzle” is one example of the kind of scrutiny under which the depictions and interpretations of the Annunciation fall in *Incarnadine*. The poem’s presumably teenage girl speakers catalogue the Annunciation iconography, but they do so in a way that disconnects each element from the others and repurposes them to create a secular understanding of the moment that is nevertheless meaningful to the speakers. The speakers examine pieces of the puzzle without a clear understanding of the whole picture, so to speak. They see the red, blue, and gold typical of Annunciation artwork; they see the major figures—Gabriel and Mary (actually referred to as “the angel” and “her”); and they see the garden. But like the puzzle pieces themselves, the Annunciation iconography is not presented in the traditional order, but instead “pieced” into some secular, petty part of the girls’ lives. Blue reminds them of swimming pools and swimsuits, red of the “lipstick we saw at the / mall” (Szybist 14–15). God’s intervention in mankind’s affairs takes on soap opera proportions: they wonder why he “doesn’t / just come down and / kiss her himself” (11–13). In this poem, the old representations of Mary as majestic, virginal queen (Mary *Theotokos*) are dismissed—“What kind of / queen?... Who thought this stuff / up?” (18–19, 22–23). Mary is instead translated into a series of worldly (profane) concepts; in order to better access the previously inaccessible Mary, the girls transform the moment traditionally regarded as her unique and crowning moment into a commonplace encounter. Mary becomes an ordinary teenage girl—like them.

The Mary who could be a lover in a romance is again presented in “Long after the Desert and Donkey.” The speaker—Gabriel, the epigraph tells us—watches Mary (now no longer pregnant with the Son of God) from afar with erotic longing. He reflects on the Annunciation yearningly, recalling the first time he approached her. “I wanted to bend low / and close to the curves of your

ear” (Szybist 20–21), he explains. “There were so many things I wanted to tell you. / Or rather, / I wished to have things that I wanted to tell you” (22–24). His unearthly but nevertheless physical yearning for her recasts the encounter with the divine not as something only desirable to the human, but also to the non-human. He is just as eager to identify “what meanings” (34) he can pull from the erotic exchange as humans are.

Such romantic resonances are not new. Toward the end of the fourteenth century, Annunciation artists began to position angel and Virgin in closer proximity to one another. As Susan Von Rohr Scaff explains in her article “The Virgin Annunciate in Italian Art of the Late Middle Ages and Renaissance,” this left artists free to play on the intimacy of the scene and evoke an almost courtly relationship between the pair (114). Gabriel was depicted as the adoring and timidly imploring suitor, Mary as the confident gentlewoman, acknowledging but not encouraging his regard. Inclined heads and extended palms bespoke an almost romantic, though still decorous intimacy. These new depictions of Mary as the object of courtly—verging on erotic—desire, added another dimension to her already prestigious position. Catholic theology’s praise for Mary’s virginity was brought into tension with such sexualizing of her position. However, her careful curbing of the lover-angel’s entreaty only amplified her laudable feminine restraint, reinforcing her position as the paragon of Christian womanhood.

Szybist’s poems go a step further, evoking eroticism not to join in the tradition of applauding Mary’s feminine weakness, but to critique worshippers, priests, and artists for taking advantage of Mary’s vulnerability. In “Annunciation as Right Whale with Kelp Gulls,” the still-living, Marian right whale is subject to the kelp gulls’ sexual ravaging: “I tell you I have seen them in their glee / diving fast into the sureness of her flesh, / fast into the softness of / her wounds” (Szybist 1–4). They are keenly aware of her vulnerability, “for she is tender, pockmarked, full / of openness” (11–12), and they interpret it as “a sweetness prepared for them” (17) that they will gain not only sexual satisfaction from, but also Eucharistic spiritual nourishment from—“for they do sit and eat” (16) echoes Jesus’s invitation to “take, eat” the bread that represents His body (Matthew 26:26). The speaker’s condemnation of the violence the gulls do to the whale suggests a critique of the patriarchal religious tradition that further amplified the paradox of Mary as Virgin and Mother by approving her role as lover as well, turning her into, as von Rohr Scaff puts it, “everything that a man might hope for in a woman—virtue and beauty, submissiveness to authority, and readiness to absorb every circumstance and feeling that might

be imputed to her from modesty and reluctance to receptiveness and sexuality ripe for the taking” (119).

The collection’s feminist critique of Marian theology continues in “Annunciation: Eve to Ave.” Like “Right Whale,” this poem calls attention to the Annunciation’s more unsettling overtones of sexual violation. The Marian speaker’s description of the angel-figure is erotic: “I dreamed of his lips, / remembered the slight angle of his hips, / his feet among the tulips and the straw” (Szybist 1–4). But her wistful recollection quickly turns into impressions of sexual violence: “I learned that he was not a man—bullwhip, horsewhip, unzip” (9–10). She would do anything to escape him: “I could have crawled / through thorn and bee, the thick of hive, / rosehip, courtship, lordship, gossip, and lavender” (10–12). The lines are not only a description of her desired escape route; the language itself enacts her wish to flee this new and obviously terrifying encounter by reframing it into something comprehensible. Each word is broken down into its aural constituents and recombined with fresh elements into a series of alternative words, ones that the speaker hopes will help her name this new experience, provide her a refuge of understanding. Repeated consonants and vowels help her discover “thorn and bee, the thick of hive”; the second syllable of “rosehip” is recycled to become “ship” and combined with “court,” then “lord,” then modified to become “gossip.” But no word, no concept, is sufficient to represent what’s happening, and she is finally forced to abandon her search and succumb to her rapist. The rape, like the traditional depiction of the Annunciation, is indeed an interaction with the not-human, but it’s an encounter with the inhuman that’s so horrifying, she can find no words to describe it, and her only recourse is to fall silent, to be “quiet” (13) in “that astonished, dutiful fall” (14). The poem suggests that her forced compliance is not so different from the biblical Mary’s submission—that both acquiescences stem more from an inability to refuse than from willingness.

The poem’s title reinforces the speaker’s search for a new paradigm to apprehend the total paradigm shift she has been forced to undergo. “Eve” and “Ave” was a traditional pairing in Catholicism, particularly as the “Ave Maria” became popular in prayer books. As Ann van Dijk explains in her article “The Angelic Salutation in Early Byzantine and Medieval Annunciation Imagery,” “Images of the Annunciation inscribed with the angelic salutation are common in high and late medieval art” (420), often appearing “on a scroll that unfurls from [Gabriel’s] hand, a common medieval convention for depicting speech” (422). The inclusion of the hail reminded the viewer of Mary’s role as Godbearer,

usually during his or her recitation of the Ave Maria, which in the fourteenth century was, according to van Dijk, “immensely popular, and its recitation formed part of the daily devotions of the religious and laity alike” (420). In reading the inscription aloud, van Dijk argues, the viewer “adopts the salutation as their own. And in so doing, their eyes are led by the words themselves to the seated figure of the Virgin, the object of their angelically inspired prayer” (420). Worshippers enjoyed the aural pun in the recombined letters, and were pleased with the parallel it evoked: just as Christ was the “new Adam,” who restored humanity from the fall of Adam, Mary was the new Eve who would be, as von Rohr Scaff says, “the mother uncorrupted by sexuality” (117). In this poem, the speaker’s fall is not from virginal Mary to sinful Eve, as might be the typical Catholic interpretation of a poem about rape. Instead, the poem suggests, the true fall is from agentive Eve to passive Mary. To be the subject of the “Ave Maria” is to be fallen. Mary is subjugated by not just the angel’s hail, but the hails of all those who worship her. Like the gulls in “Right Whale,” those who participate in the Ave Maria use Mary for their own spiritual benefit. She is used not just by the angel; as a metaphor and icon, she is used—and damaged—by all believers.

Szybist’s displeasure with the dominant Marian theology is expressed particularly well in “Annunciation under Erasure,” in which Szybist has elided pieces of Luke’s account of the Annunciation to create a new version of the scene. Instead of Gabriel reassuring Mary of her unique and valuable standing in the eyes of God (“thou...art highly favoured”) and telling her not to be afraid of his approach, the Gabriel figure in the poem greets her saying, “The Lord is / troubled / in mind / be afraid Mary” (Szybist 1–5). The announcement that the Holy Ghost will overshadow her so that she will conceive the Son of God becomes the terse “The Holy / will overshadow you” (6–7). Without the inclusion of “Ghost,” “the Holy” serves as an honorific for the troubled Lord that the angelic speaker mentions in the first few lines, a Lord whose appearance in this context seems ominous, as would the appearance of a perpetrator of sexual assault (like the one in “Eve to Ave”). But “the Holy” also refers to Mary’s elevated position as an object of Catholic reverence, an icon of worship in the same cosmology that fashioned her, as the poem suggests, to “be / nothing be impossible” (9–10); Catholic tradition shaped her into a paradoxical figure (“impossible”) and one whose significance is primarily in her role as merely a vessel (“nothing”) for the Son of God. The poem’s omissions become particularly obvious at the close of the poem; rather than Mary’s submissive response

as the handmaid of the Lord, the moment Mary would speak becomes only “And Mary said” (11) followed by two lines’ worth of blank space and then the angel’s departure. Her silence echoes the Marian speaker’s “quiet” response in “Eve to Ave,” and calls attention to what’s been removed from the passage. The poem suggests that this version of Mary’s response is a more appropriate representation of Mary’s position in Catholic theology. Old patriarchal metaphors are archaic and dangerous, the poem seems to say. Only erasure of the outmoded, inaccurate symbology can accurately signify the extent of the damage, for the original metaphors are inadequate.

Interestingly, though the poem works tirelessly to erase language that it implies is deeply problematic, it nevertheless retains a portion of the King James Version (KJV) translation. In fact, in order to function, the poem must combine the KJV’s language (the old vehicles of communication), with new language. What’s new in the poem is the line on which the tone and the threat of the poem hinges—“be afraid Mary” (5). That precise wording is not in the KJV; the angel’s words are actually translated as “Fear not, Mary” (King James Version, Luke 1.30). But without the new version of the line, the Lord’s troubled mind would be indicative of brooding rather than madness, and the Holy’s threat to Mary would be diminished enough to make the second half of the poem more a meditation on some existential malaise. Instead, the introduction of the unfamiliar—the erasure and the linguistic twist on the KJV’s phrasing—into the familiar narrative transforms both erasure and twist into a critique of a patriarchal tradition that overwhelms and silences female voice.

Indeed, despite the collection’s insistence that metaphor is inadequate, it cannot deny metaphor’s usefulness as a vehicle by which to apprehend the unfamiliar. In “Holy,” for instance, the speaker’s Marian mother and the speaker herself have both been denied a transformative encounter with the divine. The speaker complains to the Holy Spirit, “I do not feel you / fall so far in me, / do not feel you turn in my dark center” (Szybist 1–3). But she also does not want to encounter the paradigm-shifting spirit, for fear of how it might change her. “I do not believe in the beauty of falling” (13), she says, a nod to the final lines of “Eve to Ave”—“Over and over in the dark I tell myself / I do not have to believe / in the beauty of falling” (14–16). She fears the disintegration of her own paradigm: “What am I,” she asks, “if I lose the one / who’s always known me?” (27–29)—and, conversely, the one (person and paradigm) she’s always known. The crumbling Eucharistic bread and the spirit represent the old Catholic tradition to which the speaker’s mother clings: “she / picks at the bread with her

small hands” (19–20), and “she edges toward you [the spirit], / saying your name with such steadiness” (17–18). Eventually, the speaker begs for a paradigmatic shift—she asks for the illness to come for her mother, for the Holy Spirit to be “the dry cough in her lungs” (34); she searches for the “Shadow...splintering into the bread’s thick crust as it / crumbles into my palms” (31–33). Toward the end of the poem, spirit and mother fuse with the bread, remnants of the previous paradigm appropriated back into the speaker’s body via a consumable, apprehensible form: “your bits of breath / diffusing in my mouth” (40–41). “Breath” is a hairsbreadth from “bread”—a word that suggests both the not-solid, not-human Spirit and the solid Eucharistic forms her mother loved. Through a blend of new symbol systems and old, fractured ones, the speaker approaches understanding and acceptance of the illness that has traumatized her and consumed her mother.

Ultimately, the collection appropriates the metaphor of the Annunciation to point to metaphor’s continuous inadequacy to fully represent or make sense of encounters with the divine—that is, to make sense of confrontations with new knowledge, unfamiliar experience, and alien worldviews. Our understanding is limited by the flawed traditions we draw on to represent the unknown; as the collection suggests, some symbol systems, like those used to depict the Annunciation, wrongfully circumscribe female behavior. But the collection also uses the Annunciation to assert our inescapable dependence on metaphor in even beginning to understand the non-human, the unknown. Szybist said in her *Paris Review* interview, “I think that a good deal of poetry and art gives us some sense of access to another’s voice, perception, texture of thought, imagination. Sometimes it gives us better access to the strangeness in ourselves” (Dueben). Attempts to fully apprehend an Other may be futile, but they are, as Szybist suggests, transformative. In the collection’s opening poem, “The Troubadours Etc.,” the speaker meditates on the difficulty of fully understanding or communing with her lover and finally closes with two lines that suggest metaphor’s simultaneous necessity and inadequacy in approaching the unknown: “try, try to come closer— / my wonderful and less than” (Szybist 41–42).

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# *"Pervasive Parable"*

## *Christ and Ligeia*

*Todd G. Workman*

Common readings of "Ligeia" involve the sinister and supernatural. For many critics, Ligeia is a witch by default, shrouded in sorcery and evil powers. Alan Brown uses this idea in his article "Edgar Allan Poe's Use of Gothic Conventions in 'Ligeia'" as he argues that this tale exemplifies the use of the Gothic (109). Certainly, the story contains undeniable Gothic aspects. Brown, though, focuses only on the narrow gothic scope and fails to explore any other interpretations. For Daryl E. Jones in "Poe's Siren: Character and Meaning in Ligeia," Ligeia is literally the siren from Greek myth and a resident of the Rhine city bent on destroying the narrator (33). This analysis takes for granted that Ligeia seeks personal gain, namely life, by destroying the narrator. Stephen Rowe, in "Poe's Use of Ritual Magic in His Tales of Metempsychosis," attributes the supernatural elements of the story to magic, portraying "Ligeia" as a tale of witchcraft. All of these, and many other analyses, portray Ligeia with evil powers and motives, bent on destruction or domination of some kind.

These readings ignore a distinct alternative, one that portrays Ligeia in a divine, rather than demonic, light. One critic, Michael L. Burdick, comes close to this idea, but still misses the potential of his own argument. In his article, "Usher's 'Forgotten Church': Edgar Allan Poe and Nineteenth-century American

Catholicism,” Burduck successfully demonstrates that Poe certainly knew a great deal about Catholicism and Christian ideals.<sup>1</sup> Burduck even references “Ligeia” as having some of these Catholic or Christian undertones. Unfortunately, in his article he fails to address the possible depth of that symbolism. In my argument, the supernatural remains inseparable from the story; the change lies in the source that exhibits the otherworldly powers.

These powers do not have demonic or wicked origins, but rather heavenly ones. The narrator's relationships with Rowena and Ligeia, along with the events surrounding Ligeia's revivification, reveal the opposite of the historical readings surrounding this story. Rowena acts as the personification of death, the narrator represents a Christian disciple, and, most importantly, Ligeia serves as a Christ figure and savior. While Ligeia is a Christ figure, she is not literally Christ, but rather portrays Christ-like qualities in her ability to meliorate the life of the narrator, as well as the narrator's dependence on her which results in his rapid decline after Ligeia's death, and in her ultimate resurrection in the overcoming of death represented by the takeover of Rowena's body. These qualities allow for an alternative and novel approach to the story of Ligeia as one of divinity and not devilish sorcery.

Many critics would scoff at the idea of Christian symbolism within a story crafted by Poe. As Burduck acknowledges, “...Poe attended church services no more than a handful of times” (3). Poe's apathy toward religious practices would seem to inhibit religious influences. However, Burduck gives substantial evidence that Poe actually held great knowledge about Christianity and doctrines of Catholicism, and he observes that Poe “usually adapted his sources very freely, often blending and modifying them in highly imaginative ways” (23), meaning that any symbol in the story is unlikely to be a perfect representation of Christian ideals. Rather, Poe likely mixed or hybridized his different sources and symbols, using representative shards and shadows of common Christian symbols.

Some readers and critics interpret the story with a sexual undercurrent to Ligeia's “magical” character. Brown cites the passage that describes Ligeia as “most violently a prey to the tumultuous vultures of stern passion” (Poe 259) and reasons this references her extreme sexual desire (Brown 112). This idea undercuts and contradicts the Christ-type thesis I offer. Ligeia and the narrator were married, and the narrator's descriptions could portray an element of sexuality and sensuality. The narrator also says “...love would have reigned no ordinary passion,” (Poe 260) seeming to indicate a connection between love and passion.

However, if readers closely consider these passages, they find that these passages actually *further* the Christ-type thesis. In modern vernacular “passion” does have a sexual undercurrent. However, the 1828 Webster’s Dictionary, a dictionary representative of the vernacular at the time, gives an entirely different definition of the word. The first two definitions of “passion” describe something suffered or received because of an external agent (Webster “Passion” 1–2). According to this definition, Ligeia suffers because of an external source. Even more interesting, the third definition of the word passion reads: “suffering; emphatically, *the last suffering of the Savior*” (Webster, “Passion” 3, italics added). Passion, in Poe’s time, had direct reference to the death of Christ. Ligeia experienced bouts of “stern [suffering],” Christ-like suffering. Therefore, “love would have reigned no ordinary passion,” or love would not rule, or be required for, ordinary suffering. This implies her love reigned over extraordinary suffering, a Christ-like suffering motivated by love. Finally, no definition of “passion” from the 1828 dictionary refers to sexuality, and only two of eight definitions mention the word “love” (Webster “Passion” 4–8). We cannot define Ligeia as a sexual character.

Another passage we read in a new light deals with the residence of Ligeia. According to Jones, the fact that the story takes place in the city on the Rhine indicates Ligeia is a siren incarnate, come to ensnare the narrator (34). However, this reading aligns with others that portray *Ligeia* as the resident. Critics often assume that because Ligeia meets the narrator in this city (notorious for witchcraft, or other supernatural evil) she must reside there. We can read to the inverse: the narrator resides in the city of the Rhine, a lost soul, and Ligeia comes to save him. Christ’s ministry involved going to perceived wicked places and trying to save the souls of the people. Ligeia does the same thing for the narrator. Like Christ, she first finds her disciple and then later becomes the teacher of salvation. Jones’ reading, as many others do, overlooks this possibility and assumes Ligeia must be evil because of her origins. On the contrary, the ambiguity of her origins helps to vindicate her as the savior of the narrator.

This idea of ambiguous origins would also explain the narrator’s choice in house decorations after Ligeia’s death. While he doesn’t stay in the city by the Rhine, he does appear to go back to old habits of magical roots: a pentagonal shaped room, decorated with ghoulish images, adorned with black sarcophagi, items which he purchased only after Ligeia’s death. Just as many fickle disciples in the Bible did, the narrator returned to his old ways. The narrator illustrates his devastation when he says “She died: and I crushed into the very dust with

sorrow...Ligeia had brought me far more [wealth], very far more than ordinarily falls to the lot of mortals” (Poe 262). The narrator shows that his life had been different— better even— with Ligeia and what she brought him. He even goes so far as to say his wealth was beyond the norm for mortals, implying a loss of something immortal or otherworldly when she died. This does not stop him from turning away from Ligeia’s legacy, though. With her death he loses his “child-like confidence” (259), his faith, and turns back to the familiar and magical. In this way, the narrator appears as Simon Peter and other disciples who went back to fishing after Christ’s death. Rather than continuing in the new way of life they had learned, these disciples went back to the familiar life of fishing, something that had been sufficient for them in the past but no longer could be. Their empty nets parallel the narrator’s empty life as he tries to fill it with new objects of his past life but fails to gain satisfaction from them. These house decorations are the narrator’s nets that he casts, trying to catch lost fulfillment.

The furnishings hold great magical symbolism. Readers may reasonably assume that Poe meant to include magical elements, which were inherent in many of Poe’s works, and commonplace in Romantic literature. Stephen Rowe (as mentioned above) successfully identifies these mystical accommodations as evidences of magic (47). However, even Rowe cannot attribute these symbols to Ligeia herself. We must note the important fact that the irrefutably “magical” items or symbols in the story directly link to the narrator, and not necessarily to Ligeia. She does not participate in his buying and decorating. The narrator does these things *after* Ligeia dies. So, while dark powers do appear, Ligeia remains disconnected from their source, contrary to what critics so often assert. In fact, evidence will further show the symbols or circumstances that may include ambiguous or Christian meaning and interpretation almost exclusively connect to Ligeia. Therefore, Ligeia does not even have an influence on the irrefutably magical, such as the pentagonal shaped room and sarcophagi. She does, though, interact with all symbols or occurrences that have Christian undertones, such as the red-drop goblet and resurrection from the dead. Ligeia is directly connected to all of the supernatural occurrences whose origins, be they magical or spiritual, are ambiguous and debatable. These occasions and symbols are the subjects of the following paragraphs.

Ligeia’s relationship with the narrator, namely her roles as teacher, mentor, and spouse, portray a Christ-disciple relationship that highlights Ligeia’s Christ-type persona. The narrator notes that Ligeia’s learning “was immense,” that no other person alive could have had as much knowledge as she (Poe

259). Furthermore, he talks of how he felt “child-like” in his dependence on learning from her, including learning things that were “divinely precious” to the point that he didn’t feel worthy of such tutelage or knowledge (259). All of these aspects point to a disciple-like learning experience. Followers see Christ as all knowing, with infinite knowledge and understanding. In the Bible, Christ spoke of coming to him and becoming like a little child. He taught ideas that purported divine consequences. Ligeia’s teachings have a similar effect and weight. She teaches of “transcendentalism” and “metaphysic[s],” subjects that go beyond mortal application, just as Christ’s teachings did. The narrator came to love and believe these teachings, though he felt unworthy of them, as some disciples did. Ligeia became the source of all of his happiness, just as Christ did for his followers. This references a name of Christ: the bridegroom, leader and head to those who espouse his teachings. Ligeia is the bride to her follower, the one she teaches and seeks to save, while he takes on her teachings for himself. In this way, the narrator not only represents discipleship, but also the individual, and the idea that Christ/Ligeia seeks out the lost individual.

This idea further reveals itself in the passage of Ligeia’s illness. Jones interprets Ligeia’s desire to live as a turning from her siren-like purpose to kill the narrator, a desire to live in order to remain with the narrator (36). The perspective of savior changes all of that. When Ligeia experiences her death-throes of sickness, they do not originate from lack of accomplishing a mission of death, but instead constitute a part of her mission of life. Her suffering corresponds with Christ’s in the garden of Gethsemane. Burduck cites Ligeia’s outburst following the poem’s reading and parallels it to Christ asking if the cup could be removed (26). Rather than cursing at God, Ligeia pleads to him in her role as savior. The narrator describes the “struggles of the passionate wife” as “energetic,” and more so than his own (Poe 260). Again we see the word “passionate” implying a Christ-like suffering inherent in Ligeia’s struggles. She does not struggle for her life, rather “*but for life,*” (261), or in other words, for life itself to conquer death, to have a way to overcome. Even Christ did not enjoy the suffering he had to endure, but he did so out of need. Ligeia, too, bemoans the physical toll on her but recognizes the essential nature of her sacrifice. Her struggles were not for herself but for the narrator. In her suffering and death comes the ability for her to then free the narrator from death. He can only overcome death if Ligeia does so first.

Thus, Rowena’s role is essential in representing the relationship between death and man. Her death symbolizes death becoming part of the narrator’s

life. With Rowena standing as an opposition to the Christ figure, she provides an embodiment of the force, death, to be overcome. She also is able to portray the interaction between man and death, the distinctly less intimate and nurturing relationship than that which exists between Ligeia and the narrator. Readers may question how Rowena can represent death when the narrator does not die. The answer lies in a Christian ideal: the existence of two types of death, physical and spiritual. Physical death occurs with the literal mortal death of the body. Spiritual death, on the other hand, comes when man removes himself from the presence of God by his actions, especially sins. With the loss of Ligeia, the narrator experiences a spiritual death as he abandons her teachings and re-embraces his old ways. His espousal of Rowena represents the idea that he has turned away from Ligeia. Like the disciples of Christ who thought the end of their new way of life and learning came with his death, the narrator too thought the end had come when his mistress died.

This idea also implies the narrator had a hand in Ligeia's death: his sins and mortality required her to die so that she could save him. Furthermore, his inability to completely live what Ligeia taught (the idea mentioned earlier to be the cause of her "passion," or suffering) depicts betrayal; a betrayal made complete with his return to magic after her death. In this way, the narrator becomes the betrayer-disciple, the Judas Iscariot of Ligeia. Further evidence of the narrator exhibiting Judas-like attributes lies in his description of his actions after Ligeia's death. He describes that Ligeia had brought him great wealth, and he soon set to spending it because of a "dotage of grief" and in the "faint hope of alleviating [his] sorrows" (260). This parallels Judas Iscariot receiving money for his betrayal, and then doing what he could to get rid of it as guilt tore him apart inside.

Because of his willing betrayal, the narrator knew Rowena brought his misery. Just as Judas Iscariot, the narrator *sought out* death, his guilt overcoming him because of his hand in Ligeia's death. The relationship between the narrator and Rowena portrays the inevitable and spiteful relationship between Death and mankind. Despite this relationship with Death/Rowena, the narrator instigates this situation: only he could invite death into his own life by his "feeble will." Rowena—Death—inhabits the narrator's life, embodying his turning away from Ligeia (spiritual death). The narrator describes that Rowena "shunned" him and "loved [him] but little" (264). The poem that the narrator reads expresses that Death loves no one and shuns everyone, in the sense of giving any kind of affection or intimacy; Death exists as an impartial agent that

takes all men (260–261). The narrator himself, expressing humankind’s general sentiment toward death, said “I loathed her with a hatred belonging more to demon than to man” (264), an interesting comparison since Christian tradition views the impenitent as hell-bound. The narrator chose death over life, spiritual suicide, just as Judas did through his betrayal or Peter through his denial and abandonment. Now trapped, the narrator can only wait in misery or gain freedom through a savior. As Ligeia represents Christ, the source of all life for the narrator, Rowena clearly stands as the opposite and must represent that death that comes without Christ.

The reader must note the important fact that man cannot overcome death alone. The narrator cannot free himself from Rowena’s influence or the spiritual death in which he finds himself. He requires a savior and liberator. This connects to the quote from Glanvill, specifically the line “Man doth not yield him to the angels, nor unto death utterly, save only through the weakness of his feeble will” (256). This reveals a key principle when applied to the idea of Rowena’s representation of two types of death. Indeed, man does not yield “*utterly*,” or in other words, yield to both deaths, except through lack of will because only *man* can choose spiritual death. Utter yielding to death requires both physical and spiritual death, and a man accomplishes the latter only when, as the narrator demonstrates, he turns from the source of spiritual life: Christ/Ligeia. Man’s will does not decide partial death: physical death comes to all, even Christ, even Ligeia. However, both deaths can be overcome through the Christ figure. Ligeia’s last words, then, become not a curse to God, but a plea to the narrator to remember and stay true to what he has learned – a plea he fails to follow. Her words become a promise that life remains possible through her, unless mankind yields their life up by choice. In other words, Ligeia’s final whispers reflect Christ’s plea to God to forgive men for not comprehending the severity of their actions. Ligeia pleads for God to not hold men accountable for not understanding fully that their will alone brings full death. She pleads for leniency for those who abandon truth and unknowingly choose death. Rowena’s death represents the death of death, the gift of resurrection. Ligeia, in overcoming death, rises to the status of deity and shows that her power equates with God’s by paralleling the only other person, according to Christian belief, who overcame death: Christ. While she is not literally Christ, within this story she takes on attributes of Christ as she does what Christian history credits only Christ with doing. Consequently, Ligeia must take on some kind of higher identity and possess higher power than mortality grants.

This triumph over death, then, becomes the focus of the resurrection scene in which Ligeia returns to life. The final scene displays the Christ-like triumph over all death as well as a disciple-like reception of the Christ figure. Rowena becomes ill, struck down with a mysterious sickness. Stephen Rowe points out the magical elements of the room seem to support the idea of a magical take over of Rowena's body (47). While this would seem to hinder the idea of a Christ-like resurrection, readers must recognize that the room does not ultimately kill Rowena. Evidence exists that the room *may* have had an effect on her health. The critical point comes, though, when the narrator sees "brilliant ruby colored fluid" falling into Rowena's cup of wine, which she then drinks (Poe 265). Once more, critics often rush to argue the role of witchcraft without considering other possibilities. In a reading with Ligeia as Christ, these "ruby" drops represent the blood of Christ. Only Christ's blood, or his sacrifice, can conquer both physical and spiritual death. Rowena, the representation of death, partakes of the blood of the savior, Ligeia. Only after this does Rowena die. In other words, the blood of Christ, not magic, defeats and overcomes Death.

Soon after the death of Rowena, Ligeia rises up in her place, symbolic of Christ rising up over death. The narrator even responds as disciples of Christ did, falling at Ligeia's feet. Interestingly, she "shrink[s]" from the narrator's touch (Poe 268), just as Christ did when first seen by Mary. The narrator recognizes his savior and rushes, freed from his bondage with Death, to the source of his new hope. In this scene he resembles the doubting Thomas of old, believing only *after* he saw that his savior would return. His dismal pessimism that Ligeia would never return portrays his doubting countenance. He continues in this specific disciple's role as he proclaims aloud "...can I never be mistaken...of the Lady Ligeia" (268). Just as Thomas proclaimed aloud his Lord's return, the narrator cries out in bittersweet recognition of his lady. Like the burial-shrouded Christ, Ligeia rises from death. Her life announces that all men can be free from death. Because *she* has overcome, so can her disciple. Jones reads this section of text as the siren returning to finally inflict death on her victim (36). However, this reading has a distinct hole: if Ligeia is a siren whose return hinges on killing the narrator, how can the narrator still live to give his tale? According to Jones' reading, the narrator should be dead. To the contrary, a previous argument for the Christ-type thesis accounts for this discrepancy. At the beginning of "Ligeia" the narrator describes his "long years" of "much suffering" (Poe 256). This can be attributed, once more, to the suffering of a fallen disciple, a Peter, Judas, or Thomas. While the narrator finds relief that Ligeia, his savior, lives and has

returned, he obviously continued to torture himself with his memory of denial, betrayal, and doubt. The idea of suffering could also be that suffering which the disciples endured in going forward and proclaiming the teachings of Christ. If the narrator followed this example, he would have been persecuted and suffered greatly for proclaiming the resurrection of his lady. This Christ-type reading actually accounts for the suffering of the narrator, but still gives reason for the resurrection of Ligeia and the significance of that event.

Readers might question why Poe would write a tale with magic and supernatural elements and still use Christian symbols within – especially ones so buried within the text. In a letter discussing “Ligeia,” Poe stated, “As for the mob—let them talk on. I should be grieved if they thought they comprehended me here” (Brown 110). In other words, Poe used the symbolism of Christ and the conquering of death through a savior in a way that required thought. He didn’t want the mob to understand. He wanted the thinker to discover the hidden meanings within his tale. What better way to accomplish this than to teach with a story, a parable, much like Christ himself did, to sift out those who remain incapable of looking past the surface meaning. A parable applies to the reader. By using these symbols, Poe shows the reader their own capacity for denial, betrayal, and doubt for those beliefs they hold dear. But, he also shows the hope that comes with holding to those beliefs. The readers see themselves in the story. If the mob sees naught but magic, demons, and witchcraft, we can know that such interpretations lack possible meanings of Poe’s “Ligeia.” Like Burduck, the reader should not deny the existence of dark elements, but should also recognize “that great literary works have many facets; like precious diamonds, they glitter in many different fashions” (26). Perhaps, though, Poe didn’t intentionally write a Christian allegory. Burduck even acknowledges, “Granted, Poe may not have consciously set out to do so” (23). Even if this were the case, that does not remove the Christian symbolism from the story. Poe’s direct references to God in all his works occur rarely, and so must be given “extra importance [for] even minor references” (12). Whether Poe intended it or not, Christian symbols and motifs do appear in this story. Ironically, supposing that such references and symbols were accidental in “Ligeia” would only further prove the very epigraph from Glanvill: God’s will or presence pervades everything, even Poe’s writing.

# Endnotes

- 1 In this article, Burduck discusses Poe's writing/professional associates, many of whom were Catholic or defended Catholicism, and who would have influenced and conversed with him about such things, as well as the religious prevalence of Poe's time. Burduck shows considerable evidence that Poe would have been familiar with the Catholic Bible (portrayed through his use of words and vocabulary) as well as the doctrines inherent to Christianity and Catholicism.

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# Seeing and Not Believing

## A Critique of Post-Civil War America's Loss of Faith Through a Spectral Medium

*Alan Hickey*

Although spectral visitations have threaded through the fine weave of literature since biblical times, the rise of the ghost story as a genre did not become a prominent fixture in the literary canon until the supernatural tales of Hawthorne and Shelley. The use of ghosts in these stories evolved during the nineteenth century from an introspective tool that highlighted challenges with religious issues arising during the Second Great Awakening to an instrument that critiqued questions of realism spawned in reaction to the psychological horrors of the American Civil War and the development of scientific theories which cut at the strata of Christian faith. Authors such as Herman Melville, Henry James, and Robert Frost resisted this cultural shift away from faith-based views. Following the Civil War, America descended into another war, a war between the rise of science and the twilight of faith, where realism and empirical evidence denoted that seeing was believing, and faith represented what the natural eye could not see.

Today, critics are torn between analyzing the use of ghosts in late-Victorian literature through the context of culture and history or through psychoanalysis. To understand Melville's, James's, and Frost's use of ghosts in their literary works, it is important to first understand both sides of ghost-story criticism. The two camps argue over the validity of viewing ghosts through the context of history and the different social theories about economic status, gender equality,

and racial views that were promulgated during the time period as opposed to the psychological analysis of how sight and psychological impairments might cause one to see apparitions. The historical analysis of ghost literature uses ghosts as gauges of past events and cultural movements that are taking place when authors incorporate them in their literature (Handley 5–6).

A psychological view centers ghost criticism on the question, “Is seeing believing?” Srdjan Smajic, professor of English at Tulane University, submits that viewing ghost stories only through historicist criticism limits their meaning because of the multiplicity of meanings derived from their ambiguity. Due to the difficulty of pinning a historically driven message and meaning to the ghost story, Smajic turns to the treatment of ghost-seeing by physicians and physiologists to examine the debate in literature of the physiological aspects of vision and spiritual sight. Smajic’s criticism focuses on “the tension between ocularcentric faith and anti-ocularcentric skepticism that defines much of Victorian thinking about vision” (Smajic 18). This tension rests in the conflict between a focus on a faith-based sight where seeing is the way human beings define truth (“seeing is believing”) and skepticism concerning the reliability of sight to define the world (seeing is not believing). By using psychoanalysis to formally examine the use of ghosts in Melville’s *Clarel*, James’s *The Turn of the Screw*, and Frost’s “Ghost House,” ghosts become a tool to critique the war between science and faith in post-Civil War America.

The theme of skepticism throughout Melville’s poem *Clarel* finds life through its characters’ struggles with faith and the ghostly apparitions embodying religious belief. In the poem, Melville navigates the ocean of thought stirred after the destruction of the Civil War in preparation for the centennial of the nation’s birth. To understand Melville’s use of ghosts as a formal element to critique the nation’s godlessness and its turn to science in accordance with the ideas presented by Smajic, readers can examine a portion of canto 1.31 when the character of Rolfe is introduced into the text. Following a long-winded discourse about the failures of Christianity, Rolfe states,

“The priest, I said. Though some be  
 hurled From anchor, nor a haven find;  
 Not less religion’s ancient port,  
 Till the crack of doom, shall be resort  
 In stress of weather for mankind.  
 Yea, long as children feel affright  
 In darkness, men shall fear a

God; And long as daisies yield  
delight Shall see His footprints in  
the sod. Is't ignorance? This  
ignorant state Science doth but  
elucidate—

Deepen, enlarge. But though 'twere made  
Demonstrable that God is not—  
What then? it would not change this lot:  
The ghost would haunt, nor could be  
laid.'

(Melville 1.31.182–196)

In this passage, Melville addresses the relationship between faith and science in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Rolfe, a religious skeptic and companion of the protagonist, observes that people will seek refuge in “religion’s ancient port” as the calamities of the world rage, such as the Civil War. He claims that as long as fear exists, “men shall fear a God” and have some kind of belief in Him. Rolfe proceeds to mock this belief by asking if a belief in God is ignorance, and he uses science as a form of measuring stick to determine the level of ignorance of God-fearing people. Lastly, he claims that even if it was possible to demonstrate there was no God, people would still believe, and the ghost of what is religion “would haunt, nor could be laid.” Melville’s use of ghost imagery in Rolfe’s dialogue gives credence to understanding that religion is comparable to a ghost, something not measured and explained solely by scientific evidence.

Melville’s representation of religion as a ghost in this previous portion of *Clarel* can extend to the canto titled “Sodom” where Melville uses ghosts as muses heralding the fate of America after the Civil War. What is important in his use of ghosts at this point of the poem is Mortmain’s monologue that expresses the ghosts of Sodom were something potentially real, but not seen with natural eyes. This text makes the reader wonder whether the ghosts are real or just figments of Mortmain’s imagination. Melville writes,

Ah, ghosts of Sodom, how ye thrill  
About me in this peccant air . . .

Slavered in slime, or puffed in stench—  
 Not ever on the tavern bench  
 Ye lolled. Few dicers here, few sots,  
 Few sluggards, and no idiots.  
 'Tis thou who servedst Mammon's hate  
 Or greed through forms which holy are—  
 Black slaver steering by a star,

'Tis thou—and all like thee in state.  
 Who knew the world, yet varnished  
 it; Who traded on the coast of crime  
 Though landing not

(Melville 2.36.55-56 & 70-80)

This portion of “Sodom” is Mortmain’s monologue to the supposed “ghosts of Sodom” still residing around the Dead Sea after the city’s destruction. In response to a vapor over the Dead Sea, Mortmain claims it to represent the ghosts of Sodom and ventures to discuss their sins that destroyed them. He imputes that the ghost’s sins were that they served “Mammon’s hate” and were involved in slavery as noted by the reference to a “Black slaver steering by a star.” These sins, though potentially Sodom’s, mirror those of the United States that led to the climax of the Civil War and a turn from faith generally.

Following his monologue, Mortmain remains sitting on the shore of the Dead Sea pondering upon certain bubbles he sees in the waves. While he is pondering, the viewpoint of the poem changes to “two spirits” hovering nearby.

Two spirits, hovering in remove,  
  
 Sad with inefficacious love,  
 Here sighed debate: "Ah, Zoima,  
 say; Be it far from me to impute a  
 sin, But may a sinless nature win  
 Those deeps he knows?"—"Sin shuns that  
 way; Sin acts the sin, but flees the thought  
 That sweeps the abyss that sin has wrought.  
 Innocent be the heart and true—  
 Howe'er it feed on bitter bread—

That, venturous through the Evil  
led, Moves as along the ocean's  
bed Amid the dragon's staring  
crew."

(Melville 2.36.116–128)

Melville's shift to the ghosts' perspective brings into question the reality of what Mortmain was seeing when he was examining the vapors over the Dead Sea. Were the vapors actually ghosts that Mortmain saw with his physiological vision or were they conjured in his imagination as he reflected on the events of Sodom's destruction and its correlation with the fall of the United States?

Melville seeks to show how physical sight is not capable of capturing all that exists by playing with the idea of reality and something beyond natural sight not viewed by Mortmain. Mortmain, as a ghost-seer, supposes the ghosts to exist, but does not see them, even though Melville acknowledges their presence. His eyes only capture the physical characteristics of the Dead Sea, the waves and a vapor, which he describes as a "gaseous puff of mineral breath" (Melville 2.36.48). By examining the formal elements of these passages in *Clarel*, the tension between physical sight and spiritual sight described by Smajic is apparent. Melville uses this tension to illustrate the tension between factual evidence and faith to critique the importance laid on science during the latter part of the nineteenth century and its failures to explain everything. Because of the failure of science to explain all, Melville's portrayal of sight denotes that faith cannot be dead, because even faith as a ghost "would still haunt" the world. Because physiological sight does not capture all of truth, as science and reason intend, faith is needed to understand the world.

Henry James uses ambiguous ghost-seeing in his story, *The Turn of the Screw* to bring into question whether ghosts are real or merely hallucinations. Throughout the novella, James uses ambiguity to shroud the definite existence of Peter Quint and Miss Jessel, two former employees of the estate that the governess repeatedly sees and believes to be ghosts. Critics like Peter G. Beidler and Stanley Renner argue over whether what the governess actually sees is a ghost or a hallucination from her psyche. Beidler turns to firsthand accounts of ghost-seers to support his claim that the governess's vivid description of Peter Quint's ghost and Mrs. Grose's recognition of him are evidence that James is depicting corporeal spirits that are visible to the physical eye (85–87). Contra

Beidler, Renner argues that the ghost of Quint is merely “the projection of her own sexual hysteria in the form of stereotypes [of sexuality] deeply embedded in the mind of the culture” (Renner 176).

By accepting the plausibility of both arguments about James’s ghosts, the tension between actual physiological sight of corporeal ghosts and hallucinations from within the mind opens up a new caveat to understanding the underlying tension between scientific empirical evidence and faith based knowledge of the unseen in post-Civil War America. James turns the screw on what can be defined as reality through the perceptions of the governess and the dialogue she has with Mrs. Grose after the first appearance of Peter Quint’s “ghost.” Before she knows the identity of the ghost, the governess describes the apparition as follows:

He has red hair, very red, close-curling, and a pale face, long in shape, with straight, good features and little, rather queer whiskers that are as red as his hair. His eyebrows are, somehow, darker; they look particularly arched and as if they might move a good deal.

His eyes are sharp, strange—awfully; but I only know clearly that they're rather small and very fixed. His mouth's wide, and his lips are thin, and except for his little whiskers he's quite clean-shaven. He gives me a sort of sense of looking like an actor. (James 29–30)

By including the governess’ detailed list of physical traits of the ghost of Peter Quint, James puts empirical evidence about the ghosts’ existence against the doubt of the governess’ character and her belief in the supernatural. The governess further tells Mrs. Grose that the apparition was definitely not a “gentleman.” To these somewhat detailed descriptions, the uneducated Mrs. Grose exclaims that the identity of the personage was none other than Peter Quint, the master’s previous valet who was dead.

Though Mrs. Grose seems to believe the governess, the credibility of the governess’s account is dependent solely upon her testimony. In the story, the only definite witness of the “ghosts” is the governess. Some may argue that the boy Miles witnesses both Miss Jessel’s and Peter Quint’s apparitions when he asks the governess in the final chapter, “Is she HERE?” referring to Miss Jessel (James 116). Following this query, the governess exclaims that it is not she and that the cowardly face was in the window before them. To this tirade, Miles responds with the question, “Is it HE?” to which the governess then responds,

"Whom do you mean by 'he'?" Miles then screams "Peter Quint— you devil!" (James 117). This dialogue shows that Miles had familiarity with the apparitions, at least to a point. The problem here is that shortly after this conversation, the governess rushes to embrace Miles and holds him tight "until his little heart, dispossessed, had stopped" (James 117). This leaves the governess as the only true ghost-seer in the novella, which then causes the reader to question whether or not she actually was seeing ghosts, or hallucinating.

James' ambiguity about the nature of the ghosts and the doubt of the governess's role as a ghost-seer indicate a purposeful literary move to make the reader ask questions about whether the ghosts were real or not. Through this juxtaposition of evidence and belief, James challenges the normal conventions of seeing as being the key factor of knowledge and argues, even if it may only be psychological, that empirical evidence cannot entirely explain certain phenomena, which therefore implies that something other than hard facts must fill the gap. This view strikes at the base of the pure scientific notions of post-Civil War America proscribing that empirical evidence defined the bounds of all truth.

The last example of how ghosts are used by post-Civil War authors to critique the conflict of science and faith comes from the poetry of Robert Frost. In his poem "Ghost House," Frost describes very eloquently the scene of a ruined house that the narrator is dwelling in. The narrator describes the house as having "vanished many a summer ago / And left no trace but the cellar walls, / and a cellar in which the daylight falls" (Frost 2-4). Around the house, the fences are ruined, and trees that had once been cleared overrun the fields. With the general area being returned to nature, the narrator turns his attention to certain persons that abide with him in house. Frost writes,

I know not who these mute folk are  
Who share the unlit place with me—  
Those stones out under the low-limbed  
tree Doubtless bear names that the  
mosses mar.

They are tireless folk, but slow and sad—  
Though two, close-keeping, are lass and lad—  
With none among them that ever sings,  
And yet, in view of how many things,  
As sweet companions as might be  
had

(Frost 21-30)

The reference to “Those stones out under the low-limbed tree” by the narrator leads a reader to conclude that his companions are dead. This implication turns the poem “Ghost House” into more than a story about a ruined home from the past and reveals it is a ghost story.

Though Frost’s poem can be viewed as a ghost story and criticized using the ideas of Smajic, the act of ghost-seeing and the nature of the narrator in the poem both raise questions pertaining to what is actually seen in this poem. The two previous literary works dealt with living ghost-seers that either postulated that ghosts existed but did not witness them (Mortmain), or became the sole witness to the apparitions (the governess). In Frost’s poem, the narrator is both the ghost-seer and addresses the ghosts as “sweet companions” that reside with him in the ruins of the house. This implies that the narrator, by living among these companions, is a ghost himself.

This realization plays with the ideas of sight because every aspect of the landscape that the narrator describes in the poem, from the “cellar in which the daylight falls, / And the purple- stemmed wild raspberries grow” to “[t]he woods come back to the mowing field,” is suspect to the question, “Is it real?” (Frost 4–5 and 7). The detailed descriptions of the ruined house that would serve as empirical evidence defining reality are turned against that purpose because of the ethereal existence of the narrator. Along this vein, Frank Lentricchia argues that Frost’s poetry examines “the gap between things as they are and the poet’s fictions—dark or bright—and the poet’s acute awareness and manipulation of this epistemological problem” (28). By understanding that Frost grapples with this gap in his poetry, his battle with reality can be transposed to Smajic’s critical debate between physiological and faith based ghost-seeing, and Frost’s poem becomes a critique of reality and how everything cannot be determined by absolute fact. This interpretation of Frost’s poem lends itself to a broader critique of the post-Civil War context of his writings when science was supplanting belief through its emphasis on empirical evidence. Frost’s poem “Ghost House” rejects a reality defined by the maxim “seeing is believing” and is evidence of Frost’s rejection of scientific explanations for all truth, thereby leaving room for faith.

Though both forms of criticism are valid, the historical reading limits the breadth of ghost-story criticism because it imbues ghost stories with a set contextual meaning for the time period in which they were written. Smajic’s use of sight to determine meaning, however, enables a broader interpretation of the ghost story. By using his form of criticism, we find a deeper meaning behind

the use of ghosts as tools to critique historical events in the works of Melville, James, and Frost. These authors critique the rise of science and the loss of faith in post-Civil War America, and they do so by using ghosts as ambiguous characters to question defining truth through physiological sight. Their critique is that most things cannot be seen through hard facts alone, but through the spiritual eye, which is not beholden to empirical evidence.

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# Subversion and Containment in Adrienne Rich's "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers"

*Samuel Turner*

The poetry of Adrienne Rich becomes so radically feminist in her later work that it is hard to imagine her writing in any other mode. A closer examination of her earlier work, however, reveals a Rich that is more conservative. Rich herself suggests that her early style was "formed first by male poets" (21), and her early work is generally regarded as bearing little resemblance to her later, more radical works. Claire Keyes goes as far as to acknowledge that Rich "accepts certain traditions associated with the division of power according to sex" (6). It's as if Rich is playing by the rules of the male-dominated game in order to establish her identity as a poet. Keyes also suggests that in these early poems "we detect subversive undercurrents and an assertion of power" (6) that are buried in Rich's formal and thematic obligations to the masculinist tradition. These subtle subversive elements have largely been the focus of critics studying Rich's early poetry, especially "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers."

While Keyes and others have done substantial work in identifying subversion in Rich's early poetry, subversion is not the only force at work. While the female voice develops and seeks independence from the patriarchal tradition,

the repressive voice of masculinism pushes back. This tension is the “split” that Rich identifies in her early poetry (21) and the “double-voiced discourse containing a ‘dominant’ and a ‘muted’ story” identified by Elaine Showalter (204). In “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers,” there is a force of masculine hegemony that attempts to contain any act of subversion present in the poem. The process of subversion and containment actually debilitates any feminist dictum that could otherwise be part of the poem’s interpretation. This process is manifest in the poem’s form, as Rich’s metrical subversions are ultimately contained by a traditional masculine structure. In addition, the effects of subversion and containment can be seen in the poem’s content, as the tigers, which are thought to embody liberation from masculine oppression through artistic expression, are actually suppressed by patriarchal maxims, preventing the development of an audible and distinct female voice.

Critics, including Keyes, tend not to see the patterns of containment in “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers,” and focus only on the subversion. We have already acknowledged Keyes’ identification of “subversive undercurrents” in this and other early poems (6). Cheri Langdell even asserts that “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers” “foreshadow[s] ideas about [Rich] and women” and is “in general characteristic of her later feminist work” (26). The critical consensus of this poem is that it is less radically feminist than Rich’s later work, but still promotes a predominantly feminist agenda through its subversive elements.

While Rich tried to portray in her early work what Keyes calls a woman’s “negative experience with power” (18), the effects of subversion and containment are fiercely contrary to Rich’s ostensibly feminist agenda. The theory of subversion and containment was first established by Stephen Greenblatt in his essay “Invisible Bullets.” The basic idea is that a well-established belief or maxim of a repressive power is brought into question. The subversion is then stifled by a reinforcement of the repressive maxim. Greenblatt explains that the subversion is, in consequence, the “very product of that power and furthers its ends” (48). In other words, the repressive power itself allows subversion to occur so that it can be contained. Its containment makes the original maxim even stronger than it was before the subversion had occurred.

In order to see how a masculinist agenda is realized in an ostensibly feminist poem, we must examine the allusions to subversion and containment built into the formal construction of the poem. As mentioned earlier, the poem’s metrical composition reveals a structural pattern of subversion and containment. “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers” is written in three rhyming quatrains. The rhymes are in a

perfect ABAB pattern, and the meter is mostly written in iambic pentameter. At surface level, what we have is a fairly traditional poem, written with an emphasis on formal precision.

This leads us to a contradiction in the poem's typical reading—that its form adheres to a male-dominated tradition of poetry. Critics have usually either ignored this fact or found a way to call it feminist expression. Langdell, for example, recognizes Rich's formal precision by saying that the poem is "written in perfect quatrains in iambic pentameter," but insists that the poem represents an escape from patriarchal hegemony through a woman's craft (Aunt Jennifer's needlework) (26). Ironically, the form of the poem itself reflects a rigid adherence to regulations of poetry established by a male canon. Keyes discusses Rich's choices "regarding diction, syntax, imagery, musical values, and prosody—that is, the components of poetic form," in her later work and asserts that "governing these choices is her womanhood" (10). This governance of "womanhood" that characterizes Rich's later poetry is clearly absent in "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers." Instead we witness a woman's muted voice that is valued only in its relationship to male poetry. The poem's form fails to develop its own tradition, but is instead forced to imitate the male poetic tradition.

But the male tradition must appear in order for it to be subverted. With a clear understanding of how the poem's metrical composition represents a masculinist power, the poem's metrical subversions are manifested. There are several instances in the poem of Rich choosing words that disrupt the iambic pentameter. These words are "Jennifer's" (1, 5, 8), "denizens" (2), "fluttering" (5), "heavily" (8), and "terrified" (9). Each of these words has a dactylic meter. While dactylic meter isn't necessarily associated with a female tradition, the dactylic feet do interrupt the formal regulations of the masculine iambs. These interruptions represent the subversive act of the female voice rebelling against the masculine poetic tradition.

We can learn a lot from Rich's choice of diction in the subversive dactyls as well. The theme of these words illustrates women's negative relationship with power. "Terrified," "heavily," and "fluttering" all represent fear. "Denizens," incorporates an element of foreignness, representing the alien feeling of women participating in a male-dominated field or discipline. While these words do appear to embody the practice of oppression itself, they are subversive in that they call into question the maxim of acceptable masculine domination of women. The "wedding band" sitting "heavily" questions the institutions of marriage and

family as positive social forces. And so the diction is not actively rebellious, but subversive in calling attention to the problems of patriarchal mastery.

Containment is introduced alongside the dactylic use of “Jennifer” as an identifier for the aunt. Originally the use of “Jennifer” is subversive; not only does it interrupt the dominance of metrical structure, but it also assigns an individual identity to Aunt Jennifer. Using her name makes her a subject, capable of making judgments and being creative—not just an object in a social system that benefits male subjects. We notice, however, that in the final stanza the name “Jennifer” is no longer used—she is just referred to as “Aunt.” The dactylic name that individualized her is discarded and she is instead given a signifier that identifies her as merely an object in the institution of the family. In this way she is “still ringed with ordeals” in death: not only Aunt Jennifer’s physical death, but the death of the poem’s subversive spirit. The concept of an individual identity for women is contained by the overwhelming domination of the “ideological state apparatus” of marriage (Althusser 1341).

The poem’s final stanza also represents containment on a more structural level. Beginning with the identifier “Jennifer” and the “denizens” (the tigers), we see metrical subversion throughout the first two stanzas of the poem. The last stanza, however, aside from the hopeless adjective “terrified,” is devoid of any dactyls. It is written in perfect iambic pentameter. Looking specifically at the last two lines of the poem, “The tigers in the panel that she made / Will go on prancing, proud and unafraid” (11-12), we see what critics generally consider to be the most subversive and hopeful lines in the poem. But the lines are superimposed with a formal restriction that represents centuries of masculine domination in all creative faculties. While the disruptive dactylic feet used early in the poem definitely arouse subversiveness, the poem ends with said subversiveness being contained. And so the very lines that are meant to inspire hope for women are burdened with the restrictions of a patriarchal poetic tradition.

While the poem’s form helps us to understand the model of subversion and containment, its themes demonstrate the effect of the poem’s final two lines—that they function against feminism and reinforce masculinist maxims. Critics have typically interpreted the closing couplet positively rather than negatively, expressing a theme that claims the tigers are an expression of freedom through art. Keyes suggests that the tigers represent how “a woman transcends the traditional dependency of her role by means of her craft” (21), and Langdell claims that the poem’s message is that “while her actual life was ‘ringed with ordeals she was mastered by,’ her cherished embroidered tigers somehow escaped any

such domination” (26). But this interpretation of the poem is fundamentally flawed when the theory of subversion and containment is applied. Keyes and Langdell’s interpretation is founded on two axioms: one is that Aunt Jennifer’s embroidery functions as an expressive and empowering form of artistic creativity and not as a repressive apparatus. The second is that the symbolism of the tigers embodies a female liberation from the maxims of patriarchal dominance and marital constraints.

The assumption that Aunt Jennifer’s handiwork is a means of escaping masculine oppression proves to be problematic when we observe the nature of her art form. Keyes and Langdell have both focused on Aunt Jennifer’s needlework as a means of overcoming masculine power through art, parallel to Rich’s own subversion through poetic composition; however, Aunt Jennifer’s craft is already characteristic of the muted female voice. Needlework is a silenced and domesticated art form with no platform for exposure. Where Rich’s poetry will eventually reach a large audience and effectively create a voice for women’s art, Aunt Jennifer’s embroidered tigers are destined to be confined within the walls of her own home. Her art is institutionalized in that it is an art to be performed in the domicile and for the domicile. It is an example of how the dominant power of masculinism allows a minor subversion, but the subversion is quickly contained, thus reinforcing the masculinist maxim. Aunt Jennifer is permitted this domesticated handicraft, but is given no real influence in artistic expression. The tigers may “go on prancing, proud and unafraid” (12), but they will do so within the confines of a patriarchal system where only men are given a dominant voice.

The second axiom of the poem’s typical interpretation, that the tigers are symbolic of a female escape from masculine oppression, is actually the poem’s most stunning example of subversion and containment. Looking at the first stanza, the subversion is evident as the tigers “do not fear the men beneath the tree” (3) and “pace in sleek chivalric certainty” (4). The tigers represent the experience of women in an ideal world where they are unburdened by the weight of patriarchal oppression. This metaphorical liberation calls into question the established maxim that women are subordinate to men, especially in family structures. The patriarchy, however, will not allow this subversion to be taken very far. The subversion is contained in the poem’s last two lines: “The tigers in the panel that she made/Will go on prancing, proud and unafraid” (11-12). These lines are usually seen as the poem’s ultimate feminist moral, but they can be seen alternatively as a masculinist maxim meant to placate woman’s desire

for subversion. Keyes states that the last stanza of the poem “indicates that [the tigers] will endure while Aunt Jennifer will die and that they will continue to represent her unfulfilled longings” (22). What we see here is a promise of fulfillment post mortem that will validate a life plagued by injustice and oppression. It is a maxim similar to the religious promise of a heaven that maintains submission and obedience. And so, while there is subversion at the beginning of the poem, eventually that subversion is contained by the surrogacy of the tigers. In the end, the original masculinist maxim of female subordination is ultimately reinforced to be even stronger than it was before the subversion occurred.

What appears to be a feminist dictum of hope is actually a lie—a lie that is alluded to earlier in the poem. Michael Rizza, Claire Keyes, and others have recognized the ambiguity in the word “lie” at the end of line nine (Rizza 65, Keyes 23). The line presumably means that Aunt Jennifer's hands lie passively, since she is dead, but it may also mean they lie, as in deceive. This lying represents not only the illusion of hope expressed in the poem's last two lines but also the general function of deception as an artificial seizure of power by women. Keyes asserts that a woman is generally incapable of obtaining power from men, but may appear to have power through cunning, seduction, or deception:

A mask is put on in order to gain favor or position that the woman cannot openly achieve or demand for herself. That mask can, of course, be a certain kind of language or tone, perhaps a gentle acceptance or modesty. . . . Naturally, the restraint of actual feelings composes the substratum of disguise.” (18)

It is interesting that Aunt Jennifer's hands “lie” only in death. In life they may have been truthful. Their creation of the tigers was hopeful, and perhaps they did “pace in sleek chivalric certainty” (4) at one point. But with Aunt Jennifer's death, the hope of liberation dies as well, and the final dictum becomes mere fancy that fortifies masculine power.

This poem stands as an example of Adrienne Rich's work before her development into the feminist visionary that she is known as today—and there is no shame in that. The poem is both an important step in her own self-discovery as a poet and as an exploration of the injustices of patriarchal power. However, as instrumental as “Aunt Jennifer's Tigers” may be in Rich's ultimate reputation as a feminist poet, feminist subversion operates in the poem itself only as a part of the whole. Examining the poem as an example of subversion and containment shows that the subversive elements of the poem are actually tools of patriarchal hegemony. The subversion is an allowance made by masculine power that can be easily contained, which creates the illusion of freedom. Overall, the poem does not further the cause of feminism as does Rich's later work. Instead it

*Criterion*

perpetuates the muted female voice by giving it a false and controlled sense of subversion.

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# *“That Lady, Sir, is Her Own Mistress”*

## *Evelina’s Condemnation of Rape Culture*

*RoseE Hadden*

The title of this essay may seem problematic. The text of *Evelina* does not contain a single instance of rape. Of course, attention can be drawn to Evelina’s close calls, such as in Sir Clement Willoughby’s carriage, where she recounts that “Never, in my whole life, have I been so terrified” (68). Kenneth Graham has already addressed the overtones of physical male-on-female violence that infuse the text, but I wish to explore Burney’s more subtle violence: the pervasive undermining of Evelina’s personal autonomy. Recent critics have blamed this disempowerment on Evelina herself: Timothy Dikstal calls her “less experienced” (559), and Christina Davidson insists that the goal of the novel is to teach its heroine “who is and who is not to be befriended and trusted” (282). However, this view of *Evelina* as a tale of young womanhood coming to awareness of the evils in the world and finding the power for self-preservation—a glorified, if atypically dark, conduct novel—overlooks a large part of what I believe Burney was trying to accomplish. Rather than decrying the supposed character flaws of the protagonist, I will instead explore the flawed assumptions of her society that make her life so dangerous and the potential solutions to those dangers that Burney presents in Lord Orville.

The problem plaguing *Evelina* is not any character flaw of her own, but a flaw in the character of her society. Far from being bashful, compliant, and naive, *Evelina* demonstrates a remarkably canny sense of character, and she doesn't hesitate to reprimand the untrustworthy with blunt, forceful language or to respond to physical violence with physical reprisals. The most dramatic instance, of course, is her attempt to throw herself out of Sir Clement's carriage, but the narrative is peppered with instances of her snatching back her hands and skirts from unwelcome contact. Yet this intelligent young woman is forever caught up in awkward and often dangerous situations—not because she is incapable of saying no, but because no one around her respects it. Nearly everyone, from the cad Sir Clement to *Evelina*'s dear friend Miss Mirvan, treats *Evelina*'s refusal to do anything as a temporary obstacle rather than an incontrovertible choice made by a free-willed and independent being. No is never allowed to mean no. *Evelina* is a condemnation, not of inexperience and timidity in young women, but in the systematic destruction of their autonomy by a set of dehumanizing societal assumptions that we now label as “rape culture.” Burney may not have known what to call this phenomenon, but the text of *Evelina* clearly demonstrates that she understood how it worked. Moreover, in crafting Lord Orville, Burney anticipated by some two hundred years the current assertion that we must overcome rape culture by teaching men a new model of masculinity in which respect, rather than dominance, is the critical factor of manhood.

Joan McGregor, Director of the Bioethics Program at Arizona State, gives a quick run-down of the fundamental assumptions behind rape culture in her discussion of the flaws in modern Anglo-American rape laws:

The law looks for explicit signs that would inform the man unequivocally that the woman is not consenting to sex at this time; otherwise he can assume consent. And even some resistance and verbal refusal is insufficient to turn the baseline of consent into nonconsent since courts have accepted the notion that women will sometimes say ‘no’ when they mean ‘yes’ and that women often need some physical encouragement, or force, to consent to sex. Consequently, the burden is on the women to say and show that she is not consenting—thereby the default is that the woman is consenting (McGregor 104).

Rape culture is based upon the assumption of consent, often in spite of verbal refusal or physical resistance. Although MacGregor is focusing specifically on the legal ramifications of this assumption, Burney explores the social problems that arise when a society assumes that a woman is, by default, perfectly content

to comply with whatever anyone else chooses to do with her. The problem is compounded by the historical moment: in Georgian England, the right to say “no” was one of a woman’s few legal rights—and, in some ways, her most powerful.

In theory, even a nameless and impoverished British woman like Evelina still has the power of veto in all dealings with the opposite sex. This power appears frequently in novels of the Romantic period as a major force of plot development: Elizabeth Bennet refuses both Mr. Collins and Mr. Darcy; Jeanie Deans refuses Lord Dumbiedikes; even timid Fanny Price turns down Henry Crawford. Concerning questions of her own body—where it will go, what it will do, and whom it will marry—the poorest and most timid woman is more powerful than the highest-born and most outspoken of men. In *Evelina*, however, society at large (female as well as male) takes every opportunity to undercut this dangerous veto power. Evelina is never permitted to say *no* and get away with it.

When she refuses to dance with Mr. Lovel at her very first ball, Lovel, though he can’t physically drag her onto the dance floor, punishes her for her refusal by publicly humiliating her. He asks “May I know to what accident I must attribute not having the honor of your hand?” (25) in front of Lord Orville, to make sure her current partner knows of her *faux pas*. Still not satisfied, he shames her again at the performance of *Love For Love* by asking, in front of Lord Orville, Sir Clement, and Miss Mirvan, “I hope, Ma’am, you have enjoyed your health since I had the honour—I beg ten thousand pardons, but, I protest I was going to say the honour of dancing with you—however, I mean the honour of seeing you dance?” Evelina correctly interprets this public shaming as “reprisals for my conduct at the ball” (55). Punishment for refusal is a motif of the novel, and it is not a tool used exclusively by men. Evelina’s grandmother, Madame Duval, threatens and humiliates her when she refuses to accompany the Branghtons to the opera: “I order you to follow me this moment, or else I’ll make you repent it all your life” (60). Madame Duval’s involvement reveals that rape culture is not merely an issue of sex: it is the restriction of a woman’s autonomy in all aspects of her life, by all persons of her acquaintance, regardless of their gender.

Sir Clement’s response to the word *no* is much more graceful than those of Lovel and Madame Duval, but also more dangerous. He does not feel the need to punish Evelina for her refusals, because in his mind, her refusals simply do not exist. When she accuses him, “You have forced me from my friends, and intruded yourself upon me, against my will, for a partner,” he responds, “Surely,

my dear Madam, we ought to be better friends, since there seems to be something of sympathy in the frankness of our dispositions" (33). Later, when their carriage is broken down, "I had scarce touched the ground when I was lifted suddenly from it by Sir Clement Willoughby, who begged permission to assist me, though he did not wait to have it granted, but carried me in his arms back to Ranelagh" (45). Sir Clement's behavior follows nicely the pattern articulated by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick: "The epistemological asymmetry of the laws that govern rape, for instance, privileges at the same time men and ignorance, inasmuch as it matters not at all what the raped woman perceives or wants just so long as the man raping her can claim not to have noticed (ignorance in which male sexuality receives careful education)" (1471). Sir Clement enjoys a studied ignorance of Evelina's refusals, effectively removing her power to say "no" to him. He is most likely not even aware that he is doing it: the unchallenged assumption of female compliance limits and warps his perception of the world. He hears yes whether Evelina says it or not.

Even when Sir Clement does manage to register Evelina's *no*, he refuses to take it seriously, clearly demonstrating a recurring problem that feminist theorists have highlighted in the past decade. "Men are as well versed in the sexual dance as women are, and when they are fully aware that women are expected to say no even when they mean yes, men are less likely to hear 'no' and accept it at face value" (Filipovic 20). At the ridotto, in response to Evelina's extremely direct command "Then, Sir, you must leave me," Sir Clement disappears for a moment, before re-emerging to demand "And could you really let me go, and not be sorry?" (31). The fault here is clearly not in Evelina's communication: it is Sir Clement's culturally conditioned assumption that *no* is just a preliminary form of yes.

Not all the power play in the novel is so overt. Miss Mirvan, who is Evelina's dear friend and, as well as we can judge, quite harmless, plays her part in undermining Evelina's resolutions: "I made many objections to being of the party, according to the resolution I had formed. However, Maria laughed me out of my scruples, and so once again I went to an assembly" (30). Though Maria's persuasion is kindly meant and gently done, it reinforces the pervasive pattern of social interactions in the text: Evelina is not allowed to refuse anything. Her body is not her own; her role in society is to facilitate the pleasure of everyone around her, male or female, friend or foe.

One crucial skill that Evelina lacks, and that is frequently used against her, is the ability to shift the burden of justification away from herself. Elizabeth

Powell highlights this strategy as part of her counsel on how to prevent rape: “In responding to verbal pressure, there are simple skills that can be helpful [. . .] to turn the pressure on the other person: “Why do you keep pressuring me like this?” (Powell 111). This powerful question of ‘Why?’ moves the responsibility of a strong ‘because’ to the other party. Unfortunately, Evelina does not have this skill, and it is consistently used against her to undermine her right to deny consent. When Evelina is reluctant to accept Sir Clement’s offer of a ride home, “He began by making many complaints of my unwillingness to trust myself with him, and begged to know what could be the reason?” (67). As Evelina is unable to think of a polite way to say “Because you are an untrustworthy misogynist,” she ends up riding with him and is assaulted en route. The assault doesn’t begin in the carriage, however: it is already well underway when Sir Clement assumes a default of consent and requires Evelina to justify her refusal. The Miss Branghtons, though they have no interest in sexually assaulting Evelina, pull the same trick when they decide to take her to the opera with them; rather than accepting that she is already engaged for the evening, they demand to know why it’s so important that she honor her engagement, with whom she is engaged, how closely related those people are to her, and where they are going, in a concerted effort to break down Evelina’s refusal of their invitation (59). The burden is on Evelina to produce a reason for refusing, rather than on anyone else to produce a reason for insisting: a strategy of rape culture that we are only now learning to codify and combat.

Behind the question of consent lurks one of blame. As *The Los Angeles Times’s* opinion columnist Robin Abcarian observes, “[J]ustice has been denied for so long and so often to young female rape victims who have been told explicitly or otherwise that they are to blame for being raped: You shouldn’t have worn that, shouldn’t have drunk that, shouldn’t have been out so late.” In the novel, Evelina is not blamed for her behavior: her physical attractiveness alone is considered a deliberate waiver of her right to autonomy and invitation to harassment. The ruffians at Vauxhall explicitly justify their harassment with Evelina’s beauty: “one of them, rudely seizing hold of me, said I was a pretty little creature [. . .] another, advancing, said, I was as handsome as an angel, and desired to be of the party” (131). Clearly being “handsome as an angel” is reason enough to believe that she desires to be of the party, even though she is struggling to escape his compatriot’s grip. Sir Clement repeatedly accuses Evelina of cruelty for being both beautiful and uninterested in him: “It cannot be that you are so cruel! Softness itself is painted in your eyes” (31). Mr. Smith joins

the discourse by asking “Why now, Ma’am, how can you be so cruel as to be so much handsomer than your cousins?” (148). In every case, Evelina’s beauty is interpreted as a deliberate decision intended to inflict suffering on others, as well as implicit consent for men to treat her as they see fit.

Reverend Villars is unintentionally complicit in this victim-blaming. In his advice to Evelina, he places the responsibility for Sir Clement’s behavior squarely on Evelina’s shoulders. “It is not sufficient for you to be reserved: his conduct even calls for your resentment; and should he again, as will doubtless be his endeavour, contrive to solicit your favour in private, let your disdain and displeasure be so marked, as to constrain a change in his behavior” (108). Villars’s advice is well-meaning, but misguided. Evelina cannot constrain Sir Clement to do anything. Yet Villars implies that if Sir Clement continues his unseemly behavior, it is because Evelina failed to protest vehemently enough. Villars’s omission to write to Sir Clement to chastise him, or even to Lady Howard, to request that Sir Clement be dismissed from Howard Grove, speaks volumes. In her guardian’s eyes, Sir Clement’s conduct is Evelina’s responsibility; its continuation is her fault.

This is where the popular view of *Evelina* as a glorified conduct novel truly breaks down. If Burney’s goal were to teach young women how to avoid the dangers of society, as Christina Davidson has asserted, then the novel should include a female character who successfully achieves both personal safety and public acclaim. Timothy Dykstal holds up Mrs. Selwyn as such a character: the embodiment of “a kind of culture—specifically, the culture afforded by novels like [Burney’s] own—[that] can encourage the independence, rather than the conformity, of its consumers” (560). However, Dykstal’s argument overlooks the crucial problem that Evelina (who is firmly established in readers’ minds as a reliable narrator and canny judge of character) doesn’t like Mrs. Selwyn. She describes both the older woman’s understanding and manners as “masculine” (179), and characterizes her sharp repartee as “revenge,” “severity,” and “indulging her humor” and her silences as “contempt” (180–81). In her first conversation (or verbal duel) with Lord Merton, Mrs. Selwyn proves herself to be the kind of woman who can say “no” and force the people around her to take her seriously. Yet her assertiveness appears unfeminine—an embarrassment, rather than a virtue. The other assertive woman in the text, Madame Duval, receives even less sympathy from Burney and her characters. Burney’s argument is not that women should be more assertive; perhaps in some other time and place, such assertiveness might be appropriate, but Georgian society is not equipped

to handle such women or take their assertions of independence seriously. It is not to Mrs. Selwyn that we must look as the hopeful embodiment of a better society: it is to Lord Orville.

Patricia Hamilton has done excellent work exploring Lord Orville as the ideal of English politeness and an embodiment of its limitations; as she points out, Orville's civility cannot provoke reform in Sir Clement, Captain Mirvan, Lord Merton, or any other character (Hamilton 440). But he does provide a stark contrast to them and their paradigm. Burney uses him from the beginning as a standard of civility against which the boorish behavior of others stands out sharply, as at Evelina's first assembly. Evelina makes a poor first impression, tongue-tied from intimidation at Orville's rank and the splendor of the party. Orville spends much of his evening trying to help Evelina feel more comfortable, even leaving her to sit quietly with Mrs. Mirvan after he deduces that it is his attention that makes Evelina so nervous. When Sir Clement teases him for neglecting such a pretty partner, Orville justifies his neglect by describing her as "A poor weak girl!" Sir Clement, clearly already eager to seduce Evelina by any means necessary, responds by summarizing rape culture in one exclamation: "By Jove [. . .] I am glad to hear it!" (27).

Orville, unlike his unsettlingly candid colleague, does not base his social position upon his ability to torment and manipulate those weaker than him. Instead, he gains respect through genuine politeness, his actions always attendant upon Evelina's explicit and voluntarily given consent.

He then, with an air the most respectfully serious, asked if he had been so unhappy as to offend me?

"No, indeed!" cried I; and, in hopes of changing the discourse, and preventing his further inquiries, I desired to know if he had seen the young lady who had been conversing with me?

No;—but would I honour him with any commands to her?

"O, by no means!"

Was there any other person with whom I wished to speak?

I said no, before I knew I had answered at all.

Should he have the pleasure of bringing me any refreshment?

I bowed, almost involuntarily. And away he flew. (24)

This exchange is critical. *Orville respects Evelina's right to say no.* He does not take any action until he has obtained Evelina's willing permission; neither does he challenge any of her refusals with demands for justification. His respect

for Evelina consistently constrains his behavior, both in trivial matters like running errands at a ball and in more serious circumstances. When Evelina makes a private appointment with Mr. Macartney, putting both her safety and her reputation at risk, Lord Orville overcomes his hesitations and honors her right to make this choice for herself (196). Though he is not perfect—he does occasionally pressure Evelina, or act without waiting for her approval—he is learning to overcome the rape culture in which he is immersed.

This radical re-imagining of male power, as manifested in self-control rather than control over women, earns Orville some backlash in the form of teasing and questioning of his masculinity.

“I suppose, my Lord,” said Mrs. Selwyn, when we stopped at our lodgings, “You would have been extremely confused had we met any gentlemen who had the honour of knowing you.”

“If I had,” answered he, gallantly, “it would have been from mere compassion at their envy.”

“No, my Lord,” answered she, “it would have been from mere shame, that, in an age so daring, you alone should be such a coward as to forbear to frighten women” (186).

Though Mrs. Selwyn is being facetious, she is, as usual, entirely correct in her prediction of Orville’s public ridicule. “‘My Lord Orville!’ cried the witty Mr. Coverley, ‘Why, my Lord Orville is as careful,—egad, as careful as an old woman!’” (189). Like Evelina’s punishment for saying no, Orville is punished for daring to allow a woman’s autonomy to limit his behavior. Orville, however, is better equipped to deal with these reprisals. He is able to laugh off Mr. Coverley’s jab by virtue of his higher social standing, his wealth, and his gender—all layers of privilege that assure that mockery poses no real threat to his safety or well-being. Although both men and women are complicit in the pervasiveness of rape culture, it is the men, from their position of privilege, that must lead the way to any real solutions.

This idealistic view of Lord Orville might make the novel’s end problematic. In a discussion of consent, surely it is worth noting that Evelina’s marriage is arranged without any input from her. However, her exclusion is not from gender-based discrimination; rather, it is the only practical response to Sir John Belmont’s inability to be in the same room with her. (As this aversion is a consequence of his failure to respect Evelina’s mother’s autonomy, it is hard to blame Burney for playing up his guilt.) Considering also the need for haste

and secrecy in order to preserve Miss Belmont's reputation, Evelina's exclusion from the arrangements becomes a matter of practical necessity. Confirming this supposition is Evelina's account that "I was obliged to consent to a compromise in merely deferring the day till Thursday!" and Lord Orville's proposal that they spend the first month of their married life on her home turf of Berry Hill (250). These arrangements show that, despite the power difference between Evelina and Orville, they are already learning to compromise and negotiate as equal partners, with mutual respect for personal sovereignty. Burney refers to Orville's skill of treating other people (male and female) with the respect due an equal as "condescension"; I interpret it as freedom from the rape culture that pervades the novel. Orville is Burney's conception of a new kind of man: one whose strength is not used for coercion, but rather for self-control. *Evelina* argues that English women cannot truly be their own mistresses until each Englishman learns to be his own master.

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# The Blind Can See

## Revisiting Disability in *Jane Eyre*

Gina Schneck

To be blind means (literally) to live without physical sight. This definition of blindness is absolute—you are blind or you are sighted, you are disabled or you are not. So what of phrases such as “What are you, *blind*?” Why do we sometimes use language of blindness to define those with physical sight? Julia Miele Rodas offers an answer: a “continuum of seeing and not seeing,” a “diversity of blindnesses,” which “obscures the imagined boundary between blind and sighted, confounding our abstract sense of blindness as an absolute” (119). Rodas speaks to the fact that those who can physically see are sometimes metaphorically blind, fumbling around in ignorance, while those who are physically blind can be visionaries. As such, she suggests a continuum rather than a binary—an in-between space where the sighted experience varying degrees of blindness and the blind can sometimes see. This in-between space has become a major focus of disability studies as it works to erase stigma and reintegrate the disabled into conversations of identity and ability—and in the case of *Jane Eyre*, sight.

As disability scholars have looked at Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, they have often criticized the novel for its antiquated approach to disability, most commonly in relation to Edward’s blindness. The earliest interpretations of his blindness rely on Freud, famously comparing the act of being blinded to a metaphorical castration that removes the possibility for both love and sexual pleasure (Bolt 46). Such an all-or-nothing approach to blindness closely represents

the early Victorian view that blind men had little access to intellectual faculties and therefore little access to pleasure (Kitto 241). Scholarly conversation *has* moved towards a more positive, nuanced interpretation of Edward's blindness, insisting that becoming physically blind opens his potential for spiritual sight (Joshua 123), or that his marriage to Jane despite his disability reveals Jane as a modern woman unshackled by nineteenth-century views of disability (Mintz 147). While I agree with the moves that scholarship has taken in recent years, I would argue that the scholarly discussion surrounding disability in *Jane Eyre* is inadequate. While scholars have accurately identified Edward as a focal point of disability within the novel, and have moved towards a more positive reading of his blindness, they have yet to pinpoint *social blindness*—meaning, in the case of both Jane and Edward, ineptitude in relationships—as disability; that is, they focus on physical or biological disability without delving into the in-between space suggested by Rodas. By exploring blindness on a continuum, we can see that both Jane and Edward experience blindness, and that they both must overcome their interpersonal naiveté in order to have a successful marriage. Their story, then, becomes one of learning to *see* through breaking down the binaries associated with blindness and disability.

To understand the blindness that Jane brings to her relationship with Edward, we must explore passages in which her gaze is turned to Edward. As we examine these passages, placing the terms *looking* and *seeing* on a continuum will prove useful, the former suggesting the physical ability to see with a lack of spiritual or transcendent insight and the latter suggesting a deeper level of spiritual sight with or without physical eyesight.

Let us first turn to a scene in which Jane and Edward reunite after an extended absence. "I had not intended to love him," Jane narrates, "The reader knows I had wrought hard to extirpate from my soul the germs of love there detected, and now at the first renewed view of him, they spontaneously revived, green and strong! He made me love him without looking at me" (Brontë 185). This is long before Edward is blinded; yet already we see Brontë experimenting with the power of seeing. In this scene, Jane is referring to the fact that Rochester has literally not glanced in her direction; however, it would be an oversight to ignore the implications behind this observation. Brontë seems to suggest that Rochester has yet to *see* Jane—has yet to comprehend all that she is worth, both as a woman and as a lover. The same can be said for Jane. That she believes herself to be in love "at the first renewed view of him" will—and should—be read as a shallow sort of love, even a sexual attraction.

In fact, much of what we know of Edward is translated into very bodily, and therefore shallow, descriptions. Just before the quote above, we get a description from Jane grounded in physical characteristics: “My master’s colorless, olive face, square, massive brow, broad and jetty eyebrows, deep eyes, strong features, firm, grim mouth . . .” (185)—all characteristics derived from looking. The novel is sprinkled with these descriptions, hinting at both young Jane’s inexperience with the nuances of romantic relationships as well as Edward’s current state of unknowability—that Jane knows him only through the external suggests a hardness of character that prohibits her from knowing him intimately.

However, Jane’s report of Edward’s physical characteristics doesn’t stop there. “The soul,” Jane argues, “has an interpreter . . . in the eye” (343). And so it is in Rochester’s eyes that Jane sees “energy, decision, will . . . [and] an influence that quite master[s] [her]” (185). She is able to decipher his soul (seeing) through the physical (looking), discovering an “influence” that spawns respect. Here we see the line between seeing and looking begin to blur. This blurring is perpetuated by the fact that the respect Jane fosters for Edward errs on the side of hero worship. As Jane watches Edward, she does so as an Olympian might look upon a god:

[M]y eyes were drawn involuntarily to his face: I could not keep their lids under control: they would rise, and the iris would fix on him. I looked, and had an acute pleasure in looking—a precious, yet poignant pleasure; pure gold, with a steely point of agony: a pleasure like what the thirstperishing man might feel who knows the well to which he has crept is poisoned, yet stoops and drinks divine draughts nevertheless. (185)

Jane loses mastery over her own will; she is drawn in by the vision of Edward and blinded by the “divine” she perceives in him. Brontë casts this blindness as poisonous. As naïve Jane peers into Edward’s soul, striving for a communion of sight, she is poisoned by her inability to see beyond the god she has made of this human man. Several chapters later, Jane remarks,

[Rochester] was becoming to me my whole world; and more than the world; almost my hope of heaven. He stood between me and every thought of religion, as an eclipse intervenes between man and the broad sun. I could not, in those days, see God for his creature of whom I had made an idol. (295)

Jane admits her own *disability* to “see God” past the “eclipse” that consumes her sight: Edward. As she attempts to see him—and he to “read [her] unspoken

thoughts" (263)—she is blinded by all that he is, or all she perceives him to be, remaining ignorant of the sins and suffering of his past that color his character.

The object of Jane's gaze, Edward, experiences blindness as he puts *her* on a pedestal, calling her a myriad of otherworldly names that indicate he thinks her above the earthly sphere. He calls her "fairy" (263), "angel" (279), "unearthly thing" (273), and suggests that she has "the look of another world" (262). Jane rejects these titles, saying, "I am not an angel . . . and I will not be one till I die: I will be myself. Mr. Rochester, you must neither expect nor exact anything celestial of me—for you will not get it, any more than I shall get it of you: which I do not at all anticipate" (279). Edward strives to see Jane as something perfect rather than something human, and in doing so he blinds himself—perhaps willingly—to Jane's flaws. Rather than be offended, Jane uses these instances of blindness to teach Edward to see her as she is, and in doing so begins to establish more realistic expectations for Edward as well (that she will not expect anything "celestial" from him). She establishes a pattern of communication that proves essential to their later marriage, when Edward becomes physically blind and the pair must become one pair of eyes in order to see—a highly sophisticated form of communication predicated upon earlier attempts of both looking and seeing.

The turning point for both Jane and Edward occurs soon after the discovery of Bertha's existence. Jane says to Edward, "I am not talking to you now through the medium of custom, conventionalities, nor even of mortal flesh: it is my spirit that addresses your spirit; just as if we both had passed through the grave, and we stood at God's feet, equal—as we are!" (272). Here again Jane is able to see through Edward's exterior, and it is through comparing her soul to his that she deems herself and Edward equal. Ironically, this passage comes after Jane accuses Edward of thinking her "an automaton—a machine without feelings" (272) and proud Edward accuses her in turn of "know[ing] nothing about [him], and nothing about the sort of love of which [he is] capable" (325). Though at this point they meet soul to soul, and though they are both truly *seeing* each other in a moment of raw vulnerability for perhaps the first time in the novel, they both remain blind to the host of layers present in the other.

When Edward's blindness becomes physical in the fire that consumes "the madwoman in the attic," Jane approaches him with a surety of purpose—to cheer him—which affords a closeness that *reveals*. Upon hearing of the fire at Ferndean, she hastens to the spot with the intention never to leave. She approaches Edward, who at first believes her to be a spirit. Jane muses, "His

[Edward's] countenance reminded me of a lamp quenched, wanting to be relit; and alas! It was not himself . . . he was dependent on another for office!" (478). So she stays. And she sees. Edward's character is altered through his intimate interaction with Jane, his helper. Through her constancy, her *humanity*, he blooms. He allows her in, which dissolves the barrier that previously prohibited Jane from seeing him, as her Edward had been a proud, cold man. "Hitherto I have hated to be helped," he admits, ". . . but Jane's soft ministry will be a perpetual joy" (485). Now, in his vulnerability, he can be seen and, more importantly, he can see. Jane, in turn, moves beyond idol worship in order to accept Edward as he is—wounded both physically and emotionally—and she "love[s] [him] better now" (485). The pair comes together as they learn to navigate and communicate through one pair of eyes. They marry and the communion is complete.

Though scholars argue that Edward's blinding has cost him happiness and love, the language Jane uses to describe their marriage suggests that the very opposite is true. The passage bears reading in its entirety:

Mr. Rochester continued to be blind the first two years of our union; perhaps it was that circumstance that drew us so very near—that knit us so very close; for I was then his vision, as I am still his right hand. Literally, I was (what he often called me) the apple of his eye. . . . Never did I weary of reading to him; never did I weary conducting him where he wished to go; of doing for him what he wished to be done. And there was a pleasure in my services, most full, most exquisite, even though sad—because he claimed these services without painful shame or dampening humiliation. He loved me so truly, that he knew no reluctance in profiting by my attendance; he felt I loved him so fondly, that to yield that attendance was to indulge my sweetest wishes. (491)

As we pull apart this important passage, we play witness to the language of seeing that Brontë uses to describe a union of equals—not a nurse and her patient, not a subject and an object, not an able woman and a disabled man, but a successful marriage of two souls who have learned to see.

At the beginning of the passage, we see Jane admitting that the occasion of Edward's blindness has "knit [them] so very close." This is an interesting assertion as it suggests that disability serves a positive purpose: disability enables. Susannah Mintz argues that "Brontë's novel represents such an ethic of understanding across the boundaries of plurality that is the foundation of recognition" (131). Within the realm of disability studies, this passage gains significance; it

proves that the portrait of the incapable, fumbling, helpless patient does not adequately depict disability and blindness. In the case of *Jane Eyre*, Brontë suggests that physical blindness is useful, that it unites, and that it is perhaps less of a disability than the naiveté that previously prevented Jane and Edward from fully knowing each other.

The next line of the passage tells us that Jane has become Edward's eyes: "I was then his vision." Jane and Edward have literally and figuratively become one pair of eyes—Jane is tasked with navigating for blind Edward, and in that they begin to see the world and each other through a shared comprehension. In this respect, it does not matter who is physically blind. That Edward is the "chosen one" is not a commentary on his "bad" soul nor does it suggest what Georgina Kleege terms Jane's "rise to power" (70). Their coming together is a journey of learning to see spiritually, and they do so through sharing Jane's eyes. They are thus both "limited" by Edward's blindness—just as Edward must learn to navigate without physical sight and to use other means to see the world, Jane must also learn to navigate for him. They are both "limited," both "punished" for their previous artlessness in love, and yet they both see. Again, disability is problematized by both its limiting and enabling qualities.

As we return to the passage, we find a significant turn of phrase in Jane's monologue: "Literally, I was . . . the apple of his eye." This familiar phrase indicates that Jane is dearer to Edward than all else; it also carries religious undertones, signifying the spiritual insight that Jane and Edward now share as man and wife. Here again, Brontë plays with the language of sight—for though Edward is blind, his eyes still play a significant role in the novel. That his love of Jane comes across through the language of sight suggests the importance of *seeing*, both to the novel as a whole and to the Rochesters' marriage. Edward's physical disability, his physical lack of sight, is downplayed in light of their shared spiritual sight.

The remainder of the passage suggests the equality of their marriage—that Jane never wearied of caring for Edward and Edward never felt shame in accepting Jane's help. As the passage concludes with "[h]e loved me so truly" and "I loved him so fondly," Edward's physical blindness seems almost insignificant; it would be ridiculous to argue that this marriage suffers as a result of his disability. In my estimation, it would also be ridiculous to suggest that their happy marriage is predicated upon Edward's disability, as Gilbert and Gubar suggest, and upon Jane's resultant "rise to power" as Kleege suggests. Instead, as Mintz argues so masterfully, "If we read those injuries [disability] in the context of

recognition and the novel's sustained interest in challenging too quick assessments of subjectivity based on bodily traits, it becomes possible to understand the end of *Jane Eyre* as a continuation, rather than a reversal, of its protagonists' relationship" (147). Edward's recovery of sight in one eye works to further prove that Jane and Edward are equal with or without Edward's physical disability, for it is not the presence of disability that defines their relationship, but the transcendence of disability—both their own disabilities and their judgments of the disabilities of others.

*Jane Eyre*, then, works to normalize disability by revealing the shades of disability present in all of us. If it is not only the madwoman and blindman that are disabled, but also Jane, the "perfect" protagonist, then surely disability is not so strange, not so "other" as Victorian critics thought it to be; all struggle with blindness and deafness and madness. Jane and Edward's journey to happily ever after involves overcoming metaphorical blindness (in regards to each other), with Edward's physical blindness serving as a tool that perpetuates their success, demanding "the hard work of acceptance—not only, or not even, of the apparently monstrous *other* but of the innately strange *self*" (Mintz 131). In this respect, one character is not privileged over the other—they are equally blind and they can equally see.

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# *The Folks of the Post-Apocalypse*

*The Road, Religion, and Folklore Studies*

*Megan M. Toone*

The post-apocalyptic genre strips society of its physical and ideological constructions. For this reason, apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic scenarios offer an opportunity to analyze the most basic and central aspects of society that remain after all else falls. The hallmarks of social ranking, cultural creations, societal customs, and physical structures that aid in defining individuals and groups are destroyed in the apocalypse. The post-apocalypse reduces these defining factors to their most basic forms while maintaining complexities. Post-apocalypses reveal insight into the center of society, the possibility of ethics in a post-apocalyptic world, and ideas about how people are able to live together. The post-apocalyptic genre explores an existence where all defining influences are gone and people must create new ways to define, connect, morally direct, and coexist. With the demolition of social construction, a new framework becomes necessary, one that allows for the base elements of society to be discussed without depending on the destroyed concepts and terms used by mass civilization that no longer apply to a post-apocalyptic world. Folklore, a study of the ever-adapting, unofficial aspects of cultural beliefs and communication within a given group, thus becomes necessary when analyzing apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic texts. Folklore by definition defies the official structures and the culture of the masses, making folklore especially pertinent

to the post-apocalyptic genre. When analyzing the revelatory aspect of the post-apocalypse in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* through the folkloric lens of analysis, religion comes to the forefront, but religious folklore and folk belief rather than structured mass religion. The center of society—both in the world before the nuclear winter as well as in the shattered remains shown during the scope of the novel—proves to be religion, answering the questions posed by post-apocalyptic texts about the core of human civilization, how people unify and live together, and what, if anything, survives when all structure fails. Religion, particularly the reworked and unofficial aspects of religion, defines the relationships and identities of these post-apocalyptic people. Ultimately, the use of folklore in *The Road* interconnects literature, post-apocalyptic fiction, and folklore studies in academic conversation. *The Road* is a literary case study of folklore, a field not often associated with mass print media. Through this folkloric case study, *The Road* shows how religion sustains humanity, ethical action, and relationships, both in the nightmarish setting of the novel and in life outside its pages.

A discussion of religious folklore in the novel builds upon the religious analyses of many previous critics of *The Road*. Religion and religious ideas emanate from the novel (O'Connell 305–306). Aspects of the book resonate with religious ideas, such as the main characters being a father and son pair—alluding to God and Jesus Christ—along with their meeting a “prophet” and their emphasis on light. Lydia R. Cooper, like many of the other critics of the novel, focuses on these religious elements. She asserts the need for heroes and religion even after social structures fail. Cooper explains that a new post-apocalyptic hero and religious leader emerges in the form of the father. While these are valuable analyses, religious discussions of *The Road* benefit from a folkloric framework, because folklore studies, particularly religious folklore studies, offer “a lens through which religious experience as well as nonreligious experience can be investigated” (Danielson 53), and as William A. Wilson explains, folklore is “centrally and crucially important in our attempts to understand our own behavior and that of our fellow human beings” (415). Folklore helps explain and examine the unique nature of the characters and their groupings in *The Road*. With the religious overtones and references but lack of official doctrines, structures, and rituals in *The Road*, religious folklore in particular helps to explain actions and beliefs presented in the novel. Without the folkloric lens, there is no standard or structure that aptly applies to *The Road* because the

novel portrays a new world order with new needs and obligations for survival and connection.

In order to examine religion as a societal center using a folkloric lens, the revelatory nature of post-apocalypses must be established. Through post-apocalyptic literature's revelatory ability to strip society and reveal the underlying center, actions are contextualized within the adapted religion, and the relationship between the father and the son is explained. An apocalypse is "a disaster resulting in drastic, irreversible damage to human society or the environment, esp. on a global scale; a cataclysm." Predating this modern definition of the word, from the 1100s to the early 1800s, "Apocalypse," with a capital initial, referred to "the 'revelation of future granted to St. John in the isle of Patmos.'" Around the 1300s, this idea evolved into an "apocalypse" being "revelation or discourse" ("apocalypse, n"). Combining these two concepts of apocalypse, the idea emerges that an apocalypse, through its associated decimation of society, provides revelation. Revelation comes from sifting through the broken pieces of a destroyed world.

A significant part of apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic revelation is the base ethics, or standards and morals to live by. In her discussion of apocalypses, Claire P. Curtis sees the questions of ethics and identity. All post-apocalyptic fiction begs the question, "Is there an ethics of the post-apocalypse?" (Rosen). The different needs and different standards of the post-apocalypse create different ethical parameters. What is and is not acceptable, the hierarchy of priorities, and the new issues of personal and group survival all change, so the ethics and needs change as well. The judgment and analysis of characters must reflect the revised ethics. The main characters of *The Road* adhere to a set of ethics based on their folk beliefs and the folkloric religion that connects them. Others in the novel do not adhere to these new standards of ethics, providing a stark difference between the father-son pair and the rest of the survivors. Post-apocalyptic fiction also reveals the basic ideas of how people can peacefully live together, a question that remains central to any society because it explains the purpose and possibility of that society (Rosen). A functioning and whole society would obfuscate such questions and any possible answer. Only in the wake of a destroyed society can such things be seen, or as it is stated in *The Road*, "Perhaps in the world's destruction it would be possible at last to see how it was made" (274).

In this post-apocalyptic world, all concepts of formal or structured religion have perished with the other staples of society, bringing religious folklore into

the spotlight. Of the two main characters in the novel, only the father has any concept of organized religion and constructions of God—something he questions and must reconstruct during his journey with his son. The boy knows no structured religion because he knows no other world than the post-apocalyptic existence he lives in with his father. When both physical and societal structures are gone, hallmarks of religion like material culture and formal traditions cannot be leaned on. Folklore definitions of religion apply to *The Road* because the mass culture, including structured mass religion, that stands in opposition to folklore has gone. Religious folklore, even though it exists in conjunction with official religions and beliefs, can be reworked to accommodate the needs of the folk group even after “official” and “mass” religion has perished. Religion in folklore studies can be seen as the traditions and practices among a group that bind the group together, permit communication, and allow the ideas and beliefs (both official and unofficial) of the group to be perceived (Eliason; Danielson 45–70). There are countless variations of the idea of religion in folklore studies, but this seems to be the general trend.

The father and the son use folkloric religion to keep them together and form a folk group connected by their folklore, folk beliefs, and folk customs, which allows communication and the formation of shared values. The father-son pair receives strength from religious folklore of their folk group. This fundamental relationship endures in large part because of the shared belief and actions. Part of that belief is the way the father and son view each other and their mutual belief in one another. The father compares his son to angels and God. When literally lost in darkness, the father counts out his steps away from the boy, aiming to count his steps back. As he returns, he muses that the boy/god he is returning to is a “lode or matrix. To which he and the stars were common satellite” (15). The world and all the light it still possesses, both literal and figurative, center on the boy, as shown here when the father compares the boy to the stars. It is not simply the father-son relationship that keeps the pair together; it is the belief of goodness and godliness existent in the boy. This unofficial and nontraditional belief extends to the father’s sense that God—a constantly shifting entity that endures in the boy, who has retreated from the world, or still watches from afar—appointed him to care for the boy (77). This protection of the son and these feelings of “appointment” go beyond responsibility of parenthood. The boy “carries the fire,” giving their journey and coexistence purpose and worth. With the metaphorical fire of goodness and humanity dwindling among others of the human race, the man’s endeavor to protect the

boy also protects the divine fire. These shifting roles of the boy and the father who both take on the part of Savior, God, Prophet, Apostle, Survivor, Sacrifice, Goodness, Fire, and Light complicate traditional conceptions of religion as well as simple labels. They defy the set categorization of traditional religion, only using those remnants of constructed religion that pertain to their identities as a folk group. They are not simply “The Father” and “The Son,” but rather a new conceptualization of the divine, fundamental to their folkloric religion, which has adapted and will continue to adapt to the needs of the folk group. These new conceptualizations of religion encourage endurance, kinship, love, protection, and even hope between the pair whilst others in the world resort to eating their own children or giving up on life.

To reinforce their folk beliefs, the father and the son create and participate in evolving folk traditions. The ritualistic aspects of folk belief reinforce interconnectedness and provide symbols of meaning (Eliason). Many of these traditions echo customs of Christianity, but have different meanings than they had in the pre-apocalyptic world. They are repurposed, altered, rebuilt, and then acted out by the pair. Moments echoing Christian tradition surface throughout the novel. Each moment references Christianity, but has been transformed to fit the unique circumstances of the father and the son. For example, the father kneels in the ashes “like a penitent” as he coughs up blood and thinks of his wife (54). The father does not perform the act of penitence as he kneels in the ashes thinking about his wife; instead, his resolve, his feelings, and even his measured callousness are renewed as he uses the occasion to recenter on his son. Such actions resemble Christian ritual, but are repurposed to aid the folk group.

Another altered Christian-esque ritual in the novel is the repeated act of “sacrament.” The boy constantly makes the father partake of the food in a sort of pseudo-sacrament (23, 34). The boy extends this same sacrament to others on the road, as shown in the scene with Ely (163). The sacrament when practiced outside the pages of this novel, an ordinance representing the blood and body of Christ and by extension, his atonement and crucifixion, often connotes an eternal perspective. However, in *The Road*, the sacrament surrounds the temporal and the immediate. These isolated instances perpetuate the immediate physical survival of the partakers. The sacrament invites and extends the group’s folk religion to others, but it does not function in the same capacity as before the nuclear winter.

The multiple baptism-like scenes with the father and the son further illustrate the use and necessity of the altered religious rituals. The father washes/

baptizes the boy, and sometimes himself, on multiple occasions, including a cleansing in a waterfall and later in the ocean. One baptism of significance is after the shooting of the cannibal who went after the son:

When they'd eaten he took the boy out on the gravelbar below the bridge and he pushed away the thin shore ice with a stick and they knelt there while he washed the boy's face and his hair. The water was so cold the boy was crying. They moved down the gravel to find fresh water and he washed his hair again as well as he could and finally stopped because the boy was moaning with the cold of it. He dried him with the blanket, kneeling there in the glow of the light with the shadow of the bridge's understructure broken across the palisade of treetrunks beyond the creek. This is my child, he said. I wash a dead man's brains out of his hair. That is my job. Then he wrapped him in the blanket and carried him to the fire. (73-74)

When the two have returned to the fire, the man sees the boy staggering and is careful to not let the boy fall into the flames. As the two proceed to fall asleep together, the following is written: "he sat holding him while he tousled his hair before the fire to dry it. *All of this like some ancient anointing. So be it. Evoke the forms. Where you've nothing else construct ceremonies out of the air and breathe upon them*" (74, emphasis added). While in Christianity, baptism often symbolizes becoming clean through Christ, repentance, and rebirth, within the father-son folk religion, baptism takes on altered meanings. The baptism does cleanse; it is a physical cleaning away of ash and grime that will continue to plague the two even after they wash. The boy specifically is already seen as holy and good, so his baptism is not an act of repentance and sanctification. It is the bodies of others, along with the remnants of destruction, that must be washed away each time they enter the water. As for rebirth, there is none; there is no other world to be reborn into, just like there is no renewal of plants, animals, and ecosystems in this post-apocalyptic world. Instead, the baptism functions as a separation from the "bad guys" and a renewal of being "human." Each of these instances resonates with elements of formal Christian tradition, but the meanings have changed and the ceremonies have been altered to fit the needs of the folk group. If one were to analyze these religious folk traditions and rituals without the folklore aspect, a different view of religion would be found, a view that would not entirely fit the situations and ideas of the father and the son.

The beliefs of the man and the boy define identity, providing an “us” and a “them” by which to guide their lives. The us/them and good/evil binaries are common in religion (God/Devil, Heaven/Hell, Jews/Gentiles, Believers/Non-believers, Light/Dark, etc). Since other structures have failed, such concepts of Christian religion and binaries of God/Devil come under extreme strain because of the universal devilry that seems to be “eating” away at humanity. A different but related us/them binary becomes necessary for the sake of identity and commitment. The father and the son seek out assurance and validation of their identity. A constant question asked by the little boy to the man involves whether or not they (the father and the son) are the “good guys.” One of the biggest identifying factors of the “good guys” is their lack of cannibalistic and heathen-like tendencies. As the novel progresses, the definitions of the “good guys” and the “bad guys” rounds out. The “bad guys” are the cannibals, the rapists, the murderers, and the individuals who act on survival instincts at the expense of others. Grotesque physical indicators also become associated with the bad guys, including the loss of limbs as seen by the “spatula”-like hand of the ousted commune cannibal who attempts to take everything from the boy and the father (255). The “good guys” stay human, sustain familial relationships, believe in and continue on with some sort of faith, and do not steal from others (an example being the bunker where the boy wants to make sure they are not taking anything from the other people) (145–146). The good guys perpetuate life (not killing others except under threat and even—a trait specific to the boy—giving food to others) and most importantly, “carry the fire.” This fire represents the goodness and hope at the center of their folk beliefs. The constant need for reassurance and definition about their status as “good guys” gives form to the group and later even allows for the joining with and communication between similar folk groups when the little boy meets up with the other “good guys” after his father dies (281–287). Religion and the us/them religious binary sustain the group and provide individuals with a purpose and a sense of self in the post-apocalyptic world.

The cannibal communes, with their inhumanity, stand in opposition to the father-son religious folk group in *The Road*. Regardless of the cannibalism and wickedness portrayed in the novel, religion remains at the center of the father-son folk group, especially seen in the religious belief the father and the son tie to each other. Society is portrayed as belief and faith centered. The cannibal communes roaming the landscape complicate this religious center. On the one hand, these groups can be seen as a religion all their own. Though vastly

different from the folk religions of the “good guys,” the “bad guys” still exhibit some of the same characteristics of a folk religion as the father and the son. The practices of eating, torturing, and raping human beings are their common goals. Survival is paramount in their ideological view. In these respects, the cannibal communes could be considered to have folkloric religious aspects; however, I would argue that these “bad guys,” regardless of any application of religious folklore to their inhumane lifestyle, function in the novel more like an antireligion or an absence of religion. The rejection of religion takes away the central points of connectedness, humanity, and faith left in the demolished world. The antireligion creates an even starker contrast between the good and the bad by showing the effects of the presence or absence of religion. The cannibal communes do not exhibit the same “goodness,” “fire,” or religious folklore, and thus do not display the same level of humanity. The cannibals are portrayed more like animals than humans. Survival instincts drive them to eat their own kind. They decide to satiate more than just survival needs by imprisoning, murdering, torturing, raping, and performing other inhumane acts. Their “traditions” create an alienating dynamic rather than a unifying force. Anyone can be killed or eaten at any time. They are organized and function together, but they are not unified (60–62). Rather, they use one another, abusing the “connections” with others in the group to continue living their animalistic existence. Each member of the commune represents a means to an end for the individual, not the group. The group will not be able to continue together for long because any semblance of unity is based on something unsustainable; their supply of humans to kill and eat will run out and so will they too run out as they pick each other off. They are inhuman as opposed to human, faithless as opposed to believing, fragilely put together as opposed to unified and bound. The extreme illustrations of inhuman cannibalism emphasize the power of religion to connect and center society.

There is no question that *The Road* is rife with religion, but to only see the religious tones while missing the “how” and the “why” of the religious presence is a missed opportunity. Analyzing *The Road* in this fashion also encourages the comingling of folklore studies and mass culture. The two resist intermixing, but genres such as the post-apocalyptic narrative provide a space for the two to merge. In this union, literature becomes a folkloric case study of humanity. *The Road* presents an explanation of how people can live together by taking out everything but that which is necessary for connections among people: the central, religious idea of goodness. *The Road* reveals the importance of this

folkloric idea of goodness through the constructed traditions and the sense of purpose of the pair. Religion allows members of society to share a common goal and communicate while simultaneously maintaining a sense of humanity and faith. Folkloric faith and religion becomes a standard not just for the characters in the book, but also for other societal structures outside the pages of the novel.

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# *Visions of This Time*

*Marie-Reine Pugh*

In Cormac McCarthy's novel *No Country for Old Men*, Sheriff Ed Tom Bell is neither the protagonist nor the hero. He fails to protect his community from the violent hitman Anton Chigurh, he fails to catch him, he fails to save Llewelyn Moss and Moss's wife, and he fails his grandfather's legacy as a lawman. Yet McCarthy chooses Bell's voice to mark the progress of the story and sets it apart by presenting it in italics. Additionally, Bell's first-person narratives mark the beginning and ending of the novel, and the beginning of every chapter. To dismiss Bell's narratives as the ramblings of a nostalgic old man belies their function, both for the novel and for the character. Bell's voice acts like that of a seer: he cannot change the course of fate, but by the end he has a vision of the past, present, and future.

Although an imperfect seer, he emerges from his struggles standing in the middle of the times, neither too old to understand the world nor too young to see the past—"a man of this time" (McCarthy 279). Throughout the text, Bell seems trapped between a nostalgic view of the past inherited from the "old timers," his memories of the collective, and his own personal memories, which are filled with feelings of failure and guilt (64). His first-person narratives reveal the struggle between the two extremes, between his personal memories and his memories of the collective. In the end, Bell is able to settle in a less conflicted place, a place mediated by his closest relations—his family—where he can exist without overindulging in the destructive excesses of either extreme.

Despite the change that Bell's narratives undergo throughout the novel, some critics of *No Country for Old Men* interpret the nostalgia present as a reason for dismissing both Bell's narratives and Bell himself. Erika Spoden, in her exploration of the Vietnam War in the novel, describes him simply as "a World War II veteran who embodies the past" (76). According to Francisco Collado-Rodríguez, who focuses specifically on trauma and storytelling in his criticism of the novel, "[Bell's] melancholic approach to life defeats his will. . . and he [succumbs] to the miseries presented in his own pessimistic and apocalyptic understanding of the American situation" (59). Even Jay Ellis, in his exhaustive study of McCarthy's novels, comes to a similar conclusion. He states: "Bell's rants may sound like those of a grumpy old man, but their frustration center son nostalgia for a world of impossible safety" (260). I do not contest that Bell is, at times, nostalgic, nor do I find these readings of the novel without merit. However, there is more than one kind of nostalgia, and if we focus on how memory works in Bell's narratives, a different and perhaps more valuable purpose for Bell emerges.

Most critics have not delved into how memory and nostalgia function within Bell's first-person narratives. In his comparison between the Coen brothers' film adaptation and McCarthy's novel, John Cant recognizes the significance of Bell's narratives, stating: "[McCarthy's] novels are noted for the manner in which the internal consciousness and psychological motivation of characters is absent. . . This alone gives this thread [Bell's narratives] a special significance" (94). While openly lamenting the loss of Bell's unique and revealing monologues in the film adaptation (95), Cant does not offer further insight on their role in the novel.

Similarly, in his article on untold bible stories in various McCarthy novels, Richard Walsh highlights Bell's importance as a character by naming him "the story's most significant commentator," but he also reduces the importance and possibility of Bell's vision to "nostalgic, homespun wisdom" (342). Walsh remarks pointedly: "they are not the divinely explanatory and restorative speech of the prologue and epilogue of the book of Job" (344). Bell's vision may not be redemptive, but this should not preclude the fact that Bell has vision, or the closest thing to it in the novel's godless, violent landscape. He arrives at this clarity after struggling with the weaknesses inherent in memory.

Memory scholars classify memory as either from the collective or the individual, with few allowances between the two, and these opposing theories are necessary in understanding the pitfalls of Bell's

memories. For Maurice Halbwachs, the father of collective memory, “to remember, we need others. . . [N]ot only is the type of memory we possess not derivable in any fashion from experience in the first person singular, in fact the order of derivation is the other way around” (Ricoeur 120). From our earliest moments of life as children, learning from our parents, to our later interactions as adults living under codified societal expectations, external forces narrativize our memories and our sense of the past.

Conversely, historian David Lowenthal defines memory in the following terms: “The remembered past is both individual and collective. But,” he continues, “as a form of awareness, memory is wholly and intensely personal. . . We recall only our own experiences at first hand, and the past we remember is innately our own” (194). We all have memories that include other people or that are about others, but unlike Halbwachs, Lowenthal foregrounds the individual’s mind as the space where the past resides: we remember within ourselves what we experienced as individuals, and this memory of the past can only belong to or come from our individual selves.

As occurs with Bell, the weaknesses of both types of memory can distort our view of the past and taint the present and future. In Halbwachs’ theory, “the influence of the social setting [becomes] imperceptible to us” (122). In other words, while our experience of memory certainly does not feel collective, the collective still has an influence on what we remember and how we remember it. Bell relies on his memories of his collective—of old timer lawmen, of his small Texas town, and of his settler ancestors—as a refuge from his private memories. But this is not without consequence. In Bell’s case, the influence of the collective has a nostalgic drag on his memories. When remembering the old timers, he tells the reader: “The old time concern that the sheriffs had for their people has been watered down some. You cant help but feel it” (McCarthy 63). Bell perceives the past through his memories of the collective, in this instance, the old timers, and although the memories are his own, the past he sees is filtered through this group’s influence on him, which he does not question. At least, not until the end of the novel.

Like the unseen influence of collective memory, personal memories also have a weakness, but this weakness manifests itself more painfully for Bell than the nostalgia triggered by memories of the collective. This is why he is driven to think about the group rather than about himself, even when such comparisons lead him to long for a by-gone past over the present. Per Lowenthal: “The uniquely personal nature of memory. . . flaws its communication of the past.

Doubts assail us about a memory that is only private” (Lowenthal 196). In Bell’s case, rather than leading to self-doubt about the truthfulness of his memories, his personal memories make him blind to his own prejudices against himself. For instance, he muses: “People complain about the bad things that happen to em that they dont deserve but they seldom mention the good. About what they done to deserve them things. I dont recall that I ever give the good Lord all that much cause to smile on me. But he did” (91). Ironically, he criticizes others for what he is guilty of doing. He is unable to see how he could be worthy of the happiness he has gained, saying: “Me I was always lucky” (91). Consequently, he feels uncomfortable in his private memory space because it is only filled with proof of his unworthiness.

Bell’s struggle between different types of memories manifests itself in his narrative flights. He takes refuge from his guilt-ridden private memories in memories of the collective, fleeing out of fear of digging too deeply into his private experiences. On remembering an execution, he says: “It aint somethin I would like to have to see again. . .The ones that really ought to be on death row will never make it” (62). As a lawman, he is responsible for those criminals who roam free and witnessing executions serves as a reminder of all the ones still at large. From this disturbing memory he shifts abruptly to remembering the previous generation of sheriffs, saying: “I always liked to hear about the old timers. Never missed a chance to do so” (64). Later in the novel Bell begins to speak about his undeserved medals, but quickly changes the subject to speak of his fellow soldiers. He first says, bitterly: “I was supposed to be a war hero and I lost a whole squadron of men. They died and I got a medal. . .There aint a day I dont remember it” (195). His personal past haunts his present, so he takes refuge in what seem to be safer memories of the collective. He continues: “Some boys I know come back they went on to school up at Austin on the GI bill, they had hard things to say about their people” (195). And this sets off the memory of a teacher questionnaire from the thirties, which only serves to compare the failures of the present to the attractive veneer of the past (195). He refuses to stay in his personal memory, hopping from the present to the past, from individual to the collective. Even though both kinds of memories are flawed, Bell’s memories of the collective lead him to dwell on former prosperity, a more comfortable place to occupy than the painful memories of his personal failures.

In these moments, when Bell’s focus turns from the present to the past specifically to value the past over the present, he does succumb to nostalgia. However, nostalgia has more than one voice. In its modern manifestation,

Svetlana Boym defines nostalgia as “a mourning. . .for the loss of an enchanted world with clear borders and values” (8). She categorizes this nostalgic longing into two “tendencies,” restorative and reflective nostalgia, meant to act “not [as] absolute types, but rather. . .ways of giving shape and meaning to longing” (8, 41). Boym explicitly links restorative nostalgia with the collective, specifying that “it builds on the sense of loss in community and cohesion and offers a comforting collective script for individual longing” (42). As seen previously, critics of the novel seem to have pegged Bell as a nostalgic, and I would suggest that the type of nostalgia they seem to be sensing approaches restorative nostalgia. In some respects, this view is supported by Bell’s nostalgic turn to memories of the collective. For instance, when he remembers the old timer sheriffs, he expresses a sense of loss of values between their time and his—this certainly seems to fit with Boym’s definition of restorative nostalgia (McCarthy 63). On the other hand, although restorative nostalgia characterizes some of Bell’s reminiscences, it should not be considered as the prime feeling he expresses but as a symptom of his struggle between the different types of memory.

Just as Bell’s memories of the collective lead him to restorative nostalgia, his acceptance of his personal memories by the end of the novel leads him to a different manifestation of nostalgia. In the beginning of the novel, he says: “We lost a girl but I wont talk about that” (90). By the end, he makes this honest confession: “I dont make excuses for the way I think. Not no more. I talk to my daughter. . .I dont care how that sounds” (285). This sounds much more like “reflective nostalgia,” restorative nostalgia’s contemplative opposite, where “longing and critical thinking are not opposed to one another” (49–50). His feelings towards the past and the present vacillate between the two tendencies of nostalgia as a result of his flight between personal memory and memory of the collective, and as the plot progresses, Bell continues to seek a more independent and complex way to narrate his experiences.

Bell escapes the reductive influences of restorative nostalgia and the weaknesses of memory through his interactions with his family. According to phenomenologist Paul Ricœur, Bell’s family, or in Ricœur’s terms, his close relations, can close the gap between personal and collective memory because “[t]hese close relations occupy the middle-ground between the self and the ‘they’” (132). Our close relations literally share the same memories as we do, like the collective, but unlike memories of the general, impersonal collective, they do not deny us who we are individually. Ricœur continues: “my close relations are those who approve of my existence and whose existence I approve of in the

reciprocity and equality of esteem” (132). They provide outside reference without negating the self. Bell finds balance in his closest relations—his deceased daughter, his wife, his uncle Ellis—and is able to rely on them to come to a better understanding of his worth and of the world around him.

His interaction with his Uncle Ellis especially demonstrates how close relations can defuse extremes in memory to eventually bring clarity. In a conversation with Bell, his uncle acts as a mitigating influence, pulling him back from the brink of his own dark thoughts when necessary and pushing him to question the idealized collective memories of his grandfather (and the other old timer lawmen that he constantly compares himself to, by extension) (278–79). And it is in a subsequent reminiscence of this conversation, in a first-person narrative, when he ceases to idealize the past. He muses: “I thought about my family and about [Uncle Ellis] out there in his wheelchair in the old house and it just seemed to me that this country has got a strange kind of history and a damned bloody one too” (284). The present may be bloody, but now Bell can finally admit that the past has been no different. He also gains perspective on his personal worth. Later when thinking of his father, he concedes: “As the world might look at it I suppose I was a better man” (308).

His close relations enable him to have this clearer vision, enabling him to acknowledge his limitations and the change that has come over him at the beginning of the novel, like a prophet announcing his vision in retrospect. Certainly, this vision includes knowledge of evil, of the “living prophet of destruction”—Chigurh has prompted his change (4). This is also a place of clarity and self-knowledge that is unprecedented for Bell. At the end of his opening remarks, he tells the reader unequivocally: “It aint just bein older. . . I think a man would have to put his soul at hazard. And I wont do that. I think now that maybe I never would” (4). He has been able to gain perspective on his own experiences and memories, and divorce himself from the determinative and subsuming influence of his memories of the collective. What follows in his first-person narratives is an increasingly visionary testimony born out of navigating the pressures of memory and the changing times.

Some critics of the novel have likewise linked Bell to the prophetic, though not through his memories. Walsh does not find “divine speech” in Bell’s narratives, but he does call the novel “a new, slightly twisted biblical story of life among the demons” (344). Ellis coins the phrase “the Old Man book” to describe Bell’s italicized musings, and compares Bell to Jeremiah of the Old Testament, both in tone and tenor (227, 243). Lydia Cooper’s critical volume on McCarthy

most closely links Bell's unease in the present to his potential as a visionary, stating: "Bell, haunted by prophetic visions of hope, looks into the future and the past in order to construct a sense, however elusive, of transcendence" (123). Though untraditionally, Bell's culminating vision and his privileged narration seem to fit him with the mantel of a prophet.

We should resist the urge, however, to classify him so easily as a prophet and thereby classify all his narratives as liturgy, gospel, or determinative—he is not so simply or dogmatically defined. Bell himself seems to invite this mantel, making grim pronouncements on the future throughout the novel. In the middle of novel, he reflects: "I know as certain as death that there aint nothing short of the second comin of Christ that can slow this train" (159). His clarity of thought and vision only comes after his experiences in the plot and his struggle with his memory. Only then does he consciously reflect on his ability to see, telling the reader, "I've been forced to look at it again and I've been forced to look at myself" (296). Consequently, to call him a prophet outright only makes smooth what has proven to be a fraught and conflicted narrative journey. The title "prophet" also connotes a privileged connection to deity, being chosen or elect, which the novel lacks. Rather, Bell could more aptly be called a seer or, to go even further and strip the deterministic and religious connotations that this word also carries, a "see-er," as in "one who sees or beholds" ("see-er"). This may seem like a negligible quibble, but it more accurately represents Bell's ultimate decision not to engage the enemy, unlike a prophet of God, while also emphasizing that he is finally able to see himself and the world around him.

Like most of McCarthy's novels, *No Country for Old Men* ends on an unresolved note. Despite his final clarity, will Bell inevitably grow too old and out of touch to see, like the old people he describes as looking "like they woke up and they dont know how they got where they're at" (304)? Bell leaves us with one last vision. He describes a dream, where his father passes him in the snow on horseback, carrying a horn with fire, going on ahead of him to light a fire (309). These are Bell's closing words: "And in the dream I knew that he was goin on ahead and that he was fixin to make a fire somewhere out there in all that dark and all that cold and I knew that whenever I got there he would be there" (309). According to Edwin T. Arnold, a noted McCarthy scholar, "in the world of McCarthy, the only true destination is death" (11). Eventually, we all cease to see when we pass into complete obsolescence, but perhaps it does not really matter how dark or how cold we have been on the journey. The fire is ready, and someone we love is there.

The complexity in Bell's narratives should prompt a deeper analysis of his culminating vision. We should listen to him more closely when he tells us: "I'm not the man of an older time they say I am. I wish I was. I'm a man of this time" (279). This short study of memory in Bell's first-person narratives reinforces his importance both as a character and as a structure for the novel. His narratives reveal that private memories and memories of the collective can denature time, tainting the present with guilt and shame, the past with undeserved prosperity. Despite his obvious failures, the memories of those close to him help Bell attain a sense of stability and clarity. As a seer, he provides the reader with a vision of the world of the novel—a world that has always been bloody and violent, but also a world where those closest to us carve out a place where we can rest.

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# Contributors

**Jillie Orth Reimer** graduated from Brigham Young University this year with a bachelor's degree in English. Her research and writing is focused on representations of gender in literature.

**Andrew Doub** is a second-year MA student at Brigham Young University. He studies British literature, and he is currently writing a thesis on the concept of the “leak” from the radical print culture of the Regency period to the digital age. Andrew presented a version of this article at the 2015 British Women Writers Conference.

**Camille Richey** is a self-proclaimed chocolate-lover, nature-admirer, and Scandinavia-enthusiast. Camille enjoys writing her own music and conversing about faith, subjectivity, meaning-making, and, of course, Taylor Swift in her spare time.

**Katherine Snow Nelson** holds an MA in English from Brigham Young University and now teaches composition at her alma mater. Her interests include Renaissance literature, the devotional lyric, gender studies, contemporary poetry, and magical realism.

**Todd G. Workman** is an English major with minors in creative writing, Portuguese, and Russian. Todd plans to one day teach at the college level and to write for a career. He likes pickles and rollerblading.

**Alan Hickey** is currently a juris doctorate candidate at the J. Reuben Clark Law School. As an undergraduate, he majored in political science with minors in both English and editing. He is married to his beautiful wife, Rachel, and they have one lovely daughter named Evelyn.

**Samuel Turner** is a senior at BYU studying English. His research interests include British literature, modernism, feminism, and post-humanism.

**RoseE Hadden** received her BA in English in 2007 from Brigham Young University, and she is currently a graduate student at the same university. Her areas of interest include Victorian women's literature, Renaissance literature, folklore studies, and feminism.

**Gina Schneck** is a master's student studying 19th century American women's literature (despite her contribution being an essay on British literature). Gina is originally from Ohio—the Kirtland area—but currently lives in Provo with her husband and their cats.

**Megan M. Toone** is the third of four children and is a native of Idaho Falls, Idaho. She received a BA from BYU-Idaho where she majored in English Education and minored in Art Education. Megan is now finishing up work on her master's degree in English at BYU.

**Marie-Reine Pugh** is currently completing her master's degree in English at BYU, with an emphasis on twentieth-century and contemporary American literature. The article printed in this journal is part of a larger project, her thesis, which includes a similar study of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* in addition to *No Country for Old Men*.