“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: A Journal of Literary Criticism* is a student-run journal associated with the English Department at Brigham Young University. We are supported by a team of dedicated volunteer student editors, and we know that we could never produce this journal without their amazing efforts. It has been a long and busy semester, but we are proud of the work that our staff has been able to produce under the consistent pressure.

It was one year ago that we began contemplating the direction for our Winter 2017 issue, and we are incredibly pleased with how our goals came to fruition in this issue. In our initial meeting, we knew we wanted to create a special forum around Edgar Allan Poe, and we were fortunate enough to receive a wonderful and thought provoking forum prompt from Professor Scott Peeples from the College of Charleston. We would like to thank Dr. Peeples for his efforts and the contribution he made to *Criterion*. His prompt “What Can Poe Do for You?” generated a great amount of interest and encouraged our authors to approach Poe in a new way. We are excited to present our readers with these intriguing papers in the forum section of this issue.

We also received an unprecedented response to our open submission call. The variety of topics we received made for an exhilarating final decision. From Dante and Shakespeare to Capote and O’Brien, we believe this issue’s articles will appeal to the wide and varied interests of our readers.
While it is difficult to adequately express our appreciation to all of the relevant parties connected with a student journal, we would like to especially thank the BYU English Department for their continued support for the journal. We would also like to show our gratitude to our faculty advisor, Emron Esplin, for being a pillar of support for this journal for the past three years. Finally, we would like to recognize the efforts of Amanda Smith, who won our cover design contest, giving us a delightfully Poe-themed aesthetic for this issue.

We sincerely hope that our readers enjoy the Winter 2017 issue of Criterion: A Journal of Literary Criticism.

Chelsea Lee and Makayla Okamura, Editors-in-Chief
Herman Melville’s focus on Ahab in *Moby-Dick*, and particularly his focus on the destructive consequences of Ahab’s obsession with discovering hidden truths, is not necessarily a concern with the desire to seek truth, but rather with the isolation that Ahab brings upon himself through his searching. Ahab’s “madness” is a madness of isolated fixation with truth which can be countered by human companionship—much like Melville’s own friendship with Nathaniel Hawthorne. In a letter written to Hawthorne, Melville expressed the connection that he felt with Hawthorne as a fellow author and friend who understood him and his writing: “A sense of unspeakable security is in me at this moment, on account of your having understood the book . . . I feel that the Godhead is broken up like the bread at the supper and we are the pieces. Hence this infinite fraternity of feeling” (*Letters* 142). Melville’s expression of his profound connection to Hawthorne is significant because it is both an intellectual connection and an emotional bond coming out of Hawthorne’s recognition of the major themes at work in *Moby-Dick*. Melville’s spiritualized description of the connection and deep friendship that he shares with Hawthorne is particularly interesting because it is intensified in Melville’s depiction of Ishmael and
Queequeg’s companionship. Just as Melville and Hawthorne’s friendship is comparable to communion bread, Ishmael’s multicultural companionship with Queequeg is a redeeming experience that saves him from the belief that he can possess all of the answers to life’s questions. As such, Queequeg becomes a Christ figure who introduces Ishmael to cultural otherness and relativism, saving him mentally from the hellish madness experienced by Ahab in the same way that Queequeg’s “coffin” physically saves Ishmael at the conclusion of the novel (*Moby-Dick* 427).

In order to illuminate the ideal nature of Ishmael’s communal multiculturalism, Melville juxtaposes the character of Ahab, who directs his efforts only toward his own selfish, personal mission to dissect the meaning of Moby Dick. His expressed goal moves beyond a desire to achieve vengeance for the loss of his leg to an epistemological desire to “strike through the mask” of the whale’s enigmatic surface and discover the underlying secrets within (140). Ahab’s pursuit of the whale is a pursuit of absolute truth, and as a result, he requires unitary, objective answers in order to locate the whale and extract the knowledge that he seeks. When Ahab is presented with the head of a decapitated whale that the crew has harvested, he asks this severed head to reveal the solitary secret contained within, commanding the personified whale head: “Tell us the secret thing that is in thee. Of all divers, thou hast dived the deepest” (249). Ahab’s assertion in this passage that the whale has “dived the deepest” illustrates Melville’s metaphoric treatment of diving as a symbol for deep knowledge and abstract interpretation. As Ishmael also attempts to interpret the white whale and his significance, he notes that explaining the full mystery of the whale “would be to dive deeper than Ishmael can go,” indicating his interest in understanding the whale coupled with recognition of his own limitations and the inaccessibility of the deepest depths of knowledge (158). Additionally, the notion of diving as an indication of interpretation can be seen in “The Doubloon,” when the efforts of various crewmembers to interpret the coin that Ahab has nailed to the mast causes their faces to take on an aspect that “might be somewhere within nine fathoms long. And all from looking at a piece of gold” (333). This change in facial expression stems from the crewmembers’ interpretive process. The crewmembers’ attempt to discover meaning in the ambiguous images depicted on the coin causes their faces to become “nine fathoms long”—paralleling the diving movements of their minds into
the oceanic depths of epistemological mysteries. Melville’s link between diving and deep interpretive thought explains Ahab’s claim that the deep diving whale may be able to provide answers to the mysteries that plague his life, such as the ultimate reason or purpose behind the loss of his leg. Ahab’s need to understand the significance of his injury, and his desire to pursue these answers in spite of the dangers to himself and his crew, represents an obsessive impulse, a need to ascertain definitive truths beyond their practical limits. Lauren Becker observes a similar problem with Ahab’s fixation on definitive answers: “[Ahab’s] monomania can be seen as an obsessive desire with his Truth, regardless of its practical consequences. Even when he learns of his Truth’s impracticality, his stubbornness will not allow him to give it up” (43). Ahab’s insistence, not only that the severed whale head holds access to truth, but also that the head contains only one truth or “secret thing,” illustrates his devotion to seeking out a singular, definite answer as the purpose of his quest.

Ahab’s obsession with diving into interpretive depths is ultimately a solitary and destructive one, something that he expresses to Starbuck before his final assault on the whale when he cries out that his life has been a “desolation of solitude” (405). Ahab’s reflection on his isolation causes him to acknowledge the detachment that began with his role as a captain and intensified during his pursuit of Moby Dick. As Ahab observes, his role as a captain contributed to his initial isolation, because his authoritative role formed the “walled-town of a Captain’s exclusiveness, which admits but small entrance to any sympathy” (405). After noting the authority that isolates him from common sympathy and communion with others, Ahab charts a progression from isolation to the dehumanizing obsession with truth that has dominated his life: “And then, the madness, the frenzy, the boiling blood and the smoking brow, with which, for a thousand lowerings old Ahab has furiously, foamingly chased his prey—more a demon than a man!” (405). Ahab’s interaction with Starbuck throughout this discussion is surprisingly open, but it describes a life that has been continuously private and closed off, both due to the isolating attributes of his authoritative career as a captain and, more significantly, due to the dehumanizing isolation of his obsession; a fixation with definitive truth that the other crewmembers cannot necessarily understand. It is this obsession with delving into the depths to find the ultimate truth while shutting out
the comforting voices of community which causes Ahab to launch into a pursuit of Moby Dick that destroys both himself and the entire crew with the exception of Ishmael (Moby-Dick 406).

Although Ahab’s destructive demise suggests that isolation and an obsessive desire to grasp absolute truth can be destructive, Melville’s desire to write, ponder, and explore complex ideas, and his similar depiction of Ishmael, reveals that intellectual searching is still a valuable pursuit—as long as it is conducted in a safe manner. In order to safely pursue intellectual inquiry Melville proposes that the individual must be tethered to other human beings as he searches in much the same way the monkey-rope joins Ishmael and Queequeg while they work on harvesting materials from whales (Moby-Dick 255). In her study of physical contact and the pursuit of knowledge, Lisa Ann Robertson notes that the attempt to decipher truth can be beneficial so long as it is balanced by human companionship and the awareness that many absolute truths are unattainable: “We are incapable of knowing if metaphysical reality exists objectively because it is empirically unverifiable. Still, trying to discover these truths makes for a grand adventure, as Melville so aptly demonstrates” (7). Robertson adds that the persistent search for deeper knowledge is personally fulfilling, but that it “must be accompanied by human touch” so that the pursuit of knowledge does not result in the psychological damage experienced by Ahab (7). The potential for human contact or companionship to save a mind mired in abstract searching can be observed in a metaphorical sense in the chapter “Cistern and Buckets,” when Queequeg rescues Tashtego from drowning in a sinking whale head in which he has become trapped. As Tashtego is helping to harvest spermaceti from one of the whales, he falls inside the whale’s head while it is sinking into the water, an incident associated with abstract contemplation: “Tashtego—like the twin reciprocating bucket in a veritable well, dropped head-foremost down into this great Tun of Heidelberg, and with a horrible oily gurgling, went clean out of sight!” (271). The combination of Tashtego’s descent into the contemplative depths of the sea and his physical placement of falling “head-foremost” into this whale’s head both convey the concept of excessive contemplation or absolutism, while the fact that he is drowning in these depths confirms the inherent risk of this pursuit. When it comes to the intellectual space represented by the whale’s head, Samuel Otter remarks that the result is considerably disappointing because “it’s disgusting. It’s oily. It’s gurgling. And you’re drowning in it” (151).
As Tashtego plunges into this intellectual abyss, he has the potential to face the same isolated destruction as Ahab; however, Melville prevents Tashtego from facing this solitary demise by having Queequeg leap into the water and save Tashtego’s life. After diving in after Tashtego, Queequeg uses his sword to cut a hole in the bottom portion of the descending whale head and then pulls Tashtego out of this newly-formed hole. Melville’s portrayal of Queequeg’s approach to rescuing Tashtego goes beyond a simple description of saving a drowning man and into language that imbues the process with the metaphor of childbirth. While rescuing Tashtego, Queequeg “thrust[s] his long arm far inwards and upwards, and so haul[s] out poor Tash by the head,” an action which deliberately mirrors the birthing process (272). Additionally, the success of the Queequeg’s operation and rescue is described by Melville as the “deliverance, or rather, delivery of Tashtego” (272). Tashtago’s “delivery” by Queequeg highlights the role of community and the need to be reborn from destructive habits. Instead of drowning in a whale head that is associated with abstract pondering, Queequeg’s rescue provides “both a literal release from the whale’s head and a figurative release from conceptual cages” (Otter 152). This release is both initiated and completed by interpersonal contact which frees Tashtego’s mind from isolated intellectual destruction. It is also significant that Queequeg’s rescue is framed as a form of “delivery” or childbirth, because his role in saving Tashtego from death in contemplative depths represents a form of redemption that harkens back to Christian salvation, which necessitates being “born again” into a new mindset and outlook on life. Tashtego’s experience of a “second birth” by being saved from drowning in contemplative depths allows Melville to set up a metaphorical salvation narrative through the redemptive efforts of Queequeg. Queequeg’s role as a “savior” and his rescue as a form of “salvation” are displayed in a more overt sense through Queequeg’s influence on Ishmael in the early chapters of *Moby-Dick*. Just as Queequeg saves Tashtego from an untimely death in intellectual waters, he also saves Ishmael from a fate similar to Ahab’s disastrous pursuit of definitive truths, allowing Ishmael to embrace multiple sources of knowledge.

Ishmael’s first encounter with Queequeg and their resulting companionship initiates a transition in Ishmael’s mind from an Ahabic dependence on detached observation and excessive contemplation to a
balanced embrace of both intellect and community. When Ishmael arrives at the Spouter Inn to rest for the night before setting out on his whaling voyage, he is informed that all the rooms are currently occupied and that he will need to share a bed with a harpooner. Ishmael’s initial reluctance to share a bed with Queequeg stems largely from the innkeeper Peter Coffin’s description of Queequeg as “a dark complexioned chap” who “eats nothing but steaks, and likes ‘em rare” (28). Coffin’s description of Queequeg as a harpooner from an unfamiliar cultural and racial background is a source of anxiety for Ishmael, an anxiety which he attempts to assuage by silently watching Queequeg undress and conduct his worship practices. Ishmael’s observation of Queequeg lasts for a surprisingly long time, objectifying and stereotyping Queequeg as a terrifying Other: “It was now quite plain that he must be some abominable savage or other . . . A peddler of heads too—perhaps the heads of his own brothers. He might take a fancy to mine—heavens! look at that tomahawk!” (34–35). Ishmael’s stereotypical view turns Queequeg into a frightening figure rather than allowing him to appreciate a new culture that he could embrace. Observing Queequeg’s alternate cultural practices from the safety of the bed, Ishmael sees Queequeg as an enigmatic figure with tattoos and other features that are mysterious to Ishmael and cause him to long for answers: “I am no coward, but what to make of this head-peddling purple rascal altogether passed my comprehension . . . I was so afraid of him that I was not game enough just then to address him, and demand a satisfactory answer concerning what seemed inexplicable in him” (34). Ishmael’s obsessive observation of Queequeg’s tattoos and his interest in discovering the “inexplicable” in Queequeg at this point is almost identical to Ahab’s later observation of Queequeg’s tattoos. When Ahab is exposed to Queequeg’s tattoos, which are imbued with a meaning that will inevitably “moulder away” upon Queequeg’s death and remain “unsolved to the last,” he studies them and expresses his frustration that he may constantly study or “survey” Queequeg, but will never discover the ultimate meaning of the enigmatic tattoos, referring to the inaccessibility of the truth behind them as a “devilish tantalization” (366–367).

Unlike Ahab, who dies as a detached, obsessive observer in pursuit of absolute truth, Ishmael is forced out of his observer status and into the role of a participant and companion. Ishmael’s anxious observation of Queequeg quickly transforms into outright terror when Queequeg
extinguishes the lights, jumps into the bed, and initiates physical contact with Ishmael: “I sang out. I could not help it now; and giving a grunt of astonishment he began feeling me” (35). As Joseph Fruscione observes, Queequeg’s physical contact with Ishmael shatters the illusion that Ishmael can arrive at knowledge through observation and forces him into the role of a participant: “For Ishmael, this safe distance at which to experience ‘the spell’ of looking disappears; he quickly transforms from an audience of to a participant in Queequeg’s pre-sleep ritual” (15). Ishmael’s sudden transition from observer to participant dismantles his dependence on detached observation and causes him to embrace physical contact as a source of knowledge because sole dependence on sight is an inadequate empirical method. Robertson explains that the detached visual senses are simply unable to arrive at interpersonal truths about Queequeg and Ishmael's companionship: “Just as his early visual impressions of Queequeg as an ‘infernal’ and ‘wild cannibal’ are revealed to be incorrect, so his sense of sight fails to provide him with accurate information about his new relationship with Queequeg” (13). Ishmael's physical contact with Queequeg serves to initiate his embrace of Queequeg’s cultural identity, a cultural embrace which Ishmael expresses only a few paragraphs later: “What’s all this fuss I have been making about, thought I to myself—the man’s a human being just as I am” (36). Contact with Queequeg transforms Ishmael, disrupting his confidence in the detached intellectual gaze and allowing him to recognize the need for interpersonal contact in order to discover multicultural truths.

While the description of Ishmael and Queequeg’s physical contact, shared bed, and “marriage” bring to mind homoerotic associations, this relationship has been explored by other critics (see, for example, the works of Steven B. Herrmann and Leslie Fiedler), and it is worth noting that the concept of marriage and romantic attachment is also utilized in the Bible as an allegory for salvation. In the book of Ephesians, husbands are urged to base their treatment of their wives on the example of Christ’s love for the church: “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word” (Eph 5.25–26). In this case, the biblical allegory of marriage is designed to represent an intimate relationship between a redeeming lover, Christ, and his bride, the church, which receives his affection. Given that this marriage places
Christ in the role of the husband and the church as a wife, it is particularly striking that Melville uses his familiarity with the Bible to place Ishmael in the position of a wife figure when he awakens the next morning after sharing the bed with Queequeg: “I found Queequeg’s arm thrown over me in the most loving and affectionate manner. You had almost thought I had been his wife” (Moby-Dick 36). This bond with Queequeg is vital to Ishmael’s psychological health; Paul McCarthy observes in his study of madness that the fact that “touchy, imaginative Ishmael manages to keep his equilibrium” without declining into madness himself is primarily due to the direct influence of Queequeg (348). By positioning Queequeg as a Christ-figure and Ishmael as an individual in need of redemption, Melville is also utilizing the concept of marriage to present a picture of salvation, the primary difference being that Ishmael receives a cultural redemption rather than a religious conversion.

Melville continues to develop Ishmael’s story as a salvation narrative in the chapter “A Bosom Friend,” when Ishmael’s perspective undergoes a shift from seeing Queequeg as an intriguing enigma to viewing him as a potential companion. While Ishmael’s earlier experience in sharing a bed with Queequeg implies a redemptive marriage, this passage clearly describes Ishmael’s acceptance of Queequeg as a “salvation” of sorts that is accompanied by an internal transformation: “I began to be sensible of strange feelings. I felt a melting in me. No more my splintered heart and maddened hand were turned against the wolfish world. This soothing savage had redeemed it” (56). Ishmael’s loving friendship and quasi-marriage to Queequeg gives him a form of redemption, endowing Ishmael vicariously with a degree of exposure to an alternate culture and thus an alternate understanding of truth. Ishmael equates the newfound cultural syncretism between Queequeg’s beliefs and his own with a religious revival that has saved him from damnation, in this case an interpersonal and multicultural relief from the obsessive need for certainty.

Melville’s depiction of Queequeg as a Pacific Islander rather than a more homogeneous American identity and Queequeg’s role in personally saving Ishmael from obsession and insanity are interconnected attributes that may be linked to nineteenth-century perceptions of decreased insanity among non-white cultures. As Norman Dain notes in his study of nineteenth-century concepts of insanity, researchers during this period observed fewer cases of insanity among Native Americans and African
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Americans and thus assumed that insanity was primarily a consequence of living in an industrialized society that was deemed more civilized than other indigenous cultures (89). Lynn Gamwell and Nancy Tomes add that the belief that other cultural identities were not susceptible to madness was fairly prevalent in the nineteenth century and influenced whether individuals from other denigrated races could be admitted into insane asylums: “Because medical authorities linked mental derangement with advanced civilization, they tended to assume that the more ‘childlike,’ dependent races, including Indians and African Americans, suffered less frequently from insanity and therefore did not need asylum care” (56). By depicting Queequeg as the cure for Ahabic madness, Melville invokes some contemporary notions of the Other as less influenced by insanity, but he rewrites or perhaps “redeems” the imperialist nineteenth-century implications of this worldview by allowing Ishmael to find healing by embracing Queequeg’s cultural identity. As Ishmael begins to unite with Queequeg, he also integrates attributes of Queequeg’s culture into his own lifestyle, joining Queequeg in some of his cultural practices. Shortly after Ishmael and Queequeg begin to pursue a relationship, Ishmael asks Queequeg if he can share a smoke with him on his tomahawk pipe, an action that illustrates the cultural merger between Ishmael and Queequeg, as well as an embrace of community: “Soon I proposed a social smoke; and, producing his pipe and tomahawk, he quietly offered me a puff. And then we sat exchanging puffs from that wild pipe of his, and keeping it regularly passing between us” (56). By sharing Queequeg’s pipe, Ishmael allows himself to embrace a new cultural practice and engages with Queequeg as an equal and sociable compatriot.

Ishmael’s transformation through the influence of Queequeg is so profound and dramatic that he eventually transitions from observing Queequeg’s unique tattooing in a detached manner in “The Spouter Inn,” to placing similar tattooing on his own body: “The skeleton dimensions I shall now proceed to set down are copied verbatim from my right arm, where I had them tattooed” (346). Ishmael then expresses his desire to leave the rest of his body “blank” so that his remaining skin can serve as the canvas for a poem he is composing, possibly in remembrance of Queequeg (346). Ishmael’s description of these tattoos is particularly significant because unlike Queequeg or Ahab, the description of his tattoos serves as his primary physical description in the novel. In Melville’s Anatomies,
a work which informs many of my observations about physicality and identity in the latter portion of this essay, Samuel Otter observes that “in contrast to the pages devoted to the details of Ahab’s aspect and ailments, the regard for Queequeg’s figure and figures, and chapter after chapter lavished on the whale, no words in Moby-Dick describe the features of Ishmael” (165). As a result of Ishmael’s limited physical description, his own description of his tattoos serves to define him because he offers up no other physical identifiers: “[When] Ishmael reveals that he has the measurements of a whale skeleton tattooed on his arm, the fact that he has a tattoo, and even the fact that he has a right arm, come as something of a surprise” (Otter 165). By physically identifying, and in some ways defining Ishmael by his tattoos, Melville suggests that Ishmael has embraced Queequeg’s culture to such an extent that it has defined his identity, in much the same way that a new religious belief might serve to redefine an individual’s consciousness. However, it is important to note that Ishmael’s acceptance of tattooing is not just an acceptance of racial conversion by Queequeg, but it is also an example of cultural syncretism because his tattoos are English words and figures rather than tattoos that resemble Queequeg’s. Ishmael's embrace of Queequeg's culture through smoking the other man’s pipe and the tattooing of his own body without necessarily abandoning his original cultural identity express a model of cultural hybridity and merging within Ishmael’s mind.

Ishmael’s willingness to cover his body with tattoos in this way is particularly striking when compared to the protagonist from Melville’s first novel, Typee: Tommo refuses to accept tattooing, and, by extension refuses the raciocultural conversion that accompanies it. Tommo’s first concerns with the process of tattooing seem to stem from a concern that tattooing will damage his physical appearance; Tommo describes himself “shuddering at the ruin [the tattoo artist] might inflict upon my figure-head” (Typee 219). Regardless of Tommo’s initial concerns about the physical damage of tattooing, it becomes evident over the course of his narration that Tommo is far more concerned about the religious implications of tattooing than he is about a change in his physical appearance: “A fact which I soon afterwards learned augmented my apprehension. The whole system of tattooing was, I found, connected with their religion; and it was evident, therefore, that they were resolved to make a convert of me” (220). Tommo’s hostility toward receiving tattoos from the Typee is not
only a rejection of the religious conversion implicated by tattooing, but it is also a refusal to become a part of the Typee culture he is being invited to join, which becomes evident as he begins to search frantically for a means of leaving the Typee settlement (220). The idea that Tommo’s aversion to tattooing suggests a deeper rejection of cultural conversion rather than simply religious conversion comes from Otter’s observation that the anxiety surrounding Tommo and tattooing is ultimately an anxiety about embracing an alternate racial consciousness. Otter explains that “Tommo is afraid not of theological conversion but of racial conversion. Tattoos are ‘engrafted upon white skin’—as though the operation involved a translation of living tissue from Polynesian to American” (40). Tommo’s rejection of tattooing in a physical, religious, but most importantly, cultural sense indicates that he is not fearfully rejecting the practice of tattooing in particular but is instead rejecting the larger symbolism of an opportunity for raciocultural salvation through the Typee people, the same salvation provided to Ishmael by Queequeg in *Moby-Dick*.

Ishmael’s connection with Queequeg is not only significant because it “converts” him to a more pluralistic way of seeing the world, but also because it serves to introduce him to a wider web of human interconnectivity, a connectivity that is displayed quite prominently in the chapter “The Squeeze of Hands.” While Ishmael is breaking down the tiny globules of spermaceti with his crewmates, he experiences a moment of radical interconnectivity where the boundaries between himself and the other crewmembers destabilizes:

I found myself unwittingly squeezing my co-laborers’ hands in it, mistaking their hands for the gentle globules. Such an abounding, affectionate, friendly, loving feeling did this avocation beget . . . Come; let us squeeze hands all round; nay, let us all squeeze ourselves into each other; let us squeeze ourselves universally into the very milk and sperm of kindness (322–323).

This extreme dissolution of interpersonal boundaries presents a strong depiction of love—a love which, as William Ellery Sedgwick observes, must eschew divisions and segmentation: “All that withdraws men from men and puts barriers between them, and obstructs the flow of vital sympathies, all that is evil . . . Virtue does not keep herself to herself on the quarterdeck but descends and fraternizes with the men” (161). As Sedgewick’s quote
suggests, love and interpersonal connection should not be concerned with the hierarchies that generally carve up human existence as a dissecting scalpel would, but love should instead find companionship in a variety of people, including those from diverse or oppressed perspectives.

The experience of blurred boundaries through squeezing the spermaceti also presents an alternate approach to pursuing knowledge as Ishmael engages in tactile contact along with his crewmates rather than isolated dissection. Otter expresses the function of “The Squeeze of Hands” in dissolving intellectual hierarchies through physical touch when he notes that “in this scene, fingers are extended and boundaries stretched. The monumental difference represented by the whale is caressed and inhaled rather than dissected, calibrated, or deciphered” (159). The tactile and communal method of engaging with the whale that Otter describes here is directly oppositional to Ahab’s obsessive dive for truth and reveals a communal presence which can sustain individuals as they pursue deeper truths. The benefit of interpersonal connection as a means of ameliorating obsession can also be observed in this instance as Ahab’s manic quest, which has “infected” the entire crew to a certain extent, is forgotten and replaced by community: “I forgot all about our horrible oath; in that inexpressible sperm, I washed my hands and my heart of it” (322). Ishmael’s communal interaction has the power to supersede the destructive influence of Ahab’s obsessive quest for absolute truth because it provides him with a different source of focus and fulfillment, in much the same way that pragmatism as a philosophy seeks out community and eschews the pursuit of absolute truths. Leigh Hunt, an essayist that Melville read while he was writing *Moby-Dick*, describes a similar curative influence through community in his essay “Advice to the Melancholy” (Sanborn 109). In this essay, Hunt argues that communal and domestic pursuits helped to alleviate melancholy feelings which also constituted a form of mental illness: “Increase all of your natural and healthy enjoyments. Cultivate your afternoon fire-side, the society of your friends, the company of agreeable children” (24). In reading this essay, Melville may have found part of the inspiration for his own depiction of a redeeming communal experience, an experience which saves individuals from madness and also prevents them from losing their sanity in the first place. As Robertson observes, Melville’s depiction of community presents companionship with other human beings as a
source of peace that the individual can take solace in, particularly after confronting the impossibility of deciphering the mysteries of existence: “Periodic physical contact with another human being is Melville’s antidote to the maddening fact that the ‘secrets’ of the universe are impenetrable” (7). By engaging in human affection, which ideally breaks down hierarchal and interpersonal boundaries, individuals are exposed to a variety of commingling perspectives and may even become less certain that there is a definitive truth to pursue in the first place.

While Ishmael’s alternate, communal and pragmatic approach to understanding the world is promoted as a better option than Ahab’s obsessive destruction, this does not necessarily mean that Ishmael’s approach is void of challenges or free of frightening implications. While Ishmael’s mode of thinking can be quite liberating in its disassociation from the limitations of categorization and domination by obsessive extremes, it is also an insecure, perilous, and frightening existence because the individual is no longer able to rely on formulaic, ingrained cultural knowledge. Ishmael’s embrace of cultural syncretism by uniting Queequeg’s beliefs with his own is also an embrace of a pragmatic approach to truth which emphasizes the importance of community in arriving at an understanding of truth and a rejection of the concept of absolute truths. While the official genesis of pragmatist philosophy wasn’t until the late nineteenth century, Maurice Lee notes that Melville’s writing contains early echoes of this communal, experiential, anti-absolutist philosophy (396). As a worldview that shuns objective truths, the pragmatist philosophy that Ishmael seems to be embracing also has the unfortunate consequence of setting him adrift in a world that he can never fully understand, a world where his experiences are rewriting his understanding of truth on a constant basis. Edwin Shneidman explores a similar idea to the instability of pragmatism when he writes that a complex worldview that embraces ambiguity and duality is terrifying because it is completely oppositional to the “ordered” world that people are familiar with: “To exist with the knowledge of ambivalences, dualities, and oxymorons is a more complicated challenge than to live in the more simple world of the sixteen valid moods of Aristotelian syllogism. And even more frightening, for unlike the ordered Aristotelian world, there are no magic talismanic formulas to guide us” (Shneidman 556). Ishmael’s hierarchal destabilization in “Squeeze of Hands” is a good example of the uncertainty that Shneidman is referring to in this case. While Ishmael is
exposed to a state of transcendental union with the crew in the communal act of sperm-squeezing, an experience of all individuals being squeezed “into each other” and becoming one is a radical new state of being that can potentially be just as terrifying as it is exhilarating. Ishmael’s active blurring and merging of hierarchies and cultural boundaries enables him to move beyond the limitations of objective analysis and enter into an exciting state of being that is free from the pitfalls of absolutism. However, in spite of the joys of Ishmael’s communal blurring, his experiences also signify the entry into a frightening world of uncertainty, liminality, and the unsettling potential for aimlessness.

Ishmael exists in Melville’s narrative as a means of introducing an alternate way to negotiate the world, one which does not depend on detachment, dissection, or absolutism. Ishmael observes after investigating the whale’s tale that in spite of his efforts and repeated explorations, he will never fully comprehend the mysterious attributes of the whale: “Dissect him how I may, then, I but go skin deep; I know him not, and never will. But if I know not even the tail of this whale, how understand his head? much more, how comprehend his face, when face he has none?” (296). Ishmael accepts that some answers are beyond the scope of his knowledge even though he also enjoys searching for this knowledge of the whale. His intellectual pursuit and embrace of unknowability reflects the pragmatic desire to pursue truth, even as it rejects the pursuit of absolutes. The acceptance that Ishmael displays by recognizing his own limited knowledge, as well as the fact that he cannot “dissect” the whale in order to arrive at definitive truth, sets Ishmael in direct contrast to Ahab who must “strike through the mask” in order to break through appearances and arrive at absolute truth (140). This problematic, unrelenting “dissection” of cultural mysteries is precisely what Ahab does as he studies Queequeg obsessively and then expresses his frustration when he cannot arrive at an explanation for what Queequeg’s tattoos mean (367).

While Ahab is himself a mixed character at many points, both romanticized and destructive, the juxtaposition between Ahab and Ishmael allows Ishmael to present himself as the solution for the pitfalls and devastation encountered by Ahab. As Emory Elliott explains, Ishmael’s survival is a form of balance because he combines deep, in some cases even scientific, contemplation with interpersonal union: “One moment, he is the empirical scientist cataloguing and defining in detail each type of whale in the ‘Cetology’ chapter while at another he
is squeezing the sperm and the hands of other seamen, appreciating the universal communication and spirit that flows through them” (190). Because Ishmael engages in both communal enrichment and a search for knowledge, the knowledge that he discovers is more multicultural and interpersonal, making him less vulnerable to the obsessive destruction encountered by Ahab. Ishmael’s survival provides hope to readers because it offers an alternative to the destructive fate met by Ahab. Robertson describes Ishmael as the redemptive solution to Ahab when she writes: “Once his voyage has begun, Ahab will not abandon it, but others learn ways to make it manageable. Ishmael is Ahab’s problem solved. The quest requires a shuttle-like approach that alternates between seeking and resting, questing and communing” (14). Because Ishmael embraces community, he achieves a balance between “questing” after truth and “communing” with others a balance which changes his outlook on the pursuit of knowledge, allowing him to appreciate the chase after knowledge more than any definitive knowledge that he may gain from the pursuit.

Ishmael’s companionship with Queequeg is not only a source of personal solace, but ultimately a force that completely transforms Ishmael’s worldview and ensures his future survival. Without his embrace of a spiritual redemption through Queequeg, Ishmael’s lifestyle would be an echo of Ahab’s obsessive, detached approach to the world, and it would likely have the same destructive result. Instead of experiencing death as Ahab and the rest of the crew does, Ishmael emerges from the wreckage as the only survivor of the Pequod. His continued survival is once again due to Queequeg, as Ishmael explains that Queequeg’s coffin, the only remaining symbol of Queequeg himself, has survived the disaster and preserved his life (Moby-Dick 427). The death of Queequeg and the manner in which the symbol of that death, his coffin, becomes the source of Ishmael’s continued life, merely cements the depiction of Queequeg as a cultural Christ figure which reoccurs throughout the novel. Through Queequeg, Ishmael is culturally converted, welcomed into an understanding of truth that is communal and infinite in its expansive potential. A worldview that can contain the conflicting, multicultural views of the community and still hunger for more without obsessing over truths that are unattainable.
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Criterion
The Space In-between
Exploring Liminality in *Jane Eyre*

*Megan Clark*

From Mrs. Reed’s house to Morton, Jane Eyre is always singled out as otherworldly. Throughout the novel, Charlotte Brontë creates different spheres and worlds, especially through the means of social class and the way people are perceived and treated. These worlds are presented in juxtaposed pairs, but Jane never belongs to either world. She remains in her own realm, always separated from the others. Throughout the text, she is compared to an elf or fairy, emphasizing the otherworldliness that defines her. While some look at Jane as a social outcast due exclusively to class boundaries and other limitations outside of her control, it is important to recognize her agency in the matter. Despite what critics, such as Sarah Gilead and John Peters, have said about her “gaining social membership” by the end of the book, there is extensive textual evidence that Jane is always a part of this otherworld, a liminal place that belongs neither to one world nor the other. During each stage of her life, Jane’s reaction to her separation is the very thing that leads to her otherworldliness in the next stage. There are moments in the text where she seems to almost escape this liminal realm, but in the end she must remain there, with Rochester eventually joining her in the otherworld.

We see the beginning of Jane’s separation and perpetual liminality during her time at Gateshead. She is singled out and excluded, made to feel lesser than her spoiled cousins. The importance of this separation
is made apparent by Brontë’s emphasis of it on the first page of the novel. Within the first paragraphs, Jane has been “dispensed from joining the group” and described as unnatural (5). The Reeds, in the words of John Peters, “attempt to transform Jane into the other by excluding her from society and by labeling her as something other than human” (57). Jane then chooses to separate herself from the Reeds with a physical barrier, the red curtain, and encloses herself in her own realm of books and private thought. This is our introduction to Jane’s world. It is a place of imagination and artistry where Jane can escape the labels imposed upon her and form “idea[s] of her own” (6). She tells us that in this state, in her world, she is happy. This peace of mind is broken along with the removal of the physical barrier that she had established between herself and her hard-hearted family. John Reed’s arrival not only shatters Jane’s feeling of contented isolation, but it also creates a new environment of pain and terror. This fear is augmented when Jane is locked in the red-room, which becomes yet another physical barrier dividing her from the others in the house. This barrier, however, was not self-imposed. Peters describes this separation as a representation of “the physical and spiritual solitary confinement to which the Reeds relegate her” (59). Despite her previous desire to be isolated, Jane is now embittered and hurt by her forced isolation. In this state, her imagination running rampant, she begins to apply non-human labels to herself as the Reeds had done previously. While looking in the mirror she thinks to herself:

All look colder and darker in that visionary hollow than in reality: and the strange little figure there gazing at me, with a white face and arms specking the gloom, and glittering eyes of fear moving where all else was still, had the effect of a real spirit: I thought it like one of the tiny phantoms, half fairy, half imp . . . (11)

One could interpret these thoughts and acknowledgement of her nature as “other” as a mere submission to abusive words and behavior from the Reeds, but as Sarah Gilead argues, “the consequence of each [liminal] episode is to strengthen Jane’s selfhood” (305). Each life occurrence that seems only to isolate Jane from the group simultaneously allows her to further discover herself and to create her own world.

Jane’s world is not simply a separation from the family, but a liminal sphere that is caught in between two worlds, that of the Reeds and that of the servants. Jane is not one of the Reeds as made consistently clear
by Mrs. Reed, and even by Jane herself. She recognizes a discrepancy in her character and that of her cousins when she defiantly states that “they are not fit to associate with [her]” (22). The servants also disown her, saying that she is “less than a servant for [she] does nothing for [her] keep” (9). Two societies have been established, and Jane belongs to neither. Although she has felt the most happiness when in her own world of imagination, Jane still desires to be loved. She does not wish to be like the Reeds, thereby joining their world, but she does hope to be cared for by them. The Reeds, however, cannot accept Jane in her otherworldly state. It is this disapproval that embitters Jane and causes her to lash out at her aunt. Because of her behavior, Mrs. Reed tells Mr. Brocklehurst that Jane is a liar, thus “obliterating hope from the new phase of existence which [she] destined [Jane] to enter” (28). Through her reaction to her separation, Jane perpetuates this state into the next stage of her life.

At Lowood school, Jane is singled out as a liar by Mr. Brocklehurst, thus separating her from the other students and reinforcing her liminality. He calls her a “castaway,” an “interloper,” and an “alien,” publicly marking her out as otherworldly. Although most of the teachers and students do not necessarily exclude Jane as Brocklehurst would have them do, she is still made separate from them by his declaration. In response to his speech, Miss Temple reaches out specifically to Jane, along with Helen. She treats them deferentially, giving them food and talking with them. Jane no longer belongs with the mass of Lowood girls, but becomes otherworldly yet again. Gilead recognizes this phenomenon when she says, “Jane is spoken to and treated as an adult. She enters a secret and largely hypothetical microcosmic society of intellectual and humane elite” (307). Thus, Jane is separated from the group both by Brocklehurst and Miss Temple, albeit in different manners.

There is another, however, who does not belong to the world of the rest of the students—Helen Burns; Helen occupies another world that, combined with that of the students, frames Jane’s liminal realm. Her saintly behavior is something that Jane cannot comprehend at this point, let alone exhibit herself. Jane still feels the old desire for human acceptance that she thirsted for at Gateshead. She passionately tells Helen, “if others don't love me I would rather die than live—I cannot bear to be solitary and hated” (58). Helen gently chastises her and tells her to turn to God rather than rely on the love of people. This marks a turning point in Jane’s
need for approval. She begins to change, attempting to worry less about the opinions of others. Even with her efforts to reform, Jane is unable to become as angelic as Helen. Helen is raised above the rest, including Jane, by Miss Temple herself. When Jane and Helen leave Miss Temple’s room “she let [Helen] go more reluctantly; it was Helen her eye followed to the door” (62). Jane is caught between the student body on one side and upright Helen on the other. Rather than lash out as she did at Gateshead, Jane’s reaction in this stage is to emulate the exemplar of the better of the two worlds. She recognizes in Helen a willingness to take criticism, to suffer silently, and to look to God in all things. Jane sees that these qualities give her strength and allow her to live fully and happily without concern for human judgments. As she works to develop these qualities in herself, Jane cares less about the opinions of others and the labels that they place upon her—thus becoming further entrenched in her own world. These very qualities are the foundation for Jane’s otherworldliness during her time at Thornfield.

When Jane first arrives at her new home, she is lonely and must find solace in her imagination. She has yet to meet Mr. Rochester, and the company of Adèle and Mrs. Fairfax does not excite her. When she feels this discontent, Jane walks along the third floor hallway in silence, recreating the solitude of her childhood hideaway behind the red curtain. Here she lets her imagination run wild and allows gleaming visions to come into her mind. She “open[s] [her] inward ear to a tale that was never ended—a tale [her] imagination created, and narrated continuously; quickened with all of incident, life, fire, feeling, that [she] desired and had not in [her] actual existence” (93). Here we see Jane’s active retreat into herself and her world. She has recognized this realm as a place where impossibilities become reality, and she revels in the power that she holds there. Her imagination is the driving force for the creation and continuation of her world. When Rochester comes home to Thornfield he acknowledges Jane’s powerful and innovative mind. He looks over her art and comments, “the drawings are, for a schoolgirl, peculiar. As to the thoughts, they are elfish” (108). Susanne Langer recognizes the use of art and imagination as a way “to keep ourselves oriented in society and nature” (253). Jane uses her paintings as a vehicle to enter her world and find peace. Jennifer Gribble agrees that “in Jane's responses to events, in her drawings and her dreams, we see a mind actively creating its experience” (281). Jane is able
to not only enter her world through imagination, but she is also creating her world and allowing others to envision it. As Rochester looks at the paintings, he seems to be momentarily transported into Jane’s world. There is a depth in her paintings that only he seems to perceive and feel. Despite Rochester not being a part of Jane’s world, he has accepted her and given her peace of heart and mind. However, like John Reed disrupted her comfort in the past, visitors come to Thornfield to remind her of her perpetual liminality.

With the arrival of Rochester’s guests, Jane’s social status identifies her as thoroughly other, but Mr. Rochester recognizes and is intrigued by this otherworldliness. The dashing gentleman and coy ladies are like a new species for her to examine; they are not of her world. Jane again finds herself in a liminal place between realms. She does not fit in with the upper class, and although she is paid by Mr. Rochester, as a governess she is not of the serving class. She finds herself isolated, yet Jane’s perennial need for acceptance has been almost entirely eliminated, and she regards the party as an aloof observer, neither expecting nor desiring their attention. The only exception to her new philosophy of contented detachment is Mr. Rochester. However, she does not look at him as an eligible and rich bachelor, but as a kindred spirit. She compares him with his guests and decides, “he is not of their kind. I believe he is of mine;—I am sure he is,—I feel akin to him . . . though rank and wealth sever us widely, I have something in my brain and heart, in my blood and nerves, that assimilates me mentally to him” (149). Jane recognizes Rochester as having qualities of the “other,” despite his being a part of a world different from her own. Rochester also recognizes these qualities in Jane almost immediately after meeting her. He tells her that she has “rather the look of another world,” comparing her to elves and fairies (104). As he continues to learn about her, he seems more convinced that Jane is otherworldly. She is quiet, obedient, and moral. Her ethical likeness to Helen Burns at this point is pronounced. Beyond that, her character and intelligence both surprise and challenge Rochester. He marks Jane out as different from the majority, telling her when she answers his questions boldly and honestly that “not three in three thousand raw school-girl-governesses would have answered me as you have just done” (115). Her candor captivates Rochester and draws him to Jane. He falls in love with this pure fairy and desires to make her a part of his world.
Edward Rochester does everything in his power to extract Jane from her world and plant her firmly in his. He compares her to a captive bird that “were it but free, would soar cloud-high” (119). In Rochester’s mind, he has the power to set her free, giving her wealth, position, and the ability to live according to her will. He plans to marry her, to make her his wife. Initially, Jane does not believe that this plan will come to fruition. She tells Rochester that nobody gets to enjoy complete happiness in life and that she “was not born for a different destiny to the rest of her species: to imagine such a lot befalling [her] is a fairy tale—a day-dream” (220). Jane sees that this marriage could only happen in a world of imagination—her world. Rochester swears, however, that this is a dream that he “can and will realise” (220). His determination to be with Jane drives his endeavor to pull Jane into his world. He attempts to buy expensive clothes and give Jane elaborate gifts, transforming her, in his mind, into an elegant lady. Jane, in spite of her deep love for Rochester, resists these attentions, recognizing that she is truly free only in her own world and would be caged by societal expectations and judgment in his. Her subconscious acknowledges the impossibility of her leaving her world for another when she dreams of “some barrier dividing [them]” (240). Owing to her devotion to Rochester, Jane decides to marry him, hoping that she can remain a “plain, Quakerish governess” as well as a bride (220). However, Rochester’s dark secret is disastrously revealed, making Jane who was “almost a bride—a cold, solitary girl again” (252). Rochester, who was so akin to her, has been taken away. Jane is again completely alone in her world, leaving her heartbroken yet determined. She knows that to retain her freedom and prevent Rochester from new attempts to extricate her from her world, she must leave Thornfield and her beloved master behind. She does so and sets out for the wild, leaving the cage of Rochester’s world behind her.

Jane spends days on an emotionally and physically taxing journey that demands all of her strength and further entrenches her in her otherworldliness. At this moment she is in a liminal place, caught between her pitiful past and her unknown future. This is another transformative moment, similar to Jane’s traumatic experience in the red room. However, there are no Reeds forcing her into the unknown. Gilead notes that “this most consequential of Jane’s liminal ordeals is self-devised” (307). Her agency is driving her forward, not the forces of society or labels placed
upon her. By the end of her journey, “not a tie holds her to human society” (275). Then, when she finally arrives in Morton, Peters notes that Jane still “does not fit into any recognizable category. She begs food but is not a beggar. She looks like a lady but has no money” (59). Jane remains in her otherworld, more isolated than she has ever been.

Paradoxically this is the beginning of a stage in her life which is exemplified mostly by acceptance, yet still does not remove her from her own world. Gilead marks Moor House as a rebirth and the end of Jane’s separation, noting that “at this borderline place, she is multiply endowed with family and friends” (310). It is true that in the Rivers siblings, Jane finds kinship and happiness. But, in spite of this, her reaction from the last stage will still mark her as otherworldly in this new stage of her life.

After leaving Rochester, Jane craves nothing more than love and approval. In many ways, the trauma of losing Rochester has shaken her newfound confidence in herself and increased her need for human acceptance. She does all in her power to gain the admiration and acceptance of her new family. Diana and Mary give their love freely, but St. John remains exacting. Jane tells us that she “daily wished more to please him: but to do so, I felt . . . that I must disown half my nature . . . He wanted to train me to an elevation I could never reach; it racked me hourly to aspire to the standard he uplifted” (340). In her overwhelming desire to please, Jane separates herself from the other girls. Diana notices this differential treatment, saying to St. John, “you used to call Jane your third sister, but you don’t treat her as such” (339). St. John has chosen Jane for a higher task than that of mere sister, he has singled her out as a potential wife and missionary. In doing so, he attempts, as Rochester did, to remove Jane from her world and place her in his. In despair, Jane exclaims that she “could not receive his call” (343). She recognizes that she can never live in St. John’s world of ice and self-sacrifice; she must remain in her world.

During this time, Rochester has suffered terrible losses; these losses in turn will make him capable of joining Jane in her liminal world. His estate is in ruins, and his body is weak and disabled. Rochester is no longer the eligible gentleman that he once was, living alone in a “desolate spot” (366) with few servants. He, who was always so similar to Jane, has now left the world of high society and has been humbled and isolated. Peters realizes that “this isolation then qualifies him to engage in a relationship with Jane” (65) as a part of her realm. Rochester has finally
entered Jane’s liminal world. Because Jane’s world is one of imagination and impossibilities, it becomes completely logical for its two inhabitants to be able to communicate with one another in spite of the distance between them. When Rochester tells of their miraculous communication he says, “in spirit, I believe, we must have met” (381). This spiritual meeting leads to a physical one in the secluded manor-house of Ferndean. The couple is at last reunited, and Rochester’s wish of being on “a quiet island with only [Jane]” is now fulfilled (174). His difficulties, both physical and emotional, had made him feel as if he were “pass[ing] through the valley of the shadow of death” (380), but in doing so he is able to enter Jane’s world and find happiness with her.

The conclusion of the book reminds us that this is in fact an “autobiography” written by Jane herself; this literary work then becomes Jane’s invitation for the reader to enter her world. She addresses us directly when she writes, “Reader, I married him” (382). In doing so, Jane shows that she has another form of world creation other than those of imagination and art. Janet Freeman recognizes that Jane has a “need to put her experience into words,” and that in doing so she is both actively creating her world and sharing it with us (683). Jane’s story is told repeatedly throughout the novel by those without authority. People like Mrs. Reed, Brocklehurst, and even Rochester and St. John label her and tell her about herself. Jane recognizes this as a way of marginalizing her and her world, and she chooses to take control of her story in writing it herself. Just as Rochester was able to see into Jane’s world by looking at her paintings, we are able to momentarily enter her world through reading. Kathleen Tillotson reinforces this idea when she notes that *Jane Eyre* is “a novel of the inner life, not of man in his social relations; it maps a private world” (257). Although Jane writes of life, school, relationships, and social class, these subjects are not her focus. She is telling us of her world, and her growth within it. Her writing shows that her otherworldliness, although isolating at times, is a blessing that allows her to develop a deeper sense of self and to bring happiness to herself and the man that she loves. In the end, we see that Jane’s agency not only perpetuates her status as otherworldly, but also drives her to share her world with us.
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Criterion
Jack London’s “Koolau the Leper” (1912) tells the story of a leprous Hawaiian who refuses to be relocated to Molokai by the American government. During Koolau’s last stand, Koolau keeps the American army at bay despite their superior weaponry. The story ends with Koolau dying from leprosy a free man on Kauai, his island home. Critics have long debated what this story reveals about London's viewpoint on American imperialism and colonialism. Some critics, like Leonard Cassuto, argue this short story “helps to contradict the stereotyped critical view of London’s racism” (120). James Slagel validates this viewpoint when he claims that this story shows the “disappearance of the racism” we see in London’s earlier works, implying a new respect for native Hawaiians (182). While these scholars view “Koolau the Leper” as a critique of America’s imperial reach into Hawaii, others like Ku’ualoha Ho’omanawanui—a Native Hawaiian—argue that London’s misrepresentation and fictionalization of Koolau’s story shows that London is “one of those racist, usurping haole he [London] despises” (238). These insightful interpretations bring depth to our understanding of London’s “Koolau the Leper” since they depict London simultaneously as a proponent and an antagonist to American imperialism.
I would like to augment this understanding by suggesting that London’s critique of American imperialism is in itself an act of imperialism. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, imperialism can be defined as “the extension and maintenance of a country’s power or influence through trade, diplomacy, military, or cultural dominance” (italics added). I propose that Jack London’s “Koolau the Leper” is an act of cultural dominance as London took the true story of Kaluaikoʻolau, a political and cultural hero to native Hawaiians, and altered it in such a way as to present a traditional American hero: independent, rebellious of authority figures, and individualistic. By taking a Hawaiian story and transforming it to fit American sensibilities, London’s story becomes an instance of imperialism, a demonstration of America’s cultural dominance. London replaces Hawaiian values with American ones when he supplants the real Koolau’s story with his fictitious, highly exaggerated one. His fragmentation and reinvention of the real story of Koolau showcases a modernist response to the creolization of differing cultures and values, celebrating the convergence of cultures that occurs through imperialism.

Koolau’s physical and cultural rebellion against American authority figures is a quality associated more with the traditional American hero than a Hawaiian hero. London’s “Koolau the Leper” begins with Koolau giving a rousing speech to his fellow Hansen-diseased outcasts, railing on the injustices done by the American government and encouraging them to defy the soldiers that demand their removal. In his speech, Koolau proclaims, “Tomorrow the soldiers land on the shore. Let the weak hearts go down to them. . . . As for us we shall stay and fight” (London 42). Koolau’s rebellion against the demand of the United States government appears to parallel the American Revolution; the Patriots rejected established prejudices and the expectations of Great Britain, and they fought to create an entirely new government than the one that ruled from an ocean away. Koolau rebels on an individual level to the demands of a foreign government, rejecting their authority to exile him to Molokai and claiming his right for independent rule. Both traditional American Patriots and Koolau are willing to fight for their independence. Regala Fuchs claims that the archetypal hero of the American frontier is “the social outlaw who fought against injustice located often in powerful institutions” (37). Koolau’s outlaw status and retreat into the wild, untamed—and for the majority inaccessible—outreaches of Kauai also
place Koolau on par with the American frontier legend. London creates a character that exemplifies the qualities held by the iconic American frontiersmen and patriot. Koolau's actions do not resemble those of our Hawaiian example: Queen Liliuokalani. She abdicated her thrown to the United States government in order to save her people from violence and bloodshed (Liliuokalani 274). Rather than rebelling against American intrusion, Queen Liliuokalani conceded to it.

In London’s depiction of Koolau, Koolau’s focus on his individual freedom rather than the community is also associated more with Western values than those of Hawaii. When a blue-eyed American captain demands Koolau turn himself in, Koolau responds fervently, “I am a free man . . . I have lived free and I shall die free. I will never give myself up” (London 53, italics added). While Koolau's yearning for freedom is not unique to an American, his focus on his own individuality reflects more American values than the community valued by Hawaiians. According to Robert Sayre, Americans “think of themselves as having great respect for the uniqueness of the individual” and it is one of the traits most associated with the Western mindset (9). When the rest of the leper outcasts turn themselves in, Koolau chooses to remain outside the community, earning “imprecations and insults” for his desertion (London 53). In Hawaii, one of the most important values of their culture is that of obana, which literally translates to “family” in English but is connotatively associated with so much more than that in Hawaii. John McDermott describes the importance of obana to native Hawaiians by saying, “the concept of obana binds a group together, and in the group is to be found the strength and purpose and meaning of existence” (12). By choosing to protect his individual rights and remain outside of the group, Koolau rejects obana and adopts a new Western-based meaning for existence.

Jack London paints Koolau as the archetypal hero of the American West, further appropriating this Hawaiian into the fabric of American legends. During the late half of the nineteenth century, stories that are set in the American Wild West and that feature a nomadic cowboy or outlaw grew in popularity due to infamous outlaws like Bill Pickett, Jesse James, and Billy the Kid. It is during this period that Koolau’s story begins. In London’s “Koolau the Leper,” Koolau is a cowboy before he is forced to flee in order to avoid exile to Molokai. As Koolau is dying, he is taken back to his cowboy days where he is once more “in the thick of the horse-breaking,
with raw colts rearing and bucking under him,” and in another instance he is “pursuing the wild bulls of the upland pastures” (55). It is significant that the nostalgia that overcomes London’s Koolau is for his cowboy days, days that were spent conquering the wild and the untamed. Memories of family or friends do not traipse across his reminiscences. Koolau finds comfort in moments that exemplify his youthful vigor and strength. The cowboy of myth is “defined by his strength, honor, independence, and his wilderness identity...He emerges from the wilderness a free and equal individual” (Wright 6). Koolau, cowboy and outlaw, exemplifies the American values of strength, independence, and individuality.

In contrast to London’s short story, the Hawaiian version of “Koolau the Leper” depicts a different set of values: community, family, and Christianity. In Pi’ilani’s autobiographical account we discover that the reason they refused to go to Molokai was Pi’ilani’s and Koolau’s belief that their wedding vows would be broken if they were to separate before death. Pi’ilani recalls, “And we agreed together to live patiently together in the hardships of this life, and that only death would separate us” (8). Koolau was willing to go to Molokai, until he realized that his family would not be able to accompany him. Koolau’s focus was not protecting his individual freedoms, as postulated by Jack London, but to remain a part of his familial community. According to his wife, Koolau’s refusal was based on his desire to be a good Christian. His story, according to Ku’ualoha Ho’omanawanui, is not the story of a rebellious cowboy but the story of “a courageous Christian family man who stands by his principles, a Hawaiian ‘David’ fighting the American ‘Goliath’ (253). While both London’s and Pi’ilani’s accounts portrays Koolau as an underdog who refuses to submit, their accounts reveal different motivations behind Koolau’s actions. James Slagel claims that the story of Koolau is “a love story, tragic and true” (182) and yet in London’s “Koolau the Leper,” there is no mention of family members and not the slightest allusion to Christianity. London replaced the qualities of Koolau that made him a Hawaiian hero with ones that were more sympathetic to American sensibilities.

Koolau’s relationship with his gun is one example of the different cultural values emphasized in London’s and Pi’ilani’s stories and demonstrates America’s encroachment on a Hawaiian story. In London’s story, Koolau’s Mauser is the one thing in his life that never failed Koolau,
and he dies with his gun “pressed against his chest with his folded fingerless hands” (55). He holds his gun as if it was something precious, something close to his heart. The Mauser is a symbol of rebellion and of his fight for freedom; his gun is the reason Koolau could die a free man. In essence, the gun allows him to protect the American values he treasures. The relationship between Koolau and his gun is portrayed differently in Pi’ilani’s account. When Koolau realizes he is dying, he instructs his wife to bury the gun with him stating: “because you had nothing to do with the gun. I alone used it and when I go, we go together; when my work is done, its work in this world is done” (36). Pi’ilani saw this moment as an act of love. By taking the gun with him, Koolau was accepting total blame for the trouble he caused (Slagel 183). The gun was a symbol of his love and desire to protect his family, even at his death. The two accounts demonstrate the different motivations behind the character, Koolau, and correspond to the different heroes portrayed in the story: American and Hawaiian.

By portraying Koolau as an American hero, London undermines the current opinion most Americans had of Hawaiians. Leprosy, in a Christian Hawaii, carried a social stigma, since the Bible declares those who have leprosy are unclean. Due to this stigma and Hawaiians’ genetic proclivity to suffer from leprosy, Hawaiians were considered “savage, immoral, promiscuous, undisciplined, stupid and inferior, in need of guidance from the ‘great white father’” (Ho’omanawanui, 235). By portraying Koolau as a renegade who not only rebels against the American government but successfully withstood their mortar shells, guns, and superior numbers, London creates a character who defies negative stigmas toward Hawaiians. Koolau is proud that despite being “a crippled wreck of a man” the American army still needed “guns and rifles, police and soldiers” in order to capture him (London 50). Due to America’s underdog status during the American Revolution, Americans hold a certain level of empathy toward other unlikely conquerors, and Koolau’s story resonates with them. London tied qualities that Americans value to a leprous ‘other,’ implying that Koolau—a leper and a Hawaiian—can still be an American hero.

Pi’ilani’s autobiographical account cedes to London’s fictional story, reflecting the appropriation of culture that occurred throughout the colonization of Hawaii. According to Susan Stanford Friedman, this hybridity between cultures is a result of modernity (479). Due to the technological advances in the communication systems and transportation
of our modern world, nations and cultures that before had remained isolated start to interact with other cultures; some even adopt the practices of foreign nations. Jack London’s “Koolau the Leper” is a result of these interactions. The convergence between a Hawaiian legend and American ideologies created something entirely new. In many ways, London’s adoption of a foreign tale is not wholly an American practice, but a Hawaiian one as well. In Liliuokalani’s *Hawaii’s Story*, she describes in great detail the common adoption practice in Hawaii where babies immediately after birth are given to another chief to be raised as their own. Liliuokalani cited that the reason for this practice was to “cement the ties of friendship between the chiefs ... and it has doubtless fostered a community of interest and harmony” (4). Could we not read London’s “Koolau the Leper” in the same way? While the story of Koolau is one born of Hawaii, London adopted it and raised it in the American way. Belonging to both cultures, “Koolau the Leper” can be a unifying force, fostering a community of interest and harmony through the timeless and universal practice of storytelling. “Koolau the Leper” is an example of what Friedman calls “creolization” defining it as a merging of cultures through “patterns of imitation, adaptation, transculturation, and cultural translation” (483). Perhaps according to Friedman’s definition, London’s story does not have to be either an American story or a Hawaiian one: “Koolau the Leper” can be both and belong to both cultures. When Koolau admires the Americans for “that will in them that was stronger than life and that bent all things to their bidding,” he failed to recognize that he, too, had the same quality, as he continued on even as his body and community failed him. Koolau does not recognize the American qualities he possesses. If literature is a reaction to the modernity that surrounds us, then “Koolau the Leper” suggests that Hawaii, even in the early twentieth century is no longer strictly Hawaiian, nor is it wholly absorbed by America.

This intermeshing of traditional myths and legends between cultures is prevalent today, and due to America’s media dominance, American ideals often overshadow other cultural stories and values. In 2016, Disney released a new animated movie, *Moana*, which features the Polynesian demigod, Māui, and Moana, the daughter and heir of a chief, whose quest is to return Te Fiti’s heart to its island. The character Māui is loosely based on the cultural hero and trickster found in Hawaiian mythology.
According to legends, Māui “fished up from the ocean New Zealand and the Hawaiian Islands with a magic hook” (Westervelt 18). He is also credited for lassoing the sun, finding fire, and making the earth a habitable environment for humankind. This trickster is well beloved by many of Polynesian descent, and some worried that the portrayal of a Polynesian legend from such a huge American conglomerate like the Walt Disney Company would misrepresent their cultural myth. With that in mind, Disney created the Oceanic Story Trust, a group of anthropologists, historians, and linguists from the Polynesian islands whose mission was to keep the integrity of the original Polynesian legend (Ito). Included in the Trust was the tattoo artist Su’a Peter Sulu’ape, “a sixth-generation master tattooist” who “checked every mark and pattern” of Māui’s tattoos, as well as fisherman in Fiji whose input helped make the boat and ropes historically and culturally accurate. Despite Disney’s in-depth research into Polynesian culture and myths, Disney still received backlash about the size of Māui, of whom Lawrence Downes from The New York Times, described as a “heavily inked muscleman pumped to what, in a tire, would be a dangerously high p.s.i.” Despite this critique, Caitlin Moore from The Washington Post claims that Moana is Disney’s “most culturally sensitive film ever.” Disney’s attempts to be culturally sensitive in their portrayal of a Polynesian princess demonstrate America’s effort to recognize the greatness of other cultures.

Disney’s cultural sensitivity indicates a shift from the creative license taken in Jack London’s “Koolau the Leper,” while still demonstrating the expansion of American influence into other cultures. While London created an American hero from a Hawaiian legend, Disney created from a Polynesian myth a new hero, one who depicts qualities from both American and Polynesian cultures. Māui’s dedication to mankind, his human ohana, as well as his determination to save Moana show the Polynesian values of community and family. His excessive pride in his personal accomplishments—all of which have been memorialized as tattoos on his skin—reflects the American focus on individualism. According to John McDermott, in Polynesia “individuals are discouraged from making public displays to seek recognition for self” and “to flaunt and publicly announce one’s credentials” is a uniquely Western mindset (14). This creolization of different cultural values enhances a nation’s identity, broadening it through the inclusion of another’s myths and legends.
Through London’s “Koolau the Leper” and Disney’s *Moana*, we can see that America’s cultural appropriation celebrates the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations due to modern globalization. London’s Koolau exemplifies the American hero of the West and of the Frontier; this hero was created from a leprosy-stricken Hawaiian, shifting America’s political paradigm and broadening the definition of an American hero to someone historically considered an undesirable foreign “other.” “Koolau the Leper” and *Moana* are examples of American imperialism through cultural dominance, and yet this cultural intermeshing often leads to a greater understanding and respect for other nations, their cultures and their traditions.
Works Cited


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In Virgil’s writings, “pastoral poetry came to be used as a vehicle for allegory or veiled social and political comment” (“Pastoral Poetry”). It is thus fitting that Dante, in his attempt to write what he believed to be the greatest allegory ever created, chose Virgil to be his literary and narrative guide. Dante pulls from what Prue Shaw, a prominent Dante critic, calls the “fertilising powers” of Virgil’s allegorical and pastoral influences throughout *The Divine Comedy* (172). And yet, it is in his very homage to Virgil that Dante subverts the pastoral mode. Kyle Anderson “examines the particulars of how Dante as Christian poet replaces the classical model of pastoral poetry, Virgil, in Canto XXVIII, via a clever misuse of the amoebean contest,” a typical pastoral device (9). Anderson argues that Dante supplants the pagan pastoral of Virgil in order to replace it with his own Christian version, but is this really accomplished in the single literary move of the amoebean contest? Or is Dante’s subversion of the classical pastoral evident throughout *The Divine Comedy*? And what is the significance of Dante’s decision to transform the genre? This paper will attempt to widen the scholarly understanding of Dante’s ultimate condemnation of the classical and pagan pastoral by rooting themes and devices typical of this genre throughout the *Commedia*. By denouncing the pagan pastoral, Dante declares his status as the supreme poet and exalts the importance of
a Christian understanding of the pastoral. To prove this, we will first establish some typical characteristics of the pastoral mode, then we will examine the development of Virgil’s role throughout The Divine Comedy, the presence of pastoral themes within it, and Dante’s Christian reinvention of the pastoral.

Before we can begin to study the pastoral within The Divine Comedy, we must first review the genre itself. Alexander Pope beautifully defined pastoral poetry as “an imitation of the action of a shepherd” (4). This simple depiction of shepherd’s life includes a few key characteristics. One characteristic is “that pastoral is an image of what they call the Golden Age” (Pope 5). Both the reader and the characters within the poem long for this idealized and seemingly perfect Golden Age. This longing, and the name itself, make it evident that reader and character are no longer a part of the Golden Age. In addition, Anderson adds that the pastoral is “characterized by the antithesis of Art and Nature” (16). Allegorical representation is a key feature of pastoral poetry. Samuel Johnson, a prominent literary figure of the eighteenth century, noted, “If we search the writings of Virgil, for the true definition of a pastoral, it will be found a poem in which any action or passion is represented by its effects upon a country life” (19). Therefore, pastoral poetry is by nature representative and thus allegorical.

Virgil is both a prominent pastoral poet and a key figure in The Divine Comedy; consequently, it is essential to understand his role in Dante’s work. We will begin by briefly reviewing the use of exile and allegory within his pastoral writing. In his Eclogue I, Virgil tells the tale of Tityrus and Meliboeus. As the two discuss their flocks and land it becomes apparent that Meliboeus is jealous of Tityrus, because, as Melibous says, “your acres will still be yours . . . but the rest of us must go from here and be dispersed” (Virgil 23). Meliboeus is being forced to leave his land and go to foreign fields. When Meliboeus exclaims, “No more singing for me, no more taking you to browse, / My little goats,” there is a clear sense that when Meliboeus leaves his fields he will no longer be quite as happy (Virgil 77).

However, Virgil’s pastoral poem is more than a tale of exile; it is also allegorical. For Wendell Clausen that allegory lies at the heart of Virgil’s pastoral. He explains, “the poetry of Theocritus and Virgil is never simple, though it affects to be; and in this affectation of simplicity, the disparity between the meanness of his subject and the refinement of the
poet’s art, lies the essence of pastoral” (xv). Thus the essence of *Eclogue I* is more than a simple story. When referring to his journey to Rome and absence from Amaryllis, Tityrus says, “freedom gave me a look” and “there was no way out of my slavery” (Virgil 27, 40). Clausen comments upon these lines, writing, “‘Freedom’ (*libertas*) and ‘slavery’ (*seruitium, seruitus*) were established political metaphors, and *libertas* had acquired a current significance: it was the slogan of Octavian and his party” (31). In this inclusion of metaphors and the allusion to Octavian, Virgil makes it clear that *Eclogue I* is much more than a tale of two shepherds, but a “veiled social and political comment” (“Pastoral Poetry”).

It is significant that Dante chose to use such a quintessential pastoral poet as a principle character and guide in *The Divine Comedy*. In the opening canto of *Inferno* we find Dante alone in a dark wood and in seemingly great peril. Dante is presumably about to be attacked by the she-wolf when he sees a shade and cries, “Have pity on me . . . / whatever you may be—a shade, a man” (*Inferno* 1.65–66). Virgil then reveals his identity to Dante, who reacts with great expressions of praise, declaring, “O light and honor of all other poets, / may my long study and the intense love / that made me search your volume serve me now. / You are my master and my author” (*Inferno* 1.82–85). It is clear here that Dante the pilgrim not only esteems Virgil, but that he accepts him as his superior. Part of this regard for Virgil is based on his writing, for Dante calls him the “light of all other poets.” Yes, Dante draws mostly from the Aeneid, but he was certainly aware of the *Eclogues*, and thus we know that Dante accepts and recognizes Virgil for his standing as a pastoral poet. Dante extends this admiration beyond poetry and gives Virgil a practical role as his guide to bring him out of the dark forest and into “an eternal place” (*Inferno* 1.112–114). Virgil is the light that brings Dante out of darkness and gives him purpose, a view reinforced by P. Luigi Pietrobono, a famous Italian literary critic, who wrote, “Qual bene, si domanda, ci poteva essere nella selva? Molti dicono: Virgilio” (14).

Dante’s choice to take a pastoral poet as a guide is clearly intentional. Why did Dante not choose Homer or Horace or Ovid? When he meets Virgil, Dante makes it clear that he has read Virgil’s writing and heralds him as an incredible poet, and in *Inferno IV* it becomes apparent that

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1 “What good, one asks, could there be in the forest? Many say: Virgil” (translated by author).
Dante’s choice of Virgil is intentional. While in Limbo, Virgil and Dante encounter four “giant shades” and Virgil introduces them, commenting, “That shade is Homer, the consummate poet; / the other one is Horace, satirist; / the third is Ovid, the last Lucan” (Inferno 4.88–90). Dante the poet acknowledges the greatness of these other writers of epic poetry, but he chooses as his guide the one famed for the pastoral. It is apparent here that the pastoral is important to Dante.

The way the dynamic of strength between Dante and Virgil progresses is indicative of the way Dante begins to supplant Virgil as the reigning pastoral poet. At the beginning of Inferno, Dante the pilgrim is weak and almost entirely reliant upon Virgil. Virgil is seen as powerful and capable of guiding and reassuring Dante. Virgil’s power is manifest as they attempt to enter the fourth circle and are blocked by Plutus, “the great enemy” (Inferno 6.115). Plutus is a Greek god, here cast by Dante the poet into the form of a devil. Dante is apparently scared by this encounter, but Virgil, “The gentle sage, aware of everything, / said reassuringly, ‘Don’t let fear / defeat you’” (Inferno 7.3–5). Here Dante is seen as weak and Virgil is able to perceive that and comfort him. Then Virgil demonstrates his own power and asserts, “whatever power he has, / he cannot stop our climbing down this crag” (Inferno 7.5–6). Loyd H. Howard comments on Virgil’s “guiding competence,” thus highlighting the respective strength and weakness of Virgil and Dante (25). This dynamic changes as they travel through Inferno and Dante becomes stronger while Virgil becomes weaker. Virgil’s weakness is first perceptible in Canto IX when they reach the gates of Dis, and, according to Howard, “Virgil’s authority has reached a low ebb” (42). At the gates Dante and Virgil are unable to pass them, and, in the face of that obstacle, Virgil cries out, “We have to win this battle . . . / if not . . . But one so great had offered help. / How slow that coming seems to me!” (Inferno 9.7–9). They are stuck and Virgil can do nothing to change their situation without some greater help from above. Here we see a Virgil that knows he has an important role and doubts his ability to complete it.

This growing weakness of Virgil is also evident in Canto XXIV. At the beginning of this canto Dante and Virgil are struggling to travel to the seventh bolgia because the bridge has collapsed. In the midst of this trial Dante presents the reader with a pastoral simile. He describes a young farmer who watches the sun rise over his land in early spring. As
the sun comes up, the farmer “gathers up new hope / on seeing that the world has changed its face” (Inferno 24.12–13). The farmer in the simile is also a shepherd because Dante tells us that he takes his “sheep to pasture” (Inferno 24.15). This clearly ties the simile into the pastoral mode with which Virgil is so adept. Much has been made of this simile and the break it provides in the bleakness of the Inferno, but an early scholar, Benvenuto da Imola, attempts to unpack the poem’s meaning beyond its function within the canto. Benvenuto suggests that “the shepherd is Virgil, who had actually been a shepherd historically and allegorically” and that the sun represents the relief Virgil feels when “at first confused by his wrath, having expelled it, after a little has let the sheep out of the pouch to graze on new grass, namely on the fodder of new matter” (qtd in Economou 640). It is significant that Benvenuto, a contemporary of Dante, believed that Virgil was a shepherd and suggests that Dante may have believed such as well. However, George Economou, a modern Dante scholar, disagrees with Benevento’s view of Virgil as the shepherd in this metaphor and posits Dante as the shepherd and Virgil as the sun. He likens Virgil “to the sun, or, more generally, to a natural process in the cosmos” (Economou 641). This reading is intriguing because it takes Virgil out of his traditional association with shepherds and replaces him with Dante. In Economou’s placement of Dante as the shepherd we see the beginnings of Dante’s move to replace the the pagan pastoral of Virgil with his own Christian pastoral.

As we continue through the Comedy, Dante’s strength becomes greater and greater and he begins to surpass Virgil. This is visible in his use of other guides in Purgatory. When the pilgrims first meet Statius, before knowing his identity, Virgil tells him that he has been exiled to hell and Statius questions, “If God’s not deemed you worthy of ascent, / who’s guided you so far along His stairs?” (Purgatorio 21.20–21). This suggests that in some way Virgil is an inadequate guide on the mountain of Purgatory. Following their discussion, Statius becomes a supplemental guide and accompanies the pilgrims all the way to the top of Purgatory, a transition in which we see Virgil very clearly beginning to fade away and Dante begin to take his place.

Virgil’s displacement becomes complete in the Garden of Eden at the top of the mountain of Purgatory. In the Canto XXVII Dante and Virgil enter that earthly paradise and Virgil utters his last words. As Poggioli
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remarks, “it is quite noteworthy that he [Virgil] is allowed to enter the Garden of Eden,” and it shows Dante’s great respect towards him (135). However, it is also the moment in which Virgil surrenders all power; in his last lines he tells Dante, “Await no further word or sign from me: / your will is free, erect, and whole—to act / against that will would be to err: therefore / I crown and miter you over yourself” (Purgatorio 27.139–142). Anderson writes that Dante’s new independence “proves to be as much of a poetic as a spiritual privilege” (7). This is not merely a feature of the plot. Yes, Virgil will no longer be Dante’s guide, but he is also relinquishing his poetic superiority and crowning Dante as his own superior poet.

This replacement of Virgil is also the replacement of the traditional pagan pastoral that he represents by first showing how the pastoral uses of allegory and exile are present and then by demonstrating its Christian subversion. Allegory is present from the very first lines of the poem: “When I had journeyed half of our life’s way, / I found myself within a shadowed forest” (Inferno 1.1–2). Dante opens, as has often been stated, by saying that he was in the midst of “our life’s way,” thus inviting the reader to take part in this life. This is important because it establishes the universality of Dante’s story and claim. By creating such a broad application, Dante makes it clear that the meaning extends beyond the events of the pilgrim’s life, and in fact symbolizes the lives of his readers.

Canto I continues to include an allegorical presentation of animals: a leopard, a lion, and a she-wolf. Dante describes the lion as so terrifying that “even the air around him seemed to shudder” and the she-wolf as one that “had already brought despair to many” (Inferno 1.46–47, 50, 52–53). These animals are plainly terrifying, but they also seem quite malicious because the she-wolf has already harmed people. The presence of these animals is important because it shows the perils that are found in nature, but they also seem to contrast with the animals found in pastoral poetry. Classical pastoral poetry focuses on sheep and goats, which tend to be harmless. Dante’s animals, though violent, are nevertheless pastoral, because they are allegorical. Benedetto Croce, the Italian philosopher, writes that in Canto I “we encounter three wild animals that are not three wild animals,” (qtd in Cassata 14) but are symbols of larger ideas. Cassata assigns specific human sins to each animal, such as the “lion of pride” and the “she-wolf of cupidity” (16). The specific meaning of
the animals may be unclear, but surely they are not simply a part of
the setting as pastoral goats and sheep seem to be. Rather, they are
a rich symbolic part of the text.

With the line “I found myself within a shadowed forest,” Canto I also
introduces the pastoral concept of exile to the reader (Inferno 1.1–2). In
Italian there are two ways to say “I found”: “trovai” and “ritrovai.” Both
can mean “I found,” but here Dante chooses the word with the prefix
“ri,” which, as in English, means to repeat or do again. Thus Dante finds
himself again in a shadowed forest. Pietrobono reinforces this reading
of “ritrova,” writing that, “Quando dunque la diritta via era smarrita . . .
Dante si ritrova” (11).\(^2\) This implies that Dante does indeed find himself
again, not on a new path, but on one that had been lost. This distinction
is essential because it changes the whole setting of the first canto: it is
not a completely strange place to Dante, but one to which he is returning,
thus embodying a return to nature.

This allusion to exile is continued in the first Canto as Dante establishes
the natural setting as dark and dangerous. Pietrobono introduces these
themes when he notes, “Quel che mi par certo si è che la sua selva sia
continuazione e svolgimento di quella terra aspra di spini e di rovi, nella
quale Adamo fu cacciato, subito che si torse ‘da via di verità e di sua vita’”
(Pietrobono 11–12).\(^3\) Pietrobono makes this argument by connecting the
negative and dark description of the forest to the thorns and thistles
described by God in Genesis 3. He then moves beyond linguistic similarities
to talk more about function. Dante refers to the forest as a place “that
never has let any man survive,” a fact that Pietrobono claims recalls the
original sin, which also let no man survive and brought death to mankind.
This connection to the Bible immediately renders the story allegorical
(Inferno 1.27). However, it also introduces the idea of exile. Adam was exiled
from the Garden of Eden, and Pietrobono’s connection between Dante
and Adam implies that Dante has also been exiled to a darker place. These
themes make it clear that, although Dante is changing the traditional pagan
pastoral, he also values the use of exile within the genre.

\(^2\) “When the straight way was lost . . . Dante found himself” (translated by author).
\(^3\) “That which seems certain to me is that his forest is a continuation and development
of that rugged land of thorns and brambles, in which Adam was cast into, immediately
one contorts ‘by way of truth and of one’s life’” (translated by author).
This theme of exile resonates strongly with Dante’s own life and the exile from which he wrote *The Divine Comedy*. In Paradise Dante meets his great-great-grandfather, Cacciaguida, who in Canto XVII begins to predict Dante’s future. He warns Dante, “You shall leave everything you love most dearly: / this is the arrow that the bow of exile / shoots first” (Paradiso 17.55–57). What seemed prophetic to Dante the pilgrim was reality for Dante the poet. Caught on the wrong side of a political battle, Dante was exiled from Florence in 1302 and never returned. This exile must have influenced his choice to draw from the pastoral and its themes of exile. However, Dante’s own feelings introduce a sense of bitterness not as evident in Meliboeus’ nostalgia. Cacciaguida informs Dante, “You are to know the bitter taste / of others’ bread, how salt it is, and know / how hard a path it is for one who goes / descending and ascending others’ stairs” (Paradiso 17.57–61). Clearly Dante’s exile was not one of nostalgic contemplation, but of real bitterness and hardship. This bitterness begins to cast a negative shade on the pastoral theme of exile.

While Dante includes pastoral themes and images, it is obvious that he is doing something different with them than simply echoing their traditional use; he is in fact subverting the pastoral. A prime example of this subversion is his description of the setting in Canto I, which becomes particularly interesting when Dante establishes that the setting is “a shadowed forest” (Inferno 1.1). Forests are a part of the natural world, which, in classical pastoral poetry, are usually considered to be a haven. Dante is returning to what would traditionally be a natural paradise, but instead it is “shadowed” and dark. Pietrobono’s reading of the “selva oscura” reinforces this negative feeling when he calls the forest the “principio e cagione di ogni dolore” (12). Within this one initial phrase Dante begins to subvert the typical pastoral by arguing against the idea that a return to paradise is desirable because Dante’s return to the natural world is anything but ideal, instead it is “shadowed” and dark. Clearly this is not the nature that pastoral poets have heralded and longed for, this is something much more haunting. Dante continues to describe this natural scene with less than positive emotions; when Dante meets Virgil in the wood Virgil invites him to “leave this savage wilderness” (Inferno 1.93). Virgil refers to nature as

4 “Principle and cause of all pain” (translated by author).
savage. This makes it clear that it is not simply Dante, or simply the dark woods, that is affected by this sense of fear, but all of nature and Virgil, a poet of nature.

Nowhere in *The Divine Comedy* is Dante’s pastoral as elevated as it is in the final scenes of Purgatorio, in the Garden of Eden, where Dante brings together the themes of allegory and exile and makes his subversion of the pastoral final. Upon crossing the purifying flames, Dante immediately begins a pastoral metaphor. He describes goats who “when they grazed, were swift and tameless” and “herdsmen in the open fields” (*Purgatorio* 27.76–82). Then, referring to Virgil, Statius, and himself, Dante explains “such were all three of us at that point—they / were like the herdsmen, I was like the goat” (*Purgatorio* 27.85–86). This seems to be a last honor to Virgil, who has so kindly been a guide and shepherd to Dante. And it seems almost sweet that Dante would honor Virgil in that pastoral for which he was famous. It is also noteworthy that the first thing Dante does to explain the Garden of Eden is refer to the pastoral. Clearly he wants to draw it to the reader’s attention and keep it there as they progress through the earthly paradise.

Using the pastoral mode of *locus amoenus*, Dante creates a true pastoral paradise in the Garden of Eden. *Locus amoenus* is “the literary description of a landscape with typical recurring features—shady trees, running water, a grassy meadow, and a cooling breeze . . . and it is the background to the pastoral poetry of Theocritus and Virgil” (“Locus Amoenus”). Poggioli notes that the Garden of Eden “may be considered as the single ‘pastoral oasis’ in the Commedia” (Poggioli 135). It is in this “pastoral oasis” that Dante merges the Christian and the pagan. Dante adapts Theocritus and Virgil’s background to create his earthly paradise. He includes the “shady trees” when he describes it as a “forest—dense, alive with green, divine” (*Purgatorio* 28.2). Upon seeing Lethe, against which “All of the purest waters here on earth / . . . would seemed to be touched with impurity,” Dante makes the presence of the “running water” manifest (*Purgatorio* 28.28–29). With this locus amoenus, “Dante is now repatterning the Garden of Eden after the bucolic versions of classical poetry” (Poggioli 137). Dante himself recognizes this when he writes, “Those ancients who in poetry presented / the golden age, who sang its happy state, / perhaps, in their Parnassus, dreamt this place” (*Purgatorio* 28.139–141). Dante acknowledges the use of a pagan paradise, or Parnassus, but he also uses this move to say that he does it better.
Dante does something with this pastoral oasis that Virgil, Theocritus, and other pagan poets could never do: he Christianizes it. Dante’s locus amoenus is itself a Christianization as the Garden of Eden, but it also becomes the scene of supreme Christian spiritual experience for Dante the pilgrim. Poggioli comments, “Beginning with early humanism, clerics, scholars, and poets tried to interpret and to translate the ancient, pagan pastoral into new, Christian terms,” but as Dante would proudly say, he always does it best (Poggioli 135). In a sense, Dante the pilgrim’s exile is undone within this paradise: he has found the Golden Age, and it is Christian. It is interesting that Dante the poet creates such a paradise, a creation that exalts his Christian poetic prowess as the solution to pagan pastoral nostalgia.

Although at its climax in the final cantos of Purgatorio, Dante’s Christian reinvention of the pastoral is evident throughout The Divine Comedy. Perhaps one of the most apparent instances is Statius’ Christianization of Virgil’s writings. Upon meeting Virgil and Dante, but before knowing their identities, Statius begins to heap praises upon the writings of Virgil (Purgatorio 21.97–136). Statius and Virgil begin talking and Statius, originally a pagan, recounts his conversion. Statius tells Virgil, “through you I was a poet and, through you, / a Christian” (Purgatorio 22.73–74). Statius became a Christian because of what he read in Virgil’s writings. Here Dante the poet is clearly using Virgil’s pastoral writings to serve his Christian ends. However, Dante extends the Christianization beyond the function of Virgil’s writing to their actual content. Statius quotes Virgil’s fourth Eclogue saying, “The ages are renewed; / justice and man’s first time on earth return; / from Heaven a new progeny descends” (Purgatorio 22.70–72). According to Mandelbaum, “From early Christian times, these lines . . . were seen as prophesying the birth of Christ—the ‘new progeny’ who descends ‘from Heaven’” (72) to restore mankind” (370). Here Dante posits Virgil as a sort of pre-Christian prophet, and he uses his most pastoral writings, the Eclogues, to do it.

Dante’s Garden of Eden is filled with rich allegory and symbolism, which draws upon Christian theology to create an overwhelming sense of spirituality. Upon entering the earthly paradise, Dante comes upon a procession. He sees first seven candles that “flamed / more radiantly than the midmonth moon / shines at midnight in an untroubled sky” (Paradiso 29.52-54). According to Mandelbaum, “these candlesticks, like the seven lamps of fire burning before the throne in Revelation 4:5, may represent the sevenfold spirit of God” (390).
This biblical allusion creates a profound symbolic sense of meaning in what would otherwise simply be candles. The candles are followed by a procession of “twenty-four elders” that have “wreaths of lilies on their heads” (Paradiso 29.83–84). These elders, like the candles, have a greater allegorical significance and represent the twenty-four books of the Old Testament (Mandelbaum 391). Four beasts then appear behind the elders and are a direct reference to the four beasts found within Revelation 4 (Mandelbaum 391). All of this spiritual symbolism culminates in the appearance of the griffon pulling a chariot. The griffon is majestic, and Dante describes him with gold limbs and wings that reach “so high that they were lost to sight” (Paradiso 29.112). This magnificent creature, made of man and bird, “is traditionally a symbol of Christ, who possessed both a human and a divine nature” (Mandelbaum 391).

The allegory of the procession harkens back to the allegory found within pagan pastoral poetry, but completely outdoes it. Dante's allegory goes beyond Virgil’s “veiled social and political comment” to the divine (“Pastoral Poetry”). Here Dante has exalted the pastoral allegory.

As we have seen, throughout The Divine Comedy Dante subverts the traditional pagan pastoral, with Virgil as its representative, and replaces it with a Christian pastoral. But Dante does not stop there, as had many poets before him; instead, he places himself at the helm of a new poetry. Poggiolo explains that “By giving a new substance to its conventions, and novel meanings to its commonplaces, Dante transfigures not only that ancient fable but also the whole tradition of pastoral poetry” (152). Dante has created a new tradition of poetry. This new tradition is begun with a coronation; when Virgil addresses Dante for the last time he crowns him (Purgatorio 27.142). In what seems like the coronation of a new poet laureate, Dante has one of the greatest poets of all time pass the power to him.

Dante’s Divine Comedy revolutionized literature, and his Christian reconstruction of the pastoral was a part of that. Suddenly, themes that had so long been pagan took on deep religious meaning. Dante’s Christian symbolism goes beyond exalting Dante as the supreme poet to create a spiritual experience for his readers. Dante the pilgrim does not go through the darkness of Inferno, the penitence of Purgatory, and the glory of Paradise alone; he is accompanied by his reader. In creating such a spiritual experience out of what might otherwise be pagan, Dante surpasses his time. This is why his Christian pastoral matters: he makes an artistic story about Dante the pilgrim into a spiritual journey for the reader.
Works Cited


The Star-Spangled Banshee
Fear of the Unknown in *The Things They Carried*

*McKay Hansen*

The Vietnam War shook the American consciousness with its persistent, looming unknowns. President Lyndon B. Johnson even addressed such public anxieties over the conflict’s uncertainties when he acknowledged before the nation that “questions about this difficult war . . . must trouble every really thoughtful person.” Ever since the conflict, American literature has tackled these questions about the war’s worrisome unknowns. Notably, Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried* depicts a platoon of soldiers that meets the fear of the unknown head-on. O’Brien describes the soldiers’ physical and moral surroundings as a fog in which “everything’s all wet and swirly and tangled up and you can’t see jack” (69). The men, not having anything definite to dread, experience a fear that only grows until it envelops anything and everything they might encounter. Giving a sense for such obscurity and terror at war, the narrator, Tim, recounts how a soldier faces that immense fear of the unknown when searching out a dark tunnel alone; even compared with the very real threat of being killed by an unseen enemy, he affirms that at least in some respects, “the waiting was worse than the tunnel. Imagination was a killer” (10). The novel challenges traditional explanations of fear as it explores many such confrontations with the unknown—indicating that even the return home after the turmoil of military service can cause disorienting alienation. O’Brien
depicts the tremendous fear of the unknown, that “killer imagination,” as an emotional force somehow more powerful than anxiety about the worst conceivable combat experiences, like capture, injury, or death.

Since the text describes Vietnam as a place where “the very facts were shrouded in uncertainty” (38), a great deal of critical attention has gone toward understanding the unknowns of *The Things They Carried*, but the fear of the unknown has gone largely unaddressed. I argue that this leaves out an invaluable facet of understanding that the text offers about cultural interaction with the unknown. O’Brien’s novel portrays the fear of the unknown as the psychological, social, and emotional struggle to reconcile gaps in one’s preconceived ideas of reality with challenging truths in the surrounding world. But many who have written about the novel take for granted how, once exposed to the foreign, O’Brien’s characters can conceive of ideological substitutes to what their communities teach them about other peoples. So although critics like Regula Fuchs and Michael Tavel Clarke have made significant steps toward detailing the battle of individuals against the “normative and formative . . . pressures, constraints, and obligations” imposed by society, their work remains incomplete (Fuchs 83). *The Things They Carried* illustrates how people can become so indoctrinated with inadequate ideologies that they undergo paralyzing fear upon encountering unknowns, never having grasped how to embrace or comprehend things outside of what they have always been told. I take Clarke’s analysis of “the voices that are missing from the text” further, claiming that the portrayal of a silenced Vietnamese people in the text represents not only imperialistic censorship by the United States, but an actively constructed trope of foreign peoples with whom it is impossible to communicate, thereby also restraining Americans themselves to a confined sphere (139). I argue that *The Things They Carried* exposes fear of the unknown as a society-driven means of unifying people into a collective identity, one in direct opposition to outsiders, who are left forever indefinite.

Seeing a fear of the unknown in a new light necessarily calls into question the way communities teach—and what they neglect to teach—about what exists in the world beyond themselves, the Other. *The Things They Carried* suggests that the failures of American communities permitted soldiers to persist in their apprehension about “all the ambiguities of Vietnam, all the mysteries and unknowns,” revealing
many communities to be structurally limited in their perspectives (15). A communal construction of fear has broad implications, for if a societal notion of fear discourages individuals from stepping outside arbitrary social bounds, guilt, conversely, results only from transgressing the same illogical conventions. In the text, guilt comes to suggest merely the emotional shaming imposed by a community for leaving what that community considers explained and knowable—and by implication, culturally important. I assert that these pressures do not manifest themselves solely on the scale of a small town or platoon like Tim’s, but that fear and guilt bear sway on a national level as well. Devotion to one’s place of origin is in many ways simple insecurity about the unknown Other, a distressed adherence to the comfort and security of the known. Tim’s expression of immobilizing fear when trying to leave his homeland captures the text’s portrayal of that cultural predisposition: “Run, I’d think. Then I’d think, Impossible” (42). In this way, The Things They Carried even undermines fundamental assumptions about patriotism, exposing how loyalty to a people and a country does not derive from any value inherent to a nation’s ideals, but rather from a citizen’s inability to conceive of escaping to any alternative.

In the novel, fear reaches beyond the preoccupation with impending misfortunes; it comes to encompass the feeling of ignorance in the face of new external realities. In fact, fear evidences the gaps in people’s understanding about the world outside their own experience, arising, as Jason Wirtz describes, when an individual has left the familiar and “passed into the territory of the unknown and chaotic” (240). Tim experiences such fear of a chaotic unknown when he contemplates fleeing to Canada to avoid the draft: all he can picture about his journey is reaching the limit of what is described and prescribed by his culture. He can imagine “getting chased by the Border Patrol—helicopters and searchlights and barking dogs,” but cannot conceive of any kind of life once he steps onto foreign soil (48). He fears what he does not know or comprehend; Tim’s miniscule understanding about a world outside his own experience is representative of the widespread myopia of his community, even his country. A focused, local awareness limits inhabitants’ consciousness to “the town, the whole universe” (57). When community members lack a reliable notion of existence beyond their own prior experience,
the strange and the unexplained become disturbingly incompatible with the familiar. Feeling repulsion toward the unknown results naturally from affirming an incomplete worldview.

A fear of the unknown grows into an unnaturally powerful force as soldiers, upon encountering the unfamiliar and foreign, attribute much of what they fail to understand to larger-than-life horrors, supernatural phenomena like “cobwebs and ghosts” (10). Relying on inevitably limited perspectives of reality, travelers like O’Brien’s soldiers seldom find their prior understanding sufficient to comprehend every new experience; and their displacement, Tina Chen claims, “transforms everything in its scope” (96). Unequipped to handle the newness, they ascribe their atypical experiences to myths and legends. Such myths are their communities’ primary narratives about what exists outside reality, stories which help them maintain a semblance of familiarity amidst the unknown. Giving any explanation, however illogical, to the unknown is preferable to remaining in a void where reason does not function. This response to the discomfort experienced as an entity abroad, as Elspeth Tilley describes it, exemplifies a tendency to “populate the spaces beyond [one’s] immediate knowledge with mythical presences and imbue them with qualities of fear and menace” (33). Even things that might seem innocent back home, like noises in the night, become “this strange gook music,” taking on frightening elements of the racial, the cultural, and the surreal (69). And so the men of O’Brien’s platoon swear that there in Vietnam, “the land was haunted. We were fighting forces that did not obey the laws of twentieth-century science” (192). By endowing the land itself with dread and with the inexplicably mystical, these men in a distant land show how superstitious imaginings arise from the cultural Other. With all its “spirits” and “boogiemen,” the fear of the unknown takes on an unreal strength more troubling, even, than the physical concerns (like impending violence, miscommunication, illness, and other literal ailments) that travelers may actually face (192).

Since being in a strange place causes so many uncanny sensations for the platoon, The Things They Carried reveals that fear of the unknown is actually brought about largely by community shortcomings, the failings of domestic education to accurately teach about other societies. By endowing entire lands and peoples with paranormal, unnatural power, O’Brien’s soldiers show that their cultural views of the Vietnamese are
tainted by dehumanizing misunderstandings, biases, and prejudices. In the text, Norman Bowker’s experience “learning” about the outside world in a community college “seemed too abstract, too distant, with nothing real or tangible at stake” (149). Communities like Bowker’s tend to emphasize only the disparities between cultures and leave unspoken much that might provide common ground. And it follows that community members easily form skewed, exaggerated images of other peoples as a result, in which most everything is alien—images established by highlighting only a few major points of difference, like language, race, and religion. In other words, communities allow their members to continue in their faulty notions of outside peoples, preserving the way they “did not know shit about shit, and did not care to know” (137). Without comprehending other cultures, any attempts to envision a world that includes them are necessarily inadequate and even well-meaning efforts can, as Clarke puts it, “involve appropriation, misrepresentation, distortion, and reduction, all of which can be forms of arrogance and ethnocentrism” (149). This flawed, incomplete cultural education means that soldiers, and foreigners more generally, rarely possess the necessary tools for intercultural discourse and mutual empathy; and without those tools, they are made uncomfortable by what they discover beyond themselves. Therefore the fear of the unknown, because it is derived from faulty social teachings, is a societal construct that embodies larger psychological struggles with questions of cultural difference.

Community as portrayed by The Things They Carried is thus purposefully shortsighted: it requires the unknown to define and perpetuate itself, to establish a clear contrast with the “knowns” it claims as reality. Even O’Brien’s small group of soldiers relies on the assurance of certain truths and uses stories to cast their cultural counterparts, women, as inexplicable and mysterious foils to their concrete reality. For Jimmy, the rain blurs Martha with the fog (23); in Rat’s tale, Mary Anne is “still somewhere out there in the dark,” enveloped in the land’s secrets (110). In both cases, women stand in for the unknown. The novel thus takes a pessimistic view of the groups people form, showing how they are united not by what they have in common, but by what they do not and cannot share with others outside their groups. People instinctively erect barriers to define what constitutes a member of a community—simultaneously specifying who and what must remain distanced and unexplained. Pitting
the desirable “known” against the fearsome unknown, Lori Newcomb contrasts the pull of “what is easily recognizable, definable, categorical, and morally absolute” with all that is unappealing about “what is nebulous, undefinable, ambiguous, and relative” (97). Newcomb’s work shows how the platoon interacts with both the Vietnamese and those on the home front to distance the mysterious Other and maintain a defining group identity. By extension, any community persists only by masking the reasons a person might abandon it for another and subjecting external peer communities to generalized obscurity.

Since the novel’s societal depictions of the Other remain incomplete by design, the unknown persists not out of benign ignorance, but out of active attempts at quieting and smothering foreign entities. In “The Man I Killed,” O’Brien brutally silences a Vietnamese soldier by leaving “his jaw in his throat” before the solider has any opportunity to make known his own intentions or anything about the people he represents (124). Tim, in faltering efforts to speak for him, can do little more than project his own general experience as a soldier and a son onto the dead man. Tim’s total inability to empathize reflects how the Vietnamese cultural voice is utterly unfamiliar to the American public. Tim’s platoon even symbolically appropriates the good that locals achieve by giving them racialized American language; when the soldiers follow an elderly Vietnamese man through a minefield to safety, he only parrots and mimics the soldiers’ bigoted words, robbing the stranger of his own voice, thought, and accomplishment (32). O’Brien’s work is not isolated in addressing how America silenced the Vietnamese during the war; films and other literary pieces from the period allow similar insight into that method of maintaining the unknown’s mysteries. In The Iron Triangle, a 1989 Vietnam War film, protagonist Captain Keene says, “I spoke Vietnamese, so I guess they thought I could communicate with the people. They were wrong.” His sentiment makes the impossibility of communication with the Other more than a language barrier: it becomes a cultural wall erected between the warring peoples. A decade closer to the war, the popular 1979 film Apocalypse Now featured soldiers repeating the mantra “never get out of the boat.” The prevailing American attitude about Vietnam therefore bars all contact with people native to other lands, betraying the foregone conclusion that any interaction with the unknown will end in failure.
Fear of the unknown therefore takes on even further nuance in O’Brien’s fiction, where it is often employed as a manipulative tool that keeps community members within established social bounds. One of Tim’s Vietnam buddies tells of his hopeless feeling that after the dissolution of the platoon, he will be unable to ever integrate into a community again. Bowker writes Tim, “There's no place to go. Not just in this lousy little town. In general. My life, I mean” (150). Bowker, with his ultimate election to die rather than to live on without fitting in to a meaningful community, demonstrates how the unknown acts as a force that pushes against people when they try leaving the security and comfort of the familiar. Yet community, with its simplistic portrayal of the world—however easy and comfortable that portrayal may seem—retains the potential fault of producing narrow-mindedness. Calling out that trend, Clarke claims that “powerful, familiar cultural narratives make it difficult for individuals to give original or countercultural meanings to experiences in their own lives” (133). Clarke submits that while communal pressures can help unify values under a single banner, they can also restrict the freedom to explore culturally unconventional ideologies. I posit that The Things They Carried therefore offers additional significance to Edward Said’s concept of “Othering” as a reduction of foreign entities to crude tropes. The novel indicates that communities like Bowker’s leave seemingly strategic gaps in their descriptions of other peoples in order to foster the fear of the unknown, thereby eliminating the possibility of an individual community member leaving the homeland to integrate with the Other. Societal taboos are therefore not attached as much to views of morality as they are to this view of the Other as powerful and menacing. Imagining external phenomena to be irreconcilable with their reality, community members resign themselves to societal input, which they see to be inevitable. And so the wearied Tim, too, finally gives in: “I understood that I would not do what I should do” (55). He follows the crowd to a war he personally opposes, deciding not out of a sense of good, but out of a compelling fear of losing what he knows. A subjective morality remains in force merely by withholding from its adherents the knowledge necessary to subsist outside of traditional communities.

If community standards in The Things They Carried consist primarily of fears and unknowns used to control, the guilt that arises from transgressing such societal norms becomes not the result of real
wrongdoing, but just another arbitrary mechanism of culture to retain its subjects. If a community’s values and narratives are truly so self-exalting, then it is as subjective as Robin Silbergleid suggests, and “to be good is to do what one is told” (146). When O’Brien’s characters feel guilt, then, it is often due to their “sins” against a restrictive, flawed society. Ascribing shame and guilt does not punish community members for trespassing boundaries between good and evil; it instead chastises entering and exploring territory traditionally left uncharted, since those at home fear how new discoveries might upset the delicate balance of the organization they have already become acquainted with. This reading of the text enables more comprehensive interpretation of key passages like Tim’s account of his guilt, in which he tells readers, “I was ashamed of my conscience, ashamed to be doing the right thing” (49). That shame, now identified as a tool of societal influence, represents Tim’s struggle against the machine—not a conflict between two of his own internal ideals. His battle is a microcosm of what John Schafer terms “the tension between collective concern and individual desire,” a tension Schafer finds every bit as prevalent in contemporary Vietnamese literature (across “enemy” lines) as in the post-war United States (14). Tim’s submission to expectation reveals how lapses in ethics can be at once “nobody’s fault” and “everybody’s”: a community has no single entity to pin blame on, but each of its individual constituents shares the blame of subscribing to an imperfect system of morality (O’Brien 168).

While both fear and guilt operate in local community groups that range from townspeople in Minnesota to soldiers in Southeast Asia, they also bear sway on a national scale, refuting the conventional image of a nigh-infallible national identity. *The Things They Carried* alleges that the society of America at war crafts a very incomplete image of the world, subjecting its citizens, in their “blind, thoughtless, automatic acquiescence to it all,” to fear and guilt of the Other in order to use them in protecting its interests (43). Presented with the unbalanced alternatives of killing for unclear causes or abandoning all they know, draftees, in John Wharton’s words, find themselves hesitating between “personal and national images of an American self which simply cannot behave in an altogether ethical way” (4). Diehard national advocates turn against those who question the government’s imperialistic military imperatives in “patriotic ridicule,” endlessly labeling as cowards those unwilling to
give over their wills (O’Brien 57). The populace of the United States accordingly feels incapable of leaving the motherland, since integration into foreign cultures and countries is portrayed as shameful—in some ways, even impossible. So the truly brave and moral in the world of the novel, as Regula Fuchs contends, are those who “fight the values instilled by [their] cultural upbringing” and dare to challenge longstanding traditions that perpetuate injustices against people at home and abroad (80). O’Brien’s work presents citizens with a blueprint of a nation’s ideological and psychological inner workings, enabling them to resist the submission and oppression that fuel cyclical systems of compulsion and encouraging individuals to work beyond the failings of their nations.

Yet in the novel, smaller communities struggle to break from cultural precedent; instead they become united through shared nationalistic terror, forming xenophobic images of a nebulous enemy so intimidating it transcends the differences between them. Such a “join or die” mentality is evident in the soldiers, who, finding themselves in a platoon integrated by others they cannot understand, are forced to accept their fellow servicemen as a lesser evil—or else persist in an impossibly divisive state of cognitive dissonance. Dave Jensen, fearing retaliation from Lee Strunk after a fight, says that obsessing over the intentions of the Vietnamese and those of another soldier at once is “like fighting two different wars . . . No safe ground: enemies everywhere” (60). Having no sense for the motives, purposes, or objectives of an external entity instills fear. Accordingly, in order to focus fear on an entire foreign people as a foe, rather than on fellow citizens and the disparities between their communities and origins, a narrative of national unity arises. Thus, using what Richard Slotkin calls “a myth of national identity,” soldiers hesitantly trust one another on the assumption that they share more similarities between platoon members than with strangers across national borders (470). O’Brien’s platoon, for instance, initially rejects Bobby Jorgensen as an outsider, but the new medic soon begins to “fit in very nicely, all chumminess and group rapport” as he joins in efforts concentrated against the Viet Cong (193). And The Things They Carried suggests that the same process takes place on the scale of an entire country by uniting figures from history, family, and pop culture against Tim’s desertion; however disparate and motley the group may seem, it succeeds in dissuading Tim from leaving his homeland and crossing the Rainy River. Slotkin expounds on the
national harmony shaped by juxtaposition to the Other, adding that “we need the supreme difference of an enemy to allow us to see our likeness as Americans” (494). For this reason, even initial hesitance about markedly unique group members, who seem not to fit in, soon necessarily dissipates in order to maintain the vision on the larger, more worrisome unknowns about the foe.

_The Things They Carried_ demonstrates how when vital national narratives disintegrate, citizens grow disillusioned with their own ideologies because the very institutions that make up their societal structure become increasingly unknown. Since most of the soldiers in the novel drift from traditional American perspectives, like the answers of Christianity in dealing with the unknowns of death, they find themselves needing to invent new explanations for their surroundings, explanations that fit their reality better than the societal stories told them for so many years. Tim says that in reaching to find answers for such defining questions, he and the soldiers “had to make up [their] own. Often they were exaggerated, or blatant lies . . .” (226). Confronted by a gap in empirical evidence about a socially promoted “truth,” one (like the existence of an afterlife) which their culture asks them to cross with a leap of faith, the soldiers struggle and search for other ways around the issue. O’Brien’s soldiers enter a moral vacuum, a whirling chaos of conflicting ideals which Marilyn Wesley characterizes as “difficult to organize into a reassuring fiction . . .” (89). Their skepticism captures why the government struggled to convince the American people of the Vietnam War’s causes and consequences. Ultimately, attempts to portray conflicts as something they are not proved futile, signaling a rise in wariness toward political leaders and confirming that war’s effect “depends on collective fictive interpretations” (Wesley 91). When President Richard Nixon claimed before the nation in his 1969 speech on Vietnam, “Our greatness as a nation has been our capacity to do what had to be done when we knew our course was right,” his words were ironically undermined by being presented at a time when the nation could not agree upon just what was right. Left to choose between cowardice and dissidence, civilians often simply comply with what the government proclaims to be right. Many soldiers go to war motivated not by the moral call of a draft, but by an administration
that drops bombs on those that do not comply with its expectations, for a faceless organization might just as easily turn against non-conformist civilians as attack dissimilar foreign enemies.

Challenging longstanding notions of the citizen’s love of country, *The Things They Carried* ultimately unmask patriotism to be merely a manifestation of insecurity about the unknown—a desperate, clinging allegiance to one’s familiar reality. The American narrative portrayed in the text would require its people to diminish the complexities of world powers until they see just “red checkers and black checkers,” ensuring that its representatives “knew where [they] stood” (31). But the novel’s soldiers make the difficult discovery that their nation’s ideals do not actually provide an infallible moral compass, and that while it may seem the easiest route, it is not always most ethical to do as Carl Horner describes and “succumb to national pride” (256). Exposed to the frightful new experiences of war, all confidence in a patriotic cause, and even the surety of justice itself, begins to collapse. Soldiers who grow embittered toward their supposedly “good” national interests are figures characteristic of Vietnam War literature as a genre. This common thread of exposing faults in biased homeland narratives runs across many literary pieces contemporary to *The Things They Carried*; Matthew Hill claims that such literature illustrates how a nation’s “collective ideologies and mythologies make industrialized violence possible” (179). And *The Things They Carried* drives home forcefully that such mythological traditions not only enable international conflict, but perpetuate and aggravate it. O’Brien shows how as soldiers rely on their country’s fallacious legends as their basis for understanding the foreign (and, by extension, the unknown generally), they maintain the demeaning oversimplification of ethnic tropes. Wanting the ease of envisioning a world with “rules,” many citizens swallow inadequate national narratives while suppressing reservations about them. But while all the flags and fireworks may put on “a pretty good show,” seeming to celebrate the values and enlightenment a nation embodies, such flashy displays of commitment to what is close to home often blind people to lies beyond them, shrouding all else in shadow and mystery (148). Patriotism does not champion the familiar—it betrays fear of the unfamiliar.
Works Cited


“Blame the Due of Blame”
The Ethics and Efficacy of Curses in Richard III

Alexandra Malouf

Language, particularly the language of cursing, plays a powerful role in determining the outcome of events in Shakespeare’s Richard III. Gender imperatives reflected in the speech of Richard III’s characters indicate where power lies and how it is exercised across gendered spheres. While male characters in the history plays typically obtain and exert power through violence, both in war and in secret, the primary source of power held by female characters in Richard III is their use of language. Consistently, the women seal the violent ends of their enemies with curses, and Richard is perpetually given cause to believe himself evil because of the women’s descriptive language surrounding his deformity. When working outside of a homosocial context however, Richard uses women’s own source of power—language—as a performative tool of manipulation against them. In this way, he defies many masculine gender imperatives, a fact which allows him to obtain patrilineal power despite his initial isolation from the patriarchal line of succession. Ultimately, Shakespeare’s thematic use of language as the determining conveyor of power in Richard III places the violence-causing curses of the women on an equal ethical plain with the physical violence of their male companions, and in so doing, urges us to consider speech as an action for which we are morally responsible.
To date, much of the critical conversation surrounding *Richard III* revolves around which characters are to blame for the destructive events that occur in the course of the play. Furthermore, a substantial portion of this discussion is confined to a binary, gendered discourse, such that one critic blames the play’s female characters while a responding critic argues against the male sphere. In this debate, female characters are typically blamed through association with witchcraft, sorcery, and their procreative power to continue or discontinue the patrilineal line of succession. Meanwhile, Richard himself is cast in various, often opposing, gendered positions; some construe him as a dangerous user of women, while contenders interpret him as unfairly used by women. Such arguments of blame often focus on Richard as a hypermasculine powerhouse, a deformed evil created by female procreative powers, or as an unmanly runt excluded from the patriarchy who must consequentially rely upon female powers in order to access the power he desires.

This discussion of gendered blame in *Richard III* finds its significance in the gender anxieties of the Elizabethan age, during which the play was initially staged. In transition from warrior community to court society, Early Modern English culture began to discourage violence amongst the aristocratic male populace and feared it as a deplorable form of masculine unruliness (Moulton 253). Fearing male aggression, this period also produced a range of instructional texts such as Castiglione’s *Book of the Courtier*, which provided counsel to men attempting to navigate the now “pacified social spaces” of the aristocratic court (Elias). Under Elizabeth I, law enforcements also allocated significant effort to reining in lower-class male violence, including the implementation of curfews to prevent night riots, placing limits on unauthorized pistols, and prohibiting concealed firearms (Moulton 252). Unruly men, however, were not the only source of gender anxiety for Early Modern Englishers. During the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, female divergence from gender imperatives was also a subject of great anxiety. Although symbolically and politically representative of the patriarchal “body politic,” England’s late sixteenth-century monarch was an aged woman, who nonetheless embraced the role of militant leader in the war with Spain (Moulton 254). It was during this war with Spain that the London stage saw a flourishing of history plays, which despite representing events of the past, often reflected the gender imperatives and anxieties present in contemporary England (Moulton 254).
Richard III, men, including Richard himself, are critically implicated in the disastrous events of the play due to their tendency to approach power play through violence.

While the narrative of Shakespeare’s Wars of the Roses tetralogy occurs a century prior to its staging, patriarchal anxieties of the late sixteenth-century, rather than the fifteenth, are ever present in their pages. Shakespeare’s representation of Richard III is perpetually aggressive and hypermasculine. Richard vehemently rejects anything he perceives as effeminate, beginning with the “idle pleasures” and “sportive tricks” that he has previously warned his womanizing brother, Edward, against (Richard III 1.1.14–31). In his youth, Richard begins to perceive weeping as an effeminate weakness “for babes” (Henry VI 2.1.86). Recounting his father’s death to Anne, Richard recalls that his “manly eyes did scorn an humble tear,” such that he was physically incapable of weeping in response to the loss of his father (Richard III 1.2.166–67). Further evidence of Richard’s scorn for femininity is present in his contempt for women. For him, the “mighty gossips in this monarchy” (Richard III 3.4.72) are to blame for anything that goes amiss, including the imprisonment of his brother, Clarence. Richard perceives himself “incapable of loving women” and instead “makes his heaven to dream upon the crown” (Moulton 266). Moreover, Richard’s hypermasculinity is not merely present in his rejection of effeminacy, but also in his vicious preoccupation with obtaining a place in the patriarchal succession. His multiple marriages are obviously pursued “not all so much for love / As for another secret close intent” (Richard III 1.1.157–58), under the recognition that women are vital to the legitimacy of his patriarchal power. Richard’s hypermasculine compensation for the effeminacy of his brothers reflects the Early Modern anxiety towards unruly masculinity and is frequently used to implicate Richard as the villain behind the ruinous occurrences in Shakespeare’s play.

Richard’s monstrous deformity is also frequently cited in order to cast blame on both Richard and women. Due to the Renaissance belief that physical beauty is correlated with moral virtue, Richard’s evil nature and aggressive pursuit of power is integrally tied up with his physical deformity. More importantly, his deformity also serves to implicate the play’s female characters by connecting them to witchcraft and corruption. The witch’s proclivity for birthing “monstrous and illegitimate children” (Roper 219) allows the witch to interfere with, and ultimately “preserve or pervert the
patriarchal heritage” (Willis 98) without engaging in the masculine violence that Richard must resort to for obtaining power. While it is Richard who directly and violently interferes with the line of succession, it is the Duchess of York who gives birth to his corruption, and who consequently might present the greater threat for the Elizabethan audience. “From forth the kennel of [her] womb hath crept / A hell-hound . . . that foul defacer [and] grand tyrant of the earth” (Richard III 4.4.47–53). Through female association with witchcraft, the women of Richard III come to represent a perceived hazard to society that is equal to, if not the origin, of Richard’s unruly nature. Richard, in murdering his way to the throne, complicates the royal line of succession by altering it from its present state and leaving the line of descent pending. Yet, as critics on the male side of the debate will argue, Richard’s monstrosity is an evil produced not by any male power, but by female sorcery.

What correlates effeminacy even more strongly to witchcraft and blameworthiness in Richard III, however, is the women’s use of language. Particular to the female speeches in the play is their tendency to come in the form of curses, a fact which invariably associates the women with witchcraft. Throughout, Queen Margaret’s prophetic curses predict with frightening accuracy the events of history. Functioning within the world of Richard III, curses have real world consequences that interrupt both historical outcome and royal succession. Grammatically, the curses are spoken as optatives—imperative and “highly articulate” statements of wish (Magnussen 32). What separates these curses from mere wishes is the insertion of “God” into the statements, as in the Duchess of York’s, “Cancel his bond of life, dear God, I plead. / That I may live and to say, ‘The dog is dead’” (Richard III 4.4.7). The women’s statements transcend mere wishes, for by invoking God, their words become prayers or curses, which ultimately act as the agent’s “plea that God intervene on his or her behalf” (Magnussen 36). Regardless of where the source of the curses’ power lies, they are nonetheless more substantive than mere statements.

Linguistically speaking, the curses constitute what J.L. Austin has termed perlocutionary speech acts—statements which perform actions, rather than merely reporting or describing (Austin 6). In their perlocutionary nature, curses in Richard III differ from mere exclamations of profanity, for like marriage vows and orders of house-arrest, the perlocutionary curse generates effects external to the performance
of the curse. Prior to his death for instance, Richard’s mother leaves him with her “most heavy curse,” that “Either [he] wilt die by God’s just ordinance . . . Or [she] with grief and extreme age shall perish / And never look upon [his] face again” (Richard III 4.4.173–76). This, the Duchess of York’s “most heavy curse” (4.4.177), not only precedes, but conclusively secures Richard’s bloody end at Richmond’s hand.

The curses, for their remarkable influence on the royal succession, function as the primary means of female power in the play. Female transgression in Richard III differs fundamentally from the aggressive unruliness of female characters such as Kate in Taming of the Shrew, and even from the women of the earlier Henry VI plays, in that these women do not consistently attempt to cross into the male sphere of physical violence. Even when explicitly given the opportunity to stab Richard, Anne does not act out physical aggression. Rather, female violence in Richard III is fundamentally linguistic in nature. Looking upon the dead Henry VI, Anne’s curse upon Richard is full of violent language: “O, cursed be the hand that made these holes! / Cursed the heart that had the heart to do it! / Curse the blood that let this blood from hence!” (Richard III 1.1.14-28). This curse, although ultimately backfiring on Anne’s intent, conducts a linguistic “dismemberment” of Henry’s murderer, “dividing hand from heart and heart from blood” (Brown 548). Although Anne refrains from physical violence, she may still be implicated in linguistic violence. By nature of the power structures in Richard III, female characters are isolated from the patriarchal succession and consequently are not frequently present for the pivotal moments of male violence and warfare that determine the line of succession. Clarence’s executors are not women, nor is Richard III killed in battle by a woman. Female influence nevertheless snakes its way into the war on succession by way of perlocutionary, optative speech acts. When Richard criticizes Margaret, asking “Why should she live to fill the world with words?” (Richard Duke of York, 5.5.43), he both affirms Joan’s foretelling that Margaret’s power lies in her words (Smith 152), and implies that she is culpable for the effects of her power.

Joan’s prophesy also leads us to a major difference in the way that Richard III navigates patrilineal power structures as compared to other male characters in the play. While male power is typically navigated through violence in Richard III, Richard himself frequently interjects
himself into the female linguistic sphere in order to obtain power that he cannot access within the patrilineal sphere. Richard's strategic participation in different gendered spheres is not present in Shakespeare's preceding *Henry VI* plays, but rather, is distinctive of Richard's behavior in *Richard III* alone. In the *Henry VI* plays, threats to the patriarchal succession are much more typically female, as with Joan's sexual transgressions, their even more overt witchcraft, Margaret's adultery, and the consequent illegitimacy of her children (Howard 106–7). Contrastingly, the greatest threat presented by the women of *Richard III* is the perlocutionary speech act—a power which Richard frequently hijacks. Margaret's first torrent of curses on Richard is interrupted by the latter and reversed upon Margaret (Howard 109). Responding to his interjection, Margaret protests, “O, let me make the period to my curse!” to which Richard stingingly replies, “Tis done by me, and ends in ‘Margaret’” (*Richard III* 1.3.237–8). Thus has Margaret, “breathed [her] curse against [her]self” (*Richard III* 1.3.239). More than other male characters in the play, Richard understands the crucial influence that women play on the patrilineal succession, and his unhesitating appropriation of female power is rooted in his relentless pursuit of a place within that patriarchal line.

Richard also deftly appropriates female power in his manipulative seduction of Anne during the first act of the play. Following her verbal dismemberment of Richard, she curses that “If ever he have wife, let her be made / More miserable by the life of him / Than I am made by my young lord and thee!” (*Richard III* 1.1.26–28). As with Margaret, Richard interjects Anne’s curse, speaking to her seductively, in an emotionally evocative discourse which he has otherwise rejected for its effeminacy (Moulton 267). Richard further diverges from his staunch hypermasculinity to fully enter into the female discourse by placing his sword in Anne’s hand and “lay[ing] his breast ‘naked’ for her penetration” (Howard 109–10) (*Richard III* 1.2.177). Richard, still owner of the sword to which he submits, plays the part of both possessive man and submissive woman (Bushnell 124). By engaging in female discourse Richard is able to effectively dispossess Anne’s curse of its power, turning her malediction against her so that “she becomes the wife whose life is blighted by her husband’s” (Brown 548). Although the female curses certainly harness incredible power over the outcome of events, the greatest threat to the patriarchal succession in *Richard III* is not female adultery as in the *Henry VI* plays, but alternatively, the murderous Richard (Howard 106–7).
Richard at once harnesses both the power of the female curse and the aggressive power of male warfare, suggesting that gendered power is performative rather than being implicit in the character’s “sexed bod[ies]” (Howard 109). Perlocutionary speech acts certainly comprise the prominent means of female power. Nonetheless, cursing is not inherent to the female sex, a fact which is insinuated by Elizabeth’s appeal for Margaret to “teach me how to curse mine enemies” (Richard III 4.4.116–17). This request suggests that cursing is not a natural form of action, but one which must be learned, and as with Anne’s unintentional cursing of herself prior to her wooing, these actions can be carried out successfully or unsuccessfully by the agent performing it. That these speech acts are not inherently sexed, but rather are consciously performed by individual agents, implies that Richard is not merely, as scholar, Kristin Smith argues, a product of witchcraft and “Margaret’s embodied curse” (156), but an agent accountable for his own actions. For this reason, we cannot hold the women solely responsible for the either the historical outcome of the play, nor all of the moral wrongdoings enacted to bring it about. Individuals of both sexes must answer for their actions regardless on what gendered side of the patrilineal struggle they stand.

Who is to blame for the tragedies of Richard III is, however, further contingent on how these tragedies, or histories, of the play are defined. During the literal Wars of the Roses, history was perceived as something that merely befell helpless victims, unfairly favoring one man while condemning another, but this conception differs starkly from the view of history presented by Shakespeare’s play. Alternatively, the historical events that occur within the text of Richard III are largely created by the actions of characters, who subsequently must answer for the moral responsibilities associated with the results of their actions. Of the many types of action influencing the events of the play, perlocutionary speech acts bear a consistently more significant impact on historical events than does physical violence. Certainly, murder and violence do function as the tool by which the patrilineal succession is deconstructed. Nevertheless, the actual outcome of this deconstruction is sanctioned by the engagement of both male and female characters in the discourse of perlocutionary cursing, rather than violence. Richard’s death, although exacted by Richmond on a battlefield, is sealed and authorized by his mother’s sworn curse. Through this, it becomes increasingly apparent
that the active influence of curses in *Richard III* does more than merely implicate women in witchcraft, and furthermore, does not hold either sex solely responsible for the corruption of the patriarchal line.

Yet, even though curses possess the strongest efficacy on the outcome of history of any action in the play, they are not the sole perlocutionary speech acts that bear ethical weight. One instance of this can be found in Richard’s complete divergence from his earlier mode of using physical violence to gain control of the throne. Instead of directly stabbing his brothers, as he does Margaret’s son in *Henry VI Part II*, Richard conducts his later murders through the use of verbal orders given to others. Consequently, the fault for these murders is not limited purely to those who do the stabbing, or the drowning, or the poisoning, but is also extended to him who speaks the order. On some level, Richard is aware of the ethical responsibility that he bears for these spoken actions, and his consciousness of that guilt is evidenced by his efforts to verbally justify his murderous actions. He attempts perpetually to peg others as the cause for his unjust actions, beginning by “making Edward appear . . . responsible for Clarence’s death,” then later “positing Anne’s beauty as the cause for his murdering the men she loved, and putting Elizabeth to blame for virtually all of the country’s woes” (Olson 317). Such vocal casting of blame does not constitute genuine “justification,” but in reality, merely reveals an ineffectual attempt on the part of a wrongdoer to neutralize his or her moral responsibility by envisioning it on the shoulders of another. This is one of the dangers of linguistic power, that it allows the user to act and yet remain mentally removed from direct responsibility for their actions.

Richard is not alone in his attempts to morally neutralise his actions in this way. His transformation from violent power to vocal power between the *Henry VI* plays and *Richard III* is shared by Queen Margaret. On the battlefields of *Henry VI Part II*, Margaret is a direct and violent participant in the war on patrilineal power, yet her only source of power in *Richard III* is her tongue. This, she uses to blame Richard for the continuation of the war: “I had an Edward, till a Richard kill’d him: / I had a Harry, till a Richard killed him” (*Richard III* 4.4.40–41). Responding to Margaret’s accusations, the Duchess of York contends that Margaret has likewise spilled the blood of men she loves. Margaret refuses to acknowledge her guilt, and retorts by reversing the Duchess’s blame upon
herself: “Thy womb let loose, to chase us to our graves” (Richard III 4.4.54). The fact that both Richard and Margaret attempt to defer their moral responsibility to others confirms the enormous ethical gravity behind their actions, for there is no reason to justify an action for which one is not guilty. Moreover, the fact that their guilt stems equally from acts of physical violence and from perlocutionary speech acts indicates that the ethical weight between both types of action is relatively equal.

It is of further significance to point out that the very presence of this mutual blame may actually account for much of the widespread critical controversy regarding which gender is at fault in Richard III. However, to merely participate along with the characters in this game of blame is analytically insufficient, if we do not also understand the ethical implications of blame on speech acts within the play.

Because speech actions function as the primary means by which the events of history are sealed, the ethical weight of speech acts is enormous. Within the textual world of Richard III, words are potentially more dangerous and impactful than any other form of action in the play. This fact suggests that all agents who exercise this power bear just as much ethical responsibility for what they say as any man who wields a sword in battle. This play neither asks readers to side with the women who cast all blame upon Richard, nor with Richard who casts all blame upon women. Rather, it begs us to question the efficacy of our words, and further, to reconsider the ethical responsibilities borne by every man or woman who wields them as weapons. The incredible ascendency of curses in Richard III insists upon our viewing words as actions with real world consequences—actions which hold the power to destroy, deconstruct, and terminally alter the course of history. In these words, moral responsibility is implicit, and this responsibility cannot—as the characters of Richard III certainly attempt to do—simply be shrugged off and cast upon others as blame.
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The Magic of Yeats’ “The Lake Isle of Innisfree”
Kabbalism, Numerology, and Tarot Cards

Genevieve Pettijohn

William Butler Yeats published his poem “The Lake Isle of Innisfree” in December of 1890, an important year in Yeats’ life due to his increased association with occult societies in London. In “Innisfree,” Yeats’ narrator asserts his desire to leave the “pavement gray” of his current locale and dwell on the mysterious island of Innisfree, with only bees, crickets, and linnets for company. Critics of the poem have highlighted several important aspects of “Innisfree,” including the spiritual journey undertaken by Yeats (Hunter); the island as an escape from sexuality (Merritt); and the island as a place of wisdom or foolishness, depending on varying historical perspectives on beans (Normandin). To these critics, it seems that the island is a place of refuge from a dangerous outside world—supposedly London specifically, although Merritt might broaden this interpretation to include all sexual encounters. While these critics acknowledge that the island is a place of escape, citing what Yeats himself has said about the Irish island Sligo, they fall short of recognizing the full implications of Yeats’ fascination with the occult. His involvement with the Theosophical Society and later the Hermetic Society of the Golden Dawn has been observed by several critics; some of his later works are even interpreted with these
considerations in mind. However, the teachings and philosophy of these societies, as well as Yeats’ interest in mysticism and his understanding of occult symbolism, have not fully been incorporated in an interpretation of “Innisfree.” I assert that the symbols which Yeats includes on the island—specifically the nine bean-rows—are meant to be examined in the light of the Kabbalism, numerology, and tarot cards to which these societies looked for inspiration in their occult practices. Through his inclusion of these symbols, Yeats is demonstrating mastery over the Golden Dawn’s basic tenants, a mastery which he perhaps hoped would help him advance in rank in the society and further his studies of magic.

Although many critics interpret Yeats’ later poetic endeavors through the lens of his involvement in the occult, mysticism and the occult were surely on the forefront of Yeats’ mind during the publication of “Innisfree.” Yeats’ interest in occultism expanded after an 1886 visit to Dublin by Mohini Mohun Chatterji, Bengali member of the Theosophical Society manipulated by Madame Helena Blavatsky to come to London as an authoritative “oriental” (Owen 60; Sasson 78–80). Chatterji’s influence extended far beyond Chatterji’s week-long visit to London (Harper 3). Already co-founder and president of the Dublin Hermetic Society, Yeats sought for a more rapid progression of his perceived innate abilities (Brown 34; Leavitt 131). Yeats’ honorary poem to Chatterji later in life suggests to Ken Monteith, author of Yeats and Theosophy, that Yeats counted Chatterji as “the source of his theosophical interests” (21). Indeed, Chatterji’s arrival, coupled with Yeats’ increasing dissatisfaction with his own group’s “vaguely progressive self-improvement,” appears to have spurred Yeats’ ambition to join Blavatsky’s Theosophical Society in 1887 (Brown 34; Owen 60). Even this society, however, did not satiate Yeats’ affinity for occult practices, and so Yeats joined the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn in 1890, the same year he published “Innisfree” (Owen 60). The Golden Dawn was a society meant to “[follow] through the interest in ritual magic and study prescribed by Esoteric Theosophists,” another Hermetic group to which Yeats had previously belonged (Foster 103). According to Pat Zalewski in The Magic Tarot of the Golden Dawn, the Golden Dawn was founded in England in 1888 and became an “immensely influential magical group [which] concentrated its teachings on applying the Tarot to the Kabbalah,” or the literature of Orthodox Judaism and Hebrew texts mingled with eastern texts (Zalewski 8; Farley 98–99).
The tarot cards and the Kabbalah no doubt played important roles in Yeats’ poetic compositions, not only because of his intrinsic interest in them but also due to his deeper desire to practice advanced magical arts. He had left the Theosophical Society of Madame Blavatsky because her mystic experiments “did not satisfy his restless spirit of inquiry” (Harper 7). Increasingly attracted to “practical magic,” Yeats joined the Society of the Golden Dawn in March 1890 (Owen 60). According to Ellic Howe, a British occult writer, “Yeats’s membership of the Order . . . had a notable influence upon his imaginative and poetical development” (xxii). Indeed, Yeats wrote in a letter that “The mystical life is the centre of all that I do and all that I think and all that I write” (Autobiographies, qtd. in Wade 70). Clearly, the influence of the occult began to permeate his life and his writing. “Innisfree,” though one of his earlier works, is not excluded from this influence.

Since Yeats’ curiosity was not satisfied with Blavatsky’s society, his pursuit of the mystic continued in the Golden Dawn. Evidence suggests that Yeats had interest in gaining access to the Second Order of the Golden Dawn, or Roseae Rubis et Aureae Curcis, an inner circle in which more advanced magic would be practiced. Ten years after “Innisfree,” he wrote a pamphlet entitled, Is the Order of the R.R. et A.C. to Remain a Magical Order?, indicating his concern for the purity of inner circle (Howe 100). This Second Order was highly selective. While those in the First Order “had to . . . know the Hebrew alphabet, understand the basic significance and attributions of the [Kabbalistic] Tree of Life, and be familiar with the symbolic import of divinatory systems like the tarot,” those in the Second Order indulged more fully in magic (Owen 59). Yeats demonstrated early proficiency in action and in writing. “Innisfree” is one indication of this proficiency.

Critic Mario D’Avanzo argues that the Kabbalah was extremely important to Yeats as he wrote “The Lake Isle of Innisfree.” Besides referring to the literature of Orthodox Judaism and Hebrew and eastern texts, the Kabbalah also expressed “the nature of God and his divine emanations which were represented diagrammatically as the Tree of Life” (Farley 98–99). Asserting that Yeats studied the Kabbalah during the composition of “Innisfree,” D’Avanzo notes the parallels of the poem between the Biblical Song of Solomon. A “[Kabbalistic] interpretation” of the Song of Solomon in conjunction with “Innisfree” implies that “the interaction of the speaker and the lake isle . . . conforms fully to
the [Kabbalistic] concept of the individual’s achievement of order and mystical unity with . . . the earthly presence of God” (16). Yeats exemplifies this “mystical unity” in his ability to “hear lake water lapping,” though he stands on a road far removed from the island. Perhaps even his ability to hear the water “in the deep earth’s core” is evidence of mystic power and unity with God’s earthly presence. Here we can already see elements of the occult seeping into Yeats’ writing as he includes Kabbalistic instances of unity with God in his poem.

Yeats demonstrated through “Innisfree” not only his understanding of the Kabbalah but also of numerology and tarot cards. One element of “Innisfree” that is particularly fascinating is the “nine bean-rows.” One interpretation of the bean-rows is put forward by Shawn Normandin. He examines the relationship that Yeats had with the Theosophical Society between 1887 and 1890, especially Yeats’ connection to Madame Blavatsky, who “drew much of her wisdom from ancient philosophers,” especially Pythagoras (25–26). Normandin highlights the potential duality of the meaning of beans in Yeats’ poem: “To go to Innisfree and plant ‘bean-rows’ may, from a Thoreauvian perspective, reap austere wisdom, or it may, from a Pythagorean perspective, amount to the betrayal of wisdom. . . . The simple word bean condenses the struggle of a poet caught between London and Sligo [the asserted inspiration for Innisfree]” (27). Normandin’s interpretation is instructive in that it incorporates the historical fact that Yeats was a member of the Theosophical Society and most likely read Blavatsky’s Pythagoras-saturated writings. However, Normandin does not go so far as to examine the occult interpretations of the number of bean rows—nine. In their book about the Golden Dawn, Chris and Pat Zalewski explain the Kabbalistic theology behind certain numbers and concepts in the occult. According to this theology, there are three stages of Light—the potential co-creator of the universe along with Sound—which become increasingly more solid (Zalewski 43). The third stage, Ain Soph Aur or Limitless Light, is made up of nine Hebrew letters. Zalewski and Zalewski explain that the nine Hebrew letters “constitute the unmanifested steps or spheres . . . so that at the number nine we cannot progress further without returning to unity” (16). Nine, it appears, is an important number for both the Kabbalah and the tarot deck.

Other meanings to the number nine exist in occult numerology. According to Sepharial, author of *The Kabala of Numbers: A Handbook*
of Interpretation, nine symbolizes mystery. It signifies “a new birth,” “premonition,” and perhaps most interestingly “going forth” (28), which echoes Yeats’ sentiment to “arise and go” to Innisfree. Nine is also linked to “Cupid, just as Erato, from desiring its opposite for a partner” (Westcott 37). This last interpretation of the number nine would suggest that even though Yeats is potentially fleeing to the island to escape his affections—Merritt’s proposed interpretation—he is still a slave to his affections, as he will be a slave to the nine bean-rows. Again, however, this interpretation is an incomplete picture without the introduction of tarot cards.

The exact origin of tarot cards is not known. Some speculate that the cards were introduced by Crusaders or gypsies (“Tarot”). According to Helen Farley, author of *A Cultural History of the Tarot*, Tarot cards first appeared in northern Italy in the early fifteenth century (18). From there, tarot cards gained popularity in France and then onward to England during the Victorian period (121). Yeats would have been familiar with tarot cards, for he had a pack of them among his “treasured possessions” in London (Raine 5). Furthermore, Farley writes: “Originally members [of the Golden Dawn] were required to make a copy of the tarot deck. . . . Initiates were to use the cards for both meditation and divination” (136). Golden Dawn members used these cards for meditation and divination (Zalewski 3, 27). An understanding of these tarot cards, as mentioned earlier, was required for advancement into the Second Order of the Golden Dawn.

Tarot cards hold significant implications for the nine bean-rows of “Innisfree” on two levels: overtly, through an understanding of the purpose of the cards; and covertly, through an application of the numerology associated with the cards. First, the physical bean plant could be synonymous to the Tree of Life which the tarot cards are meant to pictorially represent (Raine 15). The image of the Tree of Life may connect to trees “sacred to Celtic gods” which Yeats attempted to incorporate as an element of the Celtic Renaissance in his poetry (Hunter 71). However, deeper examination of the cards and their numerical significance yields a richer implication for the bean-rows. In the tarot deck, nine is the number of the Hermit, a tarot card figure, “. . . someone who has forsaken all and gone towards a spiritual path” (Zalewski 168). He is also “an outcast, whether self-imposed or not, seeking solace through the act of self-discipline of the senses and communion with his maker through his particular belief structure” (122). Yeats, who desires to “live alone” in a “small cabin . . . of clay and wattles made,” appears to become the Hermit (Yeats).
The number of bean-rows and the inherent image of the Hermit may be a prompt for us to understand Yeats’ motivation to live alone on Innisfree: to end one cycle and begin a new one, another meaning of the number nine (Zalewski 121). Indeed, his initiation into the Golden Dawn commenced at the end of his involvement with Blavatsky, who, in Yeats’ mind, wanted to limit his magical experiences. The Hermit is also a Magus or Magician, one of Yeats’ aspirations when he joined the Golden Dawn and which he eventually achieved, as confirmed by his Rose Cross (Owen 140; Raine 59). After his initiation, Yeats remarked that his studies with the Golden Dawn “… [convinced] me that images well up before the mind’s eye from a deeper source than conscious or subconscious memory” (Autobiographies, qtd. in Howe 69). This observation seems to echo the lapping of the lake water which Yeats hears “in the deep heart’s core.”

Yeats further showcased his magical abilities in “Innisfree” by describing the sights and sounds on the island itself. Several personal accounts confirm that Yeats had special powers transcending the natural realm. Maud Gonne, the object of Yeats’ unrequited love, asserted in her Memoirs that Yeats was able to call upon spirits to communicate symbolic images to her; during one such session, she cried, “I see a figure holding out its hand with a skull in it,” and the two knew they were spiritually compatible (qtd. in Leavitt 134). Indeed, soon after joining the Golden Dawn, Yeats bragged that “he could make ‘the visible world completely vanish and another world summoned by the symbol would take its place’” (128). “Innisfree” could be, in one way, an expression of this power. Sean Pyor argues that the “slow and sonorous incantation and liturgical echoes . . . cast a magic spell,” which ends up being more of a “chant rather than any physical arrival” (99). A variety of sounds are expressed in the poem, such as the “bee-loud glade,” “lake water lapping,” the singing cricket, and “the linnet’s wings” (Yeats). These sounds could serve as a further expression of Yeats’ mystical prowess—his ability to not only make the visible world vanish around himself, but also to take his listeners with him.

We may turn to studies of modernity for an explanation as to why Yeats and others in fin-de-siècle Europe and the United States were fascinated by the occult. The industrial revolution vastly increased travel and global communication (Farley 123). At the same time, urbanization created feelings of alienation; race, gender, and social classes and
boundaries were beginning to be reconfigured (Friedman 474). Because of these new emerging modernities, writers such as Yeats turned to mysticism for answers to “fundamental but nonetheless profound questions about the meaning of life and the spiritual dimensions of the universe” (Owen 5). Indeed, middle class fin-de-siècle Britons were drawn to occultism for its exclusivity and unification with “people like us” (Owen 5). In essence, Yeats’ involvement with the occult, beginning with the Theosophical Society, “made Yeats a somebody” in an era of uncertain identity (Monteith 218). It is interesting to note here that Yeats’ feeling of inclusion stemmed from his apparent attempt at isolation on “Innisfree.” But I assert that the symbols of the Hermit, the number nine, and the overall unification with nature are less representative of Yeats’ desire for physical isolation and more an expression of his mystical prowess, thus appending himself to the highest order of the Golden Dawn. This does not mean that Yeats did not intend the poem to have isolationist overtones. Indeed, writers such as Ezra Pound (who, notably, also used tarot cards in his play *Sweeney Agonistes*) felt isolated by their genius in the world of modernity. Perhaps Yeats experienced a similar feeling of isolated genius during his years in the Theosophical Society when he was denied free experimentation with magic. At any rate, returning to a surface-level interpretation of “Innisfree” leads one to conclude that the island is an escape from various forms of repression.

Another Poundism, “make it new,” is relevant not only in my discussion of the occult symbolism of “Innisfree,” but also fin-de-siècle Britain’s cultural appropriation of non-European religious symbols. As previously mentioned, the Kabbalah, numerology, and tarot cards are of ancient origin. Yet they made their appearance at the close of the nineteenth century, though at least in the case of tarot cards with new “esoteric meaning” (Farley 2–3). This new incorporation of ancient artifacts and symbols would support Peter Kalliney’s idea that “European imperialism was as much about jealousy of other European powers as it was about dispossessing or civilizing non-European peoples” (39). As Farley notes, though the history of tarot cards is as much mysterious as the cards themselves, they have strong ties to Italy and France. Kalliney’s picture of a jealous and covetous European power such as England appears to be accurate here. Perhaps, on the surface, the assessment that the dispossession and civilization of non-European nations was of equal
importance to the European jealousy of these nations seems untrue. One does see dispossession, for all three mystical systems—the Kabbalah, the tarot cards, and numerology—have extra-European influence if not origin. But the lack of society expressed in Yeats’ “Innisfree” would appear to indicate a conscious return to primitivism and therefore a desire to decivilize. However, upon further examination, there is some semblance of society on Innisfree: the “small cabin;” the orderliness of “nine bean-rows;” the “hive for the honeybee,” one of the most industrious insects (Yeats). So Innisfree is not so decivilized as it may appear. Furthermore, there is something sweeping and ever-present in the doctrines of Theosophy that undermines the concept of complete decivilization. Composed of symbols relevant to multiple religions—including Christianity, Judaism, Ancient Egyptian, and Hinduism—the motto of the society purports that “There is No Religion Higher Than Truth” (“Emblem or the Seal”). Indeed, the Kabbalistic unity between God and man which D’Avanzo argues for adds to the concept of Kalliney’s civilization of non-European peoples—perhaps as an expression of the unity between a higher nation and a lower. Through cultural appropriation, European modernity salvaged the emblems of various religions and combined them under one flag of “truth.” Yeats not only ascribed to this modernity, but he climbed an elitist social ladder constructed of appropriated cultural artifacts “made new.”

Yeats’ fascination with the occult at the turn of the century was indicative of a larger cultural trend of that era. Paralleled in Great Britain, this trend towards occultism took root in the United States before blossoming anew in fin-de-siècle Europe. Blavatsky, after establishing her Theosophical Society in London, inspired Yeats and countless others who were invested in mysticism. But what was their inspiration? According to Sam Watters of The Los Angeles Times, what inspired Yeats then—and what inspires others today—is the desire to reach Utopia. Watters describes how Blavatsky’s endeavors began in 1897 “as industrial America rose and avarice trounced charity.” He goes on to explain the society contained a “healing blend” of various occult practices, which he asserts were “dedicated to charitable works and brotherly love.” Twenty-five years after founding Societies in the United States and London, Watters writes, Blavatsky’s initial concept solidified in a “unified force for human good” in a sect in the southern Indian town of Adyar. One of the sect leaders, Albert P. Warrington, attempted to recreate Adyar in Southern
California in a colony called Krotona. As a sort of continental Innisfree, Krotona embodies the ideals Yeats and other occult devotees hoped to achieve through their studies of magic.

Yeats had his own Adyar or Krotona—his own Utopia—in Innisfree, a secluded place to become the Hermit, gain wisdom, and practice magic uninhibited by societal restrictions or expectations. Here, Yeats could continue to explore magic while living as a wise but powerful Hermit-Magician in unity with nature, seeking greater knowledge in accordance with the mantra, “There is No Religion Higher Than Truth.” Yeats attempted to reach Utopia on Innisfree, for “I shall have some peace there.” This peace, in an earlier draft of “Innisfree” came “from the dawn above” (Owen 79). That Yeats truly achieved peace through his association with Theosophic Societies and overall study of the occult is debatable. However, it seems that, to at least some degree, the poet reached his personal Utopia in the Second Order of the Golden Dawn.
Works Cited


“You are a man of extreme passion, a hungry man not quite sure where his appetite lies, a deeply frustrated man striving to project his individuality against a backdrop of rigid conformity. You exist in a half-word suspended between two superstructures, one self-expression and the other self-destruction. You are strong, but there is a flaw in your strength, and unless you learn to control it the flaw will prove stronger than your strength and defeat you” (Capote 43).

During Perry Smith’s first three years in prison, he befriends a man named Willie Jay, who later writes a letter describing Smith’s characteristics. The portion of the letter noted above not only describes Smith, a main character in Truman Capote’s novel, In Cold Blood, but also personifies the development of a new form of journalism. In the same way that Perry Smith becomes frustrated by trying to create his own identity opposite of social expectations, the genre of narrative journalism grew out of a desperation among writers for individuality. Though narrative form enhanced the way in which journalists told stories, the increase of fictional elements can detract from the author’s credibility if not kept under control. Therefore, as Perry seeks to find himself between a world of self-expression and a world of self-destruction throughout the novel, he demonstrates the way in which journalists sought a balance between fact and fiction.
During the 1960’s, fiction writers became dissatisfied with the novel as means of describing reality, and simultaneously journalists grew frustrated with the confines of the inverted pyramid—a technique that required journalists to include the most newsworthy information in the introduction of the story. As a result, both journalists and novelists rejected the constructed norms of their genres and began to experiment with new ways of self-expression. As the quote suggests, the writers of this era were passionate about the world in which they lived, but they sought new ways to share their real-world experiences. Writers sought to integrate their own perceptions within the objective truth of journalism in order to better express themselves. This transition led to the combination of fact and fiction through which subjective truth became the primary focus. Although this style has increased in popularity since then, many critics still question its validity and factuality due to the increased use of fictional elements to tell factual stories. By defying the foundation of objective truth in conventional journalism, Capote and Thompson create a more profound experience for their audience through the development of their own persona and their use of suspense within their novels.

Defining Narrative Journalism

The genre of narrative journalism is the result of an era when both novelists and journalists became frustrated with their means of expression. While writers began to question the limitations of the novel to express “contemporary reality,” journalists were displeased with the inverted pyramid and “the neutrality of conventional journalism” (Olster 44-45). Therefore, narrative journalism marks the recognition of the limitations presented in objective reportage by giving “significance to the personal view of journalists” and finding new ways to describe “the feeling or atmosphere of an event,” further exposing readers to new aspects of society (Olster 44-45; Lucy 289). By forgoing the confines of the inverted pyramid, narrative journalism seeks to promote aesthetic appeal and resonance among readers rather than factual accounts. Therefore, objectivity within narrative journalism becomes “a textual effect, the product of a
certain aesthetic proficiency, a way with words” (Lucy 294). Writers, such as Capote and Thompson, construct this form of objectivity by inserting themselves as characters in their writing and immersing themselves in the events they cover (48).

The use of oneself as a character in a narrative, other than in an autobiography, contrasts with conventional journalism. Traditional journalists develop knowledge through “an ideal of professional detachment,” which allows them to simply observe and record what happens in the world (Lucy 284). In contrast, narrative journalism allows writers to personally participate in the event by creating a new epistemology for writers. From the 1960’s to the present day, this written form of expression began to incorporate a participatory understanding of the world that could not be accomplished through conventional journalism. However, this new style of writing caused writers to be considered “incompetent outsiders from a professional point of view” because they did not adhere to the traditional expectations of objective reportage (Lucy 289). In 1990, Joan Didion wrote an essay that “warned of the falsehoods that can emerge when historical events are framed as narratives that misconstrue their meaning” (Olster 52). In order to truly understand this type of writing, a paradigm shift must take place in order to understand that the authors are not trying to be strictly factual, but are rather commenting on society in a new way.

Narrative Journalism and Truman Capote

This shift in thinking gives insight into the style and purpose of Capote’s novel In Cold Blood as he aims to retell one of the most horrific murders to happen in American history. In November 1959, Truman Capote was sent to Kansas to report on the Clutter murder for the New Yorker (Tynan 130). The accounts of the murder that were published in the newspaper adhered to the conventional forms of journalism. However, through spending five years researching the murder of Herb, Bonnie, Nancy, and Kenyon Clutter, Capote developed his most renowned work—In Cold Blood. This novel, unlike any of his journalistic writing, uses a narrative structure to tell the events of the Clutter murder through Capote’s “conscious intention to the novelistic objective throughout”
(Wiegand 137). In an article titled “The Kansas Farm Murders,” author Kenneth Tynan explains that “In Cold Blood . . . is certainly the most detailed and atmospheric account ever written of a contemporary crime” (130). The use of narrative description that Tynan points out in his article allowed Capote to defy the confines of conventional journalism.

Capote’s narrator persona becomes evident in the structure of the story, even though he is not the main character. In Cold Blood begins with detailed description of the characters and the setting. Through this initial description, Capote establishes himself as an omniscient narrator. However, the novel is written in third-person as a means to distance the author from the subject. In a personal interview, Capote explained that the hardest part of writing this novel was keeping himself out of the story (Voss 72). The distancing effect of Capote’s third-person narration, however, did not hinder him from manipulating the events of the murder as an author to adhere to a narrative form. Capote’s influence on the portrayal of the events of the crime defy objectivity, as certain scenes are reconfigured, further diminishing the factuality of the novel.

Capote’s most strategic manipulation is the way that he portrays Perry. While Perry is admittedly a victim of a poor home life, Capote reshapes the events in the novel to reinforce this victimized image and generate sympathy from his audience. Ralph F. Voss, author of Truman Capote and the Legacy of In Cold Blood, explains the reasoning behind Capote’s sympathy towards Perry: “Capote had an extraordinary relationship with the Clutter killer Perry Smith. He had parallels to Smith in his own life: both were more or less orphaned in their youth, rejected by their parents, and raised by surrogates” (77). Because of his connection with Perry, Capote emphasizes Perry’s poor home life in several places throughout the novel. One instance of this is towards the end of the story, when a detective interviews Dick and Perry about the Clutter family and notes that “[Perry’s] life had been no bed of roses, but pitiful, an ugly and lonely progress toward one mirage and then another” (Capote 246). Because Capote presents Perry in this way, he never attributes guilt to Perry for the crime against the Clutter family. Instead, Capote minimizes Perry’s guilt at the time of the killing and justifies his actions by saying that he had a “brain explosion” (Voss 87–88). Through the portrayal of such events in the novel, Capote’s bias becomes clear through his intentional portrayal of
the crime. This point of view allowed Capote to write outside the limits of regular journalism and construct the setting, characters, and events in a way that adds suspense to the novel.

The structure of the novel adds suspense to the events of the crime further separating Capote’s work from conventional journalism. When analyzing the text, one might draw the same conclusion as Galloway, who explains the “metaphorical patterns” in Capote’s novel (Galloway 145). The first metaphor occurs in the description of the scene of the crime—a suburb of Garden City in Kansas. While the location of the crime is “situated at the geographical center of the United States,” the Clutters and the killers represent two very different classes of people (Galloway 145). Galloway explains that “the Clutters seemed, at first glance, an apple-pie embodiment of the American Dream; the killers were the victims of a success-oriented society” (145). Through Galloway’s identification of such “metaphorical patterns” within the setting and characters, one can understand the larger implications of Capote’s novel (145). The Clutter murders not only disturbed the residents of Garden City, but the crime also invoked a sense of fear in every small town across the United States. Because there was no apparent motive behind the murder, the same crime could have been committed against any American family. Thus, by shaping the setting and characters to be representative of the typical American family living in a small town, Capote generates tension not found in the accounts published in the New Yorker.

*In Cold Blood* is not a chronological order of the Clutter family murders; rather, Capote organizes the four sections of his novel in a way that generates suspense for his audience. In the first section of the novel, readers are introduced to Dick and Perry, the Clutters, and Garden City. In his description of Capote’s style, Voss explains that “it is an extraordinary stylistic achievement that Capote establishes and maintains the building tension of alternating scenes between victims and killers in part one, even though readers know what is going to happen” (74). Through these alternating scenes, Capote provides a thorough background of Dick and Perry, who commit the crime against the Clutter family. By choosing to introduce the suspects and the victims prior to the description of the murder, Capote allows his readers to connect with the characters on an intimate level.
By structuring the novel this way, Capote humanizes the murderers and the victims before describing the murder in section three. After reading the novel, Mas’ud Zavarzadeh explains that Capote “structured the facts, and generated suspense, by withholding the murder scene until he had sentimentalized the victims and their killers” (qtd. in Lucy 308). In the first section of the novel, Mrs. Ashida, one of Mr. Clutter’s neighbors, says she could not imagine Mr. Clutter scared because he can always talk himself out of anything, yet Mr. Clutter could not talk Dick out of killing him and his family (Capote 36). Later in the novel, Capote reveals that Mr. Clutter arranged “a forty-thousand-dollar policy that in the event of death by accidental means, paid double indemnity” the day before his sudden death (48). The irony present in both of these scenes would not have been possible if Capote had not saved the murder scene until the third section of the novel. Because Capote had the authority to order the events in the best possible way to tell the story, he begins to refer to his book as a nonfiction novel—“Having written a book that was like a novel from the point of view of technique, but unlike a novel in as much as it was supposed to be made up of transcripts of actual conversations and reconstructions of actual events” (Lucy 292).

Though Capote’s novel serves as an excellent example of fiction because of its narrative structure, Capote’s credibility becomes questionable when considering the definition of his work as a nonfiction novel. According to A Handbook to Literature, a nonfiction novel is defined as “a classification . . . in which an historical event is described in a way that exploits some of the devices of fiction, including nonlinear time sequence and access to inner states of mind and feeling not commonly present in historical writing” (Harmon 326). This combination of fact and fiction resulted in a mixture of objective facts and subjective description throughout the novel as Capote manipulates the structure of the events to develop a suspenseful narrative account. “Determined to make the book assume the form of a traditional novel, [Capote] apparently placed facts in a consciousness in which he had chosen to locate the point of view of certain scenes” (Lucy 312). In this way, Capote inserts his own bias, however noticeable, by manipulating the setting, plot, and characters to imply a deeper meaning for his audience. Regardless of the factual evidence, Capote “stretched the material in ways disturbingly close to the approximating illusions associated with realist fiction, while continuing to claim a journalistic contract” (Lucy 312). Nevertheless,
Capote’s novel remains a literary achievement because of his willingness to venture beyond the conventional forms of journalism to “portray the decline of the American West, the death of the small town, and the ease with which American dreams can turn into American nightmares” (Olster 46).

Narrative Journalism and Hunter S. Thompson

Capote’s work on the nonfiction novel ultimately paved the way for other writers to defy traditional forms of journalism because of his success with narrative journalism. One such writer, Hunter S. Thompson, wrote *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, in which he aims to define the American dream through journalistic pursuits. The plot of *Fear and Loathing* mirrors a trip that Thompson took with his friend Oscar Zeta Acosta in 1971 when Thompson was assigned to cover the Mint 400 race in Las Vegas (Doss n.p.). Perhaps the most noticeable similarity between Capote and Thompson is their placing of themselves as characters in their novels. Though Capote does not blatantly introduce himself as a main character, his novel is “suffused from start to finish with its author’s manipulations” (Olster 49). In a similar manner, Thompson manipulates the events that take place in his novel, yet he has more freedom to construct the plot of the story because he is the main character. Thompson’s novel differs from Capote’s in that he tells a specific story about himself uncovering the American dream, rather than telling someone else’s story. Because Thompson eliminates all boundaries between the reporter and the subject, his version of the nonfiction novel—as a separation of reporter and subject and as an extension of authorial voice—can be defined as gonzo journalism.

Gonzo Journalism

The concept of new journalism, which categorizes both Capote and Thompson’s novels, is a participatory manner of reportage. Rather than remaining objective in their news stories, Capote and Thompson allow themselves to participate in the event on which they are reporting. However, Thompson expands this style of reporting through the creation of ‘gonzo journalism.’ Through blurring the lines between the reporter and the subject, Thompson allows his own feelings and experiences to dominate the story. Tom Wolfe defines gonzo journalism as a “manic,
highly adrenal first-person style in which Thompson’s own emotions dominate the story” (qtd. in Reynolds 55). Because of his more personal writing style, Thompson is free to report on stories as he experiences them, rather than merely reporting based on outside interviews. In essence as John J. Pauly explains, Thompson’s writing exhibits his belief that an author cannot fully develop a factual account without “personal involvement and immersion” (qtd. in Reynolds 56). Therefore, the author’s participation becomes the foundation for gonzo journalism. William Stephenson, author of *Gonzo Republic: Hunter S. Thompson’s America*, describes Thompson’s journalism as “a vehicle for outrageous semi-autobiographical narrative that [does] not cloak itself in any pretense of objectivity” (10). By outlining his own experiences and emphasizing his own personality in his writing, Thompson creates a fictive persona of himself that blurs the lines between fiction and nonfiction genres and further represents a “fragmented reality in fragmented form” (Stephenson 33). This experiential form of writing, which challenges objectivity even more so than Capote, allows Thompson to defy the conventional forms of journalism. Therefore, experience and emotion become the foundation to understanding subjectivity in Thompson’s novel.

Thompson challenges objectivity in his novel through the development of his own persona, almost as if the protagonist is a self-caricature. The beginning of the novel is narrated in first person, though readers are not sure which character is narrating the story; however, Thompson finally introduces the protagonist by his name, Raoul Duke, in chapter three. Not until the tenth chapter do readers realize the connection between Thompson and Duke when a letter is written to “Hunter S. Thompson C/O Raoul Duke” (76). Though his audience may have picked up on the similarities between the author and his persona, Thompson explicitly makes the connection for his readers by inserting this letter. Because Thompson wanted to create a more experiential form of written discourse, he sought to “create from within himself and to involve himself in his world . . . which suggest[s] a need to experience fully what it means to be human” (Stephenson 7). Through these personal experiences, Thompson “realized his own humanity through writing as much as through life;” in fact, the persona that Thompson creates in his novel gives insight to his authentic self (Stephenson 7).
Thompson’s character, Raoul Duke, is unique in that he seems disconnected from the world, yet he knows that he is part of something much larger than himself. Duke is ultimately on a quest to find the American dream: “It was a classic affirmation of everything right and true and decent in the national character. It was a gross, physical salute to the fantastic possibilities of life in this country—but only for those with true grit” (Thompson 18). As Duke and his lawyer travel in a red convertible filled with a mixture of drugs, they are unaware of the immense issues they will soon uncover about America. Duke was sent to Las Vegas on an assignment to cover the Mint 400 motorcycle race—“just a few photos of motorcycles and dune buggies racing around the desert” (Thompson 56). However, by the end of his time in Las Vegas, “he was plunged, without realizing it, into the maw of some world beyond his ken. There was no way he could possibly understand what was happening” (Thompson 56).

Thompson’s persona is consistently disoriented both in reality and through drug hallucinations, which makes his commentary on American culture almost void of meaning. However, through this disorientation, Thompson exposes the vulnerability that occurs when journalists directly experience or interact with that which they are reporting. Therefore, Thompson “positions his persona in an extreme situation” on the edge of the desert driving a hundred miles per hour to cover a story in Las Vegas in hopes of finding the American dream (Stephenson 27; Thompson 3). By using this “comic, mock-psychotic persona as narrator-protagonist,” Thompson enables himself to write beyond the confines of conventional journalism through the “dramatizing of an individual mind experiencing, ordering, and interpreting national events” (Hellmann 17). The protagonist, Duke, is not struggling with meeting a deadline, even though he claims to be a true journalist. In fact, his character is never seen finishing a news story in the novel. Rather, Thompson’s persona is “an antihero on a quest, confronted by powerful enemies whose symbolic representatives are the animals he has summoned up himself” (Stephenson 27).

While Thompson claims that the events in the novel are factual, and that he is the “Doctor of Journalism,” his consumption of a variety of drugs and alcohol throughout the novel create doubt in his credibility. From the beginning of the novel, as Duke and his lawyer set off on their adventure to Las Vegas, Duke has no intention of reporting on anything without drugs: “If a thing like this is worth doing at all, it’s worth doing
right. We'll need some decent equipment and plenty of cash on the line—if only for drugs and a super-sensitive tape recorder, for the sake of a permanent record” (Thompson 9). Though he intends to report factual information about the Mint 400 race, his persistent reliance on drugs makes readers question his credibility, and it even places Duke and his lawyer in several compromising situations.

Throughout the novel, Duke describes the effects the drugs have on him, which contributes to the overall experience that he has while attempting to fulfill his journalist responsibilities. The entire novel switches between ‘real’ life and hallucinations as Duke’s body and mind succumb to the effects of the drugs: “Ah, devil ether—a total body drug. The mind recoils in horror, unable to communicate with the spinal column. The hands flap crazily, unable to get money out of the pocket ... garbled laughter and hissing from the mouth ... always smiling. Ether is the perfect drug for Las Vegas” (Thompson 46). Because of their consumption of drugs and its effects on their bodies, Duke and his lawyer place themselves in situations where they are on the verge of getting caught with the drugs. Perhaps the most unique scene is when Duke hallucinates as he tries to check into his hotel in Las Vegas: “The room service waiter has a vaguely reptilian cast to his features, but I was no longer seeing huge pterodactyls lumbering around the corridors in pools of fresh blood” (Thompson 27). The lawyer drags Duke out of the bar just before the employees call the cops and blow their ‘press’ cover story. Scenes such as this demonstrate how the effects of the drugs drastically alter the perception of the events in the novel by creating a more fictional and suspenseful narrative.

The effects of the drugs further alter the personalities of the main characters as well as their decision-making skills. “The characters’ trains of thought become difficult to unravel as the distortions induced by drugs and by the extremity of their situation take their toll” (Stephenson 36). Because of the effects of the drugs, Duke struggles to distinguish between reality and the hallucinations that he and his lawyer have, which is why they are both consistently paranoid about being caught for stealing, cheating, and consuming drugs. The entire plot proves that “… the Gonzo staple [is] the stoned freak trying to deal with officialdom” (Stephenson 25). As Duke and his lawyer pretend to be well-known, professional journalists, they must hide the drugs and the lies they have told.
As Thompson works to tell the story of Duke, he also composes himself as “both a central character within the narrative and an implied author behind it” (Stephenson 29). The story that Thompson created was a commentary on American culture and the American dream. William Stephenson explains Thompson’s cultural commentary by referencing work by Weingarten: “Vegas has been read as ‘journalism as bricolage: Thompson moved around freely in space and time [. . . ] always searching in vain for the American dream.’ The adversary stopping the bricoleur Duke from finding the dream was vulgar, oppressive capitalism of the Nixon era, personified by Las Vegas itself” (29). This development would not have been possible if Thompson had remained within the strict confines of objective journalism. Hellman explains that because Thompson “conceived his journalism as a form of fiction, [he] has been able to shape actual events into meaningful works of literary art” (16). Thompson creates an authentic self and a more accurate, yet suspenseful, picture of American culture by allowing himself to explore the meaning of humanity through drug experimentation. Fear and Loathing granted Thompson the opportunity to express himself as a journalist in a way that he had not found in conventional journalism: “He flouted the conventions of journalism and fiction and violated the rules of syntax in order not only to represent drugged consciousness, but also to support the premises of the state” (Stephenson 17).

**Conclusion**

Both Capote and Thompson wrote works of literature in which the subjective and objective become one. They took creative liberties within the confines of journalism that allowed them to intertwine fact and fiction by establishing personas and generating suspense. However, each author uses different techniques to achieve these defining characteristics of their novels. While Capote establishes a persona through his omniscient narration, Thompson immerses himself as a main character in his novel. Their means of generating suspense also differs, as Capote uses the structure of events, whereas Thompson uses the influence of drugs to alter character choices and motivations. The writing style that Capote and Thompson exhibit in these novels contrasts from conventional journalism because they allow themselves to play a role within the plot;
whereas, journalists must remain strictly objective. This creates a more interactive and experiential style of writing, where the authors can express themselves and their experiences, while the readers discover new ways of looking at society and factual events.

In this way, Capote and Thompson transformed the expectations of journalism by challenging “the very way we think about a journalist’s role as producer of the first draft of history” (Nuttall 113). In doing so, Capote and Thompson’s work reaches beyond the confines of their own lives. Not only did Capote and Thompson create a new style of writing about reality, but they also left behind messages of American culture that may appear to be more relevant today than when their novels were published. The development of narrative journalism gave writers the freedom to incorporate their own experiences within the factuality of the reported event. Thus, the combination of fact and fiction suggests a more intimate level of verisimilitude by presenting the facts through the experience of the writer. No longer are journalists restricted by questions of who, what, when, where, and why; instead, they have more liberties to comment directly on the American culture as they experience it.
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For about 180 years, readers have responded intensely to the poetry and fiction of Edgar Allan Poe, experiencing terror, delight, shock, and a kind of melancholic joy, to name a few of the emotions Poe’s work inspires. But for all those sensations, does reading Poe do us any good? Do we learn anything, or—dare I say it—become better people for having read him? As it turns out, this is an old question, but one that still resonates.

In a 1937 American Literature essay, for instance, Yvor Winters attacked Poe for basically not doing anyone any good: “[P]oetry is not, for Poe, a refined and enriched technique of moral comprehension. It can be of no aide to us in understanding ourselves or in ordering our lives, for most of our experience is irrelevant to it” (387). As for Poe’s fiction, “we see the story-teller, like the poet, interested primarily in the creation of an emotion for its own sake, not in the understanding of an experience” (396). Perhaps Winters’ humanistic emphasis on moral comprehension as a goal or criterion for art seems merely quaint today. Perhaps it’s valid, but he’s wrong about Poe. Or perhaps he’s right.
Winters based his criticism on Poe’s theory as much as his practice; and indeed, in his theoretical writing Poe objected to didacticism in favor of effect—for which he was later championed by “decadent” artists from Baudelaire to Lou Reed. As early as 1831, borrowing liberally from Coleridge, Poe posed that a poem “is opposed to a work of science by having, for its immediate object, pleasure, not truth” (11). And as late as December 1848, less than a year before his death, he would inveigh against “the heresy of The Didactic,” the mistaken belief that “the ultimate object of all Poetry is Truth” (75). Poe was less insistent in his opposition to didacticism in fiction, but in his famous review of Hawthorne’s Twice-Told Tales, he offered a parallel emphasis on effect and the writer’s control of the reader, though he grants that “Truth is often . . . the aim of the tale” (573). Truth, perhaps, but not necessarily an ethical truth: The subtitle of the satirical “Never Bet the Devil Your Head: A Tale with a Moral” (1841) is clearly ironic, as Poe, in the story’s introduction, mocks contemporary critics who claim that he has never written a moral tale.

Of course, poetry and fiction need not deliver a clear moral lesson in order to convey a profound understanding of human behavior and our place in the world—in the language of my title, to do something for us. But relatively little literary criticism in recent decades has used that kind of language (“here’s what Poe has to tell us”) or concerned itself directly with what might be called fundamental questions, which is why I want to raise that possibility, and offer that invitation, particularly in relation to such an unlikely suspect as Poe.

Let me offer a few examples of critics who I believe have successfully analyzed Poe’s work in light of ethics or fundamental questions. In a 1963 essay on “The Masque of the Red Death,” Joseph Patrick Roppolo argues that the intruder who wears the mask is not death itself but a representation (a mask) of death. The revelers are forced to acknowledge what they are attempting to evade when the masked figure invades the castle: “The Red Death is not a pestilence, in the usual sense; it is unfailingly and universally fatal, as no mere disease or plague can be; and blood is its guarantee, its avatar and its seal. Life itself, then, is the Red Death, the one ‘affliction’ shared by all mankind” (140). Prince Prospero and his guests have let the fear of death get the best of them. Roppolo maintains that while Poe’s
story is not didactic, it does teach us something about living with the knowledge of death’s inevitability: “What Poe has created, then, is a kind of mythic parable, brief and poetic, of the human condition, of man’s fate, and of the fate of the universe” (144).

In “Poe and the Unreadable: ‘The Black Cat’ and ‘The Tell-Tale Heart’” (1992), Christopher Benfey describes the two stories’ narrators as extreme examples of a twinned longing for and discomfort with intimacy. Invoking Wittgenstein, Stanley Cavell, and Rilke, Benfey explores the philosophical problem of the unknowability of others’ minds in light of “The Tell-Tale Heart,” whose narrator insists that he does possess this extreme identification with the old man, whom he then kills. Like Roppolo, he reads these stories as cautionary tales:

Poe seems . . . to be saying: These fears are always with us—the fear of love and the fear of isolation. Taken to extremes, they both lead to disaster: One cat avoids us and is blinded, another cat follows us and is killed. To live life is to steer a dangerous course between these extremes and there is no point at which the current widens. (43)

More recently, J. Gerald Kennedy has discussed “Poe’s War on Terror” in various lectures, notably one delivered at the 4th International Poe Conference in 2015. For Kennedy, Poe’s fiction offers guidance for the twenty-first century on “terror management,” despite his reputation for instilling terror.

I admire the scholars I’ve cited here for their ability to tease meaning from the horrific effects of Poe’s tales without reducing them to the kind of didacticism Poe would have abhorred. But where does one draw the line that separates “useful,” meaningful interpretation from didacticism? In an essay on “The Black Cat” and New Historicist criticism, Paul Lewis objects to what he sees as the tendency of much late twentieth-century criticism to reduce Poe’s highly ambiguous, effect-driven stories to arguments about cultural and political issues of his time. Indeed, much New Historian criticism associated with Poe, while focused on the 1830s and 1840s, suggested truths about race, gender, and power relations that transcend the concerns of antebellum America. And such uses of Poe have been seen by many scholars as over-determined and preachy. Again, where, if at all, does one draw the line?
We invite readers of *Criterion* to address this broad question in any number of ways. Does Poe’s work seriously address ethical issues not specific to his moment in history? Does the history of Poe criticism offer any lessons of its own on how (not) to “use” literature for humanist purposes? If readings such as Roppolo’s seem reductive in 2016, how does work informed by more recent approaches—trauma theory, animal studies—avoid the same tendency? Authors might focus on specific Poe texts or examine larger issues of the purpose of literary study with Poe as an example or touchstone.
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Metempsychosis in the Wizarding World

Hannah E. Degn

Death is but crossing the world, as friends do the seas; they live in one another still. For they must needs be present, that love and live in that which is omnipresent. In this divine glass they see face to face; and their converse is free, as well as pure. This is the comfort of friends, that though they may be said to die, yet their friendship and society are, in the best sense, ever present, because immortal.

—William Penn

Edgar Allan Poe is renowned for his short fiction, which delves into the realm of terror, horror, and the fantastic. In several of his texts, protagonists grapple with these themes and their relationship with death in distinct ways. One such way that Poe creates horror through death is through an extension of life using the process of metempsychosis, thereby creating terror for both the protagonists of the text and the reader. The Oxford English Dictionary defines metempsychosis as “the supposed transmigration at death of the soul of a human being or animal into a new body of the same or a different species.” Upon studying Poe and metempsychosis, it is clear that the root of the terror that fascinates Poe is created by exploring the humanistic fear associated with death. J.K. Rowling is another author who

1 Originally found in Fruits of Solitude (qtd. in Rowling, Deathly Hallows XI)
has expounded upon the idea of metempsychosis and death, utilizing both
to advance the plotline within her *Harry Potter* series. Rowling advanced the
use of metempsychosis in contemporary literature, mirroring the horrific
effects of Poe’s literature through the character of Lord Voldemort. Rowling
successfully engaged a new generation into a re-telling of a classic horror
story that deals with the effects of the soul in both its meaning and existence.

**Avoiding Death**

A major theme that both Poe and Rowling deal with is the decisions
their characters make to avoid death. In Poe’s short story, “Morella,” the
narrator’s life revolves around his wife and her attempt to extend her life
upon dying. The actions he takes to ensure his wife’s survival harken back
to the definition set out by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as the transfer
of a soul into a *new* body (Poe, “Morella” 233).

Morella seemingly dies, but not before creating a vessel—her own
daughter—to act as her new body, allowing her to continue to live. The
narrator explains, with a growing sense of horror, the realization that he
comes to about the identity of his daughter:

> For that her smile was like her mother’s I could bear; but then I shuddered
> at its too perfect *identity*—that her eyes were like Morella’s I could
> endure; but then they too often looked down into the depths of my soul
> with Morella’s own intense and bewildering meaning. And in the contour
> of the high forehead, and in the ringlets of the silken hair, and in the wan
> fingers which buried themselves therein, and in the sad musical tones of
> her speech, and above all—oh, above all—in the phrases and expressions of
> the dead on the lips of the loved and the living, I found food for consuming
> thought and horror—for a worm that *would* not die. (234)

This explanation of the similarities between Morella the mother and
Morella the daughter cast doubt on the difference between the two women.
The narrator gives no notice of Morella’s pregnancy or childbirth, thus
allowing readers to interpret the “birth” as a creation of another body or
being through some other means. Poe also leaves the ending of the text
ambiguous, with the narrator remembering the deaths of both Morellas;
however, to him they are one person and not two separate beings, leaving
the reader to interpret the extent of metempsychosis at play (235).
Rowling builds upon the level of metempsychosis established by Poe in “Morella” and effectively illustrates throughout the Harry Potter series the level of terror it can cause. Both Morella and Lord Voldemort actively look for ways to continue living and refuse to accept death as an absolute concept. Morella, loath to die, searches for a way to live on, ultimately prophesizing her continued existence (233). This obsession with immortality is also seen in Voldemort’s character, which Rowling builds Harry’s story around, just as Poe expands on Morella’s immortality through the experiences of the narrator. Similar to Morella, Voldemort’s methodology for avoiding death is explained through the same definition of metempsychosis in which life can be extended through the transferring of the soul to a new or different body. Voldemort’s dominating characteristic is his fear of death. Even though he is the villain of the story, without his journey to overcome mortality, Harry Potter would never have been left an orphan, and there would be no hero’s journey for him to embark on. In short, the idea of metempsychosis is what moves the story along and allows J.K. Rowling to interweave themes of good versus evil in Harry’s quest to track down Voldemort’s split soul to ultimately end this villain’s life.

The fear of death dominates the actions of Lord Voldemort as he searches for the means to overcome it. The idea of fear or terror is something that Poe greatly emphasizes as a motivation for attempting to perform acts of metempsychosis within his short stories. This attribution and Voldemort’s experimentation with metempsychosis make him one of the greatest literary villains in the 21st century. Additionally, Rowling is able to, like Poe, create a sense of terror in characters that interact with Voldemort and in her readers themselves. This sense of terror stems from the unknown results of the metempsychosis process, Voldemort’s mental connection with Harry, and his own fear of death.

**Voldemort and Ligeia**

Poe’s texts deal with characters who are focused on extending their lives—not to continue living, but rather to avoid dying. In “Ligeia,” the protagonist narrator is afraid of his love dying, so he goes to extreme measures to extend her life. Poe is interested in the motivations behind extending one’s life. In “Ligeia,” the main motivation that exists in
extending life is a desire lovers share in wanting to be together. Whether it is because of love or obsession, the narrator is motivated to experiment in extending the life of his once-living lover. Rowling darkens this aspect of metempsychosis and explores how fearing death can motivate one to take extreme actions, exploring the fear of death versus the fear of losing a life that many of Poe’s narrators struggle with. Readers are introduced to Voldemort as a character from within the first few chapters of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, however, it isn’t until Harry comes face to face with him that one recognizes metempsychosis at play.

Voldemort is assumed to be dead throughout the book, but as Harry confronts Professor Quirrell, Quirrell removes his turban revealing another face on the back of his head belonging to none other than Lord Voldemort. To Harry, Voldemort says, “See what I have become . . . Mere shadow and vapor . . . I have form only when I can share another’s body . . . but there have always been those willing to let me into their hearts and minds” (293). This passage explains Voldemort’s continued existence. Even though his body and soul were separated, he was able to survive by finding another willing body to inhabit.

This is a clear instance of successful metempsychosis, much like the instance that takes place in Poe’s “Ligeia.” The narrator in Poe’s story takes the reader through his relationship with Ligeia, who practiced witchcraft and who ultimately died. However, the narrator goes through his grief and then embarks upon his second marriage to another woman, Rowena. She then dies and the narrator expresses his horror upon hearing her revive and realizing that she is, in fact, *not* dead. The story concludes with the narrator realizing that while Rowena’s body has come back to life, it is Ligeia who is actually possessing it. “And now slowly opened the eyes of the figure which stood before me. ‘Here then, at least,’ I shrieked aloud, ‘can I never—can I never be mistaken—these are the full, and the black, and the wild eyes of my lost love—of the lady of the LADY LIGEIA’” (327).

This clear example of metempsychosis reads two ways. Either Ligeia has come back, successfully inhabiting the body of Rowena, or both women end up dead. The narrator’s ultimate confrontation with the lady leaves the reader assuming that metempsychosis occurred successfully, yet it still allows for the reader to interpret and decide whether Lady Ligeia continued living or not. Both readings support a narrator who
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is actively seeking a way to prolong the life of Ligeia. Poe leaves an ambiguous ending, which further deepens the level of terror created by the unknown factor of the resolution and survival of Ligeia being questioned. Rowling is able to build upon this level of metempsychosis and effectively illustrate throughout the Harry Potter series by producing several instances of metempsychosis involving Voldemort, and while Harry manages to thwart him several times, the metempsychosis process is still successful in prolonging Voldemort’s life.

Terror for the Reader

One of Poe’s primary concerns was the intent behind the writing. He was aware of the impression his writing would have on the reader and intentionally created stories revolving around terror and horror. In his essay, “The Philosophy of Composition,” Poe focuses on the effect on the reader as the main motivation for his writing process; for him, one of his goals is to have the reader experience fear through his stories and poetry. Similarly, Rowling creates a feeling of terror in the reader by showing the many characters’ fear of Voldemort. In fact, the majority of Wizards that young Harry comes into contact with refuse to say his full name, referring to him as “He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named” or “You-Know-Who” (Rowling, The Sorcerer’s Stone 54). This use of ambiguity directed towards Voldemort within the wizarding world alerts readers to the potential threat he poses to the story’s protagonist. While the possibility of an evil soul continuing to survive through the metempsychosis process is clearly used to create this level of fear among wizards, Harry himself begins to develop a personal relationship with Voldemort as Harry attempts to continue surviving in the wizarding world, after Voldemort fails to murder him (12). It is this personal relationship that advances the tension of the plot and allows Rowling to eventually offer a satisfying resolution to readers regarding the terror and fear Voldemort produces.

Creating a successful effect on the reader was one of Poe’s main points in critiquing other authors, and this ideal influenced his own writings as he specifically focused on creating scenarios dealing with terror and fear to have a more powerful effect on the reader (Poetry Foundation). The theme of obsession with an extension of life that dominates Harry Potter is something that Poe also wrote about specifically in “The Facts
in the Case of M. Valdemar,” a story that follows a man who remains alive through the process of hypnosis (1230). Here Poe has striven to explore other means of immortality to shock and terrify the reader about the different possibilities that exist regarding supernatural deaths. This concept lends itself to Rowling, who similarly creates a history of other wizards who attempted to extend their lives through unorthodox methods, thus laying the groundwork allowing Voldemort to make the most advancements in this field of magic in a way which both resonates with and terrifies readers. Both Poe and Rowling utilize the common fear of death in different ways, however, both strive to create the same effect of horror within their tales. The reader is horrified and shocked with M. Valdemar and his eventual death similarly to the reaction of readers to Voldemort’s overarching fear of death and his attempts to avoid it at all costs. Just when the narrator thinks M. Valdemar has succeeded in living past death, his body dissolves, leaving a clear and horrifying death for the readers to come to terms with. This same feeling of horror and terror is found throughout Harry Potter as readers learn about Voldemort’s past and the murders he commits in order to split his soul and prolong his life (Rowling, Deathly Hallows 498).

Metempsychosis and the Soul

Rowling allows for several different instances of metempsychosis to occur, creating opposition for Harry as Voldemort continues to return to life again and again. In Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets, Harry is confronted with a schoolboy version of Lord Voldemort who, after possessing a female student, prepares to unleash a basilisk upon Hogwarts (312). This book exudes even more of Poe’s influence as Lord Voldemort reveals his name to be an anagram of Tom Marvolo Riddle (314). Poe utilizes anagrams in his tale “The Literary Life of Thingum Bob, Esq. Late Editor of the ‘Goosetherumfoodle’” to make a deeper connection creating a doubling theme between his characters (Pollin 30). The use of an anagram within the story builds up a sense of foreshadowing that gives the reader a deeper sense of satisfaction upon the unveiling of the anagram. After Voldemort reveals himself as Tom Marvolo Riddle, Harry ultimately is able to thwart his return by killing the basilisk and destroying the journal that Voldemort’s soul was tethered to (332). Even
though Harry is victorious, only a piece of Voldemort’s soul is destroyed rather than his soul in its entirety. Rowling elaborates on this concept and how it plays into Voldemort’s demise in the seventh book, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. Rowling uses bookworm character Hermione to explain the concept behind metempsychosis, of why souls can survive without a person’s body but that they need to be housed in another body in order to continue existing. “‘My point is that whatever happens to your body, your soul will survive, untouched,’ said Hermione. ‘But it’s the other way round with a Horcrux. The fragment of soul inside it depends on its container, its enchanted body, for survival. It can’t exist without it’” (104).

This explanation of a soul’s survival works with Poe’s interpretation of metempsychosis within his story “Morella.” In “Morella,” there is a transfer of a soul into a new body or vessel. The narrator’s wife, Morella, dies, but leaves behind a daughter. However, Poe leaves this open to interpretation as to whether or not it is her daughter through natural birth, or if it is a vessel that Morella is then able to come back later and possess, thereby restoring her to life as her soul exits from one body and into another. Morella’s husband is with her as she utters her last words, ultimately prophesying her continued living state. “I kissed her forehead, and she continued: ‘I am dying, yet shall I live.’ ‘Morella!’ The days have never been when thou couldst love me—but her whom in life thou didst abhor, in death thou shalt adore” (226). The prophecy of life indicates that the extension of life isn’t one by accident but a purposeful incident of metempsychosis.

Another important element to the theory of metempsychosis that Voldemort engages in is the transfer of his soul into that of a living animal. It is clear throughout the series that Voldemort and his snake, Nagini, share an unusually close bond (*Goblet of Fire* 13). This bond generates from the fact that she is also one of his Horcruxes (Rowling, *Deathly Hallows* 647). Rowling writes that the transfer of part of the soul into another living thing, like an animal, is incredibly unstable. The instability enables Harry to defeat Voldemort once and for all which brings to light the question of whether or not metempsychosis was in actuality successful. While it permitted Voldemort to live another 17 years from his original death date, he was still rendered incapable of living forever. Here, Rowling differs from Poe, who leaves his conclusions full of ambiguity in favor of a precise conclusion where her protagonist can gain closure and the reader can fully interpret what has taken place.
The Double in Rowling and Poe

The connection that Harry and Voldemort share speaks to Poe’s influence regarding the terror that develops is his texts revolving around the splitting of the soul, resulting in a theme of doubling. The idea of the double is most strongly developed in Poe’s tale, “William Wilson.” The story revolves around the narrator, who calls himself William Wilson, and his perceived struggle with his connected foe, who shares the same name of William Wilson. The narrator’s struggle is similar to Harry’s as they both deal with the sharing of a mind with another: Harry with Lord Voldemort, and the narrator with William Wilson. While Poe’s tale leaves the true identity of the double ambiguous, Rowling builds on the connection between doubles to deepen the conflict between Harry and Voldemort. The theme of the double is most prevalent in the fifth installment of the series when Harry recognizes the traits he and Voldemort share in addition to the mind connection they have. The sense of terror the narrator experiences meeting his double, William Wilson, throughout his life is what Harry goes through when he discovers the mental connection with Voldemort. Upon the conclusion of “William Wilson,” Poe effectively illustrates the possibility of killing a part of one’s soul, however, this act has irrevocable consequences and alters the narrator’s core identity (447-448). Similar to the narrator, Voldemort successfully kills a part of himself in order to create his new “body.” Ultimately, this strengthens the double connection that Harry and Voldemort share, deepening the bond through blood. Harry discovers the connection highlighting the doubling element that exists between his and Voldemort’s lives (The Goblet of Fire 642). Similar to William Wilson, Voldemort is terrified of Harry because of the similarities between them and Harry’s “destiny” to one day end Voldemort’s life. Additionally, Harry, like the narrator in William Wilson, eventually needs to kill off the shared soul between him and Voldemort. Unlike William Wilson though, Harry survives the encounter and is able to walk away unscathed, while the narrator struggles to move past his decision to kill off a part of himself.

The origin of the double in Harry Potter is found in Voldemort’s relationship with metempsychosis and the success he finds enabling him to continue living. Rowling begins to elaborate more on Voldemort’s life and the way he came to successfully manage metempsychosis in Harry Potter and The Half-Blood Prince. Here Rowling introduces
Horcruxes as a means to accomplish metempsychosis. In Poe’s “Ligeia” in order for metempsychosis to occur, another needed to die, so that the soul could live on. Similarly, in order for Lord Voldemort to split his soul, he needed to commit murder each time (Deathly Hallows 104). Terror is amplified by the added number of Horcruxes Voldemort created, deepening the fear of metempsychosis due to its connection to murder and immortality.

**Conclusion**

The theme of terror permeates both Poe’s and Rowling’s fiction, even though Rowling strives to counterbalance this with strong themes of love and friendship that bring the other characters together. While love exists in Poe’s texts—specifically between Ligeia and the narrator, his main focus is the theme of death and terror. Poe’s fascination with death is evident in the treatment of it in his texts. He pushes the boundaries between reality and truth by writing about metempsychosis and the extended life it enables. Poe utilizes metempsychosis as a supernatural element allowing him to change the reader’s expectations when it came to the notion of “death,” while Rowling creates a literary world in which metempsychosis occurs, utilizing it as a literary device that develops and advances her protagonist, Harry Potter, on his hero’s journey. The fundamentality of metempsychosis in both the works of Poe and Rowling gives further credit to Poe and his understanding of what processes could effectively produce terror in the reader.

Rowling certainly advances the idea of metempsychosis throughout her story and utilizes it as a tool to create conflict and a driving need for love and acceptance of death. The terror surrounding death that she preys on to create her story comes into conflict with the idealistic view of living forever, which Rowling proves can also be something terrifying. Both Rowling and Poe play with different expectations and understandings regarding death. While Poe fails to offer a resolution to appease readers of this fear, Rowling does exactly that with the over-arching theme of love allowing good to triumph over evil. Rather than take away from the metempsychosis within the story, it re-iterates its fundamental role in the plot, allowing Rowling to orchestrate conflict and then resolve it through Harry’s unique perspective and understanding of death.
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Developing a Feminist Pedagogy
A Look at Intersectionality Theory and Poe’s Women

Riley Haacke

The discussion of pedagogy has recently been at the forefront of Poe criticism, raising the question: how should we teach Poe? In the face of such a question, another begs to be asked in return: why should we teach Poe? American author, feminist, and social activist bell hooks said that students of literature often suffer “from a crisis of meaning, unsure about what has value in life” (qtd. in Bracher 76). Similarly, literary critic Mark Bracher stated that “[Students] come with implicit (and sometimes explicit) questions such as: . . . how can I as an individual, or we as a group reduce our suffering and destructiveness?” (128). In response to such existential inquiry, literary pedagogies are seeking to address the social issues that plague our society today in an attempt to help formulate a value-based education.

In the words of Jacqueline Glasgow: “How are we to nurture the prizing differences in race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, and language? We must create for students democratic and critical spaces that foster meaningful and transformative learning” (54). Within the classroom, literature provides the opportunity and the context for exploring today’s critical issues. There are copious literary discourses
concerning Poe and his representations of race, mental health, and philosophy (Magistrale and Weinstock). However, despite the recent surge of popularity regarding feminist criticism, there has been little to no discussion on how to teach Poe’s female characters. Considering Poe’s pervasiveness on a global scale, the way we teach Poe can have a profound impact on how we talk about gender.

An intersectional look at Poe’s representations of women and femininity lays a solid foundation for a feminist pedagogy. By providing a more holistic understanding of gender and victimization, our literary studies are more apt to address the social questions of who, why, and how women are treated and victimized. The influence of Edgar Allan Poe and his literary works permeates many diverse facets of our society, and Poe maintains a global presence in popular culture and literary studies today. Therefore, by developing a feminist pedagogy on Poe that emphasizes the diversity and individuality of women and their oppression, we can begin to cultivate a society that deviates from an inquiry fixating solely on the what and begins to explicate the why.

Intersectionality theory, the idea that social identities overlap and intersect with one another to form systems of oppression, discrimination, and domination, first emerged in the 1980s with the intention of combating gendered and racial discrimination as well as other forms of social oppression. Since its origin, it has been acknowledged as a “leading feminist paradigm” (Nash 3). The theory seeks to address the variation and diversity of victims and resists the reading of a universal victim or, in this instance, a universal woman. Instead, “the intersectional project centers the experiences of subjects whose voices have been ignored” (2). Intersectionality highlights the individual and his or her unique circumstances as opposed to asserting a representational and faceless victim of hegemonic patriarchy or monoculture. Although the theory does not propose a specific way of approaching an intersectional interpretation, the basic premise holds that critics cannot rely on assumptions or blanket interpretations. Instead, critics need to actively acknowledge the reality of intersecting social identities and their relationship to oppression, which requires assessing individual cases of oppression and discrimination.
Poe studies, in all its gendered complexity, offers a prime opportunity for establishing an intersectional feminist pedagogy. Historically, feminist criticism on Poe is riddled with contradictions. However, these contradictions and varying perspectives illuminate the complexity and diversity of Poe’s women, complementing an intersectional look at primary Poe sources. The rich diversity in and out of Poe’s literary works provides a more holistic understanding of women's issues in Poe's era and highlights how we understand those same issues today. Nevertheless, while there has been a plethora of feminist scholarship on Poe, critics have focused their attention on explicating Poe’s attitude towards women. Instead of trying to understand the role of women within the text, critics have been overly concerned with unraveling the mystery of Poe himself and his relationship to women. Scholars have linked his tumultuous history with the women in his life to the dead women in his texts and labeled him a misogynist. However, in recent years scholars have argued that such a reading has undergone a “political revolution.” In essence, after decades of critics viewing Poe as a misogynist, Poe has joined “the vanguard of male feminists” (qtd. in Kot 388). Scholars claim that the characters of Morella, Ligeia, and Madeline Usher exemplify feminine strength and prowess in the face of the patriarchy. However, it may be more beneficial simply to look at Poe feminist criticism as a whole instead of trying to identify a single argument as either true or false. The contradicting schools of criticism reflect the complexity of the characters themselves and can therefore serve as a springboard for a feminist pedagogy: because Poe is seen as both a feminist and a misogynist, the two schools of thought allow for ample opportunity to engage in a values-based discussion concerning how we view victimization and how we perpetuate it in our society.

Historical feminist criticism lacks an expansive look on Poe’s treatment of women beyond labeling them as dead and beautiful victims. Rather, it has been overshadowed by Poe’s own assertions made in “The Philosophy of Composition”: that the most poetic topic in the world is the death of a beautiful woman. The criticism, in general, maintains this broad explanation regardless of the extensive variation of Poe’s female characters. “Poe the feminist” and “Poe the misogynist” are both worthwhile arguments, and just as scholarship has seen the revolution of Poe from misogynist to feminist, it may yet expand its open-mindedness
further to embrace the intersectionality of Poe. This perspective resists a single reading or truth, but rather explores the complexity and diversity of each text. An intersectional perspective on Poe’s women can fill the gap within feminist criticism and can potentially help cultivate a needed pedagogy that focuses on why women are treated as they are in the texts as opposed to merely what is harming them.

There is a great deal of diversity in Poe’s female figures—characters which typically fall under the general title of “the dead beautiful woman.” However, accepting such a broad interpretation hinders our conversations about gender and gender relations. In congruence with identifying heuristic elements in Poe’s writings, a look at Poe’s intersectionality reveals the various driving influences behind institutionalized sexism. While “women often experience horrible deaths in Edgar Allan Poe’s tales” from “premature burial, mutilation, poisoning, [and] psychic cannibalization,” critics rarely look for an explanation beyond Poe’s need for melancholic effect (Kot 388). Nevertheless, the range of attitudes expressed by the male protagonist to the woman is much more varied. For example, Morella is despised for her mind, Ligeia for her power. The wife in “The Oval Portrait” is killed for her beauty, Marie in “The Mystery of Marie Rogêt” for getting pregnant, Bernice and Madeline Usher for their weakness and frailty. In “The Black Cat,” the wife is seen as mere collateral. By lumping all the distinct female characters into the categories of “woman” and “victim,” we lose the opportunity to engage in a discussion of gender relations. There is an apparent richness and diversity in the interactions between the masculine and the feminine characters which has been largely ignored throughout Poe studies. A pedagogy that emphasizes the various circumstances Poe’s women face can influence the way we teach gender by changing the conversations we have about victims and their struggle with silence and oppression.

While there are many examples of female oppression throughout Poe’s tales, “The Mystery of Marie Rogêt” is particularly interesting in terms of developing a feminist pedagogy. Because the tale mirrors the true story of Mary Rogers, a woman who died from a botched abortion, it testifies to the applicability of value-based literary studies. The ill-performed abortion in “Marie Rogêt” reflects society’s disdain for female promiscuity; Miss Rogêt feels compelled to risk her life getting an abortion as opposed to bearing the child along with the associated social
consequences. This particular tale is useful to a conversation centered on pedagogy because it accurately mirrors reality, both then and now. Today, 60,000 women die from unsafe abortions each year (Haddad 1). Dialogue about sexual abuse and rape continually places women at blame for sexual violence through phrases such as “she was asking for it,” “she looked older,” and “she shouldn’t have been wearing that,” which have become commonplace in our vernacular. Like Marie Rogêt, the women of today face the brunt of societal attitudes about sexual promiscuity through misplaced judgement and blame. The attitudes that drove women in the 1800s toward abortion, the shame and fear of being ostracized and alienated from their communities, reflect similar oppressive attitudes that plague women today. When asked why they chose abortion over having a baby, many women felt that having children would bar them from participating in the workforce or school. Perhaps more poignantly, younger women felt pressured by their parents to have an abortion or feared that someone would discover that they had sex (Torres 169). Despite the time difference between Poe and the present, there are similar social pressures that drive the forms of oppression females experience today.

Other Poe stories that are not based on true accounts have the same capacity for modern-day application. Stigma, stereotypes, power, and objectification are common factors behind the deaths of certain women. While the actual violence occurs because they are women, how each woman is treated depends on other social conditions and circumstances. Madeline Usher and Berenice both experience premature burial after being ostracized by a family member due to their failing health. Egaeus becomes fixated on Berenice’s decaying teeth, designating them “the teeth” and not “her teeth,” thus objectifying Berenice as an illness and stripping away her humanity. Similarly, Roderick Usher is filled with dread when Madeline comes near him. Any feeling of remorse or sympathy for his sister is now overshadowed by a fear of contamination and disease. Madeline and Berenice are thus defined by their illnesses. They are represented as objects to be acted upon rather than people who act. Nevertheless, their deaths contrast with the death of Morella and the wife in “The Black Cat” whose relationships with their husbands reveal more about their deaths than their physical health does. In “Morella” the narrator remarks, “Indeed the time had arrived when my wife’s society oppressed me like a spell...shall I then say that I longed with an earnest
and consuming desire for the moment of Morella’s decease?” (Poe 2:227). In “The Black Cat” the narrator has a greater regard for the cat, Pluto, than for his wife: “I suffered myself to use intemperate language to my wife. At length, I even offered her personal violence...for Pluto, however, I still retained sufficient regard to restrain me from maltreating him” (Poe 1:851). And although, as readers, we know that he eventually kills Pluto, we also know that he murders his wife during his second attempt on Pluto’s life and considers his wife a mere “interference” (1:856).

However, Poe’s women are not victims of violence only. While themes of violence do permeate many of Poe’s works in regard to women, women also experience social and psychological harm. “Morella,” “Ligeia,” and “The Royal Lady” exemplify the inequality of power dynamics between men and women. Poe’s character Trippetta, from “Hop-Frog,” faces discrimination that goes beyond sex as Poe critiques caste distinctions as well. Similarly, Poe’s poems “Annabel Lee” and “The Raven” as well as his poetic defense “The Philosophy of Composition” do not harm women within the texts themselves but reflect the unattainable standard imposed on women by the narrator’s fixating on the dead object of their affection. The men in these poems place the feminine ideal on a pedestal, resulting in obsession and infatuation. The women present across Poe’s literary works represent a fall from the male gaze pedestal; women who experience sickness, ambition, pregnancy, or beauty are routinely killed for not living up to the ideal, and the reasons for that violence are just as telling as the violence itself. A study on the intersecting social identities of female characters would reveal the intricacy of male-on-female oppression which extends past physical harm, an area that has routinely been eclipsed by the presence of fatal violence.

A comparative analysis of the individual representations of Poe’s feminine characters reveals the depth of sexism that moves beyond biology. Cynthia S. Jordan argues that throughout Poe’s career he sought to recover the “second story;” she “pinpoints three phases of Poe’s career ranging from the tales that ‘bear women’s names’ to the later tales of detection through which Poe worked toward a fictional form that would allow him to ‘reject one-sided male-authored fictions’” (qtd in Kot 394). Poe critics thus recognize an evolution in Poe’s stories from objectifying women to empowering them. However, it is this very breadth of representation that inspires an intersectional feminist pedagogy. A feminist study of Poe can
inspire conversation about gender relations and teach students about the various forms of female oppression as well as female strength. In Poe studies, the female characters do not have to be reduced to Poe’s own limiting interpretation of the dead and the beautiful, but rather they can be used to understand and explicate the female’s role in the past, the present, and the future.

While there is an obvious historical divide between the context of Poe’s stories and the present, women’s issues continue to be prevalent and the influences that perpetuate violence against women remain today. Although Poe’s stories are a reflection of his time, they also serve as a history of the present. During the years of 2001 and 2012, an estimated 11,766 American women were killed by a domestic partner—twice the number of American war casualties during the same period (Vagianos). An estimated 20 million American women suffer from eating disorders because of body dysmorphia and unrealistic standards of beauty—standards which are commonly represented in art (ANAD). Women continue to be vastly underrepresented in state governments—to date, there have only been fifty female heads of state. Women die in childbirth while others risk their lives aborting their babies. In essence, the conversations we can have about Poe and women can influence the conversations we need to have about women, a discourse that attempts to explicate the various forms of victimization instead of grouping them under a single generic title. Therefore, Poe studies can start to address values that are critical to our social conversations today. Concerning a value-based education model, R.S. Peters stated:

Education implies that something worthwhile has been intentionally transmitted in a morally acceptable manner. It would be a logical contradiction to say that a man had been educated but that he had in no way changed for the better, or that in educating his son a man was attempting nothing that was worthwhile. (qtd. in Carbone 25)

Establishing a value-based education is oft considered a controversial subject, threatening the balance between neutrality and ethics. Nevertheless, a feminist pedagogy that teaches an intersectional perspective of Poe’s women and the criticism of these women would not
attempt to assert truth but rather to extend the conversation beyond the broad generic answers. It would cultivate critical thinking about an issue that remains just as prevalent a social issue now as it was in Poe’s day.

A feminist pedagogy has the potential to transcend not only time, but geographical distance as well. A study conducted by Margaret Lee Zoreda in Mexico found that when non-English majors were surveyed, Edgar Allan Poe was the 3rd most popular author to be read among that demographic. In “Teaching Poe as Popular Culture in Mexico,” Zoreda explains how she used the popularity of Poe to her benefit to teach a literary course centered on values. Edgar Allan Poe has further demonstrated a global influence—Akutagawa, Baudelaire, and Machado de Assis are foreign examples of how Poe and his treatment of women have influenced various literary traditions beyond America. Poe’s global popularity presents the need for establishing a feminist pedagogy because it requires an alteration of an already accepted literary discipline. People around the world are already reading Poe. And although Zoreda’s course was designed to teach English language skills, it utilized Poe’s pre-existing popularity in Mexico to benefit the students beyond the intent of the text. Therefore, by appropriating a literary tradition that already has the influence and the popularity that Poe does, we can establish a value-based pedagogy that has the potential to make a difference. By finally giving a voice to Poe’s women, we can be prepared to provide students with a critical opportunity to talk about why gender issues matter.

Women do not hold a monopoly on oppression, but men do exemplify a monopoly on voice—“males in these tales apply their own experiences to explain the crimes against women” (Kot 395). The women throughout the tales are denied a voice as the men claim each female voice in addition to their own. By respecting each woman in Poe’s tales as autonomous and unique—by respecting the intersectionality of Poe’s female characters—conversations about Poe’s women can shift from being about what women are to why they are treated as they are. Therefore, developing a feminist pedagogy for Poe studies could be instrumental in addressing present-day inequality and discrimination. By tapping into Poe’s universal popularity and his breadth of diverse female characters, we can begin to alter the conversations we have about the literature we read as well as the critical conversations we have about our own realities.
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Criterion
Edgar Allan Poe did not speak German. He was fluent, however, in the literary style of German gothicism. This proficiency is evident in Poe’s earliest short story, “Metzengerstein: A Tale in Imitation of the German.” These silver-tongued articulations of the gothic soul caused many German readers to wonder if Poe was, in fact, a German speaker. Globally, critics spotted a distinctively German sort of darkness and gloom throughout Poe’s writing. Though, upon accusation of this so-called “Germanism,” Poe flinched. He resisted the idea that his brand of terror was uniquely gothic or derived from any German tradition. I argue that this resistance resembles a painter’s when the painter is asked if an artwork is a self-portrait; Poe’s ardent denial stems from the autobiographical nature of “Metzengerstein.” Although the story does not manifest as an autobiography in the classical sense, it reads as an artifact of Poe’s very soul—a self-destructive, vagrant soul. “Metzengerstein” is therefore not an “Imitation of the German,” but an original display of intrinsic German gothicism and an enduring invitation for authors to reach inside and write—honestly write—about what they find.
Although he was never known to set foot on German soil, Edgar Allan Poe managed to craft a lofty presence there. Echoing a romantic tradition, Poe’s work flourished by way of artistic literature, as opposed to the popular educational writings in Germany during the 19th century. Rather than create affinities semantically or to the German language itself, Poe’s writing finds a place in German ideology and style. Themes of romanticism, gothicism, and Germanism are certain in Poe’s work. “Metzengerstein,” in particular, can be diagnosed with every symptom of gothic fiction: it is based in the Middle Ages, reveling in the terrifying side of the human soul, all while featuring classical gothic elements of royalty, specters, and revenge. When reading Poe’s works, the reader is “haunted continually by echoes and reminiscences of the German Romanticists,” also known as “Gothics” (Gruener 2). One begins to wonder if these similarities came from Poe’s study of the originals, were unintentionally absorbed from the literary atmosphere of the period, or were innately Poe. It should also be noted that while Germany may not have informed Poe’s writing style, Poe greatly informed German writers. Poe embodied German romanticism, and in turn, Germans devoured his work. Poe garnered both popular and elitist attention, attracting the interest of diverse gothic writers such as “Rainer Maria Rilke, Walter Benjamin, and Ernst Junger” (Forclaz, “Poe in Europe”). According to one German author, Germans are “Poe’s compatriots by birth,” and Poe has become an integral part of “German education and civilization” in the study of gothic literature (Schaumann). Poe is lauded in Germany—in this particular way—because the gothic “school of German letters” had unknowingly prepared for his reception (Schaumann). Poe, a young and troubled American, was inadvertently writing and living for an entire culture, across the world.

Germans not only relish Poe’s creations, but they also honor his tragic background. Poe’s writing is seen as more authentic and more valuable, as it is not the only thing about him that emits a stench of terror and the fantastic—Poe’s life did as well. Poe’s own classical “fallen hero” persona is like a beacon of truth to many German readers (Schaumann). Germans value this authenticity and rawness of gothicism in word and deed, making Poe a “natural champion” to countless German readers and writers (Schaumann). Because Poe was translated into German as early as 1853, he may be more loved by German readers “than by his countrymen” (Forclaz, “Poe in Europe”). According to scholars, Poe is “the American
writer who is most read and discussed in Germany,” despite the fact that he never traveled there (Forclaz, “Poe in Germany” 38). Across mediums, Poe was a plentiful source of material for German artists and literary critics: “two Austrian engravers, Alfred Kubin and Hans Fronius, particularly deserve mention, Kubin having done three hundred engravings of Poe’s works,” along with the famously “perceptive 1968 critical study” of Poe’s works by literary critic Franz Link (Forclaz, “Poe in Europe”). Perhaps Poe “has always been more appreciated by German readers than by Americans” because American readers are not so apt to appreciate real horror (Forclaz, “Poe in Germany” 38). Poe’s style did not exactly resemble popular American works at the time. “Metzengerstein” did not provide the spirituality found in Walden or the celebration that was Leaves of Grass. Poe’s life might have been one of fame and wealth, had he lived in Germany, but Americans did not accept Poe’s dark offering with such warmth. Still, Poe would not mimic the authors with more hopeful sensibilities, because that was not his truth. Instead of an invented optimism, he gave himself. Autobiographical hints at Poe drop throughout “Metzengerstein”—some clear and others hidden. Perhaps most obvious, there is the connection between Poe and the protagonist, Frederick the Baron of Metzengerstein. Frederick, like Poe, is orphaned at a young age and plagued by expectation and feelings of inadequacy. For the baron, duty is inherited in his very name because of a prophecy that the Metzengerstein house will ride upon the Berlitzing house, and yet, Frederick is preoccupied with vain acts of cruelty and violence: “the dissolute young Baron . . . disappointed every expectation” (Poe 25). In similar self-sabotaging fashion, although Poe showed great promise in school with Latin and French, he drank himself into debt and occasional incoherence; he “drank often and drank more than was good for him” (“Poe, Drugs, and Alcohol”). Poe was forced to quit school less than a year after he began because of this alcoholism. Clearly, these orphaned men seem “agitated by a variety of emotions,” which likely contributed to their eventual demise (Poe 24). Baron Frederick could not resist the seductive flames of the castle, and Edgar Allan Poe “could not refuse a drink” (“Poe, Drugs, and Alcohol”). It is these innate masochistic behaviors in Poe and in his characters that invigorate his dark fiction even further with gothic German elements. In the “pursuit of emotional extremes, writers of the gothic
period were fascinated by experiences of pain and misery, and explored the ability to . . . produce creative energy, out of masochism” (Henderson 2). Poe presents one of these so-called “explorations” of masochism in “Metzengerstein.” The baron figuratively flogs himself with obsession. He fixates upon a horse tapestry; he is later gripped by the countenance of a real horse. This fixation twists the baron’s soul in knots, tying his fate inextricably to the equestrian demon that carries him to a fiery end. This process of descent is a “convulsive struggle,” a “contemplation of human agony,” that closely resembles Poe himself (Poe 29). The baron is drawn to self-destructive patterns, just like the man who writes him. Proving that one does not require study of the German tradition to contract a characteristically gothic strain of self-hatred.

Besides this unifying thread of self-sabotage, there are additional and subtle ties between Poe and his tale in imitation of the German that emphasize its autobiographical nature. With great care, autobiographical connections are hidden in plain sight. Poe inventively aligns himself with the world of Baron Frederick by leaving Frederick unaligned; for instance, there is no specific time period given. The events in “Metzengerstein” occur in no specified era, thus occurring in any given era. Poe claims this is because the themes of horror in “Metzengerstein” are timeless. “Why then give a date to the story I have to tell?” Poe asks (18). This displacement enforces Poe’s general flare for the bewildering and echoes the state of his own vagabond spirit. Additionally disorienting, Poe writes that the story takes place in Hungary, but the name Metzengerstein and the name of his rival—Count Wilhelm von Berlifitzing—are clearly German. Adding to its universality, the story is told from the perspective of an unnamed third-person narrator. This absence of information, again, suggests that the story exists for anyone reading. The narrator is unidentifiable, omnipresent, and unbiased. Furthermore, the conflict at the heart of “Metzengerstein” is a centuries-long rivalry between two wealthy families, so old that no one can say how far back it dates; its origins seem to depend upon an ancient prophecy: “A lofty name shall have a fearful fall when, as the rider over his horse, the mortality of Metzengerstein shall triumph over the immortality of Berlifitzing” (Poe 19). This continual lack of specificity and placement implies that the following events could occur at any time, in any place, to any person. Poe makes the linking possibilities abundant. This ambiguity functions as the
story’s connective tissue: the selective vagueness connects the reader to Baron Frederick, connects Frederick to Poe, and transitively connects Poe to the reader. Terror all around.

In addition to this element of universality, which comes from Poe’s ambiguity in “Metzengerstein,” there comes another effect: it is apparent from this literary choice that Poe is privileging gothic themes before historical accuracies and details. The chronology and geography of “Metzengerstein” take a back seat, paling in significance when contrasted to the interior goings-on of the baron. The story vibrates in its gothic themes, coming to life with “hints at secret obsessions and sins, foreboding prophecies,” and “family rivalry” (Sova 155). It is remembered more for the heights and depths of emotion its actions create, rather than the actions themselves. Clearly, Poe is more concerned with interior functions than exterior ones. As Roger Forclaz mentions in “Poe in Europe,” Poe is often fixated with the condition of the soul — he and his characters are distinguished by their internal wreckage, rather than outside forces or historical context:

“The fragmentation of the self in Poe is at the core of his characters’ being rather than the result of external incidents, and this fragmentation is connected with a radical treatment of the sense of space. Landscapes in Poe, as in Hawthorne and Melville, are characterized by an increasing ambiguity that casts the individual back upon himself: the result is a dark intermediary world in which terror is part and parcel of existence and intimately connected with individuality.” (50—51)

The terror and division in “Metzengerstein” is no exception to this trend. The characters seem driven by an unexplained force of vengeance and doomed inexplicably, in spite of what they do. The baron is cursed with “atrocious and reckless behavior” and plagued by a “perverse attachment” to his horse (Poe 26). Poe must have felt similarly doomed, tied without consent to a generally unrequited love of poetry and literature—a life of melancholy and unfulfilled wishes. Poe himself often said he was “miserable in spite of great improvement in circumstances,” unable to shake his invisible haunts (“Master of the Psychological”). Poe created and explored the atrocious inner-workings of Baron Frederick, perhaps to further understand his own darkness. Poe wrote once, in a
letter to a friend, “I am wretched, and know not why” (“Master of the Psychological”). This is truly the mark of a gothic writer, to ask questions that have no answer—to create terror for the sake of terror.

Because its source of inspiration is so mysterious, “Metzengerstein” has been a hotbed for critics and scholars to debate Poe’s true intentions. It contains all the elements of gothic horror: shadowy castles, howling winds, and seemingly supernatural phenomena. While it has been established that Poe was writing in a gothic way, loved by German readers, it is now pertinent to establish where this darkness came from. Whether Poe intended the story as a forthright tale of horror, as a parody of gothic storytelling, or as an exploration of self is a popular question. I maintain, doubtlessly, that it came about internally and—in Poe’s own words—quite “without his consciousness” (Poe 22). While it is plausible for readers to interpret the bizarre happenings in the story as the “burlesque derisions of Gothic fare,” it reads more personal than this (Sova 4). And, although the story may be a straightforward moral lesson “that evil can become so powerful that the human soul [gives] way to it and [loses] the power to resist,” and can be “drawn from the hapless rider and chained to the wild steed,” Poe was not one for moral clarity (Quinn 193). One can indeed interpret it allegorically, as events intended to demonstrate a universal truth: bad things happen to bad people, but it is unlike Poe to permit such simplicity. And finally, the story may appear as a possible work of abstract autobiography, a depiction of the horrors that go on in Poe’s own head. This seems the most fitting and human answer, because according to Poe himself, “horror and fatality have been stalking abroad in all ages” (Poe 18). This story brings horror up close, stoking a flame that hurts to look at.

Since many of the themes introduced in “Metzengerstein” are frequent in Poe’s later writing, including its general gloominess and the powers of evil, it is considered one of his most formative works. Poe published the story when he was only twenty-two years old, baffling scholars with his mastery of language and gothic horror:

Already in this first story the unity of construction and of tone, the masterly suggestion of the supernatural, the preservation of suspense, and the handling of the climax—many of the great Poe qualities—these are in “Metzengerstein.” Where before had a boy of twenty-two showed his ability in marshaling the resources of the English language to depict such a scene of terror as closes the career of Baron Metzengerstein? (Quinn 192)
It is highly significant that Poe is in his youth when writing this story. How does an untrained and adolescent author express the sentiments of an ancient sadness? How does he create, with words, the expressions of those stone gargoyles that line Gothic cathedrals? Simply put, Poe is a natural. Poe, like Baron Frederick, is sick with a fantastic “hereditary melancholy” (Poe 26). It was his gift and his punishment, to be stricken, for life, with wretchedness.

If the gothic mastery in “Metzengerstein” and Poe’s other stories was so valuable, why did he deny it? Why, in response to claims and general criticism of a German flare for the grim, did Edgar Allan Poe so intensely guard his dark tendencies? Concerning Poe’s romanticism and gothicism, some scholars assert that the bulk of Poe’s popular appeal rests upon these few striking tales of terror, like “Metzengerstein.” Yet, when Poe’s readers pointed these traits out to him, concerning his most popular “German” or “Gothic” tales, Poe answered in defense. Poe said, “Terror is not of Germany, but of the soul” (“Master of the Psychological”). In particular, I insist that terror was an exhausting attribute of Poe’s own soul. Poe believed terror was an integral part of life, and therefore a necessary topic for literature. This is why Poe’s first published tale, “Metzengerstein,” is so vital. It falls into the gothic horror genre, along with Poe’s famously frightening tales like “The Tell-Tale Heart” and “The Black Cat.” Poe produced horror in the face of horror, and this is how his great and terrible darkness could be conquered. Germans proudly claim him. Though Germany seems to be an indisputable upwelling for the gothic sensibilities, it poured from Poe himself.

Poe was a natural gothic writer. He created with the purpose of bringing his own terror to a larger audience and in the process, perhaps unintentionally, inspired other authors with only their own terror to give. Poe resisted German and gothic labels because his horror—although characteristically German—was internal. “Metzengerstein” is a story of gothic production, a piece of Poe that is just vague and just specific enough, ringing with the “agony of his countenance” (Poe 29). Poe insisted that art and poetry were the noblest pursuits, as they were his only relief in this life. Like a truly gothic or romantic figure, he held that the greatest art was that which had a strong effect on the senses—whether good or bad. Poe’s production of literary horror in the face of horrific circumstances was like an antidote for his own life. “Metzengerstein” is evidence that
ruthless honesty and self-sacrifice create art. What appears to be effortless Germanism is made with great effort indeed. Endeavoring writers can find a place to stay in stories like this, and all writers should try to create stories like this. This kind of writing required something huge and painful of Poe: a piece of himself. In return, he cornered readers into a shared sense of dread, if only for a moment. The best writing exacts a piece of its writer. “Metzengerstein” is a fixed enticement for those seeking to boast and anesthetize their own torment. It is a paradoxical incentive: the most self-indulgent, most sacrificial act.
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Criterion
The Devil’s in the Details

A Characterization of Montresor in Poe’s “The Cask of Amontillado”

Audrey Saxton

Written in 1846, “The Cask of Amontillado” remains one of Edgar Allan Poe’s most gruesome revenge tales. Critics often examine Montresor’s motive for murder and read him as a braggart; but while “Amontillado” does depict a morbid murder, other critics emphasize the religious imagery present throughout this tale which depicts the allegorical struggle between Christ and Satan. However, other critics find allegorical readings of Poe problematic since Poe often voiced his dislike for allegorical writing. In an essay criticizing Nathaniel Hawthorne’s work, Poe wrote, “In defense of allegory . . . there is scarcely one respectable word to be said” (254). Although Poe disliked allegory in general, he was not against all forms of allegorical writing. Poe continues in his essay on Hawthorne that he does not mind “allegory properly handled” which, according to Poe, is allegory “judiciously subdued, seen only as a shadow or by suggestive glimpses” (254). In “Amontillado” Poe’s use of allegory is subtle, a shadow that approaches truth rather than a horn that blasts out a moral.

Many critics have been prompted to read this short story as an allegory because of the biblical image represented by Montresor’s family crest: a human foot crushing the head of a serpent. Within the context of the family crest, critics have read Montresor as representing both
the human foot, or the Christ-figure, as well as the serpent, or the devil. Donald Pearce’s essay written in 1954 characterizes Montresor as strictly Mephistophelean, or devilish, and reads Fortunatö as a re-enactment of the passion of Christ. However, Philip M. Pittman disagrees with Pearce’s reading in his essay “Method and Motive in ‘The Cask of Amontillado’” saying that if Montresor is the serpent, then Satan triumphs. To right this wrong, Pittman reads “Fortunato as the Mephistophelean figure, and Montresor as playing out a role in which he extracts a fully Christian retribution” (95).

These two readings demonstrate a major conflict that exists in criticism surrounding this short story: if “Amontillado” is a Christian allegory, does Montresor represent the Christ figure or the devil, and what are the consequences of such a reading? Based on a close examination of the text, it is more likely that Montresor aligns with the serpent depicted on the family crest, and thus represents the devil in this eternal struggle between good and evil. However, because critics have read Montresor and Fortunatö as representations of both sides of the conflict, the criticism hints at another major element: Montresor’s and Fortunatö’s role as doubles. Because Montresor and Fortunatö are doubles, readers view Montresor in a sympathetic light which creates a less rigid division between good and evil. Their relationship as doubles further complicates Montresor’s vengeful and Satan-like character, providing a compelling look into the contradictions and ambiguities of human nature.

In the allegorical reading of this text, Montresor’s family crest is the central image that depicts the struggle between good and evil and each character’s role within the conflict. Poe describes the crest as “a huge human foot d’or, in a field azure; the foot crushes a serpent rampant whose fangs are imbedded in the heel” (1259). The foot d’or, or the golden foot, is a fitting symbol for the prosperous Fortunatö since Poe describes him as “rich, respected, admired, beloved; [and] happy” (1259). The serpent represents Montresor; snakes are the ultimate symbol of revenge, biting back at those who cause them harm and thus swiftly progressing from the victim to the perpetrator. And so, even as Fortunatö crushes Montresor’s dignity and pride with “a thousand injuries” and the singular “insult” (1256), Montresor turns around and imbeds his fangs into the foot of Fortunatö. Poe could not have picked a greater symbol to represent a man obsessed and consumed by revenge than nature’s greatest avenger—the serpent.
But besides revenge, the serpent has another equally important symbolic meaning. Most readers, especially Poe’s western audience, widely recognize snakes as symbols of the devil due to the serpent’s role in the biblical account of Adam and Eve. Thus, Montresor comes to represent the devil through his connection to the snake depicted in the family crest.

Many critics, including Pearce and Pittman, have read the crest in conjunction with the biblical tradition found in Genesis chapter thirteen, which more fully connects the crest to the allegorical struggle between good and evil. In the description of the crest, Poe’s specific use of the word “serpent” rather than snake creates a direct link between the crest and these bible verses. Genesis chapter three reads: “And the Lord God said unto the serpent, Because thou hast done this, thou art cursed [. . .] And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel” (King James Version, Gen. 3.14–15). Katherine M. Harris, another Poe scholar, observes about these verses that “this is not an image of impartial revenge, but the traditional representation of the Church militant triumphing over the forces of evil” (333). The crest clearly shows Fortunato, the foot and “Church militant,” crushing the snake with “a thousand injuries” (Poe, “Amontillado” 1256) and triumphing. Montresor’s description of the “thousand injuries” should not be taken literally, but is rather a hyperbole that suggests the injuries of Fortunato are innumerable. With this understanding, the “thousand injuries” create connotations of continued action and repeated bruising. However, Genesis reads “[the foot] shall bruise thy head, and [the serpent] shall bruise his heel.” Thus the crest depicts not only “the Church militant triumphing over the forces of evil,” as Harris writes, but also the forces of evil retaliating. After Fortunato crushes Montresor, Montresor embeds his fangs into Fortunato; the fangs are lodged deep and fixed fast into the heel with little chance of removing them. With these characteristics, the crest provides the reader with an image of Fortunato the foot and Montresor the serpent locked in a cycle of bruising—a clear image of the perpetual struggle between good and evil.

But while the crest may show continual retaliation, Montresor only commits one act of vengeance. This single act breaks the cycle and ultimately upsets the balance between good and evil. Montresor’s first words to his audience read, “The thousand injuries of Fortunato I
had borne as I best could; but when he ventured upon insult, I vowed revenge” (1256). The crest shows continual action: the foot stomps, the snake bites, and the cycle continues. However, Montresor has borne each bruise from Fortunato without vengeful actions so far; in other words, Montresor has not once bitten Fortunato back for any of the “thousand injuries.” When Montresor decides to bite back, he does not want to simply bruise Fortunato, he wants revenge. The Genesis verses show continual retaliation, but each act of retaliation is equal: a bruise for a bruise—no more, no less. Revenge, however, is not a retaliation of equal action, but a promise to commit an action that creates greater suffering than the suffering inflicted upon the seeker of revenge. Therefore, by vowing revenge, Montresor has vowed not to repay Fortunato for the bruises, but to murder him, an act far worse than any of the bruises inflicted by Fortunato. Montresor’s action will upset the balance and end the struggle between the images of the snake and the foot by removing the heel permanently.

Montresor’s family crest is a central image which allows critics to read “Amontillado” as an allegorical story. However, while Donald Pearce’s essay does briefly deal with Montresor’s family crest, he does not place nearly enough emphasis on the crest’s importance in characterizing Montresor as Mephistophelean. Pearce writes, “[Montresor’s] coat of arms (doubtless invented on the spot) contains a human foot being bruised at the heel by a satanic serpent” (449). Pearce does recognize the importance of the biblical allusion. He describes the crest’s snake as “satanic” and even includes the Genesis verses in a later parenthetical statement. But by dismissing the crest as an invention of the moment, whether by Poe or by Montresor, Pearce undermines the role the crest plays in depicting each character—and more importantly in setting up the entire story to be a conflict between good and evil. It seems odd that Pearce would ignore the essential allegorical image of the crest when he believes the story to be more than just a systematic symbolization. Pearce writes, “The elements of the scriptural parody wind through the tale demonically, as the mottled striations in a slab of black marble, suggesting powerful but indeterminate patterns that have a mythic feel” (449). Pearce’s observation is right on one account, Poe has set up details and elements of “Amontillado” that create a mythical feel, but because Pearce claims that these patterns are “indeterminate,” it is impossible to
determine to what myth Pearce is referring. Contrary to what Pearce says, these patterns are not indeterminate. Through a careful examination of the details such as the family crest and Montresor’s character, readers can trace these patterns back to a specific myth, one of the most influential and foundational myths of humanity, the battle between good and evil.

Montresor is the vengeful, satanic snake and Fortunato the foolish, prosperous foot; but many critics have also very successfully interpreted Montresor’s crest in the opposite manner. Pearce was one of the first critics to see the connection between Montresor and the devil, and others, such as Jay Jacoby and Thomas Pribek, support this reading. However, Graham St. John Stott, who reads “Amontillado” as “an exploration of the darkness in the heart of Calvinism’s God,” writes, “if Montresor is God’s agent [. . . ], then he is not the serpent but the figure whose heel bruises the serpent’s head—in the Christian tradition, Christ” (85). In his reading, Stott not only aligns Montresor with the foot, but he also asserts a reading in opposition to Pearce’s, instead declaring Montresor the Christ figure.

These opposing interpretations of the crest and its effects on Montresor’s and Fortunato’s characters present readers with an ambiguous crest. However, rather than creating an unclear reading of Montresor’s character, the ambiguous crest strengthens Montresor’s connection to the devil. The devil thrives on uncertainty; he makes morals seem ambiguous and undefined. Also, at times, Montresor seems like a Christ figure, a reading supported by Philip Pittman and other critics who see Montresor as the foot. Since the beginning of time, the devil has been enticing humans to trust him by pretending to be good or Christ-like. For example, in Second Corinthians Paul warns the people that Satan can appear as an “angel of light” (2 Cor. 11.14). Poe has successfully created a devilish character that confuses readers and critics alike. Critics cannot characterize Montresor by just one of the crest’s images, and readers can find an abundance of textual evidence to support Montresor’s role as both a devil and a Christ figure. Thus, by creating Montresor’s crest as an ambiguous image, with uncertainty being the devil’s primary tool, Poe further aligns Montresor’s vengeful soul with the devil.

In addition to strengthening Montresor’s connection to the devil, the ambiguous crest also cues readers to view “Amontillado” as a story of doubling. The ambiguous nature of the crest sets up a situation in which
the characters could embody either image of the crest. At particular times during the story, readers can clearly see Montresor’s link with the serpent. At other times, they can clearly see Montresor’s link with the heel. And while this strengthens Montresor’s devilish identity, it also complicates Montresor’s character by providing him with a link to both sides of the biblical conflict. Likewise, because Montresor and Fortunato are doubles, Fortunato is not simply the prosperous heel. Pittman’s essay provides excellent evidence to show that this story depicts Fortunato as a devilish character complete with a prideful heart and flashing eyes (329). This reversal of roles creates a fluid relationship between the characterizations of both Montresor and Fortunato, the images on the crest, and these images’ allegorical counterparts—the forces of good and evil.

Poe establishes the doubling between Montresor and Fortunato through a jumble of echoing and re-echoing, which reveals Montresor’s complex character to the reader. The most prominent example of doubling appears towards the end of the text when Montresor echoes Fortunato’s “loud and shrill screams” (Poe 1262). Montresor says, “I replied to the yells of him who clamored. I re-echoed—I aided—I surpassed them in volume and in strength. I did this, and the clamorer grew still” (Poe 1262). Amidst the rattling chains and the contending “shrill screams,” Poe creates an image of the supernatural, even of hell. Fortunato’s screams are the screams of a damned soul, and Montresor echoes Fortunato’s screams because he, too, is a damned soul. In this instance, Montresor moves away from strictly the serpent side of the allegory and reveals a very human emotion: remorse. Montresor cries out in agony as he laments assuming the identity of nature’s avenger (the snake) and following in the footsteps of the devil. Fortunato’s screams echo—or double—Montresor’s soul. However, Montresor’s screams “surpassed [Fortunato’s] in volume and strength” indicating that Montresor suffers the worse fate, a fate more potent and lasting than Fortunato’s suffocation. One could even say Montresor suffers from a guilty conscious as he bemoans not the act he has committed against Fortunato, but the fate he has ascribed to himself. Because readers do not typically associate the devil with guilt and remorse, Montresor moves away from the snake and becomes the heel, a more human and sympathetic character.

The text further reveals Montresor’s human-like character through his actions; Montresor may tell the reader that murdering Fortunato, or ending the heel, is the outcome he wants, but his actions reveal
his true desires. While Montresor’s act of echoing Fortunato’s cries provides evidence that Montresor and Fortunato are doubles, it also foreshadows Montresor’s final wishes. Montresor wants to “echo” the injuries of Fortunato with more strength and volume, ultimately causing Fortunato to grow “still” or silent and end the struggle between good and evil. However, the final brick presents readers with another story. Poe writes, “There remained but a single stone to be fitted and plastered in. I struggled under its weight” (1262). This last brick represents the weight of Montresor’s actions. If Montresor truly wanted to complete this murder and remove the foot entirely, he would have rushed to place the final brick and to finish the task with excitement and zeal, just as he builds “the second tier, and the third, and the fourth” (Poe 1262) in quick succession and with no difficulty. Additionally, Montresor says, “I forced the last stone into its position” (Poe 1263). The text offers no evidence to suggest that the other bricks were hard to fit together, indicating that Montresor had to force himself to place the final brick, which would complete his revenge and end the allegorical conflict.

Yet despite this hesitation, the reader does not doubt that Montresor enjoys watching Fortunato suffer. Montresor even says, “during [the furious vibrations of the chain], that I might hearken to it with more satisfaction, I ceased my labors” (Poe 1262). In this instance, Montresor stops working in order to gain pleasure from Fortunato’s suffering. But causing the heel to suffer is only a bruise, not an act of revenge. The text clearly shows that finishing the wall, or completing the murder, makes Montresor uneasy. He “hesitated [and] trembled” (Poe 1262); his “heart grew sick” (Poe 1263). These are not the actions of a stone-cold killer and a selfish demon, but the actions of a selfish man fearing the fate of his own soul. Montresor’s actions during Fortunato’s final moments make Montresor more human and not as intimately linked to the devil as before.

Montresor’s and Fortunato’s last exchange presents the reader with the next, and final, case of doubling. Montresor echoes Fortunato: “‘Let us be gone.’ ‘Yes,’ I said, ‘Let us be gone.’ ‘For the love of God, Montresor!’ ‘Yes,’ I said, ‘for the love of God!’” (Poe 1263). Devoid of his murderous zeal, Montresor can only echo back Fortunato’s pleas. Montresor’s hesitations reveal his true desires: to be saved from this pain and torment, to not kill Fortunato, to maintain the balance between good and evil. But since his connection with the devil overpowers these other wishes, Montresor
cannot reverse his actions and this reduces him to an echo. And just as an echo resonates and lingers, Montresor’s suffering also resonates and lingers long after Fortunato suffocates. Indeed, with the final words, “in pace requiescat” (Poe 1263), Montresor issues forth a plea for the removal of his own suffering so that he can finally “rest in peace.”

While still a horrific revenge tale, Poe’s “The Cask of Amontillado” takes on new complexity when examined in light of the Montresor family crest’s allegorical imagery. This imagery shows Montresor’s alignment with the devil, the ancient and biblical struggle between good and evil, and the story’s ambiguous interpretation. Although “Amontillado” presents readers with a story in which Montresor’s evil act triumphs over good, by the end of the tale, Montresor is not just another selfish devil. Through doubling, Montresor’s character has evolved; he does not want to destroy Fortunato entirely. Poe’s presentation of a remorseful and very human-like devil gives a new twist to the timeless struggle which begins to break down the boundaries between who is good and who is evil. The ambiguous relationship that Poe creates between good and evil, just like the relationship he establishes between the images of the crest and the characters, shows readers that Montresor’s character is also ambiguous and ultimately undefinable. Perhaps it is this message, rather than Fortunato’s murder, which characterizes “The Cask of Amontillado” as one of Poe’s most gruesome tales.
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Criterion
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