"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"
CRITERION

A JOURNAL OF LITERARY CRITICISM

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Editors’ Note

We take this opportunity to express sincere gratitude for the Criterion staff and for the excellent work they have contributed to the development of this issue. *Criterion: A Journal of Literary Criticism* is a student-run journal associated with the English Department at Brigham Young University. As a journal, we give our volunteers hands-on experience and can say with confidence that, through the invaluable efforts of the staff, we have produced a quality issue for our readers. Criterion functions entirely through the commitment of our volunteer editors. Our staff has worked tirelessly through an extensive editing and design process, and, with that in mind, we are proud to present the Fall 2019 issue of Criterion.

The papers for our Fall 2019 issue come directly from the BYU English Symposium that was held earlier this year. We are grateful for our partnership with the symposium as it has given us access to several insightful works. Many thanks to our authors, who have devoted so much of their time to the editing process, and have allowed us to publish their work. Authors revised rigorously to bring their pieces to this present state, and their intellectual engagement remains the force fueling this critical endeavor. We are truly excited to present a dynamic collection of articles that examine literary works ranging from those of medieval playwrights to modern poets.

It is difficult to express the full extent of our gratitude to all those affiliated with this issue, but we would especially like to thank our faculty advisor,
Dr. Mike Taylor, for his continued interest in and support of Criterion. Dr. Taylor has provided formative advice and guidance, and we could not have created such a quality journal without his direction. Finally, we want to thank Brigham Young University and the BYU English Department for their continued support. We sincerely hope you enjoy this issue of Criterion.

Hailey Kate Chatlin, Heather Bergeson, and Michela Miller Dickson
Black Fatherhood in America through the Lens of Contemporary Memoir

Christian Allred

"It would be wrong to comfort you," writes Ta-Nehisi Coates to his fifteen-year-old son, who learns that the killers of Michael Brown will escape punishment (Coates 11). The line comes from Coates’s 2015 book Between the World and Me, written as a father’s letter to his son, a form Coates admits is a literary device (Comedy Central). What to some might seem an unusual declaration coming from a father marks a larger question of how to raise a black child in America, where antiblack racism persists. The question weighs equally on mothers and fathers, but this essay explores particularly how black fathers approach parenting. The need to protect black children against racism appears in several contemporary African-American memoirs, allowing a rare glimpse into a unique struggle faced by black fathers in America.

Part of the challenge is inseparably connected to being a black male. A study of black masculinity reveals the challenges black males face in defending against threats to their body. Some perform a “cool pose, a set of hypermasculine behaviors . . . to cope with the barriers and pressures presented by social inequality” (Abdill 54). But the struggles black men
face are only compounded when becoming fathers. According to literary scholar Keith Clark, in many cases “black males cannot be fathers because they do not believe that American society will let them be men” (Clark 108). Evidently then, the threats faced by black fathers begin long before they even become fathers.

The challenges to black fatherhood in America extend back to slavery. Every stage of the slave trade, from slave ships to plantations, separated black families. Since slaves were not allowed to maintain the basic family unit, fathers were robbed of their role and position in their families. Dr. Wade Nobles explains that slavery instilled in black men a profound sense of shame that was then internalized. When it came to their children, enslaved fathers made a dehumanizing realization: “I cannot protect you from the horror” (Black Fatherhood Project). The negative impact of removing fathers from families cannot be understated, not to mention the effect over generations of fathers. Even after slavery, white Americans targeted black men through sharecropping and pressured them to leave their families. It became necessary to “separate to survive” (Black Fatherhood Project). Considering these facts, slavery is a foundational frame through which to understand black fatherhood in all its history.

However, history is limited by a macro view and allows us to study black fathers mostly from a distance. Literature offers a closer look into the lives of individual fathers, and the memoir provides an especially intimate picture. The memoir challenges pervading stereotypes of “absent black fathers” (Coles 3) by showing them standing between their children and racism before allowing the child to confront race on its own terms. *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Ordinary Light* by Tracy Smith, and *Negroland* by Margo Jefferson each demonstrate that black fatherhood is about recognizing there is no singular approach to teaching your children about race, and that allowing children to navigate race how they see fit, once they are old enough, is the truest expression of fatherly love.

The Dilemma

First, memoirs reveal how the fatherly instinct to protect creates a unique dilemma for black fathers: protecting a victim when you yourself are a victim. Ta-Nehisi Coates bluntly describes the predicament he, and his own father before him, finds himself in as a black father:
Now I personally understood my father and the old mantra—“Either I can beat him or the police [can].” I understood it all—the cable wires, the extension cords, the ritual switch. Black people love their children with a kind of obsession. You are all we have, and you come to us endangered. I think we would like to kill you ourselves before seeing you killed by the streets that America made. (Coates 82)

Black fathers find themselves in a desperate situation, in which they must decide how best to protect their helpless child from racism when they, too, are subject to its threats. Thus, a father would almost rather kill his child than have the child killed by systemic American racism. Coates illustrates the dilemma by recounting an incident on an escalator, in which a white woman pushes his almost-five-year-old son Samori. He describes the surge of emotion with which he reacts to the assault and his words to the woman as “hot with all of the moment and all of my history” (94). When a bystanding white man approaches Coates in her defense, Coates pushes him back, to which the man threatens to have him arrested. In this moment, Coates realizes that in his attempt to protect his son, he has only jeopardized his son further. What sets black fathers apart, then, is a compounded struggle to defend one’s child while defending one’s self.

Different Parenting Approaches

The charge to protect a vulnerable child as a vulnerable father leads to varying parenting approaches; because black fathers are not all the same, each chooses to struggle with the dilemma in his own way. In her memoir Negroland, Margo Jefferson also points out how “the question of the child’s future is a serious dilemma for Negro parents” (Jefferson 83). On the one hand, a parent may choose to shield their child from racist affronts as long as possible until the child encounters them on its own. On the other hand, a parent may choose to educate their child on the reality of racism “from infancy on” (170). Whatever their approach, black fathers, either directly or subtly, teach their children their own way of fighting racism. The following sections illustrate how different fathers combat racism by embracing order, expecting excellence, educating bluntly, or sacrificing silently.

Embrace Order

In Ordinary Light, Tracy Smith’s father embraces order to combat the struggles of life, and encourages Smith to do the same. The first references to
her father, Mr. Smith, describe his fascination with the competing forces of “mystery and order,” forces “tied up in physical laws that could be located everywhere: in the animal kingdom, the human body, the endless darkness of space” (Smith 12). From his career as a scientist in the Air Force down to the way he leads his family, he tries to see the world through the laws that govern science. Only when life does not easily fit within the explanations of science does Mr. Smith acknowledge the rest as “mystery” (12). The worldview which Smith’s father adopts reflects an escape from his past oppression. Smith recalls her father’s upbringing, how he had “enlisted in the [military] service at eighteen and left the South,” and wonders whether he was “fleeing a mystery” and “seeking a new and better order” (13). Mr. Smith was victim to the racial injustices of the South, and perhaps the mystery surrounding race led him to enlist and to adopt the strict sense of structure that the military provides.

In some sense, enlisting in the military allowed Mr. Smith to create a new beginning. Smith comes to think of her father as someone “who had fled a humble past and made himself anew,” someone who then offers a new life to his children (13). After military deployments, he returned with souvenirs, and Tracy felt that “every faraway thing [she] knew of or possessed had been filtered to [her] through [her] father” (13). Smith’s father figuratively holds out the world to her so she can see it the way he does and cope with life the way he does—by adopting order.

**Expect Excellence**

Other times, black parenting takes the form of strict behavioral expectations so as to leave no imaginable excuse for racism. In *Negroland*, Margo Jefferson’s father, Dr. Jefferson, teaches Jefferson to excel at everything. But the restricting space in which her father helps raise her is symptomatic of the oppression he fights. To maintain their privilege as an upper class African-American family, Jefferson falls victim to the confining expectations that she eradicate any flaws that could be “turned against the race” and not act too boldly which could “put [her], [her] parents, and [her] people at risk” (Jefferson 8). The stringent expectations placed on her left little room for error, creating a suffocating experience Jefferson criticizes. But Jefferson makes clear that her father’s strictness was much more a product of racism than of her own parents. She points out that her “enemies took too much” and her “loved ones asked too much,” but the “blame is not symmetrical: my
enemies forced my loved ones to ask too much of me” (174). In other words, the impossible expectations placed on Jefferson as a child result from racial oppression, and her father’s insistence on her excellent behavior marks his desperate attempt to protect her. Ultimately, Jefferson’s memoir does more to highlight the impossible choice black parents face than to comment directly on her father’s parenting. His teaching her to excel reflects his “route to freedom” (190).

**Educate Bluntly**

Coates educates his son on racism more bluntly to prepare him for the dangers ahead. When his son cries over the killers of Michael Brown escaping punishment, Coates gives him the only advice he can give, the only advice in the entire memoir, advice from his own parents: “this is your country, . . . this is your world, . . . this is your body, and you must find some way to live within all of it” (Coates 12). Thus, the advice passed from father to son over generations is not in the form of an answer to a question, but rather it is to know the right question to be asking. The lack of a concrete solution reflects both the impossibility of escaping racism and the father’s willingness to allow his son to choose his own path for navigating the immense world that threatens him. Coates tells his son “the struggle is really all I have for you because it is the only portion of this world under your control” (107). For Coates then, to be a black father means to reveal to your child the struggle you share, which teaches solidarity without giving false hope.

He passes that awareness down to his son by naming him after Samori Touré, “who struggled against French colonizers for the right to his own black body” (68). In effect, he teaches Samori to remember those who struggled before him and in his behalf. And he repeats the imperative at the end of the memoir: “I urge you to struggle. Struggle for the memory of your ancestors. Struggle for wisdom . . . Struggle for your grandmother and grandfather, for your name” (151). Coates purposefully uses the word “struggle” instead of “overcome” or “defeat” because it implies a continuous effort. He does not promise a foreseeable end to the struggle because he does not believe there is one. More importantly, he counsels Samori not to “pin your struggle on [the Dreamer’s] conversion. The Dreamers will have to learn to struggle themselves, to understand that the field for their Dream, the stage where they have painted themselves white, is the deathbed of us all” (151). In other words, the struggle cannot end until the oppressors cease to oppress, and
until then, the struggle is an end in itself. Coates is perfectly blunt in teaching his son what to expect from the world so that he is prepared. Though his approach is less optimistic than Mr. Smith’s and even Dr. Jefferson’s, he, too, wants his son to struggle on his own terms.

**Sacrifice Silently**

Finally, some black fathers protect their children through their silent suffering on their children’s behalf. Smith observes that “there must have been times when the task of keeping a family of our size afloat threatened to overwhelm [her father]. But he never showed it” (Smith 90). Smith’s father tells her that her job is “to go to school,” while his is to “take care of everything else” (90). He protected his family so well “and so invisibly that it never occurred to [her] he might have done so at any personal cost” (90). Interestingly, Smith only recognizes the grace with which he struggled in retrospect, suggesting the struggle went mostly unnoticed. Similarly, when a hotel refuses to respect Dr. Jefferson’s reservation and doctor title, he does not verbally express his frustration but hides his anger from his children. He absorbs the racist attack silently so as to not involve his children in the situation and to sustain a certain space, a wedge between his children and racism. Though it often goes unnoticed, black fathers put themselves on the frontlines against racism to mitigate its effect on their children.

**Conclusion**

Discerning the mindset of black fathers from memoirs is difficult. The embedded psychological costs of being a black father in America rarely surface, if at all. But what Dr. Jefferson and Mr. Smith conceal from their children comes out all too well in Ta-Nehisi Coates’s open letter to his son. Honesty is brutal. Or more accurately, the honest truth is brutally violent. No matter how it is faced, the “sociology, the history, the economics, the graphs, the charts, the regressions all land, with great violence, upon the body” (Coates 10). But some fathers absorb as much violence for their child as they can without showing it. They struggle by showing no sign of struggle. One cannot plainly see the internal suffering because not all black fathers provide the glimpse that Coates has provided. They find themselves in a catch-22: They must either choose to suppress any sign of frustration, or risk jeopardizing their child. As a result, a true understanding of black fathers is often inaccessible.
But with some effort, the memoir allows the reader a glimpse of what black fathers go through. Understanding what it means to be a black father in America requires more than simply acknowledging racism. It requires a figurative reading between the lines. Otherwise, one may only see distanced black fathers. Short of being told in a memoir what decisions a black father faces concerning his child, one must recognize the gaps in understanding as intentional, as a defense mechanism. Black memoir often replicates this intended barrier. The varying approaches to fathering are mirrored in how closely black fathers are revealed to the reader. Thus, memoir allows African American writers to be honest about both the facts and the methods of black fatherhood: either one sits in on Coates’s explicit letter to his son or one mines for what the gaps in two daughters’ accounts reveal about their fathers. In either case, the writer preserves the father’s approach to fathering. The memoir’s honesty, then, is twofold. And as Christopher Lebron declares, “unlike the American Memoir,” or the false narratives about black fathers, “our stories must be honest. That is how we get free” (Lebron 45).

The responsibility to understand the personal challenges of black fatherhood, whether explicitly shown or obscured, ultimately lies with the reader. To see black fathers more genuinely, readers must work to adopt a new perspective. Furthermore, this new perspective demands an increased show of compassion and empathy, an empathy only accessible once the proper work is put forth. It demands looking beyond stereotypes of black men and seeing them “in a light to which we are simply not accustomed, as family men fathering from the margins” (Abdill 227).
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“Conscious of, but could not apprehend”
Joyce’s own epiphany through “The Dead”

Leah Kelson Parks

The night of August 13, 1903, James Joyce’s mother died an early death at the age of forty-four. Mary (May) Jane Murray Joyce was diagnosed with cirrhosis of the liver (although it was likely cancer of the liver) only four months prior to her passing. Irish modernist author James Joyce returned from Paris in April 1903 to see his mother, which helped her improve slightly (“On This Day ... 13 August.”). James Joyce experienced tension with his mother occasionally due to differences in opinion: May Joyce was a devout Roman Catholic while James Joyce fought against the church and organized religion as a whole. Richard Ellmann explained that “to quarrel with the Church, as at first, ... led him to quarrel with his mother and by extension with his motherland” (Ellmann). This difference in religious beliefs resurfaced when May Joyce fell into a coma on the 13th of August. Her brother John Murray, among others present, knelt to pray by her bedside. However, James Joyce did not kneel. When John Murray urged him to do so, he refused (“On This Day ... 13 August.”). Joyce’s mother died later that night. He later felt remorse for his mother’s death, saying that one of the reasons she had died was due to his “cynical frankness of conduct” (qtd. in Paige).
In the time between his mother’s death and the publication of his short story, Joyce contracted rheumatic fever; he spent some time in the hospital, and his recovery took several months. While he was sick, Joyce wrote “The Dead” (Gabler xii) which was published in 1914. In a time when death’s door was closer than ever, Joyce experienced self-reflection and self-refinement. True to Joycian shortstory rhetoric, “The Dead” exhibits a paralyzed character, Gabriel, and his epiphany as defined by Joyce. Joycian scholar Florence Walzl interprets Joyce’s “The Dead” as “a story of maturation, tracing the spiritual development of a man from insularity and egotism to humanitarianism and love” (Walzl 46). While I agree with Walzl’s description of Gabriel’s epiphany of love, I’d like to take her argument a step further. I argue that the “spiritual development” is instead a spiritual paradigm shift for Joyce, rather than for Gabriel. Joyce, using Gabriel as a foil, ultimately has his own epiphany through the symbolic and biographical characters in “The Dead”. I am not claiming Joyce’s sudden conversion to religion, because that would be both illogical and incongruent with his further writings. But I am, however, outlining his recognition—or epiphany—of the deep significance that religion has in the lives of those he loves. This newfound empathy does not cause him to be religious or even to be a defender of the believers but rather to be conscious and respectful of the beliefs of others.

To understand the significance of Joyce’s own epiphany, we must understand Joyce’s unique definition of “epiphany” itself. While Joyce never specifically defined the concept of epiphany in his usage of the word, it is useful to look at the way Stephan Daedalus uses it in Joyce’s “Stephan hero”. Stephen explains that epiphanies are a sudden and momentary showing forth or disclosure of one’s authentic inner self. This disclosure might manifest itself in vulgarities of speech, gestures, or memorable phases of the mind. Additionally, Joyce’s brother Stanislaus described epiphanies as a Freudian slip (“Epiphanies”). Regardless of the hypothetical meanings posed by Joycian scholars, Joyce intended for the meaning to be unclear as a way for each person to internalize the personal application. For the sake of this paper, I will use the definition as posed by Stephen Daedalus of a disclosure of one’s authentic inner self.

In order to experience his own epiphany, Joyce needed a foil; Gabriel in “The Dead” acts as a foil for Joyce so that he may find a solution to the discontent he is experiencing. Once viewed this way, the commonalities between “The Dead” and Joyce’s own life are obvious. While both Gabriel
and Joyce were writers, it is not coincidental that Joyce chose to give Gabriel a writing position that he, too, possessed. At the beginning of the story, Gabriel’s pretentious attitude is evidenced by his vacillation between including a Robert Browning quote because he fears that it “would be above the heads of his hearers” (Joyce 155). However, during the party, Gabriel speaks with Miss Ivors who enjoyed his review of a Robert Browning poem. Her knowledge of the poet only proves that Gabriel has underestimated his audience and overestimated his own knowledge. By the end of the story he realizes the frivolity of his writings by calling his speech “foolish” (193). As a writer, Joyce is making commentary through Gabriel the writer: writing is often foolish and the audience knows more than the author gives them credit for. For Gabriel, his writing looked foolish in comparison to what his wife Gretta had experienced with Michael Furey. With Gabriel as the foil, Joyce discovers that writing may not be as important as his relationship with those he loves, and specifically with his mother. In essence, Joyce is recognizing that his priorities may have been more lopsided than he had thought and that his mother’s priorities (religion and family as exhibited by her last hours of life) may have been more balanced and appropriate than his own.

Joyce’s realization—or epiphany—about priorities comes while Gabriel is with Gretta. The obvious association is if Gabriel is Joyce, then Gretta is Nora, Joyce’s wife. First, both Gretta and Nora have two children: one girl and one boy. Gretta describes the children, Tom and Lottie, to the Misses Morken upon arriving at the party (Joyce 157). Similarly, Nora gave birth to children Lucia (Williams) and Giorgio (Jordan). Second, both Gretta and Nora are from Galway. Miss Ivors inquires of Gabriel (referring to Gretta), “She’s from Connacht, isn’t she?” (Joyce 164). From Margo Norris’s footnote, we understand that Connacht is the northwestern province of Ireland and location of the city Galway, Nora’s birthplace (Joyce 164, footnote 8). Third, the song that reminds Gretta of Michael, The Lass of Aughrim, links Gretta and Nora. Gretta knows the song from home (Joyce 190) and Margo Norris teaches us that Nora likely taught the song to Joyce (Joyce 183, footnote 8). Finally, Gretta and Nora both had lovers by the name of Michael. Gretta explains to Gabriel who used to sing her the song: “It was a young boy I used to know . . . named Michael Furey” (Joyce 190). Gretta then explains that she and Michael were courting when Michael got sick. She explains that Michael died when coming to her in the rain. Similarly, Nora pursued a courtship with a man named Michael Bodkin. According to scholar Sarah Marsh:
The courtship of Nora Barnacle and Michael Bodkin ended in 1903 when Bodkin was restricted to bed rest in Galway for his steadily worsening case of tuberculosis. .. Michael Bodkin’s death from tuberculosis was hastened by the last visit he paid to Nora: ignoring his doctor’s orders, he went out in pouring rain to sing farewell to her beneath an apple tree, fatally aggravating his illness. (Marsh 107)

The commonalities are, yet again, strikingly similar with Joyce’s life and those of his loved ones.

The epiphany, for both Joyce and Gabriel, hinges entirely on the character of Michael Furey. The realization comes when both men see the importance of Michael (or his symbol) in the lives of their wives. Gabriel recognizes that his lust and sexuality will never be equivalent to the passion and love of Michael Furey. Gabriel discovers (in reference to Michael Furey’s feelings): “he had never felt like that himself towards any woman but he know that such a feeling must be love” (Joyce 194). Gabriel expresses that he “was fading” (194) as if to show that he has possibly run out of time to better himself for Gretta.

However, Michael Furey’s greatest significance for Joyce’s epiphany is a symbolic rather than a biographical parallel. Michael Furey is representative of the Christ figure and ultimately symbolic for religion as a whole. First, Michael dies for someone else just like the sacrificial Christ does. Gretta says about Michael, “I think he died for me” (Joyce 191). Similarly, common Christianism teaches that Christ died for the believers. Second, Gretta is stirred to remembrance of Michael through song. The song The Lass of Aughrim is the trigger for Gretta’s memories of Michael. Likewise, in Christian culture, church-goers sing songs (hymns) to remember divinity. For example, a Christian hymn by William W. Phelps entitled “O God, the Eternal Father” expresses: “That sacred, holy off’ring, by man least understood, to have our sins remitted and take his flesh and blood . . .” (Deseret Sunday School Union 175). Finally, Michael is laid to rest on a hill: “[snow] was falling, too, upon every part of the lonely churchyard on the hill where Michael Furey lay buried” (Joyce 194). Similarly, Christ was crucified on the hill Golgotha (Calvary). Joyce makes a parallel between Gretta’s love and devotion for Michael Furey and Nora’s love and devotion for Christ, or rather, religion.

Upon arriving at the hotel, Gabriel has already been fantasizing about his wife. He is drawn to her sexually and that is the only topic he wishes to discuss. He asks Gretta, “Gretta dear, what are you thinking about?” (Joyce
189), trying to provoke the sexual conversation. But Gretta only wishes to discuss Michael Furey. Gabriel has the epiphany that he is not the only man in Gretta’s life and that the dead are as real as ever, simply because of memories that exist: “His soul had approached that region where dwell the vast hosts of the dead. He was conscious of, but could not apprehend, their wayward and flickering existence” (Joyce 194). With the symbols of Gabriel as Joyce, Gretta as Nora, and Michael Furey as a religious representative, this conversation looks quite different. In this context, Joyce is trying to talk about the things of the world (carnal, sexual desires) while Nora is trying to speak of religion (Michael).

This conversation is similar to a reality that Joyce experienced following his mother’s death. On August 29, only sixteen days after the death of his mother, Joyce decided to have a frank talk with Nora. The two were still unwed and Nora had been considering entering into a school of religious training or running away with Joyce. Joyce found it necessary to explain who he really was before Nora made any decisions in regard to him (Maddox). Joyce wrote to Nora after the conversation that night: “I may have pained you tonight by what I said but surely it is well that you should know my mind on most things? My mind rejects the whole present social order and Christianity—home, the recognised virtues, classes of life, and religious doctrines” (Maddox). Joyce, after experiencing the discontent and pain following his mother’s death concerning his religious beliefs, did not want to put Nora—or himself—through that pain again and thus thought it necessary to warn Nora. Ultimately, Nora chose Joyce but did not shift her perspective to align with Joyce’s immediately. The conversation that Gretta and Gabriel have in “The Dead,” reflects the conversation that Joyce and Nora had that day. Joyce, after a time, realized that religion (spirits, Christ, as it were) plays a large part in the lives of those he loved of which he became “conscious of, but could not apprehend” (Joyce 194).

The story ends as Gabriel hears several taps on the window pane which cause him to look out to see “snow was general all over Ireland” and remarks that it falls “upon all the living and the dead” (Joyce 194). The snow, white and pure, becomes a symbol for the religious beliefs. As Joyce looks through his own type of pain (pane) because of his mother’s death, he realizes that snow, the religious type, covers all of Ireland. And not only that, it covers the living and the dead: his mother, Nora, and himself. While Joyce isn’t able to understand (“[can] not apprehend”) why the Irish remained devout
Catholics, he does become aware ("conscious") of it. More specifically, he becomes aware of his mother's piety.

The writing of *Dubliners*, as a whole, was what ultimately led Joyce to experience his own epiphany. When Joyce began writing Dubliners, he saw Ireland as "that scullery maid of Christendom" (Conn). Full of criticism and pain, Joyce attempted to straight the "cursed . . . system" (Quigley 132) that he accused for his mother's death while burying his own remorse for his "cynical frankness of conduct" (Joyce qtd. in Paige) which he also felt had led to her death. While Joyce did not set aside his religious radicalism or even come to understand (apprehend) the beliefs of others, he was, however, able to come to terms with (conscious of) is mother’s beliefs and the important role that they played in her life. Looking through the biographical lens of Joyce’s mother’s death, “The Dead” becomes a story of reconciliation for Joyce himself. The title “The Dead” does not simply describe Michael Furey and the importance of remembrance of the dead; “The Dead” literally describes Joyce’s own epiphany. Yet, I believe that “The Dead” ultimately came to describe the feelings that Joyce had once festered in conjunction with his remorse: his hard feelings toward Ireland ultimately died because not only did Joyce forgive Ireland for his mother’s death, but he also forgave himself.
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Feminist Courtly Love in Marie de France

Summer Weaver

In his book *Medieval Imagination*, Douglas Kelly writes, “Two facts are obvious to students of courtly literature: the constant union in art of love and art of poetry, and the durability of the subject of courtly love and the forms used to express it” (xi). Marie de France is known for her ability to unite “art of love” and “art of poetry,” which correctly classifies her as a courtly love author. Though little is known about her personal life, the conventions of courtly love depicted in her *Lais* give a modern audience insight into the values of medieval society. Most courtly love themes create idealized images of medieval relationships, yet they tend to portray women as manipulative or even antagonistic. The genre of courtly love is often considered anti-feminist because of these cold-hearted portrayals of women. When critic Jane Burns wrote an article identifying moments of resistance to the patriarchy in certain examples of courtly love literature, it opened the door for the genre as a whole to be read through a feminist lens. As a rare female author, Marie de France occasionally reverses this misogynistic stereotype and gives women a more positive role in romance. Her depictions of female characters in the lais “Laustic,” “Eliduc,” and “Lanval” demonstrate a surprising sympathy for female sexuality, despite the tendency of male authors to shame women for their lustfulness. A close reading of these texts not only proves de France’s careful boldness as an author, but further supports Jane Burns’ assertion that the courtly love genre can be read through a feminist lens.
Before analyzing specific tales written by de France, it is important to understand the genre of courtly love itself. John Moore provides a general definition when he writes that courtly love is “a special form of love in which the courtly lover idealized his beloved lady and spoke to her or about her in the exalted language reserved for a deity” (Moore 622). For the most part, critics view courtly love as anti-feminist due to this male tendency to place women on an impossible pedestal. Speaking about women as “deities” and idealizing them in literature creates impossible standards for female behavior. To explain the complicated argument surrounding the anti-feminism of courtly love, Kate Millet writes, “Both the courtly and the romantic versions of love are ‘grants’ which the male concedes out of his total power. Both have had the effect of obscuring the patriarchal character of Western culture and in their general tendency to attribute impossible virtues to women, have ended by confirming them in a narrow and often remarkably conscribing sphere of behavior” (37). The concept that even the slight romantic roles women play in courtly love are “granted” to women is inherently anti-feminist. In many depictions, the woman’s actions are controlled by the male author’s, so much so that he creates an idealized image of her that is impossible for a real woman to obtain.

In addition to idealizing women to an impossible standard, authors of courtly love stories also exaggerate the lustfulness of women. Courtly love stories often detail female heartlessness as they play with their “male lover’s delicate heartstrings” (Burns 23). In her essay “Courtly Love: Who Needs It?” Jane Burns highlights ways in which this harsh “ladylove” has continued into modern America. She writes that the modern woman is “counseled to be cool and aloof, to withhold her affection, to driver her suitor mad, and thereby hold him captive. And yet, as in many medieval love lyrics and adventure stories, it is in fact the man’s desires and needs that govern this modern courtship.” These negative relationship tendencies are carried over from the initial customs learned from courtly love literature. However, Burns is not entirely convinced of courtly love’s anti-feminism, then or now. She explains that as we move through a variety of courtly love texts, “we find an array of historical and fictive women who move through the courtly world while deploying varied forms of resistance to its misogynistic, hierarchical, and normative paradigms of gendered interaction” (25). From the appearances of independent, unmarried women to the occasional depiction of same-sex relations, certain courtly love stories defy gender stereotypes and create
grander roles for women in fiction. Such subtle forms of resistance allow for careful readers, like Jane Burns, to view courtly love literature through a feminist lens. With de France being a rare woman writer, it is understandable that her literature follows many of the structured guidelines to courtly love fiction established by her male predecessors. However, as seen in the following stories, her depictions of women are not always that of “haughty and unresponsive” lovers that frequented the genre (23).

Marie de France’s lai “Laustic” is considered her most popular, as it appears in many anthologies of French literature (Green 695). In it, Marie shares the story of a man and woman who share a forbidden romance across the balconies of their neighboring houses. To summarize the message of “Laustic,” Robert Green writes, “The poem does not recount the unfortunate consequences of an unhappy love affair but is the sublimated depiction of a relationship which persists and which triumphs over exterior limitation” (695). This exterior limitation comes in the form of a violent overreaction from the woman’s husband. Like other courtly love stories, the relationship between the unmarried man and the married woman is a more emotional bond than physical one. In fact, de France makes it clear that the two have never physically sealed their affair when she writes, “They were both very content except for the fact that they could not meet and take their pleasure with each other” (94). This emotional romance is kept secret from the woman’s husband, who keeps her “closely guarded.” This secrecy fits with Andreas Capellanus’ rules of courtly love written in the twelfth century. Capellanus states that “when made public love rarely endures,” and that “the easy attainment of love makes it of little value; difficulty of attainment makes it prized” (“Courtly Love”). According to these guidelines, the husband actually enhanced the sexual desire in his wife’s secret relationship by keeping her under such strict watch. Had he given her the freedom to leave the house, she would not have found her forbidden lover so enticing. This irony of the husband’s actions helps de France portray him as the antagonist of the story, despite the fact that he is not the one being unfaithful.

De France depicts the woman’s husband as the destroyer of their romance through his murder of the nightingale. When the husband grows to suspect the woman’s behavior, she blames her nightly wanderings on a nightingale’s song. Upon hearing this, the husband “gave a spiteful, angry laugh and devised a plan to ensnare the nightingale” (France 95). Even through her narration, de France conveys her disapproval of the husband’s
“angry” actions. When he finally finds the bird, she writes that “he killed it out of spite, breaking its neck *wickedly* with his two hands. He threw the body at the lady, so that the front of her tunic was bespattered with blood” (95, emphasis added). Through her use of the word “wickedly,” de France completes the antagonistic image of the husband while emphasizing the innocence and guiltlessness of the lady. The husband’s actions are what set this lai apart from other classic courtly love stories. According to Karli Grazman, “in most of the other lais, it seems that Marie de France rewards those that stick to the appropriate, courtly actions and that the ones who are punished are the ones who tried to be sneaky or lied” (Grazman). However, unlike most other lais, the lady’s punishment seems undeserving, despite the fact that she did lie to her husband. Because of de France’s opinionated narrator, the lady is portrayed as an oppressed and innocent romantic, while the husband is preventing her from finding true love in the most gruesome of ways. And, when Capellanus’ rule that “marriage is no excuse for not loving” is taken into account, readers can interpret this to mean that the lady did not deserve punishment in the first place (“Courtly Love”). By portraying the husband as a literal murderer of love, de France makes a statement about the oppressive tendencies of marriage in the medieval period. Unlike other courtly love stories that make women out as cold and heartless manipulators, de France has subverted the theme in “Laustic” by making the husband the antagonist.

Marie de France’s stance on feminine sexuality and desire is not always as sympathetic as her narrator’s opinion in “Laustic.” In fact, de France often punishes women for their immorality or depicts them as antagonists in her lais. Michelle Freeman addresses crucial questions regarding the villainy of women in some of Marie’s own stories, saying,

That the narrator created by a female author identifies herself with a sympathetic female protagonist [in *Laustic*] is hardly surprising, but what is the reader to make of those poems in the *recueil* that project the female central character as less than sympathetic? Where do the author’s loyalties lie? How does Marie direct her narrator when the woman is indisputably at fault? (288)

These questions are relevant to “Lanval,” in which the female antagonist, Queen Guinevere, nearly destroys Lanval’s relationship with his mysterious fairy maiden. Guinevere is so persistent with her flirtations that she pushes
Lanval to confess of his secret lover, who swore him to keep their relationship hidden in order to maintain its passion (France 77). After Guinevere finds herself publicly rejected, de France describes in detail the queen’s manipulative plot against Lanval. When the king returns home, Guinevere “cried for mercy and said that Lanval had shamed her. He had requested her love and because she had refused him, had insulted and deeply humiliated her.” These blatant lies force the audience to turn against Guinevere and feel sympathy for Lanval, the one who rejected her. At first glance, this story initially appears to reinforce the traditional roles of women as the lusty manipulators in the relationship, but while Guinevere and the lady in “Laustic” both seek to commit adultery, only Guinevere is depicted by Marie as worthy of punishment. Judith Rothschild describes Guinevere and other similar stockcharacters as “female villains,” which characterization contrasts with the argument that courtly love literature can be viewed through a feminist lens. Despite the villainous Queen Guinevere, de France continues to break traditional female roles through her depictions of Lanval’s lover.

Marie de France redeems women in “Lanval” by allowing the fairy maiden to play a more traditionally masculine role by coming to Lanval’s defense in court. After Lanval is forced to defend himself in court, the barons agree to release him if he can prove the existence of his lover. De France then describes the magnificent arrival of Lanval’s lover as she “entered the palace, where no one so beautiful had ever before been seen” (81). The lady then urges the court to release Lanval, doing so with grace and confidence. According to Jane Burns, this scene openly displays the stunning beauty and refined behavior of the classic, commodified courtly lady while riding heroically to defend her seemingly helpless lover in a legal suit. The effect of this woman’s uncharacteristic participation in the legal system at King Arthur’s court is to disrupt it substantially and to defy simultaneously our preconceived notions of gendered options in the courtly world. While this heroine plays both parts of lovely lady and heroic knight, her lover Lanval is cast as stunningly “beautiful” but not effeminate. (47)

By depicting the lady as the heroic knight, de France is reversing the gender roles of classic courtly love literature. However, as stated by Burns, doing so does not place Lanval in a position of weakness or femininity. In fact, both Lanval and the lady appear attractive to the audience by the end of this
courtly love drama, even with the lady taking a more heroic position in the narrative. This careful depiction of a strong female character by de France helps counteract any anti-feminist themes enforced with the villainous actions of Queen Guinevere.

Continuing with the theme of independent women, Marie de France’s lai “Eliduc” features a woman capable of sympathizing with her own husband’s lover. Guildeluce’s reaction to her spouse’s affair can be directly contrasted with the husband’s in “Laustic,” who reacted with violence and oppression. Rather than celebrate the death of her husband’s mistress, Guildeluce weeps for the beautiful woman and for her husband’s loss. Usha Vishnuvajjala argues that the women’s interaction is what shifts the story and allows for this lai to be read with a feminist lens. She examines the language de France uses to describe their initial meeting and contrasts it to the meeting of Eliduc and Guilliadun. When noting their similarities, Vishnuvajjala writes that Guildeleuc “seems to have romantic or sexual feelings for (the unconscious) Guilliadun . . . It is easy to miss Guildeleuc’s courtly lover’s gaze in this passage because the lover is a woman. Remarkably, although the courtly love gaze is usually male, this poem depicts the gaze as exclusively female” (171). This argument for Guildeleuc’s homosexuality is one of the ways in which de France potentially subverts the typical themes of courtly love. Even if the story is not read through this lens of same-sex attraction, the actions of Guildeleuc still defy the stereotypes of women as greedy lovers. Guildeleuc’s simultaneously understands Eliduc’s love and desire for Guilliadun and forgives him almost before she is aware of his emotional infidelity.” The sympathy and forgiveness emphasized in this story paints Guildeleuc as a woman of incredible strength and virtue. After reviving her husband’s mistress and reuniting the lovers, she becomes a nun and dedicates her life to God. While this could be interpreted as another idealized depiction of women, the implication of homosexuality allows for the feminist reading to remain relevant to the analysis of “Eliduc.”

To truly demonstrate how Marie de France’s courtly love stories are unique in their feminist qualities, it is necessary to contrast her lais with a courtly lovestory written by a male author. The Canterbury Tales, written by Geoffrey Chaucer, contain many examples of courtly love and female sexuality. As arguably the most well-known English author the courtly love genre, Chaucer can serve as a representative of his male contemporaries. Unlike de France, Chaucer does not attempt to justify female sexuality—rather,
in “The Wife of Bath’s Tale,” he coincides his story with the common theme of the aggressive lustfulness of women. This tale depicts a violent rape, after which the guilty knight is sent by Queen Guinevere to discover what women want most in the world. He returns to declare, “A woman wants the self-same sovereignty / Over her husband as over her lover, / And master him; he must not be above her” (214–216). The knight essentially claims that the woman wants sexual and total control over the man in the relationship. Despite this outrageous statement, Chaucer, through the Wife of Bath, continues: “In all the court not one that shook her head / Or contradicted what the knight had said” (219–220). Although this tale is supposedly told by a woman, the Wife of Bath, Chaucer’s own bias as a male is shown through the implication that all women want control over their partners. This clearly contradicts the more feminist tales of de France, which do not imply the same level of sexual assertiveness in women. Chaucer’s tale is a particularly sexist retelling when one considers other versions in which what women want is simply a choice (“The Knight’s Tale”). Excluding the depiction of Queen Guinevere herself in “Lanval,” the women of de France’s stories do not have these same characteristics of exaggerated sexual desire. De France conveys female sexuality and behavior in a more realistic, less controlling light, as opposed to male authors like Chaucer.

Through a close reading of “Laustic,” “Eliduc,” and “Lanval,” Marie de France’s sympathetic and empowering depictions of women provide a promising platform for feminist readings of courtly love literature. While men tend to portray women as greedy, lustful, and heartless, de France shows her female characters as both strong and sensitive. While many male authors also idealize women by granting them godlike characteristics that are impossible to achieve, de France humanizes them by accurately depicting their sexual desires. Although not all of de France’s lais are perfect models of medieval feminism, as seen by the female villains such as Queen Guinevere in “Lanval,” her writing grants women a more realistic representation in literature. Her subtle forms of resistance, like depicting the woman’s husband in “Laustic” as oppressive and cruel, or hinting at homosexuality in “Eliduc,” give modern readers a better sense of what a non-idealized medieval relationship may have looked like. Through her boldness as a female writer in a sphere dominated by men, Marie de France paved the way for women to overcome stereotypes as selfish or idealized lovers.


In 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft defined the term “masculine woman” as “the imitation of manly virtues, or, more accurately, the achieving of the talents and virtues that enoble the human character and raise females in the scale of animal being when they are brought under the comprehensive label ‘mankind’” (33). In 1894, a little over a 100 years later, Sarah Grand coined the term “New Woman” as the term for a woman liberated from oppressive Victorian standards, who “does not in the least intend to sacrifice the privileges she enjoys . . . especially of the kind which man seems to think she must aspire to as so much more desirable” (273). In the century between those two terms, women fought for the necessary reforms that would allow them equal freedoms to their male counterparts. In this paper, I will examine three novels—*Wuthering Heights, Daniel Deronda*, and *Jude the Obscure*—in the context of Victorian society and women’s issues at the time, and I will highlight how the silent struggles faced by the heroines in each novel are congruent with the silent struggles of women at the time. The heroine of each of these novels could be referred to as a “masculine woman” in that she has a Victorian society-deemed masculine desire to act and take control of her own life, but that desire is blocked by forced inequality to man through the institution of marriage.
These masculine heroines are then required to find sources of power outside of marriage in order to achieve an equitable relationship with their spouse and place in society. Thus the masculine nature of the heroines in Victorian novels represent the real-life struggles of women pushing for reform, paving the way for the birth of the New Woman.

During the Victorian period, there was a severe stratification of the sexes with rigid rules and strict social constructs pinning both men and women into tight corners. In Victorian society, the role dictated to women was one of marriage and childbearing. The justifications for this were drawn from a variety of sources, from doctors who proclaimed women were physically weaker and thus dependent upon men, to religious, Biblical reasonings. Queen Victoria herself said, “Let women be what God intended, a helpmate for a man—but with totally different duties and vocations” (Bingham 135). This ideology is often referred to as “separate spheres,” meaning that men moved in their own public circles and purposes, and women in their own private ones, working together as equals to create a productive and profitable society for both sexes (Fitzpatrick 1). Despite this ideology’s theoretical sense of equality, in practice the scales were heavily tilted towards males who were given opportunities for education, employment, and expression denied to their female counterparts. This was because according to the “separate spheres” ideology, men were better suited to be leaders—one of their main characteristics being their desire to be active and in control. On the other hand, women were supposed to be passive and submissive in order to be feminine. According to John Ruskin, a prominent Victorian social thinker:

The man’s power is active, progressive, defensive. He is eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender. His intellect is for speculation and invention; his energy for adventure, for war, and for conquest, wherever was is just, wherever conquest necessary. But the woman’s power is for rule, not for battle,—and her intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision. (32)

As such, girls were raised to be submissive, and if they were given an education, that education focused on making her more appealing and thus more marriageable in the eyes of man. Askin Haluk Yildirim describes marriage in Victorian society as a “matter of survival,” but she argues that getting married did not ensure a woman’s total security as she was entirely dependent on him and she herself, all of her possessions, and any children
she should bear to him were considered solely his to use as he should please (47). Thus, with a marriage akin to slavery being one of the only options given to women, is it any wonder that many of the female characters in Victorian novels chafe against those matrimonial bonds? If marriage was the means through which women were made unequal to men, then it stands to reason women would have to look for ways outside of marriage to achieve equality.

Perhaps in response to this search for equality outside of the bonds of marriage, the Victorian era made possible the reform that led to the eventual liberation of women, as well as the arrival of the New Woman. Queen’s College, the first institution in the world to give academic awards to women and the first one to receive a royal charter, opened in 1848, thereby legitimizing the education of women (“Schools”). This school was intended as a school for governesses, but eventually opened its doors to any woman seeking to learn. Consequently, the school played a key role in championing education for women. Then in 1882, the Married Women’s Act gave women the right to own property in their own name, paving the way for greater freedom and autonomy as a woman no longer had to rely on her husband for support. This journey of reform culminated near the end of the era with the appearance of a figure that would be come to be known as the “New Woman,” a figure who had freed herself from the restrictions of a marriage in which man “set himself up as a sort of god and required [women] to worship him” (Grand 272). This journey taken by real women in Victorian society towards liberation is reflected in and preserved by the active and thus masculine, fictionalized women in Victorian novels who attempt to achieve their desires through means other than and outside of marriage.

In Wuthering Heights, there are two female characters who embody this masculine desire to act—Catherine Earnshaw, who has a wild childhood among the moors, and her daughter Cathy Linton, who is kept sheltered by her father for most of her life. Catherine is the more masculine of the two, requiring others to bend to her will as “honeysuckles embracing the thorn” (Brontë 92) and desiring to retain her wild ways at Wuthering Heights, “half savage and hardy, and free . . . among the heather on those hills” (Brontë 125–126), all the while still possessing Thrushcross Grange. Cathy comes across initially as the more feminine, but still is depicted as “eager to be active” (Brontë 218); she desires to explore beyond the boundaries her father set for her. This desire is also seen in her wanting to be mistress of the two homes. Despite their differences in circumstances, both women follow a
similar pattern of living—their idyllic and active childhood is brought to a rude end by a foreign male, to whom they are rushed into marriage as a form of control. In Catherine’s case, her marriage to Edgar Linton fails her as it takes her away from Wuthering Heights and the things she loves, forcing her into a traditional, feminine setting and keeping her from acting out her masculine desires until it kills her. Cathy, on the other hand, is able to overcome the destructive and selfish patterns of her progenitors and restore balance between Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange.

Cathy’s success in uniting the two houses does not come from her marriage, but from how she uses her education to lessen the difference between her husband and herself. Both Catherine and Cathy were educated, but Catherine’s education was neglected after the death of her mother and then subsequently forgotten upon marriage. The major difference between mother and daughter was that Cathy the Second used her education to make her marriage equitable. By teaching Hareton, her future husband, and bringing him to her level, Cathy was able to facilitate the prosperous union of the two houses. Banu Akcesme identifies Cathy’s inheritance of both contested properties in the end as a kind of victory, stating, “Cathy has a chance to establish more egalitarian and feminine society with her newly gained economic power and social rank after Heathcliff’s death as the new owner of the Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange” (35). In the end, Cathy sets things right by rising against traditional female roles through her education, lifting her prospective husband up to her level instead of lowering herself below him, as marriage to Hareton and inheriting both estates would not have been possible otherwise. Thus the contrast between Catherine and her daughter Cathy, who both have this desire to act and make decisions on their own terms, shows that education helps better the circumstances of a woman in a way that traditional marriage cannot.

Brontë’s use of education as an equalizer between the genders and a tool for helping women achieve where marriage failed them in Wuthering Heights, coincides with educational reform changes for women. Published in 1847, Wuthering Heights came out one year before the opening of the aforementioned Queen’s College. Planning for the school began as early as 1845, therefore the idea of greater educational opportunities for women would have been prevalent during the time period in which Emily Brontë was writing her novel. However, even if Brontë was not familiar with the proposed opening of a college for governesses, as a well-educated woman of
her day, she would have most likely been familiar with Mary Wollstonecraft’s essay “A Vindication on the Rights of Women” which argues that the greatest gulf between the two genders is not any actual sexual difference, but a lack of education. Brontë’s illustration of masculine women overcoming the limits of marriage through education then mirrors the steps taken to liberate women through education of the time period, marking in the pages of *Wuthering Heights* this first crucial step towards the New Woman.

After educational inequality was overcome, the next part of the journey towards the birth of the New Woman is recorded in George Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda*, where the masculine desire of Gwendolen to act serves to show how economic inequality forces women into subservience to their husbands. As a general theme, inheritance law and its system of primogeniture was major fodder for Victorian novels. In the aforementioned *Wuthering Heights*, much of the conflict revolves around which character is proper heir to the estate. However, *Daniel Deronda* differs from many of those novels in that rather than dealing with whose right it is to inherit, it deals with showing how women suffer under those inheritance laws as a general rule. As stated by Marion Helfer Wajngot in her essay on inheritance law in Victorian novels, “*Daniel Deronda* is one of many nineteenth-century novels characterized by an ethical engagement with traditional wrongs . . . creating an emotional background for a rational reconsideration of social judgments and legal practices” (30–31). Thus the legal system of inheritance in *Daniel Deronda* functions exactly as it should—which is the problem. Under this system of inheritance, women are prevented from directly inheriting their husband’s property, forcing them to be economically dependent upon him even after his death.

Eliot’s heroine Gwendolyn is caught in this trap of economic dependence created by Victorian inheritance laws. In all things, Gwendolyn appears to be the perfect Victorian ideal—she is well-versed in the myriad accomplishments a young lady is supposed to have in order to gain a husband, and is portrayed as physically very lovely. Amidst all her loveliness, however, her ambitious desire to be independent as a man is apparent, as seen in her asking “why should not a woman have a like supremacy?” (1.8). This sets her apart as having that masculine desire to act and have control over her life. She does not intend to marry, as she believes her family has means enough for her desires, but when financial ruin comes upon her family, partially as a result of the inheritance laws of the time, Gwendolyn finally accepts a proposal of
marriage. She then regards marriage as a sort of “social promotion,” stating that “a peerage will not quite do instead of leadership to the man who meant to lead; and this delicate-limbed sylph of twenty meant to lead” (4.2), with her marriage to Grandcourt seeming to promise to her “the dignities, the luxuries, the power of doing a great deal of what she liked to do” (13.53). Despite her hopes, Gwendolyn’s marriage proves to be just the opposite—rather than liberating her, it restricts her more than her prior impoverished state. Once again, marriage is shown as an inequitable relationship that requires the woman to be dependent upon her husband, one that must be overcome in order to achieve equality.

Gwendolyn’s inequality to and dependence on her husband is what prevents her from achieving her goal to act according to her own desires. Here, education is not the cause for the inequality in their marriage, as both Gwendolyn and Grandcourt are shown to be educated. Rather, it is Gwendolyn’s economic dependability on Grandcourt that makes their marriage inequitable and forces her to submit to his whims. This all should have been set right upon Grandcourt’s death, but Grandcourt’s skimping on her inheritance by giving her only a small living allowance, as made possible by inheritance laws at the time. Grandcourt could legally give his financially dependant wife as much money as he felt she needed, with the law trusting that a husband would take pity on his wife and leave her enough upon which for her to live comfortably. The fact that Gwendolyn was still financially under Grandcourt’s thumb at the end of the book is a subtle reminder of the control a man has on his wife, and her dependency on him, even after he is dead. Gwendolyn’s inability to gain economic stability through either marriage or inheritance highlights the necessity of economic independence for marriage to be equitable for women. Gwendolyn’s desire to act being thwarted by her economic dependency on her husband in Daniel Deronda shows that the system of primogeniture in Victorian inheritance laws needed to be changed before equality could be achieved. Daniel Deronda predates the Married Women’s Act of 1882 by about six years, making it a commentary on the need for such a reform and a reflection of the measures needed to increase a woman’s freedom from her husband. In this way, Daniel Deronda and its masculine woman marks the next step towards the liberation of women, giving women greater autonomy and control over their lives.

Continuing the idea of greater autonomy for women, Thomas Hardy’s Jude the Obscure addresses the inequitable nature of marriage through the
treatment of its masculine heroine, Sue Bridehead. Sue is described as one with a “curious unconsciousness of gender” (Hardy 143), able to interact with men “almost as one of their own sex” (141) and desiring to act and “Be more independent” (97), identifying her as one of the masculine women of Victorian novels. As such, Sue does not want to marry; she says, “I think I should begin to be afraid of you, Jude, the moment you had contracted to cherish me under a Government stamp and I was licensed to be loved on the premises by you—ugh, how horrible and sordid” (249). Sue’s desire to remain unmarried comes from her feeling that marriage would be restrictive and prevent her and Jude from existing as equals. In this way, Hardy shows through Sue the appeal life without marriage would have for a woman, as well as how liberation from marriage could help increase equality between the sexes.

Even as Hardy uses Sue to show how living outside of marriage can increase equality, he also uses her to show how living under the bonds of matrimony is inherently oppressive. After Sue enters into a consensual, unmarried relationship with Jude, she has relative peace for a time. Despite the equitable nature of this relationship, Sue’s peace does not last, as Society intervenes and does not allow her to live as she pleases outside of marriage without consequences. Sue is pressured into a marriage with Phillotson, which Sue agrees to “because of the awkwardness of [her] situation” (Hardy 162) in spending time with Jude as an unmarried woman. Their marriage by all accounts should be an equitable one, as they are equals both educationally and economically. However, Sue struggles to adjust to her marriage because marriage as an institution requires her to be subordinate to her husband, and not an equal. She runs away to live with Jude unwed to him, “do[ing] that which was right in (their) eyes” (Hardy 297) and not society’s. In the end, society rears its ugly head, and destroys the happiness and the children Jude and Sue had in their union. This causes Sue to run back to Phillotson in an attempt to set things right, stating “we must conform” (331), an act which leaves her trapped in her loveless marriage to a man who physically disgusts her, destined to “never [find] peace” (397) until she is dead, even as Jude is by the end of the book. Hardy’s portrayal of Sue as a masculine woman shows that even though a man and woman may be both educationally and economically equal, as Phillotson and Sue were, the institution of marriage itself forces them into an unequal relationship.
Sue’s struggles against marriage mark the final step towards liberation and the emergence of Sarah Grand’s New Woman, born from the labor of those masculine women of the Victorian era. The term “New Woman” was coined in the late nineteenth century, the same year that *Jude the Obscure* began serialization in magazines, with Sue Bridehead heralded by some as “the first delineation in fiction of the woman who was coming into notice . . . the intellectualized, emancipated bundle of nerves that modern conditions were producing” (Hardy xlvi). This “New Woman” of the late Victorian was marked by her refusal to follow societal norms, especially when pertaining to marriage and traditional gender roles. According to Serf, “[the New Woman] felt free to initiate sexual relationships, to explore alternatives to marriage and motherhood, and to discuss sexual matters such as contraception and venereal disease” (35). Rather than being submissive, as was expected, the New Woman acted like a man in regards to initiating relationships with who she pleased, or in choosing not to and remain independent—a sentiment which is echoed in Sue’s choice to live with Jude. Sue therefore represents a very special figure of the masculine woman, as she is both a response to and representative of this new women’s movement, but also the culmination of the pattern that Wollstonecraft influenced when she first delineated the term.

The fact that Sue remains trapped in an unhappy marriage at the end of the book presents a difficult challenge, and seems to suggest that Hardy wrote the book as a warning against the New Woman. However, the fact that Hardy sent letters to many of the New Women authors of the day, including Sarah Grand, seems to suggest a deep sympathy towards the New Woman (Davis 53). Forcing her into an unhappy marriage, then, is not to punish her for her ideas but to show the flaws of a system that did not allow those ideas to flourish. Therefore, Hardy’s treatment of Sue Bridehead is not meant, as William A. Davis assumed, to be a critique of the New Women and to “show us why women like Sue will fail” (58), but is more to show that she cannot exist as she desires under the current system and that the New Woman movement was destined for failure unless marriage reform happened. This puts Hardy’s sentiments on marriage more in line with Grand’s, who argued that marriage reform was not to allow greater licentiousness among women, as men feared, but to put a stop to the double standard of chastity between the sexes. As Grand said, “True womanliness is not in danger, and the sacred duties of wife and mother will be all the more honorably performed” (274) when she is free from the system that oppresses her. As this idea is manifest
in how she was happier living free to act outside of a restrictive marriage, Sue Bridehead thus marks the arrival of the New Woman in literature, her journey having been recorded throughout Victorian novels through the struggles of women embodying the supposed-masculine desire to act.

_Wuthering Heights, Daniel Deronda,_ and _Jude the Obscure_ are examples taken from early, middle, and late Victorian periods, respectively, each addressing the issues facing women trapped in inequitable marriages, and each pointing towards social reform. In this way, Victorian literature encapsulates through its various fictional masculine women—and the problems they go through—the birth of the New Woman. In their pages is preserved the journey made by countless women struggling against societal norms and pressures to gain the right to act for themselves that had long been denied them. Thus, the struggles, triumphs, and failures of these masculine women of Victorian novels echoes the actual journey of women throughout the Victorian period fighting for the liberation of their gender that would culminate in the birth of the New Woman near the end of the period.


Wollstonecraft, Mary. A Vindication on the Rights of Women. Walter Scott, 1891.

In Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice*, Portia is ruled by her father’s will for her even after he has died. She complains of her lack of agency saying, “O me, the word ‘choose!’ I may neither choose who I would nor refuse who I dislike. So is the will of a living daughter curbed by the will of a dead father. Is it not hard, Nerissa, that I cannot choose one, nor refuse none?” (*Merchant of Venice* 1.2.27). Just as Portia wished for her own agency, so it was with the general population of women in the Elizabethan era. The agency of a woman was considered much less than that of a man. Today, consent is a socially highlighted concept in current mainstream media and politics; through Shakespeare’s fictional female characters, we can perform a historical reading of the ways in which Elizabethan women obtained and expressed their agency. There seems to be an underlying assumption about the way that female autonomy was viewed in Shakespearean times. Were women granted sovereignty over themselves? If they were, how and under what conditions was it granted to them? Shakespeare, throughout his plays, uses independent female characters to show that despite the typical understanding of women’s autonomy in his time, this concept could be redefined as not only the ability of the woman to make inconsequential choices, but rather the right to make significant choices regarding her own life and body. Though consent is an idea that was not emphasized in Elizabethan
times in the ways that we understand it today, Shakespeare paves the way for the understanding of it throughout history.

The roles of consent, women’s autonomy, and female sexuality are commonly discussed topics among literary critics, though there are some facets left to explore. According to Mario Digangi, Valerie Traub, and Janet Adelman, Shakespeare spurs the argument that male anxiety is the factor that stifles and therefore defines female power, examining the “threat women pose to male bonding and masculine identity” (Traub 215). Though this may be true in some instances, we see through the characters of Portia, Cordelia, Lady Macbeth, Katherine, and Isabella, among others, that Shakespeare defines women’s authority and autonomy in different ways. While these critics provide insight into psychoanalytic readings of gender in Shakespeare, I will be exploring the ways in which women in Elizabethan times were expected to behave in relationships as well as the ways in which Shakespeare illustrates the defiance of these structures. My arguments will inform not only the literary conversation regarding this idea, but also the ways we can understand consent in today’s world through a lens of female Shakespearean characters. The fact that male anxiety is a byproduct of female power should not detract from our study of female autonomy in Shakespeare. This paper will cover the ways in which Shakespeare redefines women’s autonomy as power by creating strong female characters in his works. In plays like King Lear, Shakespeare asks us to reimagine women’s authority as independence from male expectations. These plays also help us to understand that female sexuality is not whoredom but rather female agency. He redefines this idea of consent not as just the age when a woman could be married off to a man, but rather the right of a woman to make significant choices regarding her own life and body.

In Elizabethan times, women’s choices were often governed by the men in their lives. Through characters such as Juliet from Romeo and Juliet, the princess and her three friends from Love’s Labour’s Lost, and Portia from Merchant of Venice, Shakespeare redefines women’s autonomy as power. Regarding customs of courtship Olsen writes, “It was the role of the man to do the wooing and the role of the woman to wait to be wooed and hope that an acceptable man would approach her” (146). This construct did not allow women the choice to accept or reject their suitors. Findlay writes, “Whatever material or social improvements marriage brought women, it did not necessarily bring happiness” (258). While marriage was a convenience
for women in some ways, it was a tragedy in others. It provided them social status and often money, a home, and comfort, but it also deprived them of the ability to live a life of their own making. While this social custom of arranged and forced marriage is present in Shakespeare’s plays, we also see women taking active roles in their relationships rather than passive roles. Men were expected to “achieve sexual conquest, through seduction and/or marriage, and therefore be considered a truly masculine male,” placing them in a position of dominance in the relationship with the woman being pursued (Timbrell 50).

In *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, the princess and her three friends inform the doting men who wish to marry them that if they can wait for them and refine themselves for a year, they will come back to marry them (*Love’s Labour’s Lost* 5.2.865). This instance in which women have their choice considered in a marriage proposal gives them power in the relationship to withhold or give their consent. Although this particular play does not end in a marriage, it is clear that the princess and her friends establish themselves as autonomous individuals. In the same way that men believed that they had the right to “conquer” the women they desired, these four women believed the opposite as well: “Only for praise; and praise we may afford / To any lady that subdues a Lord” (*LLL* 4.1.39). “Subdue” can be understood as “to control,” or to make quiet; contrary to the men in the play, the women think that a man can be conquered by a woman. In another sense, women’s sexual access gives them power in their relationships; the princess says,

> We are wise girls to mock our lovers so . . .
> How I would make him fawn and beg and seek,
> and wait the season and observe the times
> and spend his prodigal wits in bootless rhymes . . .
> So perttaunt-like would I o’ersway his state,
> That he should be my fool and I his fate. (*LLL* 5.2.63–74)

Here, the tables turn—the woman takes the man to be her “fool,” establishing a relationship of dominance which is unusual for the time. The use of rhymed verse in this scene places special emphasis on the words of the princess and her friends. Rhymes are often associated with wise words or bits of truth that should be remembered, therefore we can conclude that Shakespeare hoped that the reader of this play would remember the female power exhibited in these lines. In contrast to Hamlet’s quote, “Frailty, thy name is woman!”
(Hamlet 1.2.146), the princess’s quote is a display of female strength over the man, establishing the man as the “fool” and the woman as his “fate.”

In Romeo and Juliet, Juliet is being forced by her father to marry Paris. While it may seem as though Juliet does not have autonomy in her circumstances, she creates it for herself. Her suicide is a power move, showing her father that to make her do something that she does not wish to do would be worse than death.

In Shakespeare’s plays, women were able to gain authority by exercising autonomy. This helps us to reimagine women’s authority as independence from male expectations. Historically, women have had very specific roles, ones that were not conducive to the pursuit of their own interests or desires. Men’s expectations were the driving motivation for many of women’s actions. “[Women] were considered . . . essential tools to build and keep a family, marriageable items who should abide their male tutors, either fathers or their legal substitutes,” writes Serras, “They led an existence mainly that of performing their roles as breeders and caretakers” (643, 644). A submissive woman with a good temperament was the most desirable in marriage, according to Olsen. When women like Cordelia come onto the scene in Shakespeare’s play King Lear, our notions of a “traditional” woman are overturned. Her father, King Lear, asks Cordelia how much she loves him, expecting a declaration of love and admiration much like the ones that her sisters give him, though they are false. Not wanting to be fake and untrue, Cordelia says, “I love your Majesty / According to my bond; nor more nor less,” (King Lear 1.1.92-93). Lear, upon hearing of this love, which was not the declaration he was hoping for, banishes his daughter and deprives her of a dowry. Because of Cordelia’s failure to conform to her father’s expectations, she leaves, now independent from her father. She becomes the Queen of France and in the end, she is the stronger force, saving her father’s land at the expense of her own life. Through this character, we see that female authority comes when male expectations are dismissed or overcome. In the National Theatre performance of King Lear, act 1 scene 1 depicts a long table (Figure One) where Goneril and Regan sit with their husbands while Cordelia sits alone. King Lear is seated in front of all of them, asking them each to explain their love for him. The two sisters receive the microphone from their husbands, illustrating their conformity to or dependence on the men in their lives. Cordelia sits with an empty chair next to her, and when her turn comes to profess her dedication to her father, she retrieves the microphone herself.
A small detail like this is significant—it illustrates Cordelia’s difference from the rest of her family and her resistance to conformity.

Another example of this comes from Shakespeare’s *Taming of the Shrew*. At the beginning of the play, Katherine is a defiant character. She goes against all expectations of a woman that lived in that time period. She is outspoken, rude, unladylike, uninterested in marriage, and ultimately disregards all assumptions that are expected from a female character. Until Petruchio, her suitor, insists on “taming” her, she is the authority of her own life. When her father pleads for her to not be angry, she replies saying, “I will be angry: what hast thou to do? — Father, be quiet. He shall stay my leisure” (*Taming of the Shrew* 3.2.189–190). Katherine is Shakespeare’s example of a woman who disregards male expectations for the sake of her own agency. While women of the time were expected to embrace a life of marriage, household duties, and child bearing, Shakespeare challenges this structure through his portrayal of independent female characters. While Kate ultimately becomes submissive to her husband, her character at the beginning of the play complicates the typical notion of a compliant woman.

Chastity was attributive of a woman’s worth in Elizabethan times, and through characters like Isabella, Venus, and Lady Macbeth, Shakespeare helps us to see that female sexuality is not whoredom but rather female agency. Findlay describes chastity in the early modern period as an adjective that carries a lot of meaning, “signifying not only the sexual purity which guarantees male ownership, identity, and inheritance lines, but also carrying meanings of moral purity, innocence, virtue, and worth” (72). A woman’s worth was defined by her sexual purity, and an unchaste woman was considered a “whore.” Today, we understand that female sexuality is more complex than the virgin/whore dichotomy suggests. Shakespeare can be an aid in analyzing female sexuality as more than just a sin or a precedent to accusing a whore in early modern times. Isabella in *Measure for Measure* gives us an example of someone who withholds their sexuality as an act of will. An aspiring nun, Isabella is asked to compromise her vow of virginity in order to save her brother’s life. Ultimately, she expresses her agency, saying “Then, Isabel, live chaste, and, brother, die. / More than our brother is our chastity” (*Measure for Measure* 2.4.197–198). In this scene, Isabella is autonomous, not because she defies the expectations that are set for her, but because her chastity is her own possession and not something she uses to prove her worth to anybody else. The right to her own body is more
important to her than an expectation to save her brother who, ironically, is in prison for having sex before marriage. In this scene, agency and sexuality are intertwined and in a way, synonymous. In attempts to assert her will, Isabella does not relent in holding fast to her sexual standards.

While Venus is historically the object of male pursuit as the goddess of love, sex, and beauty, Shakespeare flips this typical pattern and makes Venus from Shakespeare’s poem *Venus and Adonis* the pursuer of Adonis’s love. Adonis becomes “hunted” sexually by Venus and redefines our understanding of female sexuality as something that benefits a woman and brings her agency rather than something that brings her shame. According to Rosenfield, female sexuality was also often associated with witchcraft and collusion with demons (80). Lady Macbeth’s “undiluted desire” is connected to her “instigation of treason and to her witch-like characteristics,” giving an obviously negative connotation to women’s expression of sexuality (80). In a 2016 film version of Macbeth, Vicky McClure as a modern day Lady Macbeth is possessed of evil spirits when she gives her famous monologue. The dark tones of the shot paired with the mood of Lady Macbeth combine to paint a picture of an otherworldly, creepy situation. The focus on McClure as Lady Macbeth lets the audience know that she is involved in something evil, and that the point of the shot is to display her witchy nature.

Through the character of Lady Macbeth, Shakespeare redefines our understanding of female sexuality; in a way, Lady Macbeth rejects her own femaleness and gains power over her husband. Of this rejection she says, “unsex me here, . . . make thick my blood; stop up the access and passage to remorse, that no compunctious visitings of nature shake my fell purpose . . . come to my woman’s breasts, and take my milk for gall” (*Macbeth* 1.5.31–38). Lady Macbeth manipulates her own sexuality in an effort to establish dominance in her relationship with her husband and she succeeds. She asks the spirits that she calls upon to remove any aspect of her femininity because traditional understandings of femininity would deprive her of power. She asks that the spirits “fill her breasts with gall and stop her menstrual flow” (Gootman). Lady Macbeth presents an alternate way of understanding femininity “that embraces masculine power behind the shroud of feminine appearance” (Gootman). While within the confines of a strict patriarchy, she finds ways to gain dominance and authority through her gender and sexuality.

Throughout his plays, Shakespeare uses strong, independent, female characters to show that despite the typical understanding of sexual consent
and women’s agency in his time, this concept could be redefined as not just the age when a woman could be married off to a man, but rather the right to make significant choices regarding her own life and body. In a time when consent was not understood or recognized as an important concept, Shakespeare, though maybe unintentionally, brings it to the attention of men and women in the Elizabethan era. Traub points out the preoccupation that Shakespeare probably had with the “uncontrollability of women’s sexuality,” and the ways in which it seemed threatening to men—this does not seem like a stretch in comparison to today’s society (216).

Toxic masculinity is still often threatened by the presence of female autonomy, authority, and sexuality. When it comes to consent and sexual assault, Angelo’s words from Measure for Measure may still ring true to many women today: “Who will believe thee, Isabel?” (2.4.67). In light of the #MeToo movement and increasing accounts of sexual assault in the media, Shakespeare’s works are “both timeless and timely” in that they engage us in conversations about current day issues as well as historical issues (Burton). Shakespeare’s works were a catalyst for the way that we understand consent in society today. While today we have more terminology for what we call sexual assault, sexual harassment, rape culture, patriarchy, and consent, we don’t have to search very long to find that the same issues that we deal with today existed in Shakespeare’s day, too. Shakespeare’s strong, independent female characters encourage us to understand consent in a new way—a woman is entitled to make her own decisions, especially surrounding marriage, courtship, and sexuality.
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Shakespeare’s characters are possibly more well-known than he is—Romeo, Juliet, King Lear, Henry V, Hamlet, etc. These characters have been analyzed countless times by literary critics, teachers, and students. However, because critics have been writing about Shakespeare’s work since its birth, today, critics are beginning to delve into deeper topics such as under-examined characters. One of those critics, Gemma Miller, says, “Shakespeare’s children are the most disregarded and under-analyzed of his unsung heroes, when we take into account the OED definition of an unsung hero as ‘a person whose heroism or achievements are unacknowledged or little-known’” (51). Almost all of Shakespeare’s unnamed characters fit this definition of an unsung hero. Uncoincidentally, the two children Miller focuses on throughout her analysis are both unnamed (Macduff’s son in Macbeth and the boy in Henry V). However, Miller doesn’t go into detail about why Shakespeare would have left these two children without names. In fact (from what I have found), no critic has questioned why Shakespeare leaves characters unnamed. There are many other characters besides children in Shakespeare’s works who affect the plot, and who are also left nameless (characters with descriptive names rather than creative ones). Why is it important to note that these characters are nameless? The boy in Henry V, the first servant in King Lear, and the old shepherd in The Winter’s Tale are nameless because Shakespeare uses them as a reflection
of each king, allowing the reader to empathize with the main characters' mistakes and to forgive them for their human faults. This theme of affirming personhood to conquer settler colonialism is taken up by Jeff Corntassel (Cherokee) in his essay “Re-Envisioning Resurgence: Indigenous Pathways to Decolonization and Sustainable Self-Determination,” wherein he poses similar questions to Clements and proposes his own solution. Corntassel asks, “What recourse do we have against those destructive forces and entities that have disconnected us from our longstanding relationships to our homelands, cultures and communities?” (87–8). These questions demand answers to an often overpowering abundance of issues that threaten to snuff out Indigenous life in all its forms. To overcome the seeming impossibility of the task, he invites Indigenous people to adopt “a peoplehood model” that would renew “the complex spiritual, political and social relationships,” disrupting that process of erasure and destruction (89). The heart of this model stems from the basic need to be recognized as human, not as a settler stereotype, making the struggle more of a resurgence of life than a specifically political, social, economic, or spiritual resurgence. This is done by simply enacting and living one’s Indigenous traditions, reconnecting every day to “language, homeland, ceremonial cycles, and sacred living histories” (89). While Corntassel applies his model specifically to nationhood, in this paper, I make a more individual application of his model, responding to the more personal need for life resurgence in combatting depression and suicide which are common psychological responses to seemingly insurmountable situations. I explore the food-based version of the peoplehood model solution adopted by Clements’ protagonist Angeline in The Edward Curtis Project to illustrate her journey toward asserting her humanity, which allows her to conquer the feeling of being psychologically defeated.

The boy in Henry V reflects Henry and allows the reader to sympathize with the king. Henry V begins with the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishop of Ely discussing how King Henry is trustworthy now, but “the courses of his youth promised it not” (1.1.25). They also mention that he used to spend time fooling around: “his hours filled up with riots, banquets, sports, and never noted in him any study, and retirement, any sequestration from open haunts and popularity” (1.1.57–60). If a viewer were to skip over this first scene of the play, they would not have guessed that Henry used to be a boyish prince. Throughout the rest of the play, he inspires his people and fights for what is right. Because this immature opinion of King Henry
is presented at the beginning of the play, Henry must prove to the audience that he is no longer the reckless prince he once was.

The king proves he is a man many instances in the play by showing mercy and demanding justice. In the beginning of act 2, he learns from his uncle that his former “bedfellow,” or constant companion, Scroop, plans to kill him for money with the help of two others (2.2.8). Because he doesn’t want to believe this, he decides to test them to see if they deserve any mercy. The king asks them if he should punish a drunk man that “railed against [him]” (2.2.41). Scroop answers saying, “let him be punished, sovereign, lest example breed, by his sufferance, more of such a kind” (2.2.45–46). After this exchange, the king hands them papers that prove their plans to kill him. The men beg for mercy, but the king reminds them they suggested no mercy to the drunk man. Despite their pleas, the king sentences them to death saying, “Get you therefore hence, poor miserable wretches, to your death, the taste whereof God of his mercy give you patience to endure, and true repentance” (2.2.176–79). Having King Henry justly sentence his old friend to death is just one way Shakespeare shows that the king is now a man.

Just like the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishop of Ely thought of King Henry as once immature, the boy in the play is also seen as juvenile (“I am boy to them all three” 3.2.27–30). He is the only other character presented this way by his peers. It is significant that he is left nameless because it allows the viewers to know him only as a “boy;” the way they only knew Henry as with his “hours filled up with riots, banquets, sports” (1.1.57–60). However, if he had a name, the reader would assume that he is not a boy because of the way he acts. The boy seems mature because he recognizes cowardly choices. When the officer, Fluellen, tries to send Bardolph, Nym, and Pistol back to fight, everyone runs away scared but the boy. After they run off he says, “as young as I am, I have observed these three swashers. I am boy to them all three, but all they three, though they would serve me, could not be man to me; for indeed three such antics do not amount to a man” (3.2.27–30). After recognizing their cowardice, he realizes that he doesn’t want to learn to pickpocket like they want him to. He decides then to leave them “and seek some better service” (3.2.50–51). Although he doesn’t seem to have anywhere else to go, the boy makes the mature decision to leave them. Miller agrees by saying, “[The boy] functions as a moral touchstone, his asides, soliloquies and interventions ironizing and undermining the self-serving actions and empty bombast of his adult counterparts. He rejects the lawlessness and cowardice
of the men he serves” (53). Just like the king made the mature decision to exact justice on a guilty friend, the boy mirrors Henry by choosing the right. Throughout the play, not only do both the boy and Henry try to convince the audience that they are men, but they also do what is best for themselves and for the people around them.

As if this evidence wasn’t enough to draw a parallel between Henry and the boy, Shakespeare also compares their fluency in French. Some critics, like Miller, claim that the boy’s French actually outdoes the French of the king’s. Miller says, “[the boy] demonstrates a fluency in French that highlights the deficiencies of not only Pistol but of the king himself (4.4.25–66)” (52). However, I would disagree by saying that their fluency in French is quite similar. The boy is able to get the message across from Pistol to the French Soldier with few mistakes. The only time he doesn’t translate what Pistol says is because he doesn’t know the words “fer, and ferret, and firk” (4.4.31–32). Similarly, in the scene with Henry and Kathrine, Henry is modest while speaking French. When he stumbles (“Quand j’ai la possession de France, et quand vous avez la possession de moi—let me see, what then? Saint Denis be my speed!—donc votre est France et vous êtes mienne”, he corrects himself right after. Even Kathrine comforts him when he is embarrassed by his French (5.2.182–85). She says, “saving your honor, the French that you speak is better than the English that I speak” (5.2.189–90 trans.). Kathrine connects Henry’s fluency to the boy’s fluency in French by complimenting him on it.

Additionally, in this scene, the boy demonstrates king-like qualities as he saves the French Soldier’s life by translating for him. When the soldier learns that his life has been preserved, he says, “On my knees, I give you a thousand thanks, and I consider myself happy that I have fallen into the hands of a knight, as I think, the bravest, most valiant, and the very distinguished gentleman in England” (4.4.56–60 trans.). While the boy proceeds to translate this to Pistol, it is likely that the soldier was really speaking of the boy when he said, “the bravest, most valiant, and the very distinguished gentleman in England” (4.4.60 trans.). These words allude to that of a king.

The connections drawn between Henry and the boy, rejecting immature notions and striving to be like kings, can help the reader see Henry as a good king despite the poor decisions he made in the past. Because the reader can empathize with the boy’s situation already, when they look at Henry through the boy, it is easier for them to also empathize with Henry. It is also
easier to recognize that he is trying to do his people good. The relationship between Henry and the boy helps the reader focus less on Henry’s bad traits and more on his good ones. Just like the boy tries to do everything he can to be a better person, Henry is trying to do all that he can to be a better king.

The nameless first servant in *King Lear* also helps the reader see the king in a more forgiving light. King Lear is shown as a changed king throughout *King Lear*. While some attribute this change solely to his circumstances or his daughters, the first servant that saves Gloucester can help the audience see King Lear as a repentant king. The first servant and King Lear have interesting parallels that draw them together. The namelessness of the servant, again, allows the reader to gain a more focused analysis of King Lear.

There are many hidden parallels between the first servant and King Lear. Derek Cohen, the author of “The Malignant Scapegoats of King Lear,” recognizes one of the more important parallels. He says, “There are ten recorded deaths in King Lear . . . Of these, the only deaths that take place onstage, in sight of the audience, are those of Lear, Oswald, and Cornwall’s Servant” (Cohen). Even though the first servant has fewer lines than Oswald, and is nameless, his part seems more significant in the eyes of the audience because he tries to save Gloucester’s life. Furthermore, the way the first servant dies is a reflection of the way King Lear dies. As Mahood notes, “the revolutionary fact about the first servant is that he is not . . . a shocked bystander; a performance reveals him to be one of the group of servants who have dragged in and bound Gloucester on Cornwall’s orders. Some directors even make him the one who tips over the chair so that Cornwall may stamp on Gloucester’s face” (168). Not only do performances show the first servant experience a change of heart, but the notes from many editors also show his change. The stage direction from the editor in the Bevington edition says, “[Servants hold the chair as Cornwall grinds out one of Gloucester’s eyes with his boot]” (3.7.72 s.d.). While the stage direction doesn’t single out the first servant as the one who holds down the chair, it is likely that he is one of the servants to participate in this gruesome act. Just like King Lear did a terrible thing and later repented, so did the servant.

Fortunately, this initial scene of the repentance process is not the only evidence to go on. Two scenes after the death of the first servant, a messenger relays the event to Albany when he says, “A servant that he bred, thrill’d with remorse” (4.2.73). Mahood offers insight into this phrase by saying, “The now demoted word ‘thril[l]’ retained its metaphorical vigor for the Jacobean,
so that even if ‘compassion’ rather than ‘compunction’ [guilt that follows the doing of something bad] is the more common Shakespearean meaning of ‘remorse’ the emotion is still a force that drills agonizingly into the Servant’s heart” (168). Mahood’s insight helps clarify that the messenger’s lines mean Cornwall’s servant suddenly felt bad. Because of this clarification in meaning, the phrase implies that the servant had a change of heart. The servant, who may have at first assisted in the blinding of Gloucester, felt bad about his actions (whether that meant assisting in Gloucester’s blinding or letting it happen), and then tried to stop Cornwall from blinding Gloucester completely. This change of heart is an important trait in the first servant. His actions in this scene represent Lear’s change of heart when he realized that banishing Cordelia was wrong (“I know you do not love me, for your sisters have, as I do remember, done me wrong. You have some cause, they have not.” [4.7.75–77]). Thankfully, in Lear’s case, his daughter forgives him (“No cause, no cause” [4.7.78]). Unfortunately, the first servant’s actions aren’t forgiven. In both cases, they die after having tried to do the right thing. Repentance is the most direct parallel between the first servant and King Lear. Although it is more prominent when seen on stage, the themes of repentance, redemption, and change can still be found from the text and are heightened when the audience connects the actions of the servant and King Lear.

Another parallel between King Lear and the first servant is a change in loyalty. The servant has “served [Cornwall] ever since [he] was a child” (3.7.71). Literary critic Richard Strier believes the following:

The rationale the servant offers for his act is as remarkable as the act itself. After commanding Cornwall to stop what he is doing, the servant characterizes his own behavior as loyalty rather than rebellion . . . ‘But better service have I never done you than now to bid you hold’ (3.7.71–73). This is the clearest articulation and the most extreme case in the play of what we might call ‘Kent’s paradox’ of service through resistance. Direct interference is presented as an act of service . . . We can begin to appreciate how important this conception was to Shakespeare by reflecting that he could have gotten the same plot effect, but not the paradox, if he had made the interfering servant one of Gloucester’s rather than one of Cornwall’s retinue. The scene takes place, after all, in Gloucester’s house (as Gloucester keeps saying). Shakespeare wanted the servant to be Cornwall’s in order to make the paradox of “better service” possible. (120)
In this moment, the audience never questions whether or not the servant is doing the right thing. They only recognize that he is trying to be a better servant by trying to do what is morally right. However, earlier in the play, when King Lear banishes Cordelia and Kent, most audiences question why Lear reacts the way he does. Understanding the servant’s loyalty towards his loved ones can help the audience better understand why Lear would banish his own daughter and beloved servant. It is possible that Lear does this because he thinks he is being a better father, just as the servant fought Cornwall because he thought he was being a better servant. After Cordelia tries to explain that she does love her father, but needs to leave love in her heart for a future husband, Lear is distraught (1.1.95–104). He says, “Here I disclaim all my paternal care, propinquity, and property of blood, and as a stranger to my heart and me hold thee from this forever” (1.1.113–16). By refusing to give his “paternal care” to her, he allows her to go off and do what he thinks she wants to do. He adds, “Let pride, which she calls plainness, marry her” (1.1.129). These lines seem to show that Lear believes Cordelia wanted to be freed from his care, and he allowed her to have that freedom. Although the reader still isn’t able to justify Lear’s actions, by looking at the parallels of loyalty between Lear and the first servant, the reader gains more empathy for Lear and realizes that Lear thought he, himself, was doing the right thing.

Another king, Leontes, in The Winter’s Tale, is cruel at the beginning of the play but has a change of heart by the end, just like the nameless character of the shepherd. This play is unique because there are sixteen years that go by, so the audience doesn’t get to see Leontes progress and change through his repentance process. Some critics have wondered how this play deals with Aristotle’s unity of time. Emily Grosholz says, “With this wrenching of tragedy to comic romance, and these vast expanses of time and place, how can Shakespeare save his play from becoming episodic, from falling apart into separate, unrelated pieces? And how can he salvage the probable and necessary from the fantasy of a winter’s tale that nobody would believe?” (202). Grosholz believes that the answer comes from certain named characters. However, Shakespeare wrote in another character that mirrors Leontes, who helps the audience deal with the sixteen-year gap and transition from an unforgiving Leontes to a penitent one—the old shepherd.

The shepherd fills in the sixteen-year gap for the readers by mirroring Leontes, perhaps in more obvious ways than the other nameless characters
described thus far mirror their named counterparts. At the beginning of the play, King Leontes suspects that his wife, Hermione, was unfaithful to him, which is a false assumption. In his anger and jealousy, Leontes exiles his newborn daughter, Perdita. Because Leontes sends his daughter away and thinks she is dead, the shepherd ends up raising Perdita. The most apparent similarity between Leontes and the shepherd is the fact that Perdita can call them both father. Of course, Leontes abandoned her (“Out! A mankind witch! Hence with her, out o’ door!” [2.3.68]) and the shepherd took her in (“‘Tis a lucky day, boy, and we’ll do good deeds on’t.” [3.3.133–34]); nevertheless, she is a daughter to them both.

A less-obvious parallel is shown when the shepherd finds Perdita on the seacoast of Bohemia. The very first lines given by the shepherd reflect Leontes’ feelings about adultery. Upon finding the baby he says, “Though I am not bookish, yet I can read waiting-gentlewoman in the scape. This has been some stair-work, some trunk-work, some behind-door-work. They were warmer that got this than the poor thing is here” (3.3.70–74). Bevington’s footnotes specify that the word “scape” means “sexual escapade” (3.3.70 note). These footnotes also tell that “stair-work . . . behind-door-work” means “sexual liaisons under or behind the stairs or using a room or a trunk for concealment” (3.3.72 note). It is interesting that one of the first things the shepherd talks about is secret sex when he knows nothing about what really happened. This is exactly what Leontes imagined when he thought Hermione and Polixenes had an affair. Leontes said to himself, “Too hot, too hot! To mingle friendship for is mingling bloods [sexual intercourse] . . . My heart dances, but not for joy, not joy. This entertainment may a free face put on, derive a liberty from heartiness, from bounty, fertile bosom, and well become the agent” (1.2.108–14). These lines come after Leontes sees Hermione and Polixenes conversing. He has very little evidence for their affair, just like the shepherd had little evidence of where the baby came from. But the shepherd decided to raise the child despite his opinion on adultery, just like Leontes later realizes his mistakes. Both characters made a snap-judgment about irresponsible affairs.

It is numinous that these aren’t the only lines between these two characters that are similar. Leo Rockas, who wrote about The Winter’s Tale in a journal called Ariel, also noticed the relationship between Leontes and the shepherd. Just before the shepherd finds baby Perdita, he says, “They have scared away two of my best sheep, which I fear the wolf will sooner
find than the master: if anywhere I have them, 'tis by the sea-side browzing of ivy" (3.3.65–68). Rockas believes the two lost sheep are symbolic of the prince and the princess (Perdita and Florizel) in the play. Rockas comments on this passage saying, “The shepherd's statement parallels what Leontes says to Florizel and Perdita: ‘I lost a couple, that 'twixt heaven and earth / Might thus have stood, begetting wonder as / You, gracious couple, do’ (V.i.131–33). As soon as the shepherd has lamented his lost sheep he discovers the baby Perdita” (14). The two lost sheep of the shepherd are comparable to the lost prince and princess in Leontes’s lines at the end of the play. These lines help parallel the two father figures because it shows that both felt bad for what they had lost. In addition to what Rockas believes, the shepherd used the words “scared away,” which is how Leontes lost his daughter. He scared the people into abandoning her (“What will you adventure to save this brat’s life?” [2.3.162–63]). Because of these immediate similarities between Leontes and the shepherd, from the point of meeting the shepherd onward, the audience can see Leontes’ change of heart through the shepherd’s character, making for an easier transition from the unforgiving Leontes to the penitent one.

All three kings, Henry V, King Lear, and Leontes, make poor decisions and try to fix them. Shakespeare gives subtle similarities to the audience between his nameless characters and the named kings in order to help the audience sympathize with those characters. Because of their exceptionally acceptable qualities, the boy being a boy, the servant trying to save Gloucester’s good eye, and the shepherd fathering an abandoned child, these nameless characters help the audience empathize with the kings. Their namelessness lets the audience reflect on the kings in a different way—with understanding for their choices, like an unbiased, clean slate or mirror that reflects who the king truly is. When looked at through the lens of their nameless characters, all three kings can be seen as people full of love for their country and their family. Unfortunately, all three kings are usually only recognized by their human faults.
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The Gothic and The Gross

Frankenstein and His Friend's Attractiveness to Children

Rebecca McKee

Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* sent shockwaves through nineteenth century society with the horror contained in her novel. In the two hundred years since its publication, stage and film adaptations have pushed the limits of each generation’s tolerance for terrifying images. In addition to appearing in increasingly terrifying movies produced by Universal Pictures and Hammer Studios, the Frankenstein creature has also undergone a metamorphosis from monstrous threat to beloved playmate of even the littlest children. Moving from true horror in film to comic books for teenagers and cartoons for children and toddlers, Frankenstein is now a beloved character inhabiting a land of imagination populated with monster friends. The domain of monsters is a gothic realm, where horror, mystery, violence, ghosts, and gore may appear at any moment. Critics have contended that gothic elements are detrimental to a child’s mental and emotional development. I refute that idea with the notion that gothic, scary images are part of a child’s everyday life. Little children live in a world where adults look like giants, where every shadow could be a monster, and where every nighttime noise could be a ghost. Everything is real to children. Embracing child-appropriate gothic elements in literature and film
allows children to confront challenging fears, enabling a cathartic release of tension. Monsters also represent a world where everyday rules like “don’t make a mess” and “wipe your nose” are ignored. Monsters get to be gross, and children love a good revolting mess. Accepting the gothic elements in children’s entertainment, including Frankenstein’s monster and other gothic characters, is a healthy and enjoyable secret of childhood.

The softening of the Frankenstein monster from the vengeful murderer of Mary Shelley’s novel and the terror represented in James Whale’s 1931 film *Frankenstein* begins with comic books during the early 1940s. Movie censors forbade horror films because they feared terrifying images were bad for national morale during World War II. Comic books satisfied the “appetite for horror” while escaping the notice of the censors (Murray 221). *Frankenstein* may have been the first horror story in American comics (Murray 220). In 1945, comic book artist Dick Briefer first makes the shift from frightful to funny by giving his Frankenstein monster a button nose placed above eye-height, suggesting deformity without inspiring revulsion. Similar to the makeup worn by Boris Karloff, the first actor to portray Frankenstein in modern film, the monster had a “flat head and an enormous frame [but] dressed in [child-friendly colors:] blue trousers, a bright yellow top and a huge red jacket” (Murray 25). The comic book Frankenstein character bridges the chasm between the abject horror that Mary Shelly imagines and the child’s imaginary monster friend who inspires laughter and courage.

Funny versions of the monster appeared with increasing frequency. For example, *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein* created a 1948 box office smash with its slapstick treatment of the horror film genre. Lou Costello displays childlike physical comedy when he accidentally sits on the monster’s lap, creating a hilarious scene that allows children to imagine themselves interacting with the Frankenstein creature. This adaptation introduced many people to the horror film genre. Using humor to soften the terror expanded the audience to include children as well as adults. Other funny versions of the character proliferated, feeding audience appetite for Frankenstein through television and animated film. *The Munsters* TV series (1964–66) featured a Karloff-inspired Dad in a family of monsters, and *The Addams Family’s* (1964–66) character Lurch is an inarticulate yet less terrifying version of Frankenstein. The stop-motion animation feature *Mad Monster Party?* (1967) is a colorful gathering of dozens of movie monsters including Frankenstein, Dracula, and King Kong. These more child-friendly versions
of the Karloff-style creature paved the way for the commercialization of the Frankenstein image in “everything from breakfast cereal to action figures” (Horton 101). Frankenberry and Count Chocula cereals first appeared in 1971 and were devoured by monster-loving children. With all ages enthralled by the monster, Frankenstein’s place in society’s cultural fabric is more than secure—it is thriving.

With the acceptance of the Karloff-inspired creature, many other monsters soon joined the childhood sphere. Public television launched the preschool educational program Sesame Street, which introduced warm and fuzzy monsters who lived peacefully alongside adults, animals, and children. Animated cartoons used imaginative artwork to create both friendly and adversarial monsters in numerous children’s programs such as Monster in My Pocket, Groovie Goolies, Scooby-Doo, Where Are You?, and Beetlejuice. Cartoons featuring monster characters are still popular, with the newest, Super Monsters, appearing in 2017. With preschoolers as its target audience, Super Monsters features the children of some of the adult creatures who have previously captivated the world. These young monsters just want to master their special powers before they go to kindergarten—a goal every preschool child can appreciate (Petski). Gothic creatures populate the imaginary world of children, allowing growth in a safe way that mere reality may not provide.

While the realms of imagination do produce learning experiences, the education of real children concerns parents, teachers, and governments. Society’s best interests are served when children are taught to function in the real world as responsible and well-intentioned individuals. Some people are concerned that gothic elements in childhood play are harmful, leading to adverse outcomes for children and society as a whole. During the eighteenth century, Enlightenment theories on child-rearing discouraged imaginative play, instead promoting ideas of industry and piety for children. Enlightenment era authors such as Mary Woolstonecraft, Anna Laetitia Barbauld, and Maria Edgeworth were inspired to write literature for children that expunged the gothic ideas of ghosts and terror (Jackson 1). Focused on educating and improving children, Woolstonecraft offered her book Original Stories from Real Life: with Conversations Calculated to Regulate the Affections and Form the Mind to Truth and Goodness as a guide. Children were expected to favor instructive narrative over the “pleasures of a good shiver” (Jackson 2). Anna Barbauld wrote prolifically for children, but Hymns in Prose for Children, written in 1781, is her best-known work today. She states, “The
peculiar design of this publication is, to impress devotional feelings as early as possible on the infant mind” (Barbauld v). Barbauld’s work seeks to turn children away from frivolous tales and toward religious devotion. Maria Edgeworth works in the same vein with her 1796 book, *The Parent’s Assistant*, prefacing her work with “care has been taken to avoid inflaming the imagination” (Edgeworth 9). All of life is enhanced by imagination, yet eighteenth century authors deliberately sought to suppress creative invention in their audience. These authors worked to instill the Enlightenment ideals of self-improvement and industry in children’s literature. Yet some of them, including Woolstonecraft, wrote gothic elements into stories for their adult audiences (Townshend 22). The notion that adults may enjoy gothic stories but children should not stems from the thinking of the eighteenth century philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. He put forward the idea that “nature wants children to be children before being men. Childhood has its way of seeing, thinking, and feeling which are proper to it.” Writers of the Enlightenment era strove to guide a child’s “proper thinking” by eliminating fright and imagination from childhood; their books were instruction tomes lacking laughter and delight. Far from promoting a child’s “way of seeing,” Woolstonecraft, Barbauld, and Edgeworth addressed miniature adults rather than children experiencing the feelings “proper to [childhood]” (Townshend 24).

Childhood’s “proper seeing, thinking, and feeling,” as Rousseau calls them, will also include natural fears such as abandonment, injury, loneliness, and death. Human fears inhabit the minds of children just as they do adults. Gothic mystery and minor horror are appropriate in children’s literature and authors who avoid spookiness may overlook the reality of a child’s inner life. Observing children’s play is very instructive; natural human instinct is fully evident as children navigate real and imaginary worlds. Innocent games with dolls will sometimes include a funeral. A dark room becomes the lair of a ghost or monster. Shivery feelings of fear and mystery are part of the fun. The assurance of safety allows for increased optimism and confidence. Removing gothic influences from children’s literature and play hinders the child’s ability to achieve the release of tension that comes from experiencing fear and concluding the fright in safety. Oftentimes the excess emotion of terror is vented through laughter. Humor does the work of making monsters less frightening. Just as Harry Potter’s teacher Professor Remus Lupin instructs Hogwarts students to repel frightening boggarts by dressing those
inhuman shapeshifters in funny hats (Rowling 135), adding humor to the fright allows children to laugh at fears, strengthening their ability to cope with future stresses.

When children face challenging feelings, such as fright, their coping mechanisms for scary situations are enhanced by confronting similar problems in the imaginary world. Gothic creatures, reimagined for an audience of children, allow for make-believe situations that youngsters can confront and overcome. Issues that plague little children include learning self-control, polite manners, and socially acceptable habits. The friendly monsters of the *Sesame Street* gang deal with some of the same issues that plague children. Cookie Monster has a voracious appetite, especially for cookies. His often uncontrollable urges to eat every cookie in sight is funny to a child because it’s incongruous to see a big, blue, furry monster craving the same treats that mommy just baked. An appetite for sweets can feel overwhelming to a child; learning to control that desire is a true challenge for children (and for many adults, too). Cookie Monster’s colleague, Oscar the Grouch, represents another childhood challenge. Oscar is always grouchy and rude. Children struggle to conform to the norms of good manners, especially when their emotions manifest as grumpiness. Exaggerating rudeness and treating it with humor allows children to forgive themselves and others for grouchy moments. Cookie Monster and Oscar the Grouch share another charm in the eyes of children—they are unapologetically messy. Cookie Monster’s uncontrolled binges result in crumbs flying everywhere, peppering his blue fur with cookie dust. Oscar treasures trash, hoarding his mess in the garbage can he calls home. The parallels to a child’s mess-making ability are clear. Kids love a good mess; they’ll happily make and live in chaos if their parents allow it. Two benefits of embracing monsters in childhood play include accepting children’s imperfect behavior and permitting their enjoyment of gross foods. Allowing tastes and behaviors to differ from societal norms eases the pressure on children to conform.

Creators of children’s entertainment are aware of the appetite for grossness; it receives a lot of attention in books and toys. A friendly and happily gross version of Mary Shelley’s original monster appears in Adam Rex’s 2006 picture book, *Frankenstein Makes a Sandwich*. Disgusting food in all its glory is both the problem and the solution to Rex’s monster’s dilemma. When he ventures into his neighborhood in search of lunch, his frightened neighbors behave like the villagers in the 1930s Frankenstein films directed
by James Whale. Rex’s Frankenstein meets immediate fear and hostility from his neighbors. Unlike the villagers in Whale’s film, these neighbors don’t attack the monster with fire—instead they throw rotten food at the creature:

They threw tomatoes, pigs, potatoes, loaves of moldy bread. And then a thought struck Frankenstein as pickles struck his head. It’s true, at first he thought the worst: His neighbors were so rude! But then he found that on the ground they’d made a mound of food. He piled it high and waved good-bye and shouted, “Thanks a bunch!” Then stacked it on a plate and ate a big, disgusting lunch. (Rex 6-7)

Rex’s Frankenstein makes a meal of the grossest things imaginable, mimicking the enjoyment that some children get by eating things that disgust the adults in their lives. Children are amused by repulsive food and their gothic-creature friends are companions in the delights of monstrous munching. The joys of disgusting food are not new. The grandparents of today’s children ate library paste in elementary school. The “five-second rule” proclaims that food is still good to eat for five seconds after it hits the floor. And little children think that anything coming out of their noses is fair game. Gross games like “see-food,” which consists of showing a wide-open mouth full of thoroughly chewed food to unsuspecting companions, both delight and disgust the children involved. A toy substance called “slime” oozes from the container to the hand of a child, who delights in the gooey texture. Accepting and enjoying disgusting substances is a monstrous diversion that children embrace with gusto. Publishers of juvenile literature and manufacturers of toys cleverly supply gross delights for young audiences.

Animated films like Tim Burton’s *Frankenweenie* also supply a continuous stream of gothic-inspired children’s entertainment. Brimming with disgusting details and weird humor, *Frankenweenie* tells the tender story of a boy, Victor, who loves his dog. Because Victor’s father doesn’t accept his son’s peculiarities, the dog dies in an accident. The heartbroken boy succeeds in reanimating his pet. Mary Shelley’s character, Victor Frankenstein, brought a dead man back to life out of all-consuming ambition. Burton’s Victor does it out of love. Ultimately, Victor’s parents let go of their narrow view of the “normal child” and fully accept their son, the gothic darkness that he enjoys, and the undead pet that he loves. Burton’s film teaches that the results of extreme experiments are happier when they are done from love. *Frankenweenie* is also a lesson for children in how to deal with loss. Sparky,
the dog, dies twice; the second time Victor is willing to let him go but the adults around him revive his pet. Victor is rewarded with the happiest of endings because he faces grief with new maturity and is able to endure loss. The lessons taught by recasting the Frankenstein myth into a children’s story exhibit the kind of benefits that gothic tales can bring about. *Frankenweenie* capitalizes on the appetite children have for the disgusting and gross. Burton’s film, which both parodies and pays tribute to Whale’s film, works as a retelling of the *Frankenstein* myth that appeals to both children and their parents. Adults enjoy the parallels to the 1931 original, while children are captivated by this new version of the myth and pleasurably repelled by its nauseating details. Exhuming dead pets for reanimation and shaping a kitty’s poo into classmates’ initials are some of *Frankenweenie*’s nauseating details that fit right into the world of monsters.

Frankenstein’s successful reinterpretation into children’s entertainment owes much to the 1931 film, which featured a lonely, confused creature searching for companionship. James Whale’s second Frankenstein film, the 1935 film *Bride of Frankenstein*, adds another layer of vulnerability and sympathy to the creature’s story as we see him rejected by the Bride, his last hope for a friend. In their essay “Growing Up Frankenstein: Adaptations for Young Readers,” Karen Coats and Farran Sands point out that all children have “a deep-seated fear of rejection and abandonment by their caregivers” (Coats 245). Psychologist D.W. Winnicott suggests that “isolation is one of the ‘unthinkable anxieties’ for a child’s developing ego” (Coats 245). *Frankenstein*, as written for adults, makes fear of being alone all too real. Adapted for children, the story enfolds scary ideas like loneliness into a package that children can comprehend. They may even gain comfort in the idea that if someone who looks like Frankenstein’s monster in children’s literature is “lovable, then there is hope” for little humans, too (Coats 245). Whether a child feels like a Frankenstein or a grouch, the realms of imagination provide creatures and situations where young ones can confront their own challenges and fears.

Among other anxieties in children, Winnicott states that they may suffer from vague feelings that “their bodies are fragmented assemblages of parts rather than coherent wholes” (Coats 245). The fear that their bodies could fall to pieces might further explain affinity with Frankenstein, who is assembled from disparate cadaver parts. Modern society’s matter-of-fact acceptance of medical transplants may also contribute to some of the fears that children...
harbor. When the Universal and Hammer series *Frankenstein* movies were made, the idea of harvesting anatomy parts for use on another body was abhorrent. Now doctors who harvest hearts, lungs, or kidneys from the bodies of fatal accident victims are heroes, not mad scientists. Faces have been recently transplanted—as have hands, arms, and legs. Television programs discuss the operations in detail, and children listen, but they do not always understand the procedure, the reasons for the operation, or the results of the surgery in the lives of transplant recipients. When examined from a child’s perspective, a transplant is a very gross and dark idea. But adults don’t see it that way because we understand the idea from the standpoint of medical necessity. Perhaps it’s the kids that have it right. It is gross. It is also very cool, even miraculous. Gothic stories of patched-together body parts, like *Frankenstein*, are weird and messy and a little disgusting and that’s why we love them. When elements of those stories appear in real life, we are delighted by the reality of life imitating art.

Gothic horror operates on many levels of fearsomeness. Adult horror films and literature will differ from those suitable for young children. Elements of gothic horror have always existed in children’s entertainment, perhaps because fright excites us and allows a cathartic release of tension. Overcoming terror teaches us to cope with strong feelings. Experiencing fright within the pages of a book or while watching a film allows the adult and the child to experience fear in a safe way. That is not to say that all horror movies are good for children. Adult caregivers must responsibly choose appropriate media for each child’s consumption (Wells 24). Exposure to adult-level horror may lead to real trauma that can harm the child’s ability to understand reality or to process anxiety (NewYork-Presbyterian Hospital). Beyond coping mechanisms, embracing monster characters allows children to domesticate their own inner monsters; they can celebrate the weirdness of childhood and revel in the grossness of the human body and all its parts. The atrocity of a reanimated dead body, be it man or pet, delights rather than revolts. The gothic parts of our psyche find acceptable expression through literature and film. Like all human beings, children are gothic creatures. *Frankenstein* is a vehicle to recognize and accept the darkness within. Children can follow their monstrous friend into the fright of gothic horror and emerge with new confidence to confront commonplace fears. Stepping into the dark, one foot at a time, ultimately leads back into the light.
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Criterion
In a 2010 article remembering Lucille Clifton, Toi Derricotte tells the story of a time when Lucille had gone to do a reading at an elementary school. “She [Lucille] asked the librarian if they had any of her Everett Anderson books. The librarian answered that, unfortunately, they didn’t have any of those books in the library because there were no black children in the school. Lucille replied, ‘Well you don’t have any bunnies in this school either, but you have books about bunnies’” (375). Clifton viewed her black skin as an essential part of her identity, and sought through her poetry to affirm black identity as well as to celebrate triumph over life’s challenges, from the most petty to the most overwhelming. Clifton’s choice of subjects, ranging from her uterus and children to sex, God, and foxes, illustrate her most personal moments, while allowing others to identify with and partake in her personal struggle.

In doing this, many of Clifton’s poems specifically affirm physical bodies. Clifton’s body is a connection with her mother and ancestors, a tool to control her space, and a site of celebrations as well as struggle. In this radical acceptance and celebration, Clifton is able to create a space where bodies, especially those of black women, are valued in their natural form, and furthermore, are celebrated for their personhood rather than solely for
physical appearance. In her poetry, Clifton connects aspects of her physical body to positive qualities she possesses, elucidating the tie between body and identity. Additionally, she takes ownership of her physical body and of the space around her, forcing us to see that while the physical is part of identity, it does not change someone’s value as a person.

Clifton’s poetry is deeply informed by her black, female identity. Because these themes underlie each poem, particularly those that focus on the body, bodies in all forms are affirmed as valid. Derricotte argues that “Lucille Clifton gives permission to be ourselves, to trust ourselves” (377). This permission is evident in the lighthearted nature of “homage to my hips” as well as the transcendent tone of “[won’t you celebrate with me].” The poem “homage to my hips” emphasizes Clifton’s pride in her body, a body that, in some circles, would be looked down upon for failing to conform to a narrow beauty standard. The first line of the poem asserts, “these hips are big hips,” which is in direct defiance to the modern rules of beauty. However, as Clifton describes her hips—“big,” “free,” “mighty,” and “magic”—she connects them with the positive characteristics she wishes to embody. Her hips “have never been enslaved” and “go where they want to go / … do what they want to do.” Alicia Ostriker wrote, “I’ve seen . . . a whole classroom of white undergraduates break into smiles when I’ve read ‘homage to my hips,’ not because these girls had big hips themselves, but because Clifton’s self-affirmation was contagious” (41). Clifton is not arguing that one must have big hips in order to have freedom; what she is doing is implicitly showing the reader that the freedoms of personhood do not require a certain body.

Clifton’s “[won’t you celebrate with me]” continues this argument in a more serious tone. Clifton emphasizes her connection to and reliance on her hands; she writes “my one hand holding tight / my other hand” (10–11), showing how she both physically and mentally relies on herself alone, as she “had no model” for what to do (3). Additionally, lines 2–3, “what i have shaped into / a kind of life,” bring to mind images of Clifton physically forming a life, molding and carving the “starshine and clay” into a shape she is satisfied with (9). In her call for celebration of this accomplishment, Clifton demonstrates her pride in the feats she has achieved with her physical body as well as her mental acuity. This reaffirms Clifton’s message of total acceptance of the self, both physical and mental, for it is her self that built her life.
In affirming the physical body, Clifton also connects to individual body parts as essential rather than ancillary to identity. In her essay “Fat Liberation in the First World,” Sylvia Henneberg discusses the way that “the European paradigms of the normal, beautiful, moral, and superior” are established and repeated from colonial times and continue today. She argues that because of a focus on a northern European ideal, black women are either “horridly objectified” by “the cumulative oppressive forces of misogyny [and] racism” or “render[ed] . . . invisible altogether” (62). According to Henneberg, “Lucille Clifton has been a steady, if often unacknowledged, champion of the New Body, proudly showcasing in her poetry the fat black body as a force of resistance against the oppressive effects of racism [and] sexism” as she “claims the right to exist in whatever shape, color, and age” (63). This has implications beyond promoting body positivity; it further connects a person’s physical body to their identity as she proves the integral role bodies play in a person’s sense of self. Clifton’s poem “to my last period” is an excellent example of this, as is “poem to my uterus.”

In “to my last period,” Clifton mourns the loss of something that is universally acknowledged as uncomfortable, but is also tied to her identity as a woman in an intimate way. Clifton writes, “well, girl, goodbye, / after thirty-eight years,” (1–2) acknowledging the immense amount of her life in which her period—a physical representation of her womanhood—has been present. She continues, “you / never arrived / splendid in your red dress / without trouble for me” (3–6), which emphasizes the dual nature of her period: both “splendid” and “trouble.” A short, bittersweet poem, “to my last period” finishes with Clifton reaching a place of strange mourning for this often-painful part of being a woman, feeling a desire to “sit holding her photograph / and sighing, wasn’t she / beautiful? wasn’t she beautiful?” (12–14). Clifton’s loss at the end of her period illustrates the important role her physical body plays in her sense of self; though menstruation is almost never a pleasant experience, it becomes a monthly physical representation of womanhood and of identity in general, a reminder of vitality in the face of struggle.

Clifton’s “poem to my uterus,” which mourns her uterus as she mourned her period, further explains the way Clifton connected her body parts with her sense of self. Her uterus had held children, “dead and living” (5), but now held cancerous tumors, and doctors had advised a hysterectomy. This poem displays her serious attachment to her body parts. Clifton had cancer, but still did not want to part with this organ that is essential to her identity. Her uterus
is metaphorically and quite literally a piece of her; to part with it seems to be leaving a constant, faithful companion behind. Clifton calls her uterus “old girl” (10) as well as other playful nicknames such as “bloody print,” “estrogen kitchen,” and “black bag of desire” (13–15). That Clifton refers to both her period and her uterus as a personified, feminine entity suggests a deep connection, and the friendly epithet “old girl” brings to mind a comfortable camaraderie. In the beginning of the poem, Clifton asks “where am i going / where am i going / old girl / without you” (9–11), and later repeats this sentiment as she expresses her bereavement in the final lines of the poem: “where can i go / barefoot / without you” (16–18). Without her uterus, Clifton feels unprepared, “barefoot,” without direction.

The poem also demonstrates a significant sense of ownership over her body parts, as Clifton describes her uterus as “my bloody print,” “my estrogen kitchen,” “my black bag of desire” (13–15, emphasis added). Her choice to use these personal pronouns rather than talking about uteruses in general demonstrates Clifton’s feeling that her uterus is truly hers, part of her essential identity. The poem “[if i stand in my window]” also focuses on Clifton taking control over her body; furthermore, it expands this control to the space around her.

Clifton, standing standing naked in a window, could seem sexualized; however, as in “poem to my uterus,” the poem emphasizes ownership. In “[if i stand in my window],” the sense of ownership is in connection with her nakedness rather than an individual body part: “my window, “my own house,” “my breasts,” “my black body,” and so on (1–3, 14, emphasis added). This ownership shows Clifton identifying her personhood with her body exactly as it is rather than in an ideal form. Additionally, the man in this poem finds new knowledge from the sight of Clifton’s naked body. That he would “discover self” (16) and “run naked through the streets / crying / praying in tongues” (17–19) as a result of this experience speaks to the power that Clifton vests in her own body. In Clifton’s poetry, celebration of bodies is not contingent on size or skin color, which gives permission for women to accept and affirm their physical attributes. This celebration, important in and of itself, also serves to galvanize female ownership of their bodies as part of their personality and power.

In her open and honest treatment of bodies, including her own, that do not fit the first-world paradigm, Clifton “creates a space for black womanhood;” however, her poems often mix this focus on the physical body with other
subjects unrelated to body shape or size, which communicates that “it is entirely possible to achieve self-efficacy and empowered personhood in a fat black female body” (Henneberg 64). Clifton therefore brings personhood to the foreground while also emphasizing physical characteristics. “[if i stand in my window]” depicts this seeming paradox that allows the body to simply be while also linking the physical attributes to the ethereal but essential characteristics of personality.

The poem starts by focusing on Clifton’s body, then shifts to depict the more abstract reality of the mind behind the physical body. This mixture of subjects, which both emphasizes the connection to physical body humans have and teaches that the characteristics of that body do not determine personhood, is also prevalent in Clifton’s poem “what the mirror said,” which parallels the fairy tale “Snow White and the Seven Dwarves” in its request for affirmation from a mirror. The poem is the mirror’s response to Clifton’s request; it begins, “listen / you a wonder. / you a city / of a woman” (1–4) and continues, “you got a geography / of your own. / . . . you not noplace” (5–6, 14). The woman in Clifton’s poem, who is seeking validation from the mirror, is the same as the queen in “Snow White;” however, as Scarlett Cunningham writes in her article “Writing the Aging Woman’s Body,” “Snow White” centers on jealousy of pale skin and youth, whereas “in Clifton’s revision pale skin does not determine beauty, nor does youth determine value . . . In Clifton’s version of the woman’s encounter with the mirror a black woman’s size and character confirm her worth” (38). The mirror’s assertion that Clifton is a “city” with “a geography / of [her] own” (3, 5–6) makes it clear that Clifton’s size does not preclude her from beauty. Rather than rejecting the queen for aging and sizing out of a beauty determined by youth and thinness, Clifton’s mirror “speaks affirmations” that “worth is not limited to physical beauty alone” (Cunningham 38).

However, “what the mirror said” is not a poem that is predominantly about beauty. While beauty in connection with Clifton’s physical body parts is an important part of the poem, more important is the shift from body to identity that, similar to “[if i stand in my window],” suggests that while physical characteristics are connected with identity, there are much more important factors. The poem continues, “listen, / somebody need a map / to understand you. / somebody need directions / to move around you” (7–11). The mirror’s validation is emphasizing Clifton’s intelligence—her mind—much more than her physical body—her brain—which allows the reader to move beyond a focus solely on an expanded definition of physical beauty and remember the
other facets of worth inherent in humanity. Cunningham notes, “needing a map to be understood connotes complication in character, intellect and personality” (38). As the mirror affirms Clifton’s beauty as both inherent in her size and connected with her mental capacity, it also reminds Clifton of her control over her body. As “a city / of a woman” in which others “need directions / to move around” (3–4, 10–11), her body is something over which Clifton has complete jurisdiction. Thus, with this poem, Clifton illustrates her personhood much more than her physical characteristics.

Clifton’s poetry about bodies accomplishes considerable feats, particularly in striking a balance between affirming the physical body as essential to identity while also proving that physical characteristics do not affect the inherent value of personhood. This is particularly important for black women, who have been oppressed for both their race and their gender for centuries. Tiffany Eberle Kriner writes about this problem, arguing that this oppression means that “recovery of a whole self” is vital to forward movement, especially when a “sub-human self or non-existent self [has been] handed down by oppressors” (194). Kriner, along with many other scholars and Lucille Clifton herself, locates the body as “the site where gains in self-creation and voice are to be made” (195), which adds additional impetus on Clifton’s poetry about bodies. Her poetry about bodies is no longer just an artistic pursuit or a career; rather, it becomes an exploration of the very place where we develop a sense of self and a voice with which to express that self. In this way, Clifton focuses on the future, “conjur[ing] in the reader [an] awareness of the multiplicity of possibilities and futures within any moment” (Kriner 204). Clifton’s poetry presents a “fully embodied and whole black womanhood” (Kriner 195), which leads the way for readers to both validate their own connection with their physical bodies and separate their physical attributes from their personhood, allowing women, particularly black women, emotional and physical freedom to take ownership of their reality.
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Criterion
Concerning the assimilation of Native American peoples into the culture of White America, Richard Henry Pratt declared that it would be necessary to “kill the Indian and save the man.” With this philosophy, which acted as a driving force behind the methods of assimilation applied during Zitkala-Ša’s lifetime, Pratt suggests that it is possible, and even beneficial, to separate the metaphorical soul and body of individual Native Americans. This supposed duality of being, when considered in combination with W.E.B. DuBois’s concept of “double consciousness,” lends a new perspective on Zitkala-Ša’s narratives, as well as her own views on bicultural

1 My definition of bicultural, as used in this article to discuss Zitkala-Ša’s bicultural identity and narratives, has been provided by Ron Carpenter in his article “Zitkala-Ša and Bicultural Subjectivity.” My treatment and discussion of biculturalism within this paper largely draws from Carpenter’s description of Zitkala-Ša as “irreducible to either culture [Anglo or Native American] and alienated from each” (1).
principle has already been discussed extensively in relation to the identity determination of colonized groups and peoples such as Native Americans.

However, many of Zitkala-Ša’s writings allow for a deeper conversation on double consciousness as experienced by Native Americans. She suggests that their perspectives on individual identity are defined by their sense of community belonging and are only surmountable by the successful development of a bicultural identity. John Gamber described this sense of community identity in the following way: “Many Native people side with the assertion that Native identity is not so much based on what community an individual claims, but on what community claims that individual” (177). “The Soft-Hearted Sioux” provides a unique opportunity to analyze this concept in conversation with the larger principle of double consciousness, especially as it contains a metonymic representation of Native and White cultures as the conflicting body and soul referenced by Pratt. This representation challenges the supposed attainability of a bicultural identity, given Native Americans’ formation of individual identity by community affiliation.

This theme of affirming personhood to conquer settler colonialism is taken up by Jeff Corntassel (Cherokee) in his essay “Re-Envisioning Resurgence: Indigenous Pathways to Decolonization and Sustainable Self-Determination,” wherein he poses similar questions to Clements and proposes his own solution. Corntassel asks, “What recourse do we have against those destructive forces and entities that have disconnected us from our longstanding relationships to our homelands, cultures and communities?” (87-8). These questions demand answers to an often overpowering abundance of issues that threaten to snuff out Indigenous life in all its forms. To overcome the seeming impossibility of the task, he invites Indigenous people to adopt “a peoplehood model” that would renew “the complex spiritual, political and social relationships,” disrupting that process of erasure and destruction (89). The heart of this model stems from the basic need to be recognized as human, not as a settler stereotype, making the struggle more of a resurgence of life than a specifically political, social, economic, or spiritual resurgence. This is done by simply enacting and living one’s Indigenous traditions, reconnecting every day to “language, homeland, ceremonial cycles, and sacred living histories” (89). While Corntassel applies his model specifically to nationhood, in this paper, I make a more individual application of his model, responding to the more personal need for life resurgence in combatting depression and suicide which are
common psychological responses to seemingly insurmountable situations. I explore the food-based version of the peoplehood model solution adopted by Clements’ protagonist Angeline in The Edward Curtis Project to illustrate her journey toward asserting her humanity, which allows her to conquer the feeling of being psychologically defeated.

The manner in which Zitkala-Ša represents double consciousness and bicultural identity within “The Soft-Hearted Sioux” provides a counterpoint to much of today’s critical conversation surrounding her work, which praises her narratives for their successful biculturalism. While discussing Zitkala-Ša’s narration of her childhood in “School Days of an Indian Girl,” Amanda Irvin observed:

Like many colonized peoples, Zitkala-Ša/Bonnin lives on the cusp of two conflicting ideologies, simultaneously grounding herself in the narration of each. The movement between these two ideas is indicative of the way Zitkala-Ša/Bonnin reconciles these oppositional views in her own life: by simultaneously aligning herself with both. However, the double consciousness that only colonization can bring comes with a price that is normally paid with the cultural values of the colonized people. (82)

Irvin claims that Zitkala-Ša has successfully cultivated a bicultural identity that balances elements of both White and Native American culture, though certainly losing a measure of her native culture (as in any case of assimilation). As opposed to the semi-autobiographical stories on which Irvin was commenting, however, “The Soft-Hearted Sioux” does not provide evidence for a successful bicultural resolution: The protagonist finds it impossible, and ultimately fatal, to attempt balancing the precepts of the two cultures. While Zitkala-Ša herself may have been able to form a new bicultural identity that melds and balances aspects of the two cultures, as described by Irvin, in this story she expresses skepticism that this is a common outcome under her time’s approach to Native American assimilation. Her protagonist, instead of “simultaneously aligning [himself] with both,” alternates between his two allegiances as he feels them pull upon him. He does not sacrifice only “the cultural values of the colonized people,” but also the values which he gained from his colonizers. Zitkala-Ša’s representation of double consciousness within “The Soft-Hearted Sioux” does not exemplify the formation of a bicultural identity, but rather the destruction of an individual caught in the trap of double consciousness. This difference in the narrative’s resolution
demonstrates Zitkala-Ša’s disdain for the assimilationist methods utilized by the United States government during her career as a school teacher and writer.

This interpretation is corroborated by Zitkala-Ša’s political essay “Our Sioux People.” In this essay, Zitkala-Ša writes concerning the challenges faced by the Sioux tribe in their interactions with the federal government. After describing difficulties faced on the reservation by students returning from White boarding schools and readjusting to their native culture, she asserts that “man’s discernment of unity in multiplicity must lead ever toward reconciliation” (“Our Sioux People” 11). This “unity in multiplicity,” or the state of a whole made up of individual parts, can only be truly unified in a man’s discernment by “reconciliation.” Zitkala-Ša is expressing that without the reconciliation of creating a stable bicultural identity, Native Americans who have been exposed to and claimed by White culture can never overcome their state of double consciousness. Zitkala-Ša’s call for greater power in unifying and reconciling cultural identities implies the necessity of drastic adjustments to the government’s approach to assimilation. By discussing double consciousness in terms of unity and reconciliation, Zitkala-Ša presents biculturalism as a solution for double consciousness. She does so even while leading her audience to consider the current plight of Native Americans who suffer the adverse effects of cultural double consciousness2, claimed by both their native tribes and the nation’s federal government.

Zitkala-Ša illustrates this perception of Native American double consciousness and its roots by metonymically reducing Native and White cultures to representations of body and soul. The conflict raging between these two cultures within the protagonist is demonstrated by his vacillating adoption of spiritual and physical priorities. Zitkala-Ša represents the Native Americans as physical beings, whose priorities and perspectives are largely those favoring life through health and strength. The Whites, however, are portrayed as spiritual beings who desire justice and salvation for the soul. The Sioux brave himself is not aligned with either of these forces, but he experiences his sense of identity as belonging to both of these cultures; throughout the narrative, he is forced to confront within himself both of

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2. Additional critical commentary on the unique experience of Native Americans when confronting double consciousness can be found in Noreen Lape’s article referenced below. Her article provides a similar discussion to mine concerning another Native American author, Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins, and shaped much of my approach to Zitkala-Ša’s portrayal of double consciousness by community affiliation.
these allegiances and find a resolution to his sense of double consciousness. By showcasing the brave’s struggle with his competing cultural obligations, Zitkala-Ša equivocates his dilemma between the spiritual and the physical with the principle of double consciousness.

The first side of Zitkala-Ša’s forced dichotomy portrays Native American culture and characters as centered on the Body and the physical, and this characterization is best exemplified by the author’s treatment of the Native American medicine man. She describes this tribal leader as “tall and large,” “strong,” and as moving in “long strides” (“The Soft-Hearted Sioux” 120, 122). He is the only character in the story that represents the ideal physicality of a strong, healthy man that provides for his family and followers. Though Native medicine would have incorporated both physical treatment and spiritual guidance, Zitkala-Ša elects to portray the medicine man almost exclusively by his work as a physical healer. This choice allows the Whites to hold the monopoly on spirituality within this story and builds the contrast between the two factions’ natures and priorities. The medicine man also expresses the expectations which the brave’s Native culture has for him as a member of their society, such as when he derides the brave as “a foolish man who could not defend his people because he fears to kill, who could not bring venison to renew the life of his sick father” (122). By accentuating the failure of the young man to fulfill the tribe’s expectations, he is emphasizing the obligations and duties which the Native community imposes upon its members. In this way, the tribal medicine man represents the culture and identity of the Native Americans in this narrative by both fulfilling these expectations himself and by seeking to instill them in others which the community has claimed.

As opposed to the clear and detailed presence of the ideal physicality in the Native medicine man, the author provides little description of any White character: This absence of a physical presence becomes the best embodiment of the White’s spiritual ideals. The brave’s White educators, who presumably could have served as their culture’s physical embodiment, only enter into the story through their doctrines and teachings. We, the audience, have no description of their stature or of their bearing, only of their influence on the philosophies of the young Sioux. Their absence is significant as it clearly sets them apart from the very present medicine man and his Native ideologies. The other white men who have a place in the text, such as the farmer and the prison guard, are not described physically to the same extent as any
Native character. Instead, Zitkala-Ša describes them simply as “figure[s]” (“The Soft-Hearted Sioux” 125). For most of the story, no mention is made of their height, their strength, or any other physical attribute: This lack of physical description reemphasizes the Whites’ spirituality over their actual physical nature. Additionally, though the brave’s White educators do not physically enter into the story, or even have any direct dialogue, we can glean the impositions which they make upon the brave through his own commentary: “At the mission school I learned it was wrong to kill. . . In the autumn of the tenth year I was sent back to my tribe to preach Christianity to them” (119-120). Zitkala-Ša’s description of those adaptations made to the brave’s actions and behaviors, such as changing his belief of what is “wrong,” highlights the cultural ideologies which the educators have instilled in him. Additionally, the brave’s own recognition of being “sent,” which denotes a master-servant relationship between the brave and his educators, reinforces the influence which White culture has over him by claiming him as a member of their community. By such narration, Zitkala-Ša uses the absence of a White embodiment of spirituality within the story to express the culture’s expectations for, and impositions upon, the Sioux brave.

However, even given this clear dichotomy between Native American physicality and White spirituality, there are choice moments in the story in which Zitkala-Ša describes physical beings as spiritual and spiritual beings as physical; these moments further serve to demonstrate the brave’s loss of identity through double consciousness. In the first instance, the Sioux acts under his White consciousness to pursue a spiritual objective, which is his entire purpose in returning to his tribe: the conversion of his native people to Christianity. Once he begins to preach, the embodiment of Native physicality, the medicine man, appears and thwarts his pursuit. In so doing, this tribal leader shows a spiritual side for only a moment when he labels the brave as “false. . . to the Great Spirit who made him” (Zitkala-Ša, “The Soft-Hearted Sioux” 122). Though in all other instances the medicine man expressed concerns only for the physical well-being of his people and promised physical hardships to the brave for his traitorous actions, in this discourse he shows that he also harbors spiritual perspectives. The medicine man’s uncovered spirituality shows that, though he is independent of the spiritual culture of the Whites, he still has enough spirituality to guide his people. On the other hand, the brave, who is brought into conflict with the medicine man by virtue of his professed spirituality, does not have the spiritual strength to overcome
him. By allowing the brave to be barred from his spiritual objective by a physical character, Zitkala-Ša shows to the reader the frailty of the brave’s spiritual identity as a result of his continued double consciousness.

Inversely to the Sioux’s conflict with the medicine man, the brave’s prioritization of his Native consciousness and successive attempts to care for his family physically are resisted by the white farmer, a spiritual being who physically accosts the brave. This is the only moment in which a spiritual being is described as physically interacting with the brave, attempting to secure him with his “rough hand” (Zitkala-Ša, “The Soft-Hearted Sioux” 124). This physical interaction serves to solidify the brave’s abandonment of his spiritual nature by forcing him to kill the farmer in an effort to preserve the physical survival of his family. However, the physical altercation between the farmer and the brave delays the young man enough that, upon returning, he finds his father dead. Just as the medicine man, a physical character, had the spiritual strength necessary to defeat the brave’s spiritual mission, the farmer, a spiritual character, had sufficient physical strength to make the brave’s physical objective fail. These two episodes show that, even though the young man ought to be the most spiritual of the Natives, and the most physical of the Whites, by virtue of his dual nature and experience with each opposing side of the dichotomy, he becomes less (not more) capable in both of these realms because of his split identity. Zitkala-Ša highlights the brave’s loss of all identity and strength through assimilation by stripping from him even those strengths which it is most reasonable to believe that he ought to have gained from his involvement with both of the two cultures.

This artificial dichotomy of spirituality and physicality allows Zitkala-Ša to highlight the brave’s perception of identity by community, the driving force behind the protagonist’s sense of double consciousness. As shared previously in this paper, Gamber asserts that “many Native people side with the assertion that Native identity is not so much based on what community an individual claims, but on what community claims that individual” (177). The double consciousness of the Sioux brave, then, stems from being simultaneously claimed by both the Native community and the White community. Such community belonging brings with it expectations of conformity and perpetuation of ideals. The Sioux attempts to conform and fulfill the expectations of both his tribe and his educators, as exemplified within the two instances of conflict discussed above. As a result of his conflict with the medicine man, the brave has failed to perpetuate the ideals of his
White religion and has been disowned by his Native tribe. As a result of murdering the farmer, the brave has failed to fulfill the expectations of his Native tribe and has been declared an outlaw by White justice. As both cultures to which the brave owes allegiance have rescinded their membership from him, the Sioux is left to consider his own identity and belonging as distinct from either of these communities.

The brave, however, seems to be incapable of considering his identity as an individual when separated from these communities. As the brave prepares for his execution, he ponders: “Yet I wonder who shall come to welcome me in the realm of strange sight. Will the loving Jesus grant me pardon and give my soul a soothing sleep? or will my warrior father greet me and receive me as his son? . . . Soon, soon I shall know” (Zitkala-Ša, “The Soft-Hearted Sioux” 125–6). It is worth noting that, in line with Gamber’s observation, both of the brave’s questions consider his fate as pertains to the acceptance of a community. Either “loving Jesus” will pardon the brave and accept him or his “warrior father” will receive him. There is still, in the mind of the brave, the belief that his identity and ultimate fate is dependent upon the acceptance of a community which espouses either White or Native ideals. Yet there is no firm resolution of the brave’s own identity, either in relation to these communities or separate from them. His assimilative experience has rendered him so doubly conscious of both his Nativeness and his Whiteness that he is powerless to choose one system of belief over another. He instead declares simply, “I go” (Zitkala-Ša, “The Soft-Hearted Sioux” 126). He has, in effect, suffered assimilation: So unsure of his own identity as to render him incapable of preference or action, he submits to the larger forces of whichever community lays a stronger claim over him. As these quotations come from the final paragraphs of this narrative, this is the note on which Zitkala-Ša leaves her audience: a young man who has lost his own individual identity by attempting to reconcile the opposing ideals of Native and White cultures.

While the concepts of double consciousness and identity by community have been explored and discussed separately in the field of Native American literature, the writings and ideologies of Zitkala-Ša provide ample support for the consideration of these principles’ interaction. Zitkala-Ša, by way of metonymically reducing Native and White cultures to dueling embodiments of physicality and spirituality within “The Soft-Hearted Sioux,” showcases the protagonist’s struggle with double consciousness brought on by his sense of identity formation by community obligation. Even though Zitkala-Ša
was (and is) considered an individual capable of successfully creating a bicultural identity for herself—as evidenced by her success as a musician, author, and social activist in both Native and White contexts—she elected to portray a negative outcome in this brave’s attempt to navigate his own double consciousness. Considering this work as it represents the interaction of double consciousness and identity by community allows for a deeper understanding of the effects of assimilation on the destruction of individual Native identity. Zitkala-Ša’s portrayal of the brave’s disastrous attempts to forge a bicultural identity and conform with two cultures’ conflicting expectations shows the author’s concern for the practices which claim that such an uncommon result is to be consistently achieved with ease. After all, the brave’s struggle is not purely fictitious, but represents the crisis of identity faced by all who undergo any form of assimilation, including the author herself.
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Vulnerable Monsters
A Comparison of Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein and Richard O’Brien’s Rocky Horror

Olivia Moskot

Richard O’Brien’s film, The Rocky Horror Picture Show (1975), much like Mary Shelley’s gothic novel Frankenstein (1818), continues to be culturally relevant and publicly celebrated year after year. Yet, The Rocky Horror Picture Show (or Rocky Horror) has received little scholarly attention as the persistently successful work of adaptation that it is. Furthermore, when discussing the many film and play adaptations of Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein, some scholars wrongfully cast Rocky Horror aside as a mere parody, or reduce the musical to the status of a "cult" flick. Shaun Soman is one of the few scholars who has thoroughly studied the musical’s thematic ties to Shelley’s Frankenstein and argues in favor of its validity as an adaptation. Through this paper, I will contribute my research pertained to both The Rocky Horror Picture Show and Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein in order to expound upon the benefits available to scholars who choose to view Rocky Horror as a serious adaptation rather than as a mere parody of Frankenstein. In establishing a viable connection between the film and the novel through the themes of horror, outrage, and, ultimately, vulnerability, I hope to show the relevance of—and possibilities that remain for—Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein in the world of adaptation. Additionally, I will demonstrate that The Rocky
Horror Picture Show is fully equipped with substance worthy of additional academic attention.

The project is a large one, as it is not only academia that contests categorizing Rocky Horror as an authentic adaptation of Frankenstein but many members of the pop culture community as well. For example, blogger for bookish.com, Natalie Zutter, published an article in 2014 detailing her favorite Frankenstein adaptations, ranking them from least to most faithful. First on the list, scoring a measly one out of ten: The Rocky Horror Picture Show. Zutter’s review revealed that she was, as many viewers tend to be too distracted by the tights, lights, and guitars to see any substantial connection between Rocky Horror and Frankenstein. Zutter’s post (which referenced a now inaccessible Tumblr blog as a reference) very briefly notes the most obvious shared point of plot before flippantly dismissing the film as a viable adaptation:

Dr. Frank-N-Furter, the fishnet-clad expat from “transsexual Transylvania,” builds himself a muscular, sweet, dumb, golden boy sextoy in Rocky. But the Frankenstein allusions end there, unless you count Susan Sarandon’s Janet, with her shrieks, as a sexually repressed Bride of Frankenstein… Even the song introducing Rocky, “I Can Make You a Man,” can’t really be applied to Shelley’s text.

I will contest many of these sentiments later in this piece but have included the passage to demonstrate that the general dismissal of the show as adaptation clearly stretches beyond the world of academia. I assert, however, that even if one looks at the plot alone to determine Rocky Horror’s validity, there are many connecting points beyond the shared laboratory scene.

Frankenstein is the tale of a scientist named Victor Frankenstein, who pushes the boundaries of scientific exploration of his time. In the 19th century, technological and scientific advancement were progressing at an alarming rate—raising questions in the minds of good conservative Brittons such as: Is this progression unnatural? How far is too far? And, will God be lost as traditional ways of life are abandoned? In the novel, Frankenstein creates a man and brings him to life in his laboratory. He then abuses and neglects his creation and eventually becomes determined to physically destroy him. His plight to do so, however, is unsuccessful. He dies, leaving a young man by the name of Robert Walton as a witness to his story. Walton, who may have
been tempted to walk a similar path of extremism before his interactions with Dr. Frankenstein, instead receives a timely warning.

*The Rocky Horror Picture Show* is the story of an alien, transexual scientist named Frank ‘n’ Furter (Frank), who pushes the boundaries of scientific and sexual exploration of his time. In 1970s America, technological and scientific advancement were progressing at an alarming rate, raising the same questions in the minds of good, conservative Americans as *Frankenstein* raised within its own primary audience: Is this progression unnatural? How far is too far? And, will God be lost as traditional ways of life are abandoned? In the film, Frank creates a man for the sole purpose of gratifying his own lust and brings him to life in his laboratory. Frank’s plan to continue his plight toward complete physical gratification is cut short, however. He is struck down by fellow aliens and his creature dies as well, leaving Brad and Janet as witnesses to his story. Brad and Janet, who may have been tempted to walk a similar path of extremism before their interactions with Frank ‘n’ Furter, instead, like Walton, receive a timely warning.

Laying the plot of each work one beside the other in this fashion allows audiences to recognize that they clearly share, at the very least, the same basic scaffolding when it comes to their plot. But, if *Rocky Horror* is an adaptation of *Frankenstein*, why are there so many obvious deviations apart from the primary skeletal structure? In order to answer this question, audiences must clearly understand the purpose and ultimate function of an adaptation.

Currently, there exists a widespread and fundamental misunderstanding of what constitutes a work as an adaptation. This is quite possibly the greatest barrier *Rocky Horror* faces as it fights for general recognition as the legitimate adaptation of *Frankenstein* that it is. True, *Rocky Horror* is hardly an exact replica of its mother text, but this is hardly grounds for its disqualification as adaptation. According to Linda Hutcheon and Robert Stram, who are both leading scholars in the field of adaptation studies, audiences should resist the urge to determine the validity of a work of adaptation based solely upon its fidelity to the original material’s text or content. In the introduction of his book *Literature through Film*, Stram claims that to create an exact duplication of any work of art through a different medium is impossible and even undesirable. Hutcheon argues similarly in the first chapter of her own book *A Theory of Adaptation*. She asserts that adaptation is far more than a simple process of reproduction and instructs her readers that “[a]daptation is repetition, but repetition without replication” (Hutcheon 7). Hutcheon and
Stram, independently of one another, push audiences toward the same more nuanced and comprehensive method of evaluating works of adaptation, one which prioritizes capturing the unique moods and concepts of the original piece over strict commitment to duplication of story, characters, or text. The critically defined concept of adaptation demands that a work of adaptation encompass the heart and the soul of the original piece rather than allowing it to simply borrow the original work’s body and imitate its movements. Adaptation understood in this way opens the door for academics and everyday audiences alike to accept the validity of the radically sexual, rock and roll, 20th century film known as *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* as an adaptation of the classic novel *Frankenstein*.

This could very well mean that an important part of an effective adaptation’s work is to inspire a similar reaction from its audience that the original piece provoked in its own. Initially, reflecting with a contemporary mindset, audiences may be inclined to believe that *Rocky Horror* must have failed to achieve this goal. How could *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, with its excessive immorality and seemingly senseless debauchery, provoke the same response as Mary Shelley’s classic and beloved work of literature that modern readers have come to cherish and revere? To address this point, one need only turn to early reviews of Shelley’s novel. Susan Tyler Hitchcock encapsulated a handful of reviews that exemplify *Frankenstein*’s general reception. Originally, critics said that *Frankenstein* indicated “‘no lesson of conduct, manners, or morality’” (75). It was called “‘[a]n uncouth story . . . leading to no conclusion either moral or philosophical’” and “‘[n]onsense decked out with circumstances and clothed in language highly terrific’” (74-75). Any viewer of *Rocky Horror* can see the transferable potential of these reviews from the 1818 novel to its 1975 cinematic adaptation. Applying the definition of adaptation provided by Hutcheon and Stram, adaptations such as Kenneth Branagh’s Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and Paul McGuigan’s *Frankenstein* (starring James McAvoy and Daniel Radcliffe), which are traditionally interpreted as being truer renditions of the original *Frankenstein*, begin to lose their claim to authenticism. The original *Frankenstein* frightened and outraged its audiences. Therefore, in order to capture the spirit and effect of the original piece, any adaptation of the novel should shock and unnerve its audiences. Adaptations that merely replicate the original *Frankenstein*’s plot with updated costumes and upgraded digital effects will fail to affect desensitized audiences of the 20th and 21st century.
The Rocky Horror Picture Show revives the scandalous mood of the text on which it is based simply by taking its most prevalent points and turning the volume up. Shaun Soman leans on Stram’s concepts to explain that “Rocky Horror engages in a hypertextual process of ‘selection’ and ‘amplification’ to emphasize issues of gender-bending and ‘playing god’ within Frankenstein” (22). Simply put, Soman is indicating that O’Brien likely picked out (or selected) the most prominent parts of Shelley’s original story and exaggerated (or amplified) these points until he was sure that modern day audiences would feel the intense, and even sensational, controversy embedded within them. Victor Frankenstein’s character horrified and outraged primary audiences for a variety of reasons. For one, Somer points out Frankenstein assumed a role reserved for women in that he created and gave birth to new life in his womb-like laboratory. Audiences today, however, hardly notice the crime against gender Shelley has boldly committed. But even the most desensitized, radicalized viewer cannot miss O’Brien’s protagonist’s obvious disregard for gender stereotypes and expectations as he confidently struts onto the stage, clad in a corset and stilettos, claiming his unique sense of gender and sexuality through rock and roll music. This is just a single example of Stram’s “selection” and “amplification” techniques in action (Soman 23).

O’Brien goes through the process of selection and amplification numerous times through his film, putting the thrill back into this 19th century thriller. But if the story of Frankenstein, regarded primarily by most contemporaries as a celebrated horror novel, has lost its horror, then how does it continue to grasp the attention of readers hundreds of years later? What has prevented it from falling into the ranks of other once beloved and now forgotten tales? Christy Tyson, John F. Knowlton, Nel Ward, Dan Ward and Nicholas A. Salerno have raised those very same questions about O’Brien’s work of adaptation. While each of these scholars attempt to answer this question with some semblance of sincerity, excluding Dan Ward, who “thought the film unredeemable and as pointless as a ‘pet rock’” (62), none of them identify the real elixir of life sustaining O’Brien’s work. Interestingly, it is the same elixir that supports Shelley’s Frankenstein—vulnerability.

The themes of both horror and outrage certainly tie Rocky Horror and Frankenstein together, but the real heartstrings that attach one to the other is the film and the book’s shared exploration of vulnerability. It is vulnerability that provides gravity to the chaos of both works. In Frankenstein, although Victor has the illusion of familial support (as well as societal support as an
intelligent, middle-class, white male), he is rendered vulnerable through his crimes against God. By usurping the power of giving and taking away life, Victor has broken one of the greatest unspoken moral laws of his time and, consequently, he discovers just how thin the chords of his safety net always were. He is vulnerable to the relative and ever evolving moral standards of his time. He is unable to obtain the mental, emotional, and practical help that he desperately needs, which was readily available to him before he crossed the ethical boundaries drawn by the moral conservatives of his day. He feels that he is powerless to speak about what he has done and what he has become.

Many members of the LGBTQ+ community confront a similar loss of community and consequential vulnerability when they reveal their sexuality. The history of homosexuality is deeply saturated in oppression, vulnerability, and violence. In the midst of the upbeat catchy rhythms and rhymes he sings, O’Brian’s Frank ‘n’ Furter, who acts as an adapted Victor Frankenstein, reminds viewers of this history through the small pink triangle on his lab coat just above his heart. The pink triangle was “the insignia that identified homosexual inmates in the Nazi concentration camps” (320). Modernly, some members of the queer community wear the triangle as a symbol of gay pride; it cannot be separated from its loaded and painful history, nor is it intended to be separated from it. The “historical memory, refracted in the symbol of the pink triangle, has mobilized vigilance against contemporary oppression from queer bashings to antigay initiatives” (Jensen 320). So, as Shelley’s Victor Frankenstein felt the need to force himself into secrecy after crossing conservative lines, O’Brian’s Frank ‘n’ Furter wore the pink triangle to signal the experience of a similar vulnerability. On the surface, Frank ‘n’ Furter may seem to be shamelessly pursuing a shocking lifestyle, however, it is important to remember that Frank ‘n’ Furter’s earthly abode is tucked away in the wilderness—hidden away from mainstream society. He is also, ultimately, killed for his lifestyle choices. The pink triangle foreshadows this fate. Just as Shelley was highly aware of the conservative sensitivities that rendered the progressive spirits of her era vulnerable, O’Brian shows the same quality of mindfulness. In order for the vulnerability in Shelley’s *Frankenstein* to transfer effectively to O’Brien’s adaptation, it had to be relevant to the vulnerabilities facing modern audiences:
As the American gay rights movement faced growing signs of conservative backlash in the mid-1970s, it drew ever more direct analogies to Nazi persecution as a means of galvanizing political support inside the community and outside of it. (Jensen 329)

Seeing as O’Brien’s *Rocky Horror* debuted in 1975, his costume choices demonstrate acute cultural awareness. It also affirms that O’Brien is making conscientious decisions rather than merely throwing wigs and pearls at his characters to see what would stick. Though his show may be bright and flashy, O’Brien is clearly invested in creating meaning in his work, just as Shelley did in her own.

Furthermore, O’Brien and Shelley’s creators are not merely subjected to the experience of vulnerability, and neither allow their scientists to escape it. Shelley’s mad doctor is brilliant but naive; he is set up to experience security and safety both in his family and in his society in general, but the shame and isolation he experiences as a result of his outrageous behavior leads to his eventual demise. O’Brien’s Frank ‘n’ Furter is in a similar position of perceived security, as he is the leader of his people. However, even in an alien society, his lifestyle is deemed “too extreme” by his subordinates and he is killed. On the car ride that begins Brad and Janet’s journey to Frank’s castle, the radio plays the resignation speech of former United States President Richard Nixon. Nixon was a wealthy white man who, for a short time, held the most powerful position in the world, and, though he would have liked to have maintained that position, he was accused of obstruction of justice. One could say that, like Frank ‘n’ Furter, his subordinates deemed his lifestyle too extreme. His resignation speech playing in Brad and Janet’s car alludes to the usurpation of Frank ‘n’ Furter by his followers and conveys the message that vulnerability inevitably accompanies the lives of all beings, regardless of how much power they appear to have. If any of Shelley or O’Brien’s characters were set up to avoid some of the more crushing realities of vulnerability, it would have been Victor Frankenstein and Frank ‘n’ Furter. They were at the top of the totem pole and, still, they were taken down. But neither Shelley nor O’Brien stopped there. They went on to demonstrate that vulnerability can strike the lowest as well as the highest of all beings and confirmed that vulnerability tends to discriminate against the socially marginalized.

Frankenstein and Frank ‘n’ Furter’s creations provoke sympathy and empathy from their prospective audiences precisely because of the intense reality of their vulnerability. First, they represent the vulnerability that
accompanies physical appearance to which every person in this world experiences and can relate. For both creatures, appearance has a major impact on how they are received both by their parental figures as well as how they are received by society in general. Both Frankenstein and Frank are deeply affected by the appearance of their creations. When Frankenstein’s monster is first brought to life, he immediately regrets that he failed to produce a being who was aesthetically pleasing. He laments, “How can I describe my emotions at this catastrophe, or how delineate the wretch whom with such infinite pains and care I had endeavoured to form? His limbs were in proportion, and I had selected his features as beautiful. Beautiful!—Great God” (Shelley 25). Frankenstein’s monster, like all mortal beings, is unable to control his appearance. He cannot change his features into such that they would earn the affection of his creator or the world around him, and—even if he could change his physical nature into one that was more appealing—he would not be able to escape the unfair influence that appearance has over the way one is treated. When Frank ‘n’ Furter introduces Brad and Janet to his own creation, he also demonstrates a preoccupation with his creature’s physical appearance as he exclaims, “You see, you are fortunate for tonight is the night that my beautiful creature is destined to be born” (O’Brien; emphasis added). This time, unlike in Shelley’s novel, the creator is successful in making a true work of art. Frank’s creation, Rocky, is the picture-perfect encapsulation of masculine beauty stereotypes in 1970’s America. This, however, does not make Frank ‘n’ Furter’s creature any less vulnerable. Rather than being terribly ugly, Rocky is strikingly attractive and he, consequently, faces the same amount of discrimination and maltreatment, just in a different form.

As alluded to above, the relationship between creator and creature in both of these tales can be read as the relationship of a parent to his or her child, and physical appearance contributes to this dynamic in uncomfortable, dark ways. This parent-child relationship, in the case of both Frankenstein and Rocky Horror, is unhealthy and deeply abusive. For Victor’s creation, appearance provokes verbal abuse, neglect, and eventual intent to do physical harm from his father figure. In the case of Rocky, appearance provokes sexual abuse and a complete loss of freedom as symbolized in the scene in which he is chained to the bed of his father figure. To make sure that audiences consistently remember the parent-child relationship between creator and creature, O’Brien costumes Rocky in nothing but a set of golden short-shorts
that are fashioned in such a way that viewers cannot help but connect their form to that of a diaper. Frank sexualizes his “child” in a way that triggers the audience’s intrinsic knowledge of the desperate vulnerability inseparably connected to the act of child molestation (Soman 23).

What’s more, the vulnerability experienced by both creatures, enhanced and directly connected to physical appearance, extends outward from their familial relationships to their societal relationships. Victor’s monster is rejected by the family in the cottage, whom he had come to love with deep sincerity, and he fails to find a single person in the world to befriend or accept him. Rocky, on the other hand, is taken advantage of by Janet (who is, arguably, recovering from her own sexual trauma). While she could have acted as a friend to Rocky without turning their encounter into a one of sexual exploitation, she perpetuates the cycle of sexual abuse by engaging in sexual intercourse with a man who was clearly half child. Here, pertaining to the matter of vulnerability experienced by the scientists’ creations, there is a sort of call response taking place between Shelley and O’Brien’s works. Shelley’s monster is rendered deeply vulnerable by his ugliness and O’Brien’s creation is rendered deeply vulnerable by his beauty. Shelley’s newborn being’s vulnerability is completely betrayed by his “father” who hated and abandoned his “child.” O’Brien’s newborn being’s vulnerability is exploited by his “father” who pushes a cheap imitation of love onto his “child” through forced physical intimacy.

These observations, pertaining specifically to vulnerability, only scratch the surface of the material in both Richard O’Brien’s Rocky Horror Picture Show and Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein. The unexplored vulnerability matters because it is vulnerability that acts as the heart of each piece, providing truth, life, and longevity that horror and outrage never could. With the passing of time, Shelley and O’Brien’s works would have fallen apart and out of the public eye completely if their monstrous creations had not been stitched together with everlasting threads of vulnerability. Readers and audiences are not simply entertained by these works, they are nourished by them—facing their own weaknesses and complexities vicariously, from a safe distance. Additionally, this study of vulnerability helps audiences understand that an authentic connection between Rocky Horror and Frankenstein exists. Beyond the shared plot points, horror, and outrage, it is ultimately the vulnerability that makes it undeniably clear that The Rocky Horror Picture Show is more than a ridiculous parody or castaway spoof of Frankenstein. The benefits of
acknowledging a true relationship between the two works are invaluable to the world of academia; especially to scholars who are invested in vulnerability studies. Finally, if the binding connection between *Rocky Horror* and *Frankenstein* is established through vulnerability, then it follows that the two pieces provide a window into the transformation of vulnerability from the year 1818 to 1975 and onward. With so much material yet to be unpacked, there is no reason that either Shelley’s or O’Brien’s monsters should not rage forward for many years to come. As long as there are members of our society who continue to reach inward—past the parts of themselves that are both ugly and beautiful, bold and curious, terrifying and terrified—toward their vulnerable, human cores that lie beneath, Frankenstein’s monster and Frank ‘n’ Furter’s beloved Rocky will rock on.
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Criterion
Sexual Assault and Its Impacts in Young Adult Literature

Amanda Charles

As a bright-eyed high school freshman, young for my class at only 13 years old, I was invited to read Speak as part of my English course curriculum. Within its binding I encountered the story of a girl my age named Melinda who was scared into silence after being raped at her first high school party. I was deeply moved by Melinda’s pain and her struggle to continue moving forward with her life. Although I had not shared in Melinda’s tragedy, I felt connected to her. Having been sexually abused at the tender age of 10, I had found solace in silence, just as Melinda did. My 9th grade mind tore through the pages, and I felt bound to Melinda in some kind of literary sanctuary. It was the first time I remember thinking, someone else has felt this way. I had never vocally acknowledged my experience with sexual assault and still did not feel ready to do so at the time, but Melinda offered me a companion in acceptance and healing. Reading her story helped me begin to understand what had happened to me.

As I went through high school, I read books like The Lovely Bones and The Perks of Being a Wallflower, and within each novel I bonded with characters who had shared in an agony similar to mine. It seemed as though there were always more books about sexual abuse to read; an endless supply of horrible, heart-wrenching stories. But they were real stories, stories based in a terrible
yet common aspect of life. I began to wonder why exactly these books had been written and whether there were actually as many as I thought. Goodreads lists 262 young adult novels that discuss rape, molestation, or sexual abuse, and that is with just one click. The dominance of sexual abuse in young adult literature explained why I had come in contact with so much explicit content with little to no effort. However, as I began to come to terms with what had happened to me, I started to seek out these books. As my mental library has filled with more and more narratives of sexual abuse, I have found myself asking the question, Are these accounts of sexual abuse in young adult literature harmful or helpful to its readers? It is my belief that by allowing young adults to interact with these kinds of texts, we open a space in the literary realm for them to empathize, heal, and broaden their perspectives on the subject of sexual abuse. When discussed correctly in a classroom or read appropriately outside of school, rape novels become a source of strength to victims. They portray the message, “You are not alone.”

Stephen Chbosky has proved through his own YA literary success that young adult novels can and should guide readers through dark topics like sexual abuse. Having been sincerely touched by the reveal of child molestation by Chbosky in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, I began my investigation with him. Why did he write this book, and was he thinking about people like me while writing it? In an interview with NBC Connecticut, he explains, “I wrote this book as a blueprint for healing. I wrote this book to end the silence” (Vo, 2015). In the novel, the main character Charlie suffers from severe anxiety, depression, and social disconnect. It isn’t until the end of the novel that the reader learns that Charlie was molested by his aunt at a very young age and that this is likely the cause of his mental illness and instability. Chbosky further elaborates on the subject by stating that his book “creates dialogue about issues that young people face” (Vo, 2015). It was true; Chbosky had written his book for me. It was intended to give readers like me a safe place to explore and understand trauma.

However, the controversy surrounding *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* exposes the delicacy with which adults are expected to handle the topic of sexual assault while dealing with adolescents. Ultimately, the debate is immersed in how YA rape novels function in the classroom. When approached with this concern, Chbosky says, “the classroom legitimizes these issues and by taking it out of the classroom we demote these things to ‘dirty little secrets’ and they’re not dirty little secrets; these are things young people face every
This raises another question: are the benefits of YA novels that discuss sexual assault dependent on the setting in which they are read? According to Chbosky, the best place to read sensitive texts like this is in the classroom, but there are teenagers all over the world that benefit from these novels in their recreational reading.

Although I read several young adult novels about sexual assault on my own in high school, the critical conversation supports the notion that there are more benefits to discussing these novels in an academic setting. In an article titled “Critical Representation of Sexual Assault in Young Adult Literature,” Erika Cleveland and Sybil Durand report, “Most recently, researcher Victor Malo-Juvera conducted a survey of students who also read *Speak* in their eighth grade English classes. The study revealed that reading and discussing the novel effectively decreased students’ acceptance of rape myths” (2014). Several academics were proposing the idea that YA literature about sexual assault can and should be utilized in the classroom to dismantle rape culture. For readers like me, who did not have much interaction with texts about sexual abuse in the classroom, the concept of dispelling rape myths within an academic setting is exciting! By opening up a complex text to students, they not only offer a connection to individuals coping with trauma but also create opportunities for other students to understand the effects of sexual abuse. Classroom exposure ensures that students have the opportunity to explore these controversial topics and increases the likelihood that these texts will be approached with an appropriate mindset. Although my experiences reading *Speak* and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* were very positive, these texts can often be misconstrued in their purpose and portrayal. Young adult novels about sexual abuse need to be read with an attitude that cultivates empathy, healing, or both.

The fragile and daunting subject of sexual abuse invites hesitation among teachers; however, when allowed into the classroom, YA novels about sexual abuse offer students a new, relatable narrative that they can utilize to heal, overcome bias, and stop the perpetuation of rape myths. In the article “‘But She Didn’t Scream’: Teaching About Sexual Assault in Young Adult Literature,” Colantonio-Yurko, Miller, and Cheveallier cite the experience of three high school English teachers who experimented with YA rape novels in the classroom. While teaching *Speak* in her class, one of the teachers “found that her middle school female student participants often blamed the victim and noted that a student believed, ‘Sexual violence is the result of individual
girls making poor decisions, such as flirting or drinking at a party’’ (2017). The hurtful stigma surrounding rape victims, as shown in the previous quote, plays an important role in proving the validity of teaching novels like *Speak*. Researcher Malo-Juvera “found that teaching the young adult novel *Speak* was effective when combating pernicious rape myths” like the one quoted above (Colantonio-Yurko et al.). In an effort to combat the abundance of rape myths among teenagers, novels like *Inexcusable* pull apart subjects like date rape and its legitimacy. The novel *Target* tackles the myth that only women are raped by telling the story of an adolescent male rape victim. Through these novels and others like them, students and administrators are given a plethora of literature designed to give voice to every kind of survivor.

An open approach to these novels can stir productive and perspective-shifting reactions from the students reading. A New York Times article discussing the #MeToo movement explains, “As the country continues to respond to the #MeToo movement, teachers and librarians are turning to fiction to help teenagers understand emotional trauma and make sense of this cultural reckoning” (Jacobs, 2018). They continue with, “Novels can provide a safe place to explore ideas about consent and speaking out after abuse because young readers can inhabit the experience of a fictional character rather than face their own trauma head-on.” My own experience proves this claim correct, as living through Melinda’s healing allowed me to approach my past in a less threatening way. By placing these novels in the classroom, we offer more students the opportunity to move toward healing and empathy. This is arguably the largest benefit of YA literature about sexual abuse.

However, as stated in an article by Cleveland and Durand, “It is thus imperative that educators evaluate YA texts in terms of their accuracy and implicit messages on such issues.” Several articles discussing young adult novels that were written in response to the Columbine shooting convey the importance of realistic depictions in YA literature. Each piece of fiction explored the topic of school shootings and struggled with the difficult task of offering an accurate portrayal of a high school shooter. Picoult, the author of *Nineteen Minutes*, did extensive research on the Columbine shooting and interviewed dozens of students in order to craft a realistic representation of the event. The same principle and detail can also be applied to writing about sexual assault. The intention behind Picoult’s extensive research was to avoid any myths or stereotypes surrounding the shooting, to offer
something raw and authentic. This should be the goal of any author writing about sexual violence. If rape is used as a plot line, to add dramatic effect, or slander a character, then the novel itself is perpetuating rape culture in its poor portrayal. It is the responsibility of all authors engaging the subject of sexual abuse to portray it honestly, and it is the responsibility of all teachers discussing this topic to use it as a platform for understanding.

The dangers in writing about sexual assault, where it becomes more harmful than helpful, are realized when rape or sexual abuse is used for titillation or dramatic effect in a novel. In a particularly controversial article titled “Who Gets to Write About Sexual Abuse, and What Do We Let Them Say?” Erin Spampinato explores what society seems to be able to handle when discussing sexual assault and what it cannot. The overarching question of her article is, How detailed is too detailed? As she examines the need for intimately detailed memoirs it becomes apparent that the books that were too descriptive for audiences to handle, so realistic that they pained the psyche of the reader, were not young adult books (2017). This offers substantial comfort to those who worry that YA books about sexual abuse could become too graphic and thus harmful. Fortunately, young adult books that tackle the subject of sexual abuse are generally written with milder details and focus on the healing process; books that go into the harsher, more graphic aspects of sexual abuse are most often targeted at an adult audience. Now, the word “milder” is completely subjective. I have read what I consider to be dark material in YA literature, but it has always been for the purpose of gaining a deeper understanding. Adult literature however, has next to no limitations in terms of graphic detail. If a young adult wanted a darker text on sexual abuse, they would need to look for it in the adult section. This discovery solidifies my belief that YA novels on sexual abuse are a beneficial resource and defends against the counter claim that the material available to teens is too provocative.

Young adult novels are designed as vehicles for self-discovery and reflection. Courtney Summers, the author of All The Rage (a book about a victim who chooses to publicly challenge and accuse her attacker—the town golden boy—to stop him from assaulting other girls) stated in an interview, “Seeing your secrets on a page can be validating and also make them less scary to say out loud to someone else. That’s not the only reason it’s important to write realistic YA books for teens, no matter how close to the truth that they might be for some. They offer a safe space for readers to process and discuss
what is happening in the world around them, whether or not they ever directly experience what they’re reading about” (Kuehnert, 2015). As Summers so eloquently explains, although young adults novels about sexual abuse are risky in their context, they are necessary. These novels do more good than harm because of the comfort and discussion they offer.

Laurie Halse Anderson and Stephen Chbosky have both commented on how many young adults email or approach them expressing gratitude for the message in their books—the message that there is healing. Although there are dangers in exploring this kind of young adult literature, when the reader’s goal is to find hope and community, these novels become a literary support group for countless survivors. Chris Crutcher explains, “Stories that depict . . . ‘an unsavory world view’ allow bruised kids to talk about—and therefore better understand—their own situations, and relatively unbruised kids to become more enlightened and therefore, hopefully, more decent” (2018). Crutcher’s claim of increased empathy and decency among young adults not only supports the notion that YA novels about sexual abuse are helpful, but it implies the need for more of them. The purpose of these novels is to develop compassion within the heart of the audience and expose the details and aftermath of destructive human behavior, thus supporting the argument that an increase of YA sexual assault novels in the classroom as well as in general print would benefit the development of young adults. Combatting the discomfort of reading about sexual abuse is well worth the effort when the result is an enlightened and uplifted generation of young readers.
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