Just as telling stories that get at the truth of the war are acts of reverence, the custom of telling "story-truth" through ceremony and the truthful telling of his story, his death is granted an attitude of reverence. O'Brien's detailed telling of "story-truth" elevates the metaphysical and concrete, tangible object that the men carry, a story with gruesome details of the brutality of war, and the symbolic meaning of the Deeper Meaning: 'Exile and the Embodied Poetics of Things They Carried.' O'Brien tells his stories of Vietnam through stories storytelling the sublime and the truth of beauty even while elevating it into an aesthetic moment is an act of reverence. Human language and the attitude of storytelling accesses the sublime as an act itself of reverence through stories storytelling. O'Brien's writing of the horror of death and metaphorical language of beauty and the language of storytelling the sublime and the truth of beauty even while elevating it into an aesthetic moment is an act of reverence is a type of custom that Woodhull says "by which human beings distinguish themselves most importantly from prey" (Reverence 97). Although Kiowa died like an animal in the most repulsive way, his death is granted an attitude of reverence. O'Brien's detailed telling of "story-truth" elevates the metaphysical and concrete facts of the war and invites the men to carry a story with gruesome details of the brutality of war, and the symbolic meaning of the Deeper Meaning: 'Exile and the Embodied Poetics of Things They Carried.' Just as the men carry, their stories of the war are acts of reverence, telling stories that get at the truth of the war.
“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

Staff

Editors-in-Chief
Kristen Soelberg
Jenna Peterson

Faculty Advisor
Emron Esplin

Adam Anderson
Sarah Barlow
Katelyn Bean
Melinda Fox
Chelsea Lee
Tyler Moore
Contents

Editors’ note
Kristen Soelberg & Jenna Peterson

A Saintly Epic
Reading Beowulf as Hagiography
Jordan Jones

Archiving Art
The Value of Nostalgia in Hemingway’s A Moveable Feast
Jared Michael Pence

Foregoing Intellectual Powers
Exploring Social Instincts in ”The Old Gentleman”
Brittany Strobelt

The Joker, The Blockbuster, and Mass Shootings
Watching the World Burn
Connor Race Davis
The Motifs of Water and Death in Rudyard Kipling's and Joseph Conrad's Short Stories

Shane Peterson

The Profane and Reverent in *The Things They Carried*

Tamara Pace Thomson

Redirecting the Disney Rants
The Real Angst Fueling the Negative Obsession with Disney Tales

Laura Randle
Editors’ Note

This year, we as editors-in-chief were excited to be working on a new kind of issue for Criterion. The essays that you are about to read were presented in the 2014 English Symposium, a conference that included some of the best work produced by English students at Brigham Young University. We were also excited to work with Emron Esplin, our new faculty advisor. Finally, we were thrilled for the chance to help Criterion become a biannual student journal. We have been able to build off of the work of previous editors and staff members, and continuing their work has been a privilege and a learning experience. As we have worked through the process of taking over and running a student journal, we have encountered both obstacles and support. There were a lot of changes for Criterion this semester, but the hard work of various parties has allowed our first English Symposium issue to be a success.

Our marvelous staff members have worked hard, reading and editing essays. Professor Esplin has been very involved and has put in just as much work as any staff member. As always, members of the library staff have generously given their time to help us learn the ins and outs of the online journal system. And, of course, we must thank our writers, who have worked so hard on their papers and helped so much during the editing process. We hope that you are as proud of this edition as we are.

Jenna Peterson and Kristen Soelberg
In his book *Genre*, Jonathan Frow asserts that genre is “a matter of discrimination and taxonomy: of organising things into recognisable classes” (51). He explains that science has inspired us with the desire to classify and systematize everything so we can understand the world around us. However, Frow points out that the theoretical practice of classifying things in the real world is very complicated and that entities share characteristics of multiple classes or genres—especially in literature. He identifies several criteria used to determine a text’s genre: semiotic medium (how a text is delivered to the reader/listener), radical of presentation (first- or third-person narration, delivery through song, etc.), mode (the themes and motifs present in the text), genre (the specific elements required by a particular genre), and sub-genre (themes and elements that restrict a text’s classification even further) (67).

After discussing these criteria, Frow concludes that instead of focusing on assigning texts to static genres we should recognize that “there are never any ‘correct’ answers” to such questions; we should focus on how people actually use different genres to interpret texts and see what they gain as a result (55). I intend to use Frow’s criteria to show how *Beowulf* (traditionally considered to be an epic) can be read as a hagiography. After briefly describing what hagiographies are and what characteristics they tend to have, I will compare elements of *Beowulf* to those of several hagiographies contemporary with the text. I will
compare them in terms of storyline and the different aspects of genre as defined above. In doing so, I am not claiming that it was originally written to be a hagiography; I am simply attempting to demonstrate the value of analyzing texts from different perspectives. By comparing *Beowulf* to canonical hagiographies, I will show how our understanding of texts and the cultures in which they are produced can deepen if we consider the conventions of various genres in our analysis.

Before looking at *Beowulf* as a hagiography, we must know what hagiographic texts look like. In the introduction to her book *Roads to Paradise*, Alison Godard Elliott explains that hagiographies tell the stories of saints’ lives and are written to edify readers or listeners. She points out that hagiographies are more concerned with being inspiring than historically accurate; as a result, many of them seem fantastical. She reminds us, however, that we need not discard them simply because they are not completely factual: “Hagiography is not history” (7). This is a telling statement because it informs the way we should read hagiographies—not as histories, but as spiritually significant texts that encourage normal people to live faithfully. After cautioning us against approaching them as we approach other texts, Elliott introduces the formulaic plot that many hagiographies employ:

Saints were heroes, no different in the popular imagination from many other beloved figures of story and legend. They worked wonders, defeated the forces of evil, and earned their just reward at the end of a life of trial. Moreover, while every man might not realistically aspire to winning the hand of a princess and acquiring a kingdom, all might hope to resist the wiles of the devil and attain the kingdom of heaven. (7)

In providing this general formula, Elliott tells us what to expect as we read hagiographies; she goes on to explain that there are generally two directions these stories can take: they can focus on the death of the saint (these stories are called “passions”) or they can focus on the life of the saint (these stories are called “vitae”). I propose that *Beowulf* shares characteristics with both: the beginning of the work resembles a vita because it discusses Beowulf’s marvelous physical triumphs over evil monsters, and the end resembles a passion by presenting Beowulf sacrificing himself for the good of his kingdom. In this way, he resembles many of the saints who die as martyrs, refusing to denounce their responsibility to Christ. Similarly, Beowulf does not shun his responsibilities as king; he feels a duty to fight the dragon that threatens his people’s safety.
He states, “As king of the people I shall pursue this fight” (2513); his subsequent death seals his life of generosity and goodness. Beowulf’s faithfulness in defending his people is described thus: “He worked for the people, but as well as that he behaved like a hero” (3006-7). Indeed, in Beowulf’s case we could invert Elliott’s statement that “saints were heroes” (7) and say that “heroes were saints.”

In a similar vein, many scholars have drawn attention to what appears to be Christian symbolism in Beowulf. Edward Irving Jr. states that ever since the 1950s the consensus has been that the poem’s narrator is “a Christian composing for a Christian audience” (177). Because of this, the narrator puts a Christian slant on everything. And while this telling of the tale may not be historically accurate (especially because Beowulf himself was probably not Christian), it supports Elliott’s idea that hagiographies are not historical. What matters is whether it inspires readers/listeners to be better people. Irving identifies this spiritually didactic element of Beowulf by observing that the poet clearly condemns the Danes for worshiping heathen gods (lines 175-88). It is significant that Beowulf himself is not described as worshiping heathen gods; indeed, it could be claimed that the Danes are not delivered from Grendel’s power precisely because they pray to false gods whereas Beowulf defeats Grendel because of his faith in the true God. Here Beowulf is portrayed as a saint who never wavers in his faith in the true God.

Like Irving, many other scholars have effectively argued that Beowulf has Christian overtones, but I intend to take their arguments a step further in order to show that, aside from simply containing anachronistic Christian elements, Beowulf qualifies as a full-fledged Christian hagiography. Here I will reference other Anglo-Saxon saints’ lives from the perspective of Frow’s criteria (semiotic medium, radical of presentation, mode, genre, and sub-genre) in order to compare them to Beowulf.

The semiotic medium of Beowulf is generally thought to be oral performance. Though the manuscript we study today is written, most scholars believe it was meant to be heard rather than read (Beowulf). In this respect it resembles hagiographies, which were often used in church to help those preaching communicate their ideas more effectively. And because not everyone could read, hagiographies were often designed to be short enough so that priests could read them in their entirety during their sermons. In this way, illiterate church members could benefit from the stories of saints’ lives and apply the principles they learned. Beowulf is too long to be read in full in a church
service, but a priest could easily use segments of it to teach specific principles. For example, he could relate Beowulf’s fight with Grendel (lines 662-835) as a parable to teach about overcoming sin, Beowulf’s admission that God helped him defeat Grendel’s mother (lines 1383-1650) as a tool to teach about humility, and Beowulf’s fight against the dragon (lines 2510-2820) as a way to teach about protecting those under one’s stewardship. Furthermore, Beowulf’s design as an oral poem shows that it could have been written as a hagiography (or at least that we can read it as such).

The radical of presentation in Beowulf is a poet speaking in the third-person. The narrator of the story is omniscient, just as the narrators in the lives of saints seem to be. Guthlac A, for example, tells the life of Guthlac, a hermit-saint who died in the beginning of the eighth century. Though there were presumably no witnesses for many of the events contained in the text, it contains details of his fights with devils and of his devotion to God. Since he or she was not physically present, the narrator must claim to have some degree of omniscience in order to help the reader believe the story. Similarly, Beowulf does not write his own biography; someone else chronicles his defeat of Grendel, Grendel’s mother, and the dragon. It is of course highly unlikely that the narrator accompanied Beowulf to the lair of Grendel’s mother, but he nonetheless provides an extraordinarily detailed account of what happened. In this respect, Beowulf’s radical of presentation (an omniscient narrator relating a tale) is the same as that of most hagiographies.

The mode is perhaps the most convincing aspect of Beowulf’s potential designation as a hagiography. Elliott states that in hagiographies there is a “binary and inflexible opposition between Christian and pagan, good and evil” (14). We see this “inflexible opposition” in Beowulf in that there is no attempt to make Grendel or his mother seem human or pitiable. Grendel is called a “shadow-stalker” (703), a “monster” (737), and a “hell-serf” (786). His mother is called a “monstrous hell-bride” (1259), a “hell-dam” (1292), and a “wolfish swimmer” (1506). The two are called the offspring of Cain and are compared with devils and demons. The narrator likely vilifies them so readers will side with Beowulf and focus on God’s deliverance of him, rather than wondering whether Grendel and his mother are subjects to be pitied. This simplification of characters and events to make the story easier to interpret is also visible in hagiographies—Guthlac’s enemies are simply described as devils, for example, with no further character development that would allow us to pity them (255).
Another similarity between hagiographies and *Beowulf* is the lack of depth in the protagonist. *The Life of Cuthbert*, a seventh-century text about an English saint, presents Cuthbert as changing very little throughout his life. At a very young age he is called of God and ever after possesses great faith (45–6). He performs miracles and suffers for Christ, never wavering in his convictions. Similarly, Beowulf is a fairly static character, especially in the beginning of the book; he is always the strongest, he is always the leader, and he is nearly always the victor in the contests and battles he enters. Many other saints we read about are static in a similar way—Andreas (one of Christ’s original apostles whose story is told in the text *Andreas*) is always a faithful and powerful disciple of Christ. Frideswide, an eighth-century English queen who renounces her position to devote her life to God, never looks back after deciding to become a nun, no matter how much she is tempted to do so (Frideswide).

Like these saints, Beowulf is possessed of constant strength and unwavering power in battle. Indeed, Beowulf’s victories over monsters could be seen as physical counterparts to the spiritual triumphs of Guthlac over temptations and devils. While Guthlac confronts and is victorious over many demons throughout his life, Beowulf defeats Grendel, Grendel’s mother, and ultimately the dragon (though it costs him his life). In Beowulf’s final act we see another instance of his acting as an Old English saint would: he sacrifices himself so the dragon will not afflict his people.

Beowulf’s burial is somewhat different from other saints’ because he is not buried on land. Whereas most saints are buried and exhumed years later to reveal that their bodies are uncorrupted, Beowulf’s body is launched into the water and then cremated. This ritual burial could be symbolic of the purifying of his flesh in preparation for him to inherit God’s kingdom. In any case, his body is not corrupted by flesh worms or by time because his followers burn his remains entirely. And notwithstanding the fact that other saints’ bodies are sources of divine miracles—for example, Frideswide’s kiss heals a leper (150–3) and Cuthbert turns water into wine just by tasting it (88-9)—Beowulf continues to influence his people after his death by his legacy of generosity and friendship. His followers learn from his example and “let the ground keep” the dragon’s treasure rather than allowing themselves to be corrupted by it (3166). They build a mound to remember Beowulf by and ever after look to him as an example of “heroic nature” and grace (3173).

*Beowulf* also resembles hagiographies in terms of genre, which Frow defines as the “thematic, rhetorical and formal dimensions” of a text (67). Hagiographies
clearly contain the themes of faith, sacrifice, and miracles; Beowulf contains Christian imagery and stories of physical triumphs that could be symbolic of such miracles. Thematically, then, the poem fits within the genre of hagiography. The rhetorical and formal dimensions of Beowulf also coincide with those of hagiographies, which, as Elliott explains, are often formulaic in nature. Katherine O’Brien O’Keeffe explains that many scholars have criticized Beowulf because it is very formulaic and because many of its lines appear elsewhere in the Old English canon (99–101). But hagiographies are also repetitive and predictable in their structure and wording. The repetition of epithets and ideas in Beowulf mirrors the repetition of plot elements in hagiographies—miracles, martyrdom, and so on—and meets the genre’s rhetorical and formal demands.

Beyond containing these similarities, Beowulf also meets the criteria for the “subgenres” of hagiography—what Frow calls “the further specification of genre by a particular thematic content” (67). As stated earlier, Elliott distinguishes between two main types of hagiographies: passions and vitae. Beowulf exhibits characteristics of both (the first part of Beowulf resembling a vita and the second a passion), thus encompassing the entire genre. More research is needed to find even stronger links between the poem and these types of hagiographic texts, but looking at the basic characteristics of each shows that different parts of Beowulf qualify for each sub-genre.

Having established Beowulf’s potential designation as a hagiography, I turn to the issue of why it matters. In order to do this, I reiterate Frow’s argument that it is important to look at the following question: “What models of classification are there, and how have people made use of them in particular circumstances?” (55). We could very well compare the aspects of other genres with Beowulf, and I believe it would yield interesting results. However, looking at this text through the lens of hagiography is especially beneficial as we attempt to understand early English texts because it helps us understand something of the history of Christianity in England. The Anglo-Saxons were writing hagiographies during the same period in which Beowulf was recorded and, just as the two genres overlap, the contexts in which the texts were produced are interrelated. Thus, this hagiographical reading of Beowulf relates directly to Anglo-Saxon culture and gives us insights into the development of Christian thought that existed in early England and that permeates literature for the next thousand years and more. Understanding the spread of Christianity will allow us to analyze this and other texts more intelligently and see their importance in the literary canon of the past and in that of the present.
This paper has shown that *Beowulf* could be read as a hagiography without too much effort on the part of the reader. Such an exercise will help readers develop a critical eye and learn more about how genre classifications affect our analysis of literature. As readers engage in these activities, they will learn more about the cultures in which and for which texts are produced. More importantly, they will learn to challenge traditional values, discarding those that are not useful and engaging with people around them in more productive and meaningful ways.


Archiving Art

The Value of Nostalgia in Hemingway's *A Moveable Feast*

*Jared Michael Pence*

In 1979, Fred Davis published his book *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia*, in which he prophesied that “it is conceivable that ‘nostalgia’ qua word will in time acquire connotations that extend its meaning to any sort of positive feeling toward *anything* past, no matter how remote or historical” [emphasis in the original] (8). Davis’s prophesy about feeling nostalgic for what we’ve never experienced seems to have come true, evidenced by the Oxford English Dictionary’s definition of nostalgia as a “sentimental longing for or regretful memory of a period of the past, esp. one in an individual’s own lifetime,” where nostalgia is first and foremost for the vague “period of the past” and is only specific to an individual’s experience in “especial” cases (“nostalgia”). This definition broadens the concept of nostalgia beyond the scope of what a person has experienced to the possibility of nostalgic longing for anything in the past, regardless of any personal connection to it. Rather than seeing nostalgia as longing for our personal experiences, both Davis and current definitions of nostalgia broaden the concept to include longing for what we’ve never experienced. For instance, Davis’s forecast about nostalgia appears in the contemporary proliferation of nostalgic evocations of the 1920s seen in films such as Baz Luhrmann’s *The Great Gatsby* (2013) and Paula McClain’s bestselling novel *The Paris Wife* (2011). Arising from this trend is Woody Allen’s *Midnight in Paris* (2011), a film which specifically revolves around
the nostalgia for 1920s Paris. How is there such prominent nostalgia for 1920s Paris ninety years after the fact, especially when most people living never experienced that time or place personally? We can feel nostalgia for things we never experienced because of the way we remember and archive the past, and even though memory is unreliable for accurate representations of the past, archiving the past through art allows artists and cultural consumers the freedom to discover subjective truth and feel nostalgia for it. The subjective truth and current nostalgia for 1920s Paris rests on how Ernest Hemingway remembered and archived his past in _A Moveable Feast_.

As a young American soldier trying to work through the trauma of World War I, Hemingway spent seven years living in Paris, struggling to establish himself as a writer. Nearly forty years after his time in Paris, Hemingway wrote _A Moveable Feast_, a memoir of his Paris years, which was edited and published by his wife Mary three years after he committed suicide. The memoir is a disjointed collection of sketches that details some of the people and places that Hemingway interacted with in 1920s Paris. The book includes often glamorous and mythic representations of his interactions with famous artists and writers as well as depicting a romanticized account of his rise to success as a writer. Even though the preface to the 1964 edition of _A Moveable Feast_ makes it clear that Hemingway was not striving for historical accuracy, his memoir has stood as a foundation for representations of 1920s Paris since its publication. In fact, the memoir establishes the remembered archive of 1920s Paris with Hemingway as the principle archon or keeper of the archive. Through an exploration of Hemingway’s memoir as the principal archive of 1920s Paris, discussing the unreliability of memory and the truth value of unreliable, artistic representations in the text, I will show that while critics argue that nostalgia can be dangerous to our present and future, nostalgia for 1920s Paris is constructive and useful. Furthermore, while it is true that memory is possibly inaccurate and unreliable at reflecting the historical past, artistic representation of memories can often better portray truth than texts that strive for factual documentation.

The Archive and the Unreliability of Memory

The term “archive” has received significant analysis as many critics have sought to understand and explain the concepts of memory and nostalgia.
In the introduction to Derrida’s *Archive Fever*, he breaks down the linguistic constructs of the word “archive,” explaining the dual meaning of *arkhē* as both commencement and commandment (1–2). Anciently, the archive that held historical documents served to establish the commencement of a society as the source of historical origin and sequence. It was also the place where order and law were constructed (commandment), since its foundation was on the precedents of the past as recorded in the documents. The archon, the person who guards or maintains the archive, is in a position of power because of the role the archive has in establishing commandment, law, and order. Of course, the archive was initially a physical place but over time transformed from a literal place to a representative seat of power. Consequently, those in power establish the archive basing it more on what they deem important rather than on some kind of objective historical past. The archive for 1920s Paris (what has been established as important pieces of that past) is built on Hemingway’s *A Moveable Feast*, making this memoir the central text of the archive, while establishing the author as the central archon of that time and place.

Although essentially self-proclaimed, Hemingway as the archon of 1920s Paris establishes both commencement and commandment in writing *A Moveable Feast*. The memoir recounts the commencement or origin of Hemingway as a writer and likewise presents the commandment of how everyone ought to view and remember 1920s Paris. In an interview with writer Alexander Maksik, who moved to Paris in 2002, *World Literature Today* quoted him saying,

> I fell in love with Hemingway’s Paris after reading *A Moveable Feast*... So, yes, I was seduced by the Paris of *A Moveable Feast* and *The Sun Also Rises*... I owe a debt to Hemingway because without him, I might have fallen in love with some other imaginary city, and gone off in search of that fantasy. It wasn’t Hemingway’s life in Paris that drew me to the city, it was his writing about Paris that drew me. *A Moveable Feast* is one of the most powerful pieces of writing I’ve ever read. It’s an exquisite book. I’ve lived there. I’ve been drunk in the cafés he describes. I’ve written a novel there. I know the city well and, as I’ve said, been disappointed. But despite that disappointment, I can still read *A Moveable Feast* and feel what I always felt. I think that’s an important distinction—it’s the writing, not the city.
Maksik’s experience with *A Moveable Feast* demonstrates how it is “the writing, not the city” that serves as an archive for Paris, even though it presents an “imaginary city,” and a “fantasy,” which is ultimately a “disappointment.” Maksik’s attitude towards Paris is “seduced” by *A Moveable Feast*, which creates a kind of nostalgia that transcends the disappointing reality, allowing him to read the story and still “feel what [he] always felt.” Although the memoir and the author have been accepted respectively as the archive and archon of 1920s Paris, *A Moveable Feast* is fraught with the complications surrounding the unreliability of memory, which questions the veracity of the archive and potentially invalidates our present nostalgia for 1920s Paris.

While the book concerns real people and real places from the 1920s, it production is a work of remembrance. The stories and descriptions Hemingway wrote were influenced by his present situation; what he remembered and chose to include depended upon his life in the late 1950s when he was writing *A Moveable Feast*. In the preface, Hemingway acknowledges that the book is not attempting to be a historical or precise account when he writes, “If the reader prefers, this book may be regarded as fiction” (6). Interestingly, however, Hemingway does see his remembered past as valuably reflecting on the historical reality: “But there is always the chance that such a book of fiction may throw some light on what has been written as fact” (6). Hemingway himself realized that his book was a function of memory—not just factual history—and his descriptions of himself and others had as much to do with how he felt about his life and career in the late 1950s as it did with the 1920s events he was writing about. He also realized that these biased memories were still valuable.

Hemingway knew his memories would need to be read as fictional, because memory cannot maintain any objective accuracy to historical fact since it depends on human subjectivity. *A Moveable Feast* fictionally represents Hemingway’s memory of his biographical experience in Paris as a poor, newly married writer in the 1920s. He interacted with numerous people who were renowned or would later come to artistic fame. However, *A Moveable Feast* is not a straightforward reflection of Hemingway’s experience. The very fact that it is written means that even if the events made an imprint or mnēmē in his mind as they occurred, there has been time, space, and interpretation separating the mnēmē from Hemingway’s writing of it—a process of anamnēsis. Memory as a process (anamnēsis) cannot maintain a high degree of fidelity to the past, even if memory as a thing (mnēmē) could have. Therefore, reading *A Moveable Feast* with any sense of accuracy or historical fact is problematic.
One example of the way *A Moveable Feast* is contingent upon unreliable memory is the way Hemingway writes about his development as a writer. *A Moveable Feast* suggests writing was a struggle for the young Hemingway, but, being written from the perspective of the old Hemingway, the memoir romanticizes the experience. J. Gerald Kennedy’s *Imagining Paris* discusses Hemingway’s inclusion of his development as a writer in *A Moveable Feast* but calls it a “myth,” a “construct,” and a “distorted version” of reality: “in shaping this myth of his literary beginnings, Hemingway constructs a fantastic place and a selective, even distorted version of his literary apprenticeship” (130). Hemingway was not just recalling what his first attempts at writing were like as a young man; he was explaining as an old man and well-known writer how the process worked for him. He describes his writing process in *A Moveable Feast*:

Sometimes when I was starting a new story and I could not get it going...I would stand and look out over the roofs of Paris and think, “Do not worry. You have always written before and you will write now. All you have to do is write one true sentence. Write the truest sentence that you know.” So finally I would write one true sentence, and then go on from there. It was easy then because there was always one true sentence that I knew or had seen or had heard someone say...I was trying to do this all the time I was writing, and it was good and severe discipline. (20)

Hemingway’s forty years of experience as a writer surely influenced such a description of the writing process. In the process of anamnēsis, the mnēmē of his experience writing in Paris is informed and deformed by the fact that he had an established career as a writer. As Kennedy puts it, “When Hemingway composed *A Moveable Feast*, he obviously foresaw the end of his career; he reflected on his apprentice years as if to consolidate the myth of his origins and to recover, by an act of identification, his earlier relationship to writing” (140). His inability to write has a solution in the story because, with hindsight, Hemingway knows he will be able to write many stories and novels. From his point of view, his ability to “get it going” and “go on from there” was inevitable. He was cognizant of his success as a writer in the late 1950s, so his memory of himself as a writer in 1920s was one where eventually “it was easy” to write.

Keeping in mind that Hemingway himself permitted the reader of his memoir to regard it as fiction, Hemingway’s own imagination is, of course, at play. Such a dependence on a person’s imagination for historical events may seem problematic. Paul Ricoeur writes that “the constant danger of confusing
remembering and imagining, resulting from memories becoming images in this way, affects the goal of faithfulness corresponding to the truth claim of memory” (7). Certainly *A Moveable Feast* is a work of imagination and therefore has little, or perhaps no, relevance to faithfully depicting true accounts, something that Hemingway’s preface reiterates when he admits that *A Moveable Feast* can be “regarded as fiction.” But it does not lose its value—even its historical value—because it is a product of memory and imagination. Ricoeur qualifies his thought about the “constant danger of confusing remembering and imagining” by stating that “We have nothing better than memory to guarantee that something has taken place before we call to mind a memory of it” (7). Ricoeur suggests that there is no better way of establishing the reality of the past than memory. So, as inaccurate or self-aggrandizing as *A Moveable Feast* may be, it is likely the best way of having any record of the past.

Walter Benjamin takes Ricoeur’s acceptance of memory as the best record of the past even further when he suggests that memory is the past. Benjamin remarks that “memory is not an instrument for exploring the past, but rather a medium” (576). It is due to memory that the past exists at all. For Benjamin, memories—while incapable of accuracy or objective truth—are what allow the past to have any significance at all. Speaking of remembering as an archeological excavation, Benjamin says that “it is undoubtedly useful to plan excavations methodically. Yet no less indispensable is the cautious probing of the spade in the dark loam” (576). The dark loam of Hemingway’s memory of 1920s Paris is equally incapable of accuracy or objective truth and is not suitable for a methodical excavation. Hemingway’s subjectivity and imagination taint *A Moveable Feast*, but its cautious probing into his memory still provides useful insight into his character and environment.

**Truth Value in Artistic Representation**

*A Moveable Feast* is not only beneficial because it is the best record we could have of the past (as Ricoeur would suggest), but because as a representation, its artistic approach to the past can more freely draw the reader near the truth. The reason for putting something in an archive is so we can forget it and have someone else remember it for us. When we can pass on the responsibility for remembering to the archive, our imagination and subjective thoughts are then free to deal with the past without concern for accuracy of testimony.
This kind of imagination and subjectivity endorses creative, idealistic, hopeful, and hyperbolic representations of the past. While bearing witness or providing testimony based on memory is under constant scrutiny for how it will lead to commandment and judgment, subjective representation is free from those constraints and is therefore able to approach the truth without concern for its reliability. Free from that pressure for accuracy, artistic remembrances can better represent the past. *A Moveable Feast* serves as an archive for 1920s Paris, thus relieving society of the burden of having to remember, while at the same time allowing society to nostalgically not forget. It is unreliable as a testimony or documentary account of 1920s Paris, but as a subjective representation of memory it can approach the truth without having to declare a verdict of true or false. Because memory is unreliable, it is best to tell and archive artistic stories. Tim O’Brien explores the way that unreliable memory is still artistically useful when he admits that the stories of his experiences in Vietnam are “invented” in *The Things They Carried*. He made things up because, as he says, “I want you to feel what I felt. I want you to know why story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth” (179), suggesting that how “true” something is might have more to do with the feeling it creates than with the accuracy or objectivity by which facts are related. Like O’Brien, Hemingway’s record is in some ways “made-up” and is not always “happening-truth.” But that does not make it useless. In fact, the artistic construction of *A Moveable Feast* makes it more valuable than verified facts would be to readers trying to understand 1920s Paris. Just as O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried* fails to be accurate and thereby gets closer to the story-truth of Vietnam, so Hemingway’s *A Moveable Feast* fails to be accurate and thereby creates an artistic nostalgia of 1920s Paris.

Nostalgia based on subjective representations like *A Moveable Feast* is disconcerting to critics such as Fredric Jameson who, in his essay “Nostalgia for the Present” argued that nostalgia is dangerous. He says that nostalgia can so powerfully impact how we view ourselves that “the sense people have of themselves and of their own moment of history may ultimately have nothing whatsoever to do with its reality” [emphasis in original] (281). His concern about nostalgia is that by focusing too much on the past, society will neglect to alter the present and thus harm or even destroy the future. This concern is directly addressed in Woody Allen’s *Midnight in Paris* where the ideal setting for analyzing nostalgia is 1920s Paris, a setting that relies on the archive established by *A Moveable Feast*. Gil Pender, a modern American, is magically transported back in time, experiences 1920s Paris, but eventually chooses to remain in his
present. Gil’s nostalgia is critiqued by his fiancé and others, including Paul Bates, the presumptuous and condescending character who mockingly refers to Gil as “Miniver Cheevy” and tells him that “nostalgia is denial”⁵. Denial of the painful present” (Midnight in Paris). Paul echoes the argument of Jameson, that nostalgia has dangerous consequences for how we live in the present. But Gil, the nostalgic romantic in denial, is the one who learns and grows in the film. Characters like Inez and Paul, who never had any nostalgia, are the most hollow and unhappy characters. While in the end, Gil realizes that he cannot live in the past and does not want to. His nostalgia makes him more mature, creative, and assertive. Gil’s nostalgia for 1920s Paris provides him with a mature identity and ideology that give him the determination to leave his unhealthy relationship with Inez, embrace his passion for writing, and find happiness. The characters who criticize nostalgia must live in the unsatisfying present, while remembering the past motivates characters like Gil to live life more fully. Allen’s film resists the fears that Jameson espoused and instead demonstrates that nostalgia is constructive, even when basing the longing on a subjective archive, it is good for us. Despite the fact that Gil’s nostalgia is based on the fictional, inaccurate archive of A Moveable Feast, it is useful and even healthy to experience that nostalgia.

The value of subjective representation is not just clear in 2011 artistic creations like Midnight in Paris, but it was also apparent to Hemingway himself. Hemingway was aware that the accuracy of his work, although often autobiographical, was obscured by his unreliable memory. As Verna Kale has noted, “Hemingway seems aware that translation and autobiography are both artificial systems that rely on language and the subjective experience of the reader. Because it cannot be explained to anyone who was not there, Hemingway plays down the importance of the era (‘personally I don’t think it was worth much’)” (139), helping to explain why he felt he could express a lot by saying very little. In fact, one of the hallmarks of Hemingway’s style is his “iceberg theory” that encourages writing as little as possible to convey an idea or image⁶. Hemingway writes only what is necessary to avoid misguided attempts at being accurate or truthful because descriptions are always filtered by human subjectivity. Hemingway’s very style of writing suggests that he had at least a subconscious grasp of the unreliability of memory. The fact that he did not stop writing suggests he also understood that there was value in nostalgia and subjective, artistic representation.
It is true that memory is inherently subjective and therefore questionable and problematic for establishing order or pronouncing judgment, but even subjective representations based on memory are beneficial and productive. While a memoir like A Moveable Feast fails to achieve historical accuracy, it succeeds in creating a nostalgia that is free from having to assign truth or falsehood and instead can be a vehicle for nostalgia that helps cultural consumers learn and grow. Like Gil Pender, when we turn to 1920s Paris through A Moveable Feast (or potentially to any other memory-based representation of the past), we are able to understand an artistic truth (or story-truth) that can be more valuable than objective history. As fictional art, nostalgic representations of the past as depicted in A Moveable Feast provide a space for artistry that, because of its freedom, can perhaps approach truth more closely than witness or testimony by representing, rather than passing judgment on, what is “true.”

Endnotes
1 See Gajdusek’s Hemingway’s Paris 8.
2 See Ricoeur 166-76; Agamben 137-65, esp. 143-46; and Marlene Manoff’s extensive report “Theories of the Archive from Across the Disciplines.”
3 See Ricoeur’s discussion of Aristotle’s terms mnēmē and anamnēsis 18-19.
4 See Jameson 286-87.
5 Jameson’s distrust of nostalgia is reminiscent of Edwin Arlington Robinson’s Miniver Cheevy, the poetic character whose nostalgia for swords, steeds, Camelot, and iron clothing, turn him toward melancholy and drinking.
6 Hemingway succinctly describes his “iceberg theory” in Death in the Afternoon: “If a writer of prose knows enough of what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them. The dignity of movement of an ice-berg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water. A writer who omits things because he does not know them only makes hollow places in his writing” (192).


Charles Darwin proclaimed that fitness, which includes instincts, determines survival. In application to society, Darwin takes that theory a step further: in order to survive—or rather thrive—in society, humans rely upon their innate “social instincts” (1279). But just how powerful are these “social instincts” that Darwin claims humans possess? According to Darwin’s *The Descent of Man*, these selfless social instincts eventually prevail, which can lead to the willingness of animals or humans “to risk or sacrifice significant amounts of their own good, sometimes their own lives, for the benefits of others” (Brandhorst 6). However, these risks or sacrifices are not made on a consistent basis, and extend “only to those of the same community,” wherein they are “highly beneficial to the species” (Darwin 1279). Theodore Hook’s “The Old Gentleman”—a neglected Victorian short story—actually participates in this discussion of social instincts, for it portrays the narrator’s imbalance of instincts that is created by a new trait (the power of mind reading and foresight). However, this imbalance of instincts causes external struggles between the narrator and society. Ultimately,
“The Old Gentleman” suggests that the supernatural power of mind reading and foresight clashes with Darwinian social instincts when an individual forsakes his “intellectual powers” (Brandhorst 9) and sympathy. Moreover, this forsaking of social instincts can potentially become detrimental to the individual with the instinct imbalance, which can even lead to a societal unfitness, resulting in removal from a community.

As Brandhorst describes, in *The Descent of Man*, Darwin names three “intellectual powers” that enable “those who have them to understand and predict the behavior of others”: “language,” “experience,” and “habit” (9). Unfortunately, the narrator of “The Old Gentleman” fails to rely upon these three intellectual powers, contributing to his numerous failed social interactions. Instead, the narrator relies upon supernatural gifts—mind reading and foresight—given to him by the curious old gentleman who follows him home in order to fulfill the narrator’s desire and vain pursuit for the last five or six years. These supernatural gifts only apply to others, meaning the narrator cannot foresee his own future, unless it is inextricably linked with that of others. Naturally, this limits the narrator from fully foreseeing the consequences of his actions. This degree of uncertainty may at first seem to be the downfall of the narrator. However, the following examples will exhibit the necessity of uncertainty in relationships with others; this uncertainty becomes an advantage when coupled with language, experience, and habit. Thus, ironically, in the end, we can see that the narrator does not have a great enough degree of uncertainty in his interactions with others, which leads to his societal rejection.

In regards to “language,” since the narrator can read minds and foresee future events, he does not have to rely on exchanging “language” with others anymore, and so he foregoes conversation and instead jumps to his own conclusions. For instance, when the narrator divulges a detailed description of Barton’s (his butler) escapades from the preceding evening with his sweetheart and of Barton’s future intentions, the narrator certainly does not gain this knowledge through an exchange of any kind with another human being. As a result, the narrator’s communication becomes very one-sided. In fact, even his perspective is one-sided, for he only sees the intentions of personal gain (especially with Sheringham—the narrator’s pompous friend—and Fanny—the narrator’s initial love interest) and is offended that these individuals of his community are inclined to do anything to his disadvantage—to violate their social instincts. But the narrator, by divulging the information in such detail, is actually hypocritically reacting in ways that bring no benefit to anyone, disregarding his own
social instincts, as he attempts to assuage his own hurt feelings. Naturally, each character assumes that the narrator has gone to extreme lengths to obtain this information; both Barton and Sheringham attribute the narrator’s knowledge to spying (294-5). Mr. Fitman, who is so outraged after the narrator exposes Mr. Fitman’s lie about the quality of the cloth he is attempting to sell him and subsequently even kicks Mr. Fitman down the flight of stairs in his fury, actually files a case against the narrator for assault (298). In these cases where the narrator abuses his supernatural powers and relies on a one-sided conversation, he burns ties with the other characters; none of the results are beneficial to anyone, not even the narrator, though he ignores these results and simply focuses on the “[elation] with the possession of [his] extraordinary faculty” (294).

In addition to creating a one-sided conversation, the narrator also incites mistrust in his relations when he bypasses language. Due to the condition that the narrator must never tell another soul about his power or else he will lose it, the narrator refuses to divulge how he really knows the information. In the case of Barton, the narrator goes so far as to affect “an anger [he does] not feel” in order to protect his power (294). Not surprisingly, each of the characters loses trust in the narrator; ironically, they probably would not believe the real means by which the narrator acquired such intimate knowledge anyway, so trust would probably have been lost either way. Thus, the narrator’s new power is even more disadvantageous to the social instinct of language, for it removes one person’s need for language, while the other person still has the existing need. This loss of a linguistic foundation upon which both sides can stand results in an imbalance. Because communication is so intricately tied to trust (sharing of information builds trust), this imbalance of communication leads to a loss of trust because the narrator withholds information from others.

Unfortunately, this mistrust caused by disregarding language can potentially lead to much more dire consequences than just severing ties; in fact, in “The Old Gentleman,” this mistrust ultimately leads to a communal rejection of the narrator. For instance, Fanny—the narrator’s initial love interest—invites the narrator to the opera, but only on the pretense that he “play propriety during the evening” (297), for she has her eyes on another man—Sir Henry Witherington. As such, the narrator rudely declines her invitation, unveiling all of his knowledge obtained through his new powers. However, he still attends the opera in order “to satisfy [himself] of the justness of [his] accusation against Fanny” (300). This only leads to more trouble, for the narrator even pulls Sir Henry Witherington, who is clueless as to the circumstances, unaware even of
the narrator’s name (301), into the drama. Ignoring Sir Henry’s need for language (which is greater than any other’s in this situation because of his lack of association with the narrator), the narrator proceeds to insult this stranger when he pulls him aside, saying, “Sir Henry Witherington, your uncalled for interference of to-night must be explained; here is the card of one who has no other feeling for your insolence but that of the most ineffable contempt” (302). By doing so, the narrator gives no explanation for his contempt of this stranger and even closes the door on any chance of future communication with his impoliteness. Not surprisingly, Sir Henry does not seek a further explanation and instead sends a friend later that same night to arrange a meeting for a challenge. However, the narrator refuses the challenge, claiming, first, that this is a matter that does not concern Sir Henry and then finally that he did not wish Sir Henry to lose his life—obviously a lie since the narrator was indeed annoyed “at the worldly consequences,” but “gloried in [his] privilege of prescience, which had informed [him] of the certain result of [their] hostile interview” (304). After the narrator’s refusal, word of the refusal spreads, and even “those who had been [his] warmest friends” begin to reject the narrator’s society, forcing the narrator to actually quit society and escape into the countryside (304). Perhaps if the narrator had taken into account Sir Henry’s complete lack of knowledge of the circumstances and chose to fulfill Sir Henry’s need for language, the narrator would not have severed ties with more than simply Fanny, Fanny’s mother, and Sir Henry. Clearly, these three characters exercised their reliance upon language and communication by relaying these trust-destroying experiences to their friends. Ironically, they build their own foundations of trust with friends while destroying the narrator’s foundations of trust with others. Therefore, by creating social disconnects between the narrator and others, the narrator’s new powers lower his biological fitness, for society begins to reject him.

In addition to language, the narrator also foregoes the intellectual powers of “experience” and “habit,” skewing his immediate knowledge and his reactions to others’ actions. In one such case, Sheringham cannot believe that “after years of undivided intimacy” (395)—of “experience” of Sheringham’s tried and true loyalty—the narrator would suddenly become suspicious enough of his intentions so as to spy on him. Of course, the narrator did not spy on the other characters because of his mistrust in each of them; his power allows him no choice in reading thoughts. Yet, in a way, the narrator indicates a general mistrust for others simply in his Dr. Frankenstein-like pursuit of such a power as to know the thoughts of others. As stated at the beginning of the story, the
narrator was ardently searching how to grant himself such power for about five to six years before the story even begins, but he never indicates his reasoning for such a strange pursuit. Certainly, he must have predicted some unexpected discoveries, even perhaps controversial ones; otherwise such a power would not possess so much intrigue. By pursuing such power, the narrator automatically indicates his desire to live without “experience,” for he desires to rely on immediate and limited knowledge. Even though “experience” is a type of knowledge, we tend to add our accumulated experiences together and then determine how we will act based on the conglomeration; hence, the knowledge upon which the narrator relies is very limited because he ignores all of the other knowledge he gained from past experiences. Therefore, this immediate knowledge from this power is skewed and too one-sided.

Even though the narrator had to be anticipating discovering unexpected information, he reacts rashly and ends up foregoing his “habits”—his social habits—which in the past used to dictate his manners. For instance, when the narrator replies to Fanny’s invitation to the opera, he informs her of her own intentions and declines by saying, “As I have no desire to be the foil of any thing in itself so intrinsically brilliant as your newly discovered baronet, I must decline your proposal” (297). Unmistakably, the narrator masks and yet even heightens his sarcasm through gentlemanly language. The message is clear and is even more impolite than if the narrator had just simply refused, which would have been the true gentlemanly action in this situation. Therefore, by breaking from a gentleman’s behavior, the narrator also breaks from his usual “habits.” Moreover, this new power becomes more than just an additional skill; it becomes instinctive—a new “habit,” per se. Even the narrator admits how integrated into his actions the new power has become when he claims he “intuitively and instinctively wrote” Fanny, using his power to reveal all of her true motives (296). And so because this new power becomes instinctive and, in tandem, overrides the narrator’s social instincts, “The Old Gentleman” seemingly questions Darwin’s theory that social instincts always prevail. However, the narrator has simply experienced an alteration in the balance of power, and as Brandhorst reasons, “this is an image of struggle, but the change in the balance of power takes time and should not be thought of as an experience of psychological conflict” (6). Thus, inevitably, the balance must be restored, meaning that the narrator must return to his old “habits.”

However, while the imbalance of power still exists, the narrator also forsakes another “native component of the human make-up passed along by
natural selection” (May 22)—sympathy. As outlined by Adam Smith, an eighteenth-century moral philosopher, in his Theory on Moral Sentiments, though sympathy is normally thought of as “the emotion which we feel for the misery of others” (1), Smith actually understood sympathy to “denote our fellow-feeling with any passion whatever” (5–6). In “The Old Gentleman,” even though the narrator can read thoughts and understand motives for people’s actions, he does not actually share in their feelings; if he did, then he would be capable of sympathizing with their actions and probably would not be so offended by them. For example, when Sheringham informs the narrator that he did not get appointed to a position that he had desired, the narrator focuses on the outrage of the subterfuge of his friend, rebutting,

“If this matter concern you so deeply, as you seem to imply it does, might I ask why you so readily agreed to your uncle’s proposition, or chimed in with his suggestion, to bestow that appointment on this relation of the Marquess, in order that you might, in return for it, obtain the promotion for which you are so anxious?” (295)

Granted, anyone would probably be upset if he found out that his friend had lied and even swindled him out of an appointment in exchange for personal gain, for this is normally not characteristic of “friend” behavior. However, the narrator only concentrates on Sheringham’s thoughts and actions, assuming that he knows exactly how Sheringham felt. The narrator simply assumes that Sheringham has absolutely no regrets, even though he admits as Sheringham is leaving that his “friendship even to [his] enlightened eye was nearly as sincere as any other man’s” (296). Evidently the narrator cannot see the whole picture; the narrator is so self-absorbed that he cannot sympathize with Sheringham to understand what feelings motivated him to pursue his own personal gain (even though the narrator is not a stranger to pursuing personal gain). In this respect, even though Adam Smith reasons that no human being can ever perfectly sympathize with another human being, the narrator does not even manage to imperfectly sympathize. Moreover, from Sheringham’s perspective, since the narrator himself knows every detail of the circumstances, he also has violated “friend” behavior because he mistrusted Sheringham in the first place. Thus, with this combination of mistrust, lack of sympathy, foregoing of experience, and even non-adherence to habit, the narrator loses a “valued friend” (296), further diminishing his pool of individuals in his community.
Only once the narrator quits society and starts with almost a perfectly clean slate are his social instincts finally able to prevail. However, in this environment, the individuals in his community act much differently toward the narrator; he relishes, “Here I was, domesticated with an amiable family, whose hearts I could read, and whose minds were open to me:—they esteemed, they loved me—When others would oppress and hunt me from the world, their humble home was at my disposal” (305). The narrator lauds this new community because of its constant display of social instincts— they are continuously acting for his benefit. Interestingly, almost as if invoking Darwinian Theory, the narrator utilizes primal language—perhaps even the language of animals—by using the word “hunt,” implying that the other society actively excluded him from their community, which is why he was also excluded from benefiting from any of their social instincts. But then why would the individuals in one community hardly follow social instincts while the individuals in the other community constantly follow social instincts? First of all, in town society, more opportunities and hence more competition exist. Moreover, Darwin might argue that most of those additional opportunities fail to affect the survival of the community as a whole (in fact, they really did not even affect the survival of the narrator); therefore, social instincts do not apply under those circumstances. In the end, a true test of social instincts arises when the narrator is forced to decide between saving Mary (his love interest from the new community) or keeping his supernatural power; as Darwin predicts in *The Descent of Man*, the social instincts eventually prevail, and the narrator relinquishes his power. By doing so, he benefits the community. He saves a life and ensures offspring for the future since he and Mary wed soon afterward.

In the end, what benefit does the narrator’s power even bring him? Or, more importantly, his community? Clearly, this unnatural power of knowing the thoughts of other humans and foreseeing future events is not conducive to social instincts, for social instincts rely on an element of the unknown. If everything were known, then we would have no need to exchange language or to rely on experience and habit, leading to a disconnect between human beings—a disconnect regarding sympathy. In addition, the supernatural knowledge that the individuals in his community were not always acting for his benefit were injurious to his social instincts. In this respect, “The Old Gentleman” reveals the vitality of trust between a community’s individuals—trust that the other individuals will more often than not follow their own social instincts. This blind trust is built upon experience, language, habit, and sympathy, but when
an individual destroys these foundations, that trust disappears and the fitness of the community as a whole lowers, which then leads to the rejection of an individual from a community in order to regain the lost fitness. Thus, although the narrator’s power did ultimately raise his social fitness (he never would have known Mary loved him unless he could read her thoughts), it constantly lowered his fitness in society and hence society’s fitness. Had he chosen his power over Mary, he would have ultimately been rejected from another community once he encountered an individual not acting for his benefit, and he would have repeated his cycle of societal rejection once again. Therefore, his supernatural power actually ended up being a disadvantage in natural selection. In the end, this power actually lowers one’s biological fitness instead of increasing it, as one might wrongly be inclined to believe it would. Only through learning to embrace those social instincts and abandoning his new power does the narrator succeed in the struggle of natural selection.
Works Cited


Christopher Nolan’s *The Dark Knight* was the most popular movie of 2008. It outsold the number-two film of the year, *Ironman*, (another highly anticipated superhero film) by over 200 million dollars, and earned a worldwide total of more than 1 billion dollars, making it the highest grossing Batman film ever created (*Box Office Mojo*). The phenomenal success of *The Dark Knight* is due in large measure to the character of the Joker. One reason that this character drew audiences to the theater in droves was that he is an embodied representation of the evil of mass shootings, something that petrified audiences in 2008.

It has been argued that the Joker is one of the largest causes of the wild popularity of *The Dark Knight*. Renowned critic Roger Ebert observes that “the key performance in the movie is by the late Heath Ledger, as the Joker” (Ebert). It would seem that Mr. Ebert’s assertion is correct, considering that Ledger was the only actor in the cast nominated for an Academy Award, and he won the 2008 award for best supporting actor (“Academy Award Database”). In addition, Ledger also won nearly every other award available for a supporting role, including a Golden Globe, a BAFTA award, and Screen Actors Guild Award,
along with numerous others, both American and international (“Heath Ledger: Awards”). One critic, Charles Bellinger, compared the film to John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, saying that just as Satan is Milton’s “most interesting character, much more so than Adam, Eve, the angels, or Christ,” that the Joker is “clearly the most interesting character in *The Dark Knight*”. Moreover, Bellinger insists that not only do the two villains share their popularity; the Joker is a “figurative version of Satan” (Bellinger 4).

Calling the Joker Satanic is no stretch at all. The pure evil of the character is succinctly assessed in the film by Alfred, the wise old mentor character: “Some men just want to watch the world burn,” he asserts (*The Dark Knight*). Some critics have compared the Joker’s delight in depravity and destruction to 21st century terrorism, like the 9/11 attacks on New York City in 2001, and other similar incidents; for instance, publications such as *The Wall Street Journal*, *Slate*, and *Variety* each published articles about *The Dark Knight* in which the Joker was categorized with post-9/11 terrorists (Klavan; Stevens; Chang). Because of his predilection toward causing panic and attacking citizens, such a comparison is certainly fair to a certain extent. However, a more analytical look at the Joker’s character reveals that the title of terrorist is insufficient. *The New York Times* got it right in their review, stating that the Joker “is not a terrorist,” because “he isn’t fighting for anything or anyone,” and therefore transcends such a label (Dargis).

Comparisons to terrorism are insufficient mostly because they indicate a lack of understanding concerning the Joker’s motives. Terrorism—for all of its irrationalities and cruelty—is slightly more reasonable than the Joker. Slightly. The al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, for instance, issued two *fatwas*, or declarations of war, in the late 90s leading up to the 2001 World Trade Center attacks. The 1996 *fatwa* was a 30-page, structured declaration of grievances in which Bin Laden describes the United States as “iniquitous crusaders” and proclaims that “efforts should be concentrated on destroying, fighting and killing the enemy until, by the Grace of Allah, it is completely defeated” (“Bin Laden’s Fatwa”). He accuses the United States of the unwarranted arrests of prominent Sheikhs, invasions of holy lands, and numerous economic wrongdoings. However misguided and unreasonable the actions of al-Qaeda and other similar organizations may be judged to be, they at least have reasons behind their actions. They have a goal, and they are engaging in a fight that they believe will allow them to attain that goal. For Batman’s grinning nemesis, however, the fight is the goal. Destruction is the means and the end.
The Joker himself, in a moment of bone-chilling transparency, declares, “I’m a dog chasing cars . . . I wouldn’t know what to do with one if I caught it, ya know? I just do things,” and later, to Batman, he says, “I don’t want to kill you. What would I do without you?” adding “I won’t kill you, because you’re just too much fun. I think you and I are destined to do this forever.” In Alfred’s words, once again, the Joker isn’t “looking for anything logical, like money. [He] can’t be bought, bullied, reasoned, or negotiated with” (The Dark Knight). The Joker scared audiences in 2008, but not because he was a terrorist. Rather, he was completely unreasonable. In this sense, the Joker finds his place in cultural mythos among such terrors as the zombies from Romero’s Night of the Living Dead, the shark from Jaws, and the titular whale of Moby Dick. These figures share the alarming characteristic of insatiability and ambivalence. As Alfred points out, no amount of money, persuasion, or intimidation can prevail against an utterly unreasonable foe.

The indiscriminate and motiveless cruelty of the Joker finds its nearest analogue in reality in the figure of the mass shooter. It is both unfortunate and undeniable that by 2008 mass shootings had become a regular feature on the nightly news. Many consider 1999, the year of the Columbine High School shooting, to be the beginning of an era of similar mass shootings (“10 Years Later”). In the years between Columbine and opening night of The Dark Knight in 2008, there were at least fourteen instances of such tragedies in the United States (“Mass Shootings In America”). These attacks occurred in diverse locations including shopping centers, government buildings, places of worship, and schools. These locations reflect the general randomness of the shootings. Almost exclusively, the gunmen entered crowded locations and began killing indiscriminately, targeting anyone, everyone. Their murderous aggression was not focused on a supposed enemy or individuals who had done them any harm. For this reason, mass shootings were a particularly ominous form of violence. The victims were not in violent neighborhoods, military locales, or other settings where violence could predictably erupt. This meant that every person, no matter how innocuous their activity or peaceful their surroundings, could potentially find themselves staring down the barrel of a gun. This utterly senseless and morally unthinkable manifestation of violence is the reason why the Joker frightened audiences in 2008 in a way that he would not have fifty years earlier. Random, motiveless public slaughter was a looming threat to all Americans.

One additional way in which the Heath Ledger version of the Joker mirrors the real-life shooters familiar to the 2008 ticket-holder is his seemingly
magical appearance out of thin air. Other earlier versions of the Joker, in both film and comic books, were generally not as mysterious. An exhaustive review of the Joker’s 70-year history as a character is not to be attempted here, but concerning his backstory, there are two common patterns that are relevant to the discussion at hand. In some tellings of the story, the Joker is a recurring and familiar menace that returns frequently to raise mayhem in Gotham. In a 1980s comic, for instance, the Joker is chased away from the city, and Commissioner Gordon asks, “Do you think he’s gone this time, Batman?” Batman answers, “believe me, Commissioner; I’d like to think so. But in my heart of hearts, I doubt it” (Wein). Thus the Joker as an incessant menace is an unwelcome but not unexpected presence in Gotham City. Indeed, the nature of the Joker/Batman hostility is characterized by Michael Nichols as an eternal struggle, a primeval yin and yang dichotomy that follows the tradition of the ancient combat myth (Nichols). However, it is significant to note that in the Nolan incarnation the Joker is a complete mystery, a new and horrifying development that inexplicably bursts onto the scene. At the end of the precursor to The Dark Knight, the appropriately titled Batman Begins (also created by Nolan), in a scene of deliberate foreshadowing, Commissioner Gordon informs Batman of a new criminal presence in the city. Handing him an evidence bag containing a single joker playing card, Gordon says “He has a taste for the theatrical, like you; he leaves a calling card.” To which the caped crusader coolly replies, “I’ll look into it” (Batman Begins).

Thus the Joker is not a known and anticipated foe, but a new and mysterious nihilistic force. When he is finally apprehended by the police, an investigation on him yields “No matches on prints, DNA, dental. Clothing is custom, no labels. Nothing in his pockets but knives and lint. No name, no other alias” (The Dark Knight). In a similar fashion, shooters such as Adam Lanza, Dylan Klebold, Eric Harris, and James Holmes became nationally recognizable names, rising from obscurity to infamy overnight. Of the 12 previously mentioned shootings that took place in the years before the release and success of The Dark Knight, none were perpetrated by career lawbreakers or famous crime figures. Each was an episode of murderous rage carried out by an unknown and heretofore non-threatening individual. This is part of the terror of the mass shooter; the person who was living life quietly yesterday is suddenly shooting up a church today. The Joker reflects that in his out-of-thin-air appearance in Gotham.

The second pattern of note in the Joker’s past is the presence or absence of his backstory. As has already been discussed, the Joker is alternatingly known
and mysterious in Gotham. In a similar way his past and transformation into an anarchic jester are sometimes explained in detail, and at other times are not. Occasionally in the Batman canon, the Joker's transformation is depicted outright. For instance, in a 1988 comic book, it is explained that the Joker was once a normal man who fell into a river full of chemicals, which turned his skin green and his heart to stone (Moore). The 1989 film Batman—also the most popular film of its respective year—offers a similar origin; the audience sees a criminal fall into a vat of chemicals and emerge as the colorful, murderous Joker.

Significantly, the origins of the 2008 Joker are uncertain. In fact, he purposefully muddies the waters of his past, telling conflicting stories about how he received his signature facial scars. In one version, his alcoholic father slits his cheeks after killing his mother, leaving the young Joker-to-be disfigured and motherless. In a second, contradictory account, he claims that he mutilated himself, in order to match the scars his wife earned from an attack by his loan sharks. Other than these obviously contradictory stories, the audience has no idea who the Joker is, where he came from, or what his motivations are for his actions.

The 2008 Joker wears white makeup and a painted-on, sloppy red grin. He cannot have the colorful face as a result of falling into a vat of chemicals. Such an explanation would have been too fantastic to frighten the mass-shooting plagued audience for whom Nolan made the film. Such a story of origin would have alternatingly humanized the Joker as a man with a burden and caricatured him as a fantasy villain. This Joker paints his own face, purposely decorating himself in the macabre grimace, and he is angry and violent for no explained reason.

For these reasons, the Joker in The Dark Knight fascinated audiences, and continues to do so today, considering that the wave of public shootings has not slowed since the appearance of the most recent Joker incarnation. If in 20 years such horrific acts of senseless violence are no longer a source of public fear, the Heath Ledger Joker will cease to frighten and compel audiences in the same way. It should be noted, however, that the Joker manages to be compelling in terms of his similarities to mass shooters without being distasteful. Had this film depicted the Joker as actually entering a school and firing at random, or anything quite that concretely connected with mass shootings, it would have been too close to home. Thus, this film found the razor's edge between realism and repugnance. This is mainly accomplished through the chronotopic nature of the Joker's character. A chronotope is a “fundamental organizing metaphor” in
which “basic conceptions of time and space get translated into narrative terms” (Dentith). In this case, the concept of mindless, senseless violence has been given a foul cackle and a purple suit and has been sent into the city of Gotham. He is an embodiment, a living, breathing evil, a metaphor ambulant. The use of a chronotope allows the film to directly address the evil and heartlessness taking the form of mass shootings without becoming heavy handed or crass.

Seeing that this chronotopic representation of evil comes just short of being too close for comfort, Batman’s reaction to the chronotopic Joker is one of the most satisfying parts of the film. If his rival is absolute evil, Batman must be absolutely vicious in his attack. Much has been said concerning the clandestine nature of Batman’s tactics, many seeing them as a thinly veiled metaphor for Patriot Act-style political intrusion. One critic goes as far as to say that the entire film is “a paean of praise to the fortitude and moral courage that has been shown by George W. Bush in this time of terror and war” (Klavan). Others, however, are quick to point out that the pendulum swings both ways, and that the depiction of rogue tactics is as much a condemnation as a celebration. Either way, as has already been put forth, terrorism and Bush-era international politics are not as useful an analogy for the joker as are the mass shooters of the same period. That being the case, the extreme tactics that Batman, his corporation, and the city officials resort to in order to stop the maniacal Joker can be seen as the national outcry and rage directed toward the perpetrators of violent public shootings.

For example, accused mass shooter James Holmes may face the death penalty for his alleged attack on a movie theater in Colorado in 2012. He is one of the few mass shooters to stand trial for his actions. One man who lost a friend in the massacre shockingly told reporters “I want [James Holmes] dead. I just want to be there in the room when he dies” (“James Holmes Death Penalty”). This dramatic desire may not be communal among all Americans, but surely the heartache and desire for retribution is not isolated to one person. That is why Batman’s tactics and tough-guy demeanor are so satisfying in the film. If the Joker is the embodiment of ultimate Evil, movie logic dictates that Batman is justified in using ultimate force to stop him.

In an iconic scene, Batman dangles one of the Joker’s henchmen, Salvatore Maroni, over a ledge. Maroni sneers “If you’re trying to scare somebody, pick a better spot. From this height, the fall wouldn’t kill me,” to which Batman responds “I’m counting on it,” just before releasing the mobster and watching his legs break as a result of the fall. Later, when the Joker will not give the
police the information that they want, he is left alone with Batman, who does not have the ethical obligations that the police do. Once the door is closed, Batman unleashes a storm of physical violence against his nemesis, in what would be considered highly questionable interrogation techniques. Batman is performing a catharsis for the entire culture. He is punishing the unpunishable, considering that all but one of the 14 shooters previously mentioned committed suicide after carrying out their murderous rampages. When viewed in the light of national anger, Batman's brutality becomes satisfying, even appropriate and desired.

While no one aspect of a film can be credited with the film's success, the audience's abhorrence for and fear of mass shooters was certainly a psychological factor in the success of the 2008 blockbuster *The Dark Knight*. It had what every superhero film needs: a villain. Not just a “good” villain, but also one that terrified audiences in a way that struck home. Because of the sly way in which he was presented, the Joker was simultaneously compelling and repulsive without ever becoming too uncomfortably realistic. Like the feared shooter that haunted the national psyche, he appeared from nowhere, performed his foul deeds with no remorse, and could not be influenced, persuaded, or bargained with. In addition, Batman handled him in a way that was supremely satisfying, giving the audience a sense of perverse satisfaction. *The Dark Knight* came to the box office at a dark time in America's history. It was a dark film with dark heroes and villains, and it was gratifying enough to become the most popular film in the country.
The Motifs of Water and Death in Rudyard Kipling's and Joseph Conrad's Short Stories

Shane Peterson

Aside from the similarity of themes on European imperialism, Rudyard Kipling’s “Without Benefit of Clergy” and Joseph Conrad’s “The Lagoon” have similar motifs of life and death as shown through the natural surroundings of India and Southeast Asia. In both of these short stories, the descriptions of water in the monsoon and in the lagoon show how nature almost mourns for the deaths of the two female characters, Ameera and Diemelen. Kipling views water as bringing death because it is full of noise, fury, and sickness. Conrad’s descriptions of the river and the lagoon convey a sense of silence and immobility, reflecting the illusions of love and life that Arsat strives to attain. In either case, both authors seem to suggest that Nature is the true master of the Eastern provinces—rather than the British colonists, the local natives, or anyone in between—as shown in its manifestations of water, which give life and instill death simultaneously.

Conrad and Kipling had a large breadth of understanding of the water features and imperialist cultures in their respective settings of Southeast Asia and
India. Conrad gained some significant maritime experience from his travels with French ships that led him across the Atlantic, into Africa, and around the Far East (Watts). The symbol of water in the ocean or rivers becomes a major theme in some of his fiction. In Kipling’s case, he worked as a journalist in native India, particularly in the province of Lahore. He held this position for several years, which allowed him to “move freely among the different levels of Lahore society,” including the British military officials and the local Indians (Pinney). He also witnessed the rainy seasons throughout the year and how they affected the two different groups. For the British, times of flooding and famine were nothing but a loss of profits; for the Indians, they could bring either seasons of plenty and abundance or seasons of starvation and disease. These experiences of both authors may have helped them understand Nature’s prevalence over colonial power and influenced the narratives of these short stories as well as their natural settings and primary characters who stand above the colonized land and its inhabitants.

As part of the trope of white rulers in exotic foreign lands, both of these authors narrate their stories through the perspectives of two imperial white men who witness the beginning of the fall of colonialism. According to Kaori Nagai, both authors write their narratives from the viewpoints of white men who rule over the local natives in a way that “provokes awe and respect among the inhabitants,” so that the natives see each one of them as “a protector, a champion, and sometimes a god” (90). In “The Lagoon,” Arsat addresses the white man as “Tuan,” a Malaysian term for a European lord that means “sir” or “mister” (“Tuan”). Similarly, Ameera often calls Holden her “whole life” and even her “god” (Kipling 1740). In both cases, these white men live out a real-life fantasy of a white ruler over the natives, which Pinney describes as “pleasant” at first because their rule “is not forced but spontaneously accepted: the natives immediately see in the hero qualities far superior to theirs, and . . . follow his orders as the Law” (Nagai 90). Despite their respect and command over the native population, these characters “become the sole witness to the collapse of the fantasy” when someone they are close to either passes away or suffers a severe loss in correlation to a natural event like a monsoon or the rising sunrise over a lagoon (90). In essence, Nature destroys this illusion of power.

Before these natural events occur, Kipling and Conrad display the natural settings of India and Southeast Asia as being more silent with only slight suggestions of a coming catastrophe. In “Without Benefit of Clergy,” before the outbreak of cholera that would ultimately kill Ameera, the powers of Nature
“had allowed...four years of plenty wherein men fed well and the crops were certain” (Kipling 1737). Despite this abundance of food and life that the supernatural powers of nature provide, Kipling describes it as more of a calm before a storm through his images of “the blossom of the blood-red dhak tree that had flowered untimely for a sign of what was coming” (1737). This sign of the dhak tree as “blood-red” easily signifies a coming death on a national or individual scale. Its early blossoming also indicates that harder times are approaching, both for the British colonists and the local Indians, in which the land would respond after a season of plenty with a season of famine, disease, pestilence, and flood on a Biblical scale. Holden even overhears the Deputy Commissioner at the club state that “Nature’s going to audit her accounts with a big red pencil this summer” (1738). Indeed, a “red and heavy” audit comes when Kipling personifies the land itself as being “very sick and needed a little breathing-space ere the torrent of cheap life should flood it anew” (1739). At that point, the seasonal rains disturb the peace that puts the protagonist Holden at ease, making him feel like everything in his life is still within his control.

This is similar but slightly different in Conrad’s “The Lagoon,” in which the land is predominately more silent and pensive until a white ruler’s coming correlates with an impending death. As Tuan travels upstream, the jungle stands “motionless and silent” on both banks of the river as if it had “been bewitched into an immobility perfect and final” (59). This silence is almost lifeless because the water itself appears frozen and immobile as if Tuan had entered “a land from which the very memory of motion for ever departed” (59). This silence and stillness does not break until the coming of the white man’s canoe, the oars churning up the water “with a confused murmur” and causing it to gurgle out loud in “the short-lived disturbance of its own making” (59). Conrad describes the land as silent and motionless to show how the coming of the white man disturbs the peace with his presence. The sounds that the boat is making bring chaos and disorder to a place at rest. It is as though Tuan sets in motion the events of the story that will eventually claim Diamelen’s life, as if he were bringing death into the scene, while the lagoon and the forest around them remain quiet before the sick woman perishes. However, within the context of the narrative, it is important to keep in mind that Diamelen had already contracted her illness long before Tuan arrived. Even though the narrator makes it appear that the white man’s arrival foreshadows death, the natural world still maintains its hold over the jungle and its inhabitants. His journey up the river merely causes another disturbance in a world already beset by the
sickness of an apparent matriarch. Until her departure, Nature keeps her peace while she still has life within her.

Interestingly enough, the two female characters lie at the threshold between life and death, passing out of reach from their lovers as Nature takes her course. In Conrad’s story, when Arsat steps out of the hut after attending to his wife one last time, the earth seems to have enfolded into “a shadowy country of inhuman strife, a battle-field of phantoms terrible and charming, august or ignoble, struggling and mysterious country of inextinguishable desires and fears” (63). This otherworldly description suggests that his existence has become hazy and incoherent when his wife begins to leave him. Death has not come yet, but the darkness in the lagoon grows deeper. Similarly, Holden sees how Ameera begins to pass on into “a misty borderland where the living may not follow” when her sickness begins to take her (Kipling 1740). He also becomes disillusioned to how tangible or lasting this world is, as manifested by his blurred perception of her death as she is “thrust out as though the Angel of Death had himself put his hand upon her” (1740). These powers of Nature and Death—which can be seen in the two stories as being one and the same—claim his woman as their own, leaving him behind without any comprehension of any meaning left in the natural world. As these two women remain at an in-between state before they die, they give the male characters time to wonder and grieve as their natural surroundings begin to mirror these broodings.

In other words, the natural surroundings of the two British officials and the Malaysian native both reflect and influence their emotional reactions to the deaths of Diamelen and Ameera. For example, Tuan’s indifference mirrors the stillness of the lagoon. He reveals no real emotions concerning Diamelen’s death; therefore, the water to him means little else besides the misery of his Malaysian host, whom he only likes “as a man likes his favourite dog” (Conrad 62). He does not care much for Arsat’s wife either, but he is concerned enough to stay with Arsat as he mourns his loss. Because of this, the lagoon becomes “silent” and “motionless” even though poor Arsat is in torment, as shown when the stars shine out from “above the intense blackness of the earth” and cause their reflections in the lagoon to resemble “an oval patch of night-sky flung down into the hopeless and abysmal night of the wilderness” (62). His inward feelings reflect the lagoon’s image as well, alluding to how Diamelen’s eyes “glittered in the gloom” (62). But instead of feeling peaceful like Tuan, Arsat only feels hopeless and miserable. His wife’s slow passing gives him time to observe
his surroundings, which both imitate these emotions and distill them upon him.

By the same token, Holden is also in misery and turmoil when his beloved dies so the rain outside is nothing but chaos to him. As he stays by Ameera’s side, the rain roars on the roof and he cannot “think connectedly by reason of the noise, though he made many attempts to do so” (Kipling 1740). The storm within him parallels the storm outside as he tries to grasp the reality that his beloved is dead. As he leaves the house, “the roaring wind” continues to howl, “driving the bolts of rain like buck-shot against the mud walls” (1741), again implicating the correlation between the turmoil the weather creates and his own personal torment. More specifically, the rain reminds him of warfare with the word choice of “buck-shot,” as if Nature is at war with the land while he is at war with himself—much like Arsat and his “battle-field of phantoms” (Conrad 63). Rather than seeing the beauty in a much-needed rainfall that will restore the land, he views it as nothing more than a cacophony of sounds that intensify his grief.

All the while Nature seems to mourn and pay tribute to the main characters’ lovers as they pass the threshold into the other world. When the sickness finally takes Diamelen, the entire lagoon seems to pass into a different world with her when the stars shine “paler as if they had retreated into the frozen depths of immense space” (70). Soon afterward, from out of the darkness, Tuan watches as “a column of golden light shot up into the heavens and spread over the semicircle of the eastern horizon” (70). This image of the rising sun brings new life into the world and finally sets the jungle into motion as it unveils the “polished and black” shadows of the lagoon (70). Even a “white eagle” rises into the air “in a slanting and ponderous flight” as it flies into the sunlight, “dazzlingly brilliant for a moment” before vanishing “into the blue as if it had left the earth for ever” (70). Naturally, this parallels Diamelen’s passing from the earth forever, even after the light of the sun fills the lagoon, the river, and the forest with life. Life begins in the lagoon when Diamelen’s life ends.

With Ameera’s death, the “long deferred rains” finally fall as the sky becomes “heavy with clouds” after a period of famine (Kipling 1740). Before she dies, she and Holden can hear “shouts of joy in the parched city” as the rains water the impoverished earth, causing its inhabitants to rejoice (1740). It rains “eight inches” that night and washes the earth “clean,” but what brings life to the community only signals death for Ameera and misery for Holden as he sits “still in his house considering his sorrow” (1741). Only he and Ameera are in a
state of trauma and mourning, even if her death occurs when Nature begins to act benevolently toward the people of India. These images of Nature bringing life do not necessarily cause the two women's deaths, but they do correlate with their passing. The rising of the sun over the lagoon and the falling rain in India bring life to each dead or dying land at the exact moments when Diamelen and Ameera pass away at last. This suggests that either Nature honors their deaths by giving life to the other inhabitants or that their deaths are what bring life back to the land in a symbolic sacrifice. Therefore, their deaths are arguably what bring life to a world filled with lifelessness.

But Diamelen and Ameera could not survive in their native lands for very long since they represented the last generation of native inhabitants that would not adapt to the rule of the English. Diamelen was the servant of a Rajah ruler who ran away with Arsat and his brother to escape their leader’s rule. Even though a sickness from the jungle was what killed her, Tuan’s approach up the river into the lagoon can be seen as a parallel to her demise. As aforementioned, his journey up river and into the lagoon metaphorically brings death into the story, as if the English overlords of Malaysia bring and perpetuate death under their rule. Similarly, Ameera refused to adapt to a British lifestyle despite her relationship with Holden. That being said, she did not survive the breakout of cholera, an epidemic outbreak—which is also representative of a natural phenomenon—that the British government did little to prevent or alleviate. Not even Ameera’s son could survive, probably because Ameera wanted him to live a Muslim lifestyle instead of a British one. These two situations show how, on a macrocosmic scale, Diamelen and Ameera could not thrive simply because they were not of the English ruling class. They were a part of two cultures that were dwindling under the influence of European colonialism, even if Nature ultimately gives or takes away all life in the provinces.

However, the British colonists are equally subject to the throes of Nature because they fail to consider that neither they nor the natives rule over the lands that they occupy; Nature is still the true master over the Asian waters, and only the creatures able to adapt to two different modes of life can survive. This is shown through the description of the frogs that remain after the storm at the end of Kipling’s story. After Ameera’s death, Holden steps out of the death-stricken house and sees that the “rain-lashed pond” outside is “alive with frogs” (1741). These amphibious animals that can survive both on land and on water seem to mock Holden for his loss when they begin “chuckling” as he passes. The storm does little to disturb or disrupt the frog’s way of life; rather,
they are able to thrive in these new conditions, much like the natives who are able to thrive in both the local and British cultures even after the monsoon. One example is Durga Dass, the landlord that plans to pull down Holden and Ameera’s house. Kipling describes him as wearing “white muslin” and driving a “C-spring buggy.” As “a member of the Municipality,” he has to power to pull down the house and sell what he can for salvage, as if he has become the conqueror of Holden’s estate (1741). In “The Lagoon,” Conrad describes the boat that Tuan takes upriver as “an amphibious creature” once it leaves the river and enters “its lair in the forests” (Conrad 60). Conrad labels the boat “juragan,” a Chinese type of boat with the prow and stem decorated with the figures of the head and the tail of a dragon (“Juragan”). Because the boat is shaped more like an animal than a man-made construction, it can seemingly pass from water to land and survive in either element. These dual beings, or those who can survive in two different environments, can escape any destructive changes that Nature may bring.

Of course, Nature still rules over the villages of India and the jungles of Southeast Asia instead of the native inhabitants or the British imperialists because she brings life and death to the characters of both stories, usually through the mode of water. She is impartial to any love that they feel for each other, and none of them can escape the impending doom she thrusts upon them. The governing powers of the English, such as the white men Holden and Tuan, cannot prevent the deaths of the two women, and their reactions to these deaths can only be fully understood through Kipling’s and Conrad’s descriptions of the water in each story. Perhaps the two authors do this to argue that not even the might of the British Empire can conquer Nature in all of her manifestations. She is what determines the fates of all creatures that live under her dominion. The white man may rule and the natives may understand her more, but ultimately she decides who dies or who lives. In this way, all human beings are equally mortal and susceptible to the powers that rule over the waters in the Eastern colonies.


In *Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue*, Paul Woodruff examines the concept of reverence in a secular, political, and civic context rather than merely a strictly religious one. Although reverence is a word commonly used in our modern vocabulary, it is mostly misunderstood and widely ignored. Ancient civilizations often prized reverence as a virtue—a concept that Woodruff claims is wholly missing from “secular discussions of ethics or political theory” (4). Woodruff devotes an entire book to defining what reverence is and how it can be implemented in modern life. Although the use of profanity, an act “expressive of a disregard or contempt for sacred things” (“profane”), may not seem to be the most reverent use of language, when it is used to tell a story in the most truthful manner, it can become a reverent act. Tim O’Brien refers to the Vietnam War as immoral and his novel, *The Things They Carried*, deals with the profane and irreverent aspects of the war while attempting to restore reverence to the lives behind Vietnam’s stories of psychological and physical waste.

Woodruff’s entire book is an attempt to define reverence, but his most distilled explanation of the virtue says, “Reverence begins in a deep understanding of human limitations; from this grows the capacity to be in awe of whatever we
believe lies outside our control—God, truth, justice, nature, even death. The capacity for awe, as it grows, brings with it the capacity for respecting fellow human beings, flaws and all” (3). Woodruff believes that reverence is a virtue and virtues are the capacity “to have certain feelings and emotions” which feelings and emotions lead a person to do “the right thing” (61-62). Although rational, analytical decision making is highly regarded in the modern world, humans base most actions and decisions on emotions and feelings. So, a virtue provides people with an emotional response to situations that will, in turn, lead them to right actions. A war zone is a place of moral confusion where fear, anger, anxiety, terror, and doubt haunt the feelings and actions of those in the war. O’Brien illustrates in his stories the emotional complexity inherent in combat, the difficulty of maintaining a virtue like reverence within the emotional confusion, and how sometimes the best way to deal with the emotions triggered by the terror of war is to deny or bury the intensity of those emotions in vulgar humor or profanity.

In the story of Ted Lavender’s death, O’Brien’s narrator justifies the harsh language and vulgar jokes the soldiers of Alpha Company make when their comrade is shot and killed while returning from relieving himself in the jungle. He says,

They used a hard vocabulary to contain the terrible softness. Greased they say. Offed, lit up, zapped while zipping. It wasn't cruelty, just stage presence. They were actors. When someone died, it wasn't quite dying, because in a curious way it seemed scripted, and because they had their lines mostly memorized, irony mixed with tragedy, and because they called it by other names, as if to encyst and destroy the reality of death itself. They kicked corpses. They cut off thumbs. They talked grunt lingo. They told stories about Ted Lavender’s supply of tranquilizers, how the poor guy didn’t feel a thing, how incredibly tranquil he was. (19).

The “softness” the men are trying to escape is the vulnerability of terror, sadness, grief, and pain that is mitigated by hard words and jokes. If they refuse to acknowledge the magnitude of death by demeaning it, they can “encyst” the pain, contain it in a benign form, encapsulate the terror and sorrow in a barrage of epithets and irreverent jokes to protect themselves from the overwhelming reality of death. Language keeps the devastation of their friend’s death at a surreal distance from themselves, which helps to keep the truth of their own mortality far enough away to prevent them from being paralyzed by fear. Language
has the power to frame perception, altering reality to conform to the needs of the speakers, and profanity is often used to subvert authority, whether that authority is real or imagined. Profanity is a harsh, rebellious, tough-minded, and an irreverent rejection of tradition and authority which provides the men with a feeling of bravery. The “hard” language of O’Brien’s soldiers is a means of undermining and confusing the power play of war, death, and self-preservation. Profanity and joking disguise the potency of fear and shame that, during hours of crises, cannot be allayed in any other way.

In an essay on the psychology of profanity, G.T.W. Patrick says, “Profanity is a primitive and instinctive form of reaction to a situation which threatens in some way the well-being of the individual, standing next to that of actual combat. Like all instinctive reaction it does not generate emotion but allays it” (126). The emotions of fear, terror, disgust, horror, grief, and sorrow that follow the death of their comrade cannot be expressed or even acknowledged but need some means of being allayed; swearing and mocking death smother the intensity of negative emotions, allowing the men to divorce themselves from the emotional pain. Patrick goes on to say, “We are thus able to account for the catharsis phenomena of profanity. It seems to serve as a vent for emotion and to relieve it” (126). The relief that the soldiers feel from profanity is not sufficient relief for a long period of time, but it does enable the men to continue to function in the short term so that “each morning, despite the unknowns, they [could make] their legs move. They endured” (O’Brien 20).

The hard language enables the men of Alpha Company to disguise their fear and repress their pain so that they do not have to stop and mourn the loss of their friend while they are still actors in the war. However, this emotional separation from their grief prevents them from feeling awe and reverence for death which becomes callousness toward death and the dead. The narrator describes the desecration of a teenage boy’s body when “Norman Bowker, otherwise a very gentle person, carried a thumb that had been presented to him as a gift by Mitchell Sanders” (12). The reality that an “otherwise . . . gentle person” would carry such a souvenir is a physical enactment of the profane language that separates the men from their terror and grief. Fighting to defend their lives, and watching as their friends are killed and blown into pieces, alters the men of Alpha Company. Where gentleness and reverence for life may have been the norm before the war, the brutality of combat unearths parts of the men that would otherwise have remained buried in their civilian lives; both for good and bad. Although the narrator acknowledges that the dangers of combat
have the capacity to bind soldiers together in a sense of camaraderie and loyalty, he laments the change within himself when he becomes consumed with vengeance for Bobby Jorgenson who fails to treat the narrator properly when he is injured. He says, “Something had gone wrong . . . I’d turned mean inside. Even a little cruel at times. For all my education, all my fine liberal values, I now felt a deep coldness inside me, something beyond reason. It’s a hard thing to admit, even to myself, but I was capable of evil” (191). The narrator recognizes his failed sensitivity, he feels shame that his “high, civilized trappings had somehow been crushed under the weight of the simple daily realities” (190). The simple daily realities include death, killing, swearing, and irreverence for the dead, as well as a growing callousness toward the gruesome reality of fighting a war.

But for all the gruesome brutality of the daily realities of war, there is an inexplicable beauty and “awful majesty [in] combat” (O’Brien 77). Illuminated tracer rounds, troops moving in symmetry, harmonies of sound and shape and proportions are all astonishing to the beholder and have an “aesthetic purity of absolute moral indifference” (77). The narrator’s account of such “powerful, implacable beauty” (77) sounds like an encounter with the sublime, and encountering the sublime is to be in awe of something beyond human vulnerabilities. And yet, this truth about war “is ugly” at the same time that it is aesthetically pure (77). In the same way, the truth about being near death in battle is that the “proximity to death brings with it a corresponding proximity to life” (77). Something beautiful and reverential is unearthed from the same brutality that, at times, unearths cruelty in the men. The narrator describes it as becoming aware of “your truest self, the human being you want to be . . . in the midst of evil you want to be a good man. You want decency. You want justice and courtesy and human concord, things you never knew you wanted” (77). The reality of death reveals to the men what is most valuable and precious about being alive. The world’s beauty is seen in sharper relief against the possibility of it being lost. War is ambiguity and contradiction, right and wrong get upended and confused, truth cannot be discerned from lies, reverence germinates in profanity, and ugliness is beautiful; and nothing in a true war story is ever absolutely true (78).

Despite the impossibility of absolute truth in a war story, the narrator of The Things They Carried relates the profanity and irreverence of its characters as a means of getting at the truth of a war story. He says, “If you don’t care for obscenity, you don’t care for the truth; if you don’t care for the truth, watch how you vote. Send guys to war, they come home talking dirty” (66).
War leads men to “talk dirty” in order to cope with the mutilations to body and psyche that Vietnam represents, and in a fascinating reversal, it is the truthful representation of their profanity that provides the narrator with a means out of emotional paralysis: “Telling stories seemed a natural, inevitable process, like clearing the throat. Partly catharsis, partly communication, it was a way of grabbing people by the shirt and explaining exactly what had happened to me . . . all the mistakes I’d made, all the terrible things I had seen and done” (151-52). Language, through profanity and through callous humor, disconnects the soldiers from the emotional trauma of death, which is necessary for emotional survival in the moment of crises. However, remaining disconnected can cause emotional paralysis, and it is through storytelling that the narrator reconnects emotionally in order to deal with his own trauma and to ultimately revive a sense of reverence for the death he witnesses.

The most profound example in the book of a story that ultimately links profanity, storytelling, truth, and reverence, is the story of Kiowa’s death in a field used as a “village toilet” (161). Kiowa’s death, and the guilt associated with it, paralyzes Norman Bowker when he returns home from the war. He drives endlessly around a lake in his hometown, reliving the night that Kiowa died and fantasizing about telling the story to anyone who will listen. Bowker writes to the narrator and begs him to write the story of Kiowa. He says, “I’d write it myself except I can’t ever find any words, if you know what I mean, and I can’t figure out what exactly to say. Something about the field that night. The way Kiowa just disappeared into the crud. You were there—you can tell it” (151). Bowker remains emotionally paralyzed, for he lacks the words that can relieve his guilt. “I sort of sank down into the sewage with [Kiowa],” he says, “Feels like I’m still in deep shit” (150). Unlike Bowker, the narrator writes—he tells stories about the war “virtually nonstop” (151). The narrator makes it clear that writing a moral war story that is true is impossible. He says, “If a story seems moral, do not believe it. If at the end of a war story you feel uplifted, or if you feel that some small bit of rectitude has been salvaged from the larger waste, then you have been made the victim of a very old and terrible lie. There is no rectitude whatsoever” (65). And yet, he continues to write war stories. If nothing is salvageable from the stories, he would cease to write them. Just as Bowker realizes that the story of Kiowa’s death in a field of excrement needs to be told, the narrator tells the story to salvage something, to rectify his guilt or to “make good” (154) on Bowker’s silence, or simply to “speak directly” and to “tell the full and precise truth about [their] night in the shit field” (153). To leave out the
profanity would mean compromising the truth, because the only way to tell if a war story is true is “by its absolute and uncompromising allegiance to obscenity and evil” (66). Telling the truth about the war, about death, and about guilt becomes its own rectitude.

David Jarraway, in an essay on The Things They Carried, takes the narrator literally when he dismisses the possibility of rectitude in war stories. He says that O’Brien effectively “eradicates all possibility for responsive uplift . . . by reducing even the metaphorical import of waste. As the measure of atrocious acts and imbecile events, waste’s claim on all concerned, accordingly, is seen to be absolutely literal” (696). However, the metaphorical import of “human waste” does not lose its meaning, even when the waste is also literal. In fact, contrary to Jarraway’s claim, the metaphorical import haunts the characters as much as the literal. In the twenty years between Kiowa’s death and the narrator’s return to Vietnam, the field “embodied all the waste that was Vietnam, all the vulgarity and horror” (O’Brien 176). The narrator finds it essential to tell the truth about the vulgarity and horror for both its metaphoric and literal import.

In discussing truth, Woodruff says: “Reverence sets a higher value on the truth than on any human product that is supposed to have captured truth” (Reverence 39). The act of telling the “story-truth,” that O’Brien distinguishes from factual or “happening-truth” (O’Brien 171), is an act of reverence, and it helps to “clarify and explain” (O’Brien 152) the emotional reality of the stories. Telling stories becomes a “reverence that moderates war in all times and cultures” and counter acts the “irreverence that urges [war] on to brutality” (Reverence 14). Telling the truth about the field, about the waste that filled their nostrils and tried to suck them down, is the narrator’s attempt at salvaging something from the waste, and the truth he privileges elevates the story of a field of human excrement, and its “nauseous vacuity and repulsive futility” (Jarraway 696), to a story of reverence.

Kiowa’s sinking into a mess of human sewage may seem to be a strange story to choose as an illustration of reverence, but returning to Woodruff’s definition, reverence begins in a deep understanding of human limitations. Bowker felt that he had the opportunity to save Kiowa’s life, but when he tries to pull him out of the water and muck, “the shit was in his nose and eyes. There were flares and mortar rounds, and the stink was everywhere—it was inside him, in his lungs—and he could no longer tolerate it. Not here, he thought. Not like this. He released Kiowa’s boot and watched it slide away” (O’Brien 143). Bowker wants to live, or at least he doesn’t want to die in the village toilet. He becomes
paralyzed by a sense of guilt, shame, and responsibility for Kiowa’s death. In the telling of Bowker’s story of guilt, the narrator acknowledges the human limitations in all the men of Alpha Company. Recognizing human limitations is an essential aspect of Woodruff’s definition of reverence, which he also writes about in his book, *The Ajax Dilemma*. In *Ajax* Woodruff says, “Reverence leads us to feel the weakness of human beings in contrast to the majesty of the divine. For this reason, reverence is the foundation of compassion, which grows from a felt sense of shared human weakness” (136). Compassion grows out of the narrator’s profound understanding of his own capacity for weakness and evil, and for the weaknesses and vulnerabilities of his comrades, and this compassion is a vital movement toward reverence.

The morning after Kiowa’s death, his comrades search in the rain and sewage for his body. After hours of searching, they locate the body but are unable to move it. In the typical way of dealing with trauma, Azar jokes about Kiowa’s death: “eating shit . . . wasted in the waste. A shit field. You got to admit, it’s pure world-class irony” (158). For Bowker, the remorse is too overpowering to be repressed through profanity. He tells Azar to quit the vulgar jokes, and even Azar begins to sense the need for reverence. While working to release Kiowa from the mud, the group of soldiers stop: “The men stood quietly for a few seconds. There was a feeling of awe” (167). In the midst of a literal field of excrement, amid the random carnage and waste of war, the men of Alpha Company feel awe in the face of death. Woodruff describes the reverence and awe that come to soldiers at such times: “Together, they will be conscious of the fragility of their own lives, and perhaps they will feel a sense of awe . . . at the immensity of the reality that does not conform to human wishes, the reality of death” (*Reverence* 51). The immensity of what has happened to their “intelligent . . . gentle . . . quiet-spoken . . . brave . . . decent” friend confronts the men (O’Brien 157), and they feel awe for what is beyond their control. Kiowa’s foul and vulgar death provides them with a more profound capacity for respect for their fellow human beings, and they feel reverence amidst the gore and helplessness of war.

In the chapter “Field Trip,” the narrator returns to Vietnam twenty years after Kiowa’s death. He revisits the field where Kiowa died, and in a deliberate act of reverence, releases Kiowa’s moccasins into the river. The act is both an imaginative gesture toward the dead and a literal gesture toward reverence—reverence for the life and death of Kiowa. It is also a symbolic closure to the madness of the war—the carnage, trauma, and evil of fighting, killing,
and dying in a war seemingly without meaning or purpose. Like the stories that O’Brien tells, the symbolic act in a Vietnamese field cannot rectify the loss or lift the war out of its own moral degradation, but as an act of reverence it elevates the grief and pain to something that is beyond the power of human beings to change—something transcendent. Just as telling stories that get at the truth of the war are acts of reverence, the custom of treating the dead with ceremony is a type of custom that Woodruff says belongs to reverence, a custom “by which human beings distinguish themselves most importantly from beasts of prey” (Reverence 97). Although Kiowa died like an animal in the most repulsive of manners, through ceremony and the truthful telling of his story, his death is granted honor and reverence.

O’Brien’s detailed telling of “story-truth” elevates the metaphysical importance behind the war and invites a sense of reverence to the narrative. Just as the reiteration of every concrete, tangible object that the men carry lends weight to the symbolic and metaphysical things they carry, a story with gruesome details of the brutality of war lends weight to the symbolic and metaphysical meanings beneath the concrete facts. Tina Chen in her essay “‘Unraveling the Deeper Meaning’: Exile and the Embodied Poetics of Displacement in Tim O’Brien’s The Things They Carried” says: “The close attention to the death and transformation of the body lays bare the paradox that characterizes any recounting of the war, emphasizing the very real horror of death even while elevating it into an aesthetic moment” (89). The elevation of horror to an aesthetic moment is an act itself of reverence, and it also provides the transcendent truth of beauty and the sublime as another thing to be in awe of, and to feel reverence for.

The language of storytelling accesses the transcendent truth of beauty and the sublime as it creates an attitude of reverence toward its subject. In W.T. Fitzgerald’s essay, “Speakable Reverence: Human Language and the Scene of Prayer,” he says: “the conditions for manifesting an attitude of reverence are basic to our experience with language” (156). While the stories that O’Brien tells may be profane and irreverent in content, it is the act of using language to attain truth through storytelling that provides reverence for the lives wasted by the Vietnam War. Through stories, O’Brien “can attach faces to grief and love and pity and God” (172). Through his stories of Vietnam, the reader has an experience with reverence and feels awe inspired both by the brutality and the final humanity of the stories. As O’Brien says, “It comes down to gut instinct. A true war story, if truly told, makes the stomach believe” (74).
Works Cited


Redirecting the Disney Rants

The Real Angst Fueling the Negative Obsession with Disney Tales

Laura Randle

“We just try to make a good picture. And then the professors come along and tell us what we do.” – Walt Disney, Time, 1937

The Disney Company, in becoming a monolith symbol of American pop culture, consumerism, and escapism, has earned itself plenty of fans and also plenty of enemies—particularly among folk and fairy tale scholars. They have adopted Disney as a scapegoat for perpetuated economic, ideological, and gender problems in Western culture. Kay Stone, in her influential article, “Things Disney Never Told Us” (1975), complains that Disney dilutes classic fairy tale heroines into docile, character-less puppets of a male world. Since 1995, Jack Zipes has been accusing Disney of being a self-interested, patriarchal pervert who “violates” the purer literary tradition of fairy tales in order to exploit their mass-market appeal (352). Even recent and more accommodating scholars such as Jessica Tiffin, who avoid condemning Disney outright, maintain a consistent tone of lament for the “usurped” tradition of fairy tales (218). With varying degrees of intensity, this lamentation is something most Disney
critics seem to share. Throughout their remarks there is the sense that something precious and pure has been lost; the vehemence with which critics vivisect Disney and his films through historicism, feminism, and other paradigms suggests that this action is emotional as well as academic.

However, most criticism of Disney is inconsistent when it celebrates previous versions of the fairy tales as the “true” or at least “truer” approach to fairy tales (most notably versions from Charles Perrault and the Brothers Grimm). Disney often approaches fairy tales in ways that only reflect the tropes established by earlier writers, meaning that his is merely an extension of the tradition they already formed. Renewal of issues such as Disney’s editorial right to connect his films to the literary and oral traditions, to alter characters, events, or themes in the tale, and to market the tales towards women and children are common in these critiques. All arguments are ultimately connected to the question of Disney’s authorial legitimacy. This issue is important because authorship of the tales, like ownership, is “ultimately a question of control” (Haase 361). The debate of authorship is ultimately a discussion of who should have control over the tales and who those authors are controlling with the tales.

In my estimation, critics and mourners of the Disney legacy are overanalyzing problems with consumerism, chauvinism, and even cultural homogenization but sensing a larger issue that does require attention. At the heart of the problem, the critics are rebelling against the over-consistency of a public that is willing to forget a varied history in favor of a simplified present. Critics are asking: what right does Disney have to portray the tales as he did? And has his influence negatively affected the fairy tale tradition? Without protecting Disney unconditionally, as he has been guilty of self-promotion and some gender stereotyping, I will attempt to defend Disney’s role in preserving fairy tale history. I will dissect the decades of debate over Disney’s films and authorial legitimacy and redirect them towards a more productive discussion about the past and future of fairy tales. Disney’s legacy of fairy tales should not be idolized, but it should not be dismantled either. He has cleared a new space for fairy tale scholarship and discussion that can include the most elite academics and the most simple fans. Disney’s legacy is not perfect, but it is a valuable piece of fairy tale history, and it is invaluable for future fairy tale scholarship.
First Critique: Usurpation of the Literary and Oral Traditions

Many of Disney’s critics are initially peeved with Disney’s fairy tale films because they appropriate the literary and oral traditions to imply that the film is the fairy tale, thus displacing (and encouraging the audience to disregard) many older versions of the tales.\(^1\) Of Walt’s early animated “Puss in Boots,” Zipes says Walt “did not especially care whether one knew the original Perrault text of Puss in Boots or some other popular version. It is also unclear which text he actually knew. However, what is clear is that [Walt] sought to replace all versions with his animated version” (343). Tiffin says likewise, in comparing Dreamworks’ playful parody \textit{Shrek} to Disney’s adapted fairy tales, that \textit{Shrek}, “retains a more affectionate and respectful attitude to the genre than does Disney’s wholesale appropriation and mixing” (225).\(^2\) Both of these claims are well argued, but the underlying reverence for “original” fairy tales is misplaced at best (Haase 354). In this respect, both scholars succumb to Haase’s “folk voice” temptation:

Because [folk tales and fairy tales] had their genesis in an oral tradition, we are tempted to imagine their original tellers as simple folk endowed with infallible wisdom and, in some cases, divine inspiration. As consequence of that belief, tampering with the classic texts of Perrault of the Brothers Grimm is considered by some to be tantamount to sacrilege . . . While this religious or quasi-religious reverence is certainly appealing and even reassuring, it is dangerously misleading. (353-4)

While Disney should not be considered with quasi-religious reverence either, but it is a mistake to imply that older versions of the fairy tales should be honored simply because they are old. As closer examination shows, Walt’s films continued Perrault’s and the Grimms’ influence more than he antagonized it.

However, part of this critique is true: Walt encouraged his audiences to receive his films as a natural extension of the literary and oral transmission of fairy tales and as a fitting replacement to those tales. Of the thirteen films produced during his lifetime, seven begin with an overt visual anchor into the literary tradition through use of a storybook introduction.\(^3\) To emphasize the importance of this, the book is typically heavily decorated with jewels or gold leaves and sits alone on a pedestal surrounded by velvet curtains and elaborate décor. When the camera approaches, the book opens spontaneously to
Criterion

reveal illuminated and illustrated pages that frame the story as it comes to life. These techniques link the film to the folk tradition behind fairy tales and also “claim for the film the historical status of literature—[especially] in its association with literacy and education, [which is] higher than that of the oral tale” (Tiffin 185). Thus, the storybook legitimizes the tale by invoking both the invisible hand of the folk and the educated background of the literate upper class. *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* is an excellent example of this. While many of the other films rely on a narrator to read the text to the audience, *Snow White* demands literary engagement from the audience before the tale begins by showing the text without including a narrator. By distancing the book from any kind of direct human presence, the film becomes an extension of the book in a literal sense, implying that those watching the film are also participating in the literary experience.

Walt also strives to show roots for the film in oral history by adopting the omniscient fairytale narrator. With only two exceptions, all of Walt’s early, animated features rely on an educated, mature narrator or folk singer to introduce the tale. These narrators function in relation to the oral tradition in similar ways as the storybook with the literary tradition: first, they legitimize the tale by tying it back to the folk; and second, they elevate the tale through association with an educated, sophisticated, and usually European voice. The narrator also forecasts the safe resolution of the tale and tempers the authoritative presence of the storybook. Audiences can feel like they are reading as they watch the pages turn in tandem with narration without actually reading the text. For many, this triggers nostalgic memories of being read to as a child and ties the film to the viewer’s personal history with oral tales. Because nostalgia tends to exert a subtle authority over a person’s feelings towards what is “better” or “worse,” Walt’s nostalgic narrator presence at the beginning of each tale reinforces the feeling that his version of the tale is the best, oldest, and most accurate version of the text even if the viewer knows theoretically that it is not. Of course, since much of Walt’s intended audience was children, their foreknowledge of other fairy tale versions would be limited, thus ensuring that Walt’s version would be accepted as the version of the tale. Additionally, verbal tags such as “Once upon a time,” “legend has it,” and “this story has happened before and will happen again,” assert the folk connection and frame the tale in simple, familiar ways that forecast the predictability of the story and emphasize its age and authority. This comforting and empowering narration combined
with the authoritative and majestic storybook establish Walt’s fairy tale (and fairytaleesque) films as part of the respected literary and oral traditions.

In this sense, it’s easy to see evidence for the common complaint that Disney’s name has, in Zipes’s words, “effaced” the names of Hans Christian Anderson, Charles Perrault, and the Brothers Grimm (De-Disneyfying). But usurping the literary and oral traditions in order to establish a teller’s own authority and to place the new version of the tale as the version was a common practice among both oral and literary tellers long before Disney. While Disney’s film versions have obscured the referenced tales for many viewers, the older tellers that Zipes and other critics privilege instead are equally (if not more) guilty of the same offense. Perrault, for example, writing amidst women who published fairy tales as a means to advocate gender equality, wrote *Histoires ou Contes du Temps Passe [Tales of Long Ago with Morals]* with a distinctly a-feminist slant. Though his tales were certainly influenced by—and perhaps directly taken from—the women around him, his tales make no attempt to acknowledge their already-established fairy tale authorship (Windling). As an additional insult, he chose to tell his tales through a misshapen old peasant woman, Mother Goose, whom Perrault ironically frames as the originator of fairy tales. Even assuming that Perrault’s claims of collecting the stories from a folk teller are true, he still, like Disney, usurps the authorship of the original stories and replaces them with his own versions, obscuring any traceable line back to a specific teller.

A hundred years later, the Grimms did the same thing as Perrault when they established the fairy tale tradition among the Germanic states. Though they did travel and transcribe many tales from common peasants, their most prolific contributors were aristocratic women who had emigrated from France (and were familiar with Perrault’s tales). Even after they transcribed these tales, the brothers extensively edited and sometimes even wrote their own tales. They then published the tales as originating from the generalized German peasant folk (instead of French expatriates), invoking the authority of the peasants’ oral tradition fairy tales in the Germanic states to legitimize their versions as the versions of the tales. Besides the fact that Walt actually credited other authors for their previous versions of the tales, his method of adopting, adapting, and republishing the tales as his own was already an entrenched tradition for fairy tale tellers.

If the charges against Disney’s “usurpation” of the oral and literary fairy tale traditions are to be taken seriously, then the entire history of folk
and fairy tales must be extensively reexamined to remove any writers or collectors who have misrepresented their claims to tale-telling authority. But this is nonsense. To discard or diminish the tremendous influence of Perrault and the Grimms due to their questionable presentation ethics would be absurd. But this also is not an issue that should discredit Disney’s versions of the tales. The traditional invocation of the folk voice is part of the fairy tale tradition; thus, Walt’s decision to continue this tradition should not be viewed as scandalous or unexpected. If anything, Walt’s decision to anchor his films in the literary and oral traditions, and the subsequent popularity of those films, has initiated the emergence of a new “folk” through whom fairy tales will be passed and retold in the future. This presents many exciting possibilities for future fairy tale scholarship.

Second Critique: Marginalized Female Voice

Disney’s characterizations of women are a popular sore spot for both professional and casual critics. Because Walt’s characterizations highlight passive and attractive or aggressive and ugly female characters, he is often villainized as a patriarchal chauvinist who is responsible for perpetuating unrealistic and unhealthy expectations of women and also a destroyer of older portrayals of dynamic fairy tale women. This criticism has some basis, but it is often used to reach hypocritical, dead-end conclusions about what it means for the future of fairy tales. To adequately examine the accusations together, they first must be taken apart.

The claim that Walt’s films perpetuate unhealthy and unrealistic expectations for women is usually based on two elements: first, the relative inactivity of heroines as compared to the male figures idolizes females as objects; and second, the dramatized conflict between beautiful young women, and older more aggressive matriarchs vilifies age, ambition, and intellect in women. Acknowledging the literary precedent for passive heroines in the Grimms’ tales as “uninspiring,” Kay Stone calls Disney’s heroines by comparison, “barely alive” (“What Disney Never” 44). To her, Disney is uniquely to blame for both emphasizing the passive heroine and “shift[ing] the delicate balance of the traditional tales” to be about romance rather than self-discovery (Someday 34). Zipes addresses the same issues (the passive woman and the aggressive matriarch) in complaining of the outdated “patriarchal notions” that Disney films resurrect
and reinforce (348). Both Stone and Zipes also show preference for older male fairy tale authors such as Perrault and the Grimms.

Both critiques and those like them are flawed. Like the tradition of assuming the oral and literary traditions, the passive-woman stereotype and the marriage-motivated ending were already strong themes in fairy tale texts. Also, the films’ wild popularity domestically and internationally implies a high degree of receptivity for such themes already (i.e. these ideas were not being force-fed to a proactive feminist public—the public was already receptive to such ideas). Additionally, Walt grew up hearing passive-heroine fairy tales in the time after WWI that reasserted conservative, traditional gender roles in an attempt to reestablish previous societal norms. It is likely that he thought that his films asserted women’s individuality as caring, moral individuals rather than sex objects, as was common in the early days of animation.7 Modern disappointment that Walt did not create more proactive female role models for women living in the latter half of the century is unreasonable. Moreover, Disney films since Walt’s death have featured progressively more proactive and independent female characters that consistently find public acceptance.8 These recent films with more powerful heroines, however, do not fit as well into the history of fairy tale literature as Walt was referencing, nor do they reflect well the values and stereotypes that saturated his home.

Still, the issue of appropriate female representation in fairy tales is an important issue for fairy tale scholars and should not be dismissed based on the popularity of current stereotypes. But in order to adequately address gender misrepresentation, scholars and critics will need to go farther than Perrault and the Grimms and back to the time when women were also fairy tale authors and not just puppets for male authors. By addressing the issue of female authorship instead of lamenting older male-centric tales, critics would also resolve their second complaint: how Walt has destroyed or corrupted the dynamic female heroines of “original” fairy tales.

At the end of the seventeenth century, we find the first written fairy tale texts and they were written by a woman. Marie d’Aulnoy wrote fairy tales for her French salons and transcribed many of them in her collection Les Contes de Fées (“The Fairy Tales”).9 Her tales are rich with dynamic, proactive, and politically volatile female characters. Through her characters, d’Aulnoy shows her dissatisfaction with women’s roles by casting powerful, confident women in heroic roles. The tales were meant to entertain her salons and to vent her political and social frustrations with other women who felt similarly (Windling). As
Critic Anne Duggan analyzes in d’Aulnoy’s “The Bee and the Orange Tree,” the tales also attempt to equalize gender positions by redefining the “natural” role of women as an intellectual, emotional, and physical partner to man. Though Stone’s feminist critique of Disney fairy tales decries marriage’s “moralistic” role in fairy tales (37), d’Aulnoy (who could be considered the original fairy tale feminist) and her fellow salonnières “argued particularly for love, tenderness, and intellectual compatibility with the sexes” (Windling). In this respect, Disney’s renditions are closer to the original fairy tale tradition (from women) than to the later male-centric tradition because they emphasize each heroine’s individuality, her preference in suitors, and her romantic involvement. Often, Walt’s heroines (though less physically active) eclipse the Princes in character dimension, and they are always allowed to show personal preference for her suitor.

Because d’Aulnoy was a woman and because her representations of women in fairy tales were uncomfortable for members of the educated male elite, her tales were forgotten in favor of her male contemporary, Perrault. In addition to being an educated man and therefore more socially acceptable for publication, Perrault also revised the role of fairy tale heroine to be less assertive, more subservient, and more willing to be objectified than the women of d’Aulnoy’s tales. Both d’Aulnoy and Perrault use marriage as a final goal for their characters, but there is a marked difference in the quality of the female-male partnerships of d’Aulnoy and the prize-like marriages of Perrault. In analyzing the broader context of female representation by female authors and female representation by male authors, we see that Walt’s representations of women and marriage actually seem closer to the original female protagonists of fairy tales than Perrault’s objectified heroines.

Ironically, it is Perrault and the Grimms (who followed Perrault’s authorial example) that Walt credits in his films, and it is to this tradition of male-centric storytelling that he attempts to align himself. Although his female characters may have been more proactive and independent than the characters from male fairy tale predecessors, Walt’s films are still heavily aligned with the male-centric fairy tale tradition. Of his films, only Cinderella features a female narrator. Of those produced after his death, all but a few in recent years have featured male narrators, singers, or characters to introduce the stories. (Not coincidentally, the shift back towards female narration has paralleled Disney’s changing criteria for heroines. As the company adapts to incorporate more of the female voice, the heroines become more diverse and complex.)
involvement or absence of women’s authorial legacy in the tales has earned Walt and the Disney Company many scathing reviews, but it is consistent with the history of male fairy tale authorship as established by Perrault and the Grimms. This living paradox in Walt and the Disney Company’s films seems to be what many critics sense when they seethe at Disney’s misrepresentations of women. To be sure, attention to details such as these has helped motivate more careful attention to female character development in Disney films. However, to celebrate the Grimms or Perrault as better or more female-friendly is hypocritical. Older forms of sexism are still sexist.

Criticism of Disney’s fairy tale heroines can and should lead to a productive reexamination of women in fairy tale history. Because many women recognize the one-dimensionality of Disney’s heroines and because questioning Disney’s perspective would not delegitimize would-be fairy tale feminist scholars (as questioning the authority of the Grimms or Perrault might do), Disney’s portrayals of women could actually spur a greater interest and greater effort to rediscover the role of women in fairy tale history. Their role in the creation, transmission, and popularization of fairy tales is still largely unknown. Disney’s films, however, have introduced thousands of women to question the role of women in fairy tales, the appropriateness of marriage as a goal, and the future portrayal of female fairy tale characters. If these criticisms are used as a basis for investigating women in fairy tales instead of a lamentation for the older (but still male-centric) fairy tale tradition, the landscape of fairy tale scholarship could change completely, creating a new and more complex context in which to study fairy tales in the future.

Third Critique: Fairy Tales for Children

Perhaps the least acknowledged complaint against Walt is his decision to cater his films to children (and the company has mostly continued this tradition). Because authorship is essentially an issue of control and because children are the most impressionable audience, criticism of Disney fairy tales is often a complaint about Disney’s control over the upcoming generation. This claim receives the least specific attention, but it is at the heart of critics’ contention against Disney authorship of fairy tales. This is why, in 1995, Zipes describes Disney’s influence as “a stranglehold,” a “violation,” and an “attack.” This rape-associated language is common for vehement Disney critics and it shows that
their abhorrence for Disney is rooted in his and the company’s control over the tales and their young audiences. Gentler critics such as Tiffin similarly criticize Disney’s “appropriation of childhood innocence” and see this decision as a product of shallow corporate goals (207).

In an attempt to weaken Disney’s credibility with fairy tales and young audiences, fairy tales’ adult-based past is often emphasized to the extreme. Zipes, in addressing a college audience in 2010, claims that “fairy tales never originated for children. Adults told tales to communicate important information and metaphor was highly significant in disseminating knowledge. Fairy tale was never, never a genre for children.” While his statement about adults may be true to some extent, both declamations about children are emphatically false. Such unequivocal emphasis casts severe doubt on his entire perception of the issue. Firstly, little to nothing can be declared in absolutes about oral culture before fairy tale publication; and secondly, from the records of fairy tales that are accessible to modern scholars, it is clear that the connection between children and fairy tales has been assumed from the beginning. Though all tales may not have been intended for children, Perrault’s invocation of “mothers and children,” Villiers’ attempts to infantilize fairy tales based on children’s interest in them, the Grimms titular reference to “Kinder,” and even the child-centric illustrations that accompanied fairy tale anthologies from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries prove the longstanding and widespread connection between children and fairy tales. Walt’s departure from the overall fairy tale tradition was not his decision to market his films to children but to cater primarily to children. Instead of framing or editing the tales as adult entertainment that was also appropriate for children as the Grimms did, Walt recast the tales to be especially for children. Combined with the accessibility of his medium and the modern ease of dissemination, this decision gave him unprecedented power over child audiences.

Though an association with children was not new for fairy tales, this is certainly the area in which Walt differed most dramatically from his literary (and film) predecessors. Usually, critics blame this on Walt’s supposedly greedy designs to exploit an untapped market. While this may be a prime reason for the Disney Company’s decision to continue catering to the children’s market, for Walt it was almost certainly not a money-motivated decision. His films consistently drove the company to the brink of bankruptcy as he challenged the artistic, technical, and storytelling abilities of his employees. Even after the company began gaining popular attention, Walt continued to spend lavishly in
order to create the most technologically and artistically elaborate films that he could. From this behavior as well as his other statements and attitudes about children and his fascination with fairy and folk lore, it is clear that Walt's decision to cater especially to younger audiences came from a combination of his personal identification with their needs and desires in a modern world and his recognition of the fairy tale as a historically child-inclusive medium. His resounding and sustained success in this area also shows that Walt's ability to associate and empathize with children differentiated him from competitors who harbored greater interest in only the financial potential of the market.

Conclusion: A New Future for Fairy Tales

Regardless of the fairy tale's origin, Walt and the Disney Company's success granted his tales incredible influence over upcoming generations. For decades now, children have identified and resonated with Disney films, grown up, and passed on their affection to their own children. With new releases consistently coming from the Disney Company, this multi-generational soft-spot for Disney has unified Western cultures’—especially America's—perception of fairy and folk tales. Few children in America today are unfamiliar with the Disney fairy tales and even those who do not remember specifics of the films, or perhaps have not even seen the films, recognize Disney's characters and stories. This is an astonishing and fascinating development in the history of a medium that has been historically so fractured and diverse.

More than any other single factor, I believe Disney's critics are rebelling against the idea that all fairy tales and folklore can be simplified into neat, one-and-a-half hour, mass-market appropriate films. Critics are anxious over the public’s willingness to forget the rich complexity of fairy tales and their messy past because it signifies the public's willingness to be controlled by recent history. They see Disney as a threat to fairy tales’ history and their influence. But in trying to discredit Walt and his Company, they also overlook one of the most amazing phenomena of fairy tale history: where in the past a unified folk was a myth, today it is a reality. Most of the Western world is familiar with the fairy and folk tale legacy left by Disney. While the authenticity of this legacy is debatable, it is also a ready frame for discussing and studying fairy tales that no other body of scholars in history has enjoyed. Instead of attacking Disney in an attempt to dislodge his influence from the fairy tale, critics might consider
using Disney as a platform to introduce a broader perspective on the tales and their modern applications. If history’s treatment of Perrault and the Grimms is any indication, it is evident that the transmission of fairy and folk tales defies the common rules of ownership and criticism. Massively popular figures such as these are not defamed by minor critics, nor is their influence diminished by copycat competitors—they are only succeeded by the next adapter of the stories. Disney’s influence on fairy tales has left permanent marks, but like all marks on history (including fairy tales) they can be recast and adapted as needs change. The challenge for current fairy tale scholars is not to overcome the Disney influence but to direct it towards the next phase in fairy tale development.
Endnotes

1. To avoid confusion, from this point on I will use “Walt” to mean specifically the man and “Disney” to mean the Walt Disney Company or the man as combined with his company.

2. *Shrek*, a tongue-in-cheek fairytale mash-up that inverts fairy tale tropes even as it fulfills them, was produced by Disney’s rival, Dreamworks Animation Studios, in 2001. It represents one of the more successful attempts at challenging the Disney Co.’s authorial monopoly on fairy tales.

3. I consider here only narrative-based *animated* films, not hybrids of live-action and animation such as *Mary Poppins*; although, the tropes I discuss often appear in Walt’s other films as well.

4. *Alice in Wonderland* and *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*

5. Mother Goose as an actual goose is a modern interpretation of the name. For Perrault, this was a nickname for old peasant women whose voices were cracked with age and storytelling and who occasionally “honked” like geese when they spoke.


7. The Fleischer Brothers’ many short films featuring Betty Boop included all of the passivity of Walt’s Snow White while also objectifying her as a mere body. In the Fleischers’ 1933 short film version of *Snow White* featuring Betty, there is no indication that Betty has a single sentient thought. Her sole role is to make cooing sounds of distress or pleasure and to walk or lie prettily in view of the camera.

8. *Beauty and the Beast, The Little Mermaid, Pocahontas, The Hunchback of Notre Dame* all feature markedly more unique and confident women (See Zarranz’s “Diswomen Strike Back”). Though hardly the cutting edge of feminist activism, Disney films continue to develop their treatment of complex heroines through *Enchanted, The Princess and the Frog, Tangled, Frozen,* and Disney-Pixar’s *Brave.*

9. Her collection predates Perrault’s of the same year (Windling). Her volume also appears to be the first place where such stories are named “Fairy Tales.”

10. Princesses Snow White, Aurora (*Sleeping Beauty*), and Cinderella all exhibit more intellectual dimension than their princes.

11. The educated male elite included critics such as Abbé de Villiers who publicly ridiculed d’Aulnoy and other women authors as “ignorant,” “talentless,” and childish in his essay “Conversations on Fairy Tales and Other Contemporary Works, To Protect against Bad Taste” (294, 296, 310).

13. Maria Jones, for example, describes Disney as “damaging[ing] fairy tales as we know them,” “strip[ping] fairy tales of their meaning,” and “violating the sanctity of [the] tales.”

14. *Kinder und Hausmärchen*: the Grimms consistently used title meaning “Children’s and Household Tales.”

15. The frontispiece to Charles Perrault’s 1697 collection, *Histoires ou Contes du Temps Passe*, featured a quaint fireside scene of an old woman, most likely a servant, surrounded by young children. A sign on the wall directly behind the woman and visually connected to her by her spinning spindle reads: “Mother Goose Tales.” With a few minor alterations to scenery and the woman, the old peasant woman surrounded by children (and sometimes mixed with other adults) became the symbol for the Grimms’ collection and other fairy tale anthologies as well.


