“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.”

Phoenix Crayton, “Tradition and the Individual Talent”
Contents

Editors’ Note
Chelsea Lee & Sarah Barlow

1 Morality and Pleasure in Tim O’Brien’s The Things They Carried
Sarah Bonney

11 Unmooring and Anchoring Bigger Thomas:
Ontological Confusion and Mercy in Richard Wright’s Native Son
Davey Cox

26 Reexamining Virtue in Arthur Mervyn
Clarissa McIntire

35 The Weight of “Glory”:
Emily Dickinson, George Eliot, and Women’s Issues in Middlemarch
Megan Armknecht

47 The Art of Death:
Murder According to Poe, Hitchcock, and De Quincey
Jeanine Bee
“Life is a Solid Substance”:
Materialism and the Use of Objects in Virginia Woolf’s The Waves
Madeline Thatcher

Ernest Hemingway:
The Modern Transcendentalist
Camryn Scott

Forum Prompt
Faith at the Crisis Point:
Exploring the Intersection of Religion and Literature
Laura Dabundo, Kennesaw State University

Conflicting Roles of the Speaker and the Divine in the Holy Sonnets
Annette Challis

Flannery O'connor's Protestant Grace
Emily Strong

Carson's Christianity and Environment Crises
Andrew Wadsworth

The Pastor's Theology of Uncertainty in Lila
Ben Lehnardt

Contributors
Editors’ Note

*Criterion: A Journal of Literary Criticism*, is a student run journal associated with the English Department at Brigham Young University. As a journal we are dedicated to bringing quality pieces of literary criticism from the undergraduate and graduate levels to our readers. *Criterion* functions entirely through the exhaustive efforts of our volunteer editors. We would like to take this moment to thank our staff for the wonderful work they have done for this issue. Our staff devoted their time and energy to refining these articles and preparing them for publication. We could not have done this without their extraordinary efforts, and we appreciate the unique presence each and every one of them has contributed to the journal.

We would also like to thank Laura Dabundo, Professor Emerita at Kennesaw State University, for her excellent and engaging forum prompt, “Faith at the Crisis Point: Exploring the Intersection of Religion and Literature”. As a religiously affiliated university, we at BYU were interested in exploring the relationship between religion, literature, and literary criticism. Dr. Dabundo’s contribution led to the submission of varied and interesting pieces that dealt with the concept of religion over a wide spectrum of texts from Donne’s *Holy Sonnets* to Flannery O’Connor.

We also received a plethora of interesting submissions through our open call for papers. We are grateful for the authors who chose to share their work with us and were willing to take the time to create quality pieces of literary criticism. We have quite the interesting mix of papers in this issue, and we are excited by the variety we are able to show our readers.
It is always difficult to adequately express our appreciation to all of the individuals involved in the development of a student journal. However, we would like to extend our deepest gratitude for the guiding hand of our Faculty Advisor, Emron Esplin, for his continued investment in this journal. We would also like to thank Tressa Roberts who provided the design for our cover. Finally, we would like to extend our thanks to the BYU Department of English for their patronage and support.

As the Editors-in-Chief of this journal, we are both humbled and excited to present our readers with the Winter 2016 issue of Criterion.

_Chersea Lee and Sarah Barlow_
In Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, O'Brien tells of a group of soldiers' experiences during and after the Vietnam War. Throughout the novel, the soldiers are forced to construct a new morality as a result of the violence required of them; however, the soldiers’ wartime moral system conflicts with the civilian moral system, which they knew before the war and which is still in place on the home front. The civilian moral system is black-and-white with strong, simple standards to dictate acceptable behavior. Aggressive behavior, such as assault and murder, is consistently condemned and punished with fines, incarceration, and occasionally the death penalty. However, because a soldier’s duty is comprised of immoral acts, this civilian moral code is no longer applicable. Instead, killing other human beings becomes morally upright, as long as those human beings are the enemy. In opposition to counterculture claims, the soldiers do not live without a code of ethics, as Jimmy Cross demonstrates by his guilt about Lavender’s death and his commitment to be a better military leader who “[performs] his duties firmly and without negligence” (24). However, their understanding of what is ethical and what is not shifts because their duty is inherently unethical. Consequently, the soldiers must contrive a new moral system that includes violence as an honorable way to fulfill their duty, allowing the soldiers to feel pleasure in combination with
acts of violence. Unlike pleasure in civilian life, pleasure in war is no longer a reward for good behavior or a byproduct of moral living. Instead, pleasure is an emotional response to perceived benefits, such as increased safety and control. Due to the soldiers’ construction of a new moral system and the resulting correlation of pleasure with violence, morality is redefined as the least harmful way to resolve conflict, and in the battlefield, violence is that method of conflict resolution.

As the soldiers sludge through the Vietnam jungle in Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried*, the comforts of home are restricted to a few handpicked personal items each soldier carries in his rucksack (3). These mementos provide limited peace and little pleasure. Far from their civilian life and knee deep in the muddy horrors of war, soldiers find pleasure in that which might have repulsed their pre-war selves. Azar enjoys killing Lavender’s puppy (35). After Lavender’s death, Kiowa feels “pleased to be alive,” denoting pleasure in his comrade’s death (17). As the soldiers adapt to perform their service despite the repulsive nature of war, they adjust to feel pleasure differently. Noticeably, they feel pleasure honorably fulfilling their duty, which is to kill “gooks” (174). Socially conditioned to feel pleasure when fulfilling their duty, the soldiers develop to find pleasure in violence because it is their duty. Furthermore, the rise of American counterculture in the 1960s and 70s catalyzed a moral reevaluation. In the years following World War II, the popularity of war stories in both film and print skyrocketed. These representations idealized war and reflected wide acceptance of violence in a wartime context. American soldiers began deploying for Vietnam in the latter years of this cultural wave, but rising counterculture openly criticized all violence, regardless of context. Consequently, cultural activists opposed the war and condemned the soldiers’ acts as immoral, invalidating the pleasure correlated with duty. For the soldiers, morality is already a fluid concept; whereas they understood killing as wrong, they are now encouraged to kill their enemies because what was once wrong is now encouraged by a new moral code which condones violence. However, because the Vietnam War coincides with American counterculture, even a restructured military code of ethics is chastisable. What is “good” or “right” is now uncertain, but this is further complicated when the soldiers develop to find pleasure in violence.

In order to reevaluate the ethicality of wartime violence, wartime morality must be reconciled to create a standard for honorable military service; violence must be condoned for soldiers to feel pleasure fulfilling their duty. However, this reconciliation is complicated by the soldiers’ pleasure in violence and
death. This conflict of home front morality and wartime morality as manifested through pleasure has yet to be addressed in war literature or ethics criticism in the discussion of The Things They Carried. Addressing the most prominent conflict between civilian and military ethics, Cheyney Ryan explains, “Soldiers do no wrong even if their cause is unjust,” explicating the ethical pardon freely granted to military men (11). As demonstrated through the soldiers’ experiences with pleasure, the soldiers’ moral code must change from that of their civilian lives in order for them to find moral justification in the everyday violence war requires. Although “the resort to war” and “the conduct of war” have been examined with an ethical lens, the adoption of a new moral code in the battlefield, especially as manifested through pleasure, has not (McMahan 693). In O’Brien’s The Things They Carried, the concept of morality is complicated by the treatment of violence and a connection between violence and pleasure; resultanty, morality must be defined on a spectrum rather than a binary scale.

Although the battlefield requires an adjusted moral system, counterculture’s condemnation of all violence prevents reconciliation between the military and civilian understandings of morality. On the home front, many began to question whether military service was a moral duty, leading to inquiry as to whether killing as encompassed in military service is ethical. As a result, whether military men should receive the “ethical pardon” addressed by Ryan is also put in a doubtful light (11). If military service is not ethical, violence and killing performed to fulfill the soldiers’ duty is immoral and condemnable. This cultural philosophy would condemn Cross’s renewed commitment to his soldiers and his role as a military leader because this becomes synonymous with a renewed commitment to kill the enemy (23). In order to reconcile their military duty and the anti-military sentiments growing back home, the soldiers of the Vietnam War are pushed to construct a new moral code independent of military ethics established in previous wars. In previous conflicts, wartime violence was condoned by the civilian public, and soldiers were able to depend wholly on the “ethical pardon” granted in times of conflict (Ryan 11). However, the public’s condemnation of all violence during the Vietnam War requires soldiers to establish a system to justify the violence war requires. Because military morality is no longer justified by its context within the civilian moral code due to counterculture during the Vietnam War, a wartime moral code must be established. American culture’s rejection of the military moral system requires the soldiers to set new standards for acceptable and unacceptable behavior.
In contrast to the belief that moral acts hold positive consequences and immoral acts hold negatives consequences, violence, immoral behavior according to the civilian moral system, holds great benefits for the soldiers. As a result, violence becomes a pleasure trigger for the soldiers. Should a soldier kill an enemy combatant, the soldier’s safety increases, and he feels greater control over his environment. Additionally, subduing the enemy, which requires violence, is the core of successful military service. However, to fulfill their duty, soldiers are required to kill “regardless of [their] inclinations,” countering the moral foundation of their youth (Schumaker 84). Conditioned to feel pleasure through fulfilling one’s duty honorably, the soldiers adapt to find pleasure in violence. In response to the connection between duty and pleasure, the soldiers in *The Things They Carried* begin to find pleasure in violence, pain, and death, which they did not feel before their enlistment. Mitchel Sanders “almost affectionately” cuts off the thumb of an enemy’s corpse and “smiling” further abuses the body (13). Voluntarily returning to the war, an unnamed soldier explains, “All that peace, man, it felt so good it hurt. I want to hurt it back” (34). Because killing fulfills their duty and increases safety and control, it brings the soldiers pleasure in the forms of relief, comfort, amusement, and other positive emotions.

As violence is a necessary element of war, a new definition of war morality requires a new definition of violence. The soldiers’ correlation of pleasure and violence presents violence as an effective and ethical method of resolving conflict rather than a definite immorality. Besides serving as punishment “for the sins of the aggressor” and “defense of innocent others”, killing the enemy eliminates the evil contained in the opposition, which is the higher moral purpose of war (Ryan 15). “[Wasting] gooks” serves as its own protection because not only does it prevent future danger for the soldiers, but it makes the war end faster (174). Violence against the enemy resolves the conflict behind the war. Additionally, among the soldiers, violence becomes an act to restore balance, as Lee Strunk and Dave Jensen demonstrate during their disagreement resolved with violence and resulting in friendship (59; 62). Because the combat zone is so distanced from the structured justice system of civilian society, the soldiers favor the method of conflict resolution that is accessible to them: violence. They adopt violence as an acceptable form of conflict resolution among themselves as well, as the soldiers are trained to accept and carry out violence against the enemy when addressing a moral dispute. As the duty of a soldier forces regular men to forgo their civilian morality and accept violence as honorable
behavior, it is recognized and sanctioned as an ethical way to address and settle conflict between individual men as well as between themselves and the enemy. Violence and killing becomes the justice system of choice, as other methods of justice have little potency in the war zone. On the black-and-white morality spectrum, violence moves from clearly unethical to morally ambiguous as it is defined as an unavoidably harmful, but potent method of conflict resolution.

The soldiers are forced to construct a new ethical system accommodating of the violence now required of them. Subsequently, the definition of moral behavior changes from a system of set behavioral expectations, which consistently condemn violence, to the least harmful way of resolving a conflict, allowing violence in specific contexts. By this definition, a war can be moral if it is the best and least destructive way to resolve a conflict or eradicate a greater immorality. Furthermore, a war can be immoral if there was a less destructive way to resolve the conflict addressed by the war. O’Brien and the other soldiers struggle to accept that war can be moral because the violent acts required of its participants are massive immoralities according to civilian moral standards. O’Brien writes, “A true war story is never moral,” pushing the question of whether any immorality can be eclipsed by good intentions (65). However, the soldiers still strive to rectify perceived wrongs, indicating that they believe there can be morality and goodness despite immorality. Their actions support the assertion that war does have a moral code, even though it must be reconstructed. Edward E. Waldron claims that a moral system “might have its own codes of acceptable behavior, often at odds with the larger value system,” indicating that a morality established for a specific environment can stand in opposition to the morality of another environment (170). Because civilian immorality is the only path to fulfilling their duty, the standard for moral behavior as set by their modified moral system is not defined as clearly as it is by civilian morality. In war, violence is a means to an end: the end of the war and the end of a greater immorality than that committed by the soldiers. Although it contradicts civilian immorality, wartime morality does involve stipulations of right and wrong.

As war requires a new system of morality in order to justify violence as a vehicle to peace, a new standard for immorality must be established. Even though some acts of violence are acceptable according to wartime morality, not all violence is acceptable. Morality cannot exist without immorality; therefore, a code must distinguish moral violence from immoral violence. Civilian morality can easily label all acts of violence as immoral, but war zone morality does not allow for easy judgment. Although all violence is destructive and harmful,
in war, the benefits and long term rewards of some violence outweigh the short term damage. Consequently, in place of a right and a wrong, there are two wrongs and the soldiers must choose the less offensive option. Tim O’Brien must choose between killing other men and refusing his duty (40). Mitchell Sanders must choose between offending a comrade and accepting a dead man’s thumb (13). “There is no ‘right’ answer” because neither choice is ethical (Wharton). However, despite the lack of clarity between right and wrong, a distinct wrong must be established in order for a definite right to exist. By the new definition of morality, immorality must be unreasonably destructive and without a purpose. Such is Rat Kiley’s unprovoked killing of the baby water buffalo. “Garden of Evil. Over here, man, every sin’s real fresh and original,” remarks Mitchell Sanders, condemning Kiley’s act (76). Just as new standards for acceptable behavior are being established, so are standards for unacceptable behavior. Because the soldiers’ modified morality establishes a new right, it also establishes a new wrong.

Because violence in unavoidable in the warzone, a violent act’s moral justification is measured by the act’s positive repercussions. Mirroring the spectrum-nature of combat morality, there is a spectrum of violence in order to establish “wrong” in wartime, but in place of “right” and “wrong,” as bookends the morality scale, the violence spectrum is marked with “beneficial” and “destructive”. However, application of this new system is uncertain because it results in a faint line between acceptable and unacceptable violence. When Azar ties another soldier’s adopted puppy to an antipersonnel mine and blows it up, he responds to the other soldiers’ disapproval, exclaiming, “‘What’s everybody so upset about?’” implying that he doesn’t understand why his action is wrong, as their role as soldiers constantly mandates similar violence (35). Because the soldiers spend their time and supplies killing the enemy, the death of a dog seems inconsequential. The situation is similar to Kiley and the baby water buffalo, but Azar expresses confusion over the ethicality of his behavior, because although killing the puppy brings him pleasure, the other soldiers judge this violent act as unethical. The soldiers question the acceptability of Azar’s act because their ethical pardon as defined by Cheney Ryan only extends to inflicting violence on the enemy. The puppy is not the enemy and therefore the soldiers do not benefit from its death; consequently, Azar’s act is unethical. However, since he is younger than most of the other men, the soldiers assume that Azar has not yet made the distinction between violence against the enemy and violence in general, so the soldiers do not condemn Azar like
they do Kiley. The soldiers’ most significant conflict is distinguishing between moral violence and immoral violence, when both are immoral within civilian society. Ultimately, the deciding factor is feeling and personal understanding. Bertrand Russell articulated this difficulty: “The fundamental facts in this as in all ethical questions are feelings” (127). Azar was not outwardly condemned by the soldiers because he didn’t understand the difference between moral and immoral violence. Although soldiers can construct a modified morality, the ability to discern between the moral and immoral varies by the individual’s understanding of the spectrum of violence in conjunction with the spectrum of wartime morality. Consequently, soldiers experience moral disorientation as they seek to serve honorably, but they cannot establish an overarching morality system for the entire group. Nevertheless, the implication of a sliding scale against which violence can be judged designates that war can be moral if its violent acts benefit the majority; accordingly, should the harm caused by war outweigh its positive consequences, it is an immoral war.

Pleasure is dependent on context because it is partially stimulated by predictability, “repetition and sameness”; for this reason, violence can stimulate pleasure if it is a consistent element within a specific environment (Dale 257). Subsequently, displeasure results when violence is removed. This complicates the soldiers’ adjustment back to civilian life, as they are immediately unable to feel pleasure once they return home. Removal of a moral system in place of another will result in displeasure because of the lost “repetition and sameness” and resulting moral disorientation (Dale 257). The trauma of the harsh transition back to civilian life accentuates this moral turbulence the soldiers continue to experience causing further disorientation. Returning to a world they cannot understand and that cannot understand them creates a conflict the soldiers are unprepared to face. Soldiers are experienced in resolving conflicts through violence, but, in the civilian world, their method of conflict resolution is not condonable, further contributing to the loss of control they experience upon returning home. Because their worldview has been altered by the moral disassociation and horrors of war, they struggle readapting to a civilian worldview based in a black-and-white morality. The veterans can no longer accept this system as they understand that violence can have beneficial consequences. In a community that eschews the moral system that provides structure in the war zone, the veterans are unable to face the conflicts that accompany their transition from soldier to civilian. Although the soldiers are skilled in resolving conflicts through violence, this ability is useless upon their return. The veterans’
inability to alleviate the tension between them and their communities leads to emotional and psychological isolation. Motivated by a sense of powerlessness, many veterans attempted to restore balance through violence, as Norman Bowker does, “[hanging] himself in the locker room of a YMCA” after years of attempting to assimilate into society (149). Unable to reconcile their war experiences with a civilian worldview, many veterans revert to the violence they learned to trust in the jungles of Vietnam.

The correlation of violence and pleasure complicates the assumption that pleasure accompanies positive behavior for those striving to live morally, and so the soldiers’ return home turns emotionally traumatic because they are immediately unable to feel pleasure due to their sudden and antithetic change of environment. As demonstrated by the soldiers’ experiences after the war, pleasure can be limited by context. The soldiers learned to correlate pleasure with violence in the battlefield, but because violence is immoral in a civilian context, the veterans are unable to perform the violent acts that previously held positive emotion for them. Once the soldiers return home, pleasure derived from violence is no longer available to the upstanding civilian because upstanding civilians do not commit violence. Even though “participation in a war may be good, honorable, even heroic,” the juxtaposition of conditioned civilian morality and acquired wartime morality produces moral whiplash suffered by veterans as they attempt to process why their previous duty is now wholly unethical (Ryan 11). Instead of correlating pleasure with good behavior and happy experiences, the veterans correlate pleasure with Vietnam because of the violence available there. However, because of the violence there, the veterans also correlate Vietnam with immorality. When O’Brien returns to Vietnam with his daughter, he looks “for signs of forgiveness or personal grace” (173). He understands that the violence he and the other soldiers committed is inherently immoral. He no longer seeks pleasure through reminiscing violent memories because he has returned to civilian life, and he is prevented from experiencing pleasure in that capacity because violence is no longer acceptable. Ultimately, pleasure can be restricted to specific acts in specific contexts; although pleasure can be defined by its stimulants and the result of action, it is defined by its context as well.

Because of war’s violence and counterculture’s antagonism, morality gains new meaning in the context of The Things They Carried, resulting in shifting definitions of pleasure, morality, violence, and war, dependent on a spectrum determined by context. However, the wartime spectrum of morality cannot be easily reconciled with the civilian binary moral system. The soldiers experience
a harsh transition, void of pleasure, as they return to a familiar community that soon becomes foreign through moral disorientation and emotional alienation. Because the soldiers restructured their understanding of right and wrong in order to willingly carry out the immorality required of their duty, they recognize violence as an efficient means of conflict resolution. As a result, upon returning home, the soldiers are stripped of the pleasure of duty and the pleasure of violence by their new situation. Having endured attack in Vietnam and forced to face opposition in the country they fought for, many Vietnam veterans, like Norman Bowker, seek solace in the method of conflict resolution they learned to trust in the battlefield: violence.
Works Cited


As Richard Wright’s novel *Native Son* comes to its courtroom conclusion, Bigger Thomas becomes disoriented after an interview with Max, his lawyer, and begins to wonder for the first time about how other people feel. As he contemplates his imminent death, he thinks that “he would not mind dying now if he could only find out what this meant, what he was in relation to all the others that lived, and the earth upon which he stood” (363). Ontological confusion, regarding that which exists and all of his relations to reality, grips him, and he begins to think that he will die suspended in uncertainty. Only then does he abandon his previous fatalism and experience an intense desire to live, to find out “what he was in relation to all the others that lived.” The oppression Bigger experiences throughout the novel unmoors him from reality by denying him the right to understand his relations to it—not to places, not to people, not to nonhumans, not even to ideas—except as the whites in charge deem appropriate. Bigger is, as Max describes in his courtroom speech, like a tree “ripped from its native soil” (399). His participation in the
ecosystem, broadly defined as a network of relations including human beings, nature, artificial constructions, and social and political forces, is crippling uncertain. Bigger’s attempts to determine his place among all these things constitute the story’s central struggle, and the degree to which he is or is not successful is a comment on the ecological consciousness of America.

Much of the scholarly discourse on Bigger’s sense of alienation has focused on him as an individual, concluding that the conflict of the novel is his attempting to stitch together a coherent version of his own self (De Arman 87; Tremaine 104). In doing so, they either willfully discard the existing environment as an important factor in producing or defining the self, or simply conclude that Bigger’s self ultimately exists in isolation from the world and everyone and everything in it. The novel, for such critics, takes on a solipsistic, expressionist flavor. Abdul JanMohamed goes so far as to argue that the novel must be read as a dream (77). This angle may be useful in making sense of some of the novel’s unlikely circumstances and unusual happenings, but only addresses Bigger’s question of “what he was,” leaving “all the others that lived, and the earth upon which he stood” out of the equation (363). Such critics would argue that the novel does not say much about anyone or anything but Bigger. Scott Hicks, however, reminds us that reading texts such as *Native Son* ecocritically, focusing on relationships between humans and their environments, can help radically reimagine the way that humans fit into the world, and thus assist in solving problems of gender, racial, and economic inequality (218). By considering Bigger’s relations to others and to the earth, we are opening ourselves to revelations about ontology, which informs ecology and environmental justice.

When whites restrict the spatial and behavioral aspects of black lives, the impact is both environmental and ontological, and ultimately relevant to the contemporary movement in environmental justice. The oppression-born environment in *Native Son* is the South Side, a moldering, unhealthy ghetto, and the resulting ontology is one in which blacks are isolated from the rest of reality—a system to which black and white characters alike subscribe. It is this failure to create a schema, or way of organizing experience, which integrates blacks into reality that creates Bigger’s ontological confusion and blocks its resolution. It is this failure that pushes Bigger to violence as a way of getting a grip on the world, and that produces the excessively outraged response to Bigger’s crime. Revising a worldview is a formidable task, but one of the solutions that the novel suggests is a type of genuine mercy. Mercy, in this case, means intimate closeness and sincere connection, which results in traction
on reality, the beginnings of new ways of understanding ontology, and new hope for environmental justice. Though it predates both the environmental and Civil Rights movements, *Native Son* blurs the lines between nature and culture as well as the division between environmental degradation and racial oppression, something the environmental justice movement, which focuses on the right to a healthy environment and protests discrimination that results in racial minorities living in areas with degraded environments, began doing in the 1980s. Thinking about human beings and the environment separately is not productive in the context of environmental justice because oppression is both environmental and racial, and inequality has to do with relations among humans as well as between humans and nonhumans and within ecosystems that people do not directly participate. Thus, *Native Son* can be read through the lens of environmental justice and, in turn, reveal the cultural roots of and possible solutions to the problems that the environmental justice movement seeks to address.

Bigger’s ontological confusion is by nature unclear and ultimately comes down to his inability to construct a coherent schema of practice or, in other words, to imagine his world. The height of Bigger’s confusion comes at a moment when he feels unable to identify anyone or anything in the world around him—when he discovers that he can’t tell “what he was in relation to all the others that lived, and the earth upon which he stood” (363). “What he was” and “in relation” are the two key phrases here. The doubt regards identity and relation, the two components of schemas of practice, that are anthropologist Phillipe Descola’s way of locating the source of ontology in some kind of mental equipment that, at the very least, all human beings have (112). Identification is the immediate act of comparison and contrast that an entity performs when confronted with something other than itself; most particularly, this involves determining whether an Other’s interiority, or all that makes up its mind and soul, and physicality, or all its extrinsic properties, are like or unlike one’s own, and relations consist of “external links between beings and things that are detectable in typical behavior patterns and may be partially translatable into concrete social norms” (113). These schemas let individuals order the world of their experience quickly and behave regularly. Bigger, however, is unable to adapt his behavior outside a narrow set of situations, pointing to some fault in his schema of practice that prevents him from understanding his environment and its constituents. His world makes no ontological sense, and cannot,
therefore, effectively be a world. Reflecting upon his participation in an ecosystem is, under such conditions, totally impossible.

A schema of practice is meant to enable human beings within a cultural group to behave consistently and reasonably in a wide variety of circumstances and should enable creativity in new contexts, but the schema constructed and adopted by the society represented in *Native Son* only provides that privilege to a limited, white subsection of the population. The rest, African Americans in particular, have the possibilities for identification and relation restrictively prescribed for them. White dominion is a naturalized state of affairs in the novel, most explicitly stated as such in the reflection that “white people were not really people; they were a sort of great natural force” (Wright 114). The general mode of identification in modern Western thought is defined by Descola as “naturalism,” where all things are made of the same kinds of physical matter, subject to the same natural laws, but where human beings are special in that they have an interiority, or mind/soul (174). In essence, this is the nature-culture divide. Every character in the novel has this schema available to them, but interiority is apparently denied along racial lines. Bigger does not view whites as people, but as a “natural force,” allying them with universal laws, denying them any kind of mind or soul. This sets him up for problems later when he is expected to deal directly with white people, and warps his sense of himself as an agent.

Racism, of course, cuts the other way as well, where animalized African Americans can also be denied this human interiority by white people. One of the problems with naturalism, Descola points out, is that certain states of affairs can be classified as “natural,” and therefore not open to argument (199). The natural force of whites is indisputable and oppressive enough to make Bigger exclaim: “They don’t let us do nothing” (19). This restriction of action may, from the white point of view, be its own justification, as it lends itself to the idea that blacks are not, in fact, agents capable of moral decision making, and may therefore be precluded from any moral consideration, a view that Émilie Hache and Bruno Latour explore when they write: “The paucity of scruples in a given text seems bound up with the paucity of actors on the surface of its argument” (315). To a certain sensibility, only those beings capable of intentional decision making are worthy of ethical consideration; all other entities, not having the ability to act consciously, may be treated with a “paucity of scruples,” or without moral consideration. If the whites in power believe that blacks do not truly have an interiority like theirs, thereby relegating them to a status other than human, then inequality is only natural. Explicit racist rhetoric is justified by same logic.
that excuses violence to animals and ecosystems, because that which has no mind is fair game for exploitation. Naturalism with a racist twist oppresses Bigger, but the problems with the schema are even greater than this.

One of the difficulties of racism rooted in a particular schema of practice is its ability to persist even when the racism is no longer overt. This is how the Daltons can participate in oppressing Bigger even when their explicit emotions and intentions are charitable. This is one of the reasons why when Max questions Mr. Dalton about his potential complicity in producing the circumstances that made Bigger, the capitalist and philanthropist is confused by the possibility of having done anything but mitigate the unfortunate situations of African Americans. To Max’s question about why properties on the South Side are rented to blacks, Mr. Dalton is flustered and responds: “Well. . . . Er. . . . I—I—I don’t think they’d like to live any other place” (327). His hesitance to answer is either evidence of surprise at having his secret malice found out or of lack of awareness of having done anything wrong. We have no particular reason to suspect Mr. Dalton of being a closet white supremacist, but the invisible mechanisms of his ignorance require some explication. Descola argues that the psychological equipment necessary to identify and relate to an Other is somewhere “upstream” from the categorization of things and articulation of relations that is done consciously (96). This means that whatever the sentiments Mr. Dalton verbally espouses or however many ping-pong tables he donates, the chances are good that the schema of practice he has inherited from generations of white rule governs the way he ultimately treats African Americans. This also explains why he has such difficulty articulating his reasons for discriminatory behavior. Responsibility for racial oppression is hard to pin on anyone, especially those, like the Daltons, who see themselves as working to heal the rift in equality, because schemas of practice can hide behind the scenes.

Although the Daltons attempt to mitigate inequality, the primary mode of oppression in the novel is one in which they are complicit: the spatial isolation of the ghetto. As Bigger prowls the streets of the South Side, searching for an empty flat in which to hide from the army of police and vigilantes hunting for him, he reflects on the nature of confinement to a certain geographical area: “They keep us bottled up in here like wild animals, he thought. He knew that black people could not go outside of the Black Belt to rent a flat; they had to live on their side of the ‘line’” (249). The particular kind of “bottling up” that Bigger refers to occurs because of long-standing institutional policies, the arbitrariness of which is signaled by quotes around the word “line.” The policies that
produce the line constitute a kind of passive “policing” of the border between the ghetto and the other parts of the city, which creates the effect of an internal colony, over which white authorities have full control (Bennett 170). Robert Bullard and Beverly Wright have called such policies apartheid, arguing that the resulting “limited mobility, reduced housing options, inadequate residential packages, and decreased environmental choices” are matters of environmental justice (166). At this particular moment in the text the policing has become active and literal, with an army of eight thousand white men sent to close off all possible exits from the South Side, but this is merely a dramatization of the constant historical restriction on black mobility (Wright 245). The only importance that African Americans have is how they exist in relation to their white neighbors. As such, all other possible relations can be written off as unimportant, and residents of the Black Belt can be considered to exist in complete seclusion from anything else in the world. Their environment, education, and economic aspirations can be disregarded; even relations among black people are insignificant. The legitimation of such disregard is the message of residential segregation.

White Chicagoans may implicitly believe that blacks are alone in space, but even worse is that many blacks, in various ways, also buy into the white concept of the world. The white stranglehold on space results in a “cramped environment” that leads Bigger, in times of desperation, to “[close] his eyes and [strike] out blindly, hitting what or whom he could, not looking or caring what or who hit back” (240). By refusing to look around himself, Bigger relegates himself to an isolation that is ontological as well as spatial, suspended in an existential void. Wright refers to Bigger’s place as a No-Man’s Land, which is a useful way of thinking about being caught outside of a coherent world (451). Very few forms of relation are allowed for in Chicago, and the resulting place is not one that gives Bigger any purchase on reality, such that we might say that Bigger’s No-Man’s Land imbues him with a sense of what Desmond Harding calls “placelessness” (370). Not everyone on the South Side lives with such existential angst; coping in the No-Man’s Land can be done, but only by somehow ignoring the world. Bigger scorns such escapism, realizing that though it takes many forms, its effects are the same: “What his mother had was Bessie’s whiskey, and Bessie’s whiskey was his mother’s religion” (240). Whiskey deadens Bessie’s sense of reality, permitting her to carry on from day to day, and religion relieves Bigger’s mother through metaphysical assurances of salvation. These recourses are available to them because they fit squarely within the white schema of
practice that places blacks somewhere outside of reality. James Baldwin writes that Bigger’s acceptance of white “theology” is the tragedy and failure of Native Son, but Bigger is certainly not the only character who has fallen victim to white cultural hegemony. Thus, not only do the whites perceive a severely limited number of relationships with black people, but black people are only capable, due to their isolation, of experiencing a small variety of relationships.

Even if most of the characters share a dysfunctional worldview, the text supports the idea of a wider ecological reality, one in which there are more entities and relations than anyone imagines. Aside from the Daltons’ house cat, the only animal to make a significant appearance in the text is the rat from the opening scene. The rat’s intrusion into the Thomas family’s domestic space produces terror in Vera and Bigger’s mother and provokes reckless brutality in Bigger (4–7). The most notable function of this scene might be to foreshadow Bigger’s fate. The rat is black, after all, “[pulses] with fear,” and has its space restricted in order to enable Bigger and Buddy to find and kill it (6). More importantly, however, it shows that people, especially black people, are not alone. The rat is an eruption of the city’s ecosystem into the lives of the same city’s most isolated inhabitants. Rats are a part of the urban landscape that most affects the poor, since the wealthy have the means to shut out such undesirable elements of the environment, much as they can shut out African Americans (Bullard and Wright 170). The encounter with the rat is not enough to shake Bigger into a realization of his place in the world, a phenomenon that will be repeated when Bigger intrudes violently into the white world. Killing the rat with impunity, in fact, enhances Bigger’s instability, since, as Christine Gerhardt argues, it places him “at the margins and the center of two overlapping systems of power (i.e., racism and ecological exploitation)” (520). The rat is an early suggestion of reality beyond No-Man’s Land.

What the rat begins to imply is further developed in the way that characters, both black and white, use ecological metaphors to describe each other and the city, demonstrating their unawareness of any sort of wider ecosystem. The most important of these metaphors is that of the jungle. At various times, Chicago itself is compared to a jungle. During one such occasion, Bigger tries to convince Bessie that hiding in one of the abandoned buildings on the South Side will be safe and says, “It’ll be like hiding in a jungle” (228). The reason why hiding in a jungle is safe is because of the multiplicity of organisms, the complex web of relations, and the chaos of entities acting and growing—never mind that the jungle is also treacherous for the same reasons. This deployment
of the term does not acknowledge relations and complexity so much as it points to Bigger’s sense of anonymity. Rather than understanding the urban jungle as the home of other organisms, he recognizes only that its expansiveness makes him as an individual difficult to locate (perhaps, on a figurative level, even for himself). Later, in one of the many newspaper articles concerning Bigger’s case, the journalism refers to Bigger as a “jungle beast” (279). This comparison has roots in the slave trade from Africa, where the association of blacks with wild nature began and has been repeatedly deployed to justify their oppression (Gerhardt 520). Aside from being twisted and bigoted, this metaphor also demonstrates the lack of “an intense consciousness of land,” of which Aldo Leopold would write in 1948 (223). Whites think of blacks as existing in isolation, yet compare them to jungle beasts, members of one of the most complex biotic communities on the planet, betraying ignorance of what “jungle” truly means, perhaps thinking of it only as corresponding to savagery, mystery, and other abstractions.

Such distance between perception and reality creates a situation with a high potential for moments of radical re-imagination and re-worlding. As Bigger becomes aware of situations outside the purview of his schema of practice, beginning with his evening out with Mary and Jan, his behavior becomes erratic, violent, and self-destructive. Wright asserts that Chicago’s jungle-like environment of endless potential creates such “a taunting sense of possible achievement that the segregation it did impose brought forth from Bigger a reaction more obstreperous than in the South” (442). Ralph Ellison, similarly, writes: “For despite Jim Crow, Negro life does not exist in a vacuum, but in the seething vortex of those tensions generated by the most highly industrialized of western nations” (271). The confusion that begins with violence eventually settles into small revelations that shock Bigger into reconsidering the isolation he previously took as self-evident, but his discoveries, instead of resolving his perplexity, amplify it. One of these revelations occurs when Bigger’s family confronts him before the inquest, when he realizes that actions, performed “on the assumption that he was alone,” have hurt and affected his family, each member of which “was a part of him, not only in blood, but in spirit” (298). He begins in this moment to understand that he doesn’t exist as a totally discrete entity, but that his identity is tied up in other people, the beginning of a sense of self that Catrin Gersdorf says consists of “who [one] is in relation to [his/her] environment” (30). Unfortunately for Bigger, this realization is not enough to anchor him. Even if he has successfully located himself in relation to a few people, he
lacks a wider context in which those relations make sense, and winds up cast
even further adrift by the realization that things are not as he thought they were.

If Bigger’s assumptions about his family are radically revised, then his
notions about white people are even more greatly challenged, opening the way
for the novel’s resolution. At various times, Bigger conceptualizes white people
as a mass, constituting a “white mountain looming behind him” (298). So ide-
ated, white people can be dealt with not as individuals with whom some kind of
unique relationship might be possible, but as representative of a great, imperso-
nal mass with such inertia that the thought of moving it is simply absurd.
This attitude is manifest in Bigger’s inability to understand Jan and Mary and is
certainly reinforced by the lynch mob surrounding the jail, but as a metaphor,
the white mountain moves Bigger from the concrete, the real people around
him, to the abstract, where no one is real. After talking with Max and express-
ing his feelings, he begins to entertain the alternative that the “white looming
mountain” might not be “a mountain at all, but people, people like himself, and
like Jan” (361). Significantly, Jan has moved into the realm of personhood, and
possibility of personhood has opened up for each human constituent of the
mountain that oppresses him. Once more, Bigger has no basis for evaluating
these newfound individuals, nor for choosing appropriate relations with them,
extcept the formerly utilized matrix of hate, so the confusion increases, but at
least his deep-seated schema of practice is open for change.

At the same time as Bigger’s suppositions about the world have been utterly
shaken, the white citizens of Chicago, rather than being awoken to their inad-
equate worldview, hastily patch the hole, thereby ensuring the perpetuation
of the ontological status quo. Bigger knows that by acting like any normal
black boy, he can easily rule himself out of the suspect pool (113). White society
doesn’t have an automatic protocol to deal with the murder of a white woman
by a black man, so Bigger believes himself to be safe from detection. When
Bigger’s crime is discovered, however, whites already have a number of ontolog-
ical solutions to fall back on. The first and most important is rape. They know
how to deal with rape, and their built-in schema for such a relation is evident
when Buckley declares that, instead of murder, which would reflect true events,
“the central crime here is rape!” (413, italics in original). The appropriate course
of action with a black rapist is all too clear, but the fact remains that whites have
been shocked. Thus as Buckley’s italics and exclamation point indicate, a run
of the mill rapist would be fit for little but deliverance to the lynch mob, but a
murderer must have an example made of him. The precedent must be set that
black men cannot get away with murder, but that they will be dispatched with the same harshness as any sexual predator. Murder, which gives Bigger a sense of power, will not be privileged over baser crimes.

Having collapsed murder onto rape and solved one aspect of Bigger’s world shaking, whites move on from relational solutions to employing new schemas of identification. Since it is inconceivable for a normal black boy to kill a white girl, Bigger must not be a normal black boy. This redefinition is manifest in the variety of nonhuman terms Buckley uses to refer to Bigger, from “half-human black ape” to “black mad dog” to “ghoul” (408, 409, 413). But dehumanization of African Americans is commonplace in racist discourse, and a murder trial certainly isn’t necessary to justify the use of these debasing terms to a sufficiently prejudiced mind. More noteworthy may be the newspaper article in which the editor of the *Jackson Daily Star* writes that Bigger, “despite his dead-black complexion, may have a minor portion of white blood in his veins, a mixture which generally makes for a criminal and intractable nature” (281). What makes this newspaper editor such an expert on Bigger Thomas is unclear. Resorting to his dubious authority indicates the widespread consternation at discovering that Bigger, who appeared to be one thing, has turned out to be another. A mild-mannered black man may not be capable of murder, but the product of miscegenation certainly might. The horror with which white people respond to Bigger has a touch of the uncanny to it—the familiar made unfamiliar, somewhere between self and Other. Bigger is thus recast into a new subset of black people, even more contemptible than the rest.

If white Chicagoans can ride out the traumatic events of the novel with little to no change in their ways of organizing experience, then we might ask what results in Bigger’s liberation from his isolating assumptions, or, indeed, how anyone might overcome the reign of an oppressive ontological regime within. Because of shared cultural contexts, everyone’s schemas of practice have the same roots and are likely just as entrenched in the unconscious workings of one mind as another. It would be easy to suppose that the different outcomes stem from their relative positions of power, where Bigger, oppressed and disenfranchised, is more amenable to changing his worldview because he has more to gain by doing so. This may be the case, but the mechanism of change still needs to be explicated. That mechanism is mercy, which first occurs, curiously, when Jan comes in on the black preacher’s sermon on the mercy of Christ and says to Bigger: “And when I heard that you’d [killed Mary], I wanted to kill you. And then I got to thinking. I saw if I killed, this thing would go on and on and never
stop. I said, ‘I’m going to help that guy, if he lets me’” (288). This is mercy in the traditional sense—forbearing from exact retribution even when it is apparently deserved. Jan refuses to give in to the rhetoric of inflexible justice, which would dictate that he had no choice but to make sure that Bigger died for his crime. He breaks the cycle and offers his friendship to a man who had done him a personal wrong, and in doing so, changes his fundamental way of understanding black people. Lip service to their basic humanity goes deeper when he has mercy, and the schema that leaves African Americans isolated is defeated.

Having mercy has certain benefits for the merciful one, but there are obvious advantages for the recipient of mercy as well. The effects of Jan’s mercy on Bigger’s concept of the world are immediate: “a particle of white rock had detached itself from that looming mountain of white hate and had rolled down the slope, stopping still at his feet. The word had become flesh. For the first time in his life a white man became a human being to him” (289). Here, Bigger’s abstract metaphor for white people begins to work its way back into reality, from a chip off the mountain of hate to a real human being, in three dimensions and full of complexity. The reference to Christ in the Book of John in the phrase “the word had become flesh” further emphasizes the mercy inherent in the act that made Jan appear as a human being. Perhaps the most important aspect of this moment of mercy is that, in order to receive it, Bigger must have mercy on Jan as well. Bigger would be justified in persisting embittered, in denying personhood to Jan just as all white people who made him feel uncomfortable in his black skin, but by so doing, he would be dooming himself to unchanging hate. This reciprocal mercy redeems Bigger ontologically, forging a new relationship with a new being that allows him to interpret the world in a new way. He has to wade across some confusion first, falling apart completely before he can put himself back together, but mercy helps him begin to heal.

The kind of mercy Jan has is, unfortunately, limited in scope because it requires a specific wrong to be done by one particular entity to another in order for it to have any occasion to become effective. It must be easy to draw lines of blame. Racism and environmental degradation, as well as other large systemic problems, do not work that way, which is part of what makes them so difficult to deal with (Jenkins 1). Max’s mercy, though less clearly definable, may be a better example of the kind of flexible mercy adequate for large-scale, nebulous wrongs. After Max finishes his long speech, pleading for Bigger’s life, Bigger is not so much concerned with the content of the speech, since he didn’t understand it, nor whether or not it was successful, but sits “hugging the proud
thought that Max had made the speech all for him, to save his life” (406). The mercy inherent in Max’s act of trying to save Bigger’s life constitutes a type of mercy that, instead of sparing its object a deserved wrong, bestows undeserved blessings. Although Max cannot trace a direct line of obligation between himself and Bigger, he does his best to save Bigger’s life. The result is that Bigger feels a “hugging” kind of closeness to Max, even if they do not actually embrace, and has mercy in return.

Mercy is an admirable virtue, but not an easy one, because it demands such so much from its disciples, but this arduous nature is what makes mercy so effective in amending schemas of practice. Max, while he demonstrates an exemplary kind of mercy, also gives us an illustration of the deep discomfort that accompanies mercy. In the novel’s final scene, Bigger has finally healed to a point where he can make some sense of himself in relation to others, and as he haltingly explains himself, Max fills with terror and makes his exit, “keeping his face averted” (429). Critics have variously interpreted this gesture as a denial of Bigger’s right to self-determination, the ultimate failure either of the novel or of society (Baldwin 45, De Arman 87). But since Bigger has finally given up what Tremaine notes as “his instinct . . . to dissemble,” Max’s terror has more to do with the anxiety of intimacy than with rejection (92–93). True mercy requires anyone who exercises it to consider his or her relation to another in a radically new light; it demands openness, intimacy, and vulnerability, and Bigger, at least, has complied. If Max recoils, it is because this final interaction between Max and Bigger is an excellent example of Timothy Morton’s intimate encounters with the “strange stranger,” which “goad us to greater levels of consciousness, which means more stress, more disappointment, less gratification (though perhaps more satisfaction), and more bewilderment” (135). In other words, there is a price to pay, but the reward is communion with some small part of the universe, human or otherwise.

The awareness of relations with others that this communion generates is necessary to dethrone a dominant ontological imaginary that perpetuates racial oppression. The environmental justice movement’s platform demands both self-determination for oppressed peoples and acknowledgement of the “ecological unity and the interdependence of all species” (“Principles”). These goals map nicely onto the overlap between racial and environmental issues gestured to by Wright’s use of ecological metaphors. Although, addressing both areas of oppression is without its problems, since accommodating both the right to autonomy possessed by individuals and the complex network of
relationships in which each individual finds him or herself entangled is part of what makes matters of environmental degradation and racism into such “wicked problems” (Rittel and Webber 160). It is often nearly impossible to say definitively when to privilege the claims of an individual over those of the larger collective, and the difficulty is only amplified when the collective is expanded to include nonhuman members, including inanimate objects like buildings and natural features. Despite the problems, however, environmental justice does well to expand “ethics to an ecological membership” (Jenkins 202). Nature and culture fold into one another and become indistinguishable. Quality of life for the human species is connected to the quality of life of other organisms and the health of ecosystems, and becoming aware of the ecological relations that tie all of us together is a vital part of understanding this. Effective action is greatly facilitated by this kind of knowledge about the world, knowledge accessible through acts of mercy.

In the face of systemic problems like environmental racism, relying on individuals to have mercy on one another may not be particularly promising as a means of achieving drastic changes in culture, but mercy as I have described it is at least one way of breaking deeply engrained patterns of oppression by becoming more aware of our ecological interdependence. Indeed, the mercy enacted between Max and Bigger is abortive and awkward, but results in Bigger’s curiosity about his place in the world, including among its nonhuman elements. True mercy is amenable to environmental justice because it is widely practicable and demands extreme openness and consciousness from all those involved. Individual acts of mercy may not be enough to enact change on a large scale, but Native Son demonstrates its potential. Cultivated as a civic virtue, mercy may be a feature of a better future—not just for human beings, but for the entire biotic community of the earth.
Works Cited


Charles Brockden Brown wrote that the intent of his novel, *Arthur Mervyn*, was to inspire sympathy for others. Brown claimed that his portrayal of the enslaved, the poor, and the diseased would motivate readers to aid those in need, since he reasoned that “men only require to be made acquainted with distress for their compassion and their charity to be awakened” (3). His treatment of women, though, calls into question the novel’s purpose of inspiring universal compassion. His sole use of masculine pronouns in his introduction (“men,” “he”) alone could indicate his possible sexism. More conspicuously, Brown’s treatment of women illustrates what Bernard and Shapiro have called “the dominated status of women,” due to the “repeated linkage of seduction and exploitation” in the cases of Clemenza Lodi and Watson’s and Arthur’s sisters (qtd. in Brown 69). Nearly every woman Arthur comes in contact with experiences abuse to some degree (although not by Arthur himself); even Thetford’s wife, a fairly minor character, makes a brief appearance in which she yields to her husband’s manipulation (31). The unusual and surprising coupling of a novel about compassion with subplots of the seduction and
ruin of women appears to subvert the novel’s intent and limit to one gender the sympathy Brown advocated for all.

Critics have extensively analyzed the role of charity in *Arthur Mervyn*, though never in conjunction with the novel’s treatment of women. Most term Brown’s work a purely “humanitarian novel,” since it “describes particular suffering and offers a model for precise action,” as Dietmar Schloss defines it (178). The “model” *Arthur Mervyn* offers is Arthur’s own behavior as he encounters each type of sufferer and forms a plan for how to help them, such as his sudden impulse to volunteer at the local hospital (135). These sudden desires to help the less fortunate occur whenever Arthur sees anyone in need, as seen in his response to Susan’s distress, Wallace’s illness, or the discovery of what was possibly an Underground Railroad hideout, showing that Arthur does not discriminate against sex or race in his attempts to give relief. On the other hand, *Arthur Mervyn* follows all the “typical plot points of seduction-and-ruin narratives” that were established in the British novel *Clarissa*, according to Bernard and Shapiro (qtd. in Brown 69). The conventions *Clarissa* provided, based on British culture (from which American culture was derived, and was still very similar to), dictated that women “seem sexually cold” and “maintain an attitude of indifference or even of aversion” (Brophy 107). Further, British and American culture condemned any women who gave in to seduction, making those women outcasts. By narrating this process of seduction to rejection to ruin, the first volume of *Arthur Mervyn* seems to align itself with these cultural beliefs and condone poor treatment of seduced or fallen women.

However, I would like to suggest that by presenting a seduction narrative in a humanitarian novel, Brown finds a way to logically disprove the idea that a woman’s worth should be based on her sexual purity, as it was in the culture of the time. Placing the situations of promiscuous women and those infected with yellow fever side by side draws a parallel between society’s speedy judgment and intense dislike of both, even though the infected, and possibly the women, had fallen from social graces through no fault of their own. By drawing these parallels, sexual virtue becomes defined as an unreliable standard—since it can be taken from someone against their will—rather than a touchstone of morality. The way Brown folds his critique of society’s treatment of fallen women into an unreliably narrated coming-of-age story, when considered alongside the restrictions both social and literary convention placed on women in the late 18th century, underscores the irrational nature of a society that judges based on the criterion of sexual virtue. By exposing how chastity can be easily imitated
or forcibly taken away, morality becomes associated with personal choice rather than a status of chastity. Other more trustworthy aspects of a person become more important when judging character, such as their civic, not sexual, virtue.

By portraying those infected with yellow fever alongside seduced women, Brown draws a parallel between the two categories of people and reveals a surprising number of similarities between the two situations. Arthur’s excursions into the city include several episodes during which he sees the bodies of diseased individuals—some of “whose heart[s] still quivered”—roughly transported from the city to graveyards (133). The fear of the yellow fever consumes the public to the point that people were buried alive in the hopes of reducing any transmission of the disease. Those untouched by the disease treat the infected as lost causes without any hope—infection equated with death in the public mind. Similarly, unchaste women also experience total rejection from society. After being seduced by Colvill, Arthur’s sister kills herself to escape “the upbraidings of her parents” and “the contumelies of the world” (143). The popular and contemporary seduction novel *The Coquette* likewise portrays the condemnation, “censure and reproach” experienced by women who had sex before or outside of marriage, whether they were willing or forced (Foster 899). Just as if they had been infected with a disease, they are uniformly scorned and no longer welcomed in respectable society. Family and friends repulse them with the same fearful, senseless rejection to which victims of yellow fever were subjected. Seen as impure, contaminated with either a physical illness or a socially unacceptable exploit, fever victims and seduced women face a miserable and probably very short future (members of both groups quickly succumb to death in *Arthur Mervyn*).

Then again, one notable exception to the death toll of the yellow fever, if extended to apply to the rejection of the unchaste, emphasizes the need to reassess society’s treatment of seduced women. The only character readers meet in the first part of *Arthur Mervyn* who is able to contract and recover from yellow fever is Arthur himself, and he only succeeds in recovering due to the treatment he receives from Dr. Stevens. At great personal risk, Dr. Stevens takes Arthur into the former’s own home and cares for him, despite the “fervent” and “well-meant” advice he receives against it from his neighbors (Brown 7). He believes there is hope for Arthur’s recuperation, and Arthur does regain his health. This formula of kindness resulting in recovery frames Arthur’s narrative, allowing him to live to tell his story and the stories of Clemenza, Watson’s sister, and Arthur’s sister. Arthur’s acceptance into Dr. Stevens’ home and subsequent
recovery, contrasted with the rejection and ruin of the women in the seduction subplots, allows us to question why acceptance was offered to one type of social outcast but not the other. If extended to apply to the treatment of women, Stevens’ formula of compassion would save women from ruin as successfully as it did Arthur from death. For example, even when Arthur discovers that Welbeck seduced Clemenza, rather than rejecting her as society would, Arthur feels even more concern and compassion for her. Further, in the second part of *Arthur Mervyn*, Arthur even goes so far as to seek Clemenza out at a brothel, eventually rescuing her from the life of a prostitute. Unfortunately, just as Stevens’ neighbors consider his mercy for Arthur to be dangerous, Brown’s contemporary society considered the idea of offering mercy to unchaste women unwise and hazardous.

To challenge that common belief, Brown plainly linked his novel with the contemporary debate on the treatment of yellow fever by giving his fictional doctor the same name as a real and prominent doctor, Dr. Edward Stevens. Doing so underscores the similarity between the yellow fever treatment debate and the question Brown raises of how to treat seduced women, inviting readers to reconsider the logic of punishing seduced women with rejection rather than showing them mercy. Due to the rising number of cases of yellow fever in 1793, doctors argued extensively about the best ways to treat it, but they were unable to agree. One prominent doctor, Benjamin Rush, advocated for treating yellow fever harshly with “heroic bleedings”; on the other hand, Dr. Edward Stevens focused on “strengthening the body,” which later proved a much more effective method (Schloss 178). Rush’s and Stevens’ methods parallel approaches to treating unchaste women at the time. The counterpart of Edward Stevens’ gentle method of fever treatment is the fictional Dr. Stevens’ mercy, while that of Rush’s is society’s condemnation. While Rush tried to help people regain health and American society tried to help people retain righteousness, their good intentions exhibited only “myopic, self-righteous humanitarianism that debilitates more than cures” (Schloss 178). On the other hand, the methods of the two Stevens resulted in successful recovery. Strengthening victims of yellow fever caused them to heal; taking in a sick man and caring for him personally and kindly, as the fictional Dr. Stevens did, resulted in recovery; therefore, forgiving and helping unchaste women can result in their reintegration into society and, ultimately, their redemption.

Reading *Arthur Mervyn* as an argument in favor of the redemption of ruined women could be problematic for many readers due to the submissiveness of the
female characters in the novel. Brown portrays not only the seduced women as weak and passive, but also Eliza and Susan (who aren’t seduced), so that all the women are “unable to consult and to act for [themselves] on the most trivial occasion” (Brown 153). Susan either cannot or will not go to the city to find out the fate of her fiancé, Wallace, so Arthur goes for her; Clemenza subsists at Welbeck’s mercy, and is unable to reclaim her fortune from him. Women in Arthur Mervyn are passive, never active, and it seems that men both create and solve their problems. The female characters are stationary while the males move about, either seducing women or saving them, and women exist only to “provide a crucial test of maturity and manhood” (Person 36). Brown’s female characters behave only passively and incompetently, never assertively. Brown appears to be overlooking women as far as humanitarianism and compassion go since he chooses to put his characters under the same restrictions and imbue them with the same submissiveness expected of women in his day. Brown’s readership, from his contemporaries to the present, could easily mistake the traditionally subservient roles of his female characters as supportive of society’s conventionally demeaning treatment of women.

However, not only was his novel a reflection of the reality of the time, but on top of that, Brown uses the adolescent Arthur’s unreliable narration to indirectly advocate for the rights of women by reflecting on Arthur’s continuing attempts to figure out his own masculine identity in an unusual coming-of-age story. Responding to Susan’s distress, Arthur spontaneously decides to return to the city to find Wallace and leaves without telling anyone, thinking his journey a “heroic sacrifice” (Brown 104). The possibility exists, though, that Arthur only interprets Susan’s anxiety as inert when that wasn’t actually the case. Arthur may leave out some information in his narrative, choosing to read Susan as immobile with anxiety because in giving her an identity of incapability, he simultaneously gives himself a capable one. In order to view himself as strong and authoritative, Arthur has to describe Susan as weak and helpless. Similarly, Arthur never even considers the fact that Clemenza could recover her fortune from Welbeck herself (154–155). This unreliability, which Patrick Brancaccio recognized, “lies not in the literal truth of Arthur’s report of outward events, but in Arthur’s interpretation of them” through the “interplay between [his] conscious and unconscious” (20). Arthur doesn’t deliberately label Susan or Clemenza or any of the other women as incompetent in his narrative. Rather, he describes them as such in order to create a distinction between himself and women in general; he defines his own identity against the identity he creates for
the opposite gender. Descriptions of women, therefore, filter through Arthur’s perception of reality and then surface in his narrative, resulting in the presentation of women as inactive and inept.

In addition to Arthur’s unreliable narration, the seduction subplots’ use of contemporary conventions of narrative writing makes *Arthur Mervyn* more successful in advocating for the rights of women than if those subplots had been omitted, which explains the novel’s apparent degradation of women. On several occasions, Arthur takes the opportunity to imbue his story with a moral, such as when he claims that “to feel extraordinary indignation at vice, merely because we have partaken an extraordinary degree, of its mischiefs, is unjustifiable” (Brown 144). Arthur is permitted to pass judgment on the moral correctness of the events of the story. Pronouncing morals and lecturing with such boldness and authority occurs rarely in seduction novels of the time, though, because women narrated most of them, and such pronouncements and lecturing was considered unfeminine. Female characters dominate the authorship of letters in the epistolary novels *Clarissa* and *The Coquette*, and few of those novels’ narrators proclaim moral correctness as confidently as Arthur does. The conventions of writing from the perspective of female narrators prevented them from pronouncing morals, since “female narration . . . [was] characterized by the restriction of the female narrator to the role of narrative witness,” keeping them from participating in the “active shaping of narrative form and meaning” (Case 4, emphasis in original). According to these standards, had a woman narrated Arthur Mervyn, no direct or indirect condemnation of society’s behavior towards seduced women could have been included in the text, since it would not have been prudently feminine for a woman to suggest such a thing.

Female authors of the time were painfully aware of the restrictions placed upon both them and their writing. Susanna Rowson, author of *Charlotte Temple* (another of the “canonical representations of seduction novels by women”), taught at the Young Ladies Academy in Boston, at which women were not allowed to speak in their graduation ceremony. In a speech by one of Rowson’s female students, which had to be read at the ceremony by a man, the student declared, “We are called upon to use our influence to the honour of God and the well-being of society, we are responsible for . . . our acknowledged power” (Jarenski 60). Contemporary society limited the influence of that student, as well as the influence of all women, to almost nothing more than existing, since the only way this student could use her “acknowledged power” was to have a man exercise it for her. Richardson’s *Clarissa* and Defoe’s *Moll Flanders* are both
written by men but narrated by women, making it unacceptable for their narrators to preach about morals in any way. On the other hand, Arthur Mervyn is unique because it is both narrated and authored by men while addressing society’s treatment of unfaithful women. It is this masculine presentation of the plight of women that makes it most successful at subverting common perceptions of women at the time. Because it occurred so rarely, the combination of a male author and a male narrator together highlighting the severity of woman’s situation evidenced the gravity of the issue and encouraged society to more seriously consider it.

Although it seems that Brown endorses the unjust treatment of women by portraying the seduction and consequent ruin of three women, his inclusion of seduction plots actually strengthens the case against punishing women for unchaste behavior. The account of Clemenza Lodi particularly illustrates the illogicality of condemning women for loss of sexual virtue since that virtue can be taken from a woman against her will—it is a fallible standard of judgment. Clemenza speaks no English and relies on Welbeck to act as a translator, so when he begins to force himself on her, she doesn't have the ability to go to anyone for help. She relies on him so much, being “protectorless and indigent,” that she remains entirely in his power (Brown 75). Welbeck gives her no other alternative than to give in to his persistent solicitations. Richardson’s Clarissa similarly depicts the powerlessness women could experience when seduced, but contemporary readers criticized Clarissa, avowing that she “should have loved [and married] her rapist” (Lee 34). No one spoke out to praise her for trying so determinedly to avoid having sex with Lovelace. This popular reading has perplexed critics, inspiring in-depth analyses like The Clarissa Project (Stuber and Doody) in order to reconcile the reception of Clarissa with Richardson’s instructive intent. Tom Keymer defines this intent as “a heightened awareness not only of the dangers represented in Lovelace but also of his own susceptibility to them” (qtd. Lee 37). The public’s reception of Clarissa set a precedent for the interpretations of subsequent seduction novels, including The Coquette and Charlotte Temple, even though the first widely successful seduction novel intended to incriminate not the seduced woman but the libertine. The practice of reading the manipulated woman as the guilty party in a seduction confuses critics because they expect audiences to favor an alternative reading, considering women like Clemenza and Clarissa to be victims of the manipulations of scheming men. Such a reading argues that it is impossible to pass judgment
on the adulterous women of seduction novels since societal conventions and scheming men are the perpetrators of the seduction.

Therefore, because sexual purity isn’t a reliable method of judging one’s character, Brown advocates for a radical social change in which judgment of character and worth is based on civic virtue, sacrifice, and charity rather than abstinence and chastity. Had society based their judgment of Watson’s sister on her “purest of human hearts” rather than the fact that she yielded to Welbeck, she and the other persecuted female characters would have had the opportunity to recover their reputations and reenter respectable society (Brown 68). The same mercy that Dr. Stevens extended to Arthur could have reclaimed Watson’s and Arthur’s sisters from ignominious deaths had judgment been based on their character and not their circumstances. Clemenza’s eventual deliverance from the brothel also shows the power that mercy can have on the life of seduced women when Arthur treats her like a human being rather than one carrying a contagion of sexual corruption. Brown understood that, contrary to the common thought of the time, one’s character cannot be understood when based on one’s sexual purity. While society didn’t distinguish between the two concepts, Brown’s “conception of virtue . . . was infinitely more complicated” (Schloss 171). He understood that virtue includes not just chastity but qualities such as integrity, charity, and ethics. *Arthur Mervyn* shows that focusing wholly on only one aspect of virtue leads to faulty judgments and ruined lives, while judging women (or men) by their civic virtue and integrity of character leads to a much more sound and reliable understanding of the individual.
Works Cited


“What do I think of Middlemarch? What do I think of glory—except that in a few instances this ‘mortal has already put on immortality.’ George Eliot is one.” (L254). So wrote Emily Dickinson in response to a question posed by her Norcross cousins. Although we do not know exactly what her Norcross cousins asked her, Dickinson’s response shows her strong admiration of both Middlemarch and its author, George Eliot (the pseudonym of the English writer Mary Ann Evans). Dickinson expressed her admiration in more ways than writing. Not only did Dickinson equate Middlemarch to “glory” and say that Eliot had put on “immortality,” but Dickinson also had a portrait of Eliot in her room, considering Eliot a close friend, even though she had never met her (Heginbotham 22). When Dickinson heard of Eliot’s death in December 1880, she wrote to her Norcross cousins that she was devastated by the loss of “my George Eliot” (L260). Whereas Dickinson was unequivocal in her praise of Eliot and Middlemarch, other Americans had mixed feelings about both Eliot and her masterpiece. Some critics generously praised the novel, saying it was “as nearly perfect as any novel can be,” whereas others felt the story “far too long.” (Spaulding, 352 and Middlemarch The Literary World 131). For example, in the
Old and New, H.G. Spaulding wrote that as “a work of art, ‘Middlemarch’ is as nearly perfect as any novel can be. The reader rushes on untired, lays the book down with a sigh, and always, as he does so, says, ‘How perfectly well done it is!’” (352). Similarly, Middlemarch was described by other critics as “matchless”, and Eliot as “more than simply a great writer (“‘Deronda’ and ‘Middlemarch’” 698). She is a prime elemental literary power” (“Quality of George Eliot’s Novels” 685). However, some reviewers felt the story was “far too long,” and that even though the reader grew “richer for [the] toil” of reading Middlemarch, he or she also would become “undeniably weary” from such an endeavor (“Middlemarch” The Literary World 131). Other critics preferred Eliot’s earlier novels such as Adam Bede and The Mill on the Floss, since they did not think that Middlemarch had “the charm of plot” as these other novels (“Middlemarch” Scribner’s Monthly 648).

It is likely many reviewers responded negatively to Middlemarch because they knew George Eliot was a woman. Contemporary male literary critics downplayed George Eliot’s importance in literary history and patronized her genius. They argued that “the remarkable thing about George Eliot’s genius [was], that though there [was] nothing at all unfeminine in it,” and that she had achieved the “highest point which, in a woman, [could reach] in our literature” (“George Eliot” 256). This condescending observation suggests that Eliot’s writing was good—but only for a woman—thereby perpetuating the misogynistic viewpoint that women were not as capable as men in thinking, writing, and reasoning.

Dickinson, on the other hand, gloried in the fact that Eliot was a woman—a thinking, interesting woman whom she could idolize. While other American critics felt obligated to find fault in Middlemarch, Dickinson had no qualms about equating the novel with sheer “glory” (L254). Although this might seem like a sentimental reaction, it poignantly shows the strong connection Dickinson had with British female writers—particularly George Eliot—and their need to express the essence of their souls and their acquired knowledge. While it is well-established that Emily Dickinson admired George Eliot and Middlemarch, there has been debate as to why Dickinson compared Middlemarch to “glory.” Although there is little remaining evidence from Dickinson as to why she deeply admired Middlemarch, there are connections between the women’s issues of Middlemarch and many of Dickinson’s poems. Resonances in both Middlemarch and Dickinson’s poetry suggest that Dickinson’s admiration for Middlemarch is deeply rooted in Eliot’s ability, as a successful female writer, to
address prominent women's issues of the time, especially surrounding the difficulties of finding love for intellectual, ambitious women in the nineteenth century. Analyzing the character of Dorothea in *Middlemarch* alongside Dickinson's own poems about thwarted love allow for a deeper understanding of why Dickinson may have related to Eliot’s novel.

**Connections Between Eliot and Dickinson**

Modern scholars have said much about the relationship between Dickinson and Eliot. For example, Karen Richardson Gee points out that Dickinson avidly read everything by and about George Eliot—including contemporary Eliot biographies—“to draw close to a writer whom she loved” (26). Dickinson most likely came to love Eliot’s writing after reading *The Mill on the Floss* as “early as November of 1862, when her first epistolary reference to *The Mill on the Floss* occurs” (26). Interestingly, Dickinson often refers to Eliot as Marian Evans or Mrs. Lewes in her letters, suggesting that Dickinson connected strongly with the woman writing these novels as well as the novels themselves. For example, in a November 1861 letter to Thomas Higginson, Dickinson writes: “Mrs. Hunt’s Poems are stronger than any written by Women since Mrs. – Browning, with the exception of Mrs. Lewes—but truth like Ancestor’s Brocades can stand alone –” (L368). To Dickinson, “Mrs. Lewes” was a genius on the same (or even on a higher plane) than Elizabeth Barrett Browning or Helen Hunt Jackson. Gee also suggests that by calling Eliot “Mrs. Lewes,” Dickinson was simultaneously pitying and “personally blessing Evans’s unsanctified union with George Henry Lewes. Unlike many members of Evans’ society, including many of her friends and relatives, who rejected her for her unconventional life, Dickinson insinuates here that she understands and approves of Evans’ marriage” (32). By doing so, Dickinson demonstrates loyalty and friendship for one of her favorite authors.

Not only have modern scholars noted Dickinson’s affinity for Eliot, but also the similarities between Dickinson’s and Eliot’s writings. Eleanor Elson Heginbotham suggests that Dickinson’s famous “*Middlemarch* letter” has a polyvocality about it which mirrors the voices of the town in *Middlemarch*. Heginbotham analyzes the way that Dickinson wrote the letter and compares it
to Eliot’s “comic tone” which she uses on the sanctimonious citizens of her rural English village” (21). For example, in the Middlemarch letter, Dickinson gently mocks her pious neighbors of Amherst: “I know of no choicer ecstasy than to see Mrs. [Sweetser] roll out in crape every morning, I suppose to intimidate antichrist; at least it would have that effect on me” (L389). In the next paragraph, Dickinson abandons Amherst gossip and instead talks about the wonders of spring: “Spring is a happiness so beautiful, so unique, so unexpected, that I don’t know what to do with my heart. I dare not take it, I dare not leave it—what do you advise?” (L389). Heginbotham argues that this “polyvocality” is “reflective of Eliot’s own multiple voices: the social commentator, the psychological prober of human hopes and disappointments, the literary critic, and the seeker of whatever solace or encouragement may come from mortal or immortal power” (20). Similarly, Margaret Freeman notes the “artistic kinship” (37) between Dickinson and Eliot through their use of “play” within their prose, and how this “play” was important to both women, specifically Dickinson’s “aesthetic and world view” (38).

Although the similarities between Eliot’s and Dickinson’s writing styles are important to understanding each woman’s art, it does not give a completely satisfying answer as to why Dickinson admired Eliot so much. One of the more intriguing possibilities for Dickinson’s admiration of Eliot and Middlemarch is that Dickinson would have resonated with an intellectual woman who wrote literature that highlighted women’s experiences (Showalter xxxiii). Paula Bennett contends that Dickinson “saw herself as part of a female literary tradition which she and [American female poets] shared. British in origin, this tradition had found its richest, most complicated expression in the work of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, the Brontë sisters, and George Eliot” (Woman Poet 1415, qtd. in Stonum 60). It was not simple to be a creative woman in nineteenth century England and America. Indeed, “nineteenth-century, middle-class femininity demanded self-abnegation, while the artistic life required egoism. Domesticism demanded woman’s silence, while her artistic vocation required that she believe enough in her opinions to express them” (Gee 33-34). This psychological and social struggle of the woman writer has been well presented by Gilbert and Gubar, who argue that the woman who desired to be creative—indeed, the woman who desired to rebel against the societal norm—was diagnosed as “diseased” (1536). Women writers of the nineteenth century struggled to find their voice and express their stories in “an attempt to make [themselves] whole” (1535). Both Eliot and Dickinson sought to express their experiences
through writing—not only to make themselves whole, but to legitimize women’s experience in an extremely patriarchal society.

**Women’s Issues in Middlemarch and in Dickinson’s Poetry**

One prominent woman’s issue in both *Middlemarch* and in many of Dickinson’s poems is the idea of impossibility of happy love for an intellectual woman in the nineteenth century. Both Dickinson and *Middlemarch’s* Dorothea are described as having intellectual ambitions. Dickinson was a precocious child and learned to “read, write, and do simple arithmetic in a common school, which she began attending by age five” (Habegger 96). After her common school education, Dickinson attended Amherst Academy in the 1840s, where she studied many subjects including Latin, geology, and botany, and had “freedom to be herself as well as competent instruction” (Habegger 140). Dickinson wrote about her self-awareness of her talents and intelligence in many of her poems. Her poem “It was given to me by the Gods –” describes her realization of her talent in poetry, and compares her talent to a “present” of “gold” (3, 14). By saying that this gift was “given to [her] by the Gods –” Dickinson recognizes that her creative talent is something special—sacred, even.

Unlike Dickinson, Dorothea never had a formal education. Even though Dorothea might not have had a formal education, she still views herself as a capable woman with desires to do good with her talents. Dorothea’s mind is described as “theoretic and yearned by its nature after some lofty conception of the world” (6). Furthermore, she has a great “soul-hunger” to “make her life greatly effective” and attempts to do good in the world by being creative (51). For example, she wants to design and build better cottages for poor estate tenets (14). Although Dorothea’s pride and naivety get in the way of her happiness, she never entirely gives up on her desire to do good and to be good. Indeed, one reason she wants marry Casaubon is because she believes that he will educate her. She thinks marrying him will be like “a neophyte about to enter on a higher grade of initiation,” and believes that she would “have room for the energies which stirred uneasily under the dimness and pressure of her own ignorance” (45). Her decision to marry Casaubon results in disaster, but Dorothea’s reasons for marrying him—although misguided—are sincere. Dickinson would likely
have related to Dorothea's character because both were intellectual, creative women who were not fully appreciated by those closest to them.

One of the difficulties of being a misunderstood, creative, intelligent woman during the nineteenth century was finding an equal, loving marriage partner. This is especially evident in the case of Dorothea, who enters into a terrible marriage at the beginning of Middlemarch, and then has to live with the repercussions of that marriage throughout the rest of the novel. Dorothea marries Casaubon, thinking that she will be able to use her creative talents to help Casaubon write his Key to All Mythologies (525). However, Causabon does not “delight in what [Dorothea is]” and rather “demands much interest and labour from her” (385). Essentially, he makes her his research assistant without any pay, let alone thanks. He certainly is not the “Saint Augustine” Dorothea held him up to be, and her marriage begins and ends in disaster, leaving her emotionally and spiritually broken (205).

Although Dickinson never married, she did realize the limitations marriage placed on nineteenth-century women. Dickinson critiques the ignorant “Christian” housewives of her society in “What Soft – Cherubic Creatures - ” (Fr675). In this poem, she satirizes the way society expects women to be: “soft,” “Plush,” “Gentlewomen” (1-3). However, this expectation does not prepare women for the “freckled Human Nature” everyone encounters in their lives (7). By mocking these “Gentlewomen,” Dickinson also critiques the society that demands them to be uneducated and sheltered. Furthermore, Dickinson’s poem “She rose to His Requirement” (Fr857) describes the way women are required to “drop” everything—their “playthings,” talents, and “Awe” in order to take up the “honorable Work/Of Woman, and of Wife” (1, 2, 5, 3-4). She laments that women have to give away the things that make them unique and interesting in order to meet their husbands’ demands; they give up their own dreams in order to fit their husbands’ dreams.

Another poem which talks about the potential terrors of matrimony is “I had not minded – Walls” (Fr 554). In this poem, the speaker hears the “silver Call” (3) of her future husband, but instead of being rescued from “Walls” (1), she finds the limitations of marriage: “A limit like the Vail/Unto the Lady’s face” (13-14). To her, marriage is a prison that confines her soul. Furthermore, instead of finding her archetypal “knight in shining armor,” the speaker finds “Dragons – in the Crease –” (16), suggesting that some marriages can go horribly, terribly wrong. This is certainly the case in Middlemarch; indeed, Causabon is actually described as a “dragon” who has “carried [Dorothea] off to his lair”
(223). It is significant that Dickinson wrote “I had not minded – Walls –” in 1863, eleven years before *Middlemarch* had been written. Dickinson would have pitied Dorothea’s state as a woman who had given up her identity and desires to conform to a man that was jealous of her talents and personality.

Indeed, happiness in marriage for an intellectual, creative woman seems almost impossible in both Emily Dickinson’s poetry and in *Middlemarch*. Although some of Dickinson’s poetry talks about the wonders of the possibility of love, a number of them talk about the exact opposite—how the speaker will never experience love or has lost a great love. Many of Dickinson’s poems about lost or impossible love were written from 1861-1863, which is also when her “productivity climaxed” (Habegger 405). Most Dickinson scholars agree that there was some sort of terror or pain that compelled Dickinson to write these “pain poems” (409). It is possible that this pain was brought on by the loss of someone she was very close to, however, the exact reason why Dickinson wrote these pain poems “remains an unsolved problem” in Dickinson scholarship (Habegger 410). However, since many of the poems from 1861-1863 are about hopeless love, it is quite possible that Dickinson lost someone whom she loved deeply, but realized that they could never be together.

One of the poems Dickinson wrote during this time which fully captures the despair of a woman thwarted in love is “I cannot live with You” (Fr706). In this poem, the speaker laments the fact that she cannot be with the person she loves, because “It would be Life –/And Life is over there –/Behind the shelf” (2-4), suggesting that even though she does love him, “Life” is something that is not allowed to her—it is beyond her reach; “Behind the shelf.” She cannot even “die – with You –” (13), because she could not bear to die or live without him, and knows that “Where You were not/That self – were Hell to me –” (43-44). In short, she does not want to be separated from him, but it is impossible for them to be together. The tone of the final stanza is full of longing and despair at the hopeless situation:

> So we must meet apart –
> You there – I – here –
> With just the Door ajar
> That Oceans are – and Prayer –
> And that White Sustenance –
> Despair – (45-50)

The last word of this stanza underscores the theme and meaning of the entire poem—despair. Even though the speaker has chosen her love, there is no
possible way for them to be together happily, and so she gives him up. The pain of this poem is echoed in Fr713, which states that her love “left me – Sire – two Legacies –/A Legacy of Love” and “Boundaries of Pain” (1-2, 5), suggesting that the vulnerability of falling in love is coupled with the certainty of pain. These two “legacies” of love are inseparable.

Similar legacies of love, pain, and despair at hopeless love are easily seen in Dorothea’s story, especially in her interactions with Will Ladislaw. After Casaubon’s death, Dorothea is left broken, hurt, confused, but also liberated: “Her world was in a state of convulsive change; the only thing she could say distinctly to herself was that she must wait and think anew” (522). However, even as she contemplates her new life, she cannot explain the “sudden strange yearning of heart towards Will Ladislaw” (522). As this “yearning of heart” deepens and as Dorothea continues to interact with Will, she realizes that she wishes to know that he loves her and that he knew she loved him because “then we could be quite happy in thinking of each other, though we are for ever parted” (587).

Still, she also feels the full weight of the world. In spite of her independent energy, that with this idea of Will as in need of such help and at a disadvantage with the world, there came always the vision of that unfittingness of any closer relation between them which lay in the opinion of every one connected with her. . . . How could he dream of her defying the barrier that her husband had placed between them – how could she ever say to herself that she would defy it? [587-88]

Dorothea realizes that she loves Will, but she is also struck by the impossibility of them ever coming together, as she is inhibited by both her former husband’s demands and societal norms. This “hopeless love” is illuminated in the parlor scene at Lowick, where Dorothea and Will realize the hopelessness of their situation. When Will mentions that they must “always be divided,” a “vivid flash of lightning” lights “each of them up for the other, and the light seem(s) to be the terror of a hopeless love” (860). Both Dorothea and Will realize the hopelessness of their situation, yet they are still drawn to each other.

Instead of letting these star-crossed lovers pass out of each other’s lives, Eliot allows them to come together, thus giving some kind of hope to the seemingly impossible situation of an intellectual woman falling and staying in love. Even though Will is decidedly below Dorothea’s station and her intellect, Dorothea “never repented that she had given up position and fortune” to marry him (887). Indeed, “they were bound to each other by a love stronger than any
impulses which could have marred it” (887). Dorothea chooses Will, and doing so makes both of them incredibly happy.

Some believe that Dorothea’s choosing Ladislaw inhibits her agency and exacerbates the problem of the intellectual woman marrying someone who does not deserve her. However, as Jeanie Thomas argues, although this scene is objectionable to many feminists, this conventional movement of Dorothea’s mind—towards the man who gratifies her emotional needs—actually clinches the argument for George Eliot as a feminist. . . . In the careful, detailed narration of Dorothea’s movement towards that choice, George Eliot exposes and critically ponders all the inner and outer forces that conspire to confound a woman’s public aspirations and to steer her towards a private conclusion which is at once a disappointment compromise and a sort of fulfillment [399-400]

In short, Dorothea does not blindly enter this marriage with Will as she did with Casaubon. Her choice to love Will is precisely that—her choice. She uses her agency to choose the man who loves her for her soul and her mind. By having Dorothea choose Ladislaw, Eliot allows some kind of happiness for Dorothea, even if it might not be entirely satisfactory to the modern reader.

It is hard to say exactly what Dickinson thought of the Dorothea-Ladislaw match, but since Dickinson compared 

Middlemarch

 to “glory,” and since she had such a high opinion of Eliot, it is possible that one reason Dickinson enjoyed 

Middlemarch

 so much was because it gave hope to women in her circumstance—that there might be men who appreciated intellectual, creative women. Of course, 

Middlemarch

 is fiction. However in many respects, the match between Dorothea and Ladislaw matches Eliot’s own relationship with Lewes—it might not have been sanctioned by society, but they were both very happy together and viewed each other as intellectual equals (Powell 293-294). Reading about an intellectual woman finding a happy match—both in the case of George Eliot and Dorothea in 

Middlemarch

—might have given hope to Emily Dickinson. Certainly, reading about real women’s issues by a well-respected woman writer would have appealed to Dickinson.

Eliot’s impact on Dickinson implies how deeply Dickinson engaged with the intellectual world around her and shows her need for deep, loyal connection—not only in her personal life, but in the kinships she formed through literature. Contrary to popular myth, Dickinson did not isolate herself from the world around her, but rather was intellectually engaged in the transatlantic literary world. She created her own networks, with Eliot as an important node in this web of women authors. Dickinson not only “gloried” in the beauty of
Middlemarch’s prose, but also in the fact that there were women writers like her whom she could connect with. Neither Eliot nor Dickinson were trying to write like men; they wrote like women and addressed important women’s issues—particularly the difficulties of being an intelligent woman in the matters of love and marriage. Like Dickinson wishing that she could “stop one Heart from breaking” (Fr982), neither Eliot nor Dickinson “lived in vain,” because they wrote their experiences as women writers, impacting future generations of women poets and authors.
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Edgar Allan Poe is baffling. He is an author who, despite his immense talent, found himself unable to support his family. He defies the recognized literary boundaries of Romanticism and Classicism, and he wrote everything from poetry to literary criticism to satire. Not to mention the fact that Poe’s work heralded the soon-to-become incredibly popular literary forms of the short story and the detective story. At a time when prose was regarded as secondary to poetry, Poe elevated pandering magazine stories to works of art.

Alfred Hitchcock is likewise baffling. Like Poe, Hitchcock’s works span decades of change from silent films to “talkies,” from black-and-white to color film, and through generations of expectation and taste changes. Also like Poe, Hitchcock found himself working in an art form that was considered inferior to other media. Despite these lowered expectations for the cinema, Hitchcock never denied his artistic instinct, and, after a lifetime of inspired work, Hitchcock will be forever remembered as an artist and his films as works of art.

Perhaps it is because of the low expectations these men encountered and the derogatory glances cast at their chosen art forms that they were drawn to the writings of a man named Thomas De Quincey. De Quincey, a contemporary of Poe’s, was well-known in his day for an autobiographical essay entitled
“Confessions of an English Opium-Eater” which was published anonymously in 1821. More relevant to the works of both Poe and Hitchcock, however, is another of De Quincey’s essays entitled “On Murder Considered as one of the Fine Arts.” Published as two satirical essays and a lengthy postscript, these “Murder” papers can be seen as a source of inspiration for both Poe and Hitchcock: all three of these authors viewed murder as an artistic opportunity.

Of course as creators they crafted their murder stories as carefully as a sculptor would mold clay, but this careful attention to artistic detail does not set these men apart from other widely respected authors and film directors. Where Hitchcock’s, Poe’s, and De Quincey’s veneration of murder as a fine art becomes most clear, rather, is in the ways that their characters treat the subject of murder.

Because De Quincey’s two main “Murder” essays are presented as the minutes from a fictional fan club dedicated to the art of homicide, many of his characters are not murderers themselves, but are murder “amateurs” — or aficionados. The first essay is written as a lecture given to the “Society of Connoisseurs in Murder” following the history of murder from Cain to the nineteenth century. The lecturer concludes his speech with some helpful tips on the “principles of murder,” because, as he says, “the mob of newspaper readers, they are pleased with anything, provided it is bloody enough. But the mind of sensibility requires something more” (“On Murder” 31). These notes are not given as suggestions for potential murderers but merely as criteria for judging future artistic presentations. The second essay is written about a celebratory dinner party hosted by Toad-in-the-hole, a murder aficionado who had been sorely disappointed by the lack of artistic quality in recent murders, but who is roused from his discontent by a murder that is, by all accounts, “the most superb of the century by many degrees” (“Second Paper” 86). At the dinner party, a round of toasts is offered to various groups of assassins whom De Quincey’s characters greatly admire for their contributions to the historical canon of remarkable murders. These essays are usually read satirically, often with a Kantian philosophy of aesthetics in mind, sometimes with an eye towards “Nietzsche’s full-blown aesthetic critique of morality in general” (Black 16). I would argue, however, that in his “Postscript” to the “Murder” papers, De Quincey reveals his true feelings about murder. Contrary to his first two essays, the “Postscript” is written in De Quincey’s own voice and begins as a defense of his “Murder” essays. Here, he explores what he calls a “universal” fascination with the gruesome details of murder. De Quincey compares this fascination to the irresistible draw of a burning building; upon reaching a fire, “the first impulse is,” he claims, “to
assist in putting it out. But that field of exertion is very limited, and...inevitably, and without restraint, we go on to consider it as a stage spectacle” (“Postscript” 95). According to De Quincey, murders are treated in much the same way. “After the first tribute of sorrow to those who have perished,” he writes, “inevitably the scenical features...of the several murders are reviewed and valued” (“Postscript” 97). He then demonstrates the fact that this universal fascination exists within his own being by writing a detailed, sensationalized account of a series of gruesome murders committed by a man named John Williams in 1811. De Quincey’s “Murder” essays may be hilarious and satirical, “a foam-bubble of gaiety” as he calls them, but lurking beneath the humorous tone is a real admiration for the art of murder.

Once understood as a murder aficionado himself, De Quincey’s “Society of Connoisseurs in Murder” becomes more than a satirical tool—it becomes almost a hopeful dream, in which De Quincey himself might someday participate in such a society of like-minded individuals. Of course, two of those like-minded individuals might very well have been Edgar Allan Poe and Alfred Hitchcock.

Poe’s own admiration of murder follows the pattern of De Quincey’s “Postscript,” in which De Quincey uses the clues left behind by Mr. Williams to unravel the manner in which his murders occurred. Poe mirrors this behavior in his own brilliant detective, Dupin, who solves the murder of an elderly woman and her child by reading the clues left behind at the scene of the killing in “The Murders in the Rue Morgue.” Poe also seems to agree with De Quincey’s assessment that fascination with gruesome murders is a universal feeling. However, rather than writing a long defense of the aesthetic virtues of murder, Poe defends his viewpoint with his stories; indeed, several of Poe’s dark, murder-centric stories are written as confessions (“The Cask of Amontillado,” “The Tell-Tale Heart,” and “The Black Cat,” to name a few). When his audience reads these pieces they are, in effect, receiving the confession of a murderer and, just as a priest who would receive these confessions, the audience is then required to make a judgement. If Poe’s murders are simply gruesome, horrible, sinful acts, the audience will cast its judgement by simply not reading any more of Poe’s stories. However, since Poe’s stories (and others like them) enjoy quite a popular following, even to this day, Poe seems to have proven his theory: everyone is able to appreciate a well-crafted murder.

Hitchcock, likewise, respected a good murder. In fact, in an essay written for the New York Times magazine in 1957, he claimed to belong to an actual murder fan club, not unlike De Quincey’s “Society of Connoisseurs in Murder.” The
Criterion

group, which he says is called simply “Our society,” would meet after particularly fascinating trials, and attendance included “journalists, novelists, playwrights, and even actors,” not to mention the legal representation from the trials and sometimes even the judge (“Murder” 137). In interviews, Hitchcock often ruminated on the best ways to kill a person (for a blonde woman, Hitchcock suggests murder by poison with peroxide), and criticized those artists who fell short in their work. In an article published in 1958, Hitchcock laments that “murder as a fine art...has declined in recent years” (Handman 87). And, of course, Hitchcock’s appreciation for murder can be seen in his films, most notably in his inclusion of characters who, like De Quincey’s murder “amateurs,” share a love of homicide. These murder aficionados are most often ordinary—even loveable—people like Joe and Herb who, through their philosophical exercise of planning the perfect murder, serve to provide a lighthearted backdrop to the much more sinister plotline of Shadow of a Doubt. Or the proper society women in Strangers on a Train, who can only giggle in tacit agreement when Bruno says almost accusingly, “Everyone’s interested in murder.”

The theme of the murder aficionado, however, comes to a dark pinnacle in Hitchcock’s film, Rope. The two main characters in this film, Brandon and Philip, are murder aficionados who decide to make the leap from enthusiast to artist when they strangle their mutual friend, David. Then they hold a dinner party in celebration of their work, inviting a handful of guests, including their old school teacher, Rupert Cadell. As Cadell speaks to the other guests, he reveals his own appreciation for murder as a tool and as an art. He details the proper ways to murder different types of people (like landlords, hotel employees, and tap-dancers), then specifies that “murder is—or should be—an art... and as such the privilege of committing it should be reserved for those few who are really superior individuals.” But, as Cadell explains his theories, a dark truth about the other party guests is exposed; Cadell’s descriptions of the types of murder elicit laughter from the guests, and after he suggests that one might murder a landlord in order to acquire an apartment in New York City, the ever-so-proper Mrs. Atwater declares, “What a divine idea!” Brandon and Philip may be cold-blooded murderers, and Cadell their unsuspecting muse, but it is the ordinary, well-behaved party-goers who reveal that universal tendency of murder appreciation defended by both De Quincey and Poe. We, as the audience, laugh along with Herb and Joe, Bruno’s society women, and the party guests in Rope, and in so doing, we are implicated in much the same way that Poe implicates his readers; we—the ordinary, well-mannered, educated people of
the world—must appreciate a well-crafted murder. If we didn’t, we wouldn’t be laughing along.

Not only do De Quincey, Hitchcock, and Poe use murderer enthusiasts as characters in their works, but they accuse each and every one of their audience members of belonging to the same society. Some might be offended at that suggestion, but there is a difference between appreciating the artistry of a good murder and actually committing one. De Quincey’s society lecturer in his first “Murder” paper claims to have toyed with the idea of becoming an artist himself, testing his own mettle by stabbing a cat to death. After the deed however, the lecturer admits that he has been turned off of the idea of murdering any lifeform, and “for the higher departments of the art,” he says, “I confess myself to be utterly unfit” (“On Murder” 34). This short rumination might just reveal the greatest mystery in such works as De Quincey’s, Poe’s, and Hitchcock’s, for none of these men can truly say what it is about a person’s soul that makes him or her “fit” to commit murder. They can, however, identify what it is about a person’s works that makes him or her “fit” to be considered an artist. Here, it is helpful to refer to De Quincey’s critical essay about Shakespeare’s Macbeth, entitled “On the Knocking at the Gate in Macbeth.” In this impressive critical reading, De Quincey examines Act II scene iii, in which Lady Macbeth and her husband have just murdered King Duncan and are startled afterwards by a knocking at the castle gate. De Quincey uses this short critical essay to examine his own emotional response to the scene, and to reveal the artistry behind those emotions. The resulting composition reveals the great secret behind great art: its purpose.

In his critical essay, De Quincey writes of Shakespeare’s work that it is “to be studied with entire submission of our own faculties” (“Knocking” 7). At the beginning of his essay, De Quincey introduces his motive for examining this particular scene in Macbeth. He says, “it reflected back upon the murder a peculiar awfulness and a depth of solemnity: yet, however obstinately I endeavored with my understanding to comprehend this, for many years I never could see why it should produce such an effect” (“Knocking” 3). He then goes on to encourage readers to abandon their “understanding” when it stands opposed to other faculties, like emotion. De Quincey felt “a peculiar awfulness and a depth of solemnity” when he encountered this scene in Macbeth, but his understanding told him there was no reason for those feelings. Instead of abandoning those feelings, though, De Quincey abandoned his understanding. He “submitted his own faculties” to Shakespeare’s art and listened instead to the feelings the play
was producing in him. According to De Quincey, then, art does not exist to create understanding, knowledge, or morality. When an artist works in his or her medium, the artist is really working to create emotions.

Both Poe and Hitchcock agree with this assessment. In his “Philosophy of Composition,” Poe writes, “A poem is such, only inasmuch as it intensely excites, by elevating, the soul” (667). Hitchcock, likewise, asks in an interview “What is art?” then goes on to answer himself with, “Art is an experience, isn’t it?” (“On Style” 293). For both of these men, every other aspect of the art is secondary to creating emotion. In terms of Kantian philosophy, Poe identifies Beauty as the proper way to evoke an emotional response in an audience, as opposed to either Truth (morality) or Reason (intelligence). Truth and Reason, he says, may indeed play a part in a work of art, but “the true artist will always contrive to tone them down in proper subjection to that Beauty which is the atmosphere and the real essence of the poem (“The Poetic Principle” 703). Hitchcock uses different words, but presents the same ideas. “I put first and foremost cinematic style before content,” he says. “I don’t care what the film is about...so long as that audience goes through that emotion!” (“On Style” 292) For Hitchcock, then, Beauty is found in style, and it is the stylistic choices that create emotion in an audience, not the Truth or Reason of the film’s content.

In light of this revelation, murder can only be a true art form if its purpose is to create emotion. De Quincey agrees, saying “The final purpose of murder, considered as a fine art, is precisely the same as that of Tragedy, in Aristotle’s account of it, viz., ‘to cleanse the heart by means of pity and terror’” (“On Murder” 32). He later expands Aristotle’s description, saying that the purpose of murder as an art is “to improve and humanize the heart” (“On Murder” 32). An example of this “improvement” can be seen in De Quincey’s first murder essay, when the speaker gives an account of a friend who planned to make his debut as an artist by murdering a baker. When he confronts the baker, however, the baker refuses to be killed, and instead challenges the would-be-murderer to a boxing match. The baker is fifty years old and out of shape, but, remarkably, he is able to hold his own for twenty-seven rounds against his assailant. De Quincey writes,

“What an astonishing stimulus to latent talent is contained in any reasonable prospect of being murdered. A pursy, unwieldy, half cataleptic baker...had absolutely fought six-and-twenty rounds with an accomplished English boxer...so greatly was natural genius exalted and sublimed by the genial presence of his murderer” (“On Murder” 29).
In De Quincey’s account, the art of murder reveals in the baker a “natural genius” which is awakened by the emotions present at the prospect of being murdered, and which otherwise might have remained undiscovered.

Like De Quincey, Hitchcock’s works often allow his murderers to “improve and humanize the heart.” For example, in his 1959 thriller, North by Northwest, Roger O. Thornhill is the victim of several artistic murder attempts. These attempts culminate in the most iconic scene of the movie: Thornhill is conned into waiting by the side of the road in the middle of a dusty field, where he is attacked by a crop-duster with a mounted machine gun. Why did Thornhill’s would-be-murderers make such an effort to craft an artistic murder when they could have much more easily shot him from a passing car? Hitchcock explains his motivation to create this scene as a director, saying, “The sequence is very carefully designed step by step both visually and to some extent in its menace... the menace of its content” (“On Style” 286–287). Hitchcock, as the director of the film, created this scene with his audience’s experience in mind. Likewise, Thornhill’s creative assailants designed this murder attempt for their audience: Roger Thornhill. The experience of being attacked by a rogue biplane would, of course, effect Thornhill in much the same way that it effects Hitchcock’s audience by creating a feeling of menace that works to “humanize” Thornhill’s heart. This process of humanization is not complete until Thornhill stages his own death; it is only after this last, “successful” murder that Thornhill is revealed to be a changed man. The menace that builds through a series of artistically attempted murders has a lasting effect on Thornhill’s character, finally allowing his heart to be “improved.” In the beginning of the film, Thornhill is a simple advertising executive, unsuccessful in love and inordinately attached to his mother. However, after his exposure to the menace of attempted murder Thornhill is improved and humanized. He becomes a brave, take-charge kind of man, finally capable of committing himself not only to save the world, but also to the woman he loves.

Many of Hitchcock’s films use murder as a method of “improving” the art’s intended audience. For example, Hitchcock’s Psycho sets up an interesting situation in which the murderer is a subset of the audience’s subconscious; when Norman dresses in his mother’s clothing and prepares for a murder, his subconscious is creating a kind of artistic performance. And since, as Norman’s psychiatrist says, “If [Norman] felt a strong attraction to any other woman, the Mother side of him would go wild,” the murders are obviously intended as a kind of chastisement for any feelings of attraction or arousal that Norman feels.
In terms of improving Norman’s heart, then, these murders are a kind of performance art that atones for Norman’s original sin of killing his own mother. By murdering the girls to whom he was attracted, Norman not only keeps his mother alive, but also improves his own heart in order to become a better, more attentive son, without any distractions from pretty blonde girls.

_Rope_ offers a more complicated version of the situation presented in _Psycho_. In _Rope_, three main characters are implicated in a murder: Brandon, Philip, and Rupert Cadell. Of the three murderers, however, Brandon is the only murderer-artist. Cadell is a philosopher who understands the aesthetics of murder, while Philip is a musician who is much more suited to his piano performances than to the act of murder. But Brandon is the true artist, saying immediately after the murder, “I’ve always wished for more artistic talent. Well, murder can be an art, too. The power to kill can be just as satisfying as the power to create.” Brandon plans the entire murder, including the party afterwards, while Philip tags along as a nervous and, at times, unwilling accomplice.

After understanding that Brandon is the murderer-artist, the question arises: who is his intended audience? Whose heart is to be “improved and humanized” by this encounter? I would posit that Brandon plans the murder in order to improve the hearts of Cadell, Philip, and himself. Brandon meticulously plans every aspect of his art down to the smallest of details. However the artistry of his murder is not complete until a party has been thrown. “The party,” he says, “is...the signature of the artist.” And since the party stands as a “signature” to his murderous artwork, he has planned it just as thoroughly as he planned the actual deed of killing their friend. Cadell mentions Brandon’s fastidious attention to detail when he asks, “Something gone wrong, Brandon? . . . You always plan your parties so well; it’s odd to have anything go wrong.” Of course, since Brandon did plan this particular party so thoroughly, nothing did go wrong; every detail was planned, including Cadell’s return afterwards. Cadell returns to the apartment under the guise of a lost cigarette case, then asks if he might stay for a drink. Brandon and Philip have a reasonable excuse to say no: they are supposed to be leaving for the country that night, so it would have been acceptable to politely refuse Cadell’s request because they must start driving immediately. Brandon, however, not only invites Cadell to stay for a drink, but then plays a game of deduction with Cadell, asking a series of leading questions and finally revealing the murder. This revelation is no accident. Philip understands this fact when he stands opposed to Brandon at the end of the film, saying “This is what you wanted, isn’t it? Somebody else to know. Somebody
else to see how brilliant you are." Indeed, Brandon intended for his crime to be discovered so that it would reach its entire audience: Brandon, Philip, and Rupert Cadell. Once the murder had spoken to its intended audience, it could begin to affect that audience in a way that would improve their characters, at least, according to Brandon. He explains his philosophical understanding of the art of murder during his dinner party, saying, “The few [who should be allowed to commit murder] are those of such intellectual and moral superiority that they’re above traditional moral concepts.” Brandon believes, then, that he is one of the few superior allowed to commit murder. But somehow, he is not confident in that fact until after he has actually carried out the deed. Immediately after the murder, Brandon states how “exhilarated” and “alive” he feels, as if he was less human before the murder than he is after. So it is only by actually committing the perfect murder that Brandon can prove that he deserves to be one of “the few.” By sharing the experience with Philip and revealing Cadell’s part in the plan as an inspiring muse, Brandon hopes to share the improving effect of his art with his friends, inducting them, along with himself, into the society of the superior few.

Poe’s murderers tend toward a slightly different audience than Hitchcock’s. For example, in Poe’s “The Cask of Amontillado,” Montresor tells the story of a murder that he committed fifty years earlier. He plans his murder carefully and waits patiently for just the right time to quietly lead his victim—the drunken Fortunato—down to his family crypt under the pretense of sharing some fine Amontillado wine. Unfortunately for Fortunato, though, there is no Amontillado. Instead, Montresor chains Fortunato to a wall and erects a new stone wall, trapping his victim and condemning him to death. In this case, Montresor plans his murder to be a secret to all, except for his victim. For Fortunato, the murder is planned to be “a spectacle of execution so that the victim knows who kills him” (Barban 56). Likewise, every minute detail of this murder is planned to coordinate with the wrongs that Fortunato has committed, creating an artistic quality that Poe termed “Unity” (Moldenhauer, 290). In “Amontillado,” Montresor creates unity in his artistic murder through parallels: since Fortunato treated Montresor as an inferior man, Montresor would force Fortunato to tour his family’s crypt, reminding him of the family’s storied history. Since Montresor sees Fortunato as a fool, he chooses to murder him during Carnival, at which time Fortunato and other people of high class would traditionally be dressed as “peasants, servants, or fools” (Barban 54). Even the Amontillado plays a role in Montresor’s unified artwork: “Amontillado” is, of
course, a kind of wine, but it can also be rendered to mean “collected in a pile,” which, according to Elena Barban, can refer to either the pile of stones that Montresor uses to trap Fortunato inside the wall or to the “pile of bones” that Fortunato would soon become (56).

Montresor’s detailed planning allows him to construct an artistic murder that is meaningful for his victim and audience, Fortunato. Since the murder is planned as a revenge killing, Montresor no doubt hopes to see Fortunato’s heart “improved and humanized” by feelings of remorse and contrition. Although no indication of remorse is given by Fortunato except for “a jingling of the bells [on his fool’s cap],” Montresor finishes his story with the words “In pace requiescat!” (“Amontillado” 421), a Latin phrase (meaning “May he rest in peace”). This phrase is normally used by a priest to absolve a dying person of his or her sins. In this case though, Barban asserts (and I agree) that these words are spoken by Montresor in regards to Fortunato, and that they prove that Montresor feels “that he has merely avenged himself for the wrong that Fortunato inflicted upon him fifty years ago” (Barban 57). I would also assert that these final words show that Montresor believes that his art has been successful; all of his work to create unity and originality has inflicted terror in Fortunato’s heart and, thereby, humanized his heart. The emotional artwork that Montresor creates leaves Fortunato a changed person, worthy of Montresor’s forgiveness.

Poe’s final short story, written the same year that he died, is another examination of a murderer-artist, this one named Hop-Frog. In “Hop-Frog; or, The Eight Chained Ourang-Outangs,” Poe tells the story of a king who is quite fond of parties and practical jokes. The king keeps in his employment a disabled dwarf who he calls “Hop-Frog,” because the dwarf’s disfigured legs only allow him to get around by “something between a leap and a wiggle” (“Hop-Frog” 422). The king also employs as a dancer a dwarf girl named Trippetta. Trippetta and Hop-Frog become close friends, and trusted entertainers of the king. So when the king decides to hold a masquerade, he summons Hop-Frog and Trippetta to help him make plans. Hop-Frog and Trippetta arrive at the king’s court and find their king to be upset and a little drunk. He forces Hop-Frog to drink some wine, despite Hop-Frog’s insistence wine makes him feel ill. When Hop-Frog, delirious with wine, cannot think of a good costume for the king to wear to his masquerade, the king forces him to drink more wine. Finally, Trippetta falls in front of the king and begs him to stop. The king pushes Trippetta down and throws a goblet of wine in her face. At this point, Hop-Frog presents a plan for the king’s masquerade—the king and his advisers will dress as escaped
orangutans, and when they enter the ballroom, the guests will be thrown into a panic. The king loves this idea and allows Hop-Frog to dress him and his advisors in furs and feathers then chain them together to make the illusion more realistic. On the night of the party, the king and his counsellors rush into the ballroom, frightening his guests with their wild behavior. Hop-Frog, a torch in hand, rushes around the orangutans, playing as a narrator for the crowd. “I shall soon find out who they are!” he shouts, hopping about the room (“Hop-Frog” 427). Then, in one quick movement, Hop-Frog attaches a chandelier chain to the chain that is holding the men together, hoists them into the air, and uses his torch to light their costumes on fire. He then climbs the chain to the ceiling and out the skylight, where Trippetta waits for him, and the two disappear into the night.

Because Hop-Frog intends for his homicide to be a revenge killing, it might make sense that, like Montresor, his intended audience is his victim. Many of the details of the murder even work to support this idea. For example, the king spends much of his time making a joke out of poor Hop-Frog, so in terms of revenge, it is only right that he dies as the punch line to one of Hop-Frog’s own jokes. And, just like Montresor luring Fortunato into his crypt with the promise of fine wine, Hop-Frog uses situations with which the king is comfortable—the promise of a party and a cruel practical joke—to lure the king into his trap. However, after all of this planning and detail, the costumes that Hop-Frog had designed “instantly burst into a sheet of vivid flame,” and his victims are dead in less than thirty seconds. If Hop-Frog had intended for his victims to benefit from his art, he certainly did not leave them enough time to do so. However, after the murder, I believe that the true audience is revealed: Hop-Frog himself. He uses his artistic murder as a way of “improving” his own heart, and lifting himself above his station. Just as Poe sees his own art as a way of “elevating” the soul and exposing it to “brief and indeterminate glimpses” of god-like ecstasy (Moldenhauer 288), Hop-Frog uses his art as a way of escaping the painful world in which he is trapped. He climbs the chain in the “domed ballroom (an architectural symbol of the arts)” (Bryant 45), elevating his own soul to a place of art and beauty. While Hop-Frog begins his story as a court jester, he finishes it as a changed artist.

This brief survey of their narrative works shows that both Hitchcock and Poe depict murder as an art in much the same way that De Quincey does in his “Murder” essays. All three men demonstrate ways in which murder might be used to evoke emotions and change characters. Additionally, they create
murder aficionados in their characters while, at the same time, accusing their audiences of harboring a like fascination. However, despite De Quincey’s best efforts, not to mention Poe’s long list of highly-esteemed stories and Hitchcock’s lasting impression on pop and sophisticated culture, murder is still not universally respected as an art form. Still, artists and aficionados should take heart; after all, Poe’s gothic tales were, for many years, seen as the ravings of a mind addled by alcohol and tragedy. Similarly, Hitchcock’s films have only relatively recently garnered serious critical attention. Not only did Poe and Hitchcock demonstrate the artistic side of murder, but they were able to use De Quincey’s ideas about the aesthetics of murder to elevate their chosen art forms. They used the emotions inherent in an artistic murder to inspire emotions in their own audiences, through their own mediums. Without the murder, there would be no Poe stories or Hitchcock films. No Montresor or Norman Bates or “Tell-Tale Heart” or Vertigo. Without the murder, there would be no art.

Endnotes

1. Jan Olsson contends that Hitchcock does not care for De Quincey’s artistic view of murder, saying, “The aesthetic approach to the art of murder was, however, not at the core of Hitchcock’s macabre spiels. His murder advocacy was rather on the cozy side, homely acts of kindness and consideration as opposed to De Quincey’s theatrical slitting of throats. Hitchcock’s preferred methods for homicide were strangulation and poisoning.” While Hitchcock’s fascination with strangulation and poisoning cannot be denied in light of his films, I disagree with the idea that strangulation and poisoning cannot be an artistic means of murder, and I will show that in the remainder of my analysis.

2. De Quincey’s “Confessions” has also been connected to Poe’s Dupin and his short story, “The Masque of the Red Death.” For a more thorough examination of either of these connections, see “Poe’s De Quincey, Poe’s Dupin,” by Robert Morrison, or “A De Quinceyan Source for Poe’s “The Masque of the Red Death,”” by Robert Lance Snyder.
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“Life is a Solid Substance”: Materialism and the Use of Objects in Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves*

Madeline Thatcher

“It is only in the world of objects that we have time and space and selves.”
—T.S. Eliot

Because of its lack of a cohesive plot, Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves* is extremely well-suited for examining the development of character, of place, and of objects. The novel, which relies heavily on a “stream of consciousness” style of writing, uses these elements as footholds for the reader by grounding the novel in something tangible. This paper proposes that although the characters that Woolf depicts within her work may vary in their relationship to solid objects, she herself is writing a novel where *objects* are at the very center. It is true that the term “objects” is fraught with multiple interpretations in scholarship over the past few years, but Jane Bennett succinctly explains how Woolf uses these items in her recent publication, *Vibrant Matter*. Bennett classifies “objects” as materials “that appear as they are to a subject,” only able to be engaged with by humans, as compared to “things,” which are considered such “the moment when the object becomes the Other” or when a “thing” gains the ability to think and act of its own accord (2). In *The Waves*, materialism—objects—has the power to draw human beings toward one
another and foster a sense of connection between characters, and as such, Bennett’s definition seems most fitting; these objects are controlled by the humans who interact with them, rather than the other way around.

Douglas Mao examines a similar vein of materialist research in his text, *Solid Objects: Modernism and the Test of Production*. Mao attempts to unravel the experiment that is *The Waves*, finding that this literary trial delves into the lack of life’s substantive material and comes on the cusp of a larger modernist movement later described by Mao himself. He considers the true “modernist vision” as one of the “predicament of the object, a vision of the modern age as one in which the particular, the concrete, and the auratic were threatened as never before by habits of generalization and abstraction serving a newly triumphant science” (6-7). Mao summarizes Woolf’s project in his assertion that modernism, “touches directly upon the question of whether art serves aesthetic experience or vice versa, whether value at last resides in the beautiful perception or the beautiful thing, in the passing moment or the enduring object” (36). While this explanation is not directly applied to *The Waves*, it certainly fits, as each of the six principle characters grapple within themselves to determine which experience—the perception or the object—should be taken as reality.

This dichotomy seems to be at the very center of modernist studies—is it an age dominated by objects, by machinery, by a lack of human connection? Or is it an era that flourishes on the abstract, on the ethereal, on the unattainable, in an attempt to “only connect?” Woolf herself engages with Mao’s proposed “predicament” in her short story, “Solid Objects,” from which Mao’s work draws its title. The story details the relationship between two friends, John and Charles, where the former, after discovering a “large, irregular lump” of sea glass at the beach, becomes obsessed with “possessing objects” in order to add to his collection; and the latter, who cannot understand “the truth of it,” eventually leaves his friend “for ever,” alone with his “pretty stones” (Dick 107). While Mao asserts that there is “danger [in] allowing the aesthetic vision to completely overcome the practical vision,” it seems this is only true in Charles’ case. When he asks John, “What was the truth of it? What made you give it up like that all in a second?” John replies, “I’ve not given it up,” and upon further protests from Charles, declares, “I don’t agree with you” (106). If we are to consider the ineffable “truth” both John and Charles seem to seek as true relationships with fellow humans, it is therefore obvious that no single “truth” exists. Rather, “truth” is relative, for while one considers truth to be lost among “the lump of glass and the star-shaped china,” the other considers it to be found by means of the same
methods (105). Essentially, the purpose of objects in creating meaningful relations with other people differs between humans—some may find them useful, while others still may see them as hindrances to true understanding.

Mao dubs this focus on objects and their subsequent effects on their owners as “making,” a deliberate act that effectively removes human influence in the process of creating and using an object. In relation to The Waves, he declares, “[The novel] confirms that Woolf was intensely, if not continuously, concerned about the element of domination [over the human] in making,” in short stating Woolf was suspicious of any sort of “material reality” seeing as objects supposedly rejected any need for human connection (76). To say so implies Woolf favored arguments against “making,” or against objects (and therefore experiences) that appear manufactured. Even in implication, it seems much too arbitrary a claim, too simplified, seeing as “the truth of it all” in “Solid Objects” can—and does—exist within both the rejection and acceptance of “making.” Ultimately, then, it is possible for Woolf to be ascribing to both interpretive meanings in “Solid Objects”; that connection is relative to each individual, and that while some may see objects as detrimental to forming fulfilling and legitimate connections, others still find that physical manifestations of their innermost thoughts bring about a clearer understanding of the transcendent “truth” her characters seem to be seeking.

It is therefore imperative that The Waves be examined for evidence of both “truths”—as those who discover a sense of self through objects and those who cannot do so, in order to be compared to Woolf’s overarching use of objects in order to create relationships between her characters. To do so, this paper will examine Bernard, Louis, and Rhoda, as they each display distinct attitudes towards objects and materialism. This idea of relative connection would naturally be examined through character development, especially in The Waves where there is little to be said of plot and much to be said of the internal life of each of the main protagonists. Whereas Mao depicts Woolf’s novel as one where human interaction is considered a “a strange and disturbing imposition on an innocent landscape,” it seems that some characters and Woolf herself believe otherwise due to a definitive reliance on objects within the novel to instigate such interactions (Mao 192). However, it is also necessary to determine which school of thought Woolf herself falls into, for it seems impossible that a writer as experimental as Woolf would fail to establish her own definitive views on the subject. Although perhaps inadvertently, Woolf seems to demonstrate the intrinsic power of objects in fostering connection, displayed in the
few but forceful interactions where all six of the main characters interact with one another.

Much of the scholarship regarding *The Waves* seems to revolve around Bernard, and rightly so, given that his narrative voice constructs much of the novel’s contents. His role as unofficial leader of the group adds an overarching framework for *The Waves*, a much-needed semblance of structure in a novel that lacks a plot to perform such an act. Bernard’s portions of the book are driven by his inner quest to create a legacy for himself that will remain long after he is gone, and he often finds himself thinking of his future biographer who will diligently record his achievements for future generations. He quotes extensively from this imaginary figure, who he imagines will write of his subject as one “possessed [of] a logical sobriety,” a man “abnormally aware of [his] circumstances” (76). The way in which Bernard intends to find this “logical sobriety” is by transforming abstract concepts—which are much larger than human experience—into objects that he can manipulate. He converses with the reader (or is it his biographer?), suggesting, “Let us again pretend that life is a solid substance, shaped like a globe, which we can turn about in our fingers. Let us pretend that we can make out a plain and logical story” (251). Life, something that cannot be touched, becomes an object that can be moved about by Bernard, making him a ruler and organizer over what is usually construed as eternal chaos. Bernard is compelled to do this, seeing as he cannot fathom comprehending life itself without any sort of physical framework. At one point he states, “How to describe the world seen without a self? There are no words” (287). In this manner, Bernard seeks to oversee both his fate and those of his friends, as one who can see the end from the beginning—the “Alpha and Omega” of *The Waves*.

But this changes; Bernard undergoes a “gradual transformation” as he attempts to understand how things can exist without being grounded in something solid, or can be experienced in a way to which words cannot do justice. He finds there are seemingly physical manifestations of human relationships that may feel tangible but are in fact intangible—such as the birth of his son—and as a writer, Bernard eventually learns that when describing feelings or experiences, it is foolish to use words or to use objects. His desires to be remembered, to be celebrated, to be worshipped—these are things that can be understood only through intuition and feeling because these desires stem from the very depths of man’s heart, a place “immeasurably receptive, holding everything, trembling with fullness” due to its capacity to feel both joy and pain. There
exists an eternal paradox within Bernard, because of the infinite possibilities that exist within his own imagination. Mao contends that in the final passages of *The Waves*, Bernard experiences “a yearning not for airy ghostliness but for solidity of self and in things,” thus proving to the reader that Woolf, like Bernard, desires to “oppose flux. . . with a fixing figured as an actual solidification of the evanescent” (71). However, this seems an inaccurate reading of Bernard’s final expressions of self; he proclaims he longs to be “a whole universe, unconfined and capable of being everywhere on the verge of things,” but is impeded by objects, reminded of his solidity as he “leans one elbow on the table, and holds in his left hand a glass of old brandy” (*Waves* 292). The enemy is not “death” as Bernard believes it to be, but rather “eyes meeting ours; the effort waiting” the immutable force that requires humanity to “call the waiter” and “pay the bill,” after which they must “find [their] coats” (293). Bernard has no reason to desire for “solidity of self and in things,” for such solidity is already within his possession.

Bernard’s metamorphosis is a replica of a similar change that exists as a bridge between Woolf’s earlier novel, *To the Lighthouse*, and *The Waves*. In the former, Mrs. Ramsay portrays the central and formative character, a matriarchal figure dedicated to bringing her family and her guests together as they spend the summer months on holiday. Her husband, Mr. Ramsay, seems a cold and detached partner and father in comparison to Mrs. Ramsay’s distinctive communicative powers, a scholar determined to publish a novel that will be remembered long after he himself has passed away. However, it is later revealed that Mr. Ramsay is struggling to come to term with his own mortality; while he was assured he had “a splendid mind. . . he had not genius” (34). Despite his attempts to grasp the whole of human understanding—a process he compares to the ordering of the alphabet—he cannot do so. He remains staunchly at “Q,” realizing he can never reach “Z.” He will not be remembered as the one man “in a thousand million” to “reach Z after all” (35).

Then comes *The Waves*, and Bernard, much like Mr. Ramsay, is obsessed with finding something that will stand the test of time, in this case his biography. His fellow characters also recognize his constructed lifestyle. Neville notes, “Bernard is posing as a literary man; Bernard is thinking of his biographer” (79). In other words, Bernard is posing as one who is obsessed with and able to comprehend the purpose behind objects. However, Bernard comes to desire something much greater for himself than simply being a permanent fixture in modern history—his desire to “be a whole universe”—to be infinite—speaks to
an aspiration not described nor contained by objects, one that must be experienced without the use of things.

Such is not the case with Louis, who instead seeks to use objects to elevate himself above his peers. Louis is the literal outsider of the group, the son of a banker in Brisbane, Australia, and therefore not properly “English.” Because of his foreign background, Louis uses materialism to his advantage and sees objects as literal stepping stones on which he might climb in order to appear superior to his friends. Much like Bernard, he seeks to obtain something long lasting, but unlike Bernard, he finds such a legacy in objects, regardless of whether or not he himself feels successful. This begins during his days at school; one afternoon, he lags behind to show one of his instructors his work. “I show my essay to Mr. Barker,” says Louis. “This will endure” (39).

After school, Louis again sets himself apart from his peers as he desires to obtain objects in an effort to set himself apart. While Bernard and Neville “go to Oxford or Cambridge,” evidently to obtain knowledge or prestige, things that cannot be held or displayed, Louis instead goes “to make money,” preferring to obtain physical representations of his worth rather than an aura of success (65). His desire for objects eventually escalates until it has consumed him. This is evident during an interaction with the group as a whole, in which Louis declares,

I beg you also to notice my cane and my waistcoat. I have inherited a desk of solid mahogany in a room hung with maps. Our steamers have won an enviable reputation for the cabins replete with luxury. We supply swimming-baths and gymnasiums. I wear a white waistcoat now and consult a little book before I make an engagement. (219)

This statement is almost entirely overcome with objects—the desk, the maps, the steamers, the gymnasiums, the expensive waistcoat, the little book—and as such there is little to be said of Louis as a character. Rather, he seems to be a compilation of his desk, his maps, his swimming-baths—a solid object that merely appears to be human.

This “cyborg” seems entirely separate and apart from Rhoda, who, it seems in direct opposition to Louis, offers perhaps the most forceful rejection of the world of materialism, but certainly not in any orthodox manner. Rhoda feels that objects prevent her from properly connecting to the physical reality she finds herself attempting to understand. And unlike Bernard, this rejection is not in any attempt to reach something more ethereal. Rather than advocating
that others realize the difficulty in human connection and therefore shun the use of objects, Rhoda longs for an emotional attachment to the world of things.

This is noted most overtly in Rhoda’s self-deprecating title “No Face,” which is repeated in almost every section of the novel. We first are introduced to Rhoda’s perception of herself in the first portion of The Waves when Rhoda arrives at boarding school. After finding herself alone and isolated in a world of objects and of people who understand them, she declares, “Here I am nobody. I have no face” (33). Her first identifying label, “nobody” is interesting when dissected into the words that create the compound: “no” and “body.” When examined in isolation, these words seem to indicate that Rhoda does not in fact have any physical form, rather than a mere feeling of separateness. She is unable to be anyone, to have any sort of “face” without a physical frame on which to place it. It is imperative for Rhoda to gain access to objects in order to completely exist.

Rhoda also acknowledges her lack of connection to others as a result of her insubstantial state. Later in the same section, she tells the reader, “I have no face. Other people have faces; Susan and Jinny have faces... Their world is the real world. The things they lift are heavy” (43). This particular line works well with Jinny’s clothing-dependent character, seeing as the dresses so central to Jinny’s power of connection can only be laid upon a physical form. The reference to “lifting heavy things” could also be seen as an allusion to Susan and her children, where Susan finds life heavy under “wrinkled thighs and sagging breasts” (131). Such is a welcome weight, one that brings about a “bestial and beautiful passion,” of which Rhoda can only dream. Rhoda is desperate for this kind of connection, and the others notice. During the scene where the characters join together to celebrate Percival’s departure for India, Louis spots Rhoda in the crowd approaching their table and perceives how unsettling interaction with others is to her. “We wake her. We torture her,” he notes. “She dreads, us, despises us, yet comes cringing to our sides because for all our cruelty there is always some name, some face, which sheds a radiance, which lights up her pavements, and makes it possible for her to replenish her dreams” (117). In light of her desire to “replenish her dreams,” Rhoda’s suicide is seen as a direct result of her failure to connect with the physical world.

Her foreshadowed death by objects—or lack thereof—is described when she states, “I hate looking-glasses which show me my real face. Alone I often fall down into nothingness. I must push my foot stealthily lest I should fall off the edge of the world into nothingness. I have to bang my head against some
hard door to call myself back to my body” (44). Here, Rhoda associates physical pain with reality; her desire to touch and to be touched is achieved through solitary efforts to bring about some kind of sensation that physically resonates within her. Further foreshadowing occurs when she states, “All palpable forms of life have failed me. Unless I can stretch and touch something hard, I shall be blown down the eternal corridors forever. What then can I touch? What brick, what stone? and so draw myself across the enormous gulf into my body safely” (159). Here it seems that Rhoda has at last accepted the lack of success reality attempts to offer her. It seems fitting therefore that in her ultimate attempt to retrieve her “forgotten face” as a result of “flutter[ing] unattached, without anchorage anywhere, unconsolidated, incapable of composing any blankness of continuity or wall against which these bodies move” would be death, a primal, physical act through which Rhoda might enter another world devoid of objects, one where she might invariably find her place.

However, there are a few key moments of connection in which all six of the characters interact with one another, and it is here where Woolf’s true opinions on materialism shine through. While these characters might find themselves divided on how they view the purpose of objects in their world, Woolf clearly sees materials as a means by which her creations can interact with one another. *The Waves* is in this way a physical manifestation of Woolf’s ideal novel, where “At first it seems as if there were no emphasis at all; and then, as the eyes accustom themselves to twilight and discern the shapes of things in a room we see how complete the story is” (*The Essays* 162). This is evident from the first page of *The Waves*.

In the initial lines, we are introduced to the group of six, and it is by their observation of their surroundings (literally “discerning shapes”) that we understand both the relationship between the characters and the setting in which they find themselves. Two thirds of the characters describe their setting in ways that objectify their placement; the sun becomes “a ring,” “a slab of pale yellow,” and “a globe hanging down in a drop against the . . . hill” (9). After interpreting these varied interpretations of the sunrise, the reader is able to gather that these six characters are close to one another, both physically as they are describing the same phenomenon at the same time, and in a more personal manner, as they seem to feel comfortable vocalizing their inner thoughts to one another. While this “vocalizing” eventually is recognized as soliloquies only the principle character at that time can know, this introduction, written in such a way that it
imitates a conversation, implies that objects are necessary in cultivating a sense of understanding and fellowship.

Soon after this first section, the characters part ways, only to reconvene years later when their mutual friend Percival is set to depart for India. Neville arrives first, and after being seated, notes, “This table, these chairs, this metal vase with its three red flowers are about to undergo an extraordinary transformation” (118). Neville is able to foresee the table filled with friends, during which the objects that construct their gathering spot will no longer be simply objects, but a part of the larger group. Although “things quiver as if not yet in being,” once all are seated, they may “say, brutally and directly, what is in [their] minds” (119). It is after this that the soliloquies cease to be isolated statements of feeling and instead are transformed into dialogue. The “I”s of the characters disappear and are replaced with the communal “we.” Individuals do not stand alone, do not remain as Bernard, or Jinny, or Rhoda, but instead become an “us,” a conglomerate party that simultaneously “drove through the streets,” where “our names [were] painted in white letters on our boxes” as “we clasped the flowers with their green leaves rustling in garlands” (120, emphasis added). Bernard summarizes this collective experience most succinctly when he declares, “We have come together, at a particular time, to this particular spot. . . [by] red carnation in that vase. A single flower as we sat here waiting, but now a seven-sided flower, many petalled. . . a whole flower to which every eye brings its own contribution” (127). It is the flower—an object—that stands literally at the center of group, and to which each individual adds a petal to make this object, in its vase, something beautiful and whole. Together as one, they agree “our senses have widened. Membranes, webs of nerve that lay white and limp, have filled and spread themselves and float round us like filaments, making the air tangible” (135).

In the final scenes of the novel, the characters once more come together at Hampton Court, and it is here that objects seem to foster the most complete of connections. Bernard, again acting as the narrative leader of the group, offers the most inclusive picture of the six and the objects that bring them together. He asks, “How many telephone calls, how many post cards, are now needed to cut this hole through which we come together, united, at Hampton Court? . . . We are all swept on by the torrent of things grown so familiar they cast no shade . . . I am wedged into my place in the puzzle” (216). The group becomes an object, a puzzle, in which each individual plays a distinct and shapely role. The “torrent of things,” the objects that make up life, have brought them together once again.
In their final moments together as a group, Bernard urges, “Let us stay for a moment. . . before we go. Let us pace the terrace by the river almost alone. . . What a sense of the tolerableness of life the lights in the bedrooms of the small shopkeepers give us! . . . How we worship the sound like the knocking together of trucks in a siding!” (234). This is profoundly significant; before the friends part for the last time, Bernard, again using the all encompassing “we,” finds solace and purpose in objects, in the sounds they make in their togetherness. Life most certainly becomes a solid substance, a substance with the power to draw individuals together. This section, the last of *The Waves* to include all of the characters, leaves the reader and the characters both gazing at the “many-sided substance cut out of [the] dark; a many-faceted flower” as Bernard tells his audience, “Stop for a moment; let us behold what we have made” (229, emphasis added).

It may seem strange to engage with Woolf as an author (at least in part) in support of materialism when she so adamantly opposed other writers who were regarded as such. To the authors she dubs as “materialists,” she considers their only value to be in demonstrating “what they might have done but have not done; what we certainly could not do, but as certainly, perhaps, we do not wish to do” (“Modern” 158). However, my argument places Woolf within the camp she so detested, as a writer who “writes of unimportant things; that they should make the trivial and transitory appear the true and enduring”; but such is not the case (159). There is evidence to support this, despite Woolf’s personal claim against such a label. Woolf inadvertently challenged her own stance on what is “true and enduring” when she wrote both “Solid Objects” and *The Waves*, in which she clearly demonstrates that the things she considered “trivial” are in fact the driving factors behind the connections between her characters. Woolf, therefore, deserves to be judged perhaps more heavily on her fiction than her nonfiction, as this genre of work appropriately responds both in form and in function to her forbearers and contemporaries against whom she took up figurative arms.

Mr. Bennett, Mr. Wells, and Mr. Galsworthy, whom she criticizes so harshly in both “Modern Fiction” and “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” wrote in a style that depicted merely the “outer life,” whereas Woolf adamantly supports the drafting of the “inner life,” making the biased nature of the importance of objects something impossible to describe. In the latter essay, she writes, “[Mr. Bennett] is trying to make us imagine for him; he is trying to hypnotize us into the belief that, because he has made a house, there must be a person living
there” (16). Essentially, Mr. Bennett and his colleagues expected objects to create their own meaning; while humans might use them or live within them, they contained their own entity, a soul of sorts that existed in some higher plane than human consciousness could comprehend. For Woolf, objects are akin to the atom she so fondly describes as the matter of life. Simultaneously solid but empty, atoms—and by extension objects—construct the framework for existence but cannot lend meaning to it. Rather, they provide a canvas upon which humans may impose their desires and their dreams, lending meaning to their relationships in ways that can be represented or interpreted by objects.

As such, Woolf herself is in fact the materialist; Mr. Bennett and those like him should instead be considered “vital materialists,” or those who expect objects to act for themselves, and in turn affect their agency on human subjects. Coined by Jane Bennett, these kinds of objects are separate and apart, a higher form of matter than humans, unable to be imposed upon by the former. The objects in Woolf’s work, and especially in The Waves, contain no such power. They are wholly and completely dependent on the humans who use them, and therefore gain their meaning and their purpose from the same. The characters depicted by the likes of Mr. Bennett find connection despite the ideology of materialism that interferes with their existence—Woolf’s come together because of it. Woolf’s friend and fellow writer E. M. Forster describes her writing style best when he writes:

Like most novelists worth reading, she strays from the fictional norm. She dreams, designs, jokes, invokes, observes details, but she does not tell a story or weave a plot, and—can she create character? That is her problem’s centre. . . Plot and story could be set aside in favour of some other unity, but if one is writing about human beings, one does want them to seem alive. Did she get her people to live? (Forster 16, emphasis added)

Forster’s question lies at the very heart of Woolf’s attempts at fiction, and what I believe finds an affirmative answer in The Waves, because of her reliance on objects. If “living” within novels can be defined as realistic interactions between characters, Woolf certainly succeeds, despite the personalized views of individualized characters that may suggest otherwise.

But in this declarative stance on materialism, there lies the possibility for didacticism that seems so out of tune with modernism as a whole. Mao argues for such a reading; in one instance, Mao approaches “Solid Objects” as a short story with a purposeful and a direct agenda when he says, “‘Solid Objects’
might be read as a projection of the Victorian childhood onto a modern adulthood, a discreet subversion that takes the nineteenth century at its word (to children) while deploying that word against it. A standard piece of Victorian advice on child-rearing was to make one’s child a collector. . .” (29). To read “Solid Objects”—and therefore The Waves—as a “projection” of an adolescent Victorian mind frame fits, at least in part, with the idea of modernism as a movement. Most scholars see modernism as a rejection of Victorian ideals; Mao’s reading of “Solid Objects” therefore works well in this vein.

However, if we are then to read the works of Woolf in this light—as an unabashed rebellion against the production of her predecessors—her writings would be just as hypocritical as they are groundbreaking. But because of her subtle nod to the subjective nature of truth in relation to objects as exhibited by the characters in The Waves, as well as her overt reliance on objects to foster connection between her characters, Woolf is able to be lauded as an extremely mature writer. She is one who understands the nuances of human connection, and one of profound conviction, solidified in her views regarding the use of objects in daily life. Essentially, this paper is offering a reclassification of Woolf, and an opportunity to examine her work in a light previously considered impossible, due in part to scholars as well as Woolf herself. The Waves is a perfect example of Woolf’s work in relation to materialism, and therefore deserves careful additional study. In this, the critic, alongside Neville, can say in unison, “The light falls upon real objects now” (127).

Endnotes

1 “Only connect...” stands as the epigraph for E.M. Forster’s novel Howards End. This theme has played a large role in determining the role of objects in modernist literature, as described by Melanie Williams in her article, “Only Connect: Howards End and Theories of Justice,” where she claims, “Forster, through [Howards End], produces a developed examination of the necessary linkage between the words of the abstract and the contingent.” This argument can be extrapolated to include the representation of the people themselves within Howards End; the struggle between the Wilcox and the Schlegel families as physical manifestations of the outer life of objects and the inner life of emotions respectively is key to the novel as a whole.

2 For the sake of space, this paper excludes the study of Ginny, Neville, and Susan. However, they are each represented in the group gatherings in the latter portion of this publication.
Bernard’s narrative comprises 45.1% of *The Waves*; Neville comes in second, with 13.9% of the text as his own.

Her “quarrel” was specifically directed to a “Mr. Wells, Mr. Bennet, and Mr. Galsworthy” as addressed in her essay, “Modern Fiction.”

This concept is explored in Sam Mitchell’s University of Richmond’s honor’s thesis, “The Stuff of Thought: Virginia Woolf’s Object Lessons” (2011).
Works Cited


The childhood of Ernest Hemingway was one of opposites. Growing up in Oak Park, Illinois, the “genteel, strait-laced, rigidly Protestant” suburb of Chicago, he was poked and prodded by his parents to adhere to the strict, respectable, and elite expectations of town residents (Meyers 4). This atmosphere existed because of the church, which was “the dominant influence” both “in the town and in the Hemingway household” (5). Yet each summer of his youth, beginning when he was seven weeks old, Hemingway left “the stuffy culture” of his hometown by going to stay at the family cottage on Walloon Lake in northern Michigan (17). These trips into the wilderness were liberating for the boy, who found great pleasure in learning to fish, hunt, and explore the natural world, far removed from the town that seemed so stifling. Perhaps because of the atmosphere of Oak Park, Hemingway developed a deep love of nature. I believe he would echo Ralph Waldo Emerson’s claim that “In the wilderness, I find something more dear and connate than in streets or villages” (5). It became his escape from expectation, from the stormy relationship he had with his mother, and the place he would return to again and again in his writing. Because of this dichotomy of place he experienced in his childhood, the settings he later created in his writing, and especially those of nature, are incredibly rich and full of meaning.

“Place-centered criticism,” as scholar Laura Godfrey calls it, forms a long-standing discussion in Hemingway scholarship that continues to draw wide
opinions and interpretations of the landscapes he created. I believe his landscapes continue to captivate us because, as Godfrey says, “Geography and place lie at the heart of Hemingway’s art, as they did in his life” (48). But most critics, like Godfrey, are more interested in talking about setting generally. They narrow in on the specific setting of a particular work and discuss its meaning and function. And while nature inevitably forms a part of their arguments, as it shows up in so many of Hemingway’s major works, it is never the focus. This leaves a hole in “place-centered” Hemingway scholarship that needs to be filled, specifically regarding his treatment of nature across multiple texts. For many of his characters, the wilderness is the place for healing, reflection, and peace, much like it was for the nineteenth-century transcendentalists of New England. I propose that Hemingway created a modern version of transcendentalism, at least in terms of his portrayal of wilderness in his works, which pointed to nature as the only place where solace and the hope of rejuvenation could be found amidst the war, disillusionment, and depression of the early twentieth century.

In order to understand Hemingway’s transcendental revival, we must first comprehend the transcendental ideal of nature. No better text exists for this endeavor than Emerson’s essay “Nature,” where he, as the voice of the original movement, articulates the ideas that formed the foundation of transcendentalism. Published in 1836, “Nature” was written during a tumultuous time in American history. With increasingly violent tensions mounting over slavery, as well as the encroaching influence of the industrial revolution on the land, Emerson retreated ideologically to the woods. And there he found a place “unchanged by man,” where his senses could be “truly adjusted to each other,” and he could be healed by nature’s “medicinal” power (2, 4, 9). Shielded by the outstretched arms of noble trees, Emerson says, “I feel that nothing can befall me in life . . . which nature cannot repair” (4). But not only is nature a place of healing and rejuvenation for Emerson, it is also a place where understanding can be found and ultimately, where spiritual, emotional, and intellectual transcendence can occur. He refers to nature as “the vehicle of thought” and “the symbol of the spirit,” where one can come and be “gradually restored to perfect sight” (14, 46). It is not strange then that Hemingway, who as a young man saw death and destruction as an ambulance truck driver in World War I, left the front lines with legs full of shrapnel, and lived in a world scarred not once, but twice by war, also turned to nature both in his life and in his writing. And the two best examples of Hemingway’s transcendentalism come from characters who also seek solace in the wilderness after traumatic experiences in the war.
While on a trip to Spain with a dysfunctional group of friends in the novel *The Sun Also Rises*, former soldier Jake Barnes decides to leave the city and go fishing in the wilderness. Hemingway gives us clues that this place will be a transcendent landscape even before Jake gets there, by describing the land he is leaving behind as “brown” and “barren,” where there “was no grass beside the road” (113–114). He also uses the word “up” repeatedly in these passages. Jake explains to a man in a bar that he is going “Up to Burguete to fish” (113). Their bus goes “up the road” several times and, if it wasn’t obvious enough, Jake then remarks that the place he is going is “high” and “must be twelve hundred metres” (114). The closer Jake gets to his fishing spot, the greater the incline is, and the thicker and greener the woods become (122). By employing this language, Hemingway suggests that Jake’s natural destination will help him to rise above his physical and emotional wounds obtained in the war.

He stays for a week, fishing and relaxing and enjoying himself in the wilderness, until telegrams from his friends inform him of their arrival in Pamplona and compel him to leave the beautiful, green landscapes of Burguete and accompany them to the fiesta. Like Emerson, it appears Jake could agree that “To the body and mind which have been cramped by noxious work or company, nature is medicinal,” as he is surrounded by very noxious company indeed (9). Each damaged in some way by the war, they all drink relentlessly and seek fulfillment in sexual encounters, chasing after things that will not bring them the peace they desire. Though Jake drinks heavily as well, he also chooses to seek healing and solace in the wilderness. He chases the “nobler want of man...served by nature,” which Emerson says is “the love of Beauty,” while his friends pursue the base, carnal desires of man (8). Hemingway juxtaposes the violent, pitiful, and self-destructive actions of Jake’s associates, which make up the rest of the novel, with the small, tranquil passage of him going fishing in the mountains to show us that spending time in the wilderness is the only way that a sort of peace can be obtained after such destruction. But Jake is not the only character of Hemingway’s who comes home from the war and finds himself drawn to the forest, and in the short story “Big Two-Hearted River,” the transcendental message is more noticeable, and therefore more powerful.

One of the reasons this story is the best example of Hemingway’s new transcendentalism is because the action of the story both begins and ends with the shell-shocked Nick Adams alone in nature. With the entire focus of the story on Nick Adams and his experiences in the wilderness, unlike *The Sun Also Rises* where many other settings and issues are emphasized over Jake’s brief vignette
in the mountains, Hemingway is able to provide a greater amount of detail, pointing more directly to transcendentalism and offering closer evidence of Nick’s inner turmoil. And with this detail, we see that the similarities between Nick’s actions and the pioneers of the original transcendental movement are striking.

Like a modern-day Emerson or Henry David Thoreau, Nick wanders through the wilderness carrying all the necessities for survival upon his back. He reverts to the simpler state, stripped of the irrelevant possessions that the transcendentalists shunned. “He felt he had left everything behind” (Hemingway 164). Nick feels comfortable in his natural setting, not needing “to get his map out,” for “he [knows] where he [is] from the position of the river” and keeps “his direction by the sun” (165). But this is no ordinary leisure trip through the woods—Nick has been wounded emotionally in the war and is seeking healing and rejuvenation. While Hemingway does not explicitly say this, he provides many references to the damage Nick has suffered.

First, the land he walks on, that he used to know as a child, is “burned over and changed” (164). Like this land, Nick was literally burned and scarred in the war, causing him to be a different man. He is like the grasshoppers along the trails that “had all turned black from living in the burnt-over land” (165). Nick can also be compared to the trout he studies so carefully in the water who are “keeping themselves steady in the current with wavering fins,” and “holding steady in the fast water” (163). He, too, is wavering in a current of pain and terrifying memory, struggling desperately to swim normally among those around him who cannot comprehend the damage he has suffered. Because of his dreadful experience in the war, he has become a broken shell of a man in the grasp of society’s problems. He has lost himself—lost what makes him an individual. But despite this ongoing struggle, shown in the short, repetitive sentences Hemingway uses when giving us glimpses into Nick’s suppressed mind (167), the important part is that he is still there, still existing, just like the grasshoppers.

Though they are forever changed by traumatic experiences, both Nick and the blackened insects are still alive and able to find their place within nature. Hemingway does not gloss over the individual side-effects caused by the atrocities of war—he never fails to remind us of them—but a feeling of hope pervades the narrative, and we are drawn to the conclusion that Nick’s time in the wilderness will help, for “He was there, in the good place” (167), the “medicinal” place Emerson prescribes for “the body and mind which have been cramped
by noxious work or company,” or, in Nick’s case, shattered by the horror of the
trenches and rampant death in World War I (9). At the end of the day, while
observing his modest camp neatly arranged between the trees, he notes that
the pack which was once “much too heavy” as he hiked into the wilderness now
looks “much smaller,” showing that nature is a place where his perspectives can
change and his burdens can be lifted (Hemingway 164, 167). Hemingway, in
writing this story, seems to agree with Emerson’s belief that when “embosomed
for a season in nature . . . why should we grope among the dry bones of the
past?” (1). Sure, Nick is scarred and changed by his traumatic past, but like the
land destroyed by fire, “It could not all be burned. He knew that” (Hemingway
164). His time spent in nature in “Big Two-Hearted River” gives him hope, and
therefore gives us further evidence that Hemingway was creating a new form
of transcendentalism in his writing. But though there are obviously many simi-
larities to the movement described by Emerson, Hemingway’s is revised in one
important way: with the exclusion of a connection to a higher power.

A large part of Emerson’s essay “Nature” discusses the experience of being
in nature as a means to connect with God in a state of transcendence. Near
the beginning of the essay, he famously writes, “Standing on the bare ground—
my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space—all mean
egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball. I am nothing. I see all. The
currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am a part or particle of
God” (4). Emerson sees nature not only as a pure, healing, or rejuvenating space,
but one wherein a person can even become a part of God, transcending his or
her mortal state. He also connects nature to morality, saying that an “ethical
character so penetrates the bone and marrow of nature, as to seem the end
for which it was made,” that “the moral law lies at the center of nature,” and
that nature “shall hint or thunder to man the laws of right and wrong” (24).
But this religious element of original transcendentalism does not show up in
Hemingway’s writing.

Though Hemingway grew up in the staunchly conservative community
of Oak Park, in a “religious family,” he later “attempted to eradicate in him-
self every vestige” of his upbringing (Meyers 5). His stories do not reinforce
traditional morals of right and wrong, and his characters rarely speak about
a higher power in any terms other than sarcasm and incredulity. While Jake
does visit a cathedral later in the novel, no reference to religion or a higher
power appears during his week in the woods, and we have no indication in “Big
Two-Hearted River” that Nick is religious at all. We can safely assume that their
Criterion

desires to enter the wilderness do not involve wanting to have the “currents of the Universal Being circulate” through them or to become a “particle of God” (Emerson 4–5). Instead of connecting to God in nature, they seek to come to themselves, to gain a sort of balance and renewal and feel at peace. Their journeys are spiritual in a transcendent sense, but not in a religious one, and that is perhaps because Hemingway is, first and foremost, a modernist writer.

The modernists, heavily affected by the tragedy and destruction of the early twentieth century, sought to deviate completely from tradition—meaning traditional literary forms, traditional themes, and traditional morality—in order to properly convey the senselessness of their war-torn world. And Hemingway’s writing, overall, embodies these modern attitudes. He writes about war, depression, dysfunctional relationships, and former soldiers whose horrifying, in some cases life-damaging experiences continue to haunt them for a lifetime. In this context, then, it is simple to see how transcendentalism could resurface at this time, and why it would not be the same as it was originally.

Emerson’s claim that “the reason why the world lacks unity, and lies broken and in heaps, is because man is disunited with himself,” seems to have struck a chord with Hemingway (44). He saw a world falling apart just as Emerson saw a nation falling apart, and believed, like him, that there was only one way for people to come to their senses and transcend, only one place where rebirth and renewal could occur after what had happened in the world. And the answer was nature. Like Nick, war-torn and traumatized, the world could go back to the forests, back to the wilderness and heal. Though it would be forever changed, Hemingway believed, as Emerson did, that those who sought out nature would “enter without more wonder than the blind man feels who is gradually restored to perfect sight” (46). The realities of the changing world were frightening, but through his neo-transcendentalism Hemingway shows he believed that healing was possible, balance could be restored, and hope still flowed from the same springs where his forefathers had found it.
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Forum Prompt

**Faith at the Crisis Point:**
Exploring the Intersection of Religion and Literature

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*Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.*
*Hebrews 11.1*

Religion and literature frequently intersect, whether a scripture is scrutinized as a literary text or a seemingly secular work suddenly reveals religious undertones or currents coursing through it. In either case, the connections can be profound and consequential for the interpretation of the work. In consideration of the second instance, let us look at three examples from contemporary short fiction in which a character’s turn to faith at the story’s climax inflects the story’s meaning.

First, we look at Philip Roth’s “The Conversion of the Jews”: “Ozzie made everybody say it. And then he made them all say they believed in Jesus Christ—first one at a time, then all together” (204). What is astonishing about this event, coming very near the end of this story, is that Ozzie is an adolescent Jew, speaking from a rooftop to a largely Jewish crowd assembled several stories beneath
Criterion

him. Ozzie has fled to the roof of a synagogue after he and the rabbi have had one too many quarrels in Hebrew class concerning the divine. On the ground below, firemen, the rabbi, Ozzie’s mother, and his friends try desperately to persuade the boy to jump safely into a net rather than directly to the pavement. Ozzie makes his demands, and the largely Jewish assembly beneath him complies.

Second, we compare the experience in Roth’s story to this extract from Wendell Berry’s “Pray without Ceasing”: A woman, inexplicably widowed as a result of a murder in broad daylight in the middle of a busy village street, suddenly says to someone who does not know what to say to her, “It’ll come by surprise, . . . It’s a time appointed, but we’ll not be notified. . . . So we must always be ready, . . . Pray without ceasing” (69). Her grief, if not assuaged, is nonetheless on some level subsumed into a powerful faith, which the author then assigns as the title of the story, in the same way that the singular event at the close of Roth’s story provides its designation.

And last, for now at least, we can add to the mix a passage from “God’s World” by Egyptian Nobel laureate Najib Mahfuz in which a fifty-five-year-old messenger, Ibrahim, absconds from his dismal life and job with the monthly payroll and heads for the beach and a sultry mistress. She tries to steal from him. In despair and without forethought, he enters a mosque and prays, “The world is after me merely because I love you; does that please you? Among millions of people, I feel so alone, it almost kills me; does that please you?” Interrupted by a detective who demands the reason for his actions: “God. . . ‘ he muttered with a smile and then raised his finger up to the sky” (160). God has not been an evident actor in this story up until now. However, Ibrahim’s call to God seems to transform everything—Ibrahim himself, his world, and his story. We shall return to this point.

What do these three short stories share? In the second and third examples, there have been no issues, motifs, discussions, or topics of religion until the stories’ conclusions. In the first, the talk in the Hebrew School has been purely intellectual without emotional content up until the rooftop experience. Thus, in all three stories, at moments of crisis or points of climax driven by violence, death, or judgment, in three different religious cultures, the characters claim faith as they find themselves poised on a brink.

The Letter to the Hebrews in the Christian New Testament is the only book of the Judeo-Christian canon that defines faith. But that definition, quoted as the epigraph above, takes away as much as it gives with its language of assurance
and conviction yoked to concepts of anticipation and absence, rather than evidence and presence. It challenges belief in what is not at hand while literature, generally understood, depends upon the tangible, the substantial, and the extant. Literature may stray into fantasy, approach the supernatural, or enter the future, but readers will stay with it, suspending their native disbelief, as long as the anchors to their worlds have been established and can be returned to. So what is it in literary presentations that might enable, might underpin, might warrant what has come to be called a leap of faith? What explains this jump across the abyss of nothingness to find meaning via a belief, an acceptance in the divine, which these three stories so unexpectedly reveal? And if the literature does make that leap, then what does that do to the text? Finding faith and discovering belief in secular texts has become an increasingly topical enterprise in contemporary scholarship. For instance, a reviewer in Christianity and Literature made this comment about a newly published book called *The Gospel According to Shakespeare* (U of Notre Dame P, 2013) by Piero Boitani: “Boitani . . . sees in Lear’s story a resurrection when he wakes from a healing sleep and realizes he has been reunited with Cordelia; Shakespeare has brought ‘Lear back to life, purified and accepting his newfound existence’” (289). Here, as with the short fiction, the end of the play proves a religious turning point for the protagonist and suddenly becomes redemptive.

Similarly, with respect to *Region, Religion and English Renaissance Literature* (Ashgate, 2013), edited by David Coleman, another Christianity and Literature reviewer observes that “what emerges is a view of culture that does not overlook the simultaneously binding and separating influences of geology, and presents to our understanding an archipelago of identities held centripetally together by lines of continuity between cultures, religions, and histories, even as differences threaten to whirl them centrifugally apart” (136). Here, authors such as Spenser, Middleton, Webster, and others illustrate crises following religious conflicts between Protestants and Roman Catholics in Ireland, Calvinists and Anglicans in England. And, once again, faith follows these challenges.

Finally, let me bring forth another recent example of this trend: *William Wordsworth and the Theology of Poverty*, which I reviewed for Christianity and Literature. In this book, Heidi Snow illuminates Wordsworth’s poetry through lenses tinted by contemporary Evangelical, Methodist, and Quaker beliefs not previously identified in the poems under consideration but for which Snow argues that indigence becomes the crucible of faith. Via destitution, the
meaning of the poetry, according to Snow, is made clear in ways influenced by one of these dissenting Protestant denominations of the poet’s time.

The redemption and the transformation that I noted above is what these conversions or acknowledgments of faith do to the characters and to the texts, by this line of interpretation. That is, according to this way of reading literature, a religious epiphany changes the seemingly secular drift of the narrative. In other words, Roth’s, Berry’s, and Mahfuz’s stories, like the works of Wordsworth, Shakespeare, and other Early Modern writers, find and show their meanings from a religious angle which suddenly becomes the hinge of the narrative. Thus, it may be possible to go back to the opening of the texts and read closely throughout to find anticipations and foreshadowings of this motif of transformation that we might have largely overlooked in our first readings.

We invite readers of Criterion to submit papers to this forum that deal with literature and religion in a broad and in a specific sense. That is, considering this topic broadly, writers might reflect the ways that scriptural texts can be considered as literature; how does religion therefore become literary? What does looking at a religious text as literature tell readers about its meaning? Are there specific points in the chosen text of scripture that function according to literary principles—theme, characterization, plot, setting, and so on—that significantly affect the way the text is read religiously? Or, more specifically, readers might also locate similar watershed moments in works of literature that are not necessarily religiously oriented, at least to begin with, and consider what it means for the characters and for the works themselves when a character experiences a crisis that becomes a moment of faith. How does that change the nature of the work? How does that become its meaning? How does the writer accomplish these transactions? Are they unexpected? Are they credible? What do they mean? How do they differ with different varieties of religion? And if these characters find belief, then their worlds find their meaning. Do readers of Criterion agree?
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Conflicting Roles of the Speaker and the Divine in the Holy Sonnets

Annette Challis

*But swear by thyself, that at my death thy Son
Shall shine as he shines now, and heretofore;
And, having done that, thou hast done;
I fear no more.*
—John Donne, “A Hymn to God the Father”

Scholars argue that this poem was written either in 1623 when Donne contracted a dangerous fever or in 1630 on his deathbed. With Judgment imminent, Donne portrays himself as a humble son calling out to a divine Father for reassurance that grace will absolve him of his sins. The final line “I fear no more” expresses that he does receive reassurance (18). However, such confidence is not present in the *Holy Sonnets*. In two of these sonnets, “Since she whom I loved” and “Oh, to vex me,” Donne portrays himself as the secular lover of God, rather than a son. Likely written around the time of his wife’s death in 1617, these sonnets do not have assurance and absolution but rather confusion and frustration. They compare the speaker’s insincere desire for God to a Lover’s narcissistic desire, which is typical in Petrarchan sonnets.
Scholars typically place the speaker in the role of Lover, with God as the unattainable Beloved. While the speaker’s musings in the *Holy Sonnets* align with some Petrachan conventions, they deviate in crucial ways that transform the role of the speaker. Because of the speaker’s infidelity, he proves to be no Lover at all; in reality, God’s complete devotion makes Him the true Lover, and the speaker becomes the adulterous, unattainable Beloved. Reversing the traditional role of the speaker reveals his fallen nature and his need for God’s grace, demonstrating the interdependency of human and divine love; God needs the speaker’s sin and adultery because only with sin and adultery will the speaker need God’s grace. While this relationship establishes a need for Christ’s grace, it falls short of cultivating true repentance because the role of the speaker as the unattainable Beloved inherently denies union with God and misplaces God as an equal partner rather than the Creator. The sins and adulteries preventing contrition established in these sonnets can only be resolved when Donne takes his rightful place as son of God in “Hymn to God the Father.” While the sonnets embody the fallen nature necessary to create a need for Christ, Donne’s death-bed poem embodies the transcendence of that nature as he fills his role as son to a Divine Father.

**I. Petrarchan Love in the Holy Sonnets**

The *Holy Sonnets* are connected to the Petrarchan lyrical tradition through their rhyme scheme and fourteen-line structure composed of an octave and sestet. Petrarchan conventions mandate that the speaker of a sonnet be the Lover; however, Donne reverses this expectation in “Since she whom I loved” and “Oh, to vex me.” In these sonnets, the speaker’s infidelity makes him the unattainable Beloved of God, and God’s devotion makes Him the true Lover. The speaker’s secular view of Divinity reveals his fallen nature and his profound need for God’s grace.

In “Since she whom I loved,” the speaker views God in an erotic lens by literalizing the biblical metaphor of Christ as husband and the church or individual as the bride. The sonnet begins with an apostrophe as the speaker laments the death of his Beloved, who is often interpreted to be Donne’s wife, Anne More (1–4). Desiring a woman who is made unattainable by death is traditional in Petrarchan sonnets, but this desire is unconventionally transferred to God in line six as the speaker “seek[s] thee God.” Even though the structures
and metaphors of Petrarchan poetry are present, the speaker fails to express the musings of devotion that characterize the role of Lover, and he ultimately becomes the Beloved. The speaker expresses his adulteries, exposing his need for Christ and the mutual dependency of human and divine love.

Donne deviates from Petrarchan conventions because the unattainable lady (God) reciprocates and transcends the speaker’s love and ultimately becomes a more appropriate Lover than the speaker. God is unlike the Petrarchan Beloved because He offers His “all” (“Since she” 10). He is more accurately the Lover because of the “tender jealousy” He develops when His Beloved is unfaithful to Him (13). God is responding to the Beloved’s adultery not in anger or abandonment but in jealousy that is “tender” and loving. It is God, not the speaker, who is jealously trying to woo the Beloved. God unsuccessfully “woos [the speaker’s] soul” just as a Petrarchan Lover tries to woo the Beloved (10). By reversing Petrarchan expectations, Donne affirms the sharp contrast between conventional Petrarchan love and the complete, perfect love of God. The speaker is certain that God offers His “all,” and it is the speaker’s lack of devotion that is preventing their union. God even surpasses Petrarchan love as He offers true devotion. He is not just a secular Petrarchan Lover, but the true, perfect Lover who will never abandon His unreachable Beloved.

The speaker proves to be an inadequate Lover as he takes on the role as Christ’s adulterous bride. His adultery ultimately makes him the unattainable Beloved. While the church is metaphorically depicted as the bride of Christ in the New Testament, Donne “disregard[s] the corporate bridal church in favor of the individual bridal soul” (Johnson 35). Donne views each individual as Christ’s spouse, married through communion. In the sestet of “Since she whom I loved” the speaker becomes the bride, though an adulterous one. The Lover should be captivated with his Beloved, but he is completely unsatisfied and adulterous to his spouse. The speaker laments that though his God has given His “all” (“Since she” 10), he continues to have a “thirsty dropsy” (8) and to “beg more love” (9), suggesting infidelity as the speaker thirsts for love outside of his relationship with God. He tries to satisfy his thirst through his “love to saints and angels” (12). He is seeking for love in other places and repeatedly expresses his infidelity. He even warns God of the possibility that the “devil put thee out” (14). The speaker is not only unfaithful to God but is cavorting with His enemy. His love for the devil, or sin, has the potential to extinguish his love of God. Donne goes beyond insincerity by making the speaker entirely doubtful and adulterous. The speaker is not just insincere or reluctant but betrays his spouse,
undermining his role as Lover. Because of his lack of devotion and adultery, the speaker is not the Lover but actually the Beloved of the true Lover, God.

This adultery against God is turned specifically to Donne's wife, revealing the communion of human and divine love. Although “Since she whom I loved” offers a sharp contrast between human and divine love, the speaker ironically claims that these two kinds of love are derived from the same source. As Donne laments his wife’s death, he claims that his secular love for her set his mind on “heavenly things” (4). He claims, “Here the admiring her my mind did whet / To seek thee God; so streams do show the head” (5–6). His love for his wife has led him to search for God, proving that both streams of love have the same source. His secular love for Anne has actually inspired his love for the divine. Line two contains a pun where the speaker states that his “good is dead,” similar in sound to “God is dead.” The death of his wife is entwined with the death of goodness and the death of God. Donne’s love for God derives from and is dependent on the secular love for his wife as God dies along with her. However, it also can be interpreted to indicate that his wife actually was his goodness and his God. As she dies, the speaker’s “good” and “God” dies, making her an idol of worship. The speaker laments that he “beg[s] more love,” which is likely a pun on his wife’s name, reinforcing that his love for Anne More is adultery against God (9). Donne’s love for his wife is simultaneously necessary for devotion to God and adultery against God. Secular love at the same time inspires and hinders divine love, forming a paradox.

This paradox that human love simultaneously hinders and enables divine love can be resolved through examining the interdependency of human and divine love. Lindsay Mann argues that Donne’s expression of the corruption of natural and physical is “simply an insistence on the effects of the Fall and sin; but the point of this insistence is that these effects can and must be offset to a degree by grace” (535). Donne employs Petrarchan conventions not to suggest that love of God is like erotic love, but rather to acknowledge the fallen nature of humankind, he embodies in verse the need for redemption. Because of the Fall, man cannot embrace divine love; therefore, he must understand God through secular love. The speaker’s “human love can realistically lead to and participate in divine love, despite human limits and fallings” (Mann 546). Thus human love is not in opposition to divine love, but rather is a preparatory love. The Holy Sonnets do not offer a speaker who has overcome his fallen nature; they expose that fallen nature. God uses “men's imperfections to draw
them to him” (Mann 537). Human love hinders divine love because it leads to the adulteries, yet it is those adulteries that create a need for atonement.

The fallen nature of man and need for grace is also prevalent in “Oh, to vex me,” as the speaker again uses the secular love of Petrarchism to frame his relationship with God. In this sonnet, his adultery is described as “inconstancy,” and he himself becomes another person who is in competition with God; he loves himself too much to recognize his nothingness and dependence on the Divine. This sonnet affirms the complete selfless love of God and the perpetual unattainability of the selfish Beloved. The secular relationship fails to inspire true repentance in the speaker, revealing its inadequacies.

The speaker in “Oh, to vex me” tries to resolve the paradox in which his inconstancy inspires constancy in God, and this inconstancy ultimately shows that he is not the devoted Lover, but the adulterous Beloved. In the octave, Donne presents inconstancy as the Beloved’s defining characteristic as he expresses repeatedly the “contraries” that “meet in one” (“vex me” 1). His devotion, love, temperature, and voice are all described as conflicting. His contribution and his love are “humorous” (5), which in Donne’s time meant “changing” (“humorous,” def. 3a). The speaker is repeatedly described as inconstant until it becomes his sole characteristic. This list of contradictions conclude with “as infinite, as none” demonstrating how his entire being is a paradox (8). The speaker does not express devotion to God but rather inconstancy. The Beloved is obsessed with his own paradoxes and is enamored with his own image.

Donne intensifies the narcissism that is conventional to Petrarchan poetry to undo the speaker’s role as Lover and reveal his true role as Beloved. Rather than declaring an adulterous affair with his wife, angels, and the devil as he does in “Since she whom I loved,” Donne suggests that love of self competes with love of God. There is no mention of God in the octave, and there is little characterization of Him other than how He affects the speaker throughout the rest of the poem. A Petrarchan Lover should be “wholly enamored with the image of the Beloved,” yet the speaker offers little description of God (Kuchar 543). The image he is enamored with is his own. Gary Kuchar rightly points out that narcissism is typical to Petrarchan sonnets (537); however, Donne goes beyond narcissism. He is not narcissistically expressing devotion to the Beloved but rather narcissistically expressing his own unattainability.

The switch in focus indicates that he is not the conventional Lover but rather the Beloved. His narcissism prevents him from repenting and makes him unattainable to God, as the Petrarchan Beloved should be. Kuchar argues,
“The speaker wants to express full contrition for his sins . . . at the same time as he experiences terror over the narcissistically traumatic insight that such contrition entails” (537). He is willing to admit that he is inadequate but is reluctant to admit that he is nothing without God. The speaker tries to make himself equal with God by viewing God as a secular lover and cannot admit his dependency on God; consequentially, he cannot transcend his fallen nature. Donne emphasizes this reluctance with the phrase “as infinite, as none” (“vex me” 8). He is as infinite as he is nothing. The Beloved wants to repent and fully love God, but he does not want to recognize that he is nothing. God responds to this reluctance with constancy as the speaker struggles to understand how the Lover can accept such infidelity.

Petrarchan lovesickness is traditionally caused by a woman’s refusal or inability to reciprocate love; however, in “Oh, to vex me” it is caused by God’s constant love. The first phrase, “oh, to vex me,” initiates this tone of lamentation and suffering. “Oh” connotes a sort of dejected sigh, while “vex” indicates that the speaker is frustrated or worried. The speaker immediately makes it very clear that he is deeply concerned with his lack of faith: his fallen nature causes him to suffer.

The personification of inconstancy that follows suggests that he is even disturbed. “Inconstancy unnaturally hath begot / A constant habit” (2–3). This personification of inconstancy indicates that the speaker is constantly inconstant, and his habit of inconstancy is a disturbing, unnatural child born out of paradox. This emphasizes the disturbing effects of the speaker’s fallen nature. The personification also insinuates that the speaker’s inconstancy has born constancy in God. Because the speaker has a fallen, inconstant nature, he has a constant need for God’s grace. In God’s selflessness, He consistently offers it. Just as Petrarchan sonnets demand, the speaker suffers greatly because of his love affair; however, it is the speaker’s unattainability that causes the suffering.

Despite the narcissism, adultery and insincerity, God still loves His Beloved. Further, Kimberly Johnson claims that God loves the Beloved because of his inadequacies (37). God’s constancy is born out of the speaker’s inconstancy, implying that the speaker’s sins and adulteries are actually the mother or creator of God’s perfect devotion. God’s divine love is dependent on the imperfect secular love of the speaker. The final two lines of “Oh, to vex me” portray this paradoxical need for inconstancy. The Beloved claims, “Those are my best days, when I shake with fear” (14). Initially, it appears ironic that his best days would be those where his “fantastic ague” is so severe that he shakes (13). However, this
shaking is connected to the earlier phrase in line eleven where he “quakes with true fear of his rod,” alluding to Isaiah 11:4, where God in His wrath will “smite the earth with the rod of His mouth . . . and slay the wicked.” The shaking with fear means that the speaker is sick with inconstancy, creating a need for God, and he is shaking with fear of His rod, suggesting the potential for repentance. This process of repentance confirms that human and divine nature “depend mutually on each other for their ultimate fulfillment” (Mann 536). God needs the speaker’s inconstancy because it will require His constant outpouring of grace. While this inconstancy serves to create a need for God, it ultimately fails to inspire true repentance.

The process of repentance is compared to a process of refining steel that has gone awry, showing how elusive the Beloved’s repentance is. The speaker describes his love as “riddlingly distempered, cold and hot” (“vex me” 7). “Distempered” refers to an illness, paralleling the “fantastic ague” simile (13). In addition, it alludes to the tempering process used to strengthen steel. Tempering is when steel is subjected to extreme heat followed by extreme cold, increasing the toughness. Distemper would be when this process goes awry (“distempered,” def. 6). This alternate meaning is reinforced as the word “distempered” is immediately followed by “cold and hot” (“vex me,” 7). The hot and cold caused by the fever is compared with the hot and cold process of strengthening steel. This process of inconstancy and repentance is meant to strengthen the Beloved like a tempering process strengthens steel, but it has gone amiss, and he is left “distempered.” He is not strengthened but is sick. The final line declares that his best days are the days in which he is the most sick because it is that sickness that strengthens his relationship with God. However, because this strengthening process is awry, this resolution fails, and the Beloved continues to be unattainable to God. The Beloved remains in a perpetual cycle of insincerity and adultery where he attempts full contrition, refuses to admit his dependency on God, and fails.

The adulterous bridal trope and Petrarchan structures in “Since she whom I loved” and “Oh, to vex me” express the interdependency of human and divine love. It is the adultery of the bride that makes her an ideal spouse for Christ because without that uncleanness, “the soul would have no need of the marriage” (Johnson 38). This marriage shows a sharp comparison between the speaker’s secular love and God’s divine love, though both kinds of love ultimately need each other for their fulfillment. The speaker’s love is selfish because he loves God only because God can provide him salvation. God is merely a mistress he
needs for redemption. This is why he is wholly enamored with his own image rather than God’s. God—the true Lover—takes no thought for His own advantages but loves so that His Beloved can achieve salvation. God marries the speaker not because He benefits, but solely because the speaker benefits. He views His Beloved as a cherished bride that He will never abandon. Donne presents us with a God whose love is completely selfless and incomprehensible to the speaker. The Lover offers devotion and love as he tries to refine his Beloved like a blacksmith refines steel; however, the Beloved refuses to submit. The Beloved remains the unattainable desire of a jealous God.

In these two sonnets, the failure of the speaker to fully repent is the result of a fundamental flaw in his view of God. His fallen nature limits him to viewing God in a secular relationship. This relationship places the speaker and God on equal footing. He tries to fit God into the role of a secular lover, but God’s selflessness makes it impossible. God does not behave the way a secular lover should, making the marriage metaphor an inaccurate representation of His relationship with the speaker. This misrepresentation results is a string of confusing paradoxes as the speaker tries to fit God into his secular frame, calling attention to the absurdity of viewing God as a secular lover. While the secular view of God does create a need for His grace, ultimately, such a view prevents the speaker from recognizing his nothingness and repenting. The speaker cannot reconcile himself with God until he abandons this mindset and recognizes his dependency.

The mixed metaphors and convoluted nature of the speaker’s relationship with God show how human love and divine love have continuity. He fills the role of Lover because of Petrarchan structures but proves to actually be the Beloved because of his unattainable contrition. This interchangeability between the speaker and God shows continuity between their two kinds of Love. The speaker’s adulteries with his wife, the devil, and himself both hinder and enable divine love. The sonnets embody mankind’s fallen nature and the profound need for grace. The speaker’s relationship with God is not resolved in the Holy Sonnets because of the crucial flaw in viewing God as a secular lover. God is not an equal partner to the speaker but rather the Divine Creator on which the speaker is dependent. Only in completely reimagining the role of God can this relationship be resolved. In “A Hymn to God the Father,” Donne takes on his justified role as the son of the Divine Father.
II. Filial Dependence Replaces the Adulterous Marriage

In “A Hymn to God the Father,” Donne finally reconciles his relationship with God as he takes his rightful place as son. The poem was written years after the Holy Sonnets, likely in a time when Donne believed he was nearing death and would soon meet God the Father (Pebworth 19). In this poem, the speaker is no longer equal to God as an erotic lover but rather is dependent and subordinate to God as His son. The selfless nature of parenthood accurately parallels the selfless love God has for the speaker. Donne’s view of God develops over time until he expresses his role as son, a role that can foster true repentance. Unlike the Holy Sonnets, each line is endstopped, creating a tone of absolution and finality. Further, the Petrarchan sonnet structure is abandoned, suggesting that the speaker is no longer limited to a secular view of God. Donne is finally assured of his salvation and has true faith in God and His grace.

As a son, the speaker is no longer trying to make himself an equal, secular lover of God but rather a son who is helpless without his Father. In this new relationship, there is no room for the narcissism that prevented repentance in the Holy Sonnets. The speaker has recognized that he is nothing without his Father but everything to his Father. The paradoxes that vexed him in the sonnets now enable him to be redeemed. The Holy Sonnets reveal the speaker’s fallen nature, and the speaker finally transcends his fallen nature in “A Hymn to God the Father.” Donne is no longer unattainable in this new role because he is willing to admit his nothingness.

Portraying himself as a son resolves the adulteries established in the Holy Sonnets. Though he expresses that he still has sins, he no longer refers to them as “adulteries” or “inconstancies” as he did in the sonnets. This new view of sin expels its power to prevent devotion to God and instead allows repentance. As an adulterous bride, the speaker was betraying his spouse. The adultery caused a divide between the speaker and God. As a son, the speaker is now repentant and pleading for forgiveness. This sin will not cause a divide between the speaker and God but ultimately bring them closer as God selflessly offers grace to His son.

As a son, Donne’s love for his wife is not in competition with God. He ends the first two stanzas saying that God “hast not done, / For, I have more,” a phrase with dual meanings: it expresses that God’s grace is not done because
he has “more” sins, and David Leigh argues that it is a pun on his and his wife’s name, More (Leigh 90). In other words, God does not have Donne because he has his wife, “more.” Just as “She whom I loved” insinuated, Donne’s wife seems to be preventing Donne’s full devotion to God. However, in the final stanza the speaker says “thou hast done; / I fear no more.” Donne does not repeat that he “has no more”; this would mean that he has let go of Anne More in order to devote himself to God. Rather, he no longer fears that his love for Anne will compete with God. As a son rather than Lover, he can reconcile his love for his wife with his love for God. He does not fear sin because he is now humble enough to repent and does not fear Anne because his new role as son removes competition. Donne no longer has the “fear” that shook him in his sonnet “Oh, to vex me.” He has overcome his inconstancy and now is confident in the grace of God.

This confidence is expressed in line sixteen when the speaker states, “Thy son / Shall shine as he shines now.” This phrase also has duality in meaning: it conveys that he wants Christ’s grace to continue to absolve him in the next life just as it does now; in addition, Donne is also implicitly a son because this poem is an apostrophe to the “Father.” Donne is pleading that he himself will shine in the next life as he does in this life. He does not fear sin, for he will shine in repentance in the next life, and he will not fear Anne More, for his love for her will shine in coexistence with divine love. The speaker’s final role as a son calling out for forgiveness from his Father allows him to finally transcend his fallen nature and realize the true potential of secular love, as it is fulfilled in unity with the divine.

“A Hymn to God the Father” and the two Holy Sonnets show that overcoming the Fall is a process of recognition and repentance. “Since she whom I loved” and “Oh, to vex me” use Petrarchan conventions and the adulterous bride metaphor to expose the speaker’s fallen nature. The two Holy Sonnets call attention to the absurdity in viewing God as a spouse and its failure to inspire repentance. They establish the speaker’s need for grace and his nothingness without God. The speaker’s repentance is finally attained as he abandons the Petrarchan approach to God and accepts his rightful place as son.
Appendix

Holy Sonnets

17.
Since she whom I loved hath paid her last debt
   To nature, and to hers, and my good is dead,
   And her soul early into heaven ravished,
Wholly in heavenly things my mind is set.
Here the admiring her my mind did whet
   To seek thee God; so streams do show the head;
   But though I have found thee and thou my thirst hast fed,
A holy thirsty dropsy melts me yet.
But why should I beg more love, when as thou
   Dost woo my soul, for hers off’ring all thine,
And dost not only fear lest I allow
   My love to saints and angels, things divine,
But in thy tender jealousy dost doubt
Lest the world, flesh, yea, devil put thee out.

19.
Oh, to vex me, contraries meet in one:
   Inconstancy unnaturally hath begot
   A constant habit; that when I would not
I change in vows, and in devotion.
As humorous is my contrition
   As my profane love, and as soon forgot:
   As riddlingly distempered, cold and hot,
As praying, as mute; as infinite, as none.
I durst not view heaven yesterday; and today
   In prayers, and flattering speeches I court God:
   Tomorrow I quake with true fear of his rod.
So my devout fits come and go away
   Like a fantastic ague: save that here
Those are my best days, when I shake with fear.
A Hymn to God the Father

Wilt Thou forgive that sin where I begun,
    Which was my sin, though it were done before?
Wilt Thou forgive that sin, through which I run,
    And do run still: though still I do deplore?
    When Thou hast done, Thou hast not done,
        For, I have more.

Wilt Thou forgive that sin which I have won
    Others to sin? and, made my sin their door?
Wilt Thou forgive that sin which I did shun
    A year or two: but wallowed in a score?
    When Thou hast done, Thou hast not done,
        For I have more.

I have a sin of fear, that when I have spun
    My last thread, I shall perish on the shore;
But swear by Thyself, that at my death thy Son
    Shall shine as He shines now, and heretofore;
    And, having done that, Thou hast done;
        I fear no more.
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The fact that Flannery O’Connor was a Catholic is obvious. Although she lived in a predominately Protestant society, she made her faith and intentions clear, and very few scholars have dared to question it. “Flannery O’Connor was something of an anomaly,” writes critic Jessica Riedmueller from *The Philological Review*, explaining O’Connor’s unique religious situation, “a Catholic, living in Georgia and writing about her Fundamentalist Protestant neighbors. Writing mostly during the 1950s, when Catholicism struggled to survive among the Southern Protestant denominations, O’Connor formed her fiction and her characters according to the teachings and dogmas of the Church” (23). However, the topic of debate that has been tossed around by many scholars is her concept of grace. Even outside of the context of O’Connor’s fiction, there exist numerous debates on how to define it, how it works, and how it affects one’s personal life. While O’Connor professes to be a stalwart Roman Catholic, some elements of the Protestant view of grace seem to have seeped, perhaps intentionally, into her fiction, implying that she may actually be less concerned with the exact doctrine than the general concept of conversion itself.

In order to fully analyze O’Connor’s works from these perspectives, it is necessary to understand the theology behind how Catholics and Protestants understand grace, beginning with the Catholic’s individualistic version. Grace is defined by the *Catechisms of the Catholic Church* as “the free and undeserved
help that God gives us to respond to his call to become children of God, adoptive sons, partakers of the divine nature and of eternal life.” Catholics view grace as a favor from God offered freely to all men to save them from their fallen state of sinful human nature. The *Catechisms* go on to say:

The fatherly action of God is first on his own initiative, and then follows man’s free acting through his collaboration, so that the merit of good works is to be attributed in the first place to the grace of God, then to the faithful. . . . Moved by the Holy Spirit and by charity, we can then merit for ourselves and for others the graces needed for our sanctification, for the increase of grace and charity, and for the attainment of eternal life.

This states that, although any merit that man has is given from and attributed to God, one still must act in “collaboration” with him to become one of the “faithful” and to attain salvation. While the ability for anyone to attain grace is a gift from God, effort to be righteous in this life—including ordinances such as the sacraments—is required in order to receive grace’s full power. Both Protestants and Catholics believe that grace was made possible through the Atone-

ment of Jesus Christ. However, they differ in their ideas of how or if we gain spiritual merit to obtain grace and become saved.

According to Protestantism, the relationship between grace and man’s merits on earth works more subjectively. While there are varying denominations within Protestantism itself—including Lutheran, Calvinist, and Arminian interpretations—their core teachings insist that grace is a gift given from God to those he sees fit to bestow it upon. Whether it be the predetermined “elect” or all mankind, depending on which theological perspective one holds, man’s mortal merits are inconsequential and even unnecessary when held in contrast to the grace provided by Christ’s Atonement. Because people are unworthy creatures compared to the divinity of God, nothing they do can truly earn them a spot in Heaven; they can only attain eternal life through God’s will and mercy. All one must do is have faith, believe in him, and hope that he is merciful (Robinson). A simple explanation of this concept is provided by Dewey Wallace Jr. in his essay on the history of predestination in Protestantism: “Redemption is entirely a gift of God quite apart from human merit. . . . [T]he elect were chosen before they did good works in order that they might do them” (203–204). In short, “the elect” according to the Calvinist terminology—in modern Protestantism this more often applies to all mankind—are already saved because of grace; mortals only do good works as a form of gratitude for this salvation, not because those
works would help them earn it. Interpretations from the Arminian denomination suggest that one can fall from grace if horrendous sins are committed, but it is God alone who can save them, not their works here on earth. This concept of grace being given and not earned is a foundational principle of all Protestant denominations.

After considering these varying perspectives, one must ask: Where does Flannery O'Connor's concept of grace fit into all of this? Of course, generally our first thoughts turn to the most common answer: Catholic—and this is not an erroneous response. In fact, she would more than likely agree wholeheartedly. We see this spelled out by many O'Connor scholars, including Thelma Shinn, who writes, “Man needs to be ‘struck’ by mercy; God must overpower him. And man must reach God through an equal violence: ‘In a corrupt world,’ Miss O’Connor is saying, ‘redemption is possible only through an extreme act, an act of absolute, irrevocable sacrifice’” (58). While she toys with the concept of grace through violence—an element of O'Connor's fiction that is often examined in academia—Shinn also illustrates O'Connor's belief that man must “sacrifice” (a form of worldly merit) in order to fully receive God's grace. This implies that the Lord requires effort on man's part in order to be redeemed. A violent act of God may first elicit this response, but it is up to the individual person to respond to that act with their own righteous sacrifice.

This explanation of sudden conversion, however, becomes complicated upon further doctrinal study. The very idea of being “struck” by grace can be interpreted as distinctly Protestant. Grace through the lens of Protestantism is seen as more of a one-time event. You either are saved or you are damned, there is no gray area between the two. Catholicism, on the other hand, often views grace as more of an ongoing process of conversion. In a critical article published in the Flannery O'Connor Review, Critic Lorna Wiedmann points out this discrepancy, explaining, “Such features as . . . the suddenness of conversion are operative Protestant, rather than Catholic, norms, for the Catholic stance features successive gradualism, rationalism, and cooperation in grace.” To be “struck” by God's mercy is almost like forcing that grace upon an individual who has shown no signs of cooperation until that point. Granted, O'Connor adds that “man must reach God through an equal violence,” implying that the person must make a grand sacrifice in return in order for the working of grace toward redemption to be complete. This, however, is cancelled out by the fact that the very act of being struck by grace already takes away their agency to make that necessary sacrifice; the sacrifice is already made for them, whether
they like it or not. Is it truly a sacrifice worthy of salvation then? Or is it God selectively choosing them to be saved by His own will, regardless of what they have done to deserve it?

In O’Connor’s story “Greenleaf” we see this point illustrated through the goring of Mrs. May by the bull, which symbolizes Christ seeking her out in order to bring her to true conversion, according to most O’Connor scholars. The bull continually shows up in her life, trespassing on her property, no matter how hard she tries to avoid it. Eventually the bull kills her, which O’Connor uses as a symbol of Christ giving her a rude awakening to the wrongness of her pretended worship. Her very life was sacrificed for the sake of being saved by grace, and although there is debate as to whether or not she realized her mistakes and accepted that gift, one would venture to wonder if her choice even mattered at that point. After all, she did not choose to die and willingly come to Christ. From the Catholic viewpoint, she would have needed to perform an act of true conversion in return before her time had come. If she actually was saved it would have been simply because of her newfound moment of truth, demonstrating the Protestant “suddeness of conversion,” as Wiedmann puts it. The fact that Christ had to come after her and strike her like a bull in order for grace to save her suggests that all of her former good works she had previously performed, however superficial, would have meant nothing. In essence, that would mean that God simply chose her to be saved regardless of her previous actions, echoing the Protestant understanding of grace.

O’Connor’s “Revelation” also presents some notable Protestant themes through Mrs. Turpin’s vision, which seemingly contradict the traditional Catholic view. When she sees the vision of “a vast horde of souls [that] were rumbling toward heaven,” she sees people from every class and type, including “battalions of freaks and lunatics” (508). This image gives us the idea that all who are believers will be saved, not just those who live in a certain way or do certain things. In fact, those who Mrs. Turpin describes as having “always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right” (508), or in other words those who had dedicated their lives and resources to attaining earthly merit, bring up the rear in the procession toward heaven. In a Catholic view, those people should have been leading the march. But this is not the case in “Revelation”: all those who have faith in Christ no matter who they are or what they did have been saved by grace.

Many of O’Connor’s works present this issue of how grace and merit correlate, shown through her archetypal “grotesque” characters (Drake). “The
Lame Shall Enter First” is a great example of this. Sheppard dedicates his whole life to being a good person and serving others, and Johnson is a selfish and manipulative child who trashes people’s homes and wreaks havoc wherever he goes. Ironically, the story ends with Johnson calling Sheppard a “big tin Jesus,” claiming that “[t]he Devil has him in his power” (480), effectively leading to Sheppard’s moment of striking truth and conversion. O’Connor often uses unlikely characters such as Johnson, the Greenleafs, Mary Grace, etc., to bring the main character to this point of spiritual realization. Flannery O’Connor critic Robert Drake noticed this as well, stating, “Yet it is often those whom the ‘upright’ and ‘wholesome’ regard as grotesque become chosen vessels indeed. . . . The real grotesques are the self-justified, the apparent grotesques may be the blessed.” Although Sheppard seemed to have been the better man initially, it is soon apparent that he is intended to be the “real grotesque.” He attempts to justify himself, like Drake suggests, by telling himself, “I have nothing to reproach myself with” (481) repeatedly after Johnson’s accusations. Johnson plays the part of the blessed “apparent grotesque,” which character-type Drake goes on to describe as “a whole lot nearer the truth than the more ‘enlightened’ but godless intellectuals” (Drake) such a Sheppard.

Interestingly enough, while Johnson is supposed to be the character “nearer to the truth,” his form of worship is far more comparable to the Protestant faith than the Catholic faith that O’Connor supposedly intended Sheppard to convert to. Wiedmann highlights this problem by pointing out that “when Norton insists that his (Norton’s) father is ‘good’ because he helps people, Johnson retorts, ‘Good! . . . I don’t care if he’s good or not. He ain’t right!’ This is a Protestant, not a Catholic, pronouncement: Luther, for example, had insisted that ‘. . . asses would make it to heaven if good works were the key’ to salvation” (Wiedmann). Clearly Johnson is more concerned with Sheppard’s faith than with his works. Sheppard himself comes to the realization that “he had stuffed his own emptiness with good works like a glutton” (O’Connor 461), implying that all of his good works had profited him nothing because he didn’t have faith in Christ. None of his earthly merits could save him. In another instance, when Norton asks if his mother is in hell, Johnson promptly asks, “Did she believe in Jesus?,” to which Norton responds that she did, and from this information Johnson concludes that “She’s saved” (462). He didn’t ask what Norton’s mother had accomplished to deserve salvation. According to both Johnson and the Protestant faith, all his mother needed to do was believe and she would be saved. While it is doubtful that Johnson was intended to be a role model
for Christians to take notes on, his character is used to bring Sheppard to the Christian faith—but through Protestant principles, not Catholic.

If all of this evidence is there, then one must wonder: Why did O’Connor allow Protestant themes to infiltrate her Catholic writing? Was it intentional or accidental? O’Connor herself admits, “I won’t ever be able entirely to understand my own work or even my own motivations” (qtd. by Popova). However, for someone who evidently is very knowledgeable about both Catholic and Protestant doctrine, it seems improbable that she would have overlooked these overlapping elements in her writing. Perhaps she wanted to appeal to diverse audiences, highlight the discrepancies she sees in Protestantism, or even go beyond the particularities of doctrine to address the deeper issue of false conversion.

It is possible that she chose to use Protestant characters and teachings to break past a barrier between her and her intended audience—namely Southern Protestants. Because her message is supposed to be stalwartly Catholic, which she was very outspoken about, many Protestant readers could potentially resist her message. However, if she were to make subtle compromises in her theology, she might be more successful in capturing their attention and helping them relate to her writing. O’Connor is, in essence,

blending Southern Protestant culture with her Catholic faith. In the South, ‘A Catholic can’t write about a Catholic world because none exists so he has to write about a Protestant one’ (qtd. in CW, “Letters 1954,” 921). O’Connor shapes her fiction according to Catholic principles, but she populates it with Protestant characters—a mixture that can be rather confusing to a reader unfamiliar with either Southern culture or Catholic theology. (Riedmueller 22)

Perhaps she blurred the lines between the Southern Protestant culture and her Catholic theology, creating Protestant characters like Johnson, in order to bring her fellow Southerners one step closer to her idea of true conversion.

Additionally, while it may seem apparent that O’Connor disapproved of her Protestant neighbors’ religion, she could have been using foundational Protestant themes to point out the wrongness and superficiality of their present-day worship. In a letter to Dr. T. R. Spivey, O’Connor writes, “The Catholic finds it easier to understand the atheist than the Protestant, but easier to love the Protestant than the atheist. The fact is though that the fundamental Protestants, as far as doctrine goes, are closer to their traditional enemy, the Church of Rome, than they are to the advanced elements of Protestantism”
(qtd. in Heschman). She clearly is sympathetic toward the founding principles of Protestantism. It is the modern form of Protestant worship that she detests, which she expresses in another letter:

One of the effects of modern liberal Protestantism has been gradually to turn religion into poetry and therapy, to make truth vaguer and vaguer and more and more relative, to banish intellectual distinctions, to depend on feeling instead of thought, and gradually to come to believe that God has no power, that he cannot communicate with us, cannot reveal himself to us, indeed has not done so, and that religion is our own sweet invention. (qtd. in Niederauer)

The worshippers she truly condemns are those who are lukewarm in any religion, not just Protestants. While she may not have agreed with their doctrines, most early Protestants were at least strong and active in their faith. The problem, according to O’Connor, is that many modern-day Protestants have abandoned their belief and made religion into “our own sweet invention.”

This idea of false or lukewarm conversion is presented in her literature through her characters Mrs. May, Mrs. Turpin, and Sheppard. Mrs. May looks down on Mrs. Greenleaf for rolling around in the dirt yelling Jesus’s name, but in the end it is Mrs. May who needs grace because her faith was nonexistent. She even describes herself as “a good Christian woman with a large respect for religion, though she did not, of course, believe any of it was true” (O’Connor 316). Mrs. Turpin, although allegedly a pious Catholic woman, is in actuality a hypocrite who cares more about worldly possessions than following Christ’s example of love and compassion. Her judging attitude is distinctly anti-Christian, when one looks at it from the Bible’s description of a true, charitable disciple’s perspective. Sheppard blatantly refuses to believe in religion altogether, even going as far as heatedly commanding Johnson to stop teaching Norton about it at the dinner table. Johnson may not have been a devout Catholic, but he was at least devout in his own belief in God, and that fact alone made him superior to Sheppard, who didn’t believe at all. All three of these characters fit the mold of those described in O’Connor’s letters who are lax in their faith, and whom she expressly disapproved of.

As we see from these characters, the themes in O’Connor’s works are not simply Protestant versus Catholic; the religious tension exists more accurately between the converted and the faithless, no matter what faith that may be. In Critical Essays on Flannery O’Connor, critic Marvin Friedman writes concerning O’Connor’s literature:
For in each work, it is the impulse toward secular autonomy, the smug confidence that human nature is perfectible by its own efforts, that she sets out to destroy . . . Again and again she creates a fiction in which a character attempts to live autonomously, to define himself and his values, only to be jarred back to what she calls “reality”—the recognition of helplessness in the face of contingency, and the need for absolute submission to the power of Christ. (120)

Friedman points out that O’Connor doesn’t limit her religious criticism to Protestants alone, she writes about all those who value secularism over God. Perhaps O’Connor included Protestant perspectives of grace because she was less concerned with the exact doctrine as she was with the conversion itself. It may not have mattered to her what idea of grace was used, as long as it brought the unbeliever to the realization of their mistakes so they could accept Christ as their Savior and live accordingly.

Flannery O’Connor may have been an outspoken and devout Roman Catholic, which is undoubtedly true, but her writing is not completely one-sided in its religious teachings. As we see from texts such as “Greenleaf,” “Revelation,” and “The Lame Shall Enter First,” Protestant beliefs have crept into her Catholic message, thus complicating the rigidly didactic purposes of her literature. However, we must consider the idea that these inconsistencies in doctrine were not accidental. Perhaps she wrote these texts to appeal to her Protestant readers, recognizing that they would be more prone to persuasion toward Catholicism if she made some subtle compromises between faiths in her writing. It is also possible that O’Connor wasn’t quite as concerned with the Catholic version of grace as she was with conversion through any means. We cannot know for sure, but these questions must be considered when we talk of her unique portrayal of grace. If we only interpret O’Connor through a strictly Catholic lens, we may be limiting ourselves from seeing the bigger and more complete picture of her grace.
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Carson's Christianity and Environmental Crises

Andrew Wadsworth

In her book, *Silent Spring*, Rachel Carson masterfully address the urgent matter of “man’s assaults upon the environment” through the “contamination of air, earth, rivers, and sea with dangerous and even lethal materials” (20). Today, climate change and pollution are generally seen as political issues. And although Carson does mention the government’s neglect to properly monitor and regulate pollutants and poisons, she attempts to paint environmental crises as more than just politics. Carson reminds readers that “man, however much he may like to pretend the contrary, is part of nature” (231). Environmental crises transcend any single political party’s ideology. They are human crises. The apocalyptic consequences of pollution and environmental neglect reach far beyond the scope of political debate. If man destroys nature, he destroys himself. And while Carson’s ecology may appear entirely secular, much of her writing resonates with Christian beliefs regarding the sacred nature of life, man’s stewardship over the earth, and man’s relationship with his fellowman.

However, despite Carson’s attempts to depoliticize environmental issues, crises such as climate change continue to be politically divisive today. Democrats contest that they are “committed to curbing the effects of climate change, protecting America’s natural resources, and ensuring the quality of our air,
water, and land for future generations,” saying that “republicans, for the most part, don’t believe climate change is man-made, or even exists” (Democratic). Although Carson attempts to depoliticize the issue, her idea of nature appears to be restricted to a solely secular view. That is to say, Carson primarily sees nature through a scientific lens of cause and effect. She does not directly link her claims with Christian beliefs. But why does linking environmentalism to Christianity matter? It matters because “the United States remains home to more Christians than any other country in the world” with “roughly seven-in-ten” Americans identifying “with some branch of the Christian faith” (Ritchey). But the Christian community is more than simply a community of faith; it is also a politically conservative community. In fact, “59 percent of self-identified conservative Republicans” said they “don’t believe that climate change is happening,” and “70 percent” said “they don’t believe humans are responsible for it”—verifying what democrats have claimed (Sola). As a result of secularizing nature, the environmental movement remains victim to political debate, and conservative Christians fail to see their duty in relation to the earth.

Many critics have analyzed Carson’s work, recognizing that “not only does Silent Spring [mark] the moment of emergence of the modern environmental movement,” but it also established a “new form of environmental writing” (Lockwood 124). However, while Carson succeeded in making ecology, “which was an unfamiliar word” in her day, “one of the greatest causes of our time,” critics have not addressed the circumstances which brought about Carson’s failed attempt to depoliticize environmental issues (Waddell 17). They have not addressed the factors that have caused her work and environmentalism as a whole to appear secular. In other words, critics have completely disregarded any notions that resonate with Christianity that Carson’s work may have.

The true secularization of the environmental movement was born from the religious and societal upheaval of the ’60s, which has cast a bleak shadow over environmentalism in the eyes of conservative Christians and which persists to this day. Once individuals begin to see nature as a gift to all mankind, rather than a resource to be mined and subdued, people will begin to see the abuse of nature as a threat not only to themselves, but also their fellowman. Once man begins to view the environment through a Christian lens, he will begin to see himself not as a dominating force over nature, but as a steward entrusted with its care. He will not see climate change as a political issue, but as a human issue, repenting of the harm he has caused the earth.
The secularization of ecology is not a consequence of Carson’s *Silent Spring*: rather, the secular perception of ecology is a product of the age in which it matured and garnered wide-spread awareness—the 1960s. Carson’s work was the springboard from which environmentalism sprang into mainstream consciousness. Her portrayal of man’s effect on the earth entered the public’s subconscious, where it resonated with another major group of ’60s—the hippies. Timothy Leary, an unofficial leader of the hippie movement, famously stated, “Hippies started the ecology movement” (*Timothy*). This notion still persists today. Although *Silent Spring* is widely credited in academic spheres with spurring the ecological revolution, the image of environmentalism is still closely tied to hippie origins in much of the public’s view. It is easy to see why her ideas resonated with hippies when Carson writes that “there are ways to . . . preserve the forests and to save the fishes, too” (Carson 177). Although this is a simplistic reading, these are the sorts of preservations for which hippies passionately fought. And at the time, conservation of forest and oceans were new ideas not yet clichéd by sitcoms and movies. Frustrated with the lack of government initiative towards cleaning up the environment, hippies organized protests against corporate polluters. Hippies “were the first to promote biodegradable products and the use of natural ingredients in everything from fabrics to shampoo . . . [They] boycotted companies: [sic] whose products polluted the environment, used animals for testing, were prowar [sic] or very reactionary; [sic] or manufactured dangerous chemicals or weapons” (Stone). When the National Environmental Policy Act was enacted in 1970, the first Earth Day was declared. This landmark event, involving twenty million people, raised awareness about how humans were treating the planet and ways to mitigate the impending dangers to the environment. This aligned hippies with the environmental movement and ecology. As a result, the environmental conversation Carson began was both augmented and overshadowed by the noise of the hippie movement.

Because Carson’s ecology was inadvertently absorbed by the counterculture hippie movement and its promotion of drugs and promiscuity (in addition to conservation of the environment), a division between Christianity and environmentalism formed. Hippies took an overall more radical approach than Carson. They, like Carson, believed in an “intricate web of life whose interwoven strands lead from microbes to man”; however, in order to truly be connected to that “web of life,” hippies promoted especially unchristian lifestyles (Carson 98). Timothy Leary, a well-known and highly controversial psychologist-turned-hippie
leader at the time, was once labeled “the most dangerous man in America” for fiercely advocating psychedelic drugs in the ’60s (Mansnerus). He was the ultimate challenger of authority: terminated from his professorship at Harvard for controversial drug experiments, arrested so often he saw the inside of twenty-nine different prisons world-wide, stood as an ally of the remnants of the Black Panther Party exiled in Algeria. He and the thousands upon thousands of hippies who worshipped him championed drug culture and the sexual revolution. Whereas Christianity teaches self-control, chastity, and adherence to God’s commandments, hippie’s had a different slogan: “If it feels good, do it!” (Stone). This meant loving “whomever you pleased, whenever you pleased, however you pleased” (Stone). In turn, this free love philosophy “encouraged spontaneous sexual activity and experimentation,”—including group sex, public sex, and homosexuality—all “under the influence of drugs” (Stone). It was hard to conceive a system of beliefs that more directly opposed the teachings of traditional Christianity. Because hippies promoted environmental reform in addition to recreational drug use and sexual promiscuity, their radical voices polluted the sphere in which Carson’s ecology operated. Her voice became guilty by association in the eyes of conservative Christians, and environmentalism became outlandish in the eyes of conservatives.

Carson further secularizes nature by drawing on the rhetoric of World War II and the Cold War era in an attempt to unite individuals and convey the immediacy of the biocides’ dangers. Carson repeatedly refers to insecticides as “artillery” or “weapons” and their usage as a display of “brute force,” an “assault,” even a “holocaust” (303, 330, 26, 310). Spawned from the post–World War, Cold War era in which she lived, Carson’s word choice succeeds in giving gravity to her argument. The image of the holocaust, the mass genocide horror that nearly annihilated an entire race of human beings, is especially powerful in portraying the seriousness of biocide’s effect on living organisms. It suggests we are unwittingly committing genocide not only against ourselves, but also against nature itself. Additionally, Carson “deliberately employ[s] the rhetoric of the Cold War . . . to persuade her readers” that the effects of the biocide crisis on the environment are “analogous to the threat of radioactive fallout” (Lear 428). Such imagery reminds readers that “we are dealing with life,” not only plant and animal life, but human life as well. (Carson 354). By pairing the imagery of World War II, the holocaust, and nuclear fallout with the biocides, Carson raises awareness to the battle taking place directly on American soil—a battle of which the general public at the time was not even conscious.
The battle was escalating and claiming many American lives. By drawing on the rhetoric of World War II and the Cold War, Carson imbues readers with a sense of patriotic duty, the responsibility to defend life and freedom. Her use of war rhetoric serves not only to resonate with the conservatives who made up much of the rural areas affected by biocides, but also liberals and everyone in-between on the political spectrum. However, while war can unite citizens to set aside political differences and support the cause of defending life and liberty, it is also extremely divisive. Shortly after *Silent Spring* was published, the United States saw an anti-war movement never before seen. The nation nearly tore itself apart and the intended unification of Carson’s war rhetoric was lost in the commotion.

The Vietnam war delivered the final blow to Carson’s attempt to depoliticize ecology and unite Americans in the cause to fight for the environment; the war pitted liberal and conservative ideologies against each other in a vehement tone, which still persists today. Believing the economic cost too high, many Americans—conservative and liberal, Christian and non-Christian—pragmatically opposed amplifying the United State’s role in Vietnam. However, as the war persisted, with no end in sight and countless American boys being sent home in body bags, still more “admitted that involvement was a mistake, but military defeat was unthinkable” (UShistory). Simultaneously, “most disapproved of the counterculture that had arisen alongside the antiwar movement”: the “clean cut, well-dressed” individuals “who had tied their hopes to McCarthy” and his promise of ending the war were “subordinated” by hippies as leaders of the antiwar movement (Barringer 3). Part of the decree under which the hippies protested was that “American planes wrought environmental damage by dropping their defoliating chemicals” (UShistory). Soon, the once peaceful protests turned violent. No one likes war. As a consequence, conservative Christians further distanced and distinguished themselves from any ideology claimed by the hippies. Christians tended to see the struggle as regrettably necessary in order preserve freedom. Those Christians who did openly oppose the war took an approach similar to Gandhi, organizing a nationwide “fast for peace” (History). But Carson’s ecology and the environmental movement to which it gave birth had already fallen victim to the labeling of *liberal ideology*, being largely rejected by Christian Conservatives. The Vietnam War polarized liberals and democrats like never before, and “man’s assault upon the environment” with “lethal materials” continued to take on new shapes while politicians bickered for votes, refusing to consider the opposing party’s views and efforts.
Despite the many historical factors that have caused environmentalism to remain a hotly contested political issue, much of what Carson writes resonates deeply with Christian doctrine concerning the sanctity of life and our responsibility to our fellowman. Carson writes that “life is a miracle beyond our comprehension, and we should reverence it even where we have to struggle against it” (331). Carson’s word choice, defining life as a miracle, paints a deeply religious image. The notion of reverence is also innately imbued with religious connotations. Reverence is more than respect. To truly reverence the miracle that is life implies acknowledging God and expressing appreciation for His creations. Carson contests that humanity has forgotten the wondrous divinity that is inherent in life itself. People have desecrated life in their craving for shortcuts to solve problems. Humans have tainted the very source of life on which they depend: they have violated the earth. It is in this vein that Pope Francis echoed Carson, saying: “We have forgotten that we ourselves are dust of the earth (cf. Gen 2:7); our very bodies are made up of her elements, we breathe her air and we receive life and refreshment from her waters” (Bergoglio). Viewing man’s relationship to the earth and the life it supports through a Christian lens will not resonate with all. But there can be no doubt that we as human beings depend upon the earth’s elements: her air, water, and soil to sustain ourselves, to sustain life. The notion of life’s sacred relationship with the earth resonates with individuals of faith outside of the Christian sphere—Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists. Even the atheist and agnostic recognize the wonder that is life. And life hinges on the state of a wondrous planet. When individuals contaminate the earth, they also inflict harm on their fellowman. Although Christianity teaches that men are to love their neighbors as themselves and care for the poor, Pope Francis acknowledges that “the gravest effects of all attacks on the environment are suffered by the poor” (Pope). If it is a Christian’s duty to succor the poor, in order to protect the impoverished, it therefore becomes every Christian’s obligation to prevent further environmental harm. Christians must broaden their view, learn to look outside their immediate sphere of living, and recognize the far-reaching effects of pollution and environmental damage. To reverence life is to recognize the responsibility to not only persevere the earth for the benefit of oneself, but for others as well—for friends and family, for future generations, for the poor, and even for strangers.

To reverence life and the earth, Carson contests that one must shift his or her perspective away from seeing oneself as a ruler over nature to recognizing and fulfilling his or her role as a steward over the earth. Carson writes that “the
‘control of nature’ is a phrase conceived in arrogance”—a sense of entitlement born from the notion “that nature exists for the convenience of man” (355). By acknowledging that nature was not created solely to serve mankind, Carson connects ecology to Christianity. The question arises: for what purpose does nature exist then, if it is not for man? The Bible teaches that man, God’s crowning creation, was given dominion over the earth. However, this does not imply that nature was created for men to consume and use however they see fit. Man’s dominion is the responsibility to govern. It is to look after the Earth as God himself would—with love, patience, and wisdom. It is a righteous dominion. Dominion is the responsibility of the Christian steward. Carson promotes “the central concept of deep ecology, that humans are not central to the universe of creatures; she preserved the concept of stewardship: what we as humans brought about, we must correct as much as possible” (Waddell 122). God’s design for human beings is for them to collaborate with Him in the work of creation, redemption, and sanctification. It is not too late for humanity to redeem itself and the earth through its efforts. The fulfillment of this monumental responsibility requires correcting the course, refocusing efforts on fulfilling the mandate of stewardship.

Fulfilling one’s stewardship over the earth by viewing and responding to environmental issues through the Christian lens of repentance offers more hope for recovery than Carson conveys in Silent Spring. Carson believes that the build-up of pollution in the environment “is for the most part irrecoverable” and that “the chain of evil it initiates” in living organisms “is for the most part irreversible” (26). But if the environmental damage has permanently been done and the effects of our fathers’ sin will be passed on from generation to generation, then what is the point of trying to correct the course? The outlook seems bleak. In Carson’s view, the compounded destruction of adding additional pollutants to the environment, and the effect that doing so would have on life, can only be lessened. Conversely, Pope Francis calls on individuals all across the globe to “repent of the ways we harmed the planet” (Bergoglio). The notion of repentance is far more powerful than Carson’s prescription. Repentance is more than simply ceasing to commit an act of sin. In the Bible, the concept of repentance is derived from multiple words—the Hebrew verb “shuv, meaning to return, and nacham, meaning to feel sorrow,” in combination with “the Greek word, metanoia, connoting a ‘change of mind and heart’” (Taylor 54). With these definitions, compounded together and applied to the earth, repentance connotes a new way of thinking of man’s relationship to the environment. It
connotes sincere attempts to repair the damage that has been done. It connotes a struggle to return the earth to its former glory. True repentance requires the examination of one’s life, the complete abandonment of prior practices, and replacing them with good works. And once the mote is removed from one’s eye, it is possible to see clearly how to help one’s fellowman, preaching with love and patience what is practiced. Naysayers have always protested that the seemingly impossible cannot be accomplished, only to be proven wrong by hardworking men and women. To approach environmentalism through Christianity is to not only abandon current harmful practices, but to truly regret and repair the damages done. By adopting a truly Christian view of the earth and the sacred life it supports, striving to care for the poor affected by pollutions, and practicing the principles of repentance, political barriers preventing progress and healing can be overcome.
Works Cited


In *Lila*, Marilynne Robinson characterizes preacher John Ames with hesitation and uncertainty, traits that seem contrary to his profession. Throughout the novel, rather than dispelling doubt, he frequently acknowledges the mysteries of God, life, and the universe. He says “I don’t know” more than any other phrase. While this apprehensive approach to theology may initially seem to be rooted in weakness or ignorance, it is actually the product of a deliberate theological decision and in fact, what may seem to be Ames’s greatest weakness is actually his greatest strength; his ability to embrace ambiguity and act in spite of insecurity allows him to better serve his parishioners and family. While Ames develops this theology of uncertainty in his teaching, Robinson reinforces the same ideology in the structure of the novel through her ambivalent representation of Ames’s relationship with Lila. Robinson further reinforces the theme by blending past and present in Lila’s narrative and creating a mysterious and slippery atmosphere. Such a perspective on the validity of uncertainty offers a fresh theological and theoretical perspective within the context of the ongoing debate between scientific positivism and humanistic philosophy and argues for a more merciful approach to religious philosophy.

Let’s pause for a moment to understand the greater philosophical context and try to understand what is meant by “scientific positivism” and “humanistic philosophy.” Although the debate between the sciences and the humanities
over intellectual superiority is not new, it is far from resolved and perhaps more pertinent than ever. Since the early 19th century, the two have become increasingly different in their approaches to knowledge and equally competitive. Each claims superiority over the other in defining and solving the important questions of human life. A simple and current example can be found in the defense against terrorism where science concerns itself with the development of new technologies to thwart attacks, while the humanities is occupied with understanding the philosophical, religious, and social forces that would cause such attacks. Both are genuine efforts to solve the same problem, but they are very different. The debate becomes especially intense when one side accuses the other of wasting time and resources as is often the case. The fundamental difference Wendell Berry draws between the two philosophical perspectives is the attitude towards ignorance. The humanities, Berry argues, live with uncertainty and make paramount “the question of how to act in ignorance” (11). Another approach to the humanistic notion of humanity is the idea that each individual is the accumulation of personal, familial, and cultural history—an infinitude of experiences and thoughts—and yet the compilation of each of those thoughts fails to amount to a complete explanation of a person. No matter how much data we gather, humans can still be unpredictable, we continue to produce the unexpected. There is, in humanity, an inherent element of the unknowable. According to the humanistic approach there is and always will be a bit of mystery in humanity. Ambiguity is an unavoidable part of the human experience, Berry argues, and a fundamentally unavoidable element of thinking, creative human individuals (11).

In contrast to the humanistic approach, science (as described by Berry) possesses a certainty that all will be explained and that all ignorance will eventually be snuffed out in the wake of scientific progress and discovery. For him, this scientific positivism leaves little to no room for the individual, reducing humans to machines and eliminating the possibility of original thought. Berry is not alone in criticizing scientific positivism. Robinson echoes and expands upon Berry’s critique of the scientific reductionist approach to humans in an essay discussing American education. She writes that, “we have been told and told again that our educators are not preparing American youth to be efficient workers. Workers. That language is so common among us now that an extra-terrestrial might think we had actually lost the Cold War” (Imagination 24). This, of course, is in reference to the thought that individuals are frequently viewed as a simple piece in the grand mechanism that is the economy, and that
individuals should be prepared and primed to fit specific roles of production. This, clearly, is the result that Berry and Robinson alike fear: a culture guided by scientific positivism that reduces humans to workers and expects production rather than individuality and favors efficiency above all else. Contrasted with the humanistic approach, the scientific approach (at least according to Berry and Robinson) seems feeble and even foolish in understanding human life.

John Ames initially appears to be remarkably uncertain about his own profession. His responses are studded with uncertainty and hesitation, and he is more likely to confess ignorance than offer definitive answers. These characteristics stand in contrast to Boughton, who appears confident in his answers and bold in his declarations, while Ames seems wary of giving straightforward answers. In many of his answers to Lila, he refers to the great “mystery” surrounding life and God and judgment (31). When it comes to Lila’s baptism, he seems terribly uncertain about the proceedings, the appropriateness, and even the preparation of it. How is it that a lifelong preacher, and furthermore, a third generation preacher, can be so uncertain, so hesitant in the work that fills his days and nights? This attitude is not the result of ignorance or laziness, as it is central to his life’s work, although at first glance it could seem to be linked to either timidity or fear.

In reality, Ames’s uncertainty does not spring from any inexperience or insufficient study. To the contrary, his theological approach is deliberate and well considered, and in contrast to what readers might expect, the vagueness of his preaching style is a deliberate and well-pondered theological approach, which he demonstrates in his conversations with his wife. In one particular instance the pair is discussing the final judgment. After overhearing Boughton and Ames discuss the subject, Lila is clearly concerned for Doll, the woman who raised her, as she was never baptized. Ames’s response to Lila is filled with fervor as he explains that imagining others in hell feels like “evil” and “a very grave sin” (101). He refuses to imagine people going to hell and firmly removes himself from any position of authoritative judgment on the matter. Instead, he insists that mortals should not and cannot imagine others in hell and instead they must live with the uncertainty, leaving the subject unexplored. Paradoxically, Ames is certain of uncertainty and although this may seem contradictory, the preacher frequently places this uncertainty at the very center of his theology.

This same cautiousness is demonstrated throughout the novel, particularly in his conversations with Lila, who continually challenges his notions with her unconventional questions. Ames frequently responds to her questions by
simply acknowledging his uncertainty. In fact, “I don’t know” almost becomes a mantra for Ames as he struggles to respond to his wife’s queries. In one passage, he demonstrates particular caution about speaking beyond his understanding. He tells Lila, “If I tried to explain I wouldn’t believe what I was saying to you. That’s lying isn’t it? I’m probably more afraid of that than anything else. I really don’t think preachers ought to lie. Especially about religion” (99). Rather than being motivated by ignorance, Ames’s hesitation spawns from a keen awareness of ignorance and a supreme allegiance to presenting truth and pure truth only. His caution stems from a reverence, rather than fear, of theology, and in his own gentle way, he shows perhaps greater conviction and certainty than any other character in the novel through firm belief in uncertainty.

A staunch belief in uncertainty seems counterproductive, though, especially in religion’s usual paradigm, wherein faith squelches doubt, and certainty stands as the fruit of progression and enlightenment. Belief in uncertainty, however, is far from being an ill-founded concept. As Wendell Berry has argued, “The mystery surrounding our life is probably not significantly reducible” (11). And while this outlook may seem pessimistic or ignorant, it is neither, according to Berry’s observations. In response to the notion that this statement is ignorant, Berry argued that each new discovery opens up more questions than existed before. In hydra-like manner, each answer produces two more questions. Therefore, rather than reducing the mystery surrounding life, exploration and study increase uncertainty in the universe. In response to the thought that Berry’s statement is pessimistic, he argues against the negative connotation of ignorance and, in fact, seems to revel in the thought of it. Ignorance and uncertainty, Berry argues, are not a result of stupidity or laziness, but are instead an inherent part of the human experience, which scientific positivism has not and will not accept (27).

At the crossroads of two forceful paradigms, Ames’s theology of uncertainty takes on ever-greater importance. And while he shies away from certainty, Ames does so for exactly the reasons Berry outlines in his work, namely fear of corruption and the value of the individual. With regards to the former, Ames clearly acknowledges the possibility for preachers to leverage their position for power and personal benefit. His statement that preachers ought not lie, especially about religion, seems flavored by the dark history of corruption that religion often bears (99). With regards to the latter, Ames seems to be a relative newcomer. Although he seems to have always valued the individual, the introduction of Lila into his life seems to have further pushed the question
in his mind. Ames repeatedly tells Lila that she asks important questions that make him reconsider things he had thought already settled. As a character so foreign to Ames’s experience, Lila pushes the preacher’s beliefs about grace and redemption to new limits by forcing him to apply, what may have previously been merely theoretical ideals, in very real and practical ways to individuals whose experience he could hardly have even imagined. Lila, in many ways, represents the lost and ignorant – those who are never taught a shred of religion and never have a real chance at conversion or baptism. As Lila remarks, the people she grew up with hardly had any concept of days of the week, let alone Sunday or going to church (21). Lila forces Ames to consider the eternal destiny of individuals like her and to reconcile their reality with his belief in a just and loving God. And although some, like Boughton the other preacher, quote, with little hesitation, scriptures clearly explaining the damnation of the unbaptized, Ames instead hesitates and insists on ignorance.

Such a commitment to ambiguity, however, seems counter-productive to the occupation of a preacher. Shouldn’t Ames be dispelling doubt, proclaiming the will of God, and extolling the justice of His decrees? Isn’t it counter-intuitive for a preacher to be questioning the necessity of baptism to salvation, the very ordinance that marks entrance into his flock? Such questions highlight the tension between the humanistic and scientific paradigms as one tries to provide definitive answers about spiritual destiny, while the other strains to leave room to adjust for each unique individual. As Robinson notes, the humanistic elements of language and culture are hardly concerned with scientific efficiency. She writes, “Some students in France drew my attention to the enormous number of English words that describe the behavior of light. Glimmer, glitter, glisten, gleam, glow, glare, shimmer, sparkle, shine and so on. These old words are not utilitarian” (Imagination 22). The linguistic behavior described by Robinson seems almost intentionally contrary to the efficient ideals of science, but that is exactly her point. Language and the humanities are not concerned with efficiency, but with human experience, individuality, and originality. This is not to say that language is unconcerned with progressing and expanding its borders, but to the contrary – the mystery and the indescribable continually urge and inspire writers to “make inroads on the vast terrain of what cannot be said” (Imagination 20). In this example Robinson demonstrates the humanistic attempt to capture and understand that bit of mystery in humanity. Each new word captures a new nuance of meaning. According to Robinson these repetitions are in many instances no more efficient or effective in communication
except that they somehow come closer to the inherent mystery of humanity. Science and the humanities share the motivation of discovering the unknown, but they fundamentally differ in their idea of the end goal – science aims to discover ultimate answers, and the humanities aims to discover ultimate questions.

Offering a theological perspective on the matter, James Smith writes that “gathering as an answer to the call to worship is a displacement of any human self-confidence or presumption.” (165). For Smith, engaging in Christian worship is embarking on a monumental task and requires the acknowledgement of human weakness and dependence on grace. In pedestrian terms, he writes, “we have a sense that we're in over our head.” Such renunciation of confidence indeed seems parallel with John Ames’s insistence on ignorance. The notion that true worship requires an acceptance, if not hearty embracing, of ignorance seems contrary to conventional religious pursuit, but is in fact an essential part of coming to know God. And as Smith points out, approaching the all-knowing, in many respects, demands acknowledging our own abundant un-knowing. In parallel fashion, as T.S. Eliot has written, “In order to arrive at what you do not know/ You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance” (201). The path to knowing is, in fact, through the territories of unknowing, which may echo Ames’s embracing of ignorance and privileging patience and charity over certainty. As Berry argues, the two perspectives of humanism and science are irreconcilable, but in a world where scientific positivism seems so heartily accepted, how might readers more clearly define and imagine the humanistic paradigm? Robinson provides a stunning example with the relationship between Ames and Lila.

While Ames is certainly conscious in his decision to embrace a theology of uncertainty, Robinson also seems to use his relationship with Lila to metaphorically embody the ambiguity and ignorance that he so heartily asserts. Ames and Lila pursue their relationship in spite of an abundance of uncertainty. Just as Berry argues, “we have to act on the basis of what we know, and what we know is incomplete” (10) The possibility that Lila might spontaneously leave and return to her life as a vagrant challenges all trust that exists between the two. Interestingly, both spouses are supremely aware of this. Ames even goes so far as to tell Lila that if she ever changes her mind about staying that he wants her “to leave by daylight. I want you to have a train ticket in your hand that will take you where you where you want to go” (25), he tells her. Lila frets about the possibility of losing his trust. “If a day came when he stopped trusting her. When that day came. She was sure it would” (25). How could a pair
function under such uncertainty? In many ways, Robinson is only highlighting the uncertainty that all couples live with. In spite of promises and vows, all relationships operate under the possibility of dissolution – and yet we act anyway. Robinson is merely exaggerating and highlighting the fact that humans live with no steadfast guarantees, and yet they still live and love in spite of it all. Furthermore, it is this very uncertainty that makes us human.

Throughout her essays, Robinson also reaffirms the importance of love over understanding, again placing definitive knowledge secondary to less easily defined human elements. Speaking of ideology she writes, “In my Bible, Jesus does not say, ‘I was hungry and you fed me, though not in such a way as to interfere with free-market principles...’ Until there is evidence that ideology mattered to Jesus, it will be of no interest to me” (Wondrous 139). Robinson clearly places charity as an absolute priority over intellectual or ideological understanding. In many instances, love is made conditional upon understanding, a belief that Robinson turns upon its head. In fact, understanding seems to be much more a fruit of love. Smith, in fact, advocates replacing a hermeneutics of suspicion with a hermeneutics of love, arguing that operating solely under suspicion closes critics to understanding as it precludes the discovery of new truth. Instead, reading under a charitable lens allows scholars to approach texts in a discerning way.

The charitable approach is once again represented in the book, as the majority of the text is narrated by Lila’s unspoken thoughts. Moments with Ames repeatedly remind Lila of stories, whether they be of Doll, St. Louis, or her childhood, and although she says she’d like to tell Ames, only the reader hears them, and Ames is left wondering and trusting. Lila is governed and shaped in many ways by these untold narratives. Rather than probing her for explanations, however, Ames demonstrates incredible patience and gently encourages, but never forces, “I think you are asking these questions because of some hard things that have happened, the things you won’t talk about,” he says. “If you did tell me about them, I could probably not say more than that life is a very deep mystery, and that finally the grace of God is all that can resolve it.” (31). In this statement, Ames demonstrates both his patience and faith in Lila, by not demanding an explanation and allowing her to give an explanation in her own time. Simultaneously, he acknowledges the importance of believing in God in spite of the mystery that surrounds belief itself and demonstrates his own comfort in the face of uncertainty.
Lila’s wandering inner narratives are also arranged in a way as to denote a vagueness and uncertainty. Woven throughout the narrative, the text is a blend of present and past often leaving the reader with a wispy sense of time and place and creating a somewhat ethereal mindset. In spite of the seemingly irrational flow of thought and memory, Robinson blends the plot into a stunningly realistic narrative. The construction of the novel therefore reflects the theology of uncertainty as it seems to follow an irrational flow and yet thereby achieves a fantastically realistic feeling.

In a particularly moving passage, Ames draws an interesting distinction between fact and hope, contrasting prayer as a hope with baptism as a fact and ultimately acknowledging the uncertainty of everything within the human realm. “Family is a prayer,” he says, “Wife is a prayer. Marriage is a prayer” (237). As if to say that each of these things is only a hope, based on faith, bound by charity, Ames acknowledges the uncertainty of all relationships and the necessity for action under uncertainty. He continues, however, to say that baptism, however, is a certainty: “[W]hat I’d call a fact” (237).

After exploring the theology of uncertainty, readers revisiting the baptism scene will see it in a completely different light. Rather than serving as a point of uncertainty and doubt for Ames, the baptism is a locus of certainty. It could be argued that Ames’s discovery is a true certitude in ambiguity. Although the slipshod nature of the ceremony once gave Ames reason to doubt, he now finds newborn certainty in the validity of uncertainty. While baptism is a certainty, however, the intention is what matters more than the particulars of the ceremony. Robinson, through Ames, seems to be making a profoundly new statement on the assumed reality of human existence and the role of uncertainty in it.

Why is it, though, that Ames decides to make such a distinction about baptism? And how might this be an argument for increased mercy in religion? What is the distinction between baptism as a “fact” and marriage, family, wife, and everything as a prayer? What makes baptism such a crucial moment of separation in his logic? One early critic marked the distinction as a means of highlighting the tension between “faith as sensibility and faith as doctrine” (Ulin). Such a distinction seems to interpret the difference as one between attitude and intellectual principle which in some ways seems to fall short of a satisfying response. Eve Tushnet offers just that. She writes, “The most compelling element of Lila’s religious vision is its tacit opposition between two ways of living in the world, the way of work and the way of baptism” (53). She continues,
Lila likes work and takes pride in it.... Work produces pride, but poverty corrodes that pride and leaves only shame behind. You can never work hard enough to escape shame; you can never earn the certainty that you deserve. Baptism, however, is unearned; it’s complete in a moment, unlike work, which must be slogged through. Work is time; baptism is the inbreaking of eternity. You can be judged on the quality of your work but the quality of your baptism – including the quality of your faith at baptism – is not relevant. Baptism is done to you, not by you, and so you can never be proud of it.

Surrendering responsibility to God, as in baptism, is an entry into uncertainty, as individuals place their fate in the hands of God rather than taking it upon themselves. According to this argument, baptism is, in fact, a distinctly different way of life – a completely new paradigm independent from Lila’s former ideology of work and also separate from Ames’s theology of uncertainty. This contrast runs perfectly parallel with the debate between the sciences and humanities and is a direct treatment of uncertainty and positivism. Ignorance, like grace, is offered to and totally necessary for mortals in their struggle through existence, but this need is not shared with God. He, instead, is the giver, not the recipient, of grace and the omniscient, not the uncertain. This highlights the difference between God and men and seems to resonate with the words, “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are my ways your ways” (Isaiah 55:8). Communion, in this case, is not an emphasis on the similarity between man and God, but their difference, namely the contrast between lack and possession, God as giver and mortal as recipient. Baptism is the crossroads between the rightly and inherently ignorant human position and the certitude of deity, and therefore, marks a distinct difference between baptism as a fact and all else as prayer. Again, this situation beautifully recasts the contrast between certainty and doubt and allows for the humanistic uncertainty in individuals and added mercy in religion.

John Ames may certainly be characterized as a preacher filled with hesitancy and steeped in uncertainty, but rather than plaguing his life with weakness, these characteristics become his greatest virtue. This virtue is not accidental, but deliberate, presenting a different, gentler approach towards belief and humanity: a humanistic approach. Throughout the novel, Robinson develops, through Ames, a theology of uncertainty, in which the greatest power comes to the characters because of their acceptance and appreciation of uncertainty. Lila and Ames represent a living relationship in which ambiguity is accepted and allowed and where trust takes priority over possession. Even the loose
chronology of the novel itself reflects an awareness of the same principles, forcing readers to exercise the very theology of uncertainty promoted in the book. Placed within the context of a philosophical debate between scientific positivism and humanistic ambiguity, Ames’s philosophy gains ever-greater significance as a manifesto for the inherent mystery of each individual’s experience. In an age filled with perhaps more information than any other, the acceptance of mystery and uncertainty becomes ever more relevant in shaping perceptions of the world and perspectives on what it means to be human. And paradoxically, perhaps the most powerful and satisfying response to the incessant hunger for knowledge is the acceptance of the unknown.
Works Cited


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