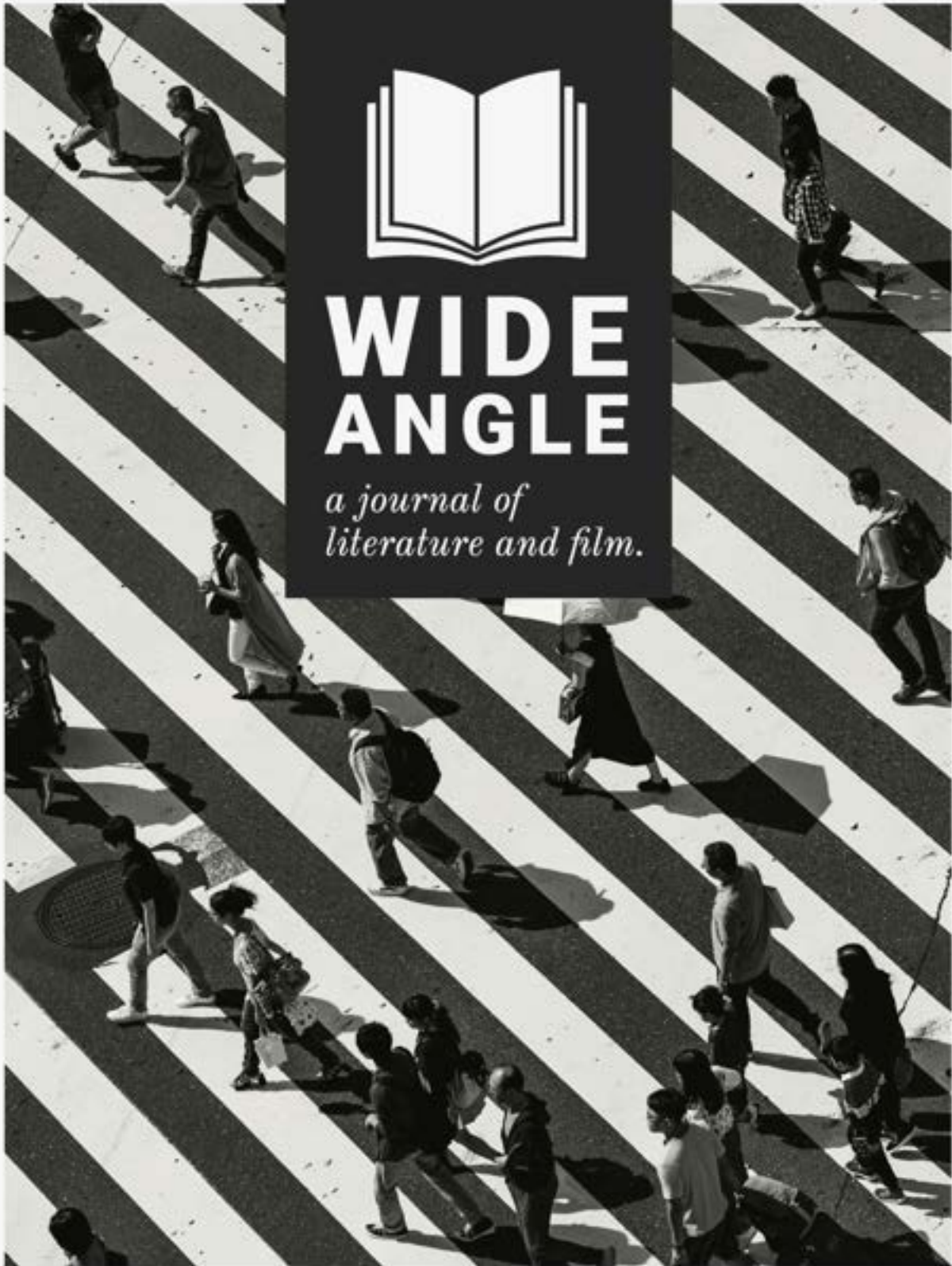




# WIDE ANGLE

*a journal of  
literature and film.*



Celebrating 10 years of literary  
and academic excellence.

VOLUME 10  
2021

*Wide Angle*  
*a journal of literature and film*

Volume 10  
Spring 2021

Published by  
Department of English  
Samford University

## Mission Statement

Literature and film continually reimagine an ever-changing world, and through our research we discover our relationships to those art forms and the cultures they manifest. Publishing one issue each academic year, *Wide Angle* serves as a conduit for the expression and critique of that imagination. A joint publication between English majors and faculty, the journal embodies the interdisciplinary nature of the Department of English at Samford University. It provides a venue for undergraduate research, an opportunity for English majors to gain experience in the business of editing and publishing, and a forum for all Samford students, faculty, and staff to publish their best work. As a wide-angle lens captures a broad field of vision, this journal expands its focus to include critical and creative works, namely academic essays, book and film reviews, and commentaries, as well as original poetry, short fiction and non-fiction, and screenplays.

### Editorial Staff 2020-'21

Managing Editor.....	Andre' A Roper
Assistant Managing Editor.....	Parker Gilley
Literature Editor.....	Margaret Kirby
Film Editor.....	Will Carlisle
Creative Writing Editor.....	Brice Boyer
General Editor.....	Dr. Geoffrey A. Wright

### Special Call

This year, along with the general call for submissions, the editorial staff issued a special call for submissions on race and ethnicity in literature and film. The *Editors' Desks* commentaries address issues of race ranging from Sherlock Holmes to Kanye West.

### Cover Art

“Ten Years of Excellence”  
By Will Carlisle

Copyright © 2021 *Wide Angle*, Samford University. All rights reserved.

## Contents

---

### *Literature*

- “Radical Reconciliation: The Role of Forgiveness in the Irish Narrative”  
Mackenzie Arnold . . . . . 6
- “A Study of Nature and the Divine in Wordsworth and Hopkins”  
Megan Harris . . . . . 18
- “‘I am come home’: Audre Lorde’s Journey from the Closet to Reclaiming Her Lesbian Identity”  
Jordan Shoop . . . . . 29
- “Avoiding Polemics: The Satirical Subversion of Langston Hughes”  
Lacey Spear . . . . . 46

### *Film*

- “From Bestseller to Blockbuster: Film Adaptation Theories”  
Ansley Burnette . . . . . 61
- “Rashomon, Godzilla, and the ‘abyssal regions’ of the Human Experience: Japanese Cinema after World War II” [Curated from vol. 6.2 in 2017]  
Jud Potter . . . . . 65
- “A Closer Look into Fidelity Discourse in Film Adaptation”  
Claire Scott . . . . . 85
- “Angels, Monsters, and Gazing in *The Birds*” [Curated from vol. 2.2 in 2013]  
Samantha Smith . . . . . 89

### *Creative Writing*

#### **Poetry**

- “Selections from Cubanidad: A Machete Will Do”  
Jillian Fantin . . . . . 101
- “Selections from Cubanidad: Elegy for José Martí”  
Jillian Fantin . . . . . 102
- “Selections from Cubanidad: Fatigues”  
Jillian Fantin . . . . . 103
- “Do Balloons Go to Heaven?”  
Ashlyn Hamrick . . . . . 105

“Ode to Tuscaloosa” Sarah Morgan Lake .....	107
“Agonal Breathing” Jake Lane .....	109
“Blue Poppies” Jake Lane .....	110
“Idiolect of a Bouncing Flame” Jake Lane .....	111
“Frankenstein’s Poetry” Emily Thorington .....	112
<b>Screenplay</b>	
“White-Tailed Deer” Jake Lane .....	113
<b><i>From the Editors’ Desks</i></b>	
<b>Special Series: Race and Ethnicity in Literature and Film</b>	
“Racism in Sherlock Holmes: A cursory Glance at Character Portrayal” Brice Boyer .....	124
“Frederick Douglass, Kanye West, and the <i>New Slaves</i> ” Will Carlisle .....	131
“Remembering to Forget: <i>Omeros</i> and the Epic Tradition” Parker Gilley .....	138
“ <i>Solus in te</i> : Only in You, or, the Writer’s Dilemma” Margaret Kirby .....	148
“Nature or Nurture: The Environment’s Effect on Racial Identity Formation in Jamaica Kincaid’s <i>Annie John</i> ” Andre’ A Roper .....	153
<b><i>Contributors</i></b> .....	161

## Essay

*Mackenzie Arnold*

### **Radical Reconciliation: The Role of Forgiveness in the Irish Narrative**

---

Violence has always been a central part of Irish history from the twelfth-century Norman invasion, to the beginning of the Ulster plantations, to the late twentieth-century Troubles. Even so, Irish history is filled with a rich religious tradition from Saint Patrick's ministry, to the Book of Kells, to the ever-present divide between Roman Catholics and Protestants. Unfortunately, the Irish narrative has created a pattern of justifying violence in the name of Christianity, effectively weaving together their violent history and religious traditions. Joseph O'Connor's novel *Star of the Sea* is set in a particularly devastating period of Irish history known as "The Great Famine." Through his novel, O'Connor tells a story of how religion and violence are as tangled together as the characters he creates.

From 1845 to 1849, Ireland's population was decimated to the point that the population has still not recovered even nearly two centuries later. Before the Great Famine, Ireland's population was estimated to be eight million people. Within an excruciating four-year timeframe, the population dropped to six million people as one million Irish died and another million left their homeland never to return (Barnhill, n. pag.). The devastation and trauma of the Great Famine did not end in 1849. The current population of Ireland is estimated to be just over five million residents (Central Intelligence Agency, n. pag.), suggesting that Ireland is still in the process of recovering from this 175-year-old tragedy.

The topic of the Great Famine still incites feelings from resentment to rage in the Irish population, not solely because of the devastating death toll it took on their ancestors, but because they believe it did not have to be as deadly as it turned out to be. The potato crop failure due to

the *P. infestans* infection was unfortunate enough, but it was the response to the blight that turned a standard famine into “The Great Famine.” While “the exact role of the British government in the Potato Famine . . . is still debated,” it is clear that had the British not increased exportation of crops, closed down soup kitchens, and collected increasing debts, the wake of the destruction from the blight would have significantly decreased (“Irish Potato Famine,” n. pag.). Although the British had a role in perpetuating the tragedy of the Great Famine, the Irish natives were not innocent bystanders as desperation led them to commit heinous acts of stealing, swindling, and murdering. The resentment from tragedies such as the Great Famine still permeate in modern Irish culture, “contribut[ing] to the Irish diaspora of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries” (“Irish Potato Famine,” n. pag.), making the perfect setting for O’Connor’s reflection on the entanglement of destruction and restoration in Irish history.

Ireland as a nation has struggled to recover, in population and mentality, from the Great Famine as they have been unable to come to a unified solution in pursuing reconciliation from such a devastating past, but O’Connor proposes a remedy. In his novel aptly titled *Star of the Sea*<sup>1</sup>, Joseph O’Connor tells the story of a coffin ship<sup>2</sup> full of characters interconnected through the tragedy of the Great Famine. As the characters make a transatlantic journey to freedom in America, they simultaneously go on a journey to freedom through reconciliation. Most characters attempt to escape their tragedy through the traditional “Irish solution” of violence. However, O’Connor contrasts this solution with something oppositional and explores forgiveness as an alternative route to freedom. This project will explore how the traditional solution of violence as a means to reconciliation falls short and only perpetuates the tragic

---

<sup>1</sup> *Star of the Sea* is an epithet for the Virgin Mary, which one scholar explains is the beginning of “O’Connor engag[ing] in a complex relationship with Christianity” (Patković 321).

<sup>2</sup> These boats were called “coffin ships” because of the high death toll the passengers faced on their overcrowded and disease-ridden journey.

narrative. I will argue that O'Connor's novel offers forgiveness as a more effective and cathartic approach to reconciliation compared to the violence generationally perpetuated within the Irish narrative as I use the theological framework described by Fiddes to showcase how forgiveness of the past can achieve present "salvation."

Theologian Paul S. Fiddes looks at the idea of forgiveness through a theological version of a cost-benefit analysis and concludes that forgiveness is always worth the cost as a means to reconciliation. Fiddes proposes that forgiveness is "a voyage of discovery, an active movement in which awareness is awakened" (173), which coincidentally mirrors the transatlantic voyage to America O'Connor's characters set out upon. Fiddes describes forgiveness as a "shattering experience" (172) where the cost is hefty for both the person offering forgiveness and for the person receiving forgiveness. Both parties must reconcile with their past and "live again through the pain of it" (173), which may be arduous but is inevitable. The cost is great, but the cathartic feeling of healing from the past reaps a greater reward.

Fiddes believes pain to be an inevitable consequence of the action of forgiveness, something even Christ had to experience to achieve forgiveness of humanity's sins. Fiddes explains that Christ's plea, "'Father forgive them' does not conflict with the awful cry 'My God why have you forsaken me?'" (175). Just as ordinary people can become emotionally and physically shattered by the toll of (or lack of) forgiveness, Christ's body was shattered when it bore the burden of our sin to offer us everlasting salvation. The "shattering experience" remains mandatory for forgiveness, a pain even our Savior had to experience. Jesus' sacrifice "offers us the possibility of a way forward into a life of freedom from our past history and our present character" (182). His past action shapes our present through reconciling all of our sins. Christ's example on the cross is the ultimate example of how forgiveness is not painless but remains



paramount. Fiddes brings an unconditional and holistic theological view of forgiveness that can be applied to the tragedy told in *Star of the Sea* to better understand the implications O'Connor makes about reconciliation. Fiddes does not believe Jesus's sacrifice to be a singular event, but one that "invites us to join in forgiving others, promising that we will not lose ourselves in the process, but not promis[ing] that we shall remain the same" (189). Fiddes's theology explores how the benefits of forgiveness far outweigh the costs when it can lead to healing from past trauma, a necessary component to understanding the conclusion of O'Connor's novel, where one character acts as the example for the Irish in both the past and the present.

The death and violence during the years of the Great Famine was tremendous, but nothing was as cruel as the Victorian prison system the novel's victim-villain, Pius Mulvey, finds himself in, and through understanding the cycle of violence the prison system perpetuated, we can better empathize with why Mulvey continuously resorts to violence and never is able to receive or extend forgiveness himself. Pius Mulvey must serve a seven-year prison sentence at Newgate Prison for the crimes he committed while in London when he simply tried to survive the fallout of the blight. During his time at Newgate, he found the prison's motto to be, "any human relationship was the enemy of reform" (O'Connor 191), which is entirely counterintuitive to the pursuit of reconciliation. One scholar builds upon this characterization of the Victorian-era prison system explaining, "even minimal familiarity with the British penal history, shows that the convicted body is still the target of the nineteenth-century punitive action . . . with the addition of prolonged psychological torture" (Patković 119). Violence was already rampant during this era, but the prison system perpetuated this cycle further. While Newgate claimed to believe "punishment could be an act of deepest love" (O'Connor 190), O'Connor resists this philosophy. Violence breeds violence, and the additional trauma Mulvey faces at Newgate is "an

unchristian cruelty” (191) intended to break him in both body and spirit. The true Christian love and restorative justice lies in Fiddes’s idea of forgiveness “because true forgiveness aims for reconciliation” (172). Unfortunately, the Victorian prison system did not aim for reconciliation and only bolstered trauma and tragedy, leading to the unfulfilling route to reconciliation Mulvey takes throughout the novel.

Mulvey’s time at Newgate Prison solidified his idea that violence could lead to freedom and reconcile his trauma, resulting in him going on a murder spree for the advantage of himself. After finding himself in a prison system where “physical violations are committed under the guise of reformist gentleness” (Patković 124), violence becomes ingrained as a way of life. Mulvey is robbed of human connection, physically assaulted, and sexually abused, so when an opportunity presents itself for him to seize a moment of escape and enact revenge on his rapist, he follows the example he has been shown. Pius Mulvey could have chosen mercy even as he chose to escape; instead, he “murmured an Act of Contrition in his dying rapist’s ear and bashed in what was left of his face with a rock” (O’Connor 198). Patković describes this as an inevitability: how is anyone supposed to step away from violence when they spent so long surrounded in a system that supports it? Unfortunately, what Mulvey experiences is “not an anomaly, nor is it merely an expression of the notorious Victorian hypocrisy” (Patković 137). And so begins Mulvey’s reign of terror. Violence is ingrained in him as a mode of survival and throughout the novel when Mulvey finds himself in a position to choose between his life or the life of another and continually chooses himself. When Mulvey chooses between death by starvation for himself or the only companion who has ever shown him genuine kindness, “*No other choice* was the phrase in his mind” (O’Connor 211). His time in prison robbed him of personal relationships and replaced it with a “by any means necessary mindset.” Later in the

novel, Mulvey is explicitly given orders from a vigilante group to either kill a man or be killed himself. Falling into the violent tradition surrounding him, Mulvey realized it was either “David Merridith or Pius Mulvey: one of them would never set foot on Manhattan” (O’Connor 357), and as is his prerogative, Mulvey chooses himself and violence. When Mulvey feels trapped, he resorts to the violence ingrained in him to help him achieve a (false) freedom from his trauma. Fiddes proposes, “like a stone thrown into a pond, the ripples spread out far beyond the centre” (181). The violence enacted by Mulvey results in repercussions that affect each character in the novel by them or a loved one facing unnecessary death within the Great Famine.

Violence did not have to directly be enacted upon someone to make them a victim of the Great Famine; however, through the tragic story of Mary Duane<sup>3</sup>, O’Connor shows that even a victim of violence can choose an alternative route to reconciliation. The story of how Mary Duane became a homeless widow bereaved of her only surviving child is a complicated one, but as O’Connor so eloquently said, “everything about the Famine is indeed complicated. Everything except the agonies of those who are its victims: the old, the young, the defenseless, and the poor” (21). Mary Duane and her husband, Nicholas Mulvey, are stripped of their lands after the blight affected their potato crop and a jealous Pius Mulvey killed their only source of income, their cow (270). Mary Duane and her family experience the simultaneous homelessness and hopelessness that was characteristic of the Great Famine period. However, the true tragedy of Mary Duane’s story occurs on a cold Christmas Eve night. While Mary is away, her husband can no longer stand to “witness the sufferings of tiny children; to hear the sounds they make in their agonies” (37), and in a moment of desperation he chooses a violent end for his child and himself leaving Mary Duane alone. One scholar describes Mary as “seemingly powerless to escape a destiny of

---

<sup>3</sup> “Mary is both a stereotypically common name for an Irishwoman and a reference to the Blessed Virgin Mary, who played an especially important role in the Catholic belief and practice in Ireland” (Ó Gallchoir 357).

impossibility” (Ó Gallchoir 356) because of how violent action surrounds her and leaves her without any agency to act, but this position was not unique to Mary Duane. The Great Famine was defined by a sense of helplessness, which resulted in the absence of hope and agency for most of the native Irish population. O’Connor uses Mary to become a symbolic figure of those who lost everything, and “although driven to the margins of the plot, [Mary] is ultimately endowed with the iconic status that her name suggests” (Ó Gallchoir 357), making her both exceptional and universal in her tragedy.

Even Mary Duane, one of the most virtuous characters in the novel, at one point seeks to use violence as a solution to remedy her trauma when she reaches out to a vigilante group to enact revenge on the person she blames for all of her sufferings. Mary Duane writes a letter to the “Els-Be Liable Men,” outlining her story of tragedy and blaming the death of her husband and her three children all on the unchecked jealousy of her brother-in-law, Pius Mulvey. Although many of the people in her town denounced Pius Mulvey for his violent actions, she explains, “not one of them did a screed to help me” (O’Connor 271). Mary believes that reaching out to the vigilantes will help her because she hopes his death can bring her some relief and reconcile the trauma she faced. Mary chooses violence, making her “not a passive victim” (Levy 142) as she acts for the sake of relieving her trauma. Mary does not physically harm Pius herself, which Levy further claims to be “realistic rather than cowardly” (142), but still seeks to find freedom from her trauma through violence enacted upon her enemy. O’Connor juxtaposes Mary’s journey towards forgiveness with the ship’s transatlantic journey: he intentionally tells Mary’s inclination towards violence in the middle of the voyage so that her journey can progress parallel to the novel’s victim-villain, Pius Mulvey. When Mary is removed from Mulvey, she

resorts to violence, but at the end of the novel when she has the chance to seal Mulvey's fate, she makes a different choice.

As the journey on the *Star of the Sea* ends, so does Mary Duane's journey towards forgiveness. Forgiveness is Mary's final mode of reconciliation, and when she has the opportunity to denounce Pius Mulvey a second time in person, which would guarantee his death, she claims him and offers him freedom off of the coffin ship as well as freedom from the burdens the trauma he caused. As the *Star of the Sea* arrives at New York, the passengers are forced to quarantine in the harbor, causing them to become restless and search for alternate means of escape as most of them are on the brink of starvation. When some of the passengers decide to cut the two lifeboats loose and escape, only women, children, and their family members are allowed on board, which leads Mary to face a difficult choice: does she claim Pius Mulvey as her family and offer him forgiveness and freedom or denounce him again and allow him to stay on the ship and die? In a moving scene, there is a moment where "the moment of retribution rolled up out of history and presented itself like an executioner's sword, she turned away and did not seize it." (366). Mary could have denounced Pius and fulfilled the wish she made to the Els-Be Liable Men, but she offered Pius "a simple human mercy" (364) and saved him. In that moment, Mary experiences a moment of "shattering" forgiveness that is central to Fiddes's theological outlook on the subject. Mary "wept that night on the *Star of the Sea*, as perhaps only the mother of a murdered child can weep" (O'Connor 365) as she offered the man responsible for the death of her husband and children a spot alongside her to redemption even though she could have easily continued to harbor hatred. Mary is not only a symbol for the Blessed Virgin Mary but also a symbol for how forgiveness can be cathartic. Can "this radically loving and radically inclusive Christianity which Mary Duane practices" be "translated, if at all, into social practice" (Patrović

337-38)? If we look at Fiddes's theory, we see that by following the footsteps of Mary Duane and choosing forgiveness over violence, we can achieve true reconciliation because forgiveness modeled after God "offers us the possibility of a way forward into a life of freedom from our past history and our present character" (Fiddes 182). To follow the example that God set for his believers, as each of the characters in the novel claims to be, they must join him in extending forgiveness. Although Pius Mulvey accepts the escape off the ship, he does not choose to accept Mary's forgiveness and continues to choose violence leading to his death upon shore. In direct contrast to Mulvey, Mary Duane ends her journey in the novel by completing the journey to forgive and is finally able to experience the freedom from her trauma as she moves forward from the woes of the Great Famine in a new land full of promise.

The trauma of the Great Famine is explored through O'Connor's novel, but his focus is on identifying the different means of reconciliation that can bring freedom from the past. O'Connor offers violence and forgiveness as two opposing paths on the voyage to freedom and describes the different circumstances in which both were extended. Each victim of the Great Famine has some form of tragedy affect them whether that be through loss of loved ones, physical violence, or prolonged suffering from hunger, and is forced to decide which journey towards reconciliation they would take. In O'Connor's novel, the characters who try to use violence to escape the tragedy of the Famine only end up being dissatisfied and face death, but the characters who practice compassion and forgiveness find freedom by escaping the ship in the dead of night. One scholar explains that *Star of the Sea* is a novel that "details the genuine blurring of these lines – between mercy and punishment, love and murder" (Levy 325), but O'Connor intentionally juxtaposes the lasting legacy of the characters who chose violence versus forgiveness and makes it clear that only one choice towards reconciliation is best. While

embarking upon reading *Star of the Sea*, a reader will go along a transatlantic voyage discovering the horrors of the Great Famine while simultaneously embarking “upon a voyage of discovery” (Fiddes 189) about the spiritual journey towards forgiveness and its ability to create true reconciliation even through tragedy.

O’Connor’s novel was not meant solely to give an account of the horrors of the Great Famine or to explore different ways in which the characters explored reconciliation in 1847, but to explore how past tragedy has contributed to present problems in Ireland and how we can learn from that. When describing the importance of the genre in which O’Connor wrote, one scholar explained, “The function of much postmodern historical fiction is to remind us that the past is not really ever past, that it informs the present, and that reshaping the past through text and narrative can in its turn reshape the present” (Ó Gallchoir 360). This is the same ideology that Fiddes proposes is inherent in the Christian idea of forgiveness. Fiddes describes the action of Jesus’s death upon the cross as “a past event with power to change human attitudes towards God and to each other in the present” (173). Just as understanding the past sacrifice of our Savior can lead to salvation in the present, O’Connor proposes that understanding Irish history can help affect modern Ireland and all of its political troubles of the late twentieth century in which he wrote his novel. O’Connor must retell the story of the Great Famine because “the inability to mourn the famine, to process its meaning, has meant that postcolonial Irish society has melancholically re-enacted what was known” (O’Malley 151). Whether the conflict is Irish versus British or Protestant versus Catholic, the cycle of violence characteristic of the Great Famine has continued into the modern Irish narrative. O’Connor explores the concept of forgiveness in his novel to propose a new way for the Irish to reconcile their past traumas and pursue a future that is free from the violent and tragic narrative of *Star of the Sea*.

## Works Cited

- Barnhill, John H. "Irish Potato Famine." *World History: A Comprehensive Reference Set*, edited by Facts on File, Facts on File, 1st edition, 2016. *Credo Reference*, login.ezproxy.samford.edu/login?url=https://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/fofworld/irish\_potato\_famine/0?institutionId=3477.
- Central Intelligence Agency. "The World Factbook: Ireland." *Central Intelligence Agency*, Feb. 2018, [www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ei.html](http://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ei.html).
- Fiddes, Paul S. "8. The Cost of Forgiveness." *Past Event and Present Salvation: The Christian Idea of Atonement*, Darton, Longman & Todd, 1999, pp. 171–89.
- "Irish Potato Famine." *History.com*, A&E Television Networks, Oct. 2017, [www.history.com/topics/immigration/irish-potato-famine](http://www.history.com/topics/immigration/irish-potato-famine).
- Levy, Heather. "Star of the Sea: Resistance and Adapted Homelands." *Studi Irlandesi: A Journal of Irish Studies*, vol. 9, no. 9, June 2019. *EBSCOhost*, doi:10.13128.
- O'Connor, Joseph. *Star of the Sea*. Harcourt, 2002.
- Ó Gallchoir, Clíona. "Modernity, Gender, and the Nation in Joseph O'Connor's 'Star of the Sea.'" *Irish University Review*, vol. 43, no. 2, 2013, p. 344. *EBSCOhost*, [www.jstor-org.ezproxy.samford.edu/stable/24576851](http://www.jstor-org.ezproxy.samford.edu/stable/24576851).
- O'Malley, Aidan. "'To Eat One's Words': Language and Disjunction in Joseph O'Connor's Star of the Sea." *Neo-Victorian Studies*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2015, pp. 131-59. *EBSCOhost*, [www.neovictorianstudies.com/](http://www.neovictorianstudies.com/).



Patković, Danijela. "Problematizing Leniency and Panopticism; Victorian Prison in Neo-Victorian Fiction and Discipline and Punish." *Primerjalna Knjizevnost*, vol. 41, no. 3, Nov. 2018, pp. 115-39. *Google Scholar*, ojs-gr.zrc-sazu.si/primerjalna\_knjizevnost/article/view/7152/6672.

---. "'The Name Is a Wealth to You': The Necropolitics of the Great Famine, and the Politics of Visibility, Naming and (Christian) Compassion in Joseph O'Connor's *Star of the Sea*." *Studi Irlandesi: A Journal of Irish Studies*, vol. 9, 2019, pp. 321-41. *EBSCOhost*, [www.fupress.net/index.php/bsfm-sijis](http://www.fupress.net/index.php/bsfm-sijis).

---

Copyright © 2021 *Wide Angle*, Samford University. All rights reserved.

*Megan Harris*

### **A Study of Nature and the Divine in Wordsworth and Hopkins**

---

**T**he natural world remains a unifying focus of poetic reflection despite the differences across various periods of historical circumstances and literary movements. In the Romantic era, William Wordsworth illustrates nature's instructive, uplifting power for the soul, both in memory and as an escape from society's reality. He finds guidance for humanity through his personal experiences of nature's wonder, which inspire his life both as an individual and a poet. In the Victorian era, Gerard Manley Hopkins describes the natural world as a clear reflection of God's presence that should move human thought to his glory even in a fallen contemporary world. Wordsworth and Hopkins differ in their conclusions about the human spirit and the divine: Wordsworth views nature as a source of moral restoration, while Hopkins embraces nature as a path to greater spiritual communion.

Amid the tensions between Christianity and the Enlightenment, Wordsworth exemplified the spirit of Romanticism in his attitudes towards mystical, imaginative, and emotional experiences. As society wrestled between biblical and rational understandings of human existence and the universe, Wordsworth sought freedom from the constraints of either contextual extreme. Despite the traditions and values of his context, he refuses to place his faith in the omnipotent Christian God or the strict rationalism of the Enlightenment. Brian Barbour explains Wordsworth's religious inclinations, writing that he "had no profound grasp of [Christianity] either as a doctrine or experience. . . . But there were numinous, religious qualities that had to be preserved—his experience of Nature had taught him that" (150-151). Wordsworth's inclination

towards the divine guides his representation of the broader ideals of Romanticism, which he depicts through his unique, mystical experience of the environment. In contrast, he wholly rejects the Enlightenment based on the belief that “[a] world . . . that was defined by materialism, rationalism, and necessitarianism was no world for a poet” (Barbour 151). Barbour analyzes Wordsworth’s position amid the literary consciousness of his time, explaining that he shifts “from faith (i.e., in a transcendent order) to experience” and defines experience within the “Romantic faith in man . . . located in the inner recesses of the spirit” (161). Wordsworth defines his relationship with nature through his individuality and experiences, which lead him to view the environment as a place of personal renewal and moral guidance.

In “Lines: Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey,” Wordsworth contrasts the renewing and uplifting beauty of natural imagery with the city’s isolation. The poem’s first stanza paints a vivid description of the tranquil, rustic wilderness at Tintern Abbey. The opening lines introduce the power and majesty of such “beauteous forms” in nature that ultimately uplift the soul (Wordsworth line 23). Wordsworth presents the environment through concrete examples of the physical world, including the majesty of cliffs, waterfalls, and other specific places at Tintern Abbey he has explored. In the second stanza, he reflects on how this beautiful landscape impacts him when he is apart from the place itself and nature as a whole. Even while he is in the crowded city, Wordsworth defines himself as separated and secluded from the dynamic livelihood of civilization. He characterizes his time in “lonely rooms, and ‘mid the din / Of towns and cities” as “hours of weariness,” where he is physically isolated and turns to nature for solace in his body, heart, and mind (Wordsworth lines 26-27). Wordsworth contrasts the city and the country to emphasize the restorative power brought by memories of the environment, although he is not always physically present there. His view of industrialization also illustrates his critique

of Enlightenment thought, and for the poet, “the city is no longer just the locus of moral corruption among wastrels: the industrial city—product of the Enlightenment and its view of nature—destroys the spirit of man” (Barbour 158-159). Wordsworth links his interactions in society with “the heavy and weary weight / Of all this unintelligible world,” a burden lightened only by the memories of his time at Tintern Abbey (lines 23, 40-41). Surrounded by industrial fervor and the intellectual developments of the Enlightenment, Wordsworth seeks harmony in nature as a reprieve from the city and its immorality.

In the latter half of the poem, Wordsworth moves from harmony with nature to its divinity and sublime power, displaying how his individual connection with the environment inspires and restores his soul. At first, he shares his doubts about these contemplations and ponders if this is merely a “vain belief” despite its strong effects on his heart, mind, and spirit (Wordsworth line 50). His answer is to divinize nature’s power over his soul in the present, and he grounds this influence within the stability of the unchanging, awe-inspiring natural world. Nature provides life-giving clarity to his mind, which allows him to let go of the weight of the world and the chaos in his own self. His reflections rely on primarily first person pronouns to narrate his experience, which convey his deeply personal ties with the natural world. By finding his meaning in the individual experience of this exalted state, Wordsworth is able to fulfill earlier emotions of harmony and joy and “see into the life of things” (line 49). Wordsworth initially feels the burden of “this unintelligible world” clouding his perspective and choices, but nature refocuses his vision on the sublime (line 41). His time at Tintern Abbey offers purpose and clarity that ultimately guide his moral principles and actions towards virtuous deeds.

Wordsworth’s perspective demonstrates how his relationship with nature forms the basis for his values and beliefs about morality, not only for himself but also for his sister Dorothy.

After using only “I” pronouns for the first four stanzas, the final stanza transitions to second person language depicting his sister as she engages with nature’s uplifting character. He introduces her with references to “thou my dearest friend” and “My dear, dear Sister!” before exhorting her to embrace a sacred relationship with the natural world (Wordsworth lines 118, 214). Summarizing his previous reflections on his individual experience, he shares that they should let nature “inform / The mind that is within us, so impress / With quietness and beauty, and so feed / With lofty thoughts” so the weight of the world cannot prevail against them (Wordsworth lines 128-135). The memory of their shared experience can heal and comfort in the future when they are apart. Wordsworth implores both Dorothy and the reader to connect with nature, where memories will continue to influence one’s existence in the present and shape the older, more mature soul. Critic Alan Grob defines the naturalistic experience at Tintern Abbey as “universally accessible and universally beneficial, available to any and all who would submit themselves . . . [and] bring [their] lives into conformity with nature’s own essential being” (qtd. in Barth 178). Wordsworth centers his poetic reflection on Tintern Abbey around this final call to action, uniting an uplifting, collective reality with his individualistic, imaginative experience of nature.

After contemplating his individual and communal connection with nature, Wordsworth gives examples of nature’s edifying effect on his morality and contrasts his present state with his previously immature relationship with the environment. He reflects on the innocent and enthusiastic freedom of his youth, when he interacted with nature on a shallow, physical level of “coarser pleasures” and “glad animal movements” (Wordsworth lines 73-75). Upon returning to Tintern Abbey now that he is older, his mind and spirit are more affected by the sublime power of nature. Even when he is absent from nature, he can still recall and envision his experiences,

and the memory brings “sensations sweet” and “tranquil restoration” (Wordsworth lines 27-30). As Wordsworth thinks of his experiences of nature’s beauty, he finds inspiration for the “little, nameless, unremembered, acts / Of kindness and love” (lines 34-35). His memories of nature nourish his inner soul and provide moral improvement, demonstrating the shift from mental contemplation to a tangible impact on his actions. His mind interacts with the memory while he is absent from the natural space, creating meaning in new perceptions that shape his good deeds. Barbour notes that the restorative influence of nature only arises from the power of the human mind, writing, “Wordsworth is keen to celebrate nature but only as it is quickened and transformed by the human imagination” (156). The power of the human imagination remains at the center of Wordsworth’s worship of nature, guiding his rejection of traditional answers to morality and religion.

As Romantic ideals gave way to religious uncertainty in his time, Gerard Manley Hopkins honored God as the true source of morality and celebrated nature as a reflection of divine majesty. The developing changes to civilization in the Victorian era raised questions about many core beliefs of Romanticism, including the value of the individual human spirit and the divinity of nature. Though industrialization and expansion strengthened stability across England, this progress also undermined previously unchallenged beliefs about humanity and the world. Despite the increasing prosperity, Victorian writers questioned traditional ideologies in the face of political unrest, social and economic instability, and new scientific discoveries about the natural world. Donald Rackin describes the historical circumstances of Hopkins’ poem “God’s Grandeur,” writing that it “directs attention to the most pressing of the problems plaguing nineteenth-century thinkers—the validity of faith in the modern world” (66). While Hopkins

himself struggled to find his identity within the religious structures of his time, he ultimately arrives at an understanding of nature through God's identity as creator.

Hopkins differs from Wordsworth because he focuses on the divinity of God and sees nature as merely a path to worship. Wordsworth focuses on his individual experiences of restoration through sublime, divine nature; Hopkins centers his language and images around the importance of God's presence in the natural world rather than working from his personal relationship with the environment. Hopkins clearly differentiates the divine from the individual even in his opening line, proclaiming, "The world is charged with the grandeur of God" (line 1). David Jasper notes the stark contrast with Wordsworth at the heart of Hopkins' poem, writing that Hopkins clearly celebrates "the grandeur of God—not the grandeur of the human mind" (15). Furthermore, the contrast between Wordsworth and Hopkins' authorial styles and pronoun usage demonstrates their unique ways of relating to their religious experiences in nature. "God's Grandeur" centers around the subject of divine majesty revealed in nature itself, and accordingly, "Hopkins puts 'God' in the periodic position . . . [and] never makes direct reference to himself" (Rackin 66). Compared with the values of Romanticism and Wordsworth's emphasis on individualism, "Hopkins, in effect, says to his fellow Romantics . . . [turn] from 'us' and 'our' and 'we' and 'I' and 'me' to that inexhaustible power that charges the world's dynamism, the power of the not-self, the power of God" (Rackin 66). In contrast with Wordsworth, Hopkins avoids any personal pronouns and finds communion with the divine by focusing his meditation around signs in creation that point to God, like images of light and oil.

While Wordsworth divinizes and celebrates nature for its physical beauty, Hopkins grounds his descriptions of nature as signs pointing to the greater splendor of God. Hopkins begins the first stanza with the image of light that will flame out "like shining from shook foil,"

depicting God's presence running like lightning or an electric current through the natural world (line 2). In this example, humanity can see God's existence like the momentarily visible flashes of refracted light created by shaken tinsel. Hopkins then compares God's presence to a rich oil or sap, which wells up to greatness when tapped with a certain kind of patient pressure (lines 3-4). Hopkins' visual and descriptive style relies upon brief moments of simplistic natural beauty in common objects, such as the flashes of light and steady movement of oil. Hopkins sees creation as proof pointing to the divine but never wholly providing full communion, and he arrives at God as the sole force of renewal.

Hopkins reflects on humanity's willful ignorance of divine wisdom and views nature as evidence to guide sinners to God. After proving God's presence in the world through the first stanza, Hopkins wonders, "Why do men then now not reckon his rod?" (line 4). He then reflects on the state of contemporary human life when humans fail to heed divine authority, where labor has become repetitive and stained by toil. Rackin compares the historical circumstances of Hopkins' and Wordsworth's works, describing their images of the city: "So too the glory of the mortal world—violently trodden down and befouled in Hopkins' industrialized England, apparently clouded or forgotten in Wordsworth's commercialized London—that glory (or 'grandeur') *will*, says Hopkins, always spring back to bright coherence, to its full, vital, electrical, and immortal relation with transcendent reality" (Rackin 68). Though the natural state of the landscape exhibits the existence of God as its creator, industrialization has transformed the land and robbed humanity of sensitivity to natural beauty. Jasper explains humanity's unique consciousness among natural creation, writing, "The harmony of all creation in Christ, therefore, is broken in the processes of destruction and decay in which man plays a particular part. . . . Alone in all creation, man has self-consciousness and freedom, a moral ability to *choose* to offer or deny



glory to God” (13). Generations of humanity have been “trodding” in this state of existence depicted through repetition and powerful word choice as Hopkins writes, “And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil; / And wears man’s smudge and shares man’s smell” (lines 6-7). He concludes the first stanza by recognizing that even shoes sever the physical connection between one’s feet and the earth. Hopkins uses distinct, simple, and even humble images to depict God’s majestic beauty in the common moments of everyday life, which strengthens his ultimate critique of humanity’s spiritual alienation from nature in the modern age.

While Hopkins acknowledges the fallen state of the contemporary Victorian world, he believes that nature does not cease to manifest the spiritual and point to God. Hopkins continues to find hope for the present age despite the trodding of generations and humanity’s separation both from spirituality and nature itself. He considers the state of Victorian society, which has rejected a prioritization of nature and religion, yet he returns to God’s glory and finds inevitable restoration, both for the created world and the individual soul. Beginning with “And for all this, nature is never spent,” he considers the tension between divinity and humanity and still concludes that the essence of nature can bring renewal and holy grace (Hopkins line 9). Jasper observes that though Hopkins finds joy in contemplating “the divine splendor in the created world,” this knowledge also drives him to consider human existence. Hopkins experiences the full force of the oppressive and dangerous conditions associated with supposed progress, yet he continues to believe in the enduring hope of God’s grandeur.

Within the created world, Hopkins sees the utter depravity of humankind that requires separation from God. Hopkins laments that “all is seared . . . bleared, smeared with toil” and the world “wears man’s smudge and shares man’s smell” (lines 6-7). He conveys the extent of humankind’s stain on the natural world, yet he sees God’s majesty in nature’s beauty and

freshness beneath the surface of human influence. For Hopkins, thinking about his own being is merely “a self-affirmation which is helpless to imitate the self-sacrifice which is the essential element in Christ,” and poetry becomes a kind of purgatory attempting expression but always falling short (Jasper 9). Despite humanity’s failings and sinful nature, God regenerates a sinful world through grace, causing “the dearest freshness” to permeate the earth and testify to his continual renewing power (Hopkins line 10). This “freshness” is the crux of hope for Hopkins and points to the enduring promise of new life that God can bring to the fallen world. God guards the potential of the world and brings the promise of rebirth, which Hopkins illustrates through the final images of the dawning morning and the Holy Ghost (lines 11-14). He represents the Holy Spirit as a loving presence brooding “over the bent / World . . . with warm breast and with ah! bright wings” (Hopkins lines 13-14). He paints the image of a mother hen protecting her hatchlings and evokes God’s watchful care over humanity and the world. Hopkins concludes with these joyful, sudden images to emphasize the path to spiritual communion through God’s gift of pure, vibrant joys in nature.

Wordsworth’s “Lines: Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey” and Hopkins’s “God’s Grandeur” contribute unique perspectives to an enduring dialogue about nature and faith that evolved from Romanticism to the Victorian era. Both Wordsworth and Hopkins share a distinctive common spirit towards the potential value of the natural world and its influence upon the human life. Wordsworth sees nature as a source of individual moral guidance, but Hopkins views the environment as an instrument created by God and charged with his glory to point humans back to him. Barth discusses the implications of their shared experience with natural beauty, writing, “Both of them, by seeing into Nature, see beyond Nature to a reality transcending the evidence of the senses [and] express the human yearning for life and beauty that

will not fade and die” (188). Wordsworth sees the implications of this restorative impact on the individual level, while Hopkins believes creation’s purpose is to drive fallen humanity back to the majesty of God. Though they differ in natural imagery, emphasis on the human spirit, and authorial style, “the experience of the two poets is essentially the same: the experience of being a traveler between two worlds—one world whose passing beauty is dearly loved, the other whose lasting beauty is deeply longed for” (Barth 189). The central difference between these two authors is that Wordsworth divinizes nature in the present moment for the sake of the individual soul, but Hopkins views the humble beauty of creation in light of the future hope of God’s glory.

The poems of Wordsworth and Hopkins portray a deep appreciation for the beauty and wonder of the natural world. Their differing conclusions about the human spirit and the divine result not only from the circumstances of their historical and literary context, but also from their personal beliefs about spirituality and humanity’s place in the universe. While Wordsworth divinizes the environment to arrive at faith in the individual man, Hopkins understands natural beauty as a reflection of divine grace and God’s ultimate power. Yet they both demonstrate how nature embodies values of morality and spirituality in unique ways that still intrigue and inspire readers today.

#### Works Cited

Barbour, Brian. “‘Between Two Worlds’: The Structure of the Argument in ‘Tintern Abbey.’”

*Nineteenth-Century Literature*, Vol. 48, No. 2, Sept. 1993, pp. 147-168. *JSTOR*,

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/2933888>. Accessed 02 Apr. 2020.

Barth, Robert J. “Wordsworth and Hopkins: In Pursuit of Transcendence.” *Renascence*, Vol. 48,

No. 3, Spring 1996, pp. 175-189. *EBSCOhost*, <https://eds-b-ebSCOhost->

[com.ezproxy.samford.edu/eds/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=12&sid=835ecaf5-ccee-4c6b-9cbb-65fd8617d289%40pdc-v-sessmgr05](https://com.ezproxy.samford.edu/eds/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=12&sid=835ecaf5-ccee-4c6b-9cbb-65fd8617d289%40pdc-v-sessmgr05). Accessed 07 Apr. 2020

Hopkins, Gerard Manley. "God's Grandeur." *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Major Authors*, edited by Greenblatt, Stephen, et al. Vol. 2, 10<sup>th</sup> ed., W. W. Norton & Company, 2019, p. 878.

Jasper, David. "God's Better Beauty: Language and the Poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins." *Christianity and Literature*, vol. 34, no. 3, Spring 1985, pp. 7-22. *EBSCOhost*, <https://eds-b-ebSCOhost-com.ezproxy.samford.edu/eds/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=5&sid=835ecaf5-ccee-4c6b-9cbb-65fd8617d289%40pdc-v-sessmgr05>. Accessed 07 Apr. 2020.

Rackin, Donald. "'God's Grandeur': Hopkins' Sermon to Wordsworth." *The Wordsworth Circle*, Vol. 11, No. 2, Spring 1980, pp. 66-73. JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24041210>. Accessed 07 Apr. 2020.

Wordsworth, William. "Lines: Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour, July 13, 1798." *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Major Authors*, edited by Greenblatt, Stephen, et al. Vol. 2, 10<sup>th</sup> ed., W. W. Norton & Company, 2019, pp. 131-135.

Copyright © 2021 *Wide Angle*, Samford University. All rights reserved.

## Essay

*Jordan Shoop*

**“I am come home”<sup>4</sup>:**

**Audre Lorde’s Journey from the Closet to Reclaiming Her Lesbian Identity**

---

A lesbian poet writes against her own erasure. As Adrienne Rich writes in the forward of *The Coming Out Stories*, lesbian women have endured “millions of letters and diaries . . . going up in flames, sifting to ash; library stacks of biographies which do not tell the truths we most need to know . . . those cages behind which women’s words, lesbian words, lie imprisoned, those shelves of life-histories gutted of their central and informing theme” (xi-xii). The theme has always been survival because a lesbian woman exists in a world that subjugates her<sup>5</sup> against her own sexual identity. In order for a lesbian woman to survive with her sexual identity, she must reclaim that identity by escaping the closet and its oppression and come out where she defines her identity for herself.

As history shows, lesbian identity has been subjugated and constantly redefined by heteronormativity. In *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present*<sup>6</sup>, Lillian Faderman states, “‘Fashion’ in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries dictated that women may fall passionately in love with each other, although they must not engage in genital sex” (73). Women were allowed to be in romantic friendships, except heterosexual men conditioned women for procreation.

---

<sup>4</sup> Line 22, Lorde “Pirouette”

<sup>5</sup> Terminology: Not all lesbians identify with she/her pronouns, but to analyze with Lorde, I will be using she/her pronouns.

<sup>6</sup> As Faderman states in her introduction, her source is not an inclusive historical study because of its absence of lesbians of color. The truth of historical academia (and among others) is that there is an absence of black lesbian material. I use this source because it can be tied generally to all lesbians and compulsory heterosexuality.

Misogynistic writers encouraged women to submit to men and published overtly sexualized stories of women loving women as freakish to discredit same-sex love as evil and sick, and sexologists and psychologists began publicly declaring lesbians “congenital invert[s]” that continued throughout the twentieth century (Faderman 239). In addition, pioneer lesbian writers were forced under censorship to silence lesbian voices. Lesbian women were subjugated under compulsory heterosexuality and heteronormativity until the Lesbian Liberation Movement of the late 1960s when coming out of the closet became part of the movement to create visibility and combat erasure against this history of subjugation.<sup>7</sup> For lesbian writers, they wrote themselves in their work to create non-fictional, biographical accounts to strategize against heteronormativity and promote lesbian self-definition; hence the popular rallying cry: “the personal is political.” Specifically at this time, lesbian women began to reclaim their lesbian identity and womanhood from compulsory heterosexuality. Faderman states, “It was women’s job to reclaim female same-sex love by redefining it for themselves. Before 1970 any attempt at redefinition was doomed to failure. . . . The image of love between women could not begin to change until there were masses prepared to validate the truth of a new image” (377). Lesbian women took the term “lesbian” and performed their identity in order to reclaim it.

Audre Lorde’s trajectory of her poetry shows the act of reclaiming. In fact, I divide her lesbian work into two sections: the poetry in the closet and the poetry after she publicly came out. Because biographical accounts were popularized in the movement and Lorde’s work parallels with her own personal life, a biographical reading is guaranteed where Lorde is being assumed as the speaker; although, I stress the importance of also seeing the lesbian speaker standing on her own with the writer’s influence. In her closeted poems, specifically “Pirouette”

---

<sup>7</sup> I am using “until” as a way to credit the change in the historical trajectory caused by the Liberation Movement. Obviously, subjugation still exists afterwards.

and “On a night of the full moon,” Lorde represents the speaker as subjugated in the closet where the speaker is questioning her identity from the erasure of lesbian history and displacing herself and her identity. After Lorde publicly came out in 1973, she visibly expressed her lesbian identity in her poetry. In addition to the previous two poems, I will be focusing on another two of her poems, “Love Poem” and “Meet,” to counteract the previous closeted poems. With “Love Poem,” Lorde reclaims the lesbian erotic, and with “Meet,” the speaker signals for a lesbian tradition, reclaiming herstory against lesbian silence. In her poetry, Audre Lorde writes against her own erasure by reclaiming her lesbian identity through the speaker’s active performance of reclaiming and the use of reclaiming language in order for the lesbian speaker to survive.

As a theoretical crux, I begin with Adrienne Rich’s “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” where she proves the subjugation of compulsory heterosexuality. She details heterosexuality as a “political institution” (637) that confines women for men’s own power. While Rich’s argument is overall directed towards both straight and lesbian women,<sup>8</sup> I am specifically interested in her points where she strongly informs heteronormative subjugation, such as the erasure of lesbian existence and the constructed belief that sexuality is heterosexual. These types of heteronormative subjugations are related to the cause of the closet<sup>9</sup> where lesbians are confined against their own identity in the double life. In *Feminism, the Family, and the Politics of the Closet: Lesbian and Gay Displacement*, Cheshire Calhoun describes that if a lesbian wants to have a legitimate place in society, she must “adopt at least the appearance of a

---

<sup>8</sup> While I am focusing on a close lens of lesbian sexuality, separating a lesbian woman from her intersectionality of being a woman and a lesbian is a blurry line. Firstly, it is detrimental to erase womanhood out of a lesbian’s identity because a lesbian’s identity would surmount in being read as similar to that of a gay man. On the other hand, some lesbians do not identify with the gendered term “woman.” With analyzing with Lorde, I am choosing to closely focus on lesbian sexuality, while trying not to erase womanhood because Lorde, herself, identified as a woman and womanhood is expressed throughout her works. With race, I also appeal to her BIPOC identity at the end of the paper. I hint and analyze moments of intersectionality, but to create a close lens of sexuality, I am specifically paying close attention to sexuality.

<sup>9</sup> See Sedgwick and Ross.

heterosexual identity” (75). For a lesbian in the closet, her outside appearance is that of a heterosexual, while her homosexual identity is invisible, i.e., the double life. This invisibility creates the lesbian identity as abject by heteronormative society, an Other. Monique Wittig, a self-identified lesbian, even agreed with this categorization. In her chapter “One is Not Born a Woman” from *The Straight Mind*, she states, “Lesbian is the only concept I know of which is beyond the categories of sex (woman and man), because the designated subject (lesbian) is *not* a woman, either economically, or politically, or ideologically” (20). While she is defining lesbians as outside of the construction of gender that can give power to lesbians because of being outside of compulsory heterosexuality, she is still creating a distance of Otherness with the lesbian identity. While Calhoun and Wittig are both valid, I would like to further their claims together: a lesbian in the closet is battling being silently identified as Other by society while also confusing her own identity.

Because a lesbian is in conflict with her own identity, she easily falls into displacement. According to Calhoun, “The social presumption that persons are heterosexuals unless there is clear evidence to the contrary helps to conceal gay men and lesbians. . . . As a result, persons who *are* lesbian or gay often evade being socially treated *as* lesbian or gay persons. Instead, they are treated as members of the social group ‘heterosexual’” (79-80). This is heteronormative performance. While in the closet, either a lesbian will conform to a heterosexual identity and reject her lesbian identity, or she will somewhat accept her identity but express it in ambiguous terms. This ambiguity allows for heteronormative casting where lesbianism is portrayed, specifically in language, as heterosexual. The lesbian will continue to displace her lesbian identity to perform as heterosexual.



While heterosexuality and heteronormativity are portrayed performances, the lesbian identity is also a performance. Adding to Wittig's idea of lesbians being a third gender that transcends outside of the gender binary, Judith Butler argues that gender is a mimic performance: "Gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*" (179). The butch and femme lesbian roles of the 1950s is a prime example of a performative act where lesbians, butch and femme, took on the gender role/partnership of heterosexual relationships. They conformed to the gender binary, "masculine" and "feminine," because they did not have a clear history to define their relationships apart from heterosexuality, taking on the performance of heterosexuality. Speaking of Butler's critique, Calhoun mentions, "The illusion of a natural binarism of gender categories into 'woman' and 'man' is the result of repetitive (and panicked) performances of a unity between body, gender, and (heterosexual) desire" (71). Within the confinement of the closet, a lesbian is displaced by heteronormative subordination where she is naturally defined as heterosexual. She must perform outside of that label to institute the "oppressed" label in order to reclaim it. I insist that reclaiming is a performance, an active one, and a performance of language.

While she is actively performing and reclaiming her identity, a lesbian must also perform within language to create self-definition. Pamela Annas insists, "For language is not only a tool to build with, it is also that which is built. Language is a house to inhabit, a space which one shapes to be comfortable in and, often, uses to define oneself" (9).<sup>10</sup> Heterosexuality is the normalized language, and to battle against that normalization, language must be reclaimed. As mentioned earlier, lesbians in the Liberation Movement wrote themselves into literature<sup>11</sup> and

---

<sup>10</sup> Pamela Annas argues a lesbian-feminist has to "rename" herself. While my idea and hers are similar, I am more drawn to the act of reclaiming the identity itself.

<sup>11</sup> See *The Coming Out Stories* and *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*

society to put a name to their “erased” identities. SaraEllen Strongman states, “Poetry was a central form and site of feminist theorizing during this period. Poetry, especially the lyric poem, facilitated exploration of the self as well as the larger, even universal, issues” (45). I further her notion and insist that poetry as a form of language and art is a tool for a powerful performance play for reclaiming against heteronormative oppression.

**“Why are you weeping?”<sup>12</sup>: Subordination and Heteronormative Casting of the Closet**

Audre Lorde publicly came out in 1973. Her poetry before that date can be read as portraying the speaker in the closet. Even though the coming out process was considered part of the Gay and Lesbian Liberation Movements, Lorde did not publicly participate. According to Alexis De Veaux, “Lorde kept her lesbian world nestled within her mostly white, liberal social circles. She was not out publicly, and she was courting a fragile acceptance within the black community, the home she longed for within it as hazardous as the specter of certain disapproval and rejection” (120). The speaker in her early poems (specifically the ones I will analyze) illustrates lesbian subordination that is created by the accumulation of lesbian silence and heteronormativity where the lesbian speaker is displaced from her lesbianism. This displacement portrays the subject in ambiguous terms that easily falls into heteronormative casting. However, the speaker still desires to freely express her lesbian sexuality.

In her poem “Pirouette,” Lorde details the confinement of the lesbian closet. Firstly, the speaker is conflicted about her lesbianism because of the absence of lesbian history. In “It is the Lesbian in Us,” Adrienne Rich quotes novelist Bertha Harris: “The lesbian, without a literature, is without life: Sometimes pornographic, sometimes a mark of fear, sometimes a sentimental flourish, she . . . floats in space . . . without the attachment to earth where growth is composed”

---

<sup>12</sup> Line 21, Lorde “Pirouette”

(200). For the lesbian speaker, she is questioning her identity because she has nothing, such as clear history and literary works, to help define her identity. At the end of the first two stanzas of “Pirouette,” the speaker repeats, “Where are you from / you said” (6-7, 11-2). The speaker is questioning the lesbian identity: What are you? Where did you come from? Do you actually exist because I cannot locate you in heteronormative tradition? By speaking directly to the subject “you,” the speaker is searching for a lesbian tradition that would help her understand her own identity: “Some road through uncertain night / For your feet to examine *home*” (9-10, emphasis added). This “home” is repeatedly being searched for until the speaker states in the last line, “I am come home” (22). While the speaker is accepting herself in the last line, the poem still deeply conveys the entrapment of the closet.

The entrapment of the closet is portrayed by the speaker constantly displacing her identity because she cannot accept her identity. The speaker begins “Pirouette” with:

I saw

Your hands on my lips like blind needles

Blunted

From sewing up stone (1-4)

With line two, she describes the lesbian performance with contrasting similes: “Your hands on my lips like blind needles” (2) and “Your hands / On my lips like thunder / Promising Rain” (13-5). While her imagery is illustrating intimacy but in the simplest terms with just touch, she counteracts the intimacy with pain. This pain is associated with the speaker giving her lesbianism negative characteristics because she is trying to dissociate herself from her lesbianism. At the end of the third and fourth stanza, the speaker changes from “Where are you from” to “Why are you weeping?” (17, 21). This change shows the speaker questioning her identity to frustration of

being trapped in displacing herself. “Pirouette” shows the speaker as trapped in the closet where the speaker is “weeping” because she is subordinated and confined in the double life.

With being confined in the double life and not fully accepting her lesbian identity, the subject displaces herself from her lesbian action with casting the subject of her lesbian desire in ambiguous terms. This ambiguity is shown in Lorde’s “On a night of the full moon.” The speaker begins:

Out of my flesh that hungers  
and my mouth that knows  
comes the shape I am seeking  
for reason. (1-4)

The speaker is “seeking” the subject who is defined under no specific gender descriptions. The speaker then describes her ambiguous erotic, stating:

The curve of your body  
fits my waiting hand  
your flesh warm as sunlight  
your lips quick as young birds  
between your thighs the sweet  
sharp taste of limes. (5-10)

The speaker transitions from “I” to “you.” While the speaker could be writing the poem to “you” as an audience, Lorde similarly uses second person in her other closeted poem, hiding the subject’s gender. In line nine, she states, “between your thighs” which could be any sexual organ, and also later in the second stanza, the speaker states, “I feel your stomach / curving against mine” (15-6). This ambiguity, especially at the time of when this poem was published,

easily allows heteronormativity to cast the characters in heterosexual terms. Heterosexuality positions itself and subjugates lesbians “in the sense that they prevent us [lesbians] from speaking unless we speak in their terms” (Wittig 25). Because Lorde is writing erotic imagery, heteronormativity also casts this lesbian erotic as heterosexual. The lesbian subject is in the double-life, and the closeted poems represent the strict and conforming subjugation of heteronormativity.

Although the speaker is in the closet and is subjugated under heteronormativity, she desires for her lesbian sexuality to freely be expressed. Throughout the poem, she is ambiguous of the gender of the subject and displaces herself: her body “hungers” and her “mouth that knows.” To contrast with “Pirouette” that details heavy subordination of the closet, the speaker in this poem does take ownership. Throughout the poem, she states, “I am seeking” (3), “I hold you” (11), “I feel” (15). She is giving herself the action, instead of using passive language, that shows the speaker as not dissociating her lesbianism. In the second part of the poem, she speaks in future tense, illustrating how her sexuality will be expressed:

And I would be the moon  
 spoken over your beckoning flesh  
 breaking against reservations  
 beaching thought  
 .....  
 and the passing of hungers  
 attended, forgotten. (19-26)

This section is the speaker’s climatic piece where she is representing sex with the lover again. The imagery describes a high tide on a full moon with the tide constantly flowing, and with the

use of alliteration of “beckoning,” “breaking,” “beaching,” she is creating a banging beat that emphasizes her constant lesbian action. As the speaker is still ambiguous in the love she is portraying, she is coming to terms with her lesbian sexuality.

**“bless me with what is richest”<sup>13</sup>: The Performance of Reclaiming**

Audre Lorde publicly came out in 1973 at a bookstore and coffee shop while reading her poem “Love Poem.” Like many other lesbians who came out during the Liberation Movement, she quickly took on the self-identified label: lesbian. Lorde states, “If we don’t name ourselves, we are nothing. . . . As a Black woman I have to deal with identity, or I don’t exist at all. I can’t depend on the world to name me kindly, because it never will. . . . So either I’m going to be defined by myself or not at all. In that sense it becomes a survival situation” (qtd. in Garber 100). For a lesbian to survive, she has to name herself and give name to her identity that has been silenced and oppressed. She has to literally *perform* her identity in order to reclaim it.

Audre Lorde reclaims her lesbian sexuality from heteronormativity and compulsory heterosexuality in her sexually explicit poem “Love Poem.” The speaker begins with a command for lesbian sex: “Speak earth and bless me with what is richest / make sky flow honey out of my hips” (1-2). She uses feminine nature imagery to describe lesbian sex, such as with her “On a night of the full moon.” With the naturalistic imagery, the speaker is changing the heteronormative assumption that lesbianism, women loving and having sex, is unnatural. She then explicitly states:

And I knew when I entered her I was  
 high wind in her forests hollow  
 fingers whispering sound

---

<sup>13</sup> Line 1, Lorde “Love Poem”

honey flowed  
 from the split cup  
 impaled on a lance of tongues (6-11)

Notice, “I” is written three times on line six. The speaker is not displacing herself from her lesbian sexuality, rather she is fully accepting and demanding it. She also references the subject as another woman.<sup>14</sup> Also, with “high wind,” “hollow,” “whispering sound,” and “lance of tongues,” the speaker is imitating sound, as though she and the woman are communicating a “common language”<sup>15</sup> in their expression of lesbian sex. Lorde is reclaiming her lesbian sexuality, fully and explicitly expressing it against heteronormative wishes.

Lorde’s reclaiming of her lesbian sexuality gives her power over her erotic. In her “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,” she states, “We have been raised to fear the *yes* within ourselves, our deepest cravings. But, once recognized, those who do not enhance our future lose their power and can be altered” (*Sister* 57). Heterosexuality has been conditioned to be the ultimate and universal love. Through power acts of defining lesbianism as “perverse” and silencing lesbian sex, heteronormativity continues to be cyclic and detrimental to lesbians. By fully expressing that “silenced” desire, she reclaims herself from heterosexual oppression. The speaker ends “Love Poem” with, “I swing out over the earth [still a naturalistic metaphor of the woman and/or the vagina itself] / over and over / again” (18-20). The speaker is ending the poem with repetition to uplift and force, as a writing strategy, repetitious lesbian sex. She is also hinting at the constant reclaiming a lesbian has to do in this (still) heteronormative society.

---

<sup>14</sup> Before this poem was published, her straight male editor Dudley Randall advised her to delete the poem from the collection. Lorde states that Randall “called and literally didn’t understand the words of ‘Love Poem.’ He said, ‘Now what is this all about, are you supposed to be a man?’ And he was a poet! And I said, ‘No, I’m loving a woman’” (*Conversations* 61).

<sup>15</sup> In reference to Adrienne Rich’s *The Dream of a Common Language* that is one of her personally visible lesbian works, where she compares worldly language and lesbian language.

Audre Lorde reclaims the speaker's lesbian identity by searching for lesbian herstory in *The Black Unicorn*. In this collection of poetry, she writes of myths and parallels woman-identified woman traditions to modern BIPOC lesbian subjects. Linda Garber comments, "Thematically and structurally, the poems in *The Black Unicorn* present a poetics of deconstruction that resists the either/or mandate of patriarchal, white [heterosexual] Western culture" (106). In the first poem of the same name in the collection, the speaker states, "The black unicorn was mistaken / for a shadow / or symbol" ("The Black" 3-5). The speaker is referencing lesbian subjectivity by heteronormativity throughout history: the "shadow" references concealment and "symbol" for lesbian stereotypes.<sup>16</sup> She speaks, as somewhat of a preface of the collection, of the "mockeries" and "fury" of trying to find her identity and locate a lesbian tradition.

In her poem, "Meet," in the collection, Lorde locates herstory. Instead of not being able to locate a lesbian tradition as with her closeted poems, the speaker in this particular poem is demanding that there has always been lesbian existence. In the beginning lines, the speaker references the past herstory tradition:

Woman when we met on the solstice  
 high over halfway between your world and mine  
 rimmed with full moon and no more excuses  
 your red hair burned my fingers as I spread you  
 tasting your ruff down to sweetness  
 and I forgot to tell you

---

<sup>16</sup> This "symbol" is also a reference to the white-washing of the lesbian stereotype that was part of the racism in the lesbian and feminist liberation movements. *The Black Unicorn* details this theme well. While I am not escaping Lorde's BIPOC identity, my main focus is the reclaiming of the lesbian identity.



I have heard you calling across this land  
 in my blood before meeting  
 and I greet you again (1-9)

The speaker uses the special time of a solstice, similarly with a full moon for “On a night of the full moon,” to contrast lesbian situations with rarity, rather than the commonality of heteronormative situations; the speaker is bridging the gap between carving out a time for a woman-identified woman experience and a closeted moment. She further describes the journey before “meeting,” i.e., escaping the closet and subjugation of heteronormativity, as painful: “from each other's hurt” (37), “we have always been sisters in pain” (43), and “lie for a season out of the judging rain” (45). To redirect having to endure heteronormative experiences, she appeals to erotic imagery of the speaker coming together with the subject as bonding to survive. While this bonding is directed towards lesbians generally, it is a reference to BIPOC women bonding.<sup>17</sup> BIPOC lesbian poet Lorraine Bethel states:

Black women have a long tradition of bonding together . . . in a Black/women’s community that has been a source of vital survival information, psychic and emotional support for us. We have a distinct Black woman-identified folk culture based on our experiences as Black women in this society; symbols, language and modes of expression that are specific to the realities of our lives.” (qtd. in Rich “Compulsory” 658)

This BIPOC bonding that Bethel is referring to gathers the present bonding as a parallel to the past women bonding. Lorde is arguing that African warriors is a past BIPOC women,

---

<sup>17</sup> At the time of the construction and publication of this poem, the Combahee River Collective was an active group. It was a black feminist lesbian organization that exhibited the reclaiming herstory by creating black lesbian bonding in the present moment. See Breines. Also, Lorde emphasized in her writings and speeches the importance of unity within difference for a movement and survival to be successful. This poem also has references to bonding with white women, especially because Lorde was in an interracial relationship.

specifically lesbian, bonding tradition. The speaker then translates this African warrior symbolism into erotic imagery. The speaker mentions, “Mawulia foretells our bodies” (35). Mawulia is part of the Dahomean deity who is a female creator god, and she assumes the most powerful role (Houessou-Adin 411). While the speaker is uplifting women’s power, she appeals to a spirituality with her lesbian action. The speaker then states, “Taste my milk in the ditches of Chile and Ouagadougou / in Tema’s bright port while the priestess of Larteh / protects us” (38-40) to contrast more woman-identified women warriors from herstory. Lorde is connecting lesbian identity to herstory to reclaim the existence of BIPOC lesbian women.

A lesbian writer has to write against her own erasure by reclaiming her lesbian identity. Audre Lorde shows the trajectory of a lesbian speaker being subjugated in the closet and then visibly reclaiming her identity. With her two poems “Pirouette” and “On a night of the full moon,” Lorde represents the speaker as stuck in the closet where she is trying to come to terms with her identity and displaces herself because of the force of heteronormativity. Later in her career where I split her work between the closet and a visible lesbian portrayal, Lorde publicly came out by reading her poem “Love Poem” at a poetry reading in 1973. In that poem, she explicitly reclaims her lesbian erotic. With her poem “Meet,” she details the actual existence of lesbian herstory, showing the woman-identified woman tradition to counteract lesbian silence. Audre Lorde writes against her own erasure.

The act of reclaiming guarantees the lesbian poet’s survival against heteronormativity, but she must continue to speak. Recently, I have read José Esteban Muñoz’s *Cruising Utopia* where he argues that “Queerness is not yet here” (1). I wrote in a footnote earlier that subjugation still exists, even though the Lesbian Liberation Movement created a chasm in that trajectory. Specifically with Lorde, she was able to accept her identity and have temporary moments where

she was in ecstasy of experiencing her lesbian love, but she was never fully accepted by society. In the present moment of writing this paper, acceptance is still being fought for; queer people are still suppressed in the closet; and erasure is still detrimental and easily attainable. As shown with this paper, Lorde and lesbian feminists, as martyrs and pioneers, were able to begin to write against their own erasure. The performance of reclaiming is a tool to get to a queer future of acceptance. It is an active act until it becomes a normalcy, and maybe, reclaiming will always be a constant necessary action. But a lesbian poet, as shown with Lorde, has the ability to transcend against heteronormativity and compulsory heterosexuality, and she must because “. . . it is better to speak / remembering / we were never meant to survive” (“Litany” 42-44).

#### Works Cited

- Annas, Pamela. “A Poetry of Survival: Unnaming and Renaming in the Poetry of Audre Lorde, Pat Parker, Sylvia Plath, and Adrienne Rich.” *Colby Library Quarterly*, vol. 18, no. 1, Mar. 1982, pp. 9–25. *EBSCOhost*.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria, and Cherrie Moraga, editors. *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983.
- Breines, Wini. *The Trouble Between Us: An Uneasy History of White and Black Women in the Feminist Movement*. Oxford UP, 2006. *EBSCOhost*.
- Calhoun, Cheshire. *Feminism, the Family, and the Politics of the Closet: Lesbian and Gay Displacement*. Oxford UP, 2000.
- De Veaux, Alexis. *Warrior Poet: A Biography of Audre Lorde*. W.W. Norton Company, 2006.
- Faderman, Lillian. *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present*. Marrow Quill, 1981.

Garber, Linda. “‘High Over Halfway Between Your World and Mine’: Audre Lorde.” *Identity Poetics: Race, Class, and the Lesbian-Feminist Roots of Queer Theory*. Columbia UP, 2001. *EBSCOhost*.

Houessou-Adin, Thomas. “Mawu-Lisa.” *Encyclopedia of African Religion*. Eds. Molefi K. Asante and Ama Mazama. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2009. 411-412. SAGE Knowledge. Web. 20 Nov. 2020, doi: 10.4135/9781412964623.n259.

Lorde, Audre. “The Black Unicorn.” *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2017, p. 233.

---. “A Litany for Survival.” *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2017, p. 255-6.

---. “Love Poem.” *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2017, p. 127.

---. “Meet.” *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2017, p. 257-8.

---. “On a night of the full moon.” *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2017, p. 53.

---. “Pirouette.” *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2017, p. 16.

---. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. 1984

Lorde, Audre, and Joan W. Hall. *Conversations with Audre Lorde*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2004.

Muñoz, José Esteban. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York UP, 2009.

Rich, Adrienne. “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence.” *Signs*, vol. 5, no. 4, 1980, pp. 631–660. *JSTOR*.

---. *The Dream of a Common Language*. W.W. Norton & Company, 1993.

- . "Power and Danger: Works of a Common Woman." *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose, 1966-1978*, W.W. Norton Company, 1995, pp. 247-58.
- . "It is the Lesbian in Us..." *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose, 1966-1978*, W.W. Norton Company, 1995, pp. 199-202.
- Ross, Marlon B. "Beyond the Closet as Race-less Paradigm." *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology*, edited by Mae G. Henderson, et al., Duke UP, 2005, pp. 161-89.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. "Epistemology of the Closet." *Epistemology of the Closet*. U of California P, 1990.
- Stanley, Julia Penelope, and Susan J. Wolfe, editors. *The Coming Out Stories*. Persephone Press, 1980.
- Strongman, SaraEllen. "'Creating Justice between Us': Audre Lorde's Theory of the Erotic as Coalitional Politics in the Women's Movement." *Feminist Theory*, vol. 19, no. 1, Apr. 2018, pp. 41-59. EBSCOhost.
- Wittig, Monique. *The Straight Mind: And Other Essays*. Beacon Press, 1992.

*Lacey Spear*

### **Avoiding Polemics: The Satirical Subversion of Langston Hughes**

---

Poetry does not simply seek to reflect the world around but to usher that world to transformation. Nevertheless, not every poet is successful in this endeavor and many, especially in the face of controversy, lose subtlety and fall prey to ineffective polemics. Generally, in the context of the following analysis, polemics can be understood as an aggressive controversial approach that fails to yield an effective reader response due to its uncalculated impulsiveness. However, Langston Hughes, in his work “Theme for English B,” serves as a supreme example for how one is to approach a controversial topic with skill and ease. As a student of the blues, Hughes learned to weigh every syllable carefully, and “Theme for English B,” underneath its seemingly simplistic language, possesses an unanticipated level of intricacy. In order to better approach the racial themes of the poem, Hughes integrates a satirical tone, mirroring the blues in the way the poem seems to both laugh and cry simultaneously (“Singing the Harlem Renaissance” 168). This satire enables the poem to embody a light-hearted tone while critiquing the white instructor and audience.

As Sonnet Retman in “Langston Hughes’s ‘Rejuvenation Through Joy’” proposes, the way in which Hughes “uses parody and satire as a form of social protest deserves more attention” (593). Moreover, not only his utilization of satire as a form of social protest, but also his ability to construct his satire in a manner that avoids polemics while simultaneously educating the reader, deserve more attention. In “Theme for English B,” Hughes carries with him the teaching spirit of the blues, and, as his speaker ends up educating his instructor within the narrative, Hughes satirically teaches the readers and gains their attention in the process.

Additionally, throughout the poem, Hughes embeds elements of Du Bois's idea of double-consciousness, which will be examined later in the analysis, in order to not only complement the satiric tension but also to enable the white reader to sense the intricacy of African American identity. Hughes's simultaneous embedment of the bite of satire, the rhythm of the blues, and the weight of double-consciousness is notable; all three of these entities perpetually hold opposing forces in tension in order to reveal greater underlying truths. Hughes, however, even while integrating satire, the blues, and double-consciousness, does not leave his subject matter in dualistic fragmentation, but in the midst of subversively critiquing his white audience, seeks to find irrevocable reconciliation.

Before integrating themes of subversion and satire, Hughes must first establish the standard that he will subvert. Concerning this idea, Ali Brox, in her work entitled "Simple on Satire," proposes that in order for one to generate a satiric effect, he or she must first highlight the societal standard that the following satire will contrast (16). Therefore, in order to fulfill this formula, Hughes identifies his standard by line one, with the mention of the instructor. Hughes dedicates five lines to the instructor's speech, and although this does not comprise a significant portion of the poem, it is vital in order to understand Hughes's speaker's response. Without the instructor serving as the standard, the following satire has no grounds upon which it can stand. Within the span of four lines, the instructor's dialogue reveals the problematic and overly romanticized view he holds of his students. The instructor, in detailing the assignment, tells the class to do the following:

Go home and write

a page tonight.

And let that page come out of you –

Then it will be true. (Hughes, lines 2-5)

Several notable issues exist concerning this prompt. Firstly, the instructor's initial command of "Go home and write a page tonight" assumes not only that all students have a stable home to which they can return but also that they possess a space conducive to uninhibited self-expression (Hughes 2-3). Secondly, the instructor tells the students simply to "let that page come out of" them and "then, it will be true" (Hughes 4-5). As we later learn that the speaker is the only student of color in his class, the general nature in which the instructor speaks to the students immediately presents a problematic approach. In the words of Daniel Morris in "Go Home and Write a Page Tonight," the instructor "fails to account for the contingent nature of subject positions in a democratic, multicultural environment" (24). The instructor, by possessing an overly simplified view of his students, actually hinders them from completing the assigned task. He naively assumes that all students will have the facility to decisively free themselves from the social, economic, and political issues around them in order to have the mental capacity to freely express their thoughts. In essence, the vagueness of the assignment fails to account for discrepancies between the students and the difficulties they face. The speaker, therefore, by choosing to subvert the prompt satirically, in reality presents a far more honest response than if he had adopted the romanticized view of the instructor.

After establishing his standard, Hughes must next fragment his subject in order to prepare the reader for the satire that will follow. Often satire, as well as the blues, thrives when its standard becomes fractured, giving way to a dualistic tension that enables humor and absurdity. Therefore, in order to undermine the instructor's unrealistic perspective, the speaker immediately questions in a subversive tone, "I wonder if it's that simple?" (Hughes 6) Throughout the remaining lines of the poem, the speaker will trade places with the instructor, "ironically"



subverting “the pedagogical hierarchy by instructing the teacher in the limits of his prompt” (Morris 22). In this way, the satirical tone of “Theme for English B” even further favors the blues, of which Hughes was so fond and which often inspired the musicality of his poetry. The blues, through subversion and questioning, can often “open up new possibilities of meaning and signification” and even “teach and enlighten” the masses and intellectuals alike (Switzer 37). The blues do not shy away from holding things in tension in order to discover the underlying truth, and Hughes’s speaker’s effective response to the instructor will do the same. By holding the perspectives of the instructor and the speaker in tension, Hughes will seek to extract a reconcilable truth from their distinct world views.

In order to mirror the blues and fully hold the instructor and speaker in tension, Hughes starkly contrasts the poetic style between the instructor and speaker. Whereas the instructor speaks in calculated iambic verse, the speaker responds through a stream of consciousness, inserting “puns, internal rhymes, assonance, and a rhythmic tempo”; in essence, the speaker refuses to conform his black voice to “white regulated lengths” (Morris 26). Understanding the contrast between the poetic verse of the instructor and speaker is essential to grasping Hughes’s message. By responding to his instructor through a more complicated and less restricting form, the speaker reveals that he views the world in a more complex manner than the instructor. Because verbal expression often mirrors private thought, this distinction in the poetic dialogue effectively embodies the differing perspectives of the instructor and speaker. Essentially, the instructor, through utilizing simple and structured verse, exhibits an effortlessly unified view of social issues; whereas the speaker, by replying with a lack of poetic meter and consequently more sporadic verse, demonstrates that his perspective does not easily maintain the same

simplicity as his white instructor's. However, in order to analyze this idea more profoundly, Du Bois's principle of double-consciousness must first be examined.

In his writings, Du Bois proposes that the African American double-consciousness is composed of a certain "two-ness," in which the individual is both "an American" and "a Negro," faced with "two warring ideals in one dark body" (qtd. in Bruce 299). Essentially, African Americans continuously war with this inescapable "two-ness" and find it impossible to choose or neglect either side of their dual identity. Throughout the poem, Hughes's speaker embodies this complexity, demonstrating the dualistic tension he pervasively feels and can never escape. On a psychological level, double-consciousness is complete anguish (Bruce 306). However, because the white instructor has no experience with this notion, the speaker must find some way to allude to this daily tension, which fuels his subversion of the prompt. Hence, by employing satire, which often holds opposing forces in tension, the speaker forces "the reader into a double-conscious state where uncertainty and contradictory interpretations are everyday reality" (Brox 25). Because the speaker responds with a less structured and more complex poetic verse, Hughes demonstrates the African American's inability to conform to simplicity due to double-consciousness. However, by utilizing a satirical tone to accomplish this effect, instead of outwardly presenting the principle of double-consciousness, Hughes, like the blues, maintains an element of subtlety and continues to avoid polemics, further contributing to his effectiveness in educating the instructor and the reader on African American identity.

As the poem progresses, in order to allude further to his daily encounter with complexity, Hughes's speaker begins to describe the lengths he must go to just to arrive home and begin his assignment. Describing his speaker's journey home, Hughes writes,

The steps from the hill lead down into Harlem,

through a park, then I cross St. Nicholas,  
 Eighth Avenue, Seventh, and I come to the Y,  
 The Harlem Branch Y, where I take the elevator  
 up to my room, sit down, and write this page. (Hughes 12-14)

With this added dimension of detail, Hughes furthers the satirical element of the poem as he converts a simple task into a drawn-out effort. However, the intricacy in his answer is entirely necessary. While the instructor simply says for the students to “go home,” the speaker, as an African American, needs to show the inherent complexity, or even anxiety, embedded within such a task. Hughes himself had struggled before with the task of simply going home after class, and therefore, he writes about this occurrence from a place of personal experience. In *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* article “The Day Langston Hughes Instructed Joe McCarthy,” Hughes describes his first day at Columbia University when he arrived at the dormitory to find that they did not have a room for him. He had to wait an entire day and a half just to receive his room, and he later reflects upon the absurdity of such a simple task being complicated due to the racial prejudices of those around him (“The Day” 40). Therefore, Hughes’s speaker, belonging to a world where simple tasks contain complexity, swiftly subverts the instructor’s idealized and simple notion of going home. Yet, once again, Hughes, through a level of skillful specificity, avoids polemics. Instead of outwardly condemning his instructor for possessing romanticized notions of the home, his speaker shows through a satirical blues-like tone and effective detail the difficulty in arriving at his residence, and hence, subtly reveals to the instructor his insufficient perspective.

Additionally, by Hughes’s speaker choosing to question the idea of truth itself, he effectually meets the goal of the task more than if he did not choose to do so. By pondering upon

the instructor's concept of truth and realizing the elusiveness of such a truth, the speaker responds to the prompt on a deeper level than the instructor could have imagined (Morris 25). Furthermore, the speaker, due to his double-consciousness, not only claims he struggles to understand the instructor's concept of truth but also proposes that the instructor, because of his white simplicity, cannot adequately grasp the speaker's idea of truth either. In line sixteen, the speaker remarks, "it is not easy to know what is true for you or me," equivalating his own struggle to find truth to that of the instructor. By claiming that the instructor, as a white man, does not have easy access to truth either, the speaker proposes a correlation between himself and the instructor. Up until this point in the poem, the speaker, through a lack of structured verse, has embodied a less cohesive self than the instructor; however, in this moment, by proposing that the instructor, even with the privilege of his racial identity, is not more prone to discover truth, Hughes equates the two individuals. This is an important point in the poem because it shifts the discourse. Up until this moment, Hughes has dedicated the majority of the lines to showing where the instructor and speaker differ, due to the speaker's struggle with double-consciousness. However, if Hughes did not, at some point, begin to show where their two identities coincide, he could not adequately advocate for their reconciliation. Therefore, the speaker, in the subversive and satiric teaching spirit of the blues, after revealing his inherent double-conscious difference, reverses the pedagogy and begins to teach the instructor the path to reconciliation.

As the poem continues, Hughes's speaker describes the other half of his identity: the portion that relates to the white instructor. He does this for two reasons. Firstly, in order to fully embody double-consciousness, which contains an even split between both identities, the speaker must now show where he does not vary from the instructor; and secondly, by proposing similarities between the instructor and himself, the speaker presents their inherent interrelation

and possible reconciliation. It should be noted that this analysis does not propose that individuals must coincide before they are considered equal but that Hughes realizes that his fight for reconciliation will be more effective if the speaker finds common ground with the instructor. Essentially, if Hughes's speaker only revealed his double-conscious difference from the instructor without revealing their inherent commonality, he would present no grounds for reconciliation. The speaker, therefore, after claiming he has the ability to like "the same things other folks like who are other races" (Hughes 26), lists things to which he believes the instructor will relate:

Well, I like to eat, sleep, drink, and be in love.

I like to work, read, learn, and understand life.

I like a pipe for a Christmas present,

Or records – Bessie, bop, or Bach. (Hughes 21-24)

It should be noted that some of these activities include basic human functions, such as eating, sleeping, and drinking. By incorporating these elements, Hughes satirically critiques the white audience by showing the absurdity of grouping entities necessary for survival under the umbrella of "the same things other folks like who are other races" (26). Although Hughes knows that in order to procure reconciliation between the speaker and instructor, he must first find similarities between the two, he furthers the satirical element in the poem by including elements such as eating and drinking.

Furthermore, in the process of having to explain his simple interests in order to find a common tie between himself and the instructor, Hughes's speaker demonstrates what Du Bois called the "peculiar sensation" of double-consciousness, which is "the sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others" (qtd. in Szmanko 102). By having to explain his interest in

the most basic of human activities, such as reading, learning, or being in love, the speaker is forced to examine himself from an outside perspective. However, even within this task, which could easily convert to polemics, Hughes retains a skillful level of subtlety. Because he embeds within these lines a cheerful tone and rhythm, he successfully distracts the reader from the underlying darkness of the speaker having to prove his humanity, and hence, balances the two opposing forces to create a satiric effect. In this manner, Hughes effectively utilizes satire not only to avoid polemics but also to help the reader feel the tension of two contrasting forces, forcing them to feel the weight of double-consciousness.

Notably, because the speaker lists his various commonalities with the instructor, he profoundly demonstrates his willingness to break social stereotypes in order to procure reconciliation. The fact that some of these items were likely appropriated to white culture should have discouraged his appreciation of them; for, as Dickson Bruce notes in “Du Bois’s Idea of Double Consciousness,” the “power of white stereotypes” often excludes African Americans from “the mainstream of society” (301). However, the speaker demonstrates his utmost dedication to reconciliation by crossing the boundaries of stereotype in order to enter the region of commonality.

As Hughes crosses over the halfway point and finally arrives at line twenty-eight of the poem, the reader, for the first time, sees the speaker attain a personal resolution. Up until this point, Hughes has utilized satire to fragment the speaker’s identity and reveal his pervasive dualistic tension, demonstrating the principle of double-consciousness. However, in line twenty-eight, Hughes’s speaker no longer serves as a victim to this tension but makes a conscious decision about his identity. After asking in the previous line “So will my page be colored that I write?” Hughes delivers the decisive blow in the next line, declaring, “Being me, it will not be

white” (27-28). Whether this means that Hughes’s speaker chooses to merge both sides of his double-consciousness or reject the culturally white portion of it altogether, these lines create a momentous accomplishment in the poem. Hughes, while building off the tradition of Du Bois, decisively deviates from the classical principle of double-consciousness. Whereas Du Bois often proposed that a double-conscious identity would never be reconciled (Szmanko 110), Hughes’s speaker exercises agency in this moment by acting solely through one portion of his double-consciousness. He, therefore, even while showing the more painful elements of double-consciousness, does not depict African Americans to be mere victims of this dualistic tension but individuals capable of agency, who can choose either to express themselves through one portion of their identity or reconcile both in order to possess one complex, but unified, selfhood.

Furthermore, by presenting the tangibility of African American self-reconciliation, Hughes makes possible a resolution between the instructor and the speaker. He reveals that even though African Americans are inherently plagued by double-consciousness and consequently do not see the world as simply as the white persons around them do, they can decisively choose to deviate from that dualistic tension. In this way, Hughes presents African Americans as individuals capable of the same level of agency as their white neighbors. Consequently, he undermines the white perspective of inequality between the two races and demonstrates the necessity of reconciliation. However, in this effort, Hughes strays from Du Bois’s tradition through the way in which he addresses the white instructor in this poem. Du Bois often focused on the “blurred vision of African Americans” instead of seeking first to correct the vision of whites (Szmanko 103). Consequently, Hughes, in his deviation, places the burden of reconciliation not upon his African American audience but upon his white readers. Because the speaker directly confronts the white instructor, he embodies Hughes’s goal to address primarily

the white perspective. Furthermore, in addressing his white teacher, Hughes's speaker ironically subverts the pedagogical hierarchy, mirroring the historic teaching nature of the blues and enhancing the skillful subversion of the poem. Because shortly before this moment in the poem, in lines twenty-one through twenty-four, Hughes showed where the identities of the speaker and instructor coincided; he puts all the more responsibility on the white reader. The possibility of relational reconciliation should usher in the act of social transformation.

As the poem begins to close, Hughes strengthens his call for white reader response by revealing the way in which national identity and interrelation present an opportunity for reconciliation. In lines twenty-nine through thirty-three, after declaring that his page will not be white, Hughes writes,

but it will be

a part of you instructor.

You are white – yet a part of me, as I am a part of you.

That's American.

In the first half of the poem, Hughes utilized double-consciousness as a means to isolate African Americans from their white neighbors and show the inherent privilege of the white individuals in that they have the facility to see the world simply. Then, Hughes demonstrated the ways in which the speaker and instructor could find commonality, attempting to reconcile their two identities. Now, through introducing the national interrelation of the two individuals, Hughes presents the means of that reconciliation. As Morris proposes, Hughes “interprets the self as something that does not exist in isolation from other selves” (25). National identity uniquely connects individuals, no matter their differences, and creates inherent interrelations that they cannot easily evade. Because the instructor and the speaker both identify as Americans, they cannot help but



possess some sort of identity-related connection. Hughes proposes that even the white instructor, with a higher level of racial privilege, cannot escape his national interrelation with those of other races. He consequently disrupts the notion that “a national belonging” is only “reserved for ‘white’ people” (Retman 598). Therefore, by utilizing national identity as the grounds for inherent interconnection, Hughes urges the white readers to reconcile the divide they have created between themselves and their African American neighbors.

To conclude Hughes’s treatment of African American identity and avid avoidance of polemics in “Theme for English B,” the last line must be observed and the way it particularly aids the satiric and sly tone of the poem. Following forty lines of tension and satiric double-consciousness, the author simply chooses to end the poem with “This is my page for English B” (Hughes 41). After correcting the perspective of the white instructor and educating him on his racial position, one would expect the speaker next to end on a profound note, spilling out some heartfelt quote to spur the reader towards action. However, the poem ends with a simple satirical line that seems to undermine the entire depth, complexity, and movement of the previous lines. By simply claiming that his poem filled with a double-conscious grappling of what it truly means to be American is merely his “page for English B,” Hughes first seems to distort his astute observations to mere whims. Nevertheless, by interpreting this last line in light of the overall satirical tone of the poem, this line appears to work towards Hughes’s advantage much more than one of blatant profoundness.

Concerning controversial topics, writers for centuries have had to undermine the seriousness of their messages in order to avoid polemics. Women have done this for years in times where they did not dare rival the egotistical threat of male writers. Anne Bradstreet, for example, the earliest poet in America, in “The Prologue” claims, “To sing of Wars, of Captains,

and of Kings, / Of Cities founded, Common-wealths begun, / For my mean Pen are too superior things,” and although she knows that her skill can easily rival male writers of the day, she utilizes modesty so that her message will avoid polemics and therefore be rendered more effectively to her opposers (Bradstreet, lines 1-3). In the same way, Hughes avoids a controversial response from his white audience by ending on a simplistic note. Through skillful subtlety and satire, Hughes forces white readers to feel the weight of double-consciousness without slipping into controversy. Hughes, therefore, “collapses the boundaries between polemic and lyricism” and presents a message that not only critiques but also captivates (Morris 28). Through embedding satirical double-consciousness and the spirit of the blues throughout his seemingly simple verse, Hughes’s speaker effectively subverts his instructor’s prompt while also avoiding polemics. Ultimately through utilizing national identity as a means for reconciliation, Hughes reveals that to be American is not only to discover inherent interrelation but also to uphold irrevocable equality.

#### Works Cited

- Bradstreet, Anne. “The Prologue.” *Poetry Foundation*, 2021, [www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43705/prologue-56d22283c12e1](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43705/prologue-56d22283c12e1). Accessed 21 Jan. 2021.
- Brox Ali. “Simple on Satire: Langston Hughes, Gender, and Satiric Double-Consciousness.” *Studies in American Humor*, no. 21, Jan. 2010, pp. 15–28. *EBSCOhost*, [search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsjsr&AN=edsjsr.42573584&site=eds-live&scope=site](http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsjsr&AN=edsjsr.42573584&site=eds-live&scope=site).

- Bruce, Dickson D. "W. E. B. Du Bois and the Idea of Double Consciousness." *American Literature*, vol. 64, no. 2, 1992, pp. 299–309. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/2927837](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2927837). Accessed 14 Dec. 2020.
- "The Day Langston Hughes Instructed Joe McCarthy about Going to School in a Racially Segregated America." *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, no. 44, 2004, pp. 38–40. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/4133725](http://www.jstor.org/stable/4133725). Accessed 14 Dec. 2020.
- Hughes, Langston. "Theme for English B." *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, edited by Robert S. Levine, W. W. Norton & Company, 2017, pp. 1043–44.
- Jones, Meta DuEwa. "Listening to What the Ear Demands: Langston Hughes and His Critics." *Callaloo*, vol. 25, no. 4, 2002, pp. 1145–75. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/3300277](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3300277). Accessed 14 Dec. 2020.
- Morris, Daniel. "'Go Home and Write a Page Tonight': Subversive Irony and Resistant Reading in 'Theme for English B.'" *The Langston Hughes Review*, vol. 24, 2010, pp. 20–30. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/26434684](http://www.jstor.org/stable/26434684). Accessed 7 Nov. 2020.
- Retman, Sonnet. "Langston Hughes's 'Rejuvenation Through Joy': Passing, Racial Performance, and the Marketplace." *African American Review*, vol. 45, no. 4, Winter 2012, pp. 593–602. *EBSCOhost*, doi:10.1353/afa.2012.0102.
- "Singing the Harlem Renaissance: Langston Hughes, Translation, and Diasporic Blues." *The Jazz Republic: Music, Race, and American Culture in Weimar Germany*, by Jonathan O. Wipplinger, U of Michigan P, Ann Arbor, 2017, pp. 165–96. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1qv5n7m.10](http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1qv5n7m.10). Accessed 14 Dec. 2020.
- Switzer, Robert. "Signifying the Blues." *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, no. 21, Jan 2001, pp. 25–76. *EBSCOhost*, doi:10.2307/1350022.

Szmańko, Klara. "The Concept of Double Consciousness and Striving for Self-Consciousness in W. E. B. Du Bois's Double Consciousness Formula and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*." *Anglica Wratislaviensia*, vol. 50, 2012, pp. 101–21. *EBSCOhost*, [search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mzh&AN=2015793595&site=eds-live&scope=site](https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mzh&AN=2015793595&site=eds-live&scope=site).

---

Copyright © 2021 *Wide Angle*, Samford University. All rights reserved.

*Ansley Burnette*

### **From Bestseller to Blockbuster: Film Adaptation Theories**

---

In “Beyond Fidelity: The Dialogics of Adaptation,” Robert Stam writes about the unrealistic nature of fidelity in film adaptation. Understandably, most readers want to see exactly what they saw in their mind’s eye while reading a book transposed precisely to the screen, but Stam argues that this ideal is in fact unidealistic. He theorizes that exact fidelity to a precursor is impossible as literary theory allows for almost endless readings of a text. If every reader cannot agree on an interpretation of a text, filmmakers, in turn, cannot produce one adaptation that every viewer agrees is the correct interpretation of the text. Regardless of whether a filmmaker could actually produce a loyal adaptation, Stam questions if a general audience would even want to sit through a “thirty-hour version of *War and Peace*” (57). In addition, Stam also suggests another practical problem that arises with the argument of fidelity: the cost of producing a film as opposed to authoring a book must be taken into consideration. While an author can write a scene for no cost that takes place in Paris, a filmmaker would have to pay an extraordinary amount of money to take a crew to Paris to film that same scene. Though Stam acknowledges that fidelity is useful in adaptation to some extent, he also attempts to show that fidelity is not the only thing that matters in a screenplay.

Stam discusses the problem of preserving fidelity by pointing out that adaptation involves a shift between two mediums. Whereas an adaptation’s precursor is made up of only written word, “the film has at least five tracks” of medium (59). Fidelity cannot exist simply because the art forms are different. Through the ability to utilize moving images, to create emotion through

music and sound effects, to provide character through the spoken word given by an actor, and to supplement the visuals with written materials embedded in the action on screen, film adaptations inherently differ from their precursor. Though fidelity to the precursor may not be plausible, adaptations offer a more complex story through these varied materials.

Both Stam's essay and Thomas Leitch's "Film Adaptation and Its Discontents" use Gerard Genette's term *transtextuality* to discuss the relationship of the precursor to the adaptation. The precursor's text can weave across the adaptation through a variety of ways, and the first way Genette suggests that an adaptation undergoes this transformation is through *intertextuality* which is the precursor's text showing up in the adaptation through means of "quotation, plagiarism, or allusion" (Leitch 94). Second, Leitch says that Genette proposes that *paratextuality* includes everything else that is related to the precursor but not actually the text of the precursor—elements such as images and accessories associated with the precursor (94). The third mode of transtextuality is *metatextuality* which is an adaptation commenting on itself (94). *Architextuality* is the fourth mode and one of subtle adaptation by means of changing titles or character names as to not reveal the precursor (94). And finally, *hypertextuality* is simply an adaptation of a hypotext or precursor text, and this mode is often seen in novels as well (94). Jumping from Genette's modes of transtextuality, Leitch offers ten strategies for screenplays.

Leitch does offer a strategy, *celebrations*, for what would be considered to be a faithful adaptation, but he also understands, as Stam does, that fidelity to an extent is impractical and presents many other strategies for adaptation including the most common strategy used, *adjustment*. Encapsulating five mini approaches to adaptation, adjustment is preferred by many audience members and filmmakers as an alternative to strict fidelity. These slight adjustments or changes to the precursor can include *compression*, which is a shortening of the precursor for the

sake of time and *expansion*, which is the lengthening of a short work of literature to fill the feature film time minimums (98). In addition, when filmmakers fix small flaws or elements that are no longer relevant or acceptable in the current time, Leitch calls this adjustment to the precursor *correction* (99). Another common adjustment is through *updating* a text to make the older precursor relevant again, thereby showing the precursor's universality (100). The final adjustment is *superimposition* in which the changes arise in order to please Hollywood, to reach a specific audience, or to provide a script for a certain actor (100). At times, the industry or a specific actor can play a larger role in shaping an adaptation than the actual screenwriter. None of these adjustments completely cause the adaptation to deviate from the precursor but bring enough creativity to make an adaptation plausible and relevant.

Another strategy that Leitch offers is that of *colonization*. This adaptation style, similar to the updating aspect of the adjusting strategy, provides for cross-cultural adaptations. Filmmakers using this strategy can take a precursor from one culture and colonize it with another culture's influence. Shakespeare's plays are often colonized by being taken out of their original geographical context or put into different time periods. In addition to actually shifting from one culture to another, colonization can also take place without having anything to do with national culture (Leitch 110). Filmmakers using this strategy see precursor "texts as vessels to be filled with new meanings" (109) even if these new meanings are not necessarily cross-cultural discoveries. The colonization strategy is especially helpful to give writers insight into not only how to study an adaptation but also how to actually engage in adapting a text. Leitch admits that the film industry often shoots this strategy down; however, he also gives examples of successful colonization adaptations and demonstrates how the strategy extends beyond cultural colonization. Problems can arise when working with texts steeped in cultural context, but if

filmmakers commit to proper preparation and research, adaptations should be able to respectfully cross cultures and share universal themes all around the world.

#### Works Cited

Leitch, Thomas M. *Film Adaptation and Its Discontents: From Gone with the Wind to The Passion of the Christ*. Johns Hopkins UP, 2007. *EBSCOhost*.

Stam, Robert. "Beyond Fidelity: The Dialogics of Adaptation." *Film Adaptation*, edited by James Naremore, Rutgers UP, 2000, pp. 54-76. *EBSCOhost*.

---

Copyright © 2021 *Wide Angle*, Samford University. All Rights Reserved.



## Essay

*Jud Potter*

**Rashomon, Godzilla, and the “abyssal regions” of the Human Experience:**

**Japanese Cinema after World War II** [Curated from volume 6.2 in 2017]

---

**A**fter the Second World War, Japan was in turmoil. The nation was economically shattered by prolonged warfare on multiple fronts. The horrific bombing of Nagasaki and Hiroshima was socially and culturally devastating. The complete and unconditional surrender of the nation led to a period of American “reconstruction” helmed by General MacArthur. American control of the highest levels of Japanese political and cultural power led to the oppression of the traditional ways that got Japan into the war in the first place. Traditions such as Bushido, or the way of the Samurai, were suppressed in popular culture and socially discouraged. The Japanese film industry was no exception to American control. However, during the American occupation in the 1950s, films began to demonstrate an acute self-awareness of their post-war socio-cultural context. Two such films are Akira Kurosawa’s *Rashomon* (1950) and Ishirô Honda’s *Godzilla* (1954). Both films explore the loss of the traditional culture and the advent of new, untested cultural paradigms. They demonstrate the irreparably fallible and subjective nature of the human experience. In other words, *Godzilla* reflects the war itself, a world falling apart. *Rashomon* depicts the struggle for existence and a search for truth in a world that has already been destroyed. The films arise from a culture searching for identity in a fundamentally changed world in which traditional values have failed, new value systems are unproven, and objective truth is more illusory than ever. These films demonstrate how a culturally devastated Japan could begin processing the horrors of the Second World War through the externalization and exploration of trauma in cinema.

### Searching for a National Narrative in the Ruins of the *Rashomon* Gate

*Rashomon* was created in the immediate aftermath of the war, and as a result it presents a dim, nihilistic version of post-war Japanese culture. *Rashomon* is a film of conflicting, competing narratives. The film makes no conclusions and leaves the viewers to decide what to make of the dissonant threads that have been pulled before them. The film's frame story takes place in the shelter of the ruined Rashomon Temple Gate during a torrential, possibly apocalyptic, rainstorm. Set in a feudal era, the film shows us a culture that is decayed or destroyed. A Japanese historian provides an enlightening perspective that illuminates the ruined gate and the rainstorm. He says, "I would simply suggest that war events and war responsibility also remain problematic in the case of Japan, which arguably stands in a state of unresolved melancholy" (Sugimoto 3). A feeling of "unresolved melancholy" also permeates the film. *Rashomon* is a nesting doll of narrative in which one story leads into another. The outermost narrative layer, or the frame narrative, takes place underneath the ruins of the titular gate. The frame narrative in the film maintains this idea of "unresolved melancholy" with the ruined gate, heavy shadows, and rainstorm. By working through the chaos of stories that they have heard, the characters in the frame narrative are trying to rebuild some semblance of civilization or order.

These events center on the death of a Samurai, recalling the post-war cultural turmoil of the late 1940s. The Americans eradicated Bushido, the creed of the Samurai, and its traditions from the culture. General MacArthur and company made it a point to eradicate anything that glorified the Samurai in popular culture. The American justification for this was that the Bushido and similar traditions led to Japanese aggression in the first place. While policies such as these might have stopped the fighting, they sent the culture into an existential crisis of uncertainty. After many of the traditions that Japanese people used to define themselves were taken away,

they faced the real possibility that the Japan of the next generation would be completely unrecognizable to the present day. In this spirit, many clung to remnants of tradition, whether it was the family sword or stories of Samurai honor and exploits. The fire that the men try to build up during the film visually symbolizes this clinging to civilization or some semblance of order. The fire is significantly extinguished at the end of the movie, when the Commoner has heard all sides of the story.

The Woodcutter and the Monk, two of the characters in the frame narrative, have failed to present a convincing version of the events they are trying to relate—they present several conflicting versions of the same story. The Commoner, to whom they are relaying these stories, is unconvinced by the answers of religion that the Monk has to offer. They fail to make a cohesive case that has any semblance of objective truth. He laughs at the fact that all of the narratives seem to contradict each other and that truth essentially does not matter or is not accessible. Here, one can see the nihilistic inclination of the film beginning to emerge. The Commoner, whose very name suggests that he is a representative of the Japanese people, is the one who gives up on starting the fire in the end. This is a film about a nation that has gone through very recent trauma, and is perhaps not finished processing it. Mark Williams explains:

According to the philosopher Walter Davis, traumatic events and experiences must be ‘constituted’ before they can be assimilated, integrated and understood (2003: 142). As such, what is required, in addition to the historical facts, is the subjective element (including emotion). And I am certainly not alone in arguing that this is precisely what the literary artist is in a unique position to provide. (Williams 11)

This process of constitution is precisely what Kurosawa and company accomplish in *Rashomon*. They constitute the trauma of the war, quantifying and qualifying the cultural fallout of the war.

The film considers the despair and hopelessness of a nation that has seen entire cities obliterated by nuclear weapons and has been oppressed by foreign occupation. Facts are of secondary importance in the narrative because the audience is never given one definite instance of objective truth. Everything is subjective and colored by the emotional subjectivities of the speakers. The end of the war and subsequent occupation would be easier to process if the Japanese people could paint the Americans as evil foreign invaders and themselves as innocent victims. However, most Japanese people were not able to view the actions of their own nation as blameless.

*Rashomon* is a product of a culture that is coming to grips with the horrors that Imperial Japan itself committed during the war. War historian Zachary Kauffman says:

The total number of victims of Japanese atrocities may never be known, but it is clear that the Japanese murdered, mutilated, tortured, beat, poisoned, starved, raped, enslaved (for both sexual and labor purposes), cannibalized, decapitated, burned alive, buried alive, froze, hanged by the tongue of, impaled the genitals of, pillaged from, and performed medical experiments on millions of men, women, and children. (Kaufman 758)

He describes a society that sees itself in ruins and struggles to find a way to cope or even find a purpose in rebuilding. They are faced with the question of whether or not they deserve to be rebuilt in the first place. In other words, the end of the war cut Japan's cultural values and identity to the bone. The Commoner, who is having the many threads of this story woven before him just as the audience is, laughs incredulously about the notions of Samurai virtue and the search for truth at court from the very beginning. The destruction of these values has already occurred. Whatever cultural devastation led to the ruination of the Rashomon Temple gate happened long before a bandit came across a Samurai in the woods.

After the war, Japan is a nation without *telos*. The first step to rediscovering some kind of *telos* would be to find a semblance of objective truth. People seek something objective when the world is falling apart, and *Rashomon* depicts both the hopeless struggle to find it and the myriad subjectivities that are so often found in its stead. When objective truth is put into question for a culture that has previously been so existentially certain that they declared war on much of the rest of the world, that culture's foundational tradition is sure to follow objective truth into uncertainty. *Rashomon*'s characters are lost in the cultural ruins of war. The film itself reflects Japan's attempt to begin the healing process by confronting these dark cultural realities.

### ***Rashomon* and the Death of Tradition: The Samurai**

In *Rashomon*, Kurosawa helps his country face the devastating fact that the traditional ways have failed and been completely uprooted. The Samurai's death starts the events of the narrative (00:11:12). The circumstances of his death prompt several different interpretations of how he died, depending on the speaker. For example, the bandit Tajômaru talks about slaying the Samurai in an epic duel, similar to something out of a child's adventure story. However, the spiritual medium, who gives us the Samurai's perspective, discusses how he killed himself in shame after his defeat and his cuckolding. This interpretation of events is not any truer than the Bandit's because they are both highly subjective. In essence, this Samurai is no more trustworthy than Tajômaru, a simple bandit. Imagine in feudal Europe if, during a trial, one could not observe much difference in the character of a noble, holy knight and a thieving brigand or pirate. In this way, the death and unreliability of the Samurai indicate a new negativity in Japanese feeling toward objective truth, and the traditions, like Bushido, that got them into the Second World War in the first place. The old ways, which would have made the word of a Samurai impeachable and unquestionable, are no longer in place. Kurosawa himself was the son of a family of Samurai.

Kurosawa shows the Samurai duel Tajômaru several times in versions told by different characters, and each version presents the Samurai with varying degrees of honor and cowardice.

In this way, Kurosawa's work exemplifies the people's complicated relationship with tradition. While traditions such as Bushido can lead to moments of great honor and heroism, they can also lead to the version of the story in which the Samurai is not a skilled fighter, and is clearly afraid of death (01:11:14). Through the representation of a Samurai on film, Kurosawa conveys the emotion, history, and tradition that people felt for the Samurai class. Most frightening of all, the film's depiction of the Samurai deconstructs the social class and illustrates the fact that there is nothing to replace it. The new absence of the Samurai class, perhaps more than anything, represents the uncertainty caused by a fundamentally shifting culture. The only conclusion that one can safely draw from the characterization of the Samurai is that the loss of the martial and ethical center of Japanese culture leaves them in very uncertain cultural circumstances.

### ***Rashomon* and the Death of Tradition: The Woodcutter**

The Woodcutter exemplifies the greatest cultural loss after the war. He represents the loss of a sense of objective truth in the middle to lower social classes in Japan. He is the one who spends the most time telling stories, and in my reading, that makes him the emotional center, if not the moral compass, of the film. He is ostensibly the only firsthand witness to the actual event and spends the most time telling the story. It should be noted that Takashi Shimura's character in *Godzilla*, Dr. Yamane, also functions as the moral and intellectual center of the film. This casting insight points to the possibility that Shimura, the actor, through the palimpsest of his performances, represented someone who was a part of the national consciousness, perhaps similar to Tom Hanks in contemporary American cinema. The Woodcutter's sense of morality

defines his character; because the horrible things he has seen and heard that day offend his moral standards, the audience sympathizes with him. Even if there are terrible, morally ambiguous people such as the Samurai, his wife, and Tajômaru, at least there are the good, common folk such as the Woodcutter to be the salt of the earth and the moral compass of the nation.

Structurally speaking, it would make more sense to have the audience surrogate character be the Commoner in the framing scenes of the film. However, using the Commoner as an audience surrogate does not work because his naked cynicism at the beginning of the film seems at first to be unfounded, and is certainly unappealing. On the other hand, the Woodcutter is introduced in a long walking sequence during which he discovers the scene of the crime (00:07:35). This prolonged sequence, coupled with the fact that the Woodcutter is present in the framing story and in the trial, serves to make him the most relatable, identifiable character to the audience. He seems to be the most moral and reliable character in the film, standing in stark contrast to the morally gray, cynical characters surrounding him. If the Woodcutter is this bastion of morality, the entire film can be read in a more optimistic context. No matter how dishonest a majority of the people seem, even when unimpeachable Samurai are shown to lie to protect their own egos, and even when one stands in the very ruins of civilization, there are still people who will hold fast to their sense of morality and Truth.

However, the end of the film calls that reading of the character and the larger film into question (01:21:32). In the Woodcutter's retelling of the story, he omits the detail of where the knife went and seems to confirm the Commoner's theory that everyone lies, and the only meaning in the world is that which individuals assign themselves. In fact, the film implies that the Woodcutter pockets the knife for himself because it is expensive and would probably fetch a decent price. Not only does the lie by omission call his character into question, the fact that he

compromises his morality for material gain makes it sting much more. Put simply, he has compromised Truth for monetary gain. Kurosawa and company have put the audience in a position to view a character who is named for his profession, which is a very material one at that. He is not named for a virtue, like truth or something similar. Kurosawa has made the viewers feel like fools for believing that such a person would be capable of the abstract moral and philosophical benevolence that they hoped to see from him. In this way, Kurosawa slowly, subtly places the viewers into a very different frame of mind than they had at the beginning. At the beginning of the film, the Commoner was a crass, heartless cynic and the Woodcutter a hopeful bastion of morality. However, by the end, the audience sympathizes more with the Commoner, feeling betrayed by the Woodcutter and understanding the cynicism of the former in a new way.

In this reading of the film, the final sequence is particularly disturbing and nihilistic (01:26:30). The Woodcutter and company discover a crying baby abandoned at the Rashomon gate, near where they have been telling this story. The Woodcutter ends up walking away with the baby at the end of the film and plans to raise the child as his own. If the audience saw this clip at the beginning of the film, they would see it as a good thing. The Woodcutter is going to teach this baby the morality that he holds on to as he grows old. The ideas of morality, objective truth, and even traditional honor might yet survive through this baby. However, if this reading is continued, then this ending is particularly devastating. The baby is going to learn survival skills from the Woodcutter, such as lying when it benefits you. The baby will not learn the kind of morality that the Woodcutter stood for at the beginning of the film. The baby is born of the ruins into a ruined world, and it seems like there is no place for the traditional morality that should have been exemplified by the common decency of the Woodcutter and the Samurai's adherence to Bushido. This is a world where the old, traditional values have been displaced by the horrors



of the present day, the horrors committed by Japan during the Second World War and the cultural devastation of losing a war, and the deployment of nuclear weapons. All of this was followed by a culturally oppressive occupation. In the world of the film, the horrors take the form of an idea. The idea is that people cannot be trusted, and even those whose virtue should be unimpeachable (such as a Samurai), are fallible and dishonest. Historically, this reading of the character of the Samurai would have easily passed MacArthur's cultural censors. It is certainly not a positive view of the Samurai or the Bushido that he follows. In *Rashomon*, the traditional values of Bushido, and the anarchist ways of Tajômaru, are shown to be equally problematic, hypocritical, and illusory in a post-nuclear Japan.

### **The Nihilism of *Rashomon***

*Rashomon* offers a nihilistic solution to the loss of identity and subsequent existential crisis facing Japan at the end of the war. Beyond the simple deconstruction of traditional value systems, *Rashomon* depicts a nation that sees the physical and cultural ruins that surround it. A repeated motif in the film involves characters laughing manically. Characters laugh when they see the ruins. In other words, characters laugh when they come to an understanding that whatever value system they hold is only a façade disguising the madness and anarchy that have been waiting just behind the thin veneer of civilized society all along. It makes sense that Kurosawa and company would make a film that puts forth such a nihilist philosophy. On top of all the horrors the Japanese went through during and after the war, they also committed a great number of horrible atrocities to the Chinese and others during the same time period. Therefore, the Japanese people after the war would have had great difficulty viewing themselves as blameless victims of foreign powers seeking to control the culture of their nation. Although they would have had that trouble, they still had to deal with the specter of Nagasaki and Hiroshima, which

was not only humbling, but culturally, socially, and existentially devastating. The Samurai, his wife, and Tajômaru all laugh during their testimonies. Although the three aforementioned characters are never physically present in the frame narrative of the film, the idea still holds water. Not only are they formally, literally framed within the gate scenes at the beginning of the film, but the fact that they are being discussed by the characters in the framing scenes fosters the idea of their thematic, if not quite literal presence. Tajômaru laughs the most frequently and with the most enthusiasm because he has been in this state of mind all along; everyone else is just catching up to him (00:30:53). He has always believed that truth was relative and that the Samurai were not authentic, and now that it seems that he might be right, he feels vindicated.

The characters laugh during the particularly subjective, perhaps less truthful portions of their stories. The Commoner also does this when the Monk and the Woodcutter have finished the whole story (01:18:30). The laughter suggests that the characters can see that they are all standing beneath the ruins of Rashomon gate as the fires of civilization burn out. In my reading, Tajômaru has just been standing there a little longer than the rest of the characters. This prior knowledge and wisdom are part of what make his superficially reprehensible character so compelling to audiences. Moreover, standing beneath the ruins, the characters recognize that finding objective truth in the film's central mystery is as preposterous as suddenly finding the titular temple rebuilt around them. All that is left of the civilization that they thought they knew are the smoldering embers of the small fire they huddle around, and in the end, extinguish.

### ***Godzilla: More Than a Monster Movie***

*Godzilla* is a unique film in the history of international cinema, and it holds an even more unique position as a film that simultaneously demonstrates the physical and cultural destruction of Japan in the Second World War and presents an optimistic view of the future of the country.

Before diving too deep, it is important to establish *Godzilla* as a film worthy of academic study. The first and most obvious way to study the film is as analogous to Japan's experience in the Second World War. However, there are more ways to view the film than as a war metonym.

According to Peter H. Brothers:

Godzilla is today justifiably recognized as a masterpiece of international filmmaking unsurpassed in its impact and imagination. While King Kong was a modern-era fairy tale and *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* a mere monster movie, *Godzilla* is much more: a semidocumentary and social commentary filmed from an eyewitness viewpoint of horrific events, from the typhoon-racked beaches of Odo Island to the smoldering streets of Tokyo to the Hospital of the Damned. We find ourselves involved as active participants in a firestorm of biblical proportions and a nightmare filmed in its entirety.

(39)

*Godzilla* is the result of a nation seeing itself fall into cultural and literal ruin at the nuclear end of the war. As a "semidocumentary," the film is able to put the audience on the ground level in the disaster, giving viewers an especially empathetic perspective of the human action on screen. Firstly, a documentary typically tries to represent reality to illustrate a point. The bias and the intent of the filmmaker steer the direction of the film to educate or illicit a response from an audience. When Brothers refers to *Godzilla* as a semidocumentary, he is referring to the way in which the film shows naturalistic performances from across the socio-economic spectrum. Other than the performances of the lead actors, scenes take place in insert shots as various groups of people see *Godzilla*'s destruction throughout the city in order to show the range of terror, shock, and sadness that one would expect to see during that kind of national crisis. Using these shots in and among shots of the destruction and the lead characters' efforts to stop *Godzilla* not only

humanizes the action on screen, but also it gives the goings-on a level of verisimilitude they would not otherwise have. Making the film a semidocumentary grounds the fantastic elements on screen in an emotional reality that is immediately relatable.

### ***Godzilla as a Re-creation of the Second World War***

If *Rashomon* presents the ruins of a civilization that has already been destroyed by war, *Godzilla* shows the ruination happening in real time. *Godzilla* depicts the destruction of civilization that the Japanese experienced during and after the Second World War. One film scholar notes that “Godzilla is in fact a virtual re-creation of the Japanese military and civilian experience during the final months of WWII, even to Godzilla itself, as Honda insisted that the monster’s roar sound like an air-raid siren while its footsteps should sound like exploding bombs” (Brothers 38). In the film, the beast visually and aurally evokes memories of wartime Japan. When Godzilla breathes fire on the city, mushroom clouds briefly flash on screen (00:57:40). Nothing is more indicative of civilization crumbling than the cutaway shots during Godzilla’s prolonged attack sequence. During the sequence, there are cutaways to different families and groups of people experiencing Godzilla’s destructive power. These shots of people serve to ground and humanize the otherwise fantastical, large-scale destruction. The monster tears apart important buildings and landmarks in the city, from radio towers to power plants, that all have something to do with technology.

This destruction of technology ties back to the Japanese anxiety about technology after the war. One such cutaway is incredibly moving: a mother holds her two children close beside her as a building crumbles behind them. She says, “We will be with your father soon,” over and over, like a mantra (01:00:58). This scene is heartbreaking, and it implies that the husband died in the war. The symbolism here is heavy, but so is the subject matter. The film still seems

appropriate and respectful today. Showing a mother and her children weep in the newly created ruins of Tokyo is an incredibly effective way to allow an audience to experience the devastation of a country and a culture in a uniquely cinematic way.

This kind of cinema is uniquely able to illustrate the tensions of a nation in cultural crisis during traumatic moments. Some of the tensions pulling on the people in *Godzilla* and *Rashomon* come from feelings that traditional values lose their place in the culture formed after nationally trying times. However, this cultural tension demonstrates a key difference between the two films. Although both films offer ways of processing the horrors of the war, *Godzilla* depicts the struggle of the protagonists against the destructive force of the monster that is reminiscent of the war, and they end up triumphing over the beast. *Rashomon*, however, demonstrates a futile search for truth that crumbles into nihilism. *Rashomon* was released four years before *Godzilla*. Perhaps the former's proximity to the war is why a nihilistic worldview was the best way to process the horror at the time. By the same token, *Godzilla*'s later release date allowed the film to confront the horrors of the war in a more direct way. By evoking the semiotics of the war, the film enabled a national catharsis or, at the very least, allowed people to process the post-war period in new ways.

### ***Godzilla Destroys Cities and Tradition***

The destruction of cities and people in *Godzilla* is a complex metaphor for the war itself and the traditions that made Japan enter the war in the first place. The film's director, Ishiro Honda, was a war veteran, as Brothers points out:

Honda knew firsthand the horrors of war. With over seven years of duty as an infantryman in China behind him, he had not only experienced combat but while on leave had also witnessed some of the fire raids on Japanese cities. After the surrender he spent

six months as a POW, and after being repatriated he walked through the rubble of what was once the city of Hiroshima. As a result of these events, this film (and it is every inch his film) is a somber testimony of those experiences, continually reinforcing the feeling that nothing can be settled by armed conflicts and that potential destruction stills looms over a Japanese populace helpless to prevent it. (39)

Honda is doing the very thing Walter Davis spoke of earlier. With this film, he is assimilating, integrating, and trying to understand his wartime experiences. Honda saw for himself the destruction of the old nation and the establishment of a new Japan, formed in America's image. In the film, the exorcism scene near the beginning depicts an old ceremony that is the last remnant of a set of mostly forgotten traditions (00:11:08). The scene is visually similar to the scenes at the Rashomon gate in the other film. There are certainly thematic parallels. Perhaps civilizations are in a constant state of loss and forgetting, whether that loss is sudden and violent, like in *Godzilla*, or gradually over time, like the abandoned decay at the gate in *Rashomon*. In any case, the exorcism scene presents an intriguing setup for *Godzilla*. At this point in the film, the beast has not been seen much. The name "Godzilla" is used in this scene for the first time. Apparently, creatures such as *Godzilla* have attacked the island intermittently throughout history. The people used to have a whole set of traditions to ward off the creature; however, most have been lost to time. Important symbolic work takes place in this scene; the juxtaposition between the mere idea of *Godzilla* and ancient, traditional ceremony sets the monster in context with tradition. This contrast complicates the simple notion of the beast as symbolic of the war. *Godzilla* still symbolizes the war in many ways, but he represents the past traditions coming to punish a culture that is moving into the future while neglecting its past. Even though the Japanese left much of their culture behind due to American mandates, this transition was a

difficult and emotionally complicated ordeal for many people. Godzilla represents this complexity. In other words, this scene sets Godzilla in a position of being an ancient entity that punishes the culture for forgetting its origins. Forgetting the old ways leaves the people unprepared. More than just a metaphor for nuclear destruction and the devastation of the war itself, Godzilla represents the old ways coming back to condemn the current generation's disconnection from its past and ancestors. Alternatively, it is possible to read the symbolism of the protagonists' struggle against Godzilla as the struggle to let go of the old ways that got Japan into the war in the first place. In this way, Godzilla embodies the ideas of the war itself and the traditions that brought Japan into it.

### **Serizawa and Letting Go of the Past**

Serizawa, a pseudo-symbolic Samurai, represents the past. Serizawa is a war veteran and scientist. He bears a terrible scar that he covers with an eye patch. In my reading, he symbolizes a Japan that has been scared by its experiences in the war and is unsure how to move on. Moreover, he represents Japan's understandable phobia of technology after the war. However, Yoshiko Ikeda argues, "On the other hand, Japan's economic recovery depended on the embrace of technology. . . . Japan in 1954 is a transitional monster caught between the imperial past and the post-war industrial future, aroused by the United States H-Bomb tests" (50). In my reading of the film, Serizawa's conflict about using the oxygen destroyer reflects this anxiety. During the climax of the film, he chooses to stay at the bottom of the sea to ensure that his oxygen destroyer detonates properly to defeat Godzilla (01:27:55). In fact, part of Japan's return to economic stability depended heavily on new technology companies. In this way, the idea that the Samurai character is working on technologies that will ultimately kill him but save the country is a particularly culturally savvy choice on the part of the filmmakers.

Serizawa's death is an interesting scene because one reading of Serizawa's demise could be that, in order to move on, Japan must forget, or at least move beyond, the trauma of the past. To defeat the specter of nuclear fallout and the trauma of war (Godzilla), Japan must let the scarred, grudge-holding, remembering part of itself go (Serizawa). Another important facet of Serizawa's character is that he is engaged to another main character, Emiko. Her affections lie elsewhere, however, with another lead character, Ogata. When Serizawa sacrifices himself, he tells Ogata and Emiko to be happy together. Serizawa gives up being a part of the future of Japan to secure that that future actually happens. The scarred war veteran will take the specter of the memory of war that has haunted the nation down with him. By this sacrifice, he ensures that the relatively innocent Emiko and Ogata are able to start a new life in a Japan that is safe and as free as possible from the scars of war. Although the other characters, watching from the safety of the boat, wanted Serizawa to survive, he died so that there could be any future at all. If he had stayed, Godzilla would most likely have survived to finish destroying the rest of the country. In other words, the old way of life has to be sacrificed in order to secure the future of the nation. Historically, this applies to MacArthur's initiatives, suppressing anything historically Japanese that could possibly lead back to Bushido or Imperial Japan.

Even though the movie seems to indicate that the loss of the Samurai class is a necessary step for Japan to move forward, Serizawa's death is one of dignity. Serizawa dies a traditional Samurai's death. When he cuts his own cord to the surface, it symbolizes seppuku. This death is a respectful, bittersweet letting go of a complicated but cherished past that is necessary for the country to move forward. In *Godzilla*, the moment is bittersweet. The survivors are faced with the loss of their friend, but they also eagerly anticipate building a new life for themselves and rebuilding the city from all the destruction. However, the death of the Samurai in *Rashomon*



paints a much more pessimistic image of the future. However, the events of the mystery are interpreted, the Samurai was killed by a bandit, which is not a noble death. His word is not reliable, which is a blemish on what should be his unimpeachable character and, by extension, the unimpeachable character of Japan. Since he is dead, the rest of society seems to have followed suit in abandoning truth and tradition. Perhaps *Rashomon*'s earlier release date, closer to the horrors of the war and its aftermath made the Kurosawa and company more pessimistic about the future. Simultaneously, perhaps with four more years to process the national tragedies that had plagued the country, Honda and company were a bit more optimistic about the future.

### **The “abyssal regions” of the Human Experience**

A line from *Godzilla* that stands out is from Takashi Shimura's character, Dr. Yamane. He says, “The earth has many deep pockets . . . abyssal regions that contain secrets we have yet to discover” (00:16:00). Significantly this line comes during his testimony, when a committee has gathered to figure out what Godzilla actually is. Dr. Yamane then sends out a “fact finding party” to do tests and research where Godzilla first appeared. The testimonial scene and the desire for facts that pervades the film were reminiscent of *Rashomon*. Some of the shots of Shimura at the stand resemble shots of Shimura giving testimony as the Woodcutter in *Rashomon*. More than that, *Rashomon* and *Godzilla* are both exploring the “abyssal regions” of the human soul. *Rashomon* deals with the capacity of humanity to lie to and harm one another.

Moreover, human beings long for some kind of objective reality but are unable to find this reality or are at least unable to perceive it. When they do find something they would swear to and call objective, the testimony of others contradicts their own, and objectivity is once again lost in the mist of antithetical subjectivities. *Godzilla* can be read as a metaphor for the war and the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the difficulty of letting go of tradition. *Godzilla*

deals with the same ideas as *Rashomon* on a national, historical scale. Both films deal with humanity's capacity for extreme destruction, both personally and nationally. In *Rashomon*, characters lack the ability to rebuild. The characters are unable to keep the fire going in the frame narrative that symbolizes civilization and the hope for its return. However, Kurosawa, at a time much closer to the war, is unable to find much hope for a bright future. His film closes with the Woodcutter walking away from the gate, baby in his arms. The Woodcutter has at the last moment compromised Truth for material gain, and the audience is left with little hope for the future or the world in which the child will grow up.

The devastation of entire cities marks the destruction of a civilization from which characters like Ogata and Emiko will rebuild. Serizawa's sacrifice and the destruction of Godzilla gives the world of *Godzilla* a more hopeful future than the world of *Rashomon*. The specters of the past return to the bottom of the sea, and those who are left can rebuild. Even though Godzilla inflicted unspeakable horror on the people and the city, and sacrifice was necessary to stop him, the film harbors genuine optimism. Whether through *Rashomon*'s initial nihilism or *Godzilla*'s surprising optimism, the nation's artists and especially its filmmakers were uniquely positioned to articulate post-war cultural tensions and to help the people process enormous loss and extremely complicated emotions.

#### Works Cited

Brothers, Peter H. "Japan's Nuclear Nightmare: How the Bomb Became a Beast Called 'Godzilla'." *Cinéaste*, vol. 36, 2011.

- Fowler, Eric S. "Will-To-Fight: Japan's Imperial Institution and The U.S. Strategy to End World War II." *War & Society*, vol. 34, no. 1, 2015, pp. 43-64.
- Gluck, Carol, Rana Mitter, and Charles K. Armstrong. "The Seventieth Anniversary of World War II's End in Asia: Three Perspectives." *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 74, no. 3, 2015, p. 531.
- Honda, Ishirô. Dir. *Gojira Godzilla*. Toho, 1954.
- Ikeda, Yoshiko. "Godzilla and The Japanese After World War II: From a Scapegoat of the Americans to a Saviour of the Japanese." *Acta Orientalia Vilnensia*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2011, p. 43.
- Kamir, Orit. "Judgment by film: Socio-legal functions of Rashomon." *Yale JL & Human*, vol. 12, 2000, p. 39.
- Kaufman, Zachary D. "Transitional Justice for Taufma Japan: The United States Role in the Establishment of the International Military Tribunal for the Far East and Other Transitional Justice Mechanisms for Japan After World War II." *Emory International Law Review*, vol. 27, no. 2, 2013, pp. 755-98.
- Kurosawa, Akira. Dir. *Rashomon*. DAIEI, 1950.
- McDonald, Keiko. "The Dialectic of Light and Darkness in KurosawaforRashomon." *Rashomon*, 1987, pp. 183-92.
- Redfern, Nick. "Film Style and Narration in Rashomon." *Journal of Japanese & Korean Cinema*, vol. 5.1, no. 2, 2013, p. 21.
- Sugimoto, Mike. "The Fifty-Year War: Rashomon, After Life, and Japanese Film Narratives of Remembering." *Japan Studies Review*, vol. 7, 2003, pp. 1-19.

Williams, Mark. "Life After Death? Writing the Alienated Self in Post-War Japan." *IAFOR Journal of Literature & Librarianship*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2013, pp. 9-31.

---

Copyright © 2021 *Wide Angle*, Samford University. All rights reserved.

*Claire Scott*

### **A Closer Look into Fidelity Discourse in Film Adaptation**

---

In “Beyond Fidelity: The Dialogics of Adaptation,” Robert Stam tackles what he describes as “the chimera of fidelity,” calling into question the validity and usefulness of descriptive words such as “infidelity” and “betrayal” when describing the process of adapting a novel into a film (54). Although some people view film adaptations through the lens of fidelity, Stam explains how this way of thinking actually limits the viewer in terms of their ability to critically analyze a film. Stam’s criticisms of fidelity parallel post-structuralist theory in the way that both agree that there are as many readings of a text as there are readers. Because of the limiting traditional language used to analyze film adaptations, Stam offers alternative ways to engage in fidelity discourse.

In order to properly understand the nature of adaptation and the restricting aspects of fidelity, Stam emphasizes the importance of recognizing the shift from a single-track medium to a multi-track medium (56). While novels solely rely on written words, films incorporate words, sounds, and images, making cinema a far more complex medium than literature. However, Stam recognizes that certain problems are inevitable in the process of film adaptation because of the “automatic difference” between novels as single-track mediums and films as multitrack mediums (55). An exact replica of a novel as a film is simply not possible because literature and film are entirely different mediums. Because of the disparity between these two mediums, Stam urges the necessity of observing adaptation as translation. The shifting of mediums requires translating the original material from the written language into an audio-lexical-visual language.

As a direct result of this process of translation, infidelity is necessary to an extent, because if unwavering fidelity is attempted, things are bound to get lost in translation. In order to further prove the limits of fidelity, Stam invokes Mikhail Bakhtin, whose ideas about heteroglossia and dialogism align with Stam's theories about film adaptation. According to Bakhtin, heteroglossia is the multiplicity of languages, voices, and discourses, and dialogism is the struggle among these languages, voices, and discourses for dominance. Because the act of reading is dialogic, this proves that there is no singular voice in a novel. When analyzing film adaptations, it is imperative to take into account the multiplicity of the novel that provides for multiple readings.

Similar to Robert Stam, Thomas Leitch also incorporates aspects of post-structuralist ideas into his chapter from *Film Adaptation and Its Discontents* where he defines and provides examples for ten different strategies that filmmakers can utilize when adapting a film. Post-structuralist sentiment can be seen in Leitch's assertion that "there is no normative model for adaptation," meaning that there is no one right way to adapt a film, because there can be multiple readings of a novel (129). The second of the strategies Leitch explains is adjustment, which is the most common approach to adaptation, because adjustments are a necessity when switching from a single-track to a multi-track medium, as Stam explains. Within the strategy of adjustment, Leitch defines five categories: compression, expansion, correction, updating, and superimposition. First, compression occurs when the filmmaker decides to omit or condense a certain aspect of the novel. Second, expansion is the decision to elaborate on specific elements of the precursor. Third, "many films correct what they take to be the flaws of their originals," but while compression can be applied to make major changes, correction is limited to specific and limited changes (104). Fourth, an example of updating would be changing the setting of an older film and making it more contemporary in order to "[guarantee] its relevance to the more

immediate concerns of the target audience” (105). Finally, superimposition relates to the influence of the actors in films and how they have the ability to change the perception of the narrative. Another of the strategies Leitch describes is colonization, which is the process of filling a text with new cultural meaning. According to Leitch, “any new content is fair game, whether it develops meanings implicit in the earlier text, amounts to an ideological critique of that text, or goes off in another direction entirely” (112). An example of this type of adaptation can be seen in Akira Kurosawa’s *Ran*, a colonization of Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. Although Kurosawa received criticism for his adaptation, Leitch defends him, saying that he “was surely entitled to colonize Shakespeare,” revealing Leitch’s open-mindedness concerning film adaptation strategies (113). Although Leitch’s ideas can be helpful when analyzing film adaptations, he accounts for some of the confusing aspects of this chapter, even going so far as to say that his own chapter is a “failed exercise in demarcation” (129), basically accounting for the notion that film adaptation is not definitive simply because there can be such a large number of interpretations and adaptations, once again invoking post-structuralist theory.

Although the language used by Stam and Leitch to explain film adaptation theory differs, the strategies they provide frequently parallel one another. For example, falling under the adjustment strategy, Leitch gives many examples of expansion, such as the 1946 adaptation of Ernest Hemingway’s *The Killers*. This film expands on Hemingway’s short story, reconstructing it into a feature film by “[treating] the Swede’s death as a mystery to be solved and then [contravening] Hemingway by providing a detective, a detailed backstory, and a solution” (Leitch 103). The process of turning a short story into a film aligns with Stam’s concept of adaptation as transformation (Stam 62). Treating adaptation as a medium through which to transform the precursor allows screenwriters to imbue new meaning into films. Both

Stam and Leitch encourage audiences to rethink their preconceived notions of film adaptation and reject the popular belief that in order for an adaptation to be valuable, it must remain completely faithful to its precursor.

#### Works Cited

- Leitch, Thomas M. *Film Adaptation and Its Discontents: From Gone with the Wind to The Passion of the Christ*. Johns Hopkins UP, 2007. *EBSCOhost*.
- Stam, Robert. "Beyond Fidelity: The Dialogics of Adaptation." *Film Adaptation*, edited by James Naremore, Rutgers UP, 2000, pp. 54-76. *EBSCOhost*.

---

Copyright © 2021 *Wide Angle*, Samford University. All rights reserved.



## Essay

*Samantha Smith*

**Angels, Monsters, and Gazing in *The Birds*** [Curated from volume 2.2 in 2013]

---

In 1963, audiences found themselves gazing in horror at chaos in a dark theater filled with the screeching of birds. Then and now, Alfred Hitchcock's classic *The Birds* leaves moviegoers looking warily at the sky for signs of disaster. Since the height of his career in the 1940s, countless scholars have used Hitchcock's works as litmus tests for film theories concerning narrative cinema. Laura Mulvey developed her groundbreaking gaze theory in her examination of *Vertigo* and *Rear Window*. Tania Modleski, a leading Hitchcock scholar, built on Mulvey's ideas, contributing her own bisexuality theory for female film viewers. The purpose of this essay is to continue in the tradition of understanding Hitchcock from a feminist perspective. To do so, I will combine the two theories mentioned above with Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's classification of the female image in literature into either "angel" or "monster."<sup>18</sup> In *The Birds*, the two young women competing for the heart of the male protagonist, Mitch, exist in a structural binary of angel/monster based on their relationship to Mitch as an agent of patriarchal society. The controlling power of Mitch's active gaze and the gaze of the camera create and sustain the identities of the two women in order to ensure that their actions align with societal expectations of "woman" as defined by the patriarchal order. Their demises, either mentally or physically, are a direct result of their relationships to the patriarchy's wishes.

Melanie Daniels's image is one of ideal female beauty. If the audience could not establish this for itself, Hitchcock makes it clear in the opening scene. The camera follows Melanie

---

<sup>18</sup>The dichotomy of angel/monster will be expanded upon later in the character readings of Annie and Melanie.

walking across the screen in a panning shot to the tune of heads turning and young boys whistling. The moving action of the camera deliberately objectifies Melanie by this watching. Not only is Melanie beautiful, she is trouble. She has what feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey describes as “to-be-looked-at-ness,” given to her by the male eye of the camera (62). Mulvey translates Sigmund Freud’s assertions about sexual scopophilia<sup>19</sup> into the terms of film, specifically pinpointing the power of the camera to “take other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze” (59). But this power is entirely “ordered by sexual imbalance,” in which the male/active looker inflicts his gaze on the female/passive image (Mulvey 62). Mulvey specifically cites Freud’s work on the curious scopophilia of children in gazing upon and understanding bodily form and function. Melanie’s first admirer is a young boy, who whistles as she crosses the street. He is followed closely by Hitchcock’s cameo, in which the director himself holds the door open for Melanie at the pet shop. The full range of masculinity, from a young child to the then sixty-four-year-old director, is present to control the woman’s actions.

Until Mitch gives her a name by recognizing her in the pet shop, Melanie’s identity remains a mystery. He presents the audience not only with her identity but also with her reputation. She is a reckless heiress who recently, to Mitch’s obvious disgust, escaped justice for her crimes. His ability to look on her and name her fulfills his role as Mulvey’s active male in control of defining the film fantasy in accordance with his desire. In doing so, he is acting as an agent of the patriarchal order that Melanie’s rebelliousness has defied. Melanie does not have the ability to name herself because she is a woman, nor does she have the ability to create success

---

<sup>19</sup> *Scopophilia* is defined as the “desire to look at sexually stimulating scenes especially as a substitute for actual sexual participation” (Merriam-Webster, n. pag.).

for herself, and yet she tries to accomplish both. In the opening scene in the pet shop, Melanie ineffectively attempts to obtain a bird for which she has been waiting. She discovers that the bird, despite its due date, has not yet arrived. She sends the shop girl away to gather more details on the bird's arrival. In the woman's absence, Mitch enters, interested in lovebirds. Melanie commits a vain attempt to prank Mitch by posing as the shop girl. She weaves among the birdcages, moving inside and outside their confinements as loosely as she moves over society's line of expected behavior. Mistakenly identifying different species of birds, Melanie has no idea that her ignorance is not only obvious to Mitch, but he also finds her humiliation amusing. Spoiling her attempt at creating her own identity, he reveals that he is aware of Melanie's true identity because he is the lawyer that recently prosecuted her in court. She is forced to be exactly what he says she is. Melanie is frustrated at her inability to self-define and decides to enact another form of creativity on Mitch by delivering a pair of lovebirds to his house, unnoticed.

This trick, too, is destined for disaster. Mitch catches her in her getaway boat, ruining the surprise. Choosing to overlook the minor case of breaking and entering, Mitch meets her at the town dock, smiling at his success. Despite her manifold attractions, Melanie cannot accomplish any goals because Mitch, proprietor of the justice system, constantly interrupts her petty endeavors with his identifying gaze. Without this gaze, she would lack meaning in the logic of the film because she would have no identity. Mitch's gaze establishes and sustains Melanie's identity in his own terms.

Mitch is justified in his gaze by his position as societal protector of justice. As a criminal lawyer he is a morally higher figure than Melanie. Mulvey recognizes this as a pattern in Hitchcock films, citing *Vertigo* and *Marnie*, male protagonists who are, respectively, a policeman and a rich man of society (65). Mitch is similarly "exemplary of the symbolic order

and law” (65). He is a deliverer of justice, a criminal lawyer, and a substitutive family patriarch who believes in the ability of society to identify, seize, and punish perpetrators of the patriarchal order. Melanie’s notorious reputation (as disclosed by Mitch) makes her one such perpetrator. Throughout the course of the film, the audience learns a slew of Melanie’s former crimes against the natural order: she is an heiress, and thus, she is financially independent, she is unmarried, and thus, she has no domestic obligations, and she has a reputation for jumping naked into famous foreign fountains and otherwise making the front page of the tabloids through scandalous deeds. The summation of these crimes is that Melanie is not adhering to the code of femininity scripted to her by her sex.<sup>20</sup> Melanie Daniels is dangerous to the natural order, and as such she deserves Mitch’s watchful gaze to keep her from repeating her trips over the line. His fantasized attraction to Melanie is underlined by revulsion to her moral inadequacies.

This tension between fantasizing and disgust points to a psychoanalytic formulation of the masculine primal fear of castration. For the male, the female signifies, as Mulvey explains, “sexual difference, the visually ascertainable absence of the penis [ . . . ] on which is based the castration complex essential for the organization of entrance to the symbolic order and the law of the father” (444). This sexual difference is imperative for the male to retain power over the female. In order to state firmly his difference, Mitch surrounds himself with females, collecting them in Bodega Bay—his mother, his sister, Annie, and now Melanie. However, his latest acquisition challenges this difference by her refusal to adhere to the symbolic order. Melanie engages in masculine acts (diversion, pranks, holding wealth) in an attempt to stretch the limbs of her female creativity. It is this “fear of sameness and erasure of differences” that David Humbert pinpoints as the catalyst for fear and aggression in the film (94). Mitch’s gaze over

---

<sup>20</sup>As a point of reference, Hitchcock gives the audience an obvious example of a woman who adheres to the code of woman-ness in Annie.

Melanie is one part erotic attraction and one part sexual fear of sameness. If Melanie can become masculine, Mitch could hypothetically become feminine. This possibility is too threatening to Mitch's ego, and thus Melanie must be carefully contained by his gaze.

Annie, Mitch's ex-girlfriend turned schoolmarm, has a precarious position in this arena of gazing. She is not the ideal beauty that Melanie connotes. Although she is female, she does not necessarily possess "to-be-looked-at-ness" in the same way that Melanie does. Hitchcock displays this contrast in the birthday party scene, shortly before the birds attack. Seconds before they swoop into the party, Annie counts to three. She is spinning a blindfolded child for a game but gazing intently at Melanie and Mitch talking together on the hill. The camera pans down from the couple as Annie counts "one . . . two . . ." and arrives on Annie at "three." She is the oddity, the outsider wandering blindfolded in a cruel game.

The birds attack and drive the party inside the house for shelter. Mitch, in the foreground of the shot, stands just outside the doorway of the house, gazing at the sky. Beautiful Melanie and homely Annie stand facing each other in the middle ground, separated from Mitch by the line of the doorway. In the background the children and other adults huddle to nurse their wounds. The camera zooms in on the doorway, leaving only the disembodied shoulder of Mitch's tweed coat. It focuses on the women, who are separated from each other as well. Annie stands confined within the shape of the bookshelf behind her. Melanie, too, is encased in the rectangle of the window beside the bookshelf. The comparison negatively tips towards Annie. She does not attract the male gaze because the symbolic order has firm control over her. She stands before the books, the tradition of knowledge, while Melanie is backed by the soft light of the window. "That makes three times," Annie says. Though her meaning is concerned with the number of bird attacks, the repetition of "three" reminds the viewer of her isolation from Mitch

and Melanie. After speaking, Annie turns and disappears into the mass of weeping children behind her. Melanie turns towards the camera, which zooms back out to encompass both her and the watchful Mitch, still gazing into the sky. Once she no longer has Mitch's romantic attention, Annie nobly accepts her place outside of Mitch's desire yet remains in Bodega Bay to watch lovingly over his family and raise "little Mitches" in her one-room schoolhouse. Through the course of the film, rather than being watched, Annie watches Mitch watch Melanie. She is what Modleski describes as the female audience member caught in a bisexuality of the gaze (59).

Modleski argues that the female spectator is constantly confronted with two desires (65): she can "overidentify" or identify more than the male spectator with the passive female object while simultaneously perceiving the object through the gaze of the active male subject (65). In this way, she is inherently bisexual in that she is both a masculine gazer and a feminine object (65). Annie identifies with Melanie as a love interest for Mitch because she sees Melanie through Mitch's gaze. It is a comparative gaze that places the two women firmly in competition for Mitch's desire. As Mitch and Melanie descend from their intimate moment on the hill and rejoin the birthday party, the camera moves to a reaction shot from Annie. Here the audience watches Annie watch Mitch watch Melanie. Similarly, returning to the parlor scene, Annie's face dominates the frame in the extreme foreground as she watches Melanie on the telephone with Mitch. Annie's look is inseparable from Mitch's presence or his absent presence. Humbert argues that the love triangle places Melanie and Annie in the position of doubles (93). The repetition of sounds in their names, Annie and Mel-annie, serves to reiterate his point (Humbert 93). As doubles, Annie's gaze upon Mel-annie is a comparative gaze. In the look, Annie notices the similarities and the differences outlined by Mitch's desire, the force responsible for the women's contact and furthering relationship. Once Mitch desired Annie. Now he desires Mel-

annie. What does Mel-annie have that Annie does not have? For his argument, Humbert returns to the parlor scene. At the sound of a loud thump on the door, the two women rise to investigate. Annie opens the door to reveal the dead bird that has just crashed blindly into the house without explanation: “They then turn to face each other,” Humbert writes, “each the mirror image of the other” (94). The more the two women recognize their rivalry, the more their differences are erased (Humbert 94). This erasure of differences causes the same problems for Annie as it does for Mitch, but for a different reason.

For understanding the depths of the Mel-annie/Annie binary, it is helpful to turn to Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s “The Madwoman in the Attic.” Gilbert and Gubar ascertain a pattern of female images in masculine literary history. The pattern is the binary of the angel-woman/monster-woman as dominant representations of the female in literature. Quoting Hans Eichner, Gilbert and Gubar give an example of the angel-woman with a passage from the novel *Wilhelm Meister’s Travels*: “She [. . .] leads a life of almost pure contemplation . . . in considerable isolation . . . a life whose story cannot be told as there is no story. Her existence is not useless . . . she shines like . . . a motionless lighthouse by which others, the travelers whose lives do a have a story, can set their course. She is an ideal, a model of selflessness and purity of heart” (815). Annie’s life of “pure contemplation [. . .] in considerable isolation” leads her into a one-room schoolhouse in the isolated bay town of Bodega Bay, where she dutifully enlightens the little citizens, mostly in the form of song. On her hill overlooking the small town, she “shines like a motionless lighthouse” to which her students, Mitch and Melanie, come and go in the course of their significant actions. As the “model of selflessness and purity of heart,” Annie sacrificed the life she possessed before she met Mitch to follow him to Bodega Bay. Even though

he is no longer faithful to her, she remains pure of heart in her fidelity to him, telling Melanie that she still likes him “a hell of a lot.”

Finally, the angel-woman’s “key act” is her sacrifice for those entrusted to her care, “for to be selfless is not only to be noble, it is to be dead” (Gilbert and Gubar 817). Accepting Gilbert and Gubar’s rule of sacrificial death as the angel-woman’s fate, I would argue that her doom is associated with her bisexuality. Modleski argues that in order for females to be allowed to perceive in both feminine and masculine ways, it must also be accepted that men have the ability to perceive by way of both sexes. If females can be both male and female, males must also be both male and female. “This is less a problem for *women*,” Modleski writes, “than it is for patriarchy” (65). Male bisexuality associates him with the female and threatens to remove him from his position of power, his “natural” place (Modleski 65). To be bisexual is equally as terrorizing as being castrated in the view of the heterosexual male because the two are essentially the same. Annie cannot be allowed to continue to perceive bisexually because her ability to do so challenges Mitch’s pure masculinity. She must be eliminated. Since she is in the full control of the patriarchy, her sacrifice is a willing act to uphold its values. This is why Edgar Allan Poe described the angel-woman’s death as “unquestionably the most poetic topic in the world,” (qtd. in Gilbert and Gubar 817); her death is beautiful because it is a direct extension of the patriarchy’s wishes. As the birds swarm around Annie’s house, she throws herself in front of Mitch’s sister, protecting his interests, and dies the horrific yet poetic death of the angel-woman. This surrender is “the ultimate shrine of the angel-woman’s mysteries,” in which Annie establishes her place as tragic saint (Gilbert 817). Her martyrdom allows Mitch to abide comfortably in the pure masculinity he will need to subdue the monster-woman.



Enter Melanie: “For every glowing portrait of submissive women enshrined in domesticity, there exists an equally important negative image that embodies the sacrilegious fiendishness of [. . .] the ‘Female Will’” (Gilbert and Gubar 819). Melanie’s attempts at female creativity echo characteristics of masculine significant action and give her “the mysterious power of the character who refuses to stay in her textually ordained ‘place’” (Gilbert and Gubar 819). This female creativity is defined in the terms of her attempts to act as sexual aggressor to engage Mitch, self-determine her identity, and otherwise participate in actions traditionally ascribed as masculine. This creativity underlines Melanie’s assumptions that she is exempt from the rules of the social order, to which Mitch so loyally ascribes, by virtue of her position as an independent heiress (Humbert 92). In her rebellion she possesses both “deformities meant to repel” and “powerful and dangerous arts” (Gilbert and Gubar 820). She is at once attracting and disgusting.

In the pattern of masculine literary history, Gilbert and Gubar recognize female arts as “trivial attempts to forestall an inevitable end” (821). In the monster-woman’s refusal to adhere to a social contract, she is expelled from the symbolic order (823). Despite all of Melanie’s feminine wiles, she cannot escape the retribution for her rebellion. Like Pandora, Melanie’s curiosity drives her out of the living room and the protection of Mitch and slowly up the stairs towards the harrowing sound of birds. Standing at the door, Melanie has one last chance to submit to Mitch’s protection and return to the lair of domesticity, but her pattern of significant action drives her forward. She opens the door and steps into the room, drawing the attention of the ravenous birds inside which descend upon her in a fury of reckoning. In response to her threats against the masculine symbolic order, the camera’s gaze emaciates her body during the attack. Her image, “stylized and fragmented by close ups” (Mulvey 445) becomes “diabolically hideous and slimy” in the true image of the monster-woman as her own blood runs down her

face and hands (Gilbert and Gubar 820). Like the birds, the masculine gaze takes complete control and demands Melanie's formal surrender. She falls to the ground unconscious and must be rescued by Mitch. In the loss of her consciousness and the resulting loss of her sanity, Melanie becomes excluded from the community and reinscribed in her appropriate female role.

Gilbert and Gubar's angel-woman/monster-woman dichotomy competes with Humbert's Annie/Mel-annie double. The tension between likeness and difference between the two women parallels the same tension between Mitch and Melanie and generates the same attracting disgust. Stemming from Mitch's castration complex, Annie's source of repulsion comes from what Gilbert and Gubar describe as the result of male-generated disgust for the monster-woman: The sexual nausea associated with so many monster-women helps explain why so many real women have for so long expressed loathing of (or at least anxiety about) their own [. . .] female bodies. The "killing" of oneself into an art object—the pruning and preening, the mirror madness [. . .] -- all this testifies to the effort women have expended not just trying to be angels but trying *not* to become female monsters (823). Annie's disgust, according to Gilbert and Gubar, is the result of patriarchal control over the angel woman.

At the same time that she looks at Melanie with the camaraderie of doubleness, Annie uses Melanie as a mirror to censor her own image against that of Melanie's. In their doubleness, she works against the erasure of difference, cementing the angel-woman/monster-woman dichotomy to retain her own divinity and Melanie's damnation. Why? Annie, as the bisexual spectator, is an active agent of the masculine symbolic order working to ensure its continuance. Both Mitch and Annie find themselves repelled by Melanie because of the castration complex. Mitch's repulsion relates directly to his fear of castration, while Annie's is an indirect result of that fear. Ultimately, the symbolic order emerges victorious. Annie is entombed in her

saintliness. Melanie is contained in her insanity. Mitch retains complete control over sexual difference.

The psychoanalytic feminist theory presented in this essay is relevant to understanding how women, traditionally, have been depicted in narrative film in order to be controlled. Women who attempt to participate in acts that have traditionally been ascribed as “masculine” (in this case self-definition and sexual aggression, i.e., the monster-woman) must be controlled by the active male gaze in order to quell the fear of castration experienced by the watching male. By defining her through the male eye, and thus forming her into the male fantasy, the woman can be controlled. However, in that fantasy, there exists an abiding disgust for the woman’s masculinity. The fine line between revulsion and erotic attraction must be walked by the masculine figure, eager to assimilate the woman back into society in whatever way possible. Women who adhere to their “textually ordained place” are rewarded by exemption from the erotic male gaze but are subjected to viewing through that male gaze (Gilbert and Gubar 819). This creates in the angel a bisexuality: she is female, looking through the eyes of a male at another female. She over-identifies with the female, relating to her not only as another woman but also as an erotic fantasy. This bisexuality, however, reminds the male of his own bisexuality, challenging his masculinity. It must, therefore, be eliminated in order for the male to continue to act as an arm of the patriarchy in delivering the monster-woman to her position in society. The angel-woman must sacrifice herself, becoming a poetic martyr. This leaves the fate of either categorization of women doomed to failure in a patriarchal society. So long as men have eyes, women will be angels and demons. So long as women are angels and demons, they will be dead. These two stereotypes and their formation through the male erotic gaze must be broken down before women will be able to survive on their own terms.

## Works Cited

- Gilbert, Sandra, and Susan Gubar. "The Madwoman in the Attic." *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. Eds. Julie Rivkin and Micheal Ryan. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004. 812-825. Print.
- Humbert, David. "Desire and Monstrosity in the Disaster Film." *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis and Culture* 17. (1994): 87-103. Print.
- Modleski, Tania. "Hitchcock, Feminism, and the Patriarchial Unconsciousness." *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*. Ed. Patricia Erens. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990. 58-74. Print.
- Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Feminism and Film Theory*. Ed. Constance Penley. New York : Psychology Press, 1988. 57-68. Print.
- "Scopophilia." *Merriam-Webster*. Merriam-Webster: An Encyclopedia Britannica Merriam-Webster: An Encyclopedia Britannica Company. 1 May 2012.

---

Copyright © 2021 *Wide Angle*, Samford University. All rights reserved.

## Poetry

*Jillian Fantin*

**Selections from *Cubanidad: A Machete Will Do***

---

for me, and for every man  
with deepset, old-as-dirt claims  
to the strength of the Sun,  
the Oxen's sinewy muscles.

thick shells of loggerheads.  
Suppose we harpoon, carve,  
hollow out the bright Moon,  
stretch its creamy craters over

the sawed-off skull of a fiesta.  
Give me this fiesta, that thrill  
of pulling just-picked 4C hair  
from our canines, pounding

bongos with braided fists,  
before that white crested wave  
bashes our coffee ground bodies,  
dissolves us into nothing

but fiberglass sand, and pours  
our ashes into red plastic sacks  
for an American to brew  
in a French Press back home.

Grant every man, every Esteban  
Montejo, that last fiesta before  
he must machete his thorny way  
back into his earthen body.

---

Copyright © 2021 *Wide Angle*, Samford University. All rights reserved.

## Poetry

*Jillian Fantin***Selections from Cubanidad: Elegy for José Martí**

our wailing forges rounded shovels, shovels plowing the scorched earth into deep reservoirs.  
 our salty sobbing swells into a handmade manmade azure ocean that dyes  
 the doors of 41 Paula Street. when we fill the reservoir, our tears flatten to petals. birth a  
 thousand mariposas, silver-edged and dotted with violet pupils. our coal-burning anger stains  
 voting ballots. we never get to touch. never  
 get to fight. but you did.

oh 41 Paula Street, Platt threatens to press white roses into thorns,  
 an afterthought. his tongue slithers in the wind like an aimless stinging nettle. his fingers vine,  
 stretch into rattlesnakes mimicking our drums, our maracas, our boidae boas hunting fruit bats  
 except the boas smash into the trunk of a hydra,  
 a hydra wearing Uncle Sam's top hat,  
 glutting on rooted sugarcane, falling  
 asleep with Jesús Menéndez dissolving

in his ripping belly.

though the child of the turquoise threshold lays beneath a plot of rosebuds, he still feeds  
*Partido Independiente de Color* black beans and fried plantains and brown rice from a cast-iron  
 pot.

he shelters Carlota when her soles ache and her soul's *aché* threatens to morph into a swarm  
 of butterflies and flit away to reefs of wildflowers. though dear 41 Paula Street holds us  
 tight against her wooden breast, our every tear and every bawl and every salty smear of snot and  
 sob hollows out another handmade manmade cyan sea, a cemetery of coral and bleach coffins  
 swimming with passed-over centuries, manatees and your living memory.

Copyright © 2021 *Wide Angle*, Samford University. All rights reserved.

## Poetry

*Jillian Fantin*

**Selections from Cubanidad: Fatigues**

---

estoy cansada, Fidel.  
yet you're the one

fighting our wars  
in tracksuits—  
sapphire sneakers  
peacock polyester

like an Adidas Atlantic.  
of course parece cansado,  
archipelago Hemingway,

Sisyphus  
of Caribbean proportions,

pushing  
neocolonial boulders  
tail to tail,  
stuffing pillowcases  
with revolution rose petals.

Buenos Dias, Fidel.

even in sleep  
the lines on your face  
run deep and warm—  
our own  
Tropic of Cancer.

will your body  
melt into our island?  
become a nurse shark,  
belly to our reefs,

or a Cuban Kite  
flying like a bullet  
through ocean skies?  
estoy cansado

pero todavía quiero leer,  
deep into the dusk,  
of what makes us up  
how we will keep making

me, you, yo y nosotros.

---

Copyright © 2021 *Wide Angle*, Samford University. All rights reserved.



## Poetry

*Ashlyn Hamrick*

### **Do Balloons Go to Heaven?**

---

The turquoise balloon strapped around my  
 finger drifted away like the limited memories of Grandfather  
 in my dreams—  
 reruns of Saturday mornings and Chicago stories  
 over and over became fizzled and battery-drained  
 like the Magnavox console in his dining room corner.  
 We never noticed his loafers,  
 worn-out and dog-chewed, unfit for company but always  
 on his feet. We never noticed until  
 six minutes ago, when they were destined to their own dusty box:

FOR SALE.

Soup-stained khakis. Dolly Parton vinyls. Corelle coffee pots.

All strewn and stockpiled across his yard. A small mold-speckled pouch hid  
 among overgrown weeds. A note. My name  
 etched in lead, legible. A delicate chain with a single golden  
 butterfly: To my dear granddaughter.  
 I had never met Grandmother. Some say  
 she and I traded lives in the year 2000—a death  
 for a life. For me she transformed  
 into the butterflies that bounce on the breeze.  
 Once, I was near a stream, and she rested on the dust  
 jacket enclosing my book, folded her wings, and looked  
 at me: burnished bronze eye  
 spots flowing with nectar,

just as he had described.  
 I never asked him about her.

That day—his funeral—I crumpled  
 a single sheet of graph paper inside the balloon.  
 Erased the truth  
 tables and tautologies from the morning's lecture. Jumbled letters  
 scribbled together like the sincere sympathies of

oversized fascinators and flattened ties.  
*I just want to know*, I wrote,

*has she asked about me?*

---

Copyright © 2021 *Wide Angle*, Samford University. All Rights Reserved.

## Poetry

*Sarah Morgan Lake*

**Ode to Tuscaloosa**

*“Alabama felt a magic descending, spreading, long ago. Since then it has been a land with a spell on it—  
not a good spell, always.”<sup>23</sup>*

---

When I was little, Momma told me that I had a soft heart  
and that mine would bruise easily,  
like plums that fell from Pappy’s tree, the ones we never ate  
on account of they hit the ground and opened like promises  
broken by the stars I wished on every night.

*“A few overpretentious bungalows, a lane of gaunt old elms, then a great blue-grey ghost of a house,  
dark and rambling. ‘Van de Graaf place,’ said my driver laconically. ‘Built before the war.’”*

Once, I climbed past lace runners, plastic silverware, wedding bells,  
up to the skylight of the Jemison House and thought I was in a crow’s nest,  
seeing my entire world for the first time, down Greensboro Blvd to the church,  
all the way over the bridge toward home, until Momma yelled at me  
to come down before I got myself killed or, worse, somebody saw me.

*“‘There’s our skyscraper,’ said the driver, pointing to a tall office building—  
promise of the future—rising into the hot sky.”*

There was magic at the top of 2330 University Blvd,  
in the clock which told you how cold it was getting, told you the time  
in Hong Kong, in London, in Los Angeles, in New York, and I would stare  
long after our navy 1999 Explorer passed by it, twisting my head to see  
what time and how warm it was in Boston, in Cairo, in Seoul.

*“Living was always too bright or too dark. There was no middle way of normality.  
Strong contrasts followed each other in startling sequences.  
For Alabama is a land of quick reactions, of sudden and stunning violences.”*

I got rid of my accent in the summer of 2011.  
That summer smelled like hot tar and burning grass, so hot you would sweat  
in swimming pools, and blood evaporated when you skinned your knees,  
and hour-long thunderstorms fed the kudzu everything under the heartburn sky,  
and glass hung in the air from all those homes razed in April.

*“If I knew you well enough to advise you, I’d say ‘For God’s sake, get out of here before it’s too late.’”  
He turned abruptly and walked away, his footsteps echoing in the silent corridor.*

When I go back, I watch the stars outside my bedroom window,  
wishing I was so, so small instead of too big for Momma’s hand-me-down bed,  
knowing home is where she cries plum juice in the shower,

---

<sup>23</sup> Carmer, Carl. *Stars Fell on Alabama*. The University of Alabama Press, 1985.

wondering exactly what it was we had in common, my heart and those plums,  
except that we break when we hit the ground we grew from.

---

Copyright © 2021 *Wide Angle*, Samford University. All rights reserved.

## Poetry

*Jake Lane***Agonal Breathing**

---

November breeds death.  
 The dry anguish of the search for warmth  
 snakes its way towards earth's surface,  
 devouring creatures most fragile.

Your god is your stomach  
 and you worship it with all you swallow.

Your hunger erodes you  
 and so too does the bitter bite  
 of your broad-beamed bones.  
 Each scratchy sweater ignites in you  
 a newfound itch for the fast-falling footsteps  
 of a freer time.

"The cold," you say,  
 "makes a man dead before he knows it"

and you press your limp hand  
 against a window  
 hoping it will bite.

The streets now are dusted with orange,  
 and you hurtle your half-joking thoughts  
 towards the burrowing animals, confiding in them  
 that orange is your least favorite color.

Your breath grows sharp when you talk about the weather  
 and you find that really you can't stand to speak  
 because deep inhales are a delicacy.

And you're repulsed by the roasted scents  
 which flutter about you  
 so you bury your nose  
 in the unforgiving white line  
 of November snow.

---

Copyright © 2021 *Wide Angle*, Samford University. All rights reserved.

## Poetry

*Jake Lane*

**Blue Poppies**

---

Swaddled in cotton blue, I lie immovable.  
Headlights slip through the plastic blinds,  
illuminating the race-speed pulse of my chest  
as it dances a stiff duet with the clack of the fan.  
Who knew words could paralyze?

A bead of sweat bedazzles my forehead--  
a child of fear or forced submission.  
It's evening now.  
The afternoon was swallowed by secret sadness,  
and I lay atop a mattress that floats on black glass,  
my body an expired vessel with an unmarked map.

Ill-fated flowers have taken root in my brain,  
poppies planted in a cursed ground.  
They settle somehow in this infertile lawn,  
infecting the flame-burnt soil with a stench of desperation.

My mind swirls and scuffs in rhythm with the seasons,  
Stretching dutifully skyward in the spring  
and keeling over in autumn's fatal fist.  
The summer nights lack moisture and reek of lemons  
with midnight hours only for my thoughts to roam  
and blistering starshine for these weeds to bask in.

Summer has left me swallowed in a torrent blue,  
lying motionless and breathless until the bed sinks in,  
tearing wayward roots out of me as I stumble towards forgetting.

---

Copyright © 2021 *Wide Angle*, Samford University. All rights reserved.

## Poetry

*Jake Lane***Idiolect of a Bouncing Flame**

---

You type out “mwah” to peck me with a kiss  
 Kiss your onomatopoeia onto the keyboard just to lie  
 Lie in bed with a sly grin while you rant about privileged problems  
 Problems between us lie like quiet death, boxed like unlit cigarettes  
 Cigarettes feel romantic but age you like a cracked, stained statue

Statues stand alone, stranded, staring out a window of impulsivity  
 Impulsivity carries me downtown in the middle of the night  
 Night cloaks me, and I swerve down one-way streets, unafraid of disappearing  
 Disappearing behind an increasingly significant sigh, you hug me at the door  
 Door clicked closed between us echoes louder now, erasing what once was gentle

Gentle hands are what you claimed to notice first  
 First memories were blindly special, now they feel like punctuation  
 Punctuation falls in consistency as it rises in importance  
 Importance is your new drug; you learn it lurks in tiny crevices  
 Crevices of unspecific rooms are the only place I escape reflections of myself

Self is a tapestry of distinctive passions and untouched nerve endings  
 Endings accentuate every etching you’ve carved into my pliant identity  
 Identity now is a question of immediate impression and sardonic wit  
 Wit can’t be conjured as I remedy your self-broken heart  
 Heart beats on in the melted wax of a gifted candle.

---

Copyright © 2021 *Wide Angle*, Samford University. All rights reserved.

## Poetry

*Emily Thorington*

**Frankenstein's Poetry**

---

You are carefully constructed in my hand,  
choice words patiently and painstakingly grown from kernels of creativity into a colossal canopy  
collapsed.

Fashioned finally onto clean pages,  
I will not bend your pointed ears back,  
for your crisp, cut bark contains contemplation  
curiously crafted and commanded.

I typed you into existence  
as a quickened pulse pounded through my fingertips.  
Every pressed key planted a seed,  
and I saw your single syllable stem stretch into two syllable leafy soles.

You were carefully grown  
from a sapling short and thin  
as I erased and typed long sentences, watching rows into lofty limbs grow.  
Each initial carved into your bark became a wounding blow.

I harvested ideas illustrated in ink  
from your chopped trunk; saw sheets of speech like tree rings split,  
spit out of the machine.  
Stacks of pages show where I lent my time  
and stamped with the sap of silver stapled stitches,  
you are out of my hands and head.

On your own, will you run when read?  
Line to line, breathing through beating rhymes?

---

Copyright © 2021 *Wide Angle*, Samford University. All rights reserved.



*Jake Lane*

**White-Tailed Deer: A short film**

---

INT. Piper's office - morning

Thursday morning. 10:17 a.m. PIPER and HARLEY are sitting across from each other at a desk. Silence.

A close-up on PIPER, which slowly zooms into her eye. Then, suddenly, she claps her hands right in front of her eye to kill a fly. A quick whip-pan to HARLEY, who sits across from her, a deer in the headlights of PIPER's bulldozer.

HARLEY

Is that what you're gonna do to me?

PIPER

What?

HARLEY

Like that bug. Squash me?

PIPER wipes her hand on her desk.

PIPER

Let's get started. Coffee?

HARLEY

(dryly)

Already had some. You're angry with me.

PIPER

Harley, please. Let's just . . .

(exhaling)

I know neither of us wants to be here longer than necessary, so let's get right into things and handle this professionally. I didn't want to call you in today, but I had to.

(beat)

I understand the pain you're in--

HARLEY

(interrupting)

No, you don't.

PIPER

(beat)

Excuse me?

HARLEY

You may know the same AMOUNT of pain, but not the same KIND.

PIPER avoids eye contact with HARLEY.

PIPER

Whatever the case may be, I know your personal . . . situations . . . are not ideal right now.

HARLEY

Do you have the right to know that? Legally?

PIPER

I'm speaking in the broadest of terms.

HARLEY

(easing off of an attacking tone)

And you've yet to say anything damaging.

PIPER

Right.

HARLEY

(indicating herself)

But this meeting will have casualties.

PIPER

(shifting in her seat, half-joking)

Well, wars aren't won by CREATING life.

HARLEY

They're won by destroying life. Decimation.

(pause)

So this is a war?

PIPER

Every struggle today is amplified until it's considered something far worse than reality: an overturning of a dynasty or a gut-wrenching battle. Label this as you will.

(Beat. She softens a bit)

It's a meeting. Not a war.

PIPER turns her attention to HARLEY's exit paperwork on the desk in front of her. The camera pans directly overhead and we get a glimpse of a few words: "immediate termination," "crazed," "blood."

HARLEY fidgets with her phone.

HARLEY

They sent you to do the dirty work, huh?

PIPER

(dismissing the question)

You're aware, of course, that there are grounds for immediate termination of your contract.

HARLEY

(pointedly)

Of course.

PIPER

In the face of all of this, however, we wanted the chance to speak with you again.

HARLEY

We?

PIPER

(dismissing her question, further emphasizing "we")

WE wanted to ensure that this is not patterned behavior. And we believe it is our duty, as your employer, to ask several questions regarding your wellbeing and your season of employment with--

HARLEY

I don't see the need for a psychological examination.

PIPER

(reading questions off the paperwork)

Do you believe we established an atmosphere of trust?

Pause, waiting. HARLEY stares incredulously.

PIPER

In your experience, have we fostered a community in which you could succeed mentally and physically, as well as in your career?

HARLEY begins to chuckle.

HARLEY

You have to go through all of these questions before you fire me?

The camera remains focused on HARLEY as PIPER continues.

PIPER

(continuing to read)

Did you take advantage of the weekly mental health check-ins?

HARLEY

No.

PIPER looks up, silently regarding her answer as untrue.

INT. OFFICE COMMON AREA - DAY

We quickly flash to PIPER and HARLEY sitting across from each other on yoga balls. Our view of them is foggy and distorted. HARLEY looks at PIPER, eyes darting. She scratches her own arm.

INT. PIPER'S OFFICE - MORNING

We flash back to PIPER's office, where HARLEY goes back on her previous answer.

HARLEY

I did, actually, at your suggestion, and it wasn't helpful.

PIPER

How so?

HARLEY wavers for a moment, then chooses self-preservation over vulnerability. She straightens in her seat.

HARLEY

It was dull.

PIPER

Like a knife?

HARLEY quickly exhales, placing her phone on the desk and leaning forward. The camera slowly pushes in towards her.

HARLEY

The word dull that we use today actually came from two parallel words in Old English and Middle Low Germanic,

neither of which had to do with knives, contrary to what you might think. Both, however, had similar meanings, and were used to describe a person: “slow, stupid, and . . . idiotic.”

A loaded pause. HARLEY is clutching the table and leaning forward, no longer a victim but instead showing hints of something more monstrous within. Without cutting, the camera whips to PIPER, who has grown nauseous.

PIPER

(reading the rest of the questions, without pause)

Are you aware of any specific actions that made this an unsafe workplace, physically, emotionally, or mentally? Would you consider your time here to have been a benefit to you moving forward in this field? And finally, do you have any recommendations for improvements in maintaining the emotional stamina of our workplace moving forward? Thank you for your time, Harley. You can go as soon as you sign this.

She places the paperwork and the pen on the table in front of HARLEY. The camera angle is wide and allows the tension to linger between them.

HARLEY

I'd like to hear the reason.

PIPER

For your termination?

HARLEY

For your personal vendetta against me.

PIPER

(scoffs)

I'm trying to handle this delicately and professionally, but from the onset of this meeting, you've been incredibly hostile.

HARLEY

Yes.

PIPER

So, you admit to that? You agree with me?

HARLEY

(scraping her way towards an upper hand)

I've never found a use for bringing my defenses down.  
Defensiveness is vital to survival.

PIPER

No, Harley. It's not.

PIPER picks up the pen and holds it in front of HARLEY, offering it, a way to end her contract peacefully. We slowly zoom in to the pen.

HARLEY

(she lifts her phone off the desk and  
examines it, picking at the case with her  
finger)

Have you ever had your power questioned?

PIPER

(a small moment of mourning)

Constantly. And ruthlessly.

HARLEY

Even at this job your daddy handed you?

PIPER searches for any softness in HARLEY yet finds none. She puts down the pen. Realizing this isn't enough, she yanks the paper back to her side of the desk. We follow PIPER and feel her shakiness in a handheld shot.

PIPER

Your contract has been terminated.

HARLEY

So nothing I say now can be held against me.

PIPER looks at her, in disbelief. She's about to say something before HARLEY continues.

HARLEY

This, all of this, this constant stress on authenticity, and  
health, and wellness. How has that taken a toll? Can you  
even begin to understand the hell you are creating?

INT. OFFICE COMMON AREA - DAY

We flash to PIPER, forcing a smile and looking at HARLEY. Our view of her is askew and intrusive. She mouths words in slow-motion indistinctly.

WE CUT BACK TO:

INT. PIPER'S OFFICE - MORNING

*Wide Angle*

PIPER

Harley, you don't . . .

PIPER pauses and laughs. Then, she takes out a piece of gum and unwraps it.

PIPER

You know what? Fine. Have your rant.

She puts the gum in her mouth and begins chewing. HARLEY continues. The words fall out of her mouth and land in her lap. She's unhinged, and this is freeing.

HARLEY

Do you enjoy inflicting pain? That's your job, right? Being at the disposal of others, knowing they'd rather choke than do the things they have you do?

(beat)

I'm trivial to you, aren't I? I WAS, at least, until I made ripples, until I shattered the façade of your perfected, formulated "atmosphere." You needed me to make a mistake. You NEEDED a problem to wrangle, and you needed blood on your hands . . .

We quickly flash to, for less than a second, HARLEY standing in a headlight, her face covered in blood. Then we flash back.

HARLEY

To prove you're worthy of the power you have. The power you've been given.

Our view of HARLEY is becoming more mechanical. The angle is changing constantly, as is her positioning. Everything is sharp.

HARLEY

So I'm perfect, right? No, really, I am. What a trajectory! From trivial to perfect. But maybe I was always perfect. Even before you got in my head. Maybe I was ALWAYS PERFECT!!

(beat)

So why was I fired?

A pause. PIPER chews her gum, placid on the surface but teeming with anger underneath.

HARLEY

You don't care about ME. You don't care about PEOPLE. Honestly, you don't even care about this company. You care about power.

We flash back and forth between PIPER'S OFFICE and the OFFICE COMMON AREA. In the OFFICE COMMON AREA, we see PIPER talking to HARLEY as HARLEY grows increasingly defensive and introspective. In PIPER'S OFFICE, HARLEY continues to berate PIPER.

HARLEY

You suffocate and squeeze people until they have no other choice but to explode, blood and guts dripping, pouring out of them, and then, you keep squeezing, you interrogate and terrorize them with your "training" and your "check-ins" until they slip up, and that's when you jump and attack their dead, bruised, beaten bodies, with your daddy's gold-plated knife.

PIPER stands, enraged. The following flies out of her: tears, spit, and all. Her rage is full-grown. We see her from below, framing her directly in the center of the shot towering above HARLEY and us.

PIPER

You are fired because you got intoxicated and vandalized company property.

INT. OFFICE COMMON AREA - DAY

PIPER speaks to HARLEY with a plastered-on smile. It echoes.

PIPER

How are you today, really?

INT. PIPER'S OFFICE - MORNING

PIPER

Your time here is over because you--a thoughtless, heedless, manic-depressive monster of a human--got drunk, drove your car into an innocent white-tailed deer, severed its head, and placed that head on the doorstep of your job.

INT. OFFICE COMMON AREA - DAY

PIPER

(questions overlapping)

When was your last real meal? Have you been drinking enough water? What is causing you anxiety? Are you able to properly focus on your tasks here?

*Wide Angle*



EXT. ROADSIDE - NIGHT

We see HARLEY, out of focus, stumbling out of her car in slow motion.

INT. PIPER'S OFFICE - MORNING

PIPER

You watched the life pour out of a pure creature, drop by drop. You just stood there and watched as it slowly died, its lifeless eyes bearing the reflection of a drunk, deranged psychopath.

(more quiet and pointedly)

You let your illness destroy you from the inside, and you spread your filth on our name.

EXT. ROADSIDE - NIGHT

We see from ground-level as HARLEY reaches out of frame past us, her hands coming back into focus covered in blood as she looks at them in horror.

INT. PIPER'S OFFICE - MORNING

PIPER

You're fired because YOU are a monster. Your bloody hands should never have touched a piece of this company's property again! And I will do everything in my power to destroy you. Because you. Deserve. It.

EXT. ROADSIDE - NIGHT

HARLEY looks at her bloody hands. The camera pushes in towards her as her look of horror turns into a small grin, then a full smile. The camera begins to tilt as she laughs.

INT. OFFICE COMMON AREA - DAY

HARLEY looks straight ahead with tears streaming down her face. The focus is shifty, as if we are seeing through her eyes and also straining to see her.

PIPER (O.S.)

(echoing)

How are you? How are you, really?

HARLEY

(echoing, through tears)

*Wide Angle*

I'm fine.

PIPER (O.S.)  
(echoing)  
That's what I wanted to hear.

INT. PIPER'S OFFICE - MORNING

HARLEY looks at PIPER, feeling a sense of relief from pulling this rage out of her. Then, quietly, she unleashes her final accusation.

HARLEY  
You pushed me.

PIPER  
(unsurprised, wounded, fearing the truth in  
this statement, she pleads earnestly)  
I was trying to help you.

EXT. ROADSIDE - NIGHT

HARLEY gets back in her car.

INT. PIPER'S OFFICE - MORNING

A long beat, then HARLEY looks PIPER directly in her eyes.

HARLEY  
It should have been your head.

EXT. ROADSIDE - NIGHT

We finally see where HARLEY is in grander detail. She sits at the steering wheel of her car, stunned. Her bloody hands clutch the wheel. Then, she looks out the driver window. We see, at a bit of a distance, in a window, PIPER standing at her sink washing dishes.

INT. PIPER'S OFFICE - MORNING

HARLEY stands and repeats her final sentiment, though this time it is more of a threat. She's almost smiling.

HARLEY  
It should have been your head.

*Wide Angle*

Then she walks out of the office. We follow her, looking directly at her face as she walks. We flash back and forth between very similar shots of her walking . . .

EXT. ROADSIDE - NIGHT

. . . though in the other shot she is walking away from her car with the headlights behind her. We flash back and forth. We see a quick shot of her outside again, with tears falling down her cheeks.

INT. PIPER'S OFFICE - MORNING

We cut back to HARLEY walking out of the office, smiling.

EXT. ROADSIDE - NIGHT

Then we once again see HARLEY walking away from her car. She wipes her hands on her face, smearing blood on her cheeks.

INT. PIPER'S OFFICE - MORNING

Back at the office, she quietly whispers to herself.

HARLEY

I'll die a king.

EXT. ROADSIDE - NIGHT

We cut back to HARLEY outside, walking away from her car again, staring straight at us, crazed.

INT. PIPER'S OFFICE - MORNING

Then finally, quickly, we cut back to: PIPER in the office. Her face is covered in blood.

CUT TO BLACK.

---

Copyright © 2021 *Wide Angle*, Samford University. All rights reserved.

*Brice Boyer*

### **Racism in Sherlock Holmes: A Cursory Glance at Character Portrayal**

---

Victorian England gave birth to some of the most celebrated works of literature today. Countless adaptations of *Frankenstein*, *Jane Eyre*, and various Charles Dickens novels show an ever-present fascination with this era of literature.

However, few novels compare to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*. Heralded as one of the most adapted characters in history ("Who IS Sherlock Holmes - Neil McCaw," 00:02:40-00:02:50), Sherlock Holmes encompasses mystery, clever twists of events, and the quintessential vignette of Victorian English culture. Particularly in the realm of culture, Doyle paints the scene of Victorian London through his descriptions of London fog, working people, and race. Throughout the various adventures of Sherlock Holmes, the race of the secondary characters carries an important aspect of the novels' and short stories' plots. Though Doyle seems somewhat progressive in his treatment of race in his short stories "The Five Orange Pips" and "The Yellow Face," Doyle still seems to suffer from implicit racism of his culture in his works *A Study in Scarlet* and *A Sign of Four*.

In "The Five Orange Pips," a man by the name of Elias Openshaw is murdered under suspicious circumstances after receiving a letter marked by three letters *KKK* and containing five orange pips (seeds). In this letter, the writer demands a chest of specific papers to be delivered to a drop-off point. Later, Elias is found dead in a garden pool after disregarding the terms of the letter. Upon Elias's death, his brother, Joseph, receives the same letter with the same demands and, in the next few days, is also found dead after doing nothing that the letter demanded. Brought to Holmes by Joseph's son, John, in fear of his life, Holmes immediately demands John

to leave a chest at the drop-off point and remain alert. In solving the case, Holmes traces the culprits back to a ship known as the *Lone Star*, but the ship sinks in the Atlantic before anyone can get justice for the murdered.

A rather short and unsatisfying ending, the true value comes in Doyle's portrayal of the characters and their connection to the KKK, which as readers of this paper in true Sherlockian fashion may have deduced, refers to the Ku Klux Klan. Doyle first portrays Elias Openshaw as a former American plantation owner who held the title of colonel for the Confederacy in the American Civil War. His reason for moving to England was "his aversion to the negroes, and his dislike of the Republican policy in extending the franchise to them" (Doyle 224). In the words of John (Elias's nephew), Elias is described as "a singular man, fierce and quick tempered, very foul-mouthed when he was, and of a most retiring disposition . . . he drank a great deal of brandy, and smoked very heavily, but he would see no society, and did not want any friends, not even his own brother" (224). Clearly, Elias is not endearing. Elias is not only distasteful but also *uncivilized*, an insult far worse than most in Victorian England. He seems without social graces and any desire to ingratiate into London society. Further, Elias's depravity seems to encapsulate not only an unagreeable disposition but also his concept of racism. Elias, though he left the KKK, nevertheless seems to retain racist ideas that carry over from his time in America. In describing the society, Doyle states that the "terrible secret society [that] was formed by some ex-Confederate soldiers in the Southern States after the Civil War . . . its power was used for political purposes, principally for the terrorising of the negro voters . . ." (231). Through the connotation of calling the KKK "terrible" and declaring it flourishing "in spite of the efforts of the United States Government" (231), Doyle continues to show a disdain for the organization. Further, his disdain seems to neglect the presence of racism in England. Throughout this story

(and interestingly the rest of his canon), Doyle never shows explicit racism in England. In pointing out the very racially charged concepts of the American Civil War, the Ku Klux Klan, and the American South, racism seems to be the problem of the United States, not England.

In “The Adventure of the Yellow Face,” a man by the name of Grant Munro comes to Sherlock with worries about his wife. His wife, a widow of a previous marriage in America, has always been the pinnacle of devotion and love. However, recently, she has been secretly visiting and taking money to a cottage without her husband’s knowledge. When Munro confronts her about the secret visits, she remains furtive and avoidant. Determined to find out for himself, Munro walks by the cottage and sees a horrifying yellow face in the window. Later, when he investigates the interior, the figure is nowhere to be found. Thus, he brought the case to Sherlock Holmes. After Munro’s departure, Sherlock begins meditating on the case and believes that the woman’s original husband, rather than dead, is very much alive and blackmailing his wife. Upon investigation, however, Sherlock actually proves to be wrong in his deductions, a rarity among Sherlock novels. Rather than fulfilling a blackmail ransom, the money and visits had been for a biracial, dark-skinned child the wife had by her first husband who was black. The yellow face had initially been a disguise for the child should anyone happen by the cottage. Out of fear of her husband’s judgement, the wife had hidden her child from Munro.

Among the canon of Sherlock Holmes stories, this short story does not usually demand much attention. At only twelve pages, the story is fairly clear and easy to follow. However, it does contain two rarities among the rest of Sherlock’s adventures: 1) an overtly counter-cultural action in accepting the biracial child and 2) Sherlock’s mistaken deductions. As Mrs. Munro’s secret is revealed, and she looks to Mr. Munro for his response, Mr. Munro, rather than disown Mrs. Munro and turn the child away, lifts “the little child, kissed her, and then still carrying her,

he held his other hand out to his wife and turned towards the door . . . ‘I am not a very good man, Effie, but I think I am a better one than you have given me credit for being’” (Doyle 372). In illustrating this scene, Doyle demonstrates a very counter-cultural understanding of biracial children—one in which they are cherished and not disregarded as a lesser race. The child, in her brief moment in the story, shows no negative stereotypes and is described as “a little coal-black negress with all her white teeth flashing in amusement at our amazed faces” (371). Granted, it takes Mr. Munro some time to process, for “It was a long two minutes before Grant Munro broke the silence” (372). However, at the conclusion of his thought, he welcomes the child as if it were his own and retains no misgivings towards his wife. This wonderful acceptance serves almost as a moral to the regular readers of Sherlock stories.

Also notable about this story is Sherlock’s mistake. Of course, throughout the canon, Sherlock will make a wrong assertion or two, but he always, ultimately, figures out the case. This is not so in “The Adventure of the Yellow Face.” At the conclusion of the case, Sherlock asks Watson, “if it should ever strike you that I am getting a little over-confident in my powers, or giving less pains to a case than it deserves, kindly whisper ‘Norbury’ (this being where the case took place) in my ear, and I shall be infinitely obliged to you” (372). Sherlock shows an unusual amount of humility in his mistake. Typically, rather cold and devoted to the task, Mr. Munro’s treatment of his new biracial child invokes a surprising amount of humanity in Sherlock. In doing so, it seems that Sherlock’s response serves as an example to the Victorian British populace in assessing misconceptions. Even the great Sherlock Holmes, an expert of deduction and investigation, had to reassess his assertions in relation to race.

Despite Doyle’s stories explicitly demonstrating a fairly enlightened approach to race, his stories still nevertheless contain implicit stereotypes as well. Though Doyle seems to caution

himself from being overtly racist, his stories still contain stereotypes that are harmful to the populations he stereotypes. For instance, in *A Study in Scarlet*, Sherlock utilizes “Arab street urchins” to find the murderer among the sea of London. When this band is introduced, Watson describes them as “the dirtiest and most ragged street Arabs that ever I clapped eyes on” (Doyle 34). They also are described as “dirty little scoundrels” and “rats” (34). In writing about these characters, Doyle taps into a preconceived caricature that his readers already understand. While this makes his story easier to tell and avoids distracting from his narrative, his flippant use of stereotypes indicate cultural anti-Arab sentiments. Though Sherlock’s fondness for the Arab street urchins gives them more social importance than society designates, Doyle’s portrayal still continues the stereotype of the foreigner street urchin. He could have simply labeled the characters as street urchins, but he labels them by a racial moniker, “Arabs.”

Likewise, in *A Sign of Four*, the murderer is a diminutive, South American island native who uses a blowgun to kill his victims. Another highly stereotypical portrayal, Doyle’s diminutive island-native also embodies cultural stereotypes about foreigners, especially since the native is the villain. As Sherlock relates his theory to Watson, he refers to an article which describes the island native as “naturally hideous, having large, misshapen heads, small, fierce eyes, and distorted features . . . a terror to shipwrecked crews, braining the survivors with their stone-headed clubs” (Doyle 128). Like the Arab street urchins, this characterization plays into racist understandings of island foreigners who are malformed, aggressive, unintelligent “savages” (127). Unlike the Arab street urchins, this character’s stereotypes are critical to the narrative, for part of the twist of the mystery is that, due to his unorthodox stature and method of killing, Scotland Yard has difficulty discerning the culprit. However, despite the plot importance



of the characterization, Doyle's portrayal still shows that he remains a product of his culture and some of culture's perceptions of race.

In some of Doyle's stories, he creates a character that seems as enlightened racially as his powers of deduction; however, the narratives surrounding Sherlock still encompass some of the era's most inappropriate stereotypes. From Arab street urchins to island natives, Doyle plays upon caricatures consisting of negative racial stereotypes to quickly give characterization to his characters. Surprisingly, the only race for which Doyle seems to disregard stereotypes is Black people. Taken with the historical context of the recent American Civil War and its focus on slavery, Doyle may have had the idea of Black racism prominent in his mind while writing these stories. Though he earnestly tries to deliver a more understanding treatment of race in his short stories, Doyle still remains a hallmark of his time. Even though he attempts to highlight a proper understanding of race in "The Five Orange Pips" and "The Yellow Face," his stories still contain racist portrayals of characters in *A Study in Scarlet* and *The Sign of Four*. While he moves in the right direction, towards a dialogue of anti-racism of Black folks, he remains blind to his own racism of Arabs and American island natives due to the limitation of his historical era.

#### Works Cited

- Doyle, Arthur Conan. "A Study in Scarlet." *The Complete Sherlock Holmes*, edited by Daniel Stashower, Race Point Publishing, 2014, pp. 5–84.
- . "The Five Orange Pips." Stashower, pp. 222–34.
- . "The Sign of the Four." Stashower, pp. 87–161.
- . "The Yellow Face." Stashower, pp. 361–72.

“Who IS Sherlock Holmes - Neil McCaw.” *Youtube*, uploaded by TED-Ed, 2016,  
[youtu.be/I8992A5oAWM](https://youtu.be/I8992A5oAWM).

---

Copyright © 2021 *Wide Angle*, Samford University. All rights reserved.

*Will Carlisle*

### **Frederick Douglass, Kanye West, and the New Slaves**

---

In July of 1852, a New York abolitionist organization called upon Frederick Douglass to speak at their annual Fourth of July celebration. Douglass agreed, and his address was bold and revolutionary. With great zeal and conviction, Douglass asserted that he, as a nineteenth-century African American, had no reason to celebrate the Declaration of Independence alongside his white peers because its privileges and liberties were not extended to him. And although slavery was federally abolished only thirteen years later in 1865, the systemic oppression of African Americans, rooted firmly in American chattel slavery, still pervades modern-day American culture.

This systemic bondage has become a primary subject of discourse in modern African American culture. Black politicians, public figures, and artists alike have made major cultural waves by echoing Douglass in the unabashed dissemination of false liberty and suppressed oppression. One of the most distinct voices of the past decade is Kanye West, a hip-hop icon, fashion mogul, and full-time iconoclast of mainstream ideology. And perhaps West's most imminent exposé of America's cultural racism is embodied in his song "New Slaves," released in 2013 as part of his highly controversial album *Yeezus*. As a comparison of these works will display, Douglass's innovation in civil confrontation birthed an era of similar, yet drastically different expressions. Frederick Douglass redefined the trajectory of social justice in America forever with his landmark speech, "What to a Slave is the Fourth of July," by boldly confronting his white audience

concerning their failure to extend America's foundational principles to those of African descent. Douglass's purposes carry through many modern-day sociopolitical works, such as Kanye West's 2013 song, "New Slaves." However, West and Douglass's ideological harmony is underscored by the piercing dissonance of their persuasive narratives, exposing the tense, often paradoxical relationship between patience and persuasion.

To begin with, the form of Frederick Douglass's address exhibits extensive thought and calculation. Douglass is alert and nuanced in his approach as he begins his address. Douglass employs two primary themes in his opening that appeal to his audience. The first is his use of biblical themes, and the second being historical testimony. In his opening remarks, Douglass declares to his audience, "This, to you, is what the Passover was to the emancipated people of God" (2). This reference to the institution of the Passover in Exodus 12 introduces an incredibly important aspect of Douglass's platform: biblical literacy (Andrews 593). This tactic, which appears repeatedly throughout Douglass's writings and speeches, is his primary method of establishing common ground with his white, Judeo-Christian audience. These biblical references are woven throughout the entirety of Douglass's address, tallying nearly fifty religious references within the hour-long speech. Douglass strategically elevates the narrative of the Israelite's escape from Egyptian bondage to represent the American liberation from the British crown, which he then subverts to rationalize his expectation for the liberation of African slaves. Douglass's emphasis on biblical literature doubtlessly catalyzes the power of his appeal for his white, American audience (Andrews 594).

Furthermore, Douglass strengthens his appeal with historical literacy, depicting America's founding fathers as figureheads of the liberation he demands for the enslaved.

After briefly detailing the British oppression experienced by colonists, Douglass recalls the political climate of eighteenth-century America. He speaks of the Tories, their political opposition, and the formation of the Continental Congress, which resulted in the signing of the Declaration of Independence (3-4). Following this, Douglass discusses the Founding Fathers, admitting his reservations due to their blind pardon of slavery while affirming a solemn admiration of their bravery and self-sacrifice (5). Douglass's knowledge of history, combined with his nuanced personal interpretation of the figures and events, reveals an intellectual depth and critical thinking ability that shatters the stereotypical expectations that would have been held for an uneducated slave like himself. His remarks indicate an urgency and refusal of "forbearance" that is cloaked in civility and respect (Douglass 7). His vocabulary is informed by his ministerial background as well as the influence of his early mentor Father Lawson (Andrews 392). Douglass's scholarship and distinction makes his speech "What to a Slave is the Fourth of July" one of the most influential and revisited moments of the abolitionist movement.

One-hundred-sixty-one years after Douglass's famed speech, Kanye West released *Yeezus*, a hip-hop record laden with racial, social, and sexual controversy. In 2013, *Yeezus* immediately established a reputation for itself as irreverent and vulgar, yet with two Grammy nominations and numerous other accolades, its cultural impact was undeniable. One of the record's most thematically charged songs is "New Slaves," the album's fourth track, which was nominated for "Best Hip-Hop Song" for the 2014 Grammy's ("Winners"). In many ways, West's sentiments align quite closely with those of Douglass as he seeks to unveil the unquestioned, silent forms of oppression that govern the nation. His approach, however, is utterly divergent of Douglass's reverent, academic exposition. In the opening

verse, West lambasts the “materialism as liberation” narrative, famously championed by Booker T. Washington (Ciccariello-Maher 387) saying,

You see it's broke n\*\*\*\* racism  
 That's that ‘Don't touch anything in the store’  
 And it's rich n\*\*\*\* racism  
 That's that ‘Come in, please buy more’  
 ‘What you want, a Bentley? Fur coat? A diamond chain?  
 All you blacks want all the same things.’ (West lines 5-10)

West spares no effort to reveal how capitalism has been leveraged by the upper-class white in order to perpetuate the oppression of minority populations. Although Douglass and West align in their refusal to medicate oppression with materialistic ambition, West’s narrative starkly contrasts from Douglass’s biblical and historical rhetoric. Kanye West is brash and evocative; his narrative is not kindly persuasive and befriending. Rather, the language here is assertive and nearly militant. Throughout the song, West employs profanity, slurs, and appalling racial stereotypes of African American illiteracy and sexual violence. West’s racial discourse is competitive and impatient (Ciccariello-Maher 388). However, these instances of vulgarity could hardly be considered vain. Rather, West uses such strong language to captivate his audience and elicit a strong emotional reaction. Where Douglass seeks to connect with his audience through religious and historical common ground, Kanye West seeks to waken and arouse his listeners through offensive, eruptive language. West’s language is persuasive, but it is not patient. According to West, white America has simply refused to truly loosen the bonds of oppression that have subjugated Black Americans for centuries. Instead, this oppression has merely shifted from outright displays of tyranny to

hidden, systematic structures that enslave Black Americans economically and politically. For example, this resounds as West condemns the private-owned prison industry in America:

They tryna lock n\*\*\*\*\* up  
 they tryna make new slaves  
 See, that's that privately owned prison  
 get your peace today  
 they prolly all in the Hamptons  
 braggin' 'bout what they made. (35-40)

Following this, West's tone becomes militant and threatening. His central message conveys that because the oppressors have refused to remove their chains from their captives, it is time for the oppressed to overcome and overwhelm their oppressors.

Despite this vast rhetorical dissonance between the appeals of Frederick Douglass and Kanye West, it is evident that Douglass assisted in building the foundation from which West's embittered appeal arises. Certainly, Douglass and West greatly differ in their emotional display and rhetorical method. However, this dissonance by no means negates their thematic harmony. First, Douglass and West share in their condemnation of false liberty. In "What to a Slave is the Fourth of July," Douglass boldly proclaims to his audience that the freedom they ask him to celebrate is *their* freedom, not his. Throughout his public career, Douglass was unwavering in questioning even the self-contradicting religious views of pro-slavery "Christians," yet always in a considerably gentle manner (PBS). West, however, harshly awakens his audience to the fact that racial equity is, at this point in history, an oppressive facade. One systemic example that West supplies is the

collaboration of the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) with the Corrections Corporation of America (CCA) in order to target and incarcerate much of the Black, inner-city population (West 53-58). As previously mentioned, this alleged collaboration erupts the profit margins of the private-owned prison economy.

This difference in tone can be attributed to several causes. Many would likely speculate that it is merely a difference of personality, Douglass being more personable and tasteful than West. Some might postulate that perhaps West's occupation as a hip-hop artist in the twenty-first century render him unequipped to communicate with the poise and impact of Douglass, a renowned author and public speaker. I believe, however, that the dissonance between West and Douglass is primarily linked to their unique placement in history. Douglass, being an early catalyst of the abolitionist movement, guides his appeal with discernment. His frustration is tempered with optimism that American slavery will soon be eradicated. Contrarily, Kanye West displays disillusionment and anger in "New Slaves." From his vantage point in 2013, he can observe the abolition of slavery in 1865, the civil rights movement of the twentieth century, and even the election of America's first Black president. Despite these victories, however, Black Americans are still rampantly oppressed. History seems to prove that every time one form of oppression is eradicated, a new form arises. This should stand as reminder to modern readers and listeners of Douglass and West that freedom and equity are not static targets. It will never be enough to simply eradicate oppressive systems and practices. Rather, true liberty must be grown and continually nurtured. Readers should learn from the harmony of Douglass and West that we ought to strive for liberty and justice to pervade every socioeconomic region of our nation.



Additionally, we must let their dissonance remind us that this work has not yet been accomplished, and it is our responsibility to press on towards the day that it is.

#### Works Cited

Andrews, William L. "Frederick Douglass, Preacher." *American Literature*, vol. 54, no. 4, 1982, pp. 592–97. JSTOR.

Ciccariello-Maher, George. "A Critique of Du Boisian Reason: Kanye West and the Fruitfulness of Double-Consciousness." *Journal of Black Studies*, vol. 39, no. 3, 2009, pp. 371–401. JSTOR.

Douglass, Frederick. "What to a Slave Is the Fourth of July." 5 July 1852, Rochester, NY. Print.

PBS. "This Far by Faith: Frederick Douglass." PBS, Public Broadcasting Service, 2007.

West, Kanye, et al. "New Slaves." *Yeezus*, Kanye West, 2013.

"Winners & Nominees." GRAMMY.com, Recording Academy, 2021, [www.grammy.com/grammys/awards/winners-nominees/256](http://www.grammy.com/grammys/awards/winners-nominees/256).

Copyright © 2021 *Wide Angle*, Samford University. All rights reserved.

*Parker Gilley*

### Remembering to Forget: *Omeros* and the Epic Tradition

---

**T**his essay will contribute to the general reflections on race and literature offered in this journal by briefly prying into the brilliant, bold, baffling language of Derek Walcott's masterful St. Lucian epic poem, *Omeros*. The question with which I am concerned is that which confronts us in the face of the aw(e)ful: *What is it?* How can the Protean Other be wrangled into thought and language? Or rather, how does *Omeros*, in its rich blend of languages, mythologies, speakers, and reflexivities, wrangle us as readers with its formal formlessness? An inquiry of this type, concerned as it is with language of a Caribbean author writing in English, teasing us Patois, Latin, Greek, and other now-anglicized words brought with his ancestors to the Antilles from a forgotten African tongue, flows through the reflections on minority literature by Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari.

In getting at this ontological question of what *Omeros is*, we would not be amiss to begin with the obvious—it is a poem, and an epic one at that, written in English. But this immediately confronts us with a two-fold problem, born of one imperialist mother: Derek Walcott is a poet of St. Lucia in the Antilles, a land of Patois and pidgin English, writing poetry in a genre enshrined as the Olympus of literary genius in the West. It is not simply that the pidgin tongue of the St. Lucia, born by the strict necessity of dueling imperial powers Britain and France needing to communicate with their respective slave populations, seems unfit for the laureled company of Homeric Greek, Virgilian Latin, Dantean Italian, and Miltonian English. It is the greatest irony to see Walcott joining this company in a literary tradition which embodies the Western values (or,

in many cases, the derivation from but recognition of those values) of the societies that enslaved his ancestors and marooned them on a faraway rock in the Atlantic Ocean. We are now in the realm of that literature on which Deleuze and Guattari write: “A minor literature doesn’t come from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major. But the first character of minor literature in any case is that in it, language is affected with a high coefficient of deterritorialization” (166). We find Walcott engaged in the same project, working within the abundance and strangeness of his St. Lucian and academic English, the Patois of the Antilles, and his erudition in Greek and Latin, comprising an expansive and potent poetic vocabulary which effectively decentralizes the language of epic and, convertibly, power, relocalizing the milieu of the genre in the tropical fishing villages of St. Lucia.

Even so, something greater is afoot. The general argument of the poem is as follows: Two fisherman and friends, Achille and Hector, fight over the love of a beautiful woman named Helen. Also involved in these fishermen’s lives is an assorted cast of characters, each seeking their own form of closure or resolution. Philoctete, another fisherman and friend, suffers from a perpetually infected wound in his leg from an anchor. Seven Seas is a blind (and perhaps deaf) old man who is constantly found sitting and singing before the NO PAIN CAFÉ, a local dive run by Ma Kilman, a seer and healer. Major Plunkett and his wife Maud are immigrants to the island as well, yet they have come by choice as distinguished citizens of the UK after WWII in hopes of settling down and having their first child. And “I,” Derek Walcott, the poetic consciousness of the epic, is the mind which wanders to and from his home, projecting these epic qualities and names on the quotidian beauties and phantoms of St. Lucia in his memory.

It is clear from this brief survey of characters that Walcott is interested in both participating in and exposing the literary form of the Western epic. Achilles and Hector are the

namesakes of the great Achean and Trojan generals in Homer's *Iliad*; Helen is the cause of the Trojan War, as well as the informal name of St. Lucia ("Helen of the West Indies"); Philoctetes is a constantly reappearing figure in the *Iliad* and in Greek mythology in general, known for his being stranded on the island of Lemnos nurturing an unhealed and festering serpent wound; Major Plunkett casts an Aeneas figure (with all the colonialist complications of Aeneas' fame implied) fleeing from his worn-torn, post-WWII Europe in search of a home for his family; Seven Seas is the archetype of the blind, Homeric bard, whose "words were not clear // They were like Greek . . . Or old African babble" (Walcott 18), and he lives on St. Lucia, patron saint of the blind.

All of these epic associations key the reader into the meaning beyond the complex nexus of literary allusions in *Omeros*. The poem is not merely allusive—allusion is the language of the poem itself. By writing in English, Patois, Latin, et al., and by writing about the epic, Walcott is immediately involving himself in the "major literatures" of a dominant Western culture. To know a language is to know what the vessels of that lingual flame favor— what is honored by its speakers, what is remembered, what has become unbound by Time or custom in the memory. In *Omeros*, Walcott proposes the epic as its own language, bearing its own symbols, fighting its own battles for human excellence on otherworldly planes, wrestling in well-wrought rhyme with what is base and what is best in our human situation. But Walcott is engaged in this process of epic-making with a twist: he is not writing to remember, but to forget. He is not writing to cast in his lot with the shining names of antiquity, but to move beyond the semiotics of History, of private languages and privileged thoughts, to a place of healing. He writes to invert the epic form—to work through the words of the dead in order to heal the gaping wound of slavery and domination left by history.

The inversion of the epic is apparent in the very first lines: ““This is how, one sunrise, we cut down them canoes.’ // Philoctete smiles for the tourists, who try taking // his soul with their cameras” (Walcott 3). Here is no credible appeal to the goddess as in Homer’s inaugural “Sing goddess, the rage,” nor Vergil’s “Remind me, Muse, the misfortunes . . .” Walcott speaks straightway with the voice of the island through Philoctete and initiates the main conflict of the poem through the soul stealing cameras of tourists. Of course, these tourists are the dregs of eroded empires, commodifying the homes and gawking at the strained, simple lives of the poor descendants of the Africans their own forefathers enslaved. Vexed by his membership in this class, the Major, seated on a “white terrace” (23), reflects: “*Pro Rommel, pro mori. // The regimental brandies stiffened on the shelves // near Napoleonic cognacs. All history // in a dusty Beefeater’s gin. We helped ourselves // to these green islands like olives from a saucer, // munched on the pith, then spat their sucked stones on a plate, // like a melon’s black seeds*” (25). Contrast this with the scene before, as a frustrated Philoctete hobbles upon his perpetual wound while harvesting his African yams:

He stretched out the foot. He edged the razor-sharp steel  
through pleading finger and thumb. The yam leaves recoiled  
in a cold sweat. He hacked every root at the heel.

He hacked them at the heel, noticing how they curled  
head-down without their roots. He cursed the yams:

“*Salope!*”

You all see what it’s like without roots in this world?”

Then sobbed, his face down in the slaughtered leaves. (21)

Like those who brought their seeds to St. Lucia, these yams, a traditional Igbo crop, were uprooted from their homes, their names, and their memories, and were transplanted in the foreign climes of a far-away land. The wound of displacement festers like Philoctete's rotting leg, and Walcott wonders through the wounded sailor: "He believed the swelling came from the chained ankles // of his grandfathers. Or else, why was there no cure?" (19).

This foregrounded conflict in the poem of scarred brown bodies and white commercialization blossoms around Walcott's oft-interjecting, reflexive, Walt Whitman-esque, Dantean "I," who perceives a deeper, philosophical tension between history and literature, land and sea, shadow and reality. As a biographical note of interest, Walcott, like many of the great epicists in history, wrote his poem removed from the homeland of his text, living in Massachusetts at the time of *Omeros*' composition. Like Dante, exiled from his beloved Florence, Walcott allows the reader brief glimpses of the oneiric St. Lucia of *Omeros* which unfolds only in his memory: "I longed for those streets that History had made great, // but the island became me fortress and retreat, // in that circle of friends that I could dominate. // Dominate, Dominus. With His privilege, // I felt like the 'I' that looks down on an island . . ." (187). The brilliance of Walcott's wordplay is on full display. Here, he, as narrator, is talking with the specter of his father, who encourages him to literary greatness through the reading of great books of the world and traveling to its great cities. Walcott complicates his own position as author, reflexively showing himself as occupying both sides of the confrontation in the poem. He is both *Dominus* (Lord, Master), exposing the Latin etymology of the word for domination, looking down both geographically and culturally at the lowly St. Lucia, while still relying on St. Lucia as his attachment to identity, far from the domination of History, which was "Circe with her schoolteacher's wand" (64). More pointedly, he is "outside his fragile community" providing

him a special vantage of privilege within which he may “express another possible community and forge the means for another consciousness and another sensibility” (Deleuze and Guattari 167).

Throughout the majority of the poem, we find Plunkett likewise wrestling with history while writing a record of Helen, the St. Lucian island he is desperately trying to become a part of as friend and not colonizer. Walcott constantly barrages the prosaic lies of history writing with his poetry, until he, as author and St. Lucian alike, realizes that Literature and History are both forms of mediating reality by both conquerors and the conquered. The theme of shadows reemerges in this context as the signifier for the perseverance of mediated narrations extending beyond their progenitors. Walcott ponders the perseverance of altered memories molded by bronze:

The nightmare cannot wake  
 from a Sunday where the mouse-claw of ivy grips  
 the grooved brick of colleges, while a yellow tractor  
 breaks the Sabbath and the alchemical plateau  
  
 of the Transcendental New England character,  
 sifting wit from the chaff, the thorn out of Thoreau,  
 the mess from Emerson, where a benefactor  
  
 now bronzed in his unshifting principles can show  
 us that any statue is a greater actor  
 than its original by its longer shadow. (210)

The hegemony of great men of letters in the Western mind, and in general, the human fascination with ancient and incorrigible principles and precepts—troubles Walcott, as a member of and sufferer of these fantasies of fixity.

How, then, to escape the mediation of Time, of which both Literature and History are guilty? The poet and Plunkett both see the beauty of Helen, and cannot help but metonymize her as a symbol of St. Lucia herself. I quote but a few selections from this hauntingly beautiful passage:

There, in her head of ebony,  
 there was no real need for the historian's  
 remorse, nor for literature's. Why not see Helen

as the sun saw her, with no Homeric shadow . . .

All that Greek manure under the green bananas . . .

the myth of rustic manners,

glazed by the transparent page of what I had read.

What I had read and rewritten till literature  
 was guilty as History. When would the sails drop

from my eyes, when would I not hear the Trojan War

in two fishermen cursing in Ma Kilman's shop? . . .



When would it stop,  
 the echo in the throat, insisting, “Omeros”;  
 when would I enter that light beyond metaphor? (271)

This poetic pain is the existential unhappiness presaged by Kierkegaard. The poet’s pain is the longing for the negation of his own poetic craft, for the mediation of pain through words to cease, even though this pain can only be made known through words. Furthermore, his words and thoughts are not his own, but are shadows of other shadows, the specters of majority literatures which represent the cause of St. Lucia’s pain.

At the end of “What is a Minor Literature,” Deleuze and Guattari write, “He [the minor author] will push it toward a deterritorialization that will no longer be saved by culture or by myth, that will be an absolute deterritorialization. . . . To bring language slowly and progressively to the desert. To use syntax in order to cry, to give a syntax to the cry” (174). Walcott achieves the enunciation of this cry by the inverse— rather than expose the paucity of depth in his deterritorialized language, Walcott drowns his rich, multi-lingual, multi-cultural allusiveness in the eternal sea. The sea is the answer to the fixity of the past, the fixity of scars and of oppressors and of the oppressed. It is the sea which exposes Walcott to that “light beyond metaphor,” where pages are replaced by the ceaseless tides of eternity:

The sea had never known  
 any of them, nor had the illiterate rocks,  
 nor the circling frigates, nor even the white mesh  
 that knitted the Golden Fleece. The ocean had

no memory of the wanderings of Gilgamesh,  
 or whose sword severed whose head in the *Iliad*.

It was an epic where every line was erased

yet freshly written in sheets of exploding surf  
 in that blind violence with which one crest replaced  
 another with a tranch and that heart-heaving sough. . . . (296)

Baptized in the lethetic Caribbean's sea, Walcott reaches his healing beyond words in the loss of memory. By the end of the poem, after Maud's death, Plunkett "forgot the war's // history that had cost him a wife and a son" (309). Philoctete's wound is healed by Ma Kilman, as is Plunkett's bereavement, in a moment which Walcott's claims "bound him for good to another race" (307). Seven Seas pronounces "We shall all heal," in spite of the "incurable wound of time" (319). And Achille ends the poem honoring his friend and enemy Hector, now dead, by "put[ting] the wedge of dolphin // that he'd saved for Helen in Hector's rusty tin" (325). If we are to finally come around to the answer of what *Omeros* may be, we might look *beyond*, or perhaps *through* all of the many designations which we have applied thus far and conclude where Walcott does on the far side of his own rich verbosity and allusive lyricism: "When he left the beach the sea was still going on" (325). *Omeros* is the eternal whisper of the boundless sea, ferrying all the pains and pleasures of peoples forgotten and remembered alike, lapping with stinging salt at the gaping wound of Time, saying "We shall all heal."

## Works Cited

Deleuze, Giles and Felix Guattari. "What Is a Minority Literature?" *The Routledge Critical and Cultural Theory Reader*, edited by Neil Badmington and Julia Thomas. Routledge, 2008, pp. 166-77.

Walcott, Derek. *Omeros*. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1990.

---

Copyright © 2021 *Wide Angle*, Samford University. All rights reserved.

*Margaret Kirby*

***Solus in Te: Only in You, or, the Writer's Dilemma***

---

**Précis:**

**A**s an undergraduate at Samford, I have learned the joy of drawing connections across disciplines. Last semester in particular, I saw the unexpected link between St. Augustine and Eudora Welty, two authors who have profoundly shaped me. When Eudora Welty's essay, "Must the Novelist Crusade," is read alongside Book 4 of Augustine's *Confessions*, the similarities in theme are overwhelming, but their approaches to these themes are different. Augustine is contemplating life itself, and Welty is contemplating the life of a fiction writer. I believe the empathetic endeavors of fiction authors are to a degree the strivings of all people. We all seek to understand each other—the only difference is that a fiction writer makes this her job. Now more than ever, I can see the opportunity in our world for the empathy of our art. Fiction writers were made for such a time as this. If we can combine our goals as fiction writers with the humble and honest purposes of St. Augustine and Eudora Welty, our fiction can bring healing to a hurting world.

***Solus in te: Only in You, or, the Writer's Dilemma***

If only You were our everything. But then we would be in heaven, wouldn't we? There are schisms within schisms down here, and we must endure. But aren't my words merely adding to the noise? Why do some people insist on twisting them into lies and then beating them to death? I meant to build a bridge, but here I've created another schism, and I'm left in the middle of my division, crying aloud in this chasm-place.

"Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee" (Augustine 1.1). There is a cycle to life. "Ecce, things come and things go" (4.11.16).

And I am continually caught in the middle of stages and pages, white spaces between the black ink of my words—I am caught in these chasms, and oh! Finally, when these spasms cease, maybe I'll unveil the great mystery of life, for what does it mean to climb out of oneself? What does it mean to escape your own words?

A dear friend once told me that crusading words are dangerously devoid of all poise and merely add to the noise, "to interrupt, interrupt" (Welty 153). But, I insisted, if "writing is an interior affair" (153), it still has a voice to declare. Words make noise either way, outward or inward,

shouting or whispering, and, like she said, noise “is the simple assertion of self, the great, mindless, general self. And for all its volume it is ephemeral” (153).

Even when my words aren’t outwardly crusading, they are inwardly creating entropy, empathy masquerading in “I’s” and “my’s,” endlessly evading the real truths of the matter. How many people a day do I look at, but fail to see? How many eyes have I gazed into and seen my own reflection? How many voices have I tried to echo in my own timbre? If anything were to devise my demise, it would be my searching for myself in others.

Can you hear me, oh God of hosts? *Deus Virtutum!* (Augustine 4.10.15). My doom is towering over me. *Adonai Tzva ’ot!*<sup>24</sup> I cannot get to you. What shall I do? How can I ever hope to scale the dark, mysterious slope of each person’s all-important “I”? You see and you hear and I need to know—how many people have I seen and then immediately unseen? How often have I glossed over someone like my eyes scanning these words? Help me dig deeper into the chasms of those places. . . .

And thus began the endless struggle: the struggle to keep fiction at “a private address” (Welty 153), to work within myself without anyone else in my mind room, to use words to “communicate” as they were always meant to, rather than “to do,” for an old woman once told me that when fiction words have an agenda, they can only “threaten, brag, or condemn” (153). I struggled to restrain myself from grabbing my drum and running out into the streets, but her warning held me back. The initial thrill of all that noise, she told me, wasn’t going to do anything but silence my words in the end. That noise was only meant “to interrupt, interrupt, and so finally to forget and to lose” (153) and once you get out there, that’s all your drumming will do. It won’t wake any slumbering minds, but it will make your heart become blind. And so I wrote within myself, but then all my vulnerable rhymes were merely signs to them that it was high time to silence me. The drumming of the crowd deafened me until I couldn’t hear my own heartbeat. And for all that indiscernible noise, they were communicating with me, not in intelligible words, but in walls of sound, closing in on me, stifling my experience and demanding that I silence myself. “You belong at the bottom of the chasm. We do not need to hear your experience. It is time for others to rise.”

With all those ephemeral assertions blockading the deepest chasm of my heart, the unnatural drumming drowned out the humming of life.

And when it came time to write, I kept trying to scale the chasm wall, determined that my experience and my voice was vital in this world; determined that I could understand the mystery of people and things, for this was the grand purpose of my life. Oh, there were so many rocks on that slippery slope to be appreciated before climbing higher, each rock itself a slope of its own,

---

<sup>24</sup> Hebrew for “God of Hosts”

and all the while I was determined not to pound those thousand amethysts with my egoist fists and wrists as I wrote. I tried so desperately to get at the depths of them, to scale those many-varying heights of each person's all-important "I." In my author-life, I strove to make HER feel important, to make HIM feel seen and known and loved. If I love my characters and seek to know them, then aren't I doing the same with my readers? With all those people who are characters themselves who sees themselves in my characters? People and characters, actuality and dream, silent or noisy alike. But that was just it—every time I wrote from within myself, there was another person in my mind-room, reading the words and judging them and oh! I was sensitive to that judge. Every word was tainted by the imagined thoughts of another. What would this sort of person say to this paragraph? I might show this to someone later—how would these words read from their eyes? And at the end of the day, I was just crusading. Why wasn't I getting anywhere? There came a point when I realized the only "I" I could really see was my own. And yet I have two eyes to see it with, and it still eludes me at times. I cannot understand myself . . . so how am I ever meant to fully understand another? Have I mistaken the grand purpose of my life? Maybe I couldn't reach their "I" because mine was always getting in the way. Was all of this striving just me trying to escape myself? How in this wide world are we meant to gain insight when we can't get outside of ourselves?

And this was when I stopped scaling the wall. I fell. I stopped holding myself, and there I went, spiraling down, back down into the chasm.

And the heavens split, and a voice descended in deep breathings, and it murmured to me: "hinc et huc usque." *From here and up to this point* (Augustine 4.10.15). Lines were drawn in the sand, and I wept.

But I want to *see*, Lord! *Truly*, I want to see as you see and hear as you hear! *Why* is it that situations and people elude me so? I cannot scale the heights set before me, and oh, I am drowning in all of this deep. I thought I was supposed to know the truth and I thought it was supposed to set me free. Isn't fiction supposed to be truth-telling! But here I am. Chained and blind. How are my words ever meant to scale these sticky rocks, and two by two string themselves to form even a fragment of another's soul? If only my vision could fission all those complexities then maybe I could finally get at the heart of things!

But then in the very same breath, I must breathe: Forbid it, oh Lord, that "[o]ur blueprint for sanity and of solution for trouble [ever] leaves out the dark"; forbid it that we are ever left bereft of "the mystery in life" (Welty 151). May we never forget that "our cry for some knowledge is under the ban" (Lanier 20). Thou shalt not eat from the tree. You cannot understand another's soul even if you tried. My Lord has hemmed me in.

And do you know what happened to me when I finally reached the bottom of the chasm? The words burst out of me like a flowing river, a never ending supply of new and crystal-clear, and all of a sudden, I realized that there are boundaries to fiction-writing; that climbing while writing is a dangerous game and lines in the sand are to keep me sane; that I am meant to write from within myself; that I can climb and climb during the day, seeking to understand and know people and things, but when it comes time to write, I must return to the deepest chasm of my heart, where my Lord is. Maybe it had been my pride all along that told me to keep climbing while writing, but now I know to sit still and let myself fall. How can I escape my own I and be led onward into the “you’s” when I’m still climbing in my own strength? If I’m going to seek truth in fiction, I must do so in humbleness. If I’m going to reach that paradise where all these “I’s” are tied, I must release and fall. I can only write true fictional characters from the chasm of my heart where Love is. I can only properly see and love people in my daily climbing when I continually return to those heart-chasms.

And from that place where I was lying, my eyes drew me upward, and it was as though I was seeing the chasm wall for the first time. All those years, I had been climbing what I thought was a solid wall of rocks, but could it really be? The wall I had been climbing was not a wall, but an intricate system of intertwined roots—a delicate cistern of sisterly shoots, line after line, teeming and reeling, sealing and healing, ever revealing the secret of life.

And then it came to me—that moment so long ago when I sat with my wise friend on her porch in Mississippi. She had been writing for so much longer than I and had seen something I hadn’t: “There is a relationship in progress between ourselves and other people. [. . .] There are relationships of the blood, of the passions and the affections, of thought and spirit and deed. There is the relationship between races. How can one kind of relationship be set apart from the others? Like the great root system of an old and long-established growing plant, they are all tangled up together; to separate them you would have to cleave the plant itself from top to bottom” (Welty 154-55). All my life I had believed we are isolated from each other, separated entities like rocks comprising a wall, but my friend knew all along that actually we are, every one of us, intertwined. And so perhaps what we once thought was uniquely our own is actually common to us all. There may be different sorts of suffering in our stories, but we have all suffered somehow—we all know what it means to be human.

And then it dawned on me: what if, in all those moments we assumed someone couldn’t understand us, we were actually prohibiting love? What if, when we pronounced our own suffering as unique, we were actually separating ourselves from the intertwined roots and cutting ourselves off from together-ness? What if the differences of our experiences, though they open up the possibility of hatred, are actually one of the very things that enable us to love? If we all suffered in the same way, love wouldn’t be victorious, but commonplace. But indeed, what does it mean just to be human? Perhaps above all, the deepest thing binding us all together is not our

suffering, but our image, the fingerprint on all our souls. Those cosmic-chasm imprints on the surfaces of all our roots. And what is it about us that will outlast? Surely it is the living, breathing plant itself, the grand Story of all stories from which we stem.

The roots were all joined. That was the secret. Each root—each soul—delicately marked by the Maker’s hand. And I couldn’t see it while I was up close and climbing, but now that I was down low and lying, I could finally see how they were connected like veins. And it seemed as though the only purpose of the Maker’s marking grooves was so that each root could fit with the roots around it. After all, that Mississippi friend of mine had known something I hadn’t. And I felt like a child who had just found the rhyme of the beginning of time. And heavenly words held hands with these illumination sensations, tiptoeing into the depths of my heart like a mother’s soft breaths preceding the start of her quiet, nighttime lullaby. The great Storyteller was drawing near, and “truth [was] borne in on [me] in all its great weight and angelic lightness, and accepted as home truth” (Welty 152).

#### Works Cited

- Augustine. *Augustine Confessions Books 1-8*. Translated and edited by Carolyn J.B. Hammond, Harvard UP, 2014, pp. 2, 158, 156.
- Lanier, Sidney. “Hymns of the Marshes: I. Sunrise.” *Poems of Sidney Lanier*, edited by Mary D. Lanier, The Echo Library, 2007, p. 20.
- Welty, Eudora. “Must the Novelist Crusade?” *The Eye of the Story: Selected Essays and Reviews*, Random House, 1970, pp. 146-62.



*Andre'A Roper*

**Nature or Nurture: The Environment's Effect on Racial Identity Formation  
in Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John***

---

In the essay “What Is a Minor Literature?” critical race theorists Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari assert that every work written by a minority author is inherently and inevitably political. Yet the scenic vignettes in Jamaica Kincaid’s novel *Annie John*, spotted with images of “kanya fish” and “eucalyptus leaves,” recall nostalgic themes of childhood rather than politics and social constructs (Kincaid 12, 139). A bildungsroman, *Annie John* tracks the development of its eponymous protagonist as she processes and responds to death, shifting family dynamics, femininity, and sexuality on the island of Antigua. Beyond characterizing Annie’s physical and emotional maturation, the novel navigates how coming of age and transitioning from revering to alienating her mother affects Annie’s identity formation. Because Kincaid uses almost every domestic, classroom, and recreational scene to depict this ambivalence, it seems unfitting that she takes an entire chapter to contemplate a seemingly unrelated topic: race and ethnicity. Discussing these themes in chapter five allows Kincaid to juxtapose Annie’s private musings about sexuality and her struggle to embrace it against classroom conversations about Antiguan heritage and Annie’s acceptance of her racial identity. This contrast allows Kincaid to emphasize the need for reading *Annie John* through an intersectional lens; if readers assume that a lack of explicit mentions of race—or femininity—signal a lack of racial—or gendered—influences in the text, they will not recognize how Annie’s race and sexuality mutually impact one another and her overall identity formation.

Split into two main passages and twelve pages, chapter five unfolds through Annie's first-person, twelve-year-old narration as she daydreams during a history lesson on Antigua's founding. The first passage adopts a speculative and straightforward tone as Annie considers the guilt her white classmate Ruth must feel in remembering her British ancestors' roles in slavery. In the second passage, Annie infuriates her history and geography teacher Miss Edward when she renames a drawing of Christopher Columbus in her textbook to scorn his demoted status. Annie begins describing the scene in a direct and satirical tone that quickly becomes apathetic and mocking once Miss Edward castigates her. Although these two passages illustrate the post-pubescent shift in Annie's mood and how that change heightens her ambivalence towards her mother, these pages also reveal an area where Annie feels assured of her identity. Throughout her childhood, she defines herself in relation to other people—her mother, father, classmates, teachers, Gwen, the Red Girl. However, Kincaid uses Ruth's guilt and Miss Edward's rebuke to demonstrate that although Annie compares herself to her mother throughout girlhood and adolescence, she grows up in an environment where identifying with her race and ethnicity is rarely threatened. Through a simple history lesson, the narrative illustrates the tacit confidence Annie has in her black Antiguan heritage by having Annie expose racism as an affront against her own personhood.

Unlike several African American novels where race occupies a primary role in the text, the first and only time *Annie John* mentions race, beyond describing a character's appearance, occurs in chapter five, "Columbus in Chains" (Kincaid 72). The first passage begins with anastrophe: "Ruth I liked" (73). By placing Ruth, the sentence's object, at the beginning, Annie emphasizes her preference for Ruth over other girls in the class. The sentence then continues with parallelism: "because she was such a dunce, and came from England, and had yellow hair"

(73). By using a similar grammatical structure for each clause, Kincaid suggests that Annie values each idea equally. Annie likes Ruth because she possesses inferior intelligence, a slight exoticism, and white features. Rather than disclosing this information in jealousy, Annie states these reasons as simple facts. She expounds upon her fascination with Ruth's white skin by describing her efforts to make Ruth blush. Using a simile, Annie equates singing Ruth inappropriate songs "just to see her turn pink" to "[spilling] hot water all over her" (73). For a pubescent girl to characterize blushing, a normal and involuntary act for fair-skinned folks, as a fascinating phenomenon implies a lack of interaction with white people during her childhood. Yet again, Annie never describes feeling inferior or envious of Ruth's rosy coloration but rather a genuine attraction to it.

The passage continues with Annie daydreaming about different teachers and friends before she focuses back on Miss Edward asking Ruth a question about their history lesson. As Annie remembers the correct answer, "On the third of November 1493, a Sunday morning, Christopher Columbus discovered Dominica," she uses an intensifier to say that "of course" Ruth "did not know the answer" (Kincaid 75). This "of course" operates on three different levels. First, Annie reminds the reader of Ruth's incompetence and general ignorance in the classroom. Second, considering "[it] was Miss Edward's way to ask . . . a question the answer to which she was sure the girl would not know"—such as requesting the time and day Columbus arrived—Annie satirizes her teacher (75). "Of course," Ruth, a girl from England, does not know the exact details of when Columbus discovered a country foreign to her own. The third and most significant way this intensifier works is by emphasizing the distance between Ruth and "the terrible things her ancestors had done" (76). Unlike Annie and her classmates who know Antigua's history as a colony of the British Empire and who spend time processing their

ancestors' enslavement, Ruth inherits the shame of descending from the very imperial system responsible for that slavery. Within two sentences, Kincaid demonstrates how growing up in a culture where classrooms openly discuss slavery and racism allows Annie to acknowledge that "it was all history, it was all in the past, and everybody behaved differently now" (76).

Annie then tries to comprehend racism from Ruth's perspective: a white girl living in a country with different traditions and cultures. Kincaid signals this shift through repetition: "perhaps she did not want to," "perhaps she wanted to," "perhaps she had felt even worse" (Kincaid 76). The repeating "perhaps" reminds the reader that working to understand ethnic experiences outside one's own always involves conjecture. As a young black girl descended from "ancestors [who] did nothing wrong except just sit somewhere, defenseless" trying to understand a young white girl descended from colonizers, Annie must use "perhaps" because full comprehension will never be reached (76). However, her repetition emphasizes that such thoughts are worth contemplating and crucial to better understanding her own identity.

The narrative ends with Annie aligning herself with her Antiguan ancestors. Kincaid invokes repetition again with the phrase, "I was sure that if," but this time achieves a different purpose (Kincaid 76). Despite Annie's bias and unreliability as a narrator, she asserts that had her ancestors been in a powerful position and traveled "from Africa to Europe . . . they would have taken a proper interest in the Europeans . . . and then gone home" (76). Although she uses "they" here, Annie initially speaks in terms of "we," placing herself in Antigua's ancestral narrative (76). Beginning these reflections with the third-person subject pronoun, Annie not only assumes that her predecessors shared her appreciation for their race, but also that this admiration arises from an unadulterated confidence. Thus, "if the tables had been turned," Annie and her Antiguan forebears would not have been motivated by fear and insecurity to enslave other races,

as the English did (76). Within three pages, Kincaid juxtaposes how guilt leads Ruth to resist learning her country's history, while acceptance enables Annie to empathize with and exculpate Ruth. Rather than orchestrate this lesson in race and ethnicity through Annie's mother—who operates as Annie's muse and menace, teaching her crucial lessons about death, femininity, and sexuality—Kincaid has Annie develop these realizations on her own to bolster Annie's pride in her race and Antiguan heritage.

The second passage steers away from Ruth to instead focus on a portrait of Christopher Columbus in Annie's textbook. In addition to noting that the painting "took up a whole page, and it was in color—one of only five color pictures in the book," Annie spotlights its significance by illustrating Columbus in vivid imagery (Kincaid 77). Taking almost half of the paragraph to describe his "maroon-colored velvet" shirt, hat embellished with "a gold feather," and "dejected and miserable" countenance prompts the reader to pay attention (77). Kincaid establishes a foil between Ruth, the humble dunce, and Columbus, the conquered conqueror. She achieves this juxtaposition through parallelism, as she did earlier with describing Ruth: "the usually quarrelsome Columbus," "the usually triumphant Columbus" (77-78). Annie equates Columbus's contentious personality with his success as a colonizer through the similar structures of these two phrases. This parallelism allows Annie to process her identity as a black descendant of slaves in relation to an innocent white classmate and a racist white colonizer. Unlike the agreeable, ashamed Ruth, Columbus perceives exploiting, fracturing, and decimating black and brown nations as a triumph.

As Annie continues to fixate on the painting, Kincaid weaves antithesis and irony into the narrative: ". . . for I did not like Columbus. How I loved this picture" (77). Placing these two contrasting ideas right next to each other intensifies their opposition. Annie appreciates the

portrait not only for its artistry, but because it portrays Columbus as disgraced and subdued. Notice, Annie only desires for persons involved in perpetuating racism to experience the “just deserts” and humiliation of their actions, or lack thereof (77). She reacts very differently to Ruth’s shame.

The text then shifts as Annie recalls a memory with her mother. Although the novel’s major theme—Annie’s ambivalent relationship with her mom—could overpower Annie’s personal progress in embracing her racial identity, Kincaid avoids letting the primary plot dominate. Instead, the shift provides a brief reflection on when Annie’s mother commented on her grandfather Pa Chess’s “stiff limbs” (Kincaid 78). The statement imprints itself on Annie’s mind and to reinforce her aversion to Columbus, she changes the painting’s title from “Columbus in Chains” to “The Great Man Can No Longer Just Get Up and Go” (78). The new title not only alludes to her mother’s comment, but it also invokes the Western trope of the Great Man, which purported that notable male leaders were born not developed. Annie undermines this entire tradition by using the same European devices that established it: a “fountain pen, and . . . Old English Lettering” (78). Through a simple title change and a subtle allusion, Annie writes a more honest tradition, declaring that wealth and agency—rather than intellect, bravery, or integrity—determine the leadership roles a person receives. Although her mother’s words spark this epiphany, Annie makes the connection on her own between the comment and Columbus, revealing her ability to affirm her identity without external help.

As Annie pulls her attention away from the caricatured Columbus, she notices an angry Miss Edward calling her name. While her teacher launches into a lecture about listening and respect, Annie uses metaphor and hyperbole to depict Miss Edward’s expression: “Her whole face was on fire. Her eyes were bulging out of her head . . . at any moment they would land at

my feet and roll away” (Kincaid 81-82). This overexaggerated imagery establishes a tempestuous tone for the following scene and vilifies Miss Edward.

As the passage continues, Kincaid inserts anastrophe with the sentence, “On she went” (82). This inverted syntax stresses the preposition “on,” which not only emphasizes the length of Miss Edward’s tirade but also creates narrative motion. The parallelism in the ensuing lines effectively disrupts this movement as Annie repeats: “. . . everything stopped. Her eyes stopped, her bottom lip stopped, her pimples stopped” (82). Beyond providing juxtaposition and visual imagery, the syntactic balance in these clauses generates suspense. Up until this point, Annie listens in silence as Miss Edward admonishes her character and defines the type of student and girl she should be. The heightened pause created by placing the anastrophe in physical proximity to the parallelism indicates and intensifies a coming shift in the type of identity critiques Miss Edward will make.

The defaced Christopher Columbus catches Miss Edward’s eye, leads her to inspect the new title further, and sends her into an uncontrollable frenzy. Throughout Miss Edward’s rebuke, she calls Annie “so arrogant, so blasphemous” and “not even hanging [her] head in remorse” (Kincaid 82). This hostile diction exposes Miss Edward’s own view of Columbus and the reverence she believes he is due. Labeling Annie as prideful underscores the gratitude Miss Edward expects from her students for the “discoverer of the island that was [their] home” (82). However, Annie’s refusal to exhibit shame not only reveals her opposing perspective but also displays defiance. Rather than succumb to an authority figure’s opinion, Annie overlooks the valid claims Miss Edward makes about her apathetic behavior and instead focuses on the extreme reaction. She upholds that as a black Antiguan girl, accepting her racial identity includes refusing to lionize the racist figures denigrating that identity. Despite never speaking throughout

the entire exchange, Annie maintains an unshakeable autonomy over defining her own personhood and values.

Miss Edward's affront against Annie's character serves as the only threat to Annie's racial identity, and even this passionate reprimand does not target Annie's skin color. In fact, Annie's calm defiance and freedom to ponder racism with boldness—rather than trepidation—demonstrates her comfort with discussing her race and ethnicity in conversation with people from different backgrounds. Dedicating an entire chapter to these musings enables Kincaid to highlight the importance of open communication in private and public spheres about how one's national history affects identity formation and acceptance. Although Annie must leave her mother and Antigua to appreciate her femininity and sexuality, growing up in an environment that celebrates and discusses her ethnic heritage allows Annie to embrace her racial identity long before boarding the boat.

#### Work Cited

Kincaid, Jamaica. *Annie John*. 1985. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997.

---

Copyright © 2021 *Wide Angle*, Samford University. All Rights Reserved.



## Contributors

---

**Mackenzie Arnold** is a senior University Fellow majoring in English and minoring in Psychology. She will be pursuing her JD at Southern Methodist University Dedman School of Law in the fall. Mackenzie has a passion for the Dallas Mavericks, all things Irish, and a properly made cup of either coffee or tea.

**Brice Boyer** is a Senior University Fellow and a Psychology and English double major with a concentration in Creative Writing. When he is not serving as Creative Writing Editor on *Wide Angle*, Brice enjoys reading, writing, playing piano, and spending time with his friends. As he finishes his last year as Creative Writing Editor, he looks forward to working as a Behavioral Health Technician at Alsana in Birmingham after college.

**Ansley Burnette** is a junior double major in Theatre and English with a concentration in Film Studies. She enjoys writing, acting, stage managing, and horseback riding. You can usually find her dreaming about being in Ireland or planning her next trip to Disney World. Soli Deo gloria.

**Will Carlisle** is a native of Birmingham, Alabama. Following his graduation from Samford University in May 2021, he will be moving to Atlanta, Georgia, where he will work as a worship leader and songwriter for a local church. He prefers to spend his time behind a piano with friends or on a long, scenic run with Jenna, his wife.

**Jillian A. Fantin** is a poet and MFA candidate at the University of Notre Dame. Their poetry is published or forthcoming in *The American Journal of Poetry*, *Sprung Formal*, *TIMBER*, and *Entropy*.

**Parker Gilley** is a senior University Fellow from Molino, FL, studying Philosophy, Classics, and English (not necessarily in any order). He is most unperturbed when nestled into some Hobbiton-esque, pastoral idyll in the South, smoking a pipe and reading antique poetry. He will be pursuing an MA in Classics at the University of Kentucky in the fall.

**Ashlyn Hamrick** is a junior from Birmingham, AL, double-majoring in Secondary Education and English. She plans to teach English and share her love for literature to middle and high school students. Her ideal morning would consist of an iced coffee from Wild Roast, a captivating YA novel, and the cozy sounds of spring rain.

**Megan Harris** is a senior from Huntsville, Alabama, majoring in English with a Writing minor and a Creative Writing concentration. She enjoys writing fiction and plans to pursue work with publishing and editing in the future.

**Margaret Kirby** is a junior studying English with a double minor in Classics and Philosophy. She is a member of Sigma Tau Delta and also sings in the A Cappella Choir. Margaret especially loves her Southern authors (mainly Sidney Lanier and Eudora Welty), and she also considers George MacDonald to be her grandfather in the faith. Her main purpose in life is to rediscover the magic of being a little child in the kingdom of God.

**Sarah Morgan Lake** is a senior at Samford, double majoring in English and Secondary Education. She was born and raised in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. When not writing arguably bad poetry, you can catch her student teaching, writing equally bad novels and essays, and dreaming of being a professor of American literature.

**Jake Lane** is a junior from Fort Lauderdale, Florida, studying English with a concentration in Creative Writing and a minor in Theatre. When not writing poetry or screenplays, he also enjoys writing creative nonfiction and playwriting. This semester, Jake's first full-length play, *Entropy*, made its debut as a part of Samford Theatre's One Act Festival.

**Jud Potter** was a senior English major with a concentration in Film Studies when he wrote his essay on *Rashomon* and *Godzilla*. He went on to pursue a career in teaching and film editing.

**Andre'A Roper** is a senior Micah Fellow from Charleston, SC, studying English with a Writing minor and Creative Writing Concentration. She interns with the Birmingham Education Foundation as a Communications Fellow and is a Howard College Ambassador. Next year, she will serve as a City Year AmeriCorps member in Jacksonville, FL, mentoring and tutoring students in underserved public schools.

**Claire Scott** is a senior from Franklin, TN, double-majoring in English and Spanish and minoring in Latin American Studies. She is passionate about Latin American literature and enjoys reading in either language. She plans on attending law school after graduation.

**Jordan Shoop** will graduate this spring with an English major and a writing minor. He is usually reading poetry collections, while feeling inspired by artwork by John Dugdale and films by Derek Jarman. His recent poetic works have been published in *The Elevation Review*, *In Parentheses*, and the last edition of *Wide Angle*.

**Samantha Smith** was a University Fellow and a senior English major with a concentration in Film Studies when she wrote her essay on *The Birds*. She went on to graduate school to study Political Science and pursue opportunities as a consultant for humanitarian aid programs.

**Lacey Spear** is a junior double major in English and Spanish with a creative writing concentration, and she serves as president for Sigma Delta Pi and Spanish Club. When not discussing theology, Spanish grammar rules, or James Joyce, Lacey enjoys riding horses and making homemade lattes. After Samford, she plans to procure her PhD in Spanish Literature.

**Emily Thorington** is a 2020 Samford alumna and former English major living in Tampa, FL. This year, she has enjoyed teaching middle schoolers about poetry, swimming laps, and soaking up the Florida sunshine.