

Wide Angle
a journal of literature and film

Volume 4, Issue 2
Spring 2015

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 semester, *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 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 2014-'15

General Editor.....Dr. Geoffrey A. Wright
 Managing Editor.....Audrey Ward
 Literature Editor.....Laura Ann Prickett
 Film Editor.....Megan Burr
 Creative Writing Editor.....Hayden Davis

Copyright © 2015 *Wide Angle*, Samford University. All rights reserved.

Contents

Literature

Finding Meaning in a Meaningless World: <i>Catch-22</i> 's Role as an Absurdist Novel Brandon Lawson.....	5
The Absurdist Nature of Language: Joseph Heller's Own "Catch-22" in his <i>Catch-22</i> Lauren Morris.....	16
Zeugma, Inversion, and Fragmentation in Virginia Woolf's <i>Mrs. Dalloway</i> Adam Quinn.....	26
The Disaster of a Diseased Mind: Rational v. Irrational Thought in "The Fall of the House of Usher" by Edgar Allan Poe and "The Yellow Wall-Paper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman Rebekah Ray.....	38
BACHE Visiting Writers Series: The Haunting Questions of Brian Turner's War Poetry Lauren Morris.....	52

Film

<i>Birdman</i> : Or (The Unexpected Virtue of Oscar Baiting) Matthew Harrison.....	56
Iñárritu's <i>Birdman</i> and the Impossibility of Continuity Dr. Jennifer Lackey.....	59
The Wonderfully Whimsical World of Wes Anderson: A Critical Review of <i>The Grand Budapest Hotel</i> Ben Crabtree.....	64
Occupation and <i>Eau de Panache</i> : Oscar-Winning Style in Wes Anderson's <i>The Grand Budapest Hotel</i> Katy Ward.....	68
<i>The Lego Movie</i> Snub Jud Potter.....	75
Damien Chazelle's Impressively Rhythmic <i>Whiplash</i> Never Loses Tempo Hudson Reynolds.....	80

Review of <i>The American Imperial Gothic</i> , by Johan Höglund Dr. Chris Metress.....	84
Review of <i>Flickering Empire</i> , by Michael Glover Smith and Adam Selzer Andrew B. Young.....	90
<i>Creative Writing</i>	
Standard Operating Procedure Michael Arthur.....	96
Coffee Laura Bone.....	97
In the Living Room Laura Bone.....	98
Collection: “Library: Second Floor” and “Pre-Rush” Franklin Lowe.....	100
Sister Mary Franklin Lowe.....	101
The Uniform Kiani Yiu.....	102
Ghost Story Chelsea Pennington.....	103
<i>From the Editor’s Desk</i>	
On Poems and Polar Bears: Why I Want to Get a PhD Audrey Ward, Managing Editor.....	111
A Feminist’s Brief Response to the Romance Genre Laura Ann Prickett, Literature Editor.....	114
Vlog Adaptations and Why You Should Be Watching Them Megan Burr, Film Editor.....	120
The Trial: Social Media Poetry Hayden Davis, Creative Writing Editor.....	127

Essay

Brandon Lawson

Finding Meaning in a Meaningless World: *Catch-22*'s Role as an Absurdist Novel

The individual exists, and the world is an empty, meaningless, chaotic void. These are the only two assumptions under which Absurdism abides. Absurdism, in its simplest terms, is the idea that the world is meaningless, and that human life accordingly is without meaning. Because any “true” meaning exists outside of the realm of human knowledge, individuals attempting to find meaning can only act according to an invented meaning. But this is self-deception. Instead, according to Absurdism, the individual should seek out freedom from those meanings imposed on him or her by society, and embrace the lack of purpose in the world. Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22* is an Absurdist novel because of its portrayal of a chaotic, absurd world devoid of meaning, in which Yossarian, the protagonist, is left to struggle with concepts such as hope, morality, and freedom. The Absurdist framework of the novel allows Heller to communicate the futility of conventions designed to give individuals meaning, specifically war.

The first character defined by Camus as an “absurd hero”—the category into which Yossarian falls—is Sisyphus, the traditionally tragic Greek hero. Mythologically, Sisyphus returns to the world after death in order to get revenge on his wife for not saving him. Once out of the Underworld, he “had seen again the face of this world, enjoyed water and sun, warm stones and sea, he no longer wanted to go to back to the infernal darkness” (Camus, *Myth* 407). So instead of going back to the Underworld, he ran from the gods. Upon his capture, they issued to him the punishment of having to continually push a boulder up a hill, only to have it roll back

down the hill where his task would begin again. Sisyphus was to perpetuate his sentence for all of eternity. According to Camus, human existence, much like Sisyphus’s task, is essentially meaningless and futile. Thus, by examining Sisyphus, the individual better understands his or her own existence because of the inherent similarities. Sisyphus demonstrates characteristics idolized by Camus: “His scorn of the gods, his hatred of death, and his passion for life won him that unspeakable penalty in which the whole being is exerted towards accomplishing nothing” (*Myth* 407). Similarly, Sisyphus demonstrates the Absurdist value of life, which is to embrace the absurd and live in defiance of it. Camus states in *The Myth of Sisyphus*,

I see that man going back down with a heavy yet measured step toward the torment of which he will never know the end. That hour like a breathing-space which returns as surely as his suffering, that is the hour of consciousness. At each of those moments when he leaves the heights and gradually sinks towards toward the lairs of the gods, he is superior to his fate. He is stronger than his rock. (407)

Essentially, Sisyphus finds meaning by living to defy his ordained fate. Likewise, Camus argues in *The Rebel* that the ideal Absurdist lives a life in defiance of the imposition of meaning; he lives to rebel against those who enforce meaning upon the individual.

Many parallels to the myth of Sisyphus can be found throughout *Catch-22*. For instance, one recalls the character Ex-P.F.C. Wintergreen. He continually “goes AWOL,” gets caught, and as punishment has to dig holes, only to repeat the infraction as soon as his service is over (Heller 104). The holes are Wintergreen’s boulder—he lives a life in defiance of the consequences. Though he gets caught and reprimanded each time, he continues to defy the military, just as Sisyphus defies the gods. Thus, Wintergreen’s sentence of digging holes is the same as Sisyphus rolling the boulder up the hill. More importantly, Yossarian also has his boulder; Yossarian’s

boulder is flying missions. Every time he has flown enough missions to get sent home—every time he has reached the top of the hill—the boulder rolls back down, the required number of missions increases, and his task begins again. Yossarian loathes the missions and does everything he can to get sent home regardless of the number of missions required, but instead of running away, he flies the missions in case the number is not raised, against all odds. He knows the number of missions is going to be raised as soon as he reaches the required number and realizes the absurdity of his situation, but he continues to fly in defiance of the inevitable. Heller represents Yossarian as the absurd hero in the same way that Camus portrays Sisyphus.

One of the main tenets of Absurdism, and one of the most repeated ideas in *Catch-22*, is the philosophy that the world is irreparably chaotic. Maria Genovese elaborates, “In his works, Camus fulfills the need to acknowledge and develop the implications of the unpredictability of the universe” (2). The unpredictability of the universe and, by nature, the future, separates humans from the ability to find meaning. Snowden’s secret, for instance, is that “Man was matter” (Heller 440). If humans are incapable of finding meaning, then human life really is devoid of purpose; people really are simply matter. This idea is shown constantly throughout the novel, in that Yossarian exists in a chaotic, absurd world. Everywhere he turns, people are trying to kill him for reasons he cannot understand. He tries to see meaning behind people wanting to kill him, but he fails time and time again. People die, people kill, people suffer, and Yossarian is left to attempt to find meaning in seeing that all around him. He sees this most clearly when he is able to disconnect himself from the world and look on as an observer. For example, when he walks through the streets of Rome, he witnesses innocent people being beaten, chased, and starved; and returns to his quarters only to find that Aarfy has killed the maid. Aarfy’s sole justification is that he doubts that “they’ll make too much fuss over one poor Italian servant girl

when so many thousands of lives are being lost every day” (418). Yossarian tries to make sense of the event, or at least convince Aarfy of the significance, but to no avail; this is parallel to his desire, and failure, to make sense of all death. Camus states in *The Rebel*, “There are crimes of passion and crimes of logic. The boundary between them is not clearly defined” (Camus, *Rebel* 6). Aarfy’s murder is no different than the organized killing in war, and Yossarian attempts to understand that. He tries to distinguish blatant murder from war but is unable to do so. Right before that instance, Yossarian has a moment of Absurdist clarity, as he is walking down the street contemplating the chaos inherent to humans, stating,

What a lousy earth! He wondered how many people were destitute that same night even in his own prosperous country, how many homes were shanties, how many husbands were drunk and wives socked, and how many children were bullied, abused, or abandoned. [. . .] How many suicides would take place that same night, how many people would go insane? [. . .] How many honest men were liars, brave men cowards, loyal men traitors, how many sainted men were corrupt, how many people in positions of trust had sold their souls to blackguards for petty cash, how many never had souls? (Heller 412)

Yossarian asks these questions while witnessing a world where his scenarios are not hypothetical—a world where Military Police personnel were beating women and children, and soldiers sent to “defend freedom” were raping and killing innocent women. He finds himself stuck as a witness, incapable of affecting the anarchic events happening around him. Every time Yossarian tries to find meaning behind such events, he leaves without satisfying answers as a result of the chaotic world in which he lives.

When left in a chaotic world in which meaning does not exist, the absurd hero is forced to reevaluate the meaning of life. Camus states, “Awareness [. . .] develops from every act of rebellion: the sudden, dazzling perception that there is something in man with which he can identify himself” (*Rebel* 14). According to Camus, one finds meaning in embracing the inability to know meaning and in living in defiance of the delusion of meaning. As Genovese explains, “This lack of inherent meaning invites people to question the validity of every social construct, as such constructs are potentially composed of arbitrary thoughts and obsolete, life-threatening values” (3). Just like Sisyphus living in spite of the gods, Yossarian lives in spite of those attempting to impose their meaning on him. He finds purpose in undermining authority and in rebelling against his own nature to look for meaning in the events around him. As Camus elaborates, “Whatever we may do, excess will always keep its place in the heart of man, in the place where solitude is found. We all carry within us our places of exile, our crimes and our ravages. But our task is not to unleash them on the world; it is to fight them in ourselves and in others” (*Rebel* 149). Yossarian adopts this philosophy as his maxim, as his interpretation of the world. He is able to give meaning to his life through embracing the lack of meaning.

In such a meaningless world, it is inevitable that the individual will struggle to accept that it is actually meaningless, as shown throughout the novel. Humans, when faced with a lack of meaning, naturally try harder to synthesize their own teleological purpose. Almost every character faced with the absurd—aside from Yossarian—is at some point incapable of accepting it and searches even more diligently to find purpose where there is none. For example, when Nately’s philosophy is under attack from the old man, he refuses to accept that his source of meaning could be flawed. He naively retorts, “There is nothing so absurd about risking your life for your country!” (Heller 247). Nately is incapable of accepting that his purpose might be

wrong. Similarly, the Chaplain struggles with his purpose; Heller states, “In a world in which success was the only virtue, he had resigned himself to failure” (267). Because the Chaplain sees success as the purpose in life, he thus considers himself a failure. Likewise, the Chaplain questions his faith when faced with the absurd, asking,

Had God Almighty, in all His infinite wisdom, really been afraid that men six thousand years ago would succeed in building a tower to heaven? Where the devil *was* heaven? Was it up? Down? There was no up or down in a finite but expanding universe in which even the vast, burning, dazzling, majestic sun was in a progressive decay that would eventually destroy the earth too. (285)

As made evident in this scenario, the Chaplain, when deprived of his perception of meaning, is sent into an existential crisis, in which his whole existence comes into question. This crisis extends past the individual’s philosophy and alters his or her entire identity, directly affecting the way in which he or she lives his or her life. When Yossarian returns to Rome to find the warehouse ransacked, he looks for a reason *why* and becomes angry when the old woman can only answer, “I don’t know...I don’t know” (Heller 407) and mutter about Catch-22. This Catch-22 is a bureaucratic rule that mandates that all who are insane cannot fly missions but all who request not to fly are sane. According to Heller, “[One] would be crazy to fly more missions and sane if he didn’t, but if he was sane he had to fly them” (47). Catch-22 is essentially the representation of the absurd. It symbolizes the paradoxical state of the universe by which all humans are bound. Yossarian constantly questions Catch-22, the same way he always wonders why people are trying to kill him. To these questions there is no answer, and, as an absurd hero, he sees it as something he must embrace and rebel against.

In an absurd world, hope must be redefined, for hope in its popular sense would be self-deception. Anyone who has “hope” is placing trust in something outside of his or her self, which does not follow Absurdist logic. A basic tenet of Absurdism is that trust cannot be placed in the future because humans cannot have knowledge of the future; therefore, hope in any external force is futile (Genovese 3). Any attempt to find meaning outside of one’s self is just a feeble attempt to find comfort and run away from the absurd. Two ways of running away from the absurd that Camus specifically talks about are religion and suicide. Camus deduces accordingly that religion is a cop-out, because religion takes value away from questioning and instead places it in faith in something external, of which the individual can have no definitive knowledge. When Yossarian asks the Chaplain if prayer works, he replies, “It takes my mind off my troubles. [. . .] And it gives me something to do” (Heller 433). The Chaplain uses prayer as a false comfort. Prayer does not actually solve any of his problems; it just makes him ignore them. It keeps him from having to face the absurd. Camus looks down upon suicide because it “constitute[s] the avoidance of the absurd, rather than its confrontation” (Cismaru and Klein 105). Heller’s novel demonstrates suicide as cowardice when McWatt, Yossarian’s pilot, kills himself after accidentally killing Kid Sampson, a young soldier. Instead of facing the absurd truth that it was a bizarre accident caused by his own incompetence and “some arbitrary gust of wind” (Heller 337), McWatt chooses to run away from the absurd by taking his own life. Camus would identify McWatt as a coward because he is afraid of facing the absurdity of the situation and accepting responsibility for his own actions.

Morality cannot exist in a world where events are devoid of meaning. Cismaru and Klein state, “In Camus the persona discovered one of its most subtle and sophisticated advocates. The subtlety of Camus found that it was necessary to insist on the integrity of the absurd experience.

The ‘integration’ of the persona resulted from the insistence that ‘There is thus the will to live without rejecting anything of life, which is the virtue I admire most in the world’” (105).

Absurdism is an amoral, but not immoral, philosophy. Absurdism rejects the idea of objective good and evil, because those concepts depend on an external, objective standard, which does not exist according to Absurdist thought. Therefore, morality is a subjective construct meant to impose meaning on the individual. Absurdism states instead that what is moral is whatever drives the individual closer to embracing the absurd. Milo, for example, demonstrates the Absurdist idea of morality at times, though he is not classifiable as an Absurdist hero. Though it is undeniable that he is a self-seeking opportunist, Milo at least realizes the absurdity of war and seeks a purpose outside of those imposed on him. He creates his own purpose, although it is not one of which the Absurdist would approve. The Absurdist would say that Milo should act not in favor of fiscal gain but in favor of defiance of social standards; morality would be acting against the war, not “[seeing] an opportunity to make some profit out of the mission, and [taking] it” (Heller 255). Instead of defying social constructs, Milo simply uses them to his advantage; he has not found actual freedom, for now he finds his meaning in money, just another distraction from the absurd. Instead of facing reality, Milo simply keeps himself distracted from it.

The most important doctrine of Absurdism, and the reason *Catch-22* is a truly Absurdist text is in its conclusion: freedom. Freedom, according to Camus, only exists when one lives a life in defiance of social constructs of purpose and openly embraces the futility found therein. Freedom is Sisyphus coming to love his task. Freedom is the Chaplain deciding to persevere. Freedom is Yossarian deciding to run away. In the Chaplain’s case, he finds joy in the absurd when he embraces the fact that the world is chaotic and chooses to continue living in a life of perseverance against those imposing purpose. Genovese summarizes, “Absurdism, then, is an

active and freeing philosophy. The world is no longer a puppet; the strings wrapped around the fingers of a higher power are snipped” (3). Accordingly, the Chaplain has snipped the strings of God and those in power, and chooses to fight for himself. That is how he is free. Yossarian becomes free when he decides to run away from the war despite knowing that the military will hunt him down and likely find him. He embraces a life of rebellion against those trying to give him meaning. Camus elaborates on the relationship, saying, “Happiness and the absurd are two sons of the same earth. They are inseparable. It would be a mistake to say that happiness necessarily springs from the absurd discovery. It happens as well that the feelings of the absurd springs from happiness” (*Rebel* 408). In the moment that the Chaplain and Yossarian accept the absurdity of the war and of the world in which they live, they become Sisyphus walking back down the hill in defiance of the gods.

By establishing such a brutal and hopeless world, Heller opens the door to criticize social conventions designed to try to give people a sense of meaning, such as religion, patriotism, and war. Heller questions religion by having the Chaplain renounce God and meaning. He attacks patriotism through characters such as Appleby, who are generally considered “patriotic.” Heller writes, “Appleby was a fair-haired boy from Iowa who believed in God, Motherhood, and the American Way of Life, without ever thinking about any of them, and everybody who knew him liked him. ‘I hate that son of a bitch,’ Yossarian growled” (18). Most importantly, Heller satirizes war throughout the entire novel. Those in power talk about how honorable war is and how the soldiers should enjoy fighting, while at the same time men are dying and suffering. The men that are supposed to be the liberators and protectors of the world are incarcerating and beating the same innocent people that they are meant to protect (416). The entire construct of

war is a great irony in which the “protectors” brutalize those they are meant to protect. Through these scenarios, Heller employs the meaningless world to criticize social constructs.

Catch-22 is an Absurdist novel because it questions the chaotic world and criticizes the human attempt to give meaning to it. It is also absurd because Yossarian serves as a direct parallel to Sisyphus. The Absurdist message is not one of futility, as many believe, but one of empowerment. When the individual can accept that life is meaningless, the result is not depression but freedom. One learns to love his or her boulder, becomes stronger than the task laid before him or her, and lives a life in open defiance of the task not for the sake of authority, God, or a sense of duty, but for their own sake. They come not to play the game to win, but to continue playing despite the circumstances. As Camus concludes, “The struggle itself toward the heights [of freedom] is enough to fill a man’s heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy” (*Myth* 409).

Works Cited

Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Trans. Justin O'Brien. N.p.: Hamish Hamilton, 1955.

Print.

Camus, Albert. *The Rebel*. Trans. Anthony Bower. New York: Knopf, 1956. Print.

Cismaru, Alfred, and Theodore Klein. "The Concept of Suicide in Camus and Beckett."

Renascence Winter 1976 28.2 (1976): 105-10.10.5840/renascence197628218. Web. 24

Nov. 2014.

Genovese, Maria K. *Meaningful Meaninglessness: Albert Camus' Presentation of Absurdism*

as a Foundation for Goodness. Diss. Salve Regina U, 2010. N.p.: Pell Scholars and

Senior Theses, n.d. Print.

Heller, Joseph. *Catch 22*. New: Simon & Schuster, 1955. Print.

Copyright © 2015 *Wide Angle*, Samford University. All Rights Reserved.

Essay

Lauren Morris

The Absurdist Nature of Language: Joseph Heller’s Own “Catch-22” in his *Catch-22*

French-Algerian philosopher and writer Albert Camus coined the philosophy of Absurdism out of the aftermath of World War Two. Camus’s essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, and his novel, *The Stranger*, captured the demoralized state of people in France, who were struggling to find personal, ethical, and national meaning after confronting Hitler and realizing the absurdity of the human condition. As a result of their anguish, they readily adopted Camus’s position about life and its meaning. The opening sentence of Camus’s *The Stranger* embodies his stance: “*Maman* died today. Or yesterday maybe, I don’t know. I got a telegram from the home: ‘Mother deceased. Funeral tomorrow. Faithfully yours.’ That doesn’t mean anything. Maybe it was yesterday” (*Stranger* 3). Through using the French term for the English ‘*Mama*,’ the first sentence implies that the speaker and his mother were close and that he is saddened by her loss, while the remaining sentences imply that the speaker is no longer concerned with his sadness. This emotional contradiction reveals the essence of Absurdism, which explores the natural search for meaning despite the inherent meaninglessness of all existence. In *Catch-22*, Joseph Heller uses this philosophical lens to evaluate language and its implications for humanity. The novel demonstrates that language is arbitrary but ultimately necessary for conveying subjective, human-imbued meaning. Arbitrary language permits the absurd actions of Heller’s characters, who choose to defy death and hopelessness despite being trapped in a truth-deficient existence.

Language is essential for human comprehension. Noam Chomsky holds that language is “the greatest of all human inventions” (*On Nature* 45). Yet, he also recognizes language’s unsettling consequence: “When mechanism fails, understanding falls” (*On Nature* 51). When words are not conveyed perfectly, comprehension is ambiguous. Although one can apprehend his or her own thoughts perfectly, he or she cannot grasp the neurological nature of language or how it creates meaning. Friedrich Nietzsche also adheres to this view in his essay “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense.” Since language is an imperfect mechanism for relating things to people, the essence of a thing, he claims, is “incomprehensible” and “not in the least worth striving for” (890). Furthermore, Nietzsche maintains that expressing essences through language “is the boldest metaphor” (890), the first metaphor being the image created by nerve stimulus, the second the transformation of the image into a sound, the third the creation of a word, a sentence, and finally a concept. Because none of these metaphors precisely replicates the essence of something, Nietzsche claims that there can be no truth but only interpretations of truth (891). Objective facts are not attainable through language. Nevertheless, this intricate web of interpretation is our primary way of communicating with one another.

Due to the complex nature of language, we must acquire skill in order to communicate properly. From a young age, we learn to combine sounds and then to associate them with symbols to convey meaning. Yet even before this linguistic understanding, humans communicate through assigning words to objects, feelings, etc. Letters were just created to express this oral tradition. There is no natural, preexisting relationship between a word (the signifier) and its meaning (the signified). As literary structuralist Jonathan Culler explains, “Signifiers could evolve; the particular sequence of sounds associated with a given concept might be modified; and a given sequence of sounds could be attached with a different concept” (32). We must

recognize that language is unreliable for precise expression of inward thoughts. Nevertheless, it is indispensable for successful human coexistence. To preserve our humanity—to create sincere relationships, exchange civilized ideas, and express human feelings—we must have some method to define and convey our perceptions, even if that method is defective. This dichotomy provides a connection between the nature of language and Absurdism. While we are naturally inclined to create meaning using tools such as language, we must come to terms with the Absurdist claim that our existence is the product of subjective perception, as is the world around us. It is impossible to find objective meaning within individual existence.

Heller portrays the arbitrary yet essential nature of language throughout *Catch-22*, particularly when John Yossarian, a U.S. Army Air Forces B-25 Bombardier in WWII, attends intelligence briefings provided by his squadron. During these briefings, Yossarian and his fellow soldiers ask aimless questions such as, “Who is Spain?” “Why is Hitler?” and “When is right?” to emphasize their inability to conceptualize the mechanisms of the war. This linguistic Absurdism reveals both their shallow knowledge of the war effort and their restricted ability to effectively express themselves. Their questions do not make sense because, as the Absurdist Camus claims, because the quest for knowledge is futile. Though Yossarian is eager to “pursue [his captain] through all the words in the world,” the universal relativity of meaning prevents his linguistic understanding (Heller 43).

However, the nonexistence of absolute, objective truth does not prevent the soldiers from asking questions. To them, it does not matter that these questions are absurd. Since meaning is arbitrary, no questions are sensible. Therefore, any question they ask, though vacuous, is relevant. As Camus insists, the Absurd arises out of the “confrontation between human need and the unreasonable silence of the world” (*Myth* 21). The soldiers ask questions because they are in

search for meaning, even as they are aware of the irrationality of their inquiry and the senselessness of life.

The clash between the search for significance and the meaninglessness of being is captured in Heller’s phrase, “Catch-22.” This stratagem describes the fact that anxiety for one’s security in dangerous situations is naturally present in a sound mind (52). In *Catch-22*, the military manipulates this device in order to tamper with perceived truth: “Orr was crazy and could be grounded. All he had to do was ask; and as soon as he did, he would no longer be crazy and would have to fly more missions. Orr would be crazy to fly more missions and sane if he didn’t, but if he was sane he had to fly them. If he flew them he was crazy and didn’t have to; but if he didn’t want to he was sane and had to” (52). Using “Catch-22,” officers coerce their soldiers into flying military planes regardless of their mental state. However, they still provide soldiers with a required number of missions. But, as Yossarian asserts with frustration, this number is always in flux. Therefore, Yossarian’s “Catch-22” is an inescapable dilemma that inevitably governs two mutually contradictory conditions; it is his acceptance of the ever-increasing number of obligatory missions and his incessant struggle to attain that magic number. One would expect Yossarian to renounce his call of duty upon establishing its hollowness. Instead, he surrenders to the process of “Catch-22” in a search for meaning: “Catch-22 did not exist, he was positive of that, but it made no difference. What did matter was that everyone thought it existed, and that was much worse, for there was no object or text to ridicule or refute, to accuse, criticize, attack, amend, hate, revile, spit at, rip to shreds, trample upon, or burn up” (377). It is through his compliance and struggle with “Catch-22” that Yossarian demonstrates our absurd response to language’s fabricated claims. Although arbitrary, language is necessary for

the development of personal value and for enforcing order within a large organization of humans such as the military.

The chasm between one’s search for meaning and the meaninglessness of reality manifests itself in moral relativity, which is a consequence of arbitrary language. As Chris Hedges says in his book *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*, the subjectivity of language “dismantle[s] our moral universe” (150). We act by the suggestion of morality, yet morality is rendered meaningless because it originates in language and is translated via words. Morality is devoid of Truth because its codifier is devoid of Truth: “When we speak within the confines of language we give up our linguistic capacity to [. . .] make moral choices” (Hedges 148). As opposed to a set of infallible definitions, language is rooted in the “concept that facts [can] and [will] be altered” (Hedges 150). Therefore, reality becomes a synthesis of changing truths that can “be true one day and false the next” (Hedges 150). With this worldview, one must accept the Absurdist claim that morality is barren, especially in a truth-deficient world where language is arbitrary.

The arbitrary nature of language, and therefore the relativity of morality, inspires vain action by *Catch-22*’s absurd characters. This is illustrated through Nately’s conversation with an “old man” while in a brothel in Italy. When Nately asks the man if he “ha[s] any principles,” the man answers, “Of course not” (231). Yet when Nately responds by assuming that he has no moral code, the man assures him with “satiric seriousness”—while “stroking the bare hip of a buxom black-haired girl”—that he is “very moral” (231). His antithetical word choice reveals both the incoherency of language and his stance on morality. The “old man” is sardonic and derisive because his moral standards are nonexistent. This is evident when he describes his farcical reactions to different nations arriving in Italy:

When the Germans marched into the city, I danced in the streets like a youthful ballerina and shouted, ‘*Heil Hitler!*’ until my lungs were hoarse. I even waved a small Nazi flag that I had snatched away from a beautiful little girl while her mother was looking the other way. When the Germans left the city, I rushed out to welcome the Americans with a bottle of excellent brandy and a basket of flowers. The brandy was for myself, of course, and the flowers were to sprinkle upon our liberators. There was a very sniff and stuffy old major riding in the first car, and I hit him squarely in the eye with a red rose. A marvelous shot! You should have seen him wince. (Heller 231)

The old man’s actions are absurd and abhorrent. Not only does he lack morality, but he also lacks a fixed national identity. By birth he is an Italian, yet he welcomes the jurisdiction of Germans and Americans alike. In other words, he is both a citizen of all nations and a citizen of no nations. Coupled with his universal identity is his all-inclusive acceptance of ideologies. He was a “fascist when Mussolini was on top,” and he is an “anti-fascist now that [Mussolini] has been deposed” (231). He was “frantically pro-German when the Germans came [to Italy] to protect [him]” from the Americans. Yet “now that the Americans are here to protect [him]” from the Germans, he is “fanatically pro-American” (231). He is a “turn-coat” and a “shameful, unscrupulous opportunist” (Heller 231). Ironically, this is how the “old man” finds meaning. “All great countries fall,” he claims, “Why not yours?” (229); in this way, he simplifies war into a natural exchange of power, which renders loyalty to any country, and its moral ideology, futile. However, while he realizes that a “country” is just an “unnatural” concept that signifies a “piece of land surrounded on all sides by boundaries,” he must justify his lack of national loyalty and principle (232). The “unpatriotic, depraved” old man creates meaning through defying the

meaninglessness of nationhood and principle by both adopting and rejecting every nation and principle.

Still, the arbitrary nature of language, and hence the meaninglessness of life, often leaves one devoid of a reason to live: “The clinging, overpowering conviction of death spread steadily with the continuing rainfall, soaking mordantly into each man’s ailing countenance like the corrosive blot of some crawling disease” (109). In *Catch-22*, Dr. Stubbs, a squadron doctor who challenges “Catch-22” by attempting to ground his patients, struggles with this quandary. One day, Dunbar finds him “sitting in dense shadows” holding a “bottle of whisky” (109). “I used to get a kick out of saving people’s lives,” he utters in misery, “Now I wonder what the hell’s the point, since they all have to die anyway” (110). Dr. Stubbs’s misery transpires out of the depressing realization that death is inescapable and life is unavailing. He cannot make sense of the inevitable result of “Catch 22.” All soldiers will eventually die, rendering his existence as a physician pointless. Nevertheless, Dunbar reminds him, in an attempt to elude his melancholy, that Stubbs’s purpose is “to keep [the soldiers] from dying for as long as [he] can” (110). Dunbar argues that Dr. Stubbs must live in defiance of the fact that, because there is no inherent meaning to anything and language is arbitrary, his title is hollow.

The individual must procure justification for the arbitrary nature of language and find altruism within his or her own construction of meaning. Although actions are futile, one must act. Camus says that the only way to find brief happiness is to endure the hopelessness of existence and to defy death even while life is meaningless. In the last pages of *The Stranger*, Meursault—Camus’s main character—asserts this with satisfaction: “As if that blind rage had washed me clean, rid me of hope; for the first time, in that night alive with signs and stars, I opened myself to the gentle indifference of the world. Finding it so much like myself—so like a

brother, really—I felt that I had been happy and that I was happy again” (122-23). From the Absurdist view, human life is a constant battle between the pursuit of meaning and the purging of this delusion. The war between these two “heights” is sufficient to “satisfy one’s heart” (Camus, *Myth* 91). One lives to defy death, but “the point is to live” (Camus, *Myth* 88). One must work within the subjective, absurd constructs of language to justify their continued existence and find happiness in their defiant struggle.

Perhaps the best example of defiance in *Catch-22* is Yossarian’s triumphant escape from the war. After realizing the secret bestowed by Snowden’s death—that a man’s tenacity to live is the architect of his humanity—Yossarian decides to incur great danger upon himself by attempting to abscond to Sweden. Though he knows that this escape is “impossible” and he will “never make it,” Yossarian is determined to seek life outside of “Catch-22”: “At least I’ll be trying,” he concludes (415). He has been “fighting all along to save [his] country” (409). Now he must save himself. His “country is not in danger any more,” but he is (409). He cannot permit himself to believe that words and lives have meaning. In his flight, he recognizes the only truth, which is that there are no Truths. He is not “running away from [his human] responsibilit[y]” to search for meaning where there is none. Rather, he is “sav[ing] [his] life” by rejecting the absurd nature of “Catch-22” and its inevitable consequence: death (414). Yossarian leaves the military in search of happiness. While his authorities may catch him and render his actions futile, he must attempt to defy “Catch-22” in order to exist contentedly in his meaningless existence.

In *Catch-22*, Joseph Heller claims that language, although necessary for generating personal identity and meaning, is arbitrary. Absurdist such as Camus further this assertion through creating a universe void of any value or significance. In this absurd reality, morality is relative, identity is barren, and actions are unavailing. However, this is not an excuse for self-

destruction. One must resist suicide in search for momentary happiness even if it is empty. Yet because happiness withers without meaning (Hedges 159), one can only “imagine [themselves] happy” (Camus, *Myth* 91). While meaning is an illusion, to deny death and meaninglessness truly is to embrace them both and to choose to live otherwise.

Works Cited

Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*. Trans. Justin O’Brien. New York: Vintage, 1955. Print.

Camus, Albert. *The Stranger*. Trans. Matthew Ward. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1988. Print.

Chomsky, Noam. *Knowledge of Language: Its Nature, Origin, and Use*. New York: Praeger, 1986. Print.

Chomsky, Noam, Adriana Belletti, and Luigi Rizzi. *On Nature and Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. eBook Collection (EBSCOhost). Web. 19 November 2014.

Culler, Jonathan. *Ferdinand de Saussure*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986. Print.

Hedges, Chris. *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*. New York: Anchor Books, 2002. Print

Heller, Joseph. *Catch-22*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999. Print

Nietzsche, Friedrich. “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense.” 1873. *Philosophy and Truth:: Selections from Nietzsche’s Notebooks of the Early 1870s*. Trans. and ed. Daniel Breazeale. New York: Prometheus Books, 1979. 885-896. Print.

Copyright © 2015 *Wide Angle*, Samford University. All Rights Reserved.

Essay

Adam Quinn

Zeugma, Inversion, and Fragmentation in Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*

In *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, Nancy Armstrong claims that Virginia Woolf emancipates the traditional, restrictive structures of language to establish “a language of the true self, which is fluid, neither male nor female, but capable of containing within the self the figure of exchange that once had organized social relations” (57). For Armstrong, this figure of exchange dominates traditional syntactical patterns of subject-verb-object and can only be escaped by offering new sentence structures capable of representing new degrees of interiority. Couched in a larger argument about the domestic novel, Armstrong considers linguistic emancipation in female writing to closely mirror social, relational, and political emancipation for women in the West. As female authority increases, however, it depends less and less on gendered language to make meaning, and “comes to use as a voice that cannot be female because it represents what is both male and female” (57). For Virginia Woolf, the language of the true self is a mode of present tense subjective narration employed by Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Smith to invert subject and object, obscure subject completely, and even confuse the verb-object relationship. By describing how Clarissa and Septimus think in addition to what they think, Woolf wields words as syntactic weapons challenging the hegemonic, patriarchal forces that try to control Clarissa and Septimus in the novel, most notably Sir William Bradshaw. In the opening scene of *Mrs. Dalloway*, Clarissa’s conversation with Peter Walsh, and Septimus’s

interactions with Sir William Bradshaw, Clarissa and Septimus employ three specific syntactic devices—zeugma, inversion, and sentence fragments—to depict new, non-logical systems of thinking that oppose language’s implicit power structures and create opportunities to represent the perspectives of female and marginalized consciousnesses.

Zeugma, inversion, and sentence fragments all belong to a unique category of linguistic constructions that do not follow grammatical rules but still successfully communicate meaning. In other words, they do and do not make sense, simultaneously. They are contradictions that allow language users to communicate ideas outside of the standard practices of the language. For postcolonial theorist Alan Lawson, they are “about things that are *relatable but not commensurable*” (1218, Lawson’s emphasis). Lawson suggests zeugma as a way for colonized peoples to challenge the linguistic power structures of a colonizer. Because language forces its users to think in terms of the language’s interior logic, Lawson argues, language itself becomes an extension of power that inculcates certain thought patterns and precludes others. Even the most basic sequence of the English sentence, for example, subject-verb-object, “has seductively offered a grammar for the outmoded transitive model of imperialism: A does X to B” according to Lawson (1218).

In contrast, zeugma, inversion, and sentence fragmentation all offer opportunities to communicate new meanings in qualitatively new ways. Employing a deconstructive logic, they each expose the unstable nature of language systems and offer its marginalized users opportunities to subvert language’s relationship to power. For Lawson, these rhetorical devices are “ways to read the coexistence of two incommensurable, politically unequal laws or epistemologies” (1218). In the world of Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*, Lawson’s unequal laws or epistemologies exist between the consciousness of men and the consciousness of women,

between those in positions of political and social power and those without political or social power, and between characters whose rationality aligns with the interests of the state and those whose thought processes are a threat to the stability of the state.

Zeugma is a rhetorical device that connects two objects or ideas together in non-logical ways with one word. Adopted from the Greek word *zeûgma*, meaning “a yoking together,” zeugma often yokes literal meaning and figurative meaning together, as in Alexander Pope’s line “Or stain her honour, or her new brocade” (qtd in Lawson 1218). In this example, “stain her honour” is a figure of speech and “[stain] her new brocade” is a literal action. However, both are connected in one line by the word “stain.” On the very first page of *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf uses zeugma to describe Clarissa’s interpolated experiences of a Wednesday morning in June 1923 and her early adulthood experiences at her family’s country house. “How fresh, how calm, stiller than this of course, the air was in the early morning,” Woolf begins, and she continues Clarissa’s long, inverted thought through a series of images: “like the flap of a wave; the kiss of a wave; shrill and sharp and yet [. . .] solemn” (3). Each of these images describes Clarissa’s perceptions of the quality and feeling of the air, connected to the verb “was.” However, a closer reading reveals each image to be linked zeugmatically in the way Clarissa seamlessly conflates literal and emotional descriptions within the same sentence. In Clarissa’s telling, she can mingle description (fresh, calm, still), zeugmatic simile (the flap of a wave and the kiss of a wave both connected by “like”), descriptions of simile (shrill and sharp) and emotional reaction (solemn) in the same sentence without contradiction. Although these descriptions cannot coexist according to traditional Western logic, Clarissa is able to connect them through zeugma, erasing distinctions between past memory and present experience, physical description and emotional perception, and literal and figurative language.

Although there are many possible forms of inversion, Woolf is most interested in omissive inversion, a type of inversion that reverses the logical order of a sentence and then omits one or more parts of the original sentence. Whereas many inverted sentences can simply be reordered to make traditional meaning, omissive inversions cannot be manipulated back into a simple sentence because either the subject, verb, or object is missing. For example, if the third sentence of *Mrs. Dalloway* were a simple inversion such as “Off their hinges the doors were to be taken by Rumpelmayer’s men,” logical order could easily be reestablished by reversing the sentence to read “Rumpelmayer’s men were coming to take the doors off their hinges” (3). However, Woolf’s sentence instead operates as an omissive inversion without the presence of a subject: “The doors would be taken off their hinges.” Woolf connects the appended clause “Rumpelmayer’s men were coming” by a semicolon instead of the word “for” or “because,” failing to establish any necessary causal relationship between the two halves of the sentence. As a result, the sentence “The doors would be taken off their hinges; Rumpelmayer’s men were coming” requires the reader to infer retroactively that Rumpelmayer’s men are the missing subject who will take the doors off their hinges. Woolf emphasizes the results of the action instead of the causes of the action because Clarissa privileges results over causes in her own consciousness. Significantly, readers will often make sense of inverted sentences by independently realigning them with a logical order in their heads. Readers resist the seeming irregularity of Clarissa’s thought even as readers immediately understand its message. In this way omissive inversions are not nonsensical; they are merely non-logical. Although the sentence as Woolf writes it still communicates meaning, it is contingent meaning; it requires an interpretive act in order to be understood.

In her conversation with Peter Walsh, Clarissa juggles past memory and current perceptions simultaneously. However, in order to do so, she combines omissive inversion and zeugma through sentence fragments, enabling her to create non-logical meaning that can express her multiple and often conflicting emotions. When Peter first comes in the door, Clarissa narrates his approach in real-time: “She heard a hand upon the door [. . .] Now the brass knob slipped [. . .] Now the door opened” (40). However, Peter’s arrival breaks the parallel pattern she has established and throws Clarissa into a long omissive inverted monologue revolving around an absent subject. The original sentence, “Now the door opened, and in came—” does not complete itself, creating a tense anticipation that is never resolved. Although Clarissa cannot “remember what he was called!” the identity of the intruder matters less than Clarissa’s reactions to him. Instead, Clarissa describes her reactions in an inverted zeugma connected to the verb “she was.” Clarissa can be “surprised,” “glad,” “shy,” and “taken aback” at the same time because these disparate emotions will eventually be connected to the infinitive clause “to have Peter Walsh come to her so unexpectedly in the morning!” The glaring omission inside each of these two sentence fragments is causal—the non-grammatical reasoning behind her surprised reactions. Characteristically, Clarissa includes cause as a parenthetical afterthought, “(She had not read his letter),” that contests language’s insistence to structure sentences as narratives in order to make effect, not cause, the primary focus of the sentence.

In the same conversation with Peter, Clarissa employs sentence fragments once again when the topic of Clarissa’s party comes up. In a moment of playfulness, Peter asks her why she will not ask him to his party. “Now of course,” Clarissa thinks in response, “he’s enchanting! perfectly enchanting!” (41). She then combines three sentences and sentence fragments to simultaneously express three different ideas: a memory, a question, and an ambiguous statement.

The first, a memory, is the only part of her thought that conforms to standard English: “Now I remember how impossible it was ever to make up my mind” (41). However, as soon as she comes to the impossible prospect of making up her mind, her thoughts lead her in an entirely different direction—toward a question. The phrase “and why did I make up my mind” is a complete sentence only if it is constructed as a question. Set off in dashes and lodged in the middle of a larger reflection, the question becomes a fragmentary aside and breaks the logical order of an English sentence, existing as a non-logical clause instead. The last fragment, “not to marry him?” is complicated by the inclusion of a question mark. In order for the original sentence to maintain standard logic, it must read “Now I remember how impossible it was ever to make up my mind not to marry him.” However, that same sentence read as a question becomes non-logical, relying on an act of interpretation by the reader to switch meanings halfway through the sentence from a statement to a question. As a result, Clarissa is able to create an ambiguous sentence, mingling the characteristics of question and statement to simultaneously raise the question of why it was so hard for her to make up her mind and if she really has made up her mind. In allowing this type of ambiguity to characterize her speech, Clarissa creates a new language of simultaneity and ambiguity for herself, allowing for a larger range of emotional expression.

Toward the end of her conversation with Peter, Clarissa has one last moment of characteristic non-logical thought patterns. After she kisses Peter and leans back on the sofa, she transitions abruptly from one thought to another as she first thinks, “If I had married him, this gaiety would have been mine all day!” and then concludes, “It was all over for her” (47). Her encounter with Peter startled her, caused her to imagine life with him, and now leads her to reflect on her current life. In one sentence fragment, she combines passive voice and an omitted

subject in a metaphor that imaginatively describes her life. “The sheet was stretched and the bed narrow,” she thinks, using the grammatically incorrect past tense instead of the more final past perfect “has been” (47). Although this phrase is not strictly zeugmatic, it does use one verb, “was,” to describe two different relationships: the stretched sheet and the narrow bed. The construction is intentionally passive, for it allows Clarissa to obscure the need for a grammatical subject, negating the placement of blame that the structure of the sentence requires. As a result, Clarissa is able to describe realities without holding anyone directly responsible for the stretched sheet and the narrow bed, or, by extension, for the state of her life.

Septimus Smith, in contrast, uses zeugma, inversion, and fragmentation in very different ways. Although he still employs language in non-grammatical and non-logical terms, he focuses on subverting existing language systems, revealing them to be unstable, contradictory, and self-defeating. Whereas Clarissa employs traditional zeugma to describe two or more ideas with the same adjective or verb, Septimus often uses a reverse zeugma to describe the same noun with two, often contradictory, verbs. In describing Septimus as a clerk visiting the West End and looking around with interest, the narrator imagines that Septimus might “explain to the visitors what a wonderful place it is; how wonderful, but at the same time, he thinks, as he looks at chairs and tables, how strange” (83). Although this passage does not originate in Septimus’s consciousness explicitly, its figures of speech are still associated with him and characterize his view of the world. The indefinite “it” as the subject of the sentence is described by two contradictory adjectives: “how wonderful” and “how strange.” Exposing language’s potential instability, Septimus plays on two different meanings of each word. In the more contemporary usage, the word “wonderful” is used to describe something good. However, closer analysis of the word could also mean something that makes its observers wonder at it. Similarly, the word

“strange” carries negative connotations in contemporary usage but can also mean unfamiliar or associated with mysticism. This ambiguity defines Septimus’s use of language in the novel.

Whereas Clarissa focuses on creating new meanings, Septimus focuses on multiplying meanings.

However, Septimus is also a character of change. Woolf gives Septimus a complete arc more than any other character, contrasting his character before and after the war. Before he goes off to fight in WWI, the narrator uses the metaphor of a blossoming flower to describe Septimus, qualifying the metaphor with a long series of zeugmatic associations: “flowered from vanity, ambition, idealism, passion, loneliness, courage, laziness, the usual seeds” (84).

Characteristically, Septimus’s consciousness is not represented with a standard zeugma because each qualifier’s relationship to the verb “flowered” is not contradictory. Instead, all of them have an equally ambiguous connection to the verb that requires an interpretive act from the reader. The verb cannot modify each noun in contrasting literal and figurative ways because vanity, ambition, idealism, and the rest cannot be considered to be the results of flowering.

After the war, Septimus’s consciousness perceptibly shifts to rely more and more on inversion and zeugma. Returning to Shakespeare with his new secret—“that he could not feel”—Septimus reads Shakespeare through fragmentary zeugmatics (86). Like Clarissa, Septimus begins to think in sentence fragments, claiming “Shakespeare loathed humanity” in a sequence of incomplete noun phrases, “the putting on of clothes, the getting of children, the sordidity of the mouth and the belly!” (88). Each noun does not have a clear verb modifying it, making each an object of Shakespeare’s loathing. However, if each noun clause is considered as a substitute for the word “humanity” in the above line, then the complete sentence becomes a fragmented zeugma. “How Shakespeare loathed humanity—the putting on of clothes” could be logically inverted to read “How Shakespeare loathed the putting on of clothes—humanity,” exemplifying

the type of nonrestrictive logic Septimus employs. In another characteristic use of language, Septimus’s zeugma moves from the abstract concept, “humanity,” to concrete examples; he recognizes that word order, like word association, does not have a fixed meaning but can be manipulated to destabilize meanings like every other function of language.

Sir William Bradshaw, in contrast, relies almost exclusively on the short sentence and on logically cohesive, cause-and-effect relationships. As a representative of conventional logic and state authority in the novel, Bradshaw explicitly eliminates non-logical constructions from his speech patterns, imposing his exact meaning on his listeners without vagary. Each of his sentences is a tightly compact simple sentence that negates opportunities for multiple interpretation or ambiguity. Bradshaw explains to Lucrezia his plan to send Septimus to a rest house “Shortly and kindly” (97). He punctuates every thought with a jarring, choppy sentence that aurally batters his listeners into submission: “There was no alternative. It was a question of law. He would lie in bed in a beautiful house in the country. The nurses were admirable. Sir William would visit him once a week” (97). Bradshaw imposes his meaning on the world around him in a linguistically violent and relentlessly authoritarian way. Above anything else, Bradshaw’s speech is governed by his severe sense of proportion in all things, in direct contrast to the language of Septimus’s consciousness.

In the very next paragraph, Woolf directly contrasts Bradshaw’s speech with Septimus’s consciousness, allowing Septimus to lapse into a free-associating, allusive catalog prompted by Bradshaw’s short sentences. Unlike a list following a colon, however, Septimus’s catalog once again takes the form of zeugma, each phrase returning to the clause, “So they returned to the most exalted of mankind” (97). Significantly, Septimus not only uses this list to describe himself as a vast and multiple figure, but he also includes Bradshaw as his grammatical opposite through

an act of imaginative omission. Septimus describes his plight before the oppressive rationality of Bradshaw with a catalog of zeugmatic metaphors: “the criminal who faced his judges; the victim exposed on the heights; the fugitive; the drowned sailor; the poet of the immortal ode; the Lord who had gone from life to death; [. . .] Septimus Warren Smith, who sat in the arm-chair under the skylight staring at a photograph of Lady Bradshaw in court dress, muttering messages about beauty” (97). At this point in Septimus’s disjointed psychology, he has begun employing allusive zeugmas instead of grammatical zeugmas. Each example he gives holds a very different connection to the qualifier “the most exalted of mankind,” ranging from fugitive to Christ-figure with varying degrees of legitimacy. In each metaphor, Bradshaw takes the place of the omitted subject, performing action on Septimus’s direct object. If Septimus is the criminal, victim, fugitive, sailor, poet, and Christ-figure, Bradshaw is the opposing judge, exposed heights, law enforcement, poetic foil, and Pontius Pilate. Because each category of reference does not hold the same type of relationship to each other or to the controlling clause, Septimus incorporates ambiguity and multiple interpretations into his very thought and speech patterns even as he implicitly describes Bradshaw.

In finding new syntactical patterns for the speech and thought of her characters, Woolf employs a powerful new way for her readers to think about language. Instead of reading *Mrs. Dalloway* to discover one stable interpretation, the careful reader is beset by a multiplicity of interpretive possibilities and the realization that several of these valid interpretations conflict. Unlike the characters who think in orderly sentences in the novel, such as Sir William Bradshaw, Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Smith both use Woolf’s new freedom of language to its fullest effect. Through omissive inversions, zeugma, and sentence fragments, Clarissa and Septimus reject the logical hierarchies that order the English language in favor of a variegated means of

expression that rely on the reader’s interpretive choices to create meaning. Following Armstrong’s and Lawson’s reading of the social and political possibilities of this type of linguistic rebellion, Clarissa and Septimus prove themselves to be characters who are capable of new, unique directions for thought as a result of their grammatical freedom.

Works Cited

Armstrong, Nancy. “The Rise of Female Authority in the Novel.” *Desire and Domestic Fiction:*

A Political History of the Novel. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987. Print.

Lawson, Alan. “The Anxious Proximities of Settler (Post)colonial Relations.” *Literary Theory:*

An Anthology. 2nd ed. Eds. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004. Print.

Woolf, Virginia. *Mrs. Dalloway*. San Diego: Harcourt, 1925. Print.

Copyright © 2015 *Wide Angle*, Samford University. All Rights Reserved.

Essay

Rebekah Ray

The Disaster of a Diseased Mind:

**Rational vs. Irrational thought in “The Fall of the House of Usher” by Edgar Allan Poe and
“The Yellow Wall-Paper” by Charlotte Perkins Gilman**

Edgar Allen Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher” and “The Yellow Wall-Paper,” by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, although written during different times by very different authors, have striking similarities. They both involve a confining atmosphere, a clueless caretaker, a descent into insanity, and a haunting liberation at the end. But their commonalities run deeper than mere plot devices; both pieces make the same powerful statement about the mind. In each story, one character represents the rational side of the mind, and another represents the irrational side. The characters not only embody the struggle between these two halves, but they also depict a mind that is fundamentally unbalanced. In the struggle of the two opposing personalities, one character emerges dominant, and one is repressed. These stories illustrate what happens when one side of the mind turns against the other. In either case, whether the rational or the irrational gains dominion, the result is the destruction of all sanity. The oppressed side of the mind makes one final effort at liberation and causes the mind to collapse permanently.

Both Poe and Gilman make the argument through these short stories that a healthy mind is a well-balanced mind. Everyone has both rational and irrational faculties. The rational side allows people to theorize in the abstract but also ground themselves in practicality. It typically

functions as the voice of reason and logic. However, focusing on extreme intellect alone can drive a person to live in lofty, intangible thoughts and become removed from the material world. On the other hand, the irrational side of the mind has the capacity for imagination, creativity, emotion, intuition, and gut feelings; yet it is susceptible to losing touch with reality through an affinity for the absurd and fanciful. Each side has its value but also potential for serious harm if it becomes too extreme. The tragedy of these two stories is that, from the start, one side has a dangerous power over the other. “The Fall of the House of Usher” examines the disastrous effect of a mind dominated by chaotic creative energy, and “The Yellow Wall-Paper” warns against the danger of a mind imprisoned by practicality and logic. Both stories make the case that an unbalanced mind is doomed to fail. Readers watch in horror as one character gradually gains dominance over the other, illustrating a sickness of the mind that finally leads to an act of revolution by the weaker side. The mind goes from being merely unhealthy to being actually at war with itself. When one side of consciousness turns on the other and attempts to break free, that is when the mind breaks. It can no longer be whole, and it cannot contain two warring halves. Sanity essentially destroys itself, and all psychological stability is lost.

In Poe’s story, the character of Usher’s sister, Lady Madeline, symbolizes the part of the mind given to reason. John Timmerman, in his article “House of Mirrors: Edgar Allen Poe’s ‘The Fall of the House of Usher,’” claims that Madeline is meant to represent Enlightenment thought. He writes, “Madeline therefore becomes abstracted to little more than a mental evanescence—Enlightenment at its extreme, out of touch with reality” (242). To take this comparison a step further, the argument can be made that Madeline embodies reason itself, or, more specifically, reason when it is removed from human emotion. She is cold, detached, and dreamlike (243). Her ghostly appearances in the story are rare and always at a distance. The few

physical descriptions of her include phrases such as “lofty and enshrouded,” having an “emaciated frame,” and “the mockery of a faint blush” (701, 697). The first time the narrator glimpses her in person she simply “passed slowly through a remote portion of the apartment, and [. . .] disappeared” (693). Madeline drifts through this story “like a vapor” (Timmerman 228). Rational thought has the tendency to focus on the abstract, on intangible ideas like logic and philosophy, and to neglect the details of physical reality. Reason is especially dry and airy when severed from human feelings. It is sometimes hard to grasp and frustratingly elusive. Madeline, like the rational part of the mind, is disconnected from the material world, aloof from concrete reality, and characterized by an ethereal loftiness. Like abstract logic and hypothetical theories, she lacks the gritty substance and emotion of the irrational side of human consciousness.

The rational character in Gilman’s story is less a portrait of the abstract and more a personification of rigid order and logic. John, the main character’s husband, is scientific, structured, and intolerant of anything creative or fanciful. Gilman’s narrator, Jane, describes him as “practical in the extreme. He has no patience with faith, an intense horror of superstition, and he scoffs openly at any talk of things not to be felt and seen and put down in figures” (1684). His hyper-rationality can also be seen in his refusal to believe in the seriousness of his wife’s mental state by putting it off as just the product of an overactive imagination. He labels her with a “temporary nervous depression” and a “slight hysterical tendency,” suggesting that the only thing wrong with Jane is her lack of rational discipline (1684). He sees her as irrational because “he knows there is no *reason* to suffer, and that satisfies him” (1686, Gilman’s emphasis). John also discourages any creative thought in his wife, especially with her desires to write and to speculate about the queer feeling of the house. Jane has to hide her diary entries from him for fear of meeting with “heavy opposition” (1684). When she discloses her suspicion that “there is

something strange about the house” (1685) and voices her intense, instinctive reaction to the wallpaper, he only laughs at her (1686). He stubbornly insists that the only way for Jane to get better is to deny her imaginative side and to stop indulging in pointless fantasies (1689). Beverly Hume explains in her article, “Gilman’s ‘Interminable Grotesque’: The Narrator Of ‘The Yellow Wall-Paper,’” that as a caricature of rationality, John has no intuition into Jane’s creative mind (478). He can only oppose and override her; he cannot understand her.

In contrast to these two manifestations of rational thought are the characters who represent the other side of the mind: the irrational. Roderick Usher is the obvious picture of the irrational in Poe’s story. He is superstitious, fantastical, artistic, enigmatic, and, not to mention, slipping into insanity. Timmerman maintains that Roderick is “emblematic of Romantic passion” (242). He operates in “an irrationally surrealistic world of frenzied artmaking” (236) and over the course of the story he “flames into an unrestricted creative power, full of unrestrained, raw passion. He becomes the fiery polar to Madeline’s cold abstraction” (243). Even though Timmerman sees Roderick and Madeline in terms of Romanticism and Enlightenment, this same analysis can explain them as the two sections of the mind: one rational and one irrational. Roderick’s insane flare for the bizarre and spiritual can be seen in both his paintings and his musical compositions. The narrator describes in length the eerie quality of “the paintings over which [Roderick’s] elaborate fancy brooded” (693), and the songs Roderick writes display “in the notes, as well as in the words [. . .] his wild fantasies” (649). There are many hints throughout the story of Roderick’s decaying mental state even before the full magnitude of his madness is revealed. He is described as having “an incoherence—an inconsistency,” a “nervous agitation,” and a “nervous affliction” (692). He speculates that he “must inevitably abandon life and reason together in [his] struggles with some fatal demon of fear” (692). Later, Roderick enters the

narrator’s room with “a species of mad hilarity in his eyes—an evidently restrained hysteria in his whole demeanor” (698). Roderick’s artistic genius, his crumbling sense of reality, and all of his wild and emotional tendencies characterize him as the epitome of irrational thought.

Interestingly, many similar phrases appear in “The Yellow Wall-Paper” in reference to the main character, Jane, who also happens to be losing her grip on reality. Her “nervous weakness” (1689) and “hysterical tendency” (1684) earn her the diagnosis of a “nervous patient” (1686). Like Roderick, Jane has a creative mind. The story is written as her secretive journal entries, recorded in spite of her unimaginative caretakers (1685). She finds herself composing long, vivid descriptions of the wallpaper even though this sometimes wears her out (1688). Jane also possesses a wild imagination. She fantasizes about the house being haunted before John spoils her “ghostliness” (1684-5). She finds faces and skulking figures in the pattern of her wallpaper (1687). When she was a little girl she could see expressions and personalities in “blank walls and plain furniture” (1687). Jane is characterized by fancies, illusions, and her dramatic ability to visualize the otherworldly and grotesque (Hume 480). Her reality becomes gradually more distorted as she loses herself in her own diseased hallucinations. She is altogether irrational, sensational, and sentimental, the opposite of her objective, no-nonsense counterpart.

Though each story represents both sides of the mind, they present two different outcomes in the struggle for dominance. In “The Fall of The House of Usher,” the expression of madness overpowers the voice of reason. Even before Madeline’s death, she is wasting away under the oppressive atmosphere of the house. Her illness demonstrates her loss of power. Her only real symptoms are “a settled apathy” and “a gradual wasting away of the person” (693). Even though she had “steadily born up against the pressure of the malady,” she eventually “succumbed [. . .] to the prostrating power of the destroyer” (693). The most striking depiction of reason’s

imprisonment in this story comes later, when Usher maniacally entombs his sister while she is still alive. The text here is laden with oppressive imagery, using words such as “entombment,” “encoffined,” “half smothered in its oppressive atmosphere,” “small, damp, and utterly without means of admission for light,” “sheathed with copper,” “door, of massive iron,” and “immense weight” (697). This unnerving scene illustrates the raw, mysterious power of irrational creativity when it overcomes sense. Rationality is locked away in an impenetrable vault and buried alive. Leila S. May argues in her article, “‘Sympathies of a Scarcely Intelligible Nature’: The Brother-Sister Bond in Poe’s ‘The Fall of the House of Usher,’” that Madeline is subjugated by her role as a sister in Victorian society. May writes that the first time the reader sees Roderick’s sister, she “is simultaneously all-pervasive and hollowed out—already a ghost. Her desire [to be free] is never expressed, yet everywhere felt” (394). Another way of reading Madeline’s demure disposition is to understand her as the oppressed side in an unbalanced mind. She is more than just a picture of the Victorian repression of women; she represents the diminishing voice of reason in a mind subjected to the ravings of wild, unrestrained, creative passion. Her longing for freedom is not just a commentary on society, but also on mental stability. This story is not just about gender equality, but also about psychological moderation. A mind dominated by emotion and fantasy, divorced from the calm rationality of higher forms of reason, becomes a stormy, chaotic mess, violent and unanchored. When the character who embodies reason is locked away in the dungeon, all hope for balance is lost. Roderick’s eventual plummet into insanity comes as a result of indulging his irrational side for too long and neglecting his twin sister: rational thought.

“The Yellow Wall-Paper” portrays a similar situation, but the sides of the mind have been reversed so that the reasonable part takes control over the creative part. Jane, the picture of

unbridled imagination, wastes away under the officious rule of her empirical husband. Her creative powers start to drain her under his patronizing restraints. He tells her that writing is not good for her, and therefore she feels tired when she tries (1686). When she asks to leave the house, he chides her (1690). When she wants to move rooms, he gives excuses (1685). When she begs to change the color of the walls, he laughs at her and calls her a “blessed little goose” (1686). When she longs to see her friends, he flatly refuses, saying they would be far too “stimulating” (1687). At every turn he forces his structure onto her, smothering her in “special direction” and “scheduled prescription” (1685). He is condescending, inflexible, and manipulative. He refuses to allow her freedom of activity (mental or physical), visitors, or even a room without bars on the windows. Carol Margaret Davison compares the house to a prison and the husband to a jailer in her article, “Haunted House/Haunted Heroine: Female Gothic Closets in ‘The Yellow Wall-Paper’” (55). Davison’s evidence supports the overwhelming feeling of imprisonment in the story, and her reading of the text reinforces the theme of Jane’s enforced oppression at the hands of her keeper. Jane is a creative individual, teetering on the edge of a psychological breakdown because of the rigid structure that binds her every way she turns. Tragically, with every step John takes to squelch her creativity, Jane’s mind slips further beyond repair. His very rationality is what causes her to lose her grip on reality. This is the fate of a mind that allows logic to trample over imagination. When there is no room for feeling, insight, or vision, the iron bars of reason starve out all possibility for deep human experience and reduce life to a dull list of facts, theorems, and equations. Jane’s ultimate descent into delusion is the effect of too much rational structure pressing her to the breaking point. She is forced to take solace in her creative mind by going deeper into her fantasies until they become her reality.

In each story, the house, as the setting of the struggle, is a manifestation of the oppression happening inside. Roderick’s gothic mansion impresses the reader with a heavy sense of despondent captivity from the very first sentence. The tale begins on a “dull, dark, and soundless day [. . .] when the clouds hung oppressively low in the heavens” (689). The narrator’s first impression of the house is “dreary,” “melancholy,” “desolate,” “terrible,” “ghastly,” “sorrowful,” “bleak,” “hideous,” and full of “insufferable gloom” (689). The sheer weight of all the description is enough to cause an “utter depression of soul” (689). The house has a tangible atmosphere of dread and decay, described by the narrator continually throughout the story. He says, “an air of stern, deep, and irredeemable gloom hung over and pervaded all” (691) and even calls it “dull, sluggish, faintly discernable, leaden-hued” (690). Everything about the house smothers light, suppresses truth, and chokes away cheerfulness. Roderick himself is “bound” by his fear and “enchained” by superstition (692). Madeline is literally imprisoned in the dungeon vault. The narrator’s powers of reasoning are numbed to the point that he does not see the warning signs of Roderick’s insanity. Hardly a phrase in this whole story is untouched by the mighty force of the building’s oppressive ambiance. The house presents a vivid picture of the negative effects of psychological imbalance. Just as the physical structure is unsound and ready to buckle under its own weight, so a mind in this state of oppression is in a dangerous position. As shown by the crack in the outside wall, there is a level of decay here that cannot be healed. The very frantic and dramatic nature of the excessive description captures the idea that this house is ruled by the unchecked passion of the irrational portion of the mind.

Gilman builds a similarly confining atmosphere within her own story’s house. The narrator, Jane, first mentions a strange feeling about the house and wonders why it has been vacant for so long (1684). She reveals more of the prison-like qualities of the house as the story

continues. It is isolated from society (1684), with “gates that lock,” and John is quick to shut the windows (1685). He will not allow Jane to use the room that opens onto the piazza, sending her instead to the supposed “nursery” room with the yellow wallpaper. This room is full of bizarre and ominous signs of imprisonment such as bars on the windows, “rings and things in the walls” (1685), and a “great heavy bed” that “looks as if it had been through wars” (1867) and is nailed to the ground (1688). The floor itself is “scratched and gouged and splintered,” lending to the overall feeling that this room must have held captive some demented prisoner. Additionally, Jane is significantly disturbed by the wallpaper. Her first sight of the paper provokes thoughts of hatred and images of suicide (1685). She feels that it has a “vicious influence” on her (1687). But the longer it “dwells in [her] mind” the more she becomes addicted to it, consumed by it, and connected with it (Hume 480). Staring at the walls all night, she identifies with the bars of the front pattern, and the creeping woman trapped behind them (1691). Convinced that she can know things about the paper that no one knows, she is enslaved to the continual exploration and description of the pattern (1689). Even the smell of the wallpaper is inescapable, “hovering” and “skulking” in her hair and all over the house (1692). Together, the paper and the details of the room develop a scenario of eerie incarceration. They show the strict confinement of order on the creative brain. Just as Jane feels trapped by the prison-like house and the bars of the wallpaper, the irrational side of the mind with all its desire for creative freedom is confined and restricted by the cold logic of the rational side. The house is a steel cage of practical reasoning, and the wallpaper is an expression of the intricate web of chains imposed by sensible, realistic, and unimaginative thought.

Both Poe and Gilman create an atmosphere of intense oppression in order to show the sickening effect that it has on the mind, but then they take the analogy even further. These two

stories amplify the effects of mental imbalance until the mind shatters in total devastation. The ultimate downfall of sanity comes about when the repressed side of the mind attempts to break free from the dominant side. In “The Fall of the House of Usher,” this is the moment when Madeline claws her way out of her dungeon casket and throws herself on her insane brother. The entire structure of the house crumbles in response to this terrible overthrow. Poe describes the house as a “reeking, crumbling, and decaying structure that nonetheless remains seemingly intact on the surface” (392). This is the perfect way to describe a mind at war with itself. The house represents the mind containing two opposing sides: rational and irrational, Roderick and Madeline. When they live in unequal control, the house becomes sick. This can be seen by the hardly noticeable fissure that runs all the way down the outside of the structure (690). When Madeline escapes during the tumultuous storm at the end and Roderick’s true madness is realized, this crack widens dramatically, destroying the entire building and the siblings with it. In the same way, when the two parts of the mind reach the climax of their conflict through the liberation and uprising of the oppressed side, the mental structure of the mind is demolished forever. The mutual destruction of the Usher twins mirrors the ruin of a mind that rebels against itself.

A similarly destructive ending takes place in the final scene of “The Yellow Wall-Paper.” Jane’s creativity has been repressed too long, turning into tortured psychological confusion. She no longer knows what is real and what is imagined. Her reality has become wrapped up in the persona of the woman in the wallpaper (1695). In this story’s scene of disturbing liberation, Jane fully takes on the creeping identity of the trapped woman and releases her once and for all by frantically tearing the paper off the walls. When John sees her state of complete madness, he slumps to the floor in a dead faint so that she is compelled to creep over him again and again as

she makes her way around the room (1695). The analogy here is a bit more complex than in Poe’s story, but it works when looked at closely. In a sense, Jane is the woman in the wallpaper throughout the whole story; she simply does not see their shared identity clearly till the end. The woman represents Jane’s creative powers, trapped by the bars of reason. She also represents Jane’s madness, which is kept concealed and buried for a while under the guise of practical thought. When the woman finally breaks out, it symbolizes the revolution of chaotic imagination against all sanity. The room and the wallpaper, like the House of Usher, represent the mind. They are torn and destroyed beyond repair in this defiant act of hysterical lunacy. John, the figure of reason, is reduced to a weak lump on the ground over which the mad woman crawls. Although they do not meet with dramatic deaths like the Usher siblings, they each meet a ruinous end. John loses his identity of strength and authority, and Jane loses her mind and herself.

Poe and Gilman construct parallel pictures of diseased minds through these two stories. Though the minds err in opposite directions, they both come to disaster for the same reason: they allow one side to rule the other, crushing it to the point of a desperate revolution. The oppression starts the mind down a winding spiral of sickness, as is seen in the worsening conditions of both Madeline and Jane under the overbearing care of Roderick and John. The trapped side of the mind weakens, and the ruling side becomes gradually more extreme until the brain reaches the breaking point. The suppressed side retaliates, the mind snaps, and all sanity is lost. The stories of Roderick and Jane are chilling because their decline plays out in slow motion down a slippery slope. Because everyone has both rational and irrational capacities, all readers can identify with the two parts of the mind, and it is disturbing to watch one side slowly overpower the other. Gilman and Poe both understand that sanity is a fragile balance, and their stories caution readers against an excess of practicality on the one hand and an excess of imagination on the other hand.

Without moderation, the mind becomes unstable. Instability leads to oppression, oppression leads to sickness, and sickness leads to decay, destruction, and death.

Works Cited

Baym, Nina. *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2008.

689-701, 1684-1695. Print.

Davison, Carol Margaret. "Haunted House/Haunted Heroine: Female Gothic Closets In 'The

Yellow Wallpaper'." *Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 33.1 (2004): 47-75.

MLA International Bibliography. Web. 12 Mar. 2014.

Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. *The Yellow Wall-Paper*, 1892. Print.

Hume, Beverly A. "Gilman's 'Interminable Grotesque': The Narrator Of 'The Yellow

Wallpaper'." *Studies In Short Fiction* 28.4 (1991): 477-484. *MLA International*

Bibliography. Web. 12 Mar. 2014.

May, Leila S. "'Sympathies Of A Scarcely Intelligible Nature': The Brother-Sister Bond In Poe's

'Fall Of The House Of Usher'." *Studies In Short Fiction* 30.3 (1993): 387-396. *MLA*

International Bibliography. Web. 12 Mar. 2014.

Poe, Edgar Allan. *The Fall of the House of Usher*, 1840. Print.

Timmerman, John H. "House Of Mirrors: Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Fall Of The House Of Usher'."

Papers On Language And Literature: A Journal For Scholars And Critics Of Language

And Literature 39.3 (2003): 227-244. *MLA International Bibliography*. Web. 12 Mar.

2014.

Works Consulted

Johnson, Greg. "Gilman's Gothic Allegory: Rage And Redemption In 'The Yellow Wallpaper'."

Studies In Short Fiction 26.4 (1989): 521-530. *MLA International Bibliography*. Web. 12

Mar. 2014.

Obuchowski, Peter. "Unity Of Effect In Poe's 'The Fall Of The House Of Usher'." *Studies In*

Short Fiction 12.4 (1975): 407. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 12 Mar. 2014.

Copyright © 2015 *Wide Angle*, Samford University. All Rights Reserved.

Commentary

Lauren Morris

BACHE Visiting Writers Series: The Haunting Questions of Brian Turner’s War Poetry

Brian Turner is a professor, author, and Iraq War veteran. He has published two award-winning works of poetry, *Here, Bullet* and *Phantom Noise*, as well as a highly esteemed memoir, *My Life as a Foreign Country*. Earlier this year, Brian Turner presented his poetry to the Samford community as a part of the BACHE Visiting Writers Series. At this event, he captivated his large audience by posing questions that caused Samford students and faculty to contemplate war and its consequences.

Brian Turner discussed his works by reading one of his poems and then posing a question for the audience to consider. He became increasingly zealous with each poetic delivery. It was as if his poetry took him back to the war and he endured every experience and emotion again. As a result, there was something alarming about the poems he delivered: disturbing descriptions of blood and horror were interwoven into beautiful metaphors in the lines of his poetry. And yet, after Turner finished reciting, he continued to lecture and joke as if he hadn’t just explored something deathly serious and paradoxical. The change from uncomfortable silence to joyful laughter and relaxation was so instantaneous that it almost went unnoticed. The emotions of the audience were constantly fluctuating. Through this, Turner simulated the psychological conflict soldiers face every day in combat. While they must recognize the severity of war to stay alive, they must also remain lighthearted to prevent themselves from becoming savage. In other words, the battle between gravity and blitheness is the only way to rescue their life and humanity from

being corrupted by war. Turner further exposed this tension through the questions he posed to people attending the event.

Though the juxtaposition of Turner’s solemn poems and comical remarks was unsettling, the most provocative aspects about the event were Turner’s loaded questions. A few examples are as follows: “Why do we think it is okay to bomb small countries and then move on?”; “What should we say to a person after we’ve stopped bombing his or her country?”; “How do we reconcile with the fact that we have been at war for twenty-four consecutive years?” As is obvious, these questions were not lighthearted. They were arresting. Turner presented them aggressively, but also with resilience, as if he had grown accustomed to the torment of his own thoughts. For Turner, these questions were essential to his poetry; one could not understand the meaning of his poems without asking these questions. Since the job of a writer, he said, is to pose questions that instigate profound thinking, he asked one of these distressing questions after every reading and commentary. Such questions seemed to revolve around a central theme: this generation cannot ignore the problems and effects associated with war.

One idea that stood out to me reflects Brian Turner’s questions regarding the number of people lost to war. Turner struggled with the conceptualization of this incalculable number throughout his poetry, namely in “Cole’s Guitar,” “Insignia,” “The Lifetime of Conflict,” and “Bodies and Ghosts.” Specifically, Turner presented the idea that people exchange pieces of themselves with other people upon establishing a connection with them. Thus, each individual possesses pieces of many other individuals. With this in mind, Brian Turner wondered how many people we have lost in war. When soldiers die physically, do they live on spiritually through the parts of themselves they have given to other people, or does that soldier’s death cause these other people to lose the corresponding parts of them?

Yet Brian Turner did not stop at the immeasurable number of souls lost to war. Another concept proposed through Turner’s poetry was that if war takes souls and disfigures soldiers, and if each soldier is connected to other people, everybody dies as a result of war, at least from a spiritual perspective. From the opposite standpoint, Turner also wondered whether soldiers leave their identities with people at home, if no psychological part of them goes to war. If this were true, it would mean that no one really dies as a result of war because soldiers are kept alive through the connections they establish in the span of their lives. With these contemplations, Brian Turner averted his young crowd from the “out of sight, out of mind” mantra held by many Americans. Such people choose to be ignorant of the horrors of war simply because they are afraid to contemplate war’s callous consequences. Turner urged the audience to escape this mindset and address the problems and thoughts that war provokes.

Brian Turner left the audience with the responsibility not only to interpret these difficult questions but also to answer them. Above all, he stressed the idea that people cannot ignore their concerns about war, reminding the crowd that while its effects may seem distant, war affects people across the world. Furthermore, Turner offered a resolution to conflict through his poetry and challenged his audience to do the same. A poem, he shared, is completed only when a reader incorporates his or her experiences. Therefore, poems are webs of interpersonal connections that never pass away. This, he showed, is the beauty and eternity of poetry: It captures meaning from all readers and binds them together without judgment. Great poems unify. Therefore, through his poetry, Turner reminded his audience that managing the effects of war through loving soldiers is the responsibility of human beings. To be human, in that sense, is to care for one another. This means war denies a person’s humanity. With this Brian Turner showed the crowd that there is one obvious, yet forgettable tie between all people: we are all human. We are

all in this world together, and we should all support each other. Loving every person, regardless of his or her uniform, is essential if we are all to coexist harmoniously.

Copyright © 2015 *Wide Angle*, Samford University. All Rights Reserved.

Review

Matthew Harrison

Birdman: Or (The Unexpected Virtue of Oscar Baiting)

At the start of each year when Oscar predictions reach their climax and the Academy descends from Mount Sinai with their nominations for the previous year’s best films chiseled in stone, the term “Oscar bait” starts to get thrown around. It is a term used to describe any film that appears to have been produced solely for the purpose of winning an Oscar by appealing to the qualities the Academy tends to like. Some common characteristics of Oscar bait films that proponents of the term like to cite include films that feature an award-winning cast and crew, films that achieve an unprecedented cinematic or technological feat, films that value philosophical dialogue over explosive action, and, most despicably of all, films that reflexively cement their stories within Hollywood itself. The good news for those who subscribe to this criticism is that 2014’s Best Picture winner, *Birdman: Or (The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance)*, directed by Alejandro González Iñárritu, is horribly guilty of every last one of them.

At its core, *Birdman* is a meta-cinematic work. It is a film about a washed-up Hollywood actor named Riggan Thomson (played by Michael Keaton) who became famous for starring as the superhero, Birdman, decades earlier and now seeks to reinvigorate his career by writing, directing, and starring in a Broadway adaptation of Raymond Carver’s short story, “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love.” Unsurprisingly, then, *Birdman* is almost as much a fictional story of an artist seeking to reinvent his artistic persona as it is an autobiography of

Keaton himself, who became famous in the Eighties for playing a little-known superhero named Batman. Iñárritu and his co-writers brilliantly portray Riggan and Keaton’s meta-cinematic overlap through the schizophrenic-like manifestation of Birdman himself, who is simultaneously the voice of criticism, megalomania, and biting self-awareness for Riggan. He is Riggan’s superhero alter ego in the most Freudian sense, at times lifting Riggan up by asserting Birdman’s inherent artistic value as a superhero film, to moments later berating Riggan for his attempts to establish himself as anything more than a past-his-prime blockbuster movie star because, as he so fittingly tells Riggan, half tongue-in-cheek, “[audiences] love blood, they love action, not this talky, depressing philosophical bullshit.” But whether this is a jab at blockbusters or a provocation directed at the very audience who would dare call *Birdman* “Oscar bait” (and it is most likely both), it shows just how uncommonly self-aware *Birdman* really is.

While Keaton’s acting stands out as an undeniable highlight, delivering an Oscar-nominated performance worthy of what his onscreen character aspires to achieve, the other cast members are all at the top of their game as well. Edward Norton stands out in particular as Mike Shiner, a capricious but brilliant actor who butts heads with Riggan during the play’s rehearsals, and Emma Stone provides powerful emotion to the story as Sam, Riggan’s cynical, social-media obsessed daughter who shows him that power often comes more from publicity than critical praise.

Yet, just as praise-worthy as the film’s acting and meta-cinematic narrative, both of which received nominations, *Birdman*’s cinematography is perhaps the most groundbreaking. Opting to reflect the organic, live feel of a theatre performance, almost all of *Birdman* appears as a single, continuous shot in which the camera follows characters as they move from scene to scene. Here, Iñárritu substitutes conventional editing for blind cuts to make the film feel more

like a singular event than the sequential but separate events presented in traditional film. It is as visually impressive as it is mind-boggling to conceive since it means the actors had to choreograph impossibly long scenes to the most precise detail in order to enter and exit at the precise time. To complement this visual style, the film's score consists mainly of freestyle jazz drumming, which conveys a sense of unpredictability to the film's direction while also supplementing New York City's rich history of jazz music.

Even if criticisms of Oscar baiting are warranted, Alejandro González Iñárritu's *Birdman: Or (The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance)* is the kind of film too self-aware to accept them. It knows fully well what it does and who its audience is, which is something few other Oscar films can claim, but, most importantly, it understands that it is not a film for everyone. People will despise the film for what it is and the Oscar wins it stole, but that's okay with *Birdman*. He is just happy to be discussed.

Copyright © 2015 *Wide Angle*, Samford University. All Rights Reserved.

Review

Dr. Jennifer Lackey

Ignarritu's *Birdman* and the Impossibility of Continuity

Birdman's perch atop the Academy Awards was a surprise to some and an offense to others. In a year when productions and performances by women and minorities were yet again overlooked, a film about a middle-aged white man still trying to feel relevant taking the top prize felt like a new low in blatant disregard of minority contribution. But with a median voting age of 62, the 94% Caucasian and 77% male Academy could hardly do else than find *Birdman* compelling (Horn, Sperling, and Smith, n. pag.). Coupled with the additional fact that Hollywood loves nothing more than a film about Hollywood, especially if they get to be the hero (e.g., *Argo*), the only real surprise was that anyone was surprised. To quote the great James M. Cain, the Oscars reflect “the motion picture industry's frantic desire to kiss itself on the back of its neck” (Madden and Mecholsky 133).

While it would be easy to continue this rant, perhaps it is too easy. For, truth be told, I also can do little else than find *Birdman* compelling. Although centered on Riggan Thomson, a white male, the film explores his difficulty with authenticity, motivation, and his own contingency in ways that transcend race, gender, and class to touch on something very fundamental about the human condition. In the tradition of Federico Fellini's *8 1/2* or Louis Malle's *Vanya on 42nd Street*, the film uses the frustrations and glories of the creative process to explore the deep murkiness between reality and illusion that haunts all of us, artist or no. So, while having Michael Keaton play a former superhero star attempting a comeback might seem a

trite conceit geared to a certain audience, within the film it becomes part of a larger meta-narrative that questions anyone’s ability to know his or her own reasons for how and why he or she acts.

Riggan’s motivations for creating the play within the film are constantly in flux—is it fame? Is it artistry? When he tries to convince Tabitha Dickinson, the critic, that the adaptation has deeply personal relevance for him, no one buys his act, perhaps least of all Riggan himself, whose own name implies that everything we are watching has been rigged for/against us. It becomes increasingly impossible to tell when characters are displaying genuine emotions and when they aren’t or to know whether scenes are taking place in “reality” or not. It even becomes questionable whether we are still in Riggan’s life or have moved on even past his subconscious and into his own death. The film invites us, along with Riggan, to descend into a space where we can imagine multiple versions of how our own existence might be perceived, even to a version of a world without us completely. We alone among creatures are able to contemplate such contingencies as we move closer and closer to our own ends.

Therefore, whether you’re male or not, an actor or not, the process of performing our identities is a familiar one, and the ability to feel the truth of that narrative is not always within our grasp. Of course, these themes are not new and certainly not unique to cinema. As far back as *Don Quixote* in 1604, texts have been playing with unreliable narrators, fictions within fictions, and decidedly reflexive narratives. However, postmodern society seems to have a new thirst for such texts, and cinema’s visual presentation of a simultaneously photorealistic and yet highly manipulated image is uniquely suited to explore that fragile process by which we engage in reality. Filmmakers such as Alejandro Gonzalez Iñárritu realize that in cinema there is a false dichotomy between realism and expressionism; cinema is always and only both. *Birdman* is an

especially seductive paradox in its use of casting and in its location shooting, but most interestingly in its *claim* of the single, long take.

Rather than create an actual single take such as the beautiful, flowing camera-work of Aleksander Sokurov's *Russian Ark*, *Birdman* allows the far clunkier “hide the cut in the doorway” trickery of Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope*. But that's exactly what makes it a brilliant choice: its obvious falsity in a film of falsity. For, while Hitchcock attempted to keep time continuous on either side of his reel changes, *Birdman* makes no such attempt. Instead, the two-hour “single take” captures events over the period of several days to show us that even time itself is a mere construct of our own storytelling. While it might feel like a single continuous event, it is really the half-remembered, unreliable and discontinuous fragments of a reality we have no hope of retaining in any whole or complete way, no matter how many Instagrams or selfies we take. By using the one filmic device that makes the greatest claim to reality—the uninterrupted take—to highlight the most obviously impossible aspect of this film (or any film since the single 30 second takes of Edison's Kinetographs), *Birdman* confronts the viewer with the discomfiture of a completely fragmentary existence. While the directors of the French New Wave exposed the holes in Hollywood's invisible editing, using huge jump cuts and elliptical edits to show us how false cinema's and, by extension, our sense of time truly is, Iñárritu seems to achieve the same effect while doing the opposite, showing us the delightfully paradoxical discontinuous continuous take.

Thus, while the characters of contemplation in the film have all the diversity of a gallon of milk, the subject of our contemplation—the potentiality of authentic exchange, the impossibility of the contradictory possibilities of our motivations, and our fundamentally flawed relationship to time—seems worthy. The film hovers compellingly in that space where Charles

Foster Kane steps between two opposing mirrors and we watch the infinite regress of his form, a reality within a reality within a reality. We are left wondering what is outside the mirror.

Works Cited

Horn, John, Nicole Sperling, and Doug Smith. “Unmasking the Academy: Oscar voters overwhelmingly white, male.” *L.A. Times* 19 February 2012. Web. 15 March 2015.

Madden, David, and Kristopher Mecholsky. *James M. Cain: Hardboiled Mythmaker*. Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2011. Electronic.

Rope. Dir. Alfred Hitchcock. Perf. James Stewart and Farley Granger. Transatlantic Pictures, 1948. Film.

Russian Ark. Dir. Alexander Sokurov. Perf. Sergei Dreiden. Seville Pictures, 2002. Film.

Copyright © 2015 *Wide Angle*, Samford University. All Rights Reserved.

Review

Ben Crabtree

The Wonderfully Whimsical World of Wes Anderson:

A Critical Review of *The Grand Budapest Hotel*

In the vast world of cinema, few filmmakers can match the delightfully weird and sublime works of Wes Anderson. From the tale of a depressed man who falls in love with his adopted sister (*The Royal Tenenbaums*) to the adventures of three estranged brothers on a spiritual journey across India (*The Darjeeling Limited*), Anderson tackles bizarre and outlandish subjects in an oddly relatable way. His latest work, *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, solidifies him as an auteur, showcasing his artistic voice and stylistic traditions in their most mature form yet. Setting the film in three different decades, Anderson retains both the historical and cinematic styles of each period, bringing glimpses of Old Hollywood into the modern era. Overall, the beautiful production design, powerfully poetic script, and wonderfully whimsical characters define *The Grand Budapest Hotel* as a decadent piece of cinematic art.

From the first image that appears on the screen to the rolling of the credits, *The Grand Budapest Hotel* mesmerizes the viewer as a lovely, Impressionist painting would have dazzled a nineteenth-century art critic. The production design throughout the film transports one to an idealistic and aesthetically pleasing view of Europe in the 1930s, 1968, and 1985. Anderson’s collaboration with acclaimed production designers Adam Stockhausen and Anna Pinnock solidifies both the artistic beauty and cinematic maturity of the film, bringing Stockhausen and Pinnock their first Academy Awards. The gorgeously grandiose sets help immerse audiences into

the idealistic world of Anderson’s characters within the fantastical hotel and the surrounding fictional city of Zubrowka. Anderson’s elaborate tracking shots give the film a systematic motion, setting the hotel, prison, and city apart as individual characters that play a part in the plot as if they were living beings.

While all of Anderson’s films have his signature tracking shots and intricate settings, *Grand Budapest* brings a new maturity to these creative decisions, causing the film to feel more like an art piece from old Hollywood than an independent film from a few months ago. Nevertheless, Anderson preserves the modern-ness of his film with his use of vibrant color, near-perfect symmetry, and detailed makeup and costuming. The beautiful pinks, blues, purples, and browns utilized throughout the film add to the opulence and artistry of *The Grand Budapest Hotel*. Anderson’s attention to detail displays itself most purely through the use of symmetry in nearly every shot throughout the film. The perfectionism and complexity of each shot further the idealism of the world in which the film takes place. Complementing Anderson’s stylistic decisions, Milena Canonero’s beautiful period costumes set the characters apart as the subjects in the vast “painting” of the film, leading her to receive her fourth Academy Award. Furthermore, the makeup work of Frances Hannon and Mark Coulier adds a level of believability and realism to the characters, causing the film to garner even more acclaim from the Academy. The beautiful aesthetic that Anderson and his design team create further solidifies this film as a piece of art.

While it is important for a film to look beautiful, one of the most important elements that contributes to the success of a film is the writing. In my opinion, Anderson’s screenplay is one of the best of the past two decades. Each line reads like poetry, which beautifully moves the plot along. The dialogue between characters, especially M. Gustave (Ralph Fiennes) and Zero Moustafa (Tony Revolori), sound both realistic and overly poetic. While they discuss subjects

such as love, life, and death, as all people do, the way in which they articulate themselves is entirely unrealistic and overly poetic. However, the dialogue never comes off as gratuitous or unnecessary. Every line adds motion to the setting and helps the characters develop throughout the film.

Throughout the powerful and poetic script, Anderson creates one of the most diverse casts of characters in cinematic history. This eclectic cast of characters features many unique individuals who are inspired by classic murder mystery novels and films. From the mysteriously murderous Jopling (Willem Dafoe) to Zero’s virtuous accomplice and love interest, Agatha (Saoirse Ronan), every character takes an idea we have seen on page and screen before and brings it into a new light, providing unique character traits ranging from physical scars and markings to bizarre fetishes and hobbies. With aspects of films such as *Grand Hotel* and *Gosford Park* appearing within the various characters, the viewer can find at least one character with whom he or she can identify personally.

The main character, Zero, provides both the narration, as an older man, and the direct action, as a younger man. His relationship with the eccentric concierge, M. Gustave, who romantically and emotionally invests in the lives of various rich old women, adds a student/mentor dynamic to the plot, making the film even more understandable and engaging. In many ways, *The Grand Budapest Hotel* goes beyond a mere student/mentor relationship and showcases a beautiful “coming-of-age” story. Throughout the film, both Zero and Gustave grow as individuals because of their relationship with one another, giving the audience the opportunity to decide who is the mentor and who is the student. In Gustave, Zero finds a home and a father figure to replace the one he lost in the war. Gustave teaches Zero about society and interaction with people, helping him grow into a well-rounded, social individual. Similarly, Gustave finds

his first true friend and counselor in Zero. Zero helps advise and assist Gustave in his endeavors concerning the murder and life, causing Gustave to become a wiser, more rational person. In the end, both people improve and reach their fullest potential.

While all of Wes Anderson’s films are incredibly thoughtful, wonderfully entertaining, and perfectly quirky, *The Grand Budapest Hotel* stylistically and cinematically exceeds the rest of Anderson’s entries in his diverse filmography. With its exquisite design—full of pastel colors, elaborate set pieces, and artistic camera work—the film truly paints a picture of Anderson’s fictional, idealistic European landscape. Furthermore, Anderson’s beautiful writing plays out like a well-written poem, perfectly orchestrating the lives of an eccentric and diverse cast of characters in an outlandish, yet somewhat relatable, set of events. *The Grand Budapest Hotel* is one of the best, if not the best, films from this past year, as it has something special for every type of viewer. From action and mystery to romance and comedy, this film has the power to withstand the test of time and become a modern classic.

Copyright © 2015 *Wide Angle*, Samford University. All Rights Reserved.

Review

Katy Ward

Occupation and *Eau de Panache*:

Oscar-Winning Style in Wes Anderson’s *The Grand Budapest Hotel*

The *Grand Budapest Hotel* opens like a set of Russian Matryoshka dolls, with one narrator after another opening stories from a past memory. An elderly author narrates into a microphone, then the same author narrates as his younger self. An elderly Zero begins the tale of his first year as a lobby boy in the golden era of the Grand Budapest, and the story is that of M. Gustave. M. Gustave is a story all his own, with winsome mannerisms recalling a time before the barbarism of war. And he begins a tale of a murder, a painting, a confectionary, and a society of keys.

Frame tales vanish as M. Gustave stumbles into the screwball comedy caper, but the darker undertones that director Wes Anderson include in his newest film distinguish it from his previous work. M. Gustave represents a golden age of courtesy banished by war, and over his shoulder we watch a wartime mystery unfold in the vernacular of Anderson’s humor. The film was nominated for nine Oscars and won four of them, in Costuming, Makeup, Musical Score, and Production Design. And though the film might be the strongest dose of Anderson’s unique style to date, the awards recognize excellence in design as a means of storytelling and not simply as cosmetic fan service.

The production team compiled extensive research in brainstorming for the film, drawing from books and films and travelling through Eastern Europe for inspiration. The Renaissance

period buildings in the eastern German town of Górlitz provided the perfect inspiration: “There are no ATMs or delis that are allowed to put signs up so it's very pristine and gorgeous, and they could not have been more welcoming to us,” says production designer Adam Stockhausen. “We settled in there and found nooks and crannies to build sets” (qtd. in Desowitz, par. 8). The most critical cranny was the Górlitzer Warenhaus department store, a 1913 Jugendstil building that became the Grand Budapest herself. The team referenced Ingmar Bergman’s hotel in *The Silence* and found a set of photochrome postcards showing the landscape and interior architecture of various locations in Russia: “The Library of Congress photochrome-print collection is sort of like Google Earth for 1905” (Anderson qtd. in Stasukevich, par. 5). The period references make a skeleton for the film that is grounded in reality, and the colors, varying aspect ratios, and characterization lay styling over top of it. The audience knows what a 1930s hotel might look like, and generally what work hotel concierges might have to do in the wings. Anderson takes creative liberty in these backstories, letting the audience behind the scenes in ways the “old, wealthy, blonde and needy” hotel guests do not get to see. “We used bits and pieces cobbled together,” Stockhausen adds. “We were going for the onstage/backstage quality to the hotel that carries over to the rest of the film, including Mendl's bakery” (qtd. in Desowitz, par. 10).

Backstage in the wings of the hotel, costume designer Milena Canonero crafted the styles of *Budapest* with all the finesse of Agatha at the icing table. Since Agatha is “young and sweet like her pastries, [she is] simply dressed in clothes she has slightly outgrown. She has little money and wears a sweater under her short sleeves to keep herself warm” Canonero says. Since Agatha “works in a pastry shop, I selected colors that went with her pastries. Wes liked that, and he added the blade of wheat that she always has in her hair” (qtd. in Kinoshian, par. 8).

Transforming Tilda Swinton into the ninety-year-old art collector Madame D was a whimsical

process for Canonero as well. “I suggested she's retro but very elegant and arty,” Canonero says. “As Wes envisioned, she collects Klimt, so I printed a Klimt-inspired pattern for her velvet costumes” (qtd. in Kinosian, par. 7). Fendi and Prada provided details such as Madame D’s mink fur trim and Jopling’s black leather coat with the snap pocket for arsenal weapons. “The silver knuckles of Willem's were made especially by Wes' friend Waris Ahluwalia,” Canonero says. He “is not only a renowned jewelry maker but also an actor and appears often in Wes' movies; here he plays the Indian concierge” (qtd. in Kinosian, par. 11). As most of the actors in the film had costumed up for their roles in his previous films, they were comfortable in their odd looks and enjoyed getting into character in purple, mink, and pastels. ““The actors on a Wes Anderson movie like to wear their clothes,” Canonero says. But ““Wes will do the last touches, especially with the makeup and hair that he is so particular about” (qtd. in Kinosian, par. 13).

Anderson also helped his actors take on the feel of the film by providing a table of references that he was drawn to in pre-production: “We had lots of Ernst Lubitsch movies, [and] we had lots of ‘30’s Hitchcock movies . . . and the Max Ophuls movies: *The Earrings of Madame de* and *La Ronde*, maybe we had that” (qtd. in Roberts, par. 18). The reference library also included the photochrome prints, and stacks of books that cinematographer Robert D. Yeoman used as well: “Many of those books had pictures of old European hotels from the 1930s and other visual references that were relevant to our story,” he says (qtd. in Stasukevich, par. 5). The materials were available at all times because the entire team (including the actors) stayed in a hotel off-site for the duration of production. They even brought in a cook. “It was a very comfortable, modest, but just terrific little hotel. In fact, the guy who owned the hotel and his wife, we cast them both in the movie. We cast him as one of the people in the front of house at the front desk of the hotel, and he was in a purple outfit and everything” Anderson says. “We

would leave work and then we would go back to the hotel, and he would already be there in his regular clothes. I don't know how he always got there ahead of us, but we'd leave him at one hotel and he'd be waiting at the other hotel” (qtd. in Roberts). Of course, the concierge working for Anderson was as good in the lobby as he was on set.

Another favorite moment for Adam Stockhausen happened while filming in a hay field. It was “this scene where they're in a telephone booth in the middle of this snow covered field, and we have these mobile haystacks that you could get inside and walk around,” Stockhausen says. “One of my favorite days of shooting it was the day we were marching the haystacks around the field trying to line them up just right.” Anderson continues the anecdote: “We were talking with them on walkie talkie. There were seven guys inside the haystack and we're saying, ‘Go to the right’ and the haystack just moved left” (qtd. in Roberts, par. 25). Stockhausen had finished working on *12 Years a Slave* immediately before *Grand Budapest* production began, and walking pastel haystacks marked a definite cinematic culture shock.

12 Years a Slave certainly did not have origami boxes and stop-motion miniatures either, which are characteristic details of this Anderson film. The funicular, the town, the Alpine observatory, the ski chase, and alpine run were all handmade puppetry-style insertions, and the iconic Mendl's boxes were a project of their own. The handmade miniatures and dessert boxes represent the team's craftsmanship, a welcome complement to Anderson's comprehensive attention to detail in every scene. Anderson even worked the aspect ratios into his styling, using smaller aspect ratios to represent the Thirties scenes and larger ratios for the Sixties and then modern scenes. The details draw the audience into the story, and the meticulous craftsmanship sustains the illusion of his world. Referring to the creation of the Mendl's box, Adam

Stockhausen says. “It took forever! It took forever . . . [but] when it works, it’s just the coolest thing” (qtd. in Adams, par. 8).

The team’s next task was in somehow balancing the details with violence in the film, and to allow for some shock value without sacrificing the subtleties of Anderson’s style and humor. Scenes of violence are brief and unemotional in *Grand Budapest*, which is effective in keeping with Anderson’s style. The detached brevity of the violence catches the viewer off-guard but does not communicate unhappy themes of war in a pathos-driven manner. Anderson does not make a World War II memorial film but instead takes hackneyed themes of sadness during war and lets the audience look at them for a few detached seconds before moving on in his story world. The result is a suggestion that the audience think on the losses of the period, which is a tasteful handling of a topic considering the lightheartedness of the film.

The bloody moments include stabbing, beheading, poisoning, and cat defenestration, and in their shock and comedy they bring heavier themes into relief. The imaginary town of ŻZubrówka may be named after a brand of Polish Vodka, but the zig-zagged emblems on the occupation flags are distinct Nazi references: “Even though it’s an invented history, we know what we’re talking about. We all know what happens in Europe in our version of that period” (Anderson qtd. in Billington, par. 5). The end of the film does not wrap up as becomingly as a Mendl’s package either, reminding the audience that Anderson did not mean to sugarcoat wartime bitterness. “When you go back into the ’60’s hotel lobby and it’s revealed to be something completely different after having witnessed the events of the film—Suddenly, it’s not just drab in a kind of funny way. Suddenly it’s heartbreaking,” as if the character of the hotel has herself passed away (Stockhausen qtd. in Adams, par. 11).

The film closes as Zero finishes telling his story, and the young author gently responds with one question: Why did you keep the Grand Budapest? Zero reflects that the hotel reminds him of Agatha, but remembers his mentor M. Gustave with reverence. He sadly recollects that the Grand Budapest does not still stand as a memento to the world Gustave was a part of. “To be frank,” Zero says, “I think his world had vanished long before he had ever entered it. But I will say, he certainly sustained the illusion with a marvelous grace.”

The Grand Budapest Hotel sustains the illusion of another Wes Anderson world with impeccably detailed, Oscar-winning aesthetic, simultaneously pleasing his loyal fans and providing the thoughtful content of a period drama. Insofar as the production department is concerned, each accolade was well deserved for its consistent verisimilitude in style and aesthetic. From the climbing funicular to Jopling’s brass knuckles, *The Grand Budapest Hotel* delivers a narrative as captivating as the *Eau de Panache* in M. Gustave’s wake.

Works Cited

Adams, Sam. "Art Director Adam Stockhausen on Creating the World of The Grand Budapest Hotel." *Below the Line*. The Dissolve, 14 Mar. 2014. Web. 05 Mar. 2015.

Billington, Alex. "Interview: Wes Anderson - 'Grand Budapest Hotel' Writer & Director." *Interviews*. FirstShowing.net, 6 Mar. 2014. Web. 03 Mar. 2015.

Desowitz, Iain. "Production Designer Adam Stockhausen Talks 'The Grand Budapest Hotel.'" *Thompson on Hollywood*. Indiewire.com, 7 Mar. 2014. Web. 05 Mar. 2015.

The Grand Budapest Hotel. Dir. Wes Anderson. Perf. Ralph Fiennes, Saoirse Ronan, Adrien Brody. Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2014. DVD.

Kinosian, Janet. "Milena Canonero's 'Grand Budapest' Costumes Match Wes Anderson's Vision." *The Envelope*. Los Angeles Times, 4 Dec. 2014. Web. 05 Mar. 2015.

Roberts, Sheila. "Grand Budapest Hotel Interview: Wes Anderson Talks Design." *Collider*. Complex TV, 26 Mar. 2014. Web. 03 Mar. 2015.

Stasukevich, Iain. "Wes Anderson's The Grand Budapest Hotel, Shot by Robert Yeoman, ASC, Follows the Whimsical Adventures of a Legendary Concierge and His Protégé." *American Cinematographer Magazine*. The American Society of Cinematographers, Mar. 2014. Web. 02 Mar. 2015.

Review

Jud Potter

The Lego Movie Snub

Form and Content: The Building Blocks

It is important to judge any film based on the cohesion of its form and content. The interplay between how a movie is made and what it is about is where the artistry of cinema comes into play. Looking at *The Lego Movie* through this lens illustrates its artistic achievement. From the very first frames of the film, the animators make everything appear to be stop-motion. Stop-motion photography is the method in which you take a single picture, move the scene or the subject just slightly and then take another picture. Lining these pictures up in sequence creates the illusion of fluid motion. This is the chosen method for innumerable “Lego movies” on the Internet, where children and childlike adults have taken Lego sets and created their own fan fiction, or entirely new worlds of their own. I was even reminded of the stop-motion movies I would make as a kid. So, from the very first frame, *The Lego Movie* pays homage not only to fans of the toy but also to amateur Lego filmmakers everywhere. This handcrafted aesthetic is evident throughout the film. Morgan Freeman’s wizard character has a staff that is actually a used Dum-Dum® sucker. The weapon of mass destruction is a tube of Krazy Glue®. Moreover, the attention to detail in this film is superb. The Lego bricks all look like real Lego bricks, with scratches on the plastic and tiny copyright logos in certain close-up shots. There is even dust floating around in appropriate scenes, adding to the illusion that these

are actual toys in a stop-motion film. In other words, they are some of the most meticulously rendered CG environments I have ever seen. All of this gives the film a unique *mise-en-scène* that makes it transcend people’s expectations of what may have been perceived as an extended commercial. It is a strange, but effective, kind of verisimilitude.

A Story Made of Bricks

All of the stop-motion is great, but it’s still a kid’s movie, right? Not really. The film is a subversive postmodern masterpiece in the most delightful way possible. Postmodernism, or poststructuralism, is a perfect philosophical underpinning for a narrative about Legos. In poststructural stories, the narrative is aware of itself and plays with the audience’s expectations by rearranging its parts and making the audience do some of the storytelling work themselves. The plot itself is made from storyteller’s Legos. This is most evident in the way the characters travel through the variously themed Lego lands. In the film, the world is divided into sections based on Lego sets. There is Middle Zealand (an allusion to Middle Earth and New Zealand), a Wild West, and a standard Lego city among others. The poststructural intersection of creative fictional worlds does not end with the worlds themselves. There are characters from all sorts of universes, both fictional and real: Gandalf, Dumbledore, Michelangelo the Ninja Turtle and Michelangelo the Renaissance artist, Shaq, and Superman are all in the same room. In fact, the main cast includes the Batman himself.

The Batman in the Room

In the film, the Lego Batman is a wonderful commentary on the dark, gritty version of the character we saw in the Christopher Nolan trilogy. Moreover, he is a critique on the trend in media fiction to err on the side of the morose instead of the fun or hopeful. How does *The Lego Movie* accomplish this? They place Batman among characters who do not share his heightened reality. The Batman stories, especially Nolan’s popular take on them, operate in a heightened, almost Shakespearean, reality. In *The Dark Knight*, Batman’s secret identity matters because the ones he loves will be in danger if it is discovered. To place Batman next to a protagonist like Emmet is to point out the inherent absurdity of Batman’s self-important seriousness when taken out of his own context. In this film, everyone knows he is Bruce Wayne, but because it is central to the character, Batman pretends no one knows. This joke goes so far as to have him infiltrate the antagonist Lord Business’s boardroom as Bruce Wayne, because the only people who do not understand Batman is Bruce Wayne are the mindless robots that serve Lord Business.

Orwell, what are you doing here?

Now to the plain old Lego City, and Emmet, the plain old Lego guy. Emmet is a wonderfully post-modern character. His character is a sort of vacuous everyman. This is appreciated by other characters within the narrative and is actually a large part of the plot. The other characters, already established in their own films, comic books, or real lives orbit him in a wonderful poststructural dance, trying to figure out who he is and what he is supposed to do. The Grammy and Oscar nominated song, “Everything is Awesome!” is used to open the film. Emmet

and his city are essentially a united Lego vision of George Orwell’s *1984* and Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*. It is a world where Lord Business, who dictates what people want by manipulating popular culture, controls everything. This is a clever bit of subversive writing for a film that celebrates pop-culture. People choose of their own free will to accept his rule, because he gives them what they want, much as the rule of the Controllers is accepted in *Brave New World*. Interestingly enough, this rule takes the form of creating a unifying popular culture, with which Emmet and others are obsessed. Emmet’s character is vacuous, because he loves everything that is popular: the popular song, “Everything is Awesome”; the popular show, “Where Are My Pants?”; the “life manual” that Lord Business puts out. Lord Business sees and controls everything. Keeping all the fictional worlds separate, neat, and enclosed is his big evil plan.

If the Story is About Everything, Can it About Anything?

Basically, the good guys are trying to make sure people can think and move freely—thinking without borders or conventional restrictions placed on thought and free will by a culture obsessed with itself. The powers-that-be want everyone to think that everything is awesome and to enjoy their cookie-cutter, predetermined life, and the good guys are trying to save the mystery and creativity that make life truly awesome.

In an age when everyone is excited that Marvel Comics character Spiderman is finally allowed to be in a Marvel Comics film, it is refreshing to see a film that reminds us to think bigger, crazier thoughts. Why shouldn’t Batman have an adventure with Sherlock Holmes and

Han Solo? You can take what exists and make something new. Coloring outside the lines is a good thing; it’s how creativity works.

In the end, the Academy decided to give the Oscar for Best Animated Feature Film to *Big Hero 6*, a.k.a. *The Avengers* for the ten and under crowd. *The Lego Movie* is a film that entertains kids and is thought provoking for adults. It certainly should have at least been nominated by the Academy.

Copyright © 2015 *Wide Angle*, Samford University. All Rights Reserved.

Review

Hudson Reynolds

Damien Chazelle’s Impressively Rhythmic *Whiplash* Never Loses Tempo

Writer and director Damien Chazelle establishes himself as a cinematic force with his magnum opus, *Whiplash*. Cinephiles and musos alike can admire this enjoyable spectacle for its impressive writing, dedicated acting, visual aesthetics, and audial prowess culminating in a poetic melting pot of cinematic mastery grossly overlooked by commercial moviegoers.

Recovering from recent missteps *The Last Exorcism Part II* and *Grand Piano*, Chazelle exemplifies quality writing with a tale full of ambivalence and juxtapositions within the characters and story itself. The film’s narratological perspective follows the protagonist, Andrew Neimann, for the film’s full duration, creating an empathetic yet frustratingly flawed lead character altered by the double-edged nature of his successes. Every step towards his dream of professional jazz drumming only strengthens Andrew’s heightening obsession, escalating his selfish narcissism and ultimately furthering his seclusion and unhappiness. As the character spirals into a state of emotional and physical deterioration, the typical story of following one’s dream collapses into a borderline tragedy.

The duality of the script extends to the film’s secondary character Fletcher. Dualistically presented as a secondary father figure and as the verbally abusive music instructor, Fletcher’s heavily dynamic personality increases the film’s tension while also offering immense

entertainment. Perhaps the most notable quality of Fletcher’s lines is their combination of hilarity and emotional anxiety for the viewer. His raging outbursts bring memories of the dialogue in James Foley’s *Glengarry Glen Ross*, offering an abundance of misogynist and homophobic comments. Yet, within his rants and inappropriate conduct, Fletcher still maintains an undeniable likability through his seemingly well-intentioned, supportive demeanor. His personality becomes practically contagious through the students’ embrace of the same intensity. Soon the players’ abrasive personalities contrast with the smooth music they play.

Perhaps equally as impressive as Chazelle’s well-rounded characters is the ability of the actors to bring those characters to life. J.K. Simmons, rightfully winning an Oscar for his performance, embodies the intensity of Fletcher and makes an exaggerated picture of student abuse believable. His talent extends further through his representation of Fletcher’s more sympathetic moments. His incredible acting brings to life the diversity of the highly dynamic character.

Accompanying J.K. Simmons’ intensity, Miles Teller’s portrayal of obsession and growing narcissism comes to life in the young actor’s wonderfully pompous execution. Much of the sweat and blood flowing from the character’s skin are the actual bodily fluids of the actor resulting from grueling extended takes. Miles’ excessive drumming maintains the verisimilitude of his character and the story itself with his actual exhaustion and frustration visible on screen during the film’s lengthy musical performances. Miles also excellently executes believable facial reactions to Simmons’ character. The back-and-forth between the actors builds the film’s tension to the point of exhaustion.

Much of the film’s camera work contributes to the character tension throughout the film. Frequently the camera quickly spins 180 degrees for creative reaction shots of Fletcher and

Andrew as they interact. Additionally, the camera frequently sutures close-ups and extreme close-ups of Fletcher and Andrew, which demonstrates their rising conflict through facial signifiers. Rather than including the cliché voiceover technique, the film demonstrates the psyche of its characters through visuals.

Diegetic lighting that accompanies the cinematography creates an attractive, distinguishably artistic direction. One of the film’s primary locations is Fletcher’s classroom. The recurring location includes warm, dim lighting, giving the feel of comfort similar to that of a typical living room. This particular use of diegetic lighting juxtaposes the hostility of the classroom itself by including a deceptive comfort in the room’s aesthetic. Contrasting the classroom, much of the film includes sickly green diegetic lighting resulting from fluorescents. This discomfoting effect remains visually pleasing but appears to create coldness to the world outside of Fletcher’s hostile yet visually comforting classroom.

The film’s music heightens the film’s aesthetic quality through the rhythmic interaction between visual and audio cues. Within the extensive musical performances throughout the film, the cinematography and editing are determined often by the diegetic music itself. The compositional focus, the duration of each take, and even the camera movement are determined entirely by the musical focal points. During a sequence of saxophones playing, the camera smoothly dollies to accompany the musical flow. Within seconds, the camera then changes into quick, frenetic movements following the drumsticks. Though this sudden change in camera style may sound disorienting, the images’ interaction with the diegetic music results in rhythmic perfection paralleling the musical talent portrayed in the scene. Rarely is there a film that offers such attention to audial detail in the film’s direction.

Damien Chazelle’s excellently crafted story and directorial originality sets *Whiplash* apart from the common money-seeking catastrophes that Hollywood dishes out, and yet the film also contains a quality many critically acclaimed films lack: entertainment. Though entertainment should never determine the critical acclaim of a film, the film industry often creates cinematic mastery that lacks a glimpse of amusement for the audience. Rarely is there a film offering substantial merit while also offering immense entertainment value. *Whiplash*’s quality writing, excellent acting, smooth execution, and delightful music create an experience of both thought-provoking cinematic excellence and indisputable enjoyment.

Copyright © 2015 *Wide Angle*, Samford University. All Rights Reserved.

Review

Dr. Chris Metress

Höglund, Johan. *The American Imperial Gothic: Popular Culture, Empire, Violence*. London, UK: Ashgate, 2014. Xi. 211 pp. \$98.96. Cloth.

In the spring of 2003, Johan Höglund, who currently teaches at Linnaeus University in Sweden, was a visiting professor of English at Samford. During his stay, he and I had many long and informal talks about American culture and politics, about which Johan knew as much, if not more, than many Americans. As a Swede, and as a scholar of both American and British literature, Johan had a unique perspective on the United States, one that coupled admiration with consternation. Because we shared a common interest in the literature of late-Victorian London, we would often find ourselves discussing the similarities and differences between Great Britain at the turn of the twentieth century and America at the turn of the twenty-first. For Johan, the similarities were more suggestive than the differences, and he argued persuasively for reading American popular culture of the last twenty years as reflecting the same imperial obsessions as British popular culture in the 1890s and early 1900s. Like Great Britain in the last century, America was now a global empire in decline and, according to Johan, our art and politics were best understood as a defensive response to that decline. For all his admiration of America, and perhaps because of that admiration, Johan was frustrated by the United States' unwillingness to acknowledge its imperial ambitions and the glorification of violence required to underwrite that empire, particularly in the wake of 9/11. In the intervening years between his visit to Samford and the present, Johan has developed this idea into a book-length study entitled *The American Imperial Gothic: Popular Culture, Empire, Violence*. Timely and intriguing, the

work is more than just an indictment of American exceptionalism and imperialism; rather, it is a careful and impassioned warning for us to read against the grain of American popular culture, much of which is designed stimulate “quiet acceptance of US imperialism. . . . [and] the politics and practices that sustain the US empire” (x-xi). Bound, at times, to make an American audience uncomfortable, the book deserves a wide and discerning readership, one that is open to the study's critique of the global ambitions that drive much of the American political and literary imagination.

The work is divided into eleven brief and illuminating chapters, and while theoretically grounded and engaged with the latest scholarship, the argument is accessible to a general audience. As Höglund notes, the main focus of his study is “the period after 1970, a time when the US entered the period of economic competition and decline that it still inhabits” (167). To set the stage for this argument, the chapters leading up to the 1970s characterize American literature as complicit in the development of our nation's imperial ambitions. Building on Patrick Brantlinger's identification of an “imperial gothic” that dominated British literature between 1880-1914, Höglund defines the “American imperial gothic” as similarly obsessed with defending “the territorial, ideological, moral and sexual borders that organize the empire” (8). Like its British counterpart, the American imperial gothic “negotiates moments of imperial crises” (8), and while it is “often openly supportive of American empire,” it “also testifies to the many anxieties that have gripped and grip the nation” as a result (12). That tension between support and anxiety is there in such early novels as Charles Brockden Brown's *Edgar Huntly* (1799), and dominates the popular culture that emerged out of the Spanish-American War, America's first openly imperial adventure. In deft readings of such widely varied works as Edgar Rice Burroughs's *A Princess of Mars* (1917), Universal Studio's remake of *Frankenstein* (1931),

and the original film version of *King Kong* (1933), Höglund establishes a pattern of regenerative violence that characterizes the American imperial gothic from its origins to the Great Depression (see Richard Slotkin's foundational book *Regeneration Through Violence* [Höglund 24]).

Anxious about the threatening territorial, racial, and moral ambiguities that attend any expansion of empire, these works posit violence as a tool for keeping such terrors at bay. Thus, we get the frontiersmen who slays the savage Indian to restore order in the Western; the torch-bearing lynch mob that meets out vigilante justice to the monster who runs amok; and the biplanes that gun down the Third World beast who climbs the Empire State building, American-damsel-in-distress in hand. Such stories of cleansing violence, Höglund argues, work to validate the political notion that the real-world gothic crises we face (that is, the territorial or racial or economic challenges to American hegemony) are best met with a regenerative military solution.

When the US emerged as a global superpower after the Second World War, the nation drew strongly upon this vision. Although some of the most popular narratives of the Cold War era, such as *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (film, 1956) and "I Am Legend" (short story, 1954), are "introspective" and "polyphonous" (67), and thereby betray increased anxieties about America's new role on the global scene, the 1950s are dominated by monster movies and invasion narratives that require the American military (or the occasional nuclear weapon) to save the day. Because the Second World War forced America to acknowledge more readily its global position as a superpower, the fictions of the Cold War era betray a "need for the constant policing of the [nation's] ideological and territorial borders" (70), a need that would, ironically, pave the way for Vietnam and the beginning of the nation's imperial decline. According to Höglund, a "post-Vietnam gothic" emerged after the war, and films such as *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) and *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974) are best understood as "radical narratives

. . . [that] attempt to sabotage the basic structure" (72) of American imperialism. The "moral dissolution and societal collapse" (77) represented in these films, as well as their unremitting and un-regenerative violence, create "ideological instability," and even when some films of the era (such as *Alien*, 1979) appear to offer a "military solution," a closer look reveals that such movies do "not tell the story of a decisive and creatively violent male" who defeats the threat at hand (79), a plot-element that is essential to the American imperial gothic.

Although the Reagan era represents a time when the nation sought to turn away from this disturbing vision of a post-Vietnam imperial decline (witness the popularity of *Top Gun*, 1986), Höglund reads 9/11 as more clearly marking that moment when America sought to reassert violence (and "the right to resolve disputes with guns") as "as a form of salvation" (82). For Höglund, the frontier rhetoric of George W. Bush's War on Terror is less revealing than its gothic rhetoric, for like the gothic, Bush's War on Terror does more than simply characterize the Other as a primitive barbarian; rather, it casts that Other as a "monstrous evil" (85) that can only be destroyed, never civilized. Although war films such as *Rendition* (2007), *In the Valley of Elah* (2007) and *The Hurt Locker* (2008) depict the War on Terror as "a confused and largely failed attempt to wreak vengeance" (89), a whole host of other popular films—such as *The Mummy* (2001), *Hellboy* (2004), *300* (2007), and *The Dark Knight Returns* (2008)—mark the return of the American Imperial Gothic and its celebration of "perpetual military violence" (100) as a way to contain the Other. In Höglund's insightful reinterpretation of the 9/11 era, *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (2007) becomes a validation of twenty-first century American imperialism, with the dying old empire represented by English colonialist Allan Quatermain literally handing over his weaponry to the young and surviving empire represented by Tom Sawyer. Other films, such as *Van Helsing* (2004) and Peter Jackson's 2005 remake of *King*

Kong, perpetuate the "colonial mythologies" (106) upon which the War on Terror relies, with Van Helsing's "one-man invasion of [Dracula's homeland] . . . perfectly justified" because that gothic territory is, like Iraq, "in dire need of some sort of (military) incursion" (113). Christopher Nolan's *Batman* trilogy, although a "conflicted narrative" (117) that can be "usefully read as a critique of US imperial violence in the Middle East," is nonetheless also supportive of America's post-9/11 imperial actions, for "it tells the story of a man who uses violence to make the world a better place, who batters and abuses his prisoner to get information, who uses advanced technology to spy on the population of Gotham and who regularly transgresses the boundaries of national and international law" (117).

In his final chapters, Höglund weaves together a series of texts that negotiate a tension between America's newly confident imperial ambitions and the hard realities of its military limitations. One such chapter explores how Hollywood films and contemporary war games have helped the military to "not only recruit and train soldiers but also to disseminate the notion that war is the only viable way to manage global crises" (125). This critique of "the military-industrial-entertainment complex" is one of the highlights of Höglund's study, revealing how the "new world orders" that emerge from games such as *Call of Duty* and *Quake 4* legitimize a more zealous American imperialism. Against this, however, Höglund sets "torture porn" movies, such as *Saw* (2004) and *Hostel* (2005), and vampire, zombie, and outbreak narratives, all of which conjure up an apocalyptic world stubbornly resistant to solutions of cleansing violence. Still, these apocalyptic narratives have now given way to a new genre of "post-apocalyptic" tales, where the "military solution is elevated from intervention into a form of permanent utopian order" (153). In *The Walking Dead*, for instance, we face the permanent "gothic crisis" (157) of becoming the Other, with the only solution to be on a high state of alert where "no other recourse

can be imagined" (157) accept for violence. The same is true for novels such as *The Passage* and *The Twelve*. Unlike early types of invasion narratives, where the military solution returned things to their previous order, in these novels the invasion creates a state that is "forever warlike" (164), with hero soldiers who give us our only chance of surviving in a world of perpetual "Darwinian violence" (164). In the end, then, while such post-apocalyptic stories betray a nation anxious about its imperial decline (the zombies are indeed coming!), Höglund reminds us that those same stories seem to double-down on our faith that we "must be armed and vigilant," for "violence . . . is the only way to defend the ideological and territorial borders that separate our modernity from the sheer darkness and abject primitivism of the Other" (177).

As Höglund notes in his introduction, America's imperial culture, like all such imperial cultures, is attended by both desire and fear. In our desire to rule, we, like all imperialists, need to believe we face a constant threat from "demons that crawl out of dark" (xi). These demons, however, do not come from the "colonial periphery" (xi) where we want all demons to dwell. Instead, we are the demons we fear. Among the many virtues of Johan Höglund's study of the American imperial gothic is to alert us to the great monster within our borders: not the dangerous Other who threatens all order, but the "ruthless and careless" (x) violence upon which our empire rests. As with all other demons, that monster must, in Höglund's elegant construction, "be exorcised not with a bullet to the head but through a nod of recognition" (xi). No easy task, but one we must embrace if we are to imagine a future different from our past.

Review

Andrew B. Young

Smith, Michael Glover, and Adam Selzer. *Flickering Empire: How Chicago Invented the U.S.*

Film Industry. New York: Columbia UP, 2015. 240 pp. \$25.00. Paperback.

Before the rise of Hollywood in 1907, production companies such as Edison Manufacturing, American Vitagraph, and American Mutoscope and Biograph helped constitute the fledgling film industry in the United States. These studios were concentrated in New Jersey and New York, so they hardly represented the full extent of American film production. But the fact that eminent directors such as Edwin S. Porter and D. W. Griffith cut their teeth on these backlots has given historians good reason to identify the East Coast as the capital of the pre-Hollywood U.S. film industry. However, Michael Glover Smith and Adam Selzer pose a challenge to this narrative in *Flickering Empire: How Chicago Invented the U.S. Film Industry* by telling the history of the Windy City's film industry before Hollywood. Smith and Selzer's account takes an in-depth look at Chicago's production and distribution companies, film exhibitors, and key figures as well as an occasional glimpse at films that represent the city's early experiments with this new medium. Additionally, over the course of their study, Smith and Selzer attempt to build a case for Chicago as the unsung inventor of American cinema. Like most historiographical alternatives, their argument is provocative and worthy of debate, but it might not persuade some readers.

The authors maintain various connections to Chicago's film history. Smith is an independent filmmaker who teaches film history at a few colleges throughout the Chicago area, while Selzer has written a handful of books on the city's sordid gangster history. Their credentials reflect an

interest in the forgotten parts of Chicago's history, which helps frame the overarching goal of their project. As they write in the preface, "There are amazing stories from this era that have been buried by the passage of time [. . .] This book, the first ever devoted solely to the rise and fall of the major Chicago studios, is an attempt to help redress the balance and to bring some of these forgotten stories to light" (4). Indeed, Smith and Selzer provide a detailed account of the early days at the Selig Polyscope Company and the Essanay Film Manufacturing Company—rival studios that drove Chicago's film industry but have since become footnotes to American film history.

In its first section, "Thomas Edison, Invention and the Dawn of a New Chicago," the book traces the origins of these studios back to Edison's invention of the Kinetograph and the 1893 *Columbian Exposition*, which helped put Chicago on the global map. In terms of telling a history about Edison or the *Columbian Exposition*, this section adds nothing that has not already been covered in previous history books. Rather, these first chapters simply provide a place to begin the historical narrative. The next section, "Chicago Rising," goes into more depth about the founding of these production companies, digging into a history that others have mostly left untitled. The chapter on "Colonel" William Selig, founder of the eponymous Selig Polyscope follows his efforts to open Chicago's first studio in 1897. In the chapters on businessman George Spoor and actor and director Gilbert "Broncho Billy" Anderson, the book explains in detail how the odd couple teamed up and formed Essanay, which rivaled Selig Polyscope not only in terms of its films' popularity but also as a chief concern to Edison, who notoriously sued his fellow filmmakers for infringing on his patent for a motion-picture camera. This section paints a vivid picture of two studios that would help inspire and contribute to the formation of Edison's Motion Picture Patents Company. Although there is plenty of historical information on the MPPC, Smith

and Selzer still contribute to our knowledge of it by descriptively recounting the significance of Selig Polyscope and Essanay to the early film industry.

Section three on “The Golden Age of Chicago Film Production” expands on the city’s film history in much of the same way as the previous chapters, spanning from 1907 to 1914, the era that also encapsulates the rise of Hollywood. In addition to boosting production values and shooting longer narratives, Selig Polyscope left its mark on this period by establishing a second studio in Los Angeles, California, initiating the wave of production companies migrating to Hollywood from the Midwest and East Coast. Conversely, Essanay ended the era in financial ruin. The book’s final section, “It All Came Crashing Down,” enumerates various reasons the Chicago film industry had lost its leading status by 1915, including the dissolution of the MPPC, a series of missteps by Essanay toward an increasingly worse financial state, Selig Polyscope’s pivot toward its Hollywood office, World War I, and the ongoing enforcement of the recently created Chicago censorship code. Indeed, less than twenty years after the opening of its first studio, the empire had flickered out.

As for the claim that Chicago invented the U.S. film industry, the book fails to make a compelling argument, occasionally leaning on questionable pieces of evidence and making slippery connections between them. The crux of the argument is that Chicago made several advances in filmmaking first and that these achievements had more of an impact than historians have acknowledged. As a result, the book sometimes refers to “endless humorous anecdotes” (5) or “various accounts” (42) in order to substantiate a claim about one of these filmmaking innovations but without actually citing any of the alleged witnesses. The story of George Spoor and his business partner Edward Amet’s experiments with early film projection demonstrates an extreme example of using hearsay to advance the book’s argument. The story refers to a rumor

started by Spoor that Amet had invented the projection of motion pictures in 1894, a full year before Auguste and Louis Lumière's momentous exhibition of the Cinematographe. But even though Smith and Selzer concede that "there are no contemporaneous newspaper articles or other 'smoking gun' evidence that can definitely establish that these 1894 exhibitions actually took place," they still contend that the notion is not only plausible but also worth serious consideration (54).

This rhetorical sleight-of-hand is clearly troubling, but the overarching argument that it serves contains its own problems. The book is upfront about the importance of Chicago's "famous firsts" (3), going so far as to outline a handy list of these items in the preface. Assertions of Chicago's chief role among certain filmmaking innovations course throughout these chapters, even when it paints an unflattering image of the city and the industry, such as when Smith and Selzer proudly claim that Selig Polyscope played a role in one of cinema's first crime of passion. This obsession with establishing the Second City as first place in America's cinema race recalls Jean-Louis Comolli's seminal essay "Technique and Ideology," in which he asks, "[W]hat is it that drives all current 'histories of the cinema' [. . .] to go on endlessly and systematically cataloguing the long series of 'first times,' that chain of 'inaugurations' of technical devices and stylistic figures by this or that film?" (422-3). Comolli argues that film histories which emphasize "famous firsts" shoehorn cinema into a linear trajectory heading toward teleological perfection. Indeed, Smith and Selzer attempt to place Chicago at the origin of a medium that perpetually "improves" itself over time. But as Comolli warns, this kind of historical methodology removes cinema from the conditions that determine it, rendering it "an ahistorical empirical object" (430). For the book to claim that Chicago invented the U.S. film industry, it is insufficient simply to argue that the city hosted some of cinema's first technological creations.

Rather, it seems that what invented the American cinema was no single city but certain cultural, social, and economic conditions, which continue to shape the medium.

As a treatise on Chicago as the inventor of the U.S. film industry, *Flickering Empire* falls short of its own ambitions. But as a historical account of the city's film industry before the rise of Hollywood, the book represents an informative and useful guide to some of film history's forgotten names. Film scholars will find this part illuminating, but the book seems best suited for readers interested in Chicago's past rather than in a piece of film history. While *Flickering Empire* covers a lot of territory better examined in other film history texts, it does fill some of the gaps in our understanding of a medium whose contours we are still pulling into focus.

Work Cited

Comolli, Jean-Louis, "Technique and Ideology: Camera, Perspective, Depth of Field (Parts 3 and 4)." 1971. *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*. Ed. Philip Rosen. New York, NY: Columbia UP, 1986. 421-43. Print.

Copyright © 2015 *Wide Angle*, Samford University. All Rights Reserved.

Poetry

Michael Arthur

Standard Operating Procedure

Stop, Lock, Reload,
A fallen brother, but an average man
Neither the first nor the last
A sacrifice by blood and calling
Unknown, but known intimately
We see him daily
Equally scared and Brave

Stop, Lock, Reload
Into the dark
The weeping euphonic with rites
Where is the pride we once held?
The call was answered
But the love unrequited
The final end, alone, but not unique

Stop, Lock, Reload
Stoic, the son already a soldier
Hot trails echoed by my own
Given a flag to replace his father
A flag no-longer snapping in the breeze
The memory already fading
About face to another product of this disease

Stop, Lock, Reload

Copyright © 2015 *Wide Angle*, Samford University. All Rights Reserved.

Poetry

Laura Bone

Coffee

When my brain is sluggish mush and worry schemes
with sleep to sit on my eyelids,
I reach for your warm comfort.
You wake me shortly
after the cock crows with a kiss
on my nose and caffeine
in your heart, and I linger
on your liquid lips
until it burns me.

When the sun is throbbing and jackhammers
in my head pound, I know
I miss you so bad
my body craves your heat.
When I'm weak and slipping
into tears, you're strong enough
to pedal the wheels
keeping me in motion.

You wrap me in your dark embrace, foaming
at the mouth with desire,
and I let milky white love drip
into your sweetened soul.
You make my heart palpitate into an early grave
of fresh grounds, but I accept the excitement
as lightbulb-lit signs of lasting love.

If the snow brushes the porch,
I'll sit curled like a cub,
clutch you close
in my paws,
sip you gently,
and laugh
to offset your bitterness.

Copyright © 2015 *Wide Angle*, Samford University. All Rights Reserved.

Poetry

Laura Bone

In the Living Room

What happens if we turn it off?
Does the tick-tick-tock knock us
into stupored sleep and leave
our brains unwashed by leaky
faucets and plastic brushes?

Or will twittering turn
our heads toward sun-streaked windows
the call of a breeze
sucked into our lungs to speed the beating
of that clump of stringy, strong flesh
lurking beneath our breast?

Do our eyes strain, then focus
in seeping-liquid warm light
skipping on asphalt 'til
we skin our knees?
Or can we lap the yellow plumed yackers
around the pond
splashing each other
with the bubbling brook breaking
from our lips?

Will our muscles remember
one foot chasing the other
jumping over the fence
willfully resisting the ground
lifting our own dead weight
branch by branch 'til
we defied our arms' limit
and scoffed at nature's height?

But the squish of rich raspberry taste
the bruises of adventure
the marmalade memory of the green
and the lavender blue
that await
will wait.

Because you will choose the TV.

Copyright © 2015 *Wide Angle*, Samford University. All Rights Reserved.

Poetry

Franklin Lowe

Collection: “Library: Second Floor” and “Pre-Rush”

Library: Second Floor

You wore those sweaters, latitudes
around the chest that caused
an ache I once reserved for God. I trembled, then,
like Kierkegaard, without his knife or holy words,
which, in reverse would stretch
like lines of wool across your back and spill onto
this final page I’ll write, this last attempt
at all the A’s I’d wear if you
would simply sear
your skin.

Pre-Rush

For sport, I hunt the fresh
and mint condition men,
who trek our paths unarmed,
unclassified by a Greco-Roman name
to bind them to the board. But soon,
their wings will splay, arrayed
in navy blue, with gilded specks of crests
stabbed squarely through their breast.

Copyright © 2015 *Wide Angle*, Samford University. All Rights Reserved.

Poetry

Franklin Lowe

Sister Mary

Sister Mary
Corita Kent
died of cancer

in nineteen eighty-six. She left
a crucifix of blue
brushes in a plus,
silks without

confessing screens, spaced letters
painting breath,
and an odd translation,

rarely written down, for
love.

Copyright © 2015 *Wide Angle*, Samford University. All Rights Reserved.

Poetry

Kiani Yiu

The uniform

we dress
as though we are dying.
garbs of indiscretion drape
off bloated bodies,
we dress as though we are
seven, instead of twenty eight.
everyday we change our skins;
fabrics blue, bright, and black
to give the next color a chance
to contain explosives,
habits, that make us
dress as though we are
lying, and yet every day
the body confesses
to breaking the seams of its own marred prohibition
 every day reliving
 every day submitting
 to the splitting and yet every day
the uniform dresses.

Copyright © 2015 *Wide Angle*, Samford University. All Rights Reserved.

Short Story

Chelsea Pennington

Ghost Story

This was country dark—the kind of dark where you were so far away from cities and street lights that you could put your hand just inches away from your face and still not see it. That’s what he kept saying, anyway, sitting in the driver's seat next to her. He had repeated it at least three times in the two hours they’d been in the car so far, traveling south on I-85. And she supposed he was right. It was a thick, dense darkness outside, and the ribbons of raindrops sluicing the sky didn’t make things more visible. Only the headlights illuminated the framework of trees crowding the road, like fractures around the edge of her vision. Unannounced lightning sometimes cracked open the sky in a bright slash, causing her to jump and make a small, surprised sound. He had begun to chuckle whenever it happened.

“Storm a little scary, Mel?” he joked when it happened again. Melissa shot him a glare, though a small smile belied her irritation. The muscles in her stomach clenched when he used his nickname for her. Like they were newlyweds again.

“I’m just not expecting it, is all,” she insisted, tucking a piece of hair, brown just starting to grey, behind her ear.

“It makes sense to be scared. These woods are perfect for who-knows-what to be hiding in.” His voice had adopted the low, story-telling tone he used to speak in when he told their daughter, Cassidy, a ghostly story that would keep her up for nights on end.

“Nate, I have enough of an overactive imagination of my own, I don’t need your help!” She yanked the sleeves of her jacket down from her elbows to her wrists and folded her arms across her chest. A small smile crossed her face, though.

“You sure? You know how good I am at ghost stories. I bet I have a couple even you haven’t heard yet.” He lowered the volume on the radio, and Melissa worried he was preparing for telling a story.

She shook her head. “I doubt it.”

“Is that a challenge?” She could hear the grin in his voice and knew what was coming.

“No, that’s not what—”

“Perfect! Have you ever heard of Mothman?” He said, his voice shaking off the smile to take on a spooky quality, low and quivering as if it was struggling to bear the weight of the story. His eyes stayed focused on the road, as if he gathered inspiration from the murky darkness ahead.

“Mothman? You’re not serious,” she scoffed, but her hands fidgeted, and she uncrossed and recrossed her legs.

Nate caught the movement out of the corner of his eye, and his mouth formed his crooked smile. “Oh yeah. Big myth up north. Heard it all the time when I grew up in Virginia.”

“It sounds ridiculous. Like a reject super hero.”

“No, no. Mothman. Lives in woods like these. He looks like a normal man, but with big furry moth wings attached to his back. And his eyes—big red glowing bug eyes. That’s how you see him coming—red eyes.” He briefly shifted his focus from the road to Melissa, his eyebrows raised in an eager attempt to be sincere.

“Still not that scary. He just wanders around?” Melissa turned her face to look at him. His normally neatly-parted dark hair was ruffled in the back where it had leaned against the chair. The askew pieces melted into the dark around him.

“There are all these reports of seeing him by the road late at night. He’ll fly as fast as your car, right next to your window and stare in at you. Sometimes he’ll land on the roof of a car.”

Unconsciously, Melissa’s eyes flitted to the top of the car, the tan covering of the sunroof suddenly not sufficient.

She realized what she was doing and shook her head at herself. Ridiculous. Looking back at him, Melissa rolled her eyes. “And what does he do if he catches you?”

“Nothing—that I’ve heard of, anyway. People just have reports of seeing him, outside their car, or standing in their yards, outside their homes. But he never tries to get in—just stands there, watching. Sometimes there are reports—pictures, even—of seeing him a little bit before something bad happens, a catastrophe I mean. Like back in the sixties, this bridge collapsed in West Virginia, and dozens of people claimed to have seen him right around that time. Like an omen.” Nate guided the car gently around a bend in the road.

“But he doesn’t do anything? Then what’s the point?”

Nate was leaning forward slightly as he tried to see through the rain, windshield wipers doing their best to help. The rapid back-and-forth sound reminded her of a clock that had gone haywire—hurried *tick-tocks* occasionally punctuated by a squeak as the wiper dragged against the glass. “What point?”

“To the story! He doesn’t really exist, so people have made up creepy stories, but if he doesn’t do anything then what is the point? How is it supposed to scare people?” Melissa insisted, now twisted in her seat to face Nate, though he continued to look at the road.

“Maybe it’s not made up to scare people then. Maybe it’s real.” The trees outside his window whisked past his head, blurred by rain. Of course that would be his response.

“Nate. Please.” She turned back toward the front of the car.

“So you’re not scared in the slightest?” He glanced at her, eyebrows raised, daring her to deny it.

“I mean, I didn’t say that...”

Nate laughed and looked back to the road. “See, I knew it. You’re so predictable.”

Melissa smiled at him, but she swallowed tightly. Predictable. That again.

The radio music seemed to swell louder in the void, and Nate noticed her silence. “You missing Cassie already?”

Melissa hadn’t been thinking about her, but now that Nate brought it up, yes, of course she was. “The drive back home is the hardest part.”

Nate shook his head, the left half of his lips curving up into a smile. “She’s been going to camp for years now, Mel. She’ll be back in a month.”

Melissa smiled sadly. “I know. But still.” She paused a moment, looking down as she fidgeted with the zipper on her jacket. “And you’ll be home when she comes back, right? We always have our welcome home party.”

Nate coughed. “Yeah, I’ll try to make sure I don’t have a business trip scheduled. I may have to be gone some weekends or spend a couple nights in the city before then.”

Melissa nodded without speaking, not caring if he saw. Her eyes flitted to his left hand, resting on the steering wheel. He twisted his wedding ring absent-mindedly. He did that whenever he talked about staying in the city, nearer to his firm, for a night, or going on a business trip.

The rain had become more determined, a solid *thunk-thunk-thunk* on the roof of their car. Nate clicked the windshield wipers into a faster setting.

“Hey, what’s that up there?” he said, lifting his right hand from the center console to point.

Melissa looked, and saw two glowing red dots in the distance on the road.

She looked at him, glaring. “No. Don’t.”

His smile stretched wide. “Looks like eyes to me.”

“Nate, you know it’s not—”

“Big, glowing, red, bug eyes, actually...Kinda what Mothman would look like?” His voice was low again. Melissa was reminded of a camping trip they took one weekend in college. The group had clustered around the fire as Nate brought an ominous looming to the darkness surrounding them through his haunting stories. Melissa sometimes imagined that when people asked him about their marriage when she wasn’t around, he used that same voice to describe it.

Stop it. She wouldn’t let him get in her head. Melissa considered reaching for him, linking her fingers with his on the console where he had rested his hand back down. Instead, she said, “Mothman is some made-up creature, probably something you came up with yourself, by the sound it.”

Nate shook his head, looking serious but his voice was earnest. “I didn’t make it up. And it looks like it’s right there, not too far ahead of us.”

Melissa gripped his arm. He didn’t return with any gesture of comfort, but her breath still caught at the physical contact. She couldn’t remember the last time they had held hands. “It’s creepy.” She tightened her grip, relishing the warmth of her hand on his skin.

“Geez, Melissa, would you calm down, are you trying to cut off circulation to my hand?” He ripped his arm out from under her fingers, placing it on the steering wheel. “C’mon, you know it’s just the taillights of a car.” She swallowed tightly, like a young child who had just been scolded.

“Just trying to have a bit of fun. It feels like we never do that anymore,” she said, not even sure he could hear her over the pounding rain.

He had, and his body tensed, as she knew it would. “We have plenty of fun. But sometimes we’re both busy—life happens. You sound like Cassidy when she’s bored, Melissa.”

She leaned her head against the car door. Maybe if she just slept the rest of the way it would be easier. They wouldn’t have to interact that way. She chewed on her lip, remembering all the nights recently she had tried to sleep to forget about him, about the emptiness next to her in the bed. Just like those nights, tonight sleep evaded her. She stared into the oncoming rain, seeing every individual raindrop as the headlights spotlighted it in its onrush towards the ground.

He must have thought she was asleep, though. He turned the radio up, transforming the song from quiet background music to the dominating sound, notes mixing with plunks of rain on the roof. She hadn’t heard the song before, but he had. His voice felt out the words, shaping each one as if he were writing the song himself, in this moment. Melissa remembered that voice, the delicacy with which his lips formed each sound, the way it had when they first met at a karaoke bar in college. The memory seemed cloudy now, obscured not so much by distance as by the fog of other, harsher memories.

The windshield wipers swept frantically back and forth, vainly trying to coax the rain away. Nate was going at least fifteen under the speed limit—twenty five under his normal pace. The thought occurred to her that they might need to stop the car on the side of the road, wait out the storm. She wondered how long that would take, sitting in the car, listening to the rain. Maybe he would sing to pass the time, sing to her. She would like that. It would be like when they had first started dating. And then maybe she would do something else like those first few months. Free herself from the seatbelt, lean over the center console toward him, he would already be leaning towards her, expecting it and wanting it to come. Their lips would touch, softly, then he would push his strongly onto hers, his rough hands grasping for her. His smell, a mixture of sweet sweat and his cologne, would fill her nostrils. Maybe then he wouldn’t call her predictable and call her Mel instead, maybe they wouldn’t notice the rain had

stopped until long after the sky was clear, maybe he would hold her hand the rest of the drive back, maybe there would be no more business trips or nights spent in the city.

“Nate, if the rain—”

He jumped. The car jerked to the left, suitcases in the trunk careening to one side in a thunder. “Damn it, Melissa, I thought you were asleep!” He pulled the car back under control.

Melissa relaxed a fist she hadn’t realized was clenched, now relieved they were the only car on the road. She tried to laugh lightly, but he didn’t join. “Sorry. I wasn’t asleep.”

“Well, yeah, I know that now. You were quiet for so long I just assumed.” His face was stony, jaw set and lips tight.

“Oh. I was just thinking.” She pushed the sleeves of her jacket up to her elbows and tucked the piece of hair back behind her ear, looking at the dashboard rather than at him.

“Hope my singing didn’t annoy you. I wouldn’t have done it if I knew you were still awake to listen.” He didn’t sound apologetic as much as bitter at her for hearing, for tricking him into thinking he was alone when she was still right there.

She swallowed. “Nate, if the rain is too heavy, maybe we should pull over.”

“Pull over? Where would we do that? There hasn’t been an exit in miles.” He lifted his hand off the steering wheel slightly, gesturing to the thickness of trees lining the road.

“I know, I meant, just, on the side of the road.”

“In the dark and by the woods by Mothman.”

The corners of her mouth twitched upward. “No, just in the dark by the woods. No Mothman.”

“I don’t think you can decide where Mothman chooses to go.”

She shook her head, laughter breaking the sound of the rain. This time his lips formed a small smile. “Mothman or not, I don’t want you driving in the rain if you can’t see through it. It’s getting pretty heavy and you’re already driving slowly. Maybe it would be best to wait it out.”

Now Nate was shaking his head, eyebrows furrowed in concentration. “No, it’ll be okay. There’s no telling how big this storm is. I’d rather just get back before it gets any worse.”

“Are you sure?” She put her hand on his arm, grasping for him again. “I wouldn’t mind getting home a little later, letting the storm pass.”

He readjusted his hand on the wheel, just barely, but enough that Melissa understood she was to remove her hand from his arm. Fine. It dropped back into her lap. “Alright, I just wanted to make sure you were good with driving. Not falling asleep or anything?” she said, her voice quieter, yielding to him.

“Nope.” The word, so casual, still carried the edge in his voice and settled like a rock in between them.

“Okay, just let me know.”

“I will.” He didn’t look at her, just kept his hands on the wheel, except to turn down the volume of the radio. The song faded into the background again.

She did not reach for him again or ask him to stop. She simply stared ahead at the rushing rain, the trees flashing past, the road reaching out, illuminated for a little bit ahead, then disappearing quietly into the country dark.

From the Editor’s Desk

Audrey Ward, Managing Editor

On Poems and Polar Bears: Why I Want to Get a PhD

If you want to see someone’s eyes glaze over in less than five minutes of casual conversation, announce that you plan to pursue a PhD in Comparative Literature. Be prepared to answer questions such as, “What, exactly, do you want to study for *five years*? And . . . *why*?”

To be honest, I have asked myself those same questions. And as the Managing Editor of *Wide Angle*, I think we should ask the same questions about what we do on these pages: *Why*? Why publish critical essays on film and literature? Why publish creative writing? Why do this thing that we call an *academic journal*?

In a culture obsessed with productivity, we’ve all heard the arguments against a liberal arts education, especially in the arenas of English and Film: it stunts a student’s marketability; it produces nothing but self-obsessed young nihilists smoking cigarettes at coffee shops and passionately reading irrelevant books! We’ve also heard plenty of arguments for it: the liberal arts encourage the critical thinking skills necessary for climbing the corporate ladder; they guard the vaults of old-fashioned culture against the degenerate modern forces of Twitter, YouTube, and *Fifty Shades of Grey*.

However, I have to admit that I find none of these arguments particularly compelling or inspiring. The problem is that, at the root, they ask the wrong question. They ask *how* we can justify the study and production of literature and film for students preparing to enter the “real” world. They forget to ask *why* literature and film—old or new, classical or just published

online—are worth preserving in the first place. In effect, they assume that literature and film aren’t part of the real world at all, and have value only by virtue of their side effects, such as generating corporate productivity or perhaps even entertainment. These arguments fail to address the more fundamental doubt expressed by many English 101 students, those who might enjoy watching *The Grand Budapest Hotel* but would groan if asked to analyze it: Why can’t we just leave stories to themselves, without dissecting them like those frogs in an eighth-grade biology experiment? Can’t we just enjoy them without killing the poor things with our probes?

Because, I would argue, we students of literature don’t kill the frogs we probe. We save them. In purpose, publications such as *Wide Angle* are like nature reserves where biological life—creative output in the form of stories, novels, poetry, screenplays, and film—can flourish, cultivated by the scholars who study how these strange creatures work. Ecologists have labored for decades to conserve ecosystems and save animals from extinction. Each organism in an ecosystem interacts with others in a biological conversation we can observe: an Arctic tundra or an Amazon rainforest. Ecologists carefully track the life patterns in an area, learning how that ecosystem works in all its fragile complexity so that we can better protect it.

Students of literature and film are like ecologists. We conserve and enjoy the ecosystem of creative thought. In general, people like the idea of nature conservation efforts, because our culture has begun to grow in awareness of the fundamental value of old-growth forests and polar bears. I say fundamental value as opposed to pragmatic value, because I refer to loving nature for itself, beyond its resources that directly support human life. Perhaps it is time to remember that we can view novels and poems and films with the same sense of innate appreciation.

Trying to pinpoint a practical use for beauty ultimately defeats the purpose. By studying medieval mystic poetry, I hope to capture some small part of the spectrum of what makes human

life worth living. Poets have composed words designed to bring us near to God for thousands of years—perhaps they are on to something. At some point, we have to stop our efforts to boil every action down to a quantitative analysis of money earned and goals met. At some point, any defense of wilderness or art (including this little essay) loops back on itself without apology. Beauty is an enigma.

Whether it’s a medieval Anglo-Saxon poet shouting HWÆT!—LISTEN—in a noisy mead hall or a modern vlogger trying to promote her work through a storm of social media, literary and film artists try to tell us something about how life works. The thoughts may conflict and some works may have better technical performance than others, but each is part of a complex ecosystem of human thought. Literary journals and PhD programs are places where people determine to listen deeply to their fellow humans, instead of simply sampling the information and moving on. Such careful listening and responding is hard work, and I don’t suggest that everyone should become a poet or a film critic. Not everyone should study to be an ecologist working in the Amazon or the Arctic. But some students have the passion to brave mosquitos or frostbite or long hours in the lab. We need them.

In the same way, I would argue, we need professors. We need poets and writers of shorts stories and screenplays. We need undergraduates willing to slog through swamps of critical sources to craft their own, original thoughts on films and novels (and instructors willing to read the results). Keeping the work of writers alive in the conversation of human culture is worth doing, and I will be proud to become one of these literary ecologists—even if I track poems instead of polar bears.

From the Editor’s Desk

Laura Ann Prickett, Literature Editor

A Feminist’s Brief Response to the Romance Genre

Confession: I love a good Romantic Comedy. I, too, justify my occasional indulgence of a predictable storyline of archetypal lovers, passionate open-mouth kisses, and peaceful ever-after’s. And yet, I cannot help but recognize the paradox of moral disengagement in which this puts me as a young feminist. (I encourage you to keep reading, Samford, despite the fact that I just used “the F word.”) Humorous spin-offs of the romance genre, romantic comedies consistently retell the same narrative, adjusting character descriptions and setting in order to avoid plagiarism scandals. Dana Percec offers that “romantic fiction survives” because of the “strictness” by which authors abide by the rules of a similar narrative (6). This narrative repeats the fairy-tale notion that women reach fulfillment and purpose when they secure their position in a heterosexual relationship, particularly through the promise of marriage. Yet, currently, the American Psychological Association estimates that forty to fifty percent of marriages end in divorce. Keeping the APA statistic in mind, when was the last time you read Francine Rivers? Furthermore, how many women do you know who will not name Nicholas Sparks as the author of one of their *favorite* novels or film adaptations? Begin to disregard this essay’s contention if the number you muster is more than a dozen. The success of the extravagantly lucrative wedding industry exemplifies our culture’s glorification of the feminine entrance into the social marriage contract. The Romance genre serves to help propagate the fictitious narrative that marriage circumscribes the feminine telos, while failing to recognize

that half of all women will not fulfill that purpose when their marriages fail. Readers, be wary of a culture that produces and consumes representations of women as merely players in love.

The exact objective of the “Romance genre” is hardly definable. A broad definition would identify the Romance genre as the development of heterosexual relationship in literary representation. This definition is understandably problematic but will suffice for the purposes of this essay. Generally, the Romance genre is connected with the notion of quixotic, or romantic, love. While there are representations of lovers in ancient mythologies, romantic love began to appear as a significant social and literary construct in the Middle Ages with the onset of courtly love. Over centuries, literary manifestations of courtly love morphed into *carpe diem* and unrequited lovers into the Renaissance. Though the Gothic and Victorian periods offered developments to the genre in literary nuance, Pecec’s brief history of the genre informs us that the “strict” script of Romance applies accurately to each historical era of the genre. Across the historical development of the genre, the main signifiers of Romance are heterosexual lovers as main characters and a happily-ever-after ending, generally through “enduring partnership” or “marriage” (6). While there is plenty to be said about the restrictive male-female requirement of Pecec’s definition of the Romance genre, my anxiety toward the genre rests primarily in the dangers of its required resolution.¹

There has been significant internet-journalism about the dangers of the Romance genre for women. These articles suggest that Romance is emotional pornography for women². While the object of sexual pornography is the control of sexual orgasm, or the moment of fulfillment, the object of emotional pornography is the control of idealistic, emotional fulfillment. According

¹ I refer you to Chapter 12, “Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgendered Romance” of Kristen Ramsdell’s *Romance Fiction: A Guide to the Genre*.

² For a well-developed, if not scholarly, argumentation of this notion, I suggest Anne Helen Peterson’s BuzzFeed article, “Why Nicholas Sparks Matters Now” (<http://www.buzzfeed.com/annehelenpetersen/why-nicholas-sparks-matters-now#.ewBBo0VJI>).

to one Blogger’s post supporting this theory, Romance is emotional pornography because it “normalizes the abnormal, promotes unattainable standards, rewires the brain, and is addictive” (Bradley, n.pag.). Proponents of the pornography theory of the romance genre often use religious rhetoric to discuss the stark differences in male and female desire. They suggest that, while men are typically sexual creatures and intend to use pornography to control the satisfaction of their sexual desire, women are generally emotional creatures and intend to use Romance as emotional pornography to satisfy relational expectations. Even if I support this theory’s promotion of caution, I am not convinced by the argument that equates Romance with feminine pornography. This framework relies heavily on a strict binary structure of gender, particularly in its rejection of the reality of female sexual desire through the edification of binary gender constructs. A poignant example of the intersection of the concepts of emotional and sexual feminine pornography that easily deconstructs the binary pornographic theory is the erotic romance genre. In this genre, feminine pornography finds a dual purpose, intending to titillate both sexual and emotional pleasure for the reader. The *50 Shades of Grey* phenomenon best exemplifies the cultural intersection of both types of feminine pleasure-seeking stimulation.

However valid and respectable caution towards Romance is in general, I lean more on political theorist Kate Millett to reveal the necessary cause for the caution toward the Romance genre. In her book, *Sexual Politics*, Millett outlines the political inequality inherent to erotic literature. Using the wide-angled definition of politics as “power-structured relationships, arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another,” Millett suggests that, in so much as literary narrative tells a culture what it is and what it values, all sexual relationships are predicated on the conventional male political dominance of women (23). Through literary examples, Millett argues that our basic political, social, and cultural infrastructures are built on a

basic hierarchy that elevates males and masculinity over females. Millett coins this phenomenon “the patriarchy” (25).

Based on Millett’s argument, I extend fundamental patriarchal inequality to the tropes of the contemporary Romance genre. The Romance genre, as a representation of what we are and what we value, informs the culture that the feminine telos is finally actualized in her union with a man, thus suggesting that the feminine purpose is defined and only realized on masculine terms and upon connection with the masculine. This substantiates the patriarchal notion that women exist subordinately to male force and will. In other words, female purpose depends upon males to be accomplished. The representations of women in the Romance genre reiterate this notion through their depictions of eternally youthful female lovers, blindly devoted to the hope offered to them by the intimate acceptance of a man. The entire consciousness of the female protagonist in the Romance genre revolves around the relationship with their male lover. A quick recollection of the character development of Allie (Sparks’ *The Notebook*), Hadassah (Rivers’ *Mark of the Lion Series*), Angel (Rivers’ *Redeeming Love*), Savannah (Sparks’ *Dear John*), or Jaime (Sparks’ *A Walk to Remember*) affirms my contention. The feminine telos suggested in Romance is particularly bothersome when our present moment suggests that almost half of all women will fail to realize it.

By no means am I a love cynic. On the contrary, I am quite confident in the value of voluntary, mutually exclusive partnerships that rely on the fundamental principle of sacrificial love and equality of both partners. I am however, a Romance cynic and believe that, at its foundation, the genre propagates a lie that women are purposed for and fulfilled through the endurance of their union with a man. Especially in our contemporary society in which the marriage contract is so obviously unreliable, we must no longer accept representations of female

purpose as subordinate to a connection with males. I can no longer indulge trite Romantic fictions with a sound conscience.

Works Cited

Millett, Kate. *Sexual Politics*. University of Illinois Press, 2000.

Percec, Dana, ed. *Romance: The History of a Genre*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012.

Copyright © 2015 *Wide Angle*, Samford University. All Rights Reserved.

From the Editor’s Desk

Megan Burr, Film Editor

Vlog Adaptations and Why You Should Be Watching Them

What comes to mind when you read the word *adaptation*? It could be anything from a recent blockbuster to your favorite indie film, but I am willing to bet that a particular phrase came into your head: “The book was better.” I am currently enrolled in Film Adaptation, a class that looks at, among other topics, why that is simply not the best way to look at adaptations. That way of critiquing adaptations, known in Adaptation Studies as the “Fidelity Standard” (Stam 54), assumes there is only one way to interpret and adapt your source material. However, every adaptation of a source text, as Robert Stam would say, is a “reading” of that text, and any text can result in “an infinity of readings” (63), not just the one we envision when we read the book or graphic novel or what have you. As a result, filmmakers could make and remake Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* an infinite number of times (some might even say they have), and they would never come out with exactly the same interpretation twice. This way of studying adaptations brings me to my main point: vlog (video blog) adaptations. “What is a vlog adaptation?” You might ask. Well, a vlog adaptation is, quite simply, an adaptation in vlog form. “How does that even work?” Let me tell you.

About three years ago, Hank Green of the Vlogbrothers worked alongside Bernie Su and a team of content producers to create a kind of adaptation never seen before. *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, an adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*, reimagined Austen’s heroine as a broke grad student living with her parents and two sisters: Jane and Lydia. As part of her thesis research,

Lizzie plans to vlog about her life, which just got a lot more interesting because of the rich, single man who moved in nearby: Bing Lee. Lizzie, along with the same yet incredibly different cast of characters you expect from the Austen novel, go through more than seven hours of footage (nine if you count the spinoffs that are part of the narrative) as they give you *Pride and Prejudice: Vlog Edition*. The series took off in a way no one could have expected, due largely in part to its social media presence, which bagged the series a Primetime Emmy in 2013. Every character in the series had a variety of real-world, interactive social media accounts: Twitters, Tumblrs, LinkedIns, even Pinterests in some cases, and all of them communicated directly with the vlog’s viewers.

Because of these social media accounts and their interactive qualities, characters such as Lizzie and Lydia Bennet were able to have direct Q&A videos with fans, which eventually led to affecting the actual storyline (Lydia being drawn to Wickham because of her viewers’ insensitive remarks, e.g.). If we were to judge solely by its fidelity to the source, this series would not have taken off as successfully as it did. *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* sparked a wave of vlog adaptations that built on this already wildly innovative concept. Though I will not go into all of the adaptations that have caught my eye (as that would take far too much time you could spend watching the adaptations), I will write on a couple of these adaptations and why their existence is so important to the development of this new genre.

Although some vlog adaptations focus on rarely adapted works (*Welcome to Sanditon*, e.g.), others zero in on sources that have been adapted time and time again, and the creators often allow those previous adaptations to influence their own readings. One prime example of the latter is *Frankenstein, M.D.*, an adaptation of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. The makers of *M.D.* were clearly influenced by the *Frankenstein* adaptations of the past, which is especially

noticeable when looking at one of the main characters: Iggy, a clear update to the film franchise’s Igor. The creators of the series integrate Iggy into the narrative in the same way that previous adapters integrated Igor, and the result is a much more relatable Frankenstein than would have been possible without a sidekick of sorts.

One way *M.D.* drastically alters its source, however, is in the transformation of Victor Frankenstein to Victoria Frankenstein, a med student who has started a vlog in order to educate the viewing public about medical advances. The change of Frankenstein’s gender, as well as the genders of Elizabeth Lavenza (now Eli) and Henry Clerval (now Rory) results in a variety of drastically alters many of the narratives storylines, most notably in the treatment of Victoria’s desire for medical advances. This in turn establishes the series as what Thomas Leitch calls a “revision,” wherein an adaptation “[seeks] to rewrite the original” (106), especially in terms of critiquing some aspect of the original. In this case, *M.D.* revises *Frankenstein* by concerning itself with gender in the medical realm.

The impetus for Victoria’s desire to bring the dead back to life is the death of her cameraman, Robert. Victoria’s drive to resurrect Robert—referred to by Victoria as “The Creature,” though by others as “Robert”—is therefore far more emotionally linked than the original Frankenstein’s more logic-fueled drive. Victoria denies any emotional attachment, but both Victoria’s friends and faculty treat her as being too emotionally driven, and they even reference the death of her mother as a way to convince her she is being irrational. The switch of Victoria’s gender allows the viewer to see gender bias in the medical community, which, although not often directly referenced, conspicuously colors this interpretation, adding another layer of potential critical analysis to an already rich adaptation.

The last vlog adaptation I’m going to discuss is perhaps one of the most innovative approaches to adaptation that I’ve seen in the vlog adaptation genre. *Classic Alice* is unusual in its approach because it is what Leitch refers to as a metacommentary (111). A metacommentary is, in essence, an adaptation about adaptations (Spike Jonze’s 2002 film *Adaptation*, e.g.). *Classic Alice* features a young English major and creative writer—Alice Rackham—who decides to base “episodes” of her life on a variety of novels, including *Crime and Punishment*, *Pygmalion*, and *Macbeth*, just to name a few. And to make her experiences as authentic as possible, Alice gives herself rules: no murder, only first time reads, no outside interference, etc. This allows Alice some leniency in her “assignments.” For example, when she reads *Crime and Punishment*, Alice decides to steal the questions to an upcoming test in one of her classes, rather than murder someone.

But the driving force behind *Classic Alice*—aside from the chemistry-fueled cast and trans-media interactions, which are often major contributing factors in successful vlog adaptations—is the continuity from book to book. In line with a “real” vlog, the ramifications of Alice’s actions don’t disappear when the book ends. Instead, the characters she interacts with continue to recur, often as different characters—a prominent example is Ewan, who acts as Eliza Doolittle in *Pygmalion* and Macbeth in *Macbeth*. This adds a surprising verisimilitude to a frankly ridiculous premise, and the adaptation’s creators succeed in making a binge-able vlog worth watching and critically analyzing again and again (proven through my watching the entirety of the vlog over the course of five days).

Sadly, I don’t have nearly enough time to discuss all the vlog adaptations I would like to (though I’ve included a vlog-ography at the end of this piece), but that in and of itself is an incredible thought. Considering that this genre did not exist before a mere three years ago, the

sheer number of vlog adaptations that have been made and are being made is astounding. Just as *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* spawned a new genre of horror classics, *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* has resulted in a plethora of vlog adaptations, and I can almost guarantee that your favorite classic novel has a vlog in the works. These vlogs don't even try to have fidelity to their sources, and that isn't the point. Rather, we have a new branch of creators and consumers dedicated to bringing their favorite books to a whole new audience that might have never read them. Sure, we may not get to see our favorite lines or scenes played out on YouTube, but we get to see our best beloved characters in a brand new environment. And that, to me at least, is worth just as much as returning to those original books time and time again.

Other Vlog Adaptations You Might Enjoy and Their Source Material

Disclaimer: I haven't finished all of these; I don't have nearly that much time on my hands.

Autobiography of Jane Eyre. Adapted from *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë.

Call Me Katie. Adapted from *The Taming of the Shrew* by William Shakespeare.

Carmilla. Adapted from “Carmilla” by Bram Stoker.

Classic Alice. Adapted from a variety of sources.

East and West. Adapted from *North and South* by Elizabeth Gaskell.

Elinor and Marianne Take Barton. Adapted from *Sense and Sensibility* by Jane Austen.

Emma Approved. Adapted from *Emma* by Jane Austen.

Frankenstein, M.D. Adapted from *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley.

From Mansfield with Love. Adapted from *Mansfield Park* by Jane Austen.

Green Gables Fables. Adapted from *Anne of Green Gables* by Lucy Maud Montgomery.

In Earnest. Adapted from *The Importance of Being Earnest* by Oscar Wilde.

Jules and Monty. Adapted from *Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare.

Kate the Cursed. Adapted from *The Taming of the Shrew* by William Shakespeare.

The Lizzie Bennet Diaries. Adapted from *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen.

The March Family Letters. Adapted from *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott.

The New Adventures of Peter and Wendy. Adapted from *Peter Pan* by J.M. Barrie.

The Nick Carraway Chronicles. Adapted from *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald.

Nothing Much to Do. Adapted from *Much Ado About Nothing* by William Shakespeare.

A Tell Tale Vlog/Socially Awkward Poe. Adapted from various works by Edgar Allan Poe.

WebCamelot. Adapted from various aspects of Medieval literature.

Welcome to Sanditon. Adapted from *Sanditon*, an unfinished novel by Jane Austen.

Works Cited

Leitch, Thomas. *Film Adaptation and Its Discontents: From Gone with the Wind to The Passion of the Christ*. Baltimore, MD : Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007. Print.

Stam, Robert. “Beyond Fidelity: The Dialogics of Adaptation.” *Film Adaptation*. Ed. James Naremore. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000. 54-76. Web. 21 February 2015.

Copyright © 2015 *Wide Angle*, Samford University. All Rights Reserved.

From the Editor’s Desk

Hayden Davis, Creative Writing Editor

The Trial: Social Media Poetry

“Poet’s aren’t very useful,
Because they aren’t very consumeful or very
Produceful.”

--Odgen Nash, “Everybody Makes Poets”

“I’ve had it with these cheap sons of bitches who claim they love poetry but never buy a book.”

--Kenneth Rexroth

I was introduced to the self-described “bleeding edge” genre of hint fiction as a freshman—a publishing company mailed the University a book the size of a coaster, where each “story” was twenty-five words or fewer. Our professor’s hilariously melodramatic readings from *Hint Fiction* highlighted the pretension and apparent indolence of the writers and publishers; the only thing an author can convey in twenty-five words, after all, is a thought, or an emotion with little in the way of plot, or context. Twenty-five words are more than enough for a self-contained poem, but a noose for any self-contained fiction. A strand of contemporary academic poetry has embraced this “less is more, emotion over editing” approach, but the self-taught poets of popular culture have become famous—legitimately and substantially, moving from viral anonymity to successful publication—by writing often, writing succinctly,

and writing on social media. This poetic movement of social media poetry is fragmented but not inconsequential; I would argue it has been an influence on several of the poems published in this very issue of *Wide Angle*. An examination, a sort of informal academic trial, is more than warranted for such a far-reaching and egalitarian evolution of the art.

R.M. Drake is a social media poet. Nearly every day he photographs a short verse or section of prose—rarely more than twenty lines—and posts the photo on Instagram to an astounding 1.1 million followers. The presentation of these writings is consistent, but “rough”—they are always on a plain typed page, photographed through a black-and-white filter for an old-world appeal. Thematically, they promote the most common of poetic themes: namely, love and loss, light and darkness, solitude and interconnectedness. There is a definite consistency—in an interview with the *Miami New Times*, Drake said "I wanted to do something where even if it had my name clipped off, you'd know it was mine if you followed my work" (Swenson, n. pag). Drake's writing (which he calls “stories” in the interview) are made for tattoos and t-shirts—sometimes long poems, sometimes shorter ones, but all devoid of context. One very popular example is “#276”:

she had the power to
change the world, but
she couldn't save the
one she loved.

r.m. drake (rmdrk).

With the emotion of a pop song and the brevity of a maxim, Drake writes as the majority of well-known social media poets do: as if he wants to be quoted, with no “filler” of thought or context or material that would normally form the basis of a cohesive philosophy. He is, essentially, quoting himself, pulling from works yet to be published (the above poem has the caption “Excerpt from a bigger piece”). Self-quotation is not necessarily a negative and not something Drake denies; in an interview with *The Daily Dot* Drake admits “I would never consider these poems. I am not a poet. To be honest, I do not know what to call these but . . . people live their lives very quickly. They don’t have time to read or do anything that takes time” (Harnish, par. 12). His book of these small “stories,” *Beautiful Chaos*, peaked at the number-four spot on Amazon’s twenty best-selling poetry books (beating out poets such as Walt Whitman and Allen Ginsburg).

Tyler Knott Gregson, another social media poet, is probably the most closely aligned with Drake—he is famous for his daily “Love Haikus” which are as a rule always positive and uplifting, and his “Typewriter Series,” another raw daily poem that is usually in the form of a reflective “wise” saying. His dedication is impressive, if nothing else—Gregson’s been publishing these poems every day for more than five years, and his first collection, *Chasers of the Light*, reached number nine on *The Wall Street Journal*’s hardcover nonfiction list. It is now sold at Anthropologie outlets.

Gregson gained attention from Tumblr, but he is first and foremost a brand—some poems are typed on hotel stationary, some on notepads, but every one is signed with either his full name or his recognizable signature. His website is clear and professional, and he is one of the few social media poets with a Wikipedia page (where he is credited with *creating* the “Typewriter Series” form of poetry, where the poet photographs a typed poem). A *Huffington Post* piece

entitled “This Social Media Heartthrob Is A Poet. And He Just Brought Poetry's Sexy Back.” describes his most recent book *Chasing Light* as featuring “some of [the] most insightful and beautifully worded poems” (Stephenson, n. pag). One praiseworthy Amazon reviewer—among many—comments that they “can already tell it's going to be a worn book, and this is coming from someone who hates to read” (Krantz, n. pag).

Despite their wisdom and popularity, neither social media poet writes professional poetry. There is emphasis on appearances, maxims, and fragmentation, small snippets of meaning that are carried solely by emotion. The impact is a feeling, pure and simple—uncomplicated by compact language, prosody, line structure, or anything remotely traditionally poetic.

In a 1977 interview with *The Paris Review*, Stanley Kunitz, one of the greatest American poets—in his seventies, editing *The Yale Series of Younger Poets*—commented on what the interviewer called “the quality of the work of young poets”:

I hate to generalize, but I'll make a stab at offering a few broad conclusions. My first and main observation is that no earlier generation has written so well, or in such numbers. But it's a generation without masters. . . . It's also clear that few poets have much of anything to say. . . . Another point is that few young poets have mastered traditional prosody. The result is that they don't really know how to make language sing or move for them . . . and they don't want to sound old-fashioned. . . . Furthermore, they see no reason why poetry should be difficult to write; they want it to be easy. (Busa, n. pag)

The poetry of social media more or less conforms to Kunitz's complaints: poets such as Drake and Gregson brilliantly bring out emotion in a limited space, and bring poetry “back into the mainstream,” which some would say is an accomplishment for poetry that transcends the specific

poet. But there is little adherence to form, little difficulty (Gregson doesn't seem to be searching for the “perfect” haiku, but mass-producing poetry), and little mastery. Social media poetry is everything millennial: it's immediately gratifying for the reader, emotionally stimulating, and part of a larger web of interaction—the reader can relay a poem to *their* network of readers (or followers, or friends) and receive positive attention for their appreciation of modern culture. The millennial reader that endorses a poet is viewed as more aware—and an image of awareness is perhaps the greatest goal of social media. Poetic promotion shows an appreciation for the emotion and “authenticity” of art, but implies a deep understanding of the “wise,” non-traditional author.

However, Kunitz says that young poets “don't want to sound old-fashioned.” Whatever the case may be, social media poets undoubtedly want to *appear* old-fashioned—in a world of vagaries and mass production, a poem written or typed on a torn sheet of paper with a straightforward message simply feels more *real* to the reader. Millennials are obsessed with the past, but the past viewed through a filter of simplicity and clarity; their childhood in 1990s America was perhaps the wealthiest time in history, but many came of age in instability—the Twin Towers went down as financial supremacy in Asia and issues of global warming arose (Kerr-Keller, n.pag). As they idealize the past, American commercialism makes it a reality: record players, Polaroid cameras, and stressed jeans are all mass produced but sold for a higher price to imply inconvenience in production and individualism in consumption. In this same way, social media poetry is presented as dignified and universal, even in its delightfully “rough” and “unfinished” state. No one who writes poems for five years should be able to write the same sort of thing every time. We have, as a generation, internalized this false nostalgia. Essayist Jane Hirschfield says in her book *The Nine Gates of Poetry* that “art, by its very existence, undoes the

idea that there can be only one description of the real, some single and simple truth on whose surface we may thoughtlessly walk” (111-2).

Poetry does not need to be a finished, lengthy “proper” verse—the evolution of poetry has hinged on writers rebelling from the traditions that came before, or subverting them to suit their means as society evolves. This is why Matthew Arnold defined poetry as “at bottom, a criticism of life” (Arnold 1) and why Walt Whitman cautioned the country and its people—its poets as well—to “Resist much, obey little” (n. pag). It is why “found poetry” became a recognized genre and part of why social media poetry has become so popular: something about these photographed words speaks to several thousands. Not to say all social media poetry is bad, even: the pseudonymous Instagrammer Rio Jones makes use of art, formal experimentation, and arresting metaphor to create original poetry (he has “only” ten thousand followers), and several of the “found poems” in the vast oceans of Twitter have definite merit and beauty.

By wanting poetry to be easy, social media poetry has attempted to make the art of reading poetry easy as well, a mere truncated act of feeling. This robs poetry of half its power—the meditation and investigation of poetic analysis. Social media poetry, then, is a digression—it delights in the aesthetics of the twentieth century and the introspective, forlorn love-lost tone of the Romantics. It is not overall a polished movement—it lacks what Kunitz calls “mastery,” relies on self-promotion and promotion from the cult of celebrity, and fixates on unfinished appearances. But its greatest indictment is the necessity of the genre to hinge on thoughtless consumption and the type of cheap aesthetic that have come to define the generation of readers—who can look at Keats or Cummings and dismiss out of hand anything long or strange or thoughtful. If coarse, disconnected sentiment becomes the defining feature of poetry, then we

have lost half of the joy of reading poetry. If repetitive, simplistic truths are the message of poetry, then it is no longer a form of art.

This may seem a panicking indictment, but a produced work that intends a visceral, physical response with little emotion or intelligence is a cheapened work, one akin to pornography. Art, in contrast, marries emotional and mental stimulation and, as such, tends to be less successful financially yet more defining culturally. Taking social media poetry from an emotional movement to one of mental *and* emotional stimulation will be negative, by the definition of social media: it would be more complicated, shared less, and consumed by fewer people. Whatever digital currency, likes or shares or tweets, artistic social media would earn less. But poetry has never been well paired with consumerism or simplicity or reduction—while I believe poetry is for everyone, it is an emotion *and* a study, an art and a science. We would not reduce Physics to a pithy-yet-poignant extract, nor deny Cinema its social and cultural appeal. Treat poetry the same, then: judge it by more than its emotional effect or ease of digestion. Still, the prevalence of social media poetry shows a desire for a more accessible use of the medium, through the lens of a younger generation. While they may be ignoring the poetic tradition, as Adrian Mitchell once said, “most people ignore most poetry because most poetry ignores most people” (1).

Works Cited

- Arnold, Matthew. “The Study of Poetry.” *Essays in Criticism*. London: Macmillan, 1888. The Poetry Foundation, 13 Oct. 2009. 1-9. Web. 8 Apr. 2015.
- Harnish, Amelia. "How R.M. Drake Turned His Instagram Poetry into an Amazon Bestseller." *The Daily Dot*. The Daily Dot, 4 Nov. 2014. Web. 14 Apr. 2015.
- Hirshfield, Jane. *Nine Gates: Entering the Mind of Poetry*. 2nd ed. New York: Harper Collins, 1997. Print.
- Kerr-Keller, Reid. "Stuck In The Past: Why Millennials Can't Let Go Of The 90s." *Elite Daily*. Elite Daily, Inc., 7 May 2014. Web. 5 Apr. 2015.
- Krantz, Amy. “Wonderful and beautiful!” Rev. of *Chasers of Light: Poems from the Typewriter Series*, by Tyler Knott Gregson. *Amazon.com*, 3 September 2014. Web. 3 Apr. 2015.
- Kunitz, Stanley. "Stanley Kunitz, The Art of Poetry No. 29." Interview by Chris Busa. *The Paris Review*. Antonio Weiss, Spring 1982. TheParisReview.org, 2008. Web. 29 Mar. 2015.
- Macias, Robert (rmdrk). “#276 by Robert M. Drake #rmdrake @rmdrk Excerpt from a bigger piece.” 7 July 2014. Instagram. 25 Mar. 2015.
- Mitchell, Adrian. "Preface." Preface. *Poems (1964)*. London: Cape, 1964. 1. Print.
- Stephenson, Mary Alice. "This Social Media Heartthrob Is A Poet. And He Just Brought Poetry's Sexy Back." *The Huffington Post*. TheHuffingtonPost.com, 19 Sept. 2014. Web. 30 Apr. 2015.
- Swenson, Kylie. "How Did R.M. Drake's Sidewalk Poetry Earn a Million Followers and a Best-Selling Book?" *Miami New Times*. Voice Media Group, 11 Feb. 2015. Web. 12 Apr. 2015.

Whitman, Walt. “173. Europe, the 72d and 73d years of These States.” *Leaves of*

Grass. Philadelphia: David McKay, 1900. *Bartleby.com*, 1999. Web. 2 Apr. 2015.

Copyright © 2015 *Wide Angle*, Samford University. All Rights Reserved.