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o g o i s
Spring 2011

Aegis: The Otterbein College Humanities Journal

Statement of Editorial Policy

A journal designed to catalyze a deeper critical appreciation of the humanities at Otterbein College, *Aegis* seeks scholarly essays and book reviews that advance the presence and values of the humanities on campus and beyond.

In accord with the National Endowment for the Humanities' (NEH) definition of the humanities, *Aegis* will consider scholarly essays and book reviews in the following disciplines: history; philosophy; languages; linguistics; literature; archeology; jurisprudence; the history, theory, and criticism of the arts; ethics; and comparative religion.

Essays and reviews of books in the social sciences that are historical or philosophical in approach—or that involve questions of interpretation or criticism traditionally in the humanities—will also be eligible for publication in *Aegis*. *Aegis* will also consider essays and reviews of books that use the disciplines of the humanities to interpret, analyze, or assess science and technology.

Essays should be between 10-30 pages—in twelve point type, double-spaced, and in Times New Roman font with standard one-inch margins. This includes pages devoted to notes and/or works cited pages. Book reviews should be between 1-4 pages—in twelve point type, double spaced, in Times New Roman font with standard one-inch margins.

Aegis is committed to nonsexist language and to wording free of hostile overtones.

Aegis will appear annually each calendar year toward the end of spring quarter. Essays and book reviews will be received on a rolling basis. The deadline for the coming year's edition shall be the second Friday of Winter Quarter. Essays and book reviews received after this date will be considered for the following year's edition—even if the writer is in the final year of his/her study at Otterbein.

Submissions, prepared according either to the *MLA Style Manual* or *The Chicago Manual of Style*, should be sent in duplicate and addressed to Dr. Karen Steigman, Faculty Advisor, *Aegis*, Towers Hall, Otterbein College, Westerville, OH, 43081. If you are submitting through the U.S. Mail, and wish for one copy of your submission to be returned, please include a self-addressed envelop with sufficient postage. Author's names should not appear on submitted essays; instead, submissions should be accompanied by a cover sheet, on which appear the author's name, address, and the title of the essay. All essays accepted for publication will need eventually to be submitted on hard diskette in Microsoft Word.

***Aegis* 2011 Editorial Board**

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Students interested in serving on *Aegis*' Editorial Board for the 2011-2012 school year should contact Dr. Karen Steigman at ksteigman@otterbein.edu.

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Editors' Introduction >>> Christine Horvath & Justin McAtee

As this year's editors, we are pleased to present the campus community with this eighth edition of *Aegis: The Otterbein University Humanities Journal*.

The eight featured essays are testaments to both the depth and breadth of scholarship produced annually by Otterbein students of the humanities. Each essay has been published on account of its scholastic merit and its ability to raise questions that are relevant to the Otterbein community and to our world at large. This year's collection contains representatives from the fields of literature, philosophy, history, and music theory. The selection is luminous with the enthusiasm and energetic inquiry of the authors. Hannah Biggs's "Shakespeare's Shylock: The Enthusiastic Fanatic" uses a sympathetic, psychoanalytic reading of the most famous character from *The Merchant of Venice* to explore themes of racism, obsession, and retaliation. In "An Implicit Ethics," Zach Hopper argues that a philosophy of ethics can be found in the fiction of Kurt Vonnegut, and examines one of the author's earliest novels, *Player Piano*, for its ethical content. Meanwhile, "Charles Ives's *Variations on "America": An American Original*," by Zach Garster, examines the ways in which a myriad of influences from the composer's personal life can be heard in one of his earliest works, as well as seen in his legacy as an early pioneer among American modernist composers. These examples, and the six other essays included herein, reflect the passion with which many Otterbein students undertake their scholastic inquiries into those questions of morality and human meaning that lie at the core of the humanities discipline.

In addition to these multidisciplinary offerings, this edition of *Aegis* features a special focus on post-colonial fiction- particularly those works influenced by the fiction of 19th century novelist, Joseph Conrad. Three of this year's essays were originally written for a Literary Studies course taught in the fall of 2011, entitled "Conrad and Other Agents." Led by Dr. Karen Steigman, and beginning with Joseph Conrad's iconic short novel, *Heart of Darkness*, students examined the rise of post-colonial literature through the lens of a canon of Conrad scholarship affectionately dubbed "Conradiana." Throughout the course, students explored novels from such authors as Graham Greene (*The Comedians*), V.S. Naipaul (*Guerrillas*), and Joan Didion (*A Book of Common Prayer*), whilst embarking on individual journeys of inquiry, research, and response to critical work from such literary theorists as Ian Watt, Edward Said, and Peter Brooks.

Also included in this edition of *Aegis* is a collection of book reviews written by members of the editorial staff. The featured titles, spanning numerous genres, include the politically-motivated mystery thriller *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, by Steig Larsson; Tracy Letts's Pulitzer Prize-winning dark comedy, *August: Osage County*; the PEN/Faulkner award-winning novella, *Everyman*, by Phillip Roth; and Christopher Hitchens' latest collection of essays, entitled *Love, Poverty, and War: Journeys and Essays*. With such a variety of styles and themes at stake, each review is sure to connect with a reader and, we hope, inspire a new reading experience.

Finally, we would like to take note of our university's great fortune this year in hosting two Distinguished Speakers in the Humanities. The first visit, in fall quarter, was from Professor Alan Rosen, currently employed by the International School for Holocaust Stud-

ies, Yad Vashem, Israel, where he teaches Holocaust literature. Throughout his visit across campus, Professor Rosen shared insights and reflections from his latest book, *The Wonder of Their Voices: The 1946 Holocaust Interviews with David Boder* (2010). In his book, and in the lecture he delivered for the Otterbein community, Professor Rosen discussed not only the academic and emotional weight contained by the voice recordings produced from the interviews, but also the various motives and multi-disciplinary academic stakes invested in the recordings by the conductor of the interviews, the Latvian-American psychologist Dr. David Boder. Reviews of Rosen's book have commended its eloquent organization, the depth of its research, and the author's effort to bring both wider and more thoroughly-informed recognition to a visionary project and researcher. Prior to Rosen's Otterbein lecture, *Aegis* conducted an interview with the scholar, who graciously shared details about the process of writing *The Wonder of Their Voices*, the history of his interest in the story of David Boder, and his collaborations with Elie Wiesel. Unfortunately, we were unable to include a copy in this edition of *Aegis*. It is our hope, however, that readers might be inspired to explore for themselves Professor Rosen's much-lauded work.

We are most pleased to present an interview with the University's second guest lecturer in the Humanities, Dr. Stephen Asma. Dr. Asma is a professor of Philosophy at Columbia College in Chicago. His work has been highly commended by the college; he was twice honored with the Faculty Development Research Award and, from 2006-2008, was appointed by the Provost as the first Distinguished Scholar of Columbia College. Dr. Asma's most recent books include *Against Fairness: In Favor of Favoritism* (forthcoming), *Why I am a Buddhist* (2010), *On Monsters: An Unnatural History of Our Worst Fears* (2009), and *The Gods Drink Whiskey: Stumbling Toward Enlightenment in the Land of the Tattered Buddha* (2006). This fall, Dr. Asma spoke to Otterbein students about his work *On Monsters*. The book takes a psychological approach to the monsters, both real and imagined, of numerous cultures, examining their symbolic meanings and the reasons for which we have come to fear them. We are incredibly pleased to publish this interview and the glimpse it offers into the content of *On Monsters* and the mind of Dr. Asma. We would like to take this opportunity to thank him for being so pleasant, open, and candid. We hope that each reader will take as much pleasure in reading the interview as we enjoyed conversing with Dr. Asma.

As our readers embark on their exploration of this 2011 edition of *Aegis*, it is our sincere hope as editors that the subsequent pages will stimulate each mind that enters hungry for knowledge and poised to encounter critical questions.



An Interview with Dr. Stephen T. Asma

Aegis: You state in Chapter 12 of *On Monsters*--and I'm paraphrasing--that we empathize easily with cartoonish replicas of ourselves, but find ultra-realistic replicas creepy enough that our level of fondness--and thus our level of relating--drops. Do you think we'll ever lose (through becoming desensitized, perhaps?) this revulsion as computer graphics and synthetic simulations of humans become more realistic?

Dr. Asma: Part of me thinks that the trajectory that's currently happening is so impressive that we will get to the point where the CGI will indeed be utterly convincing. They even have psychologists working on this stuff. There's actually military money that's going to psychology research programs to develop more empathic faces, computer faces. And what's sort of frightening about it is that they're not thinking about *Toy Story* and Hollywood films; they're thinking about "Can we make robots with trustworthy faces to go into enemy territory and bring...you know, the message of...you know [laughs], American dominance or whatever it is." So, what I'm saying is that there's a lot of research going into closing that gap--that uncanny valley--so that computer graphics can become utterly convincing. I think it's quite possible. Part of me holds out the romantic idea that we will be able to tell--there will be some subtly thing that sort of tips off that it's not really an agent or a subjective person behind it. But I also think that our ability to detect an agent is a very imperfect mechanism, so even if you satisfy it a little bit...We were talking about this today, for example, in a class. We were looking at how kids can think a robot is a real animal if it just has a couple of simple motions. So you can imagine where, if they just get the CGI close enough, our minds will provide the extra ingredient, so that it will seem utterly convincing to us. When I saw *Avatar*, there was a moment where I felt sucked into the world. I wasn't thinking "that's an effect," I thought, that's a character. So I think we're sort of already on that track, achieving that sort of level now.

Aegis: In Chapter 12 of *On Monsters* you describe the Freudian view that the defeat of the monster is an act that "symbolically returns our narcissism and reaffirms, albeit temporarily, our infantile power." You also describe the complementary view that "the purpose of the mythic narrative is to make the world intelligible...to resolve the contradictions of life...[and] our anxieties about the injustices of the world" (197-198). Hence, you see many horror-themed films and video games as means of satisfying our moral aggression against the chaos of nature and human behavior. How do you see our appetite for horror-themed art evolving in the near future? In other words, do you see our culture's anxieties evolving? Do you think our emotional needs will change with the philosophical undertones of our culture?

Dr. Asma: I would say there are these universal tendencies in mythic narratives to accomplish these universal goals that I'm describing. Which is, "Life isn't fair, so you make it fair in

art.” You know: “Life is full of misery and injustice, so you make justice in art, and it rectifies the expectations of the human being, because reality does such a bad job of fulfilling these expectations.” That, I think, is going to continue. But, to your question, “is it going to change over time,” I think so. The character of that function is going to be--the complexion of that will change over time. We are going to have much more anxiety about biotechnology than any previous generation could have had. We just had no way, 50 years ago, 25 years ago, to get into the genome and manipulate it in a way that we do now. Things like cloning, fabrication of organs, post humanism, sort of combining with the digital computing devices and interfaces. All this stuff is totally new. So we’re going to see more scenarios in our art--like horror narratives and monster stories and morality tales that look at the frightening circumstances of biotechnology. Now, as to how this will adjust to our sense of ethics. There is a famous argument the philosopher Kant gives for why you should believe in god. He says you have to believe in God because, in this life, you rarely see justice. So it has to happen somewhere! And You expect it so much, it seems, he says, this is one of the great interest of human reason--is justice. But you don’t get much of it in real life, so it must rule in another realm. I’m not a Kantian; I don’t think he’s right about that. But I do think this is one of the great functions of art--to redress the disappointments of life. And it’s not always just about comfort, about how “I didn’t get what I wanted, and therefore I need a story about people getting what they wanted, and I can live vicariously through it;” it’s also that the arts are inspirational. When you’re down, they don’t just console you, but they also light a fire in you. So it’s not just about consolation. I also think monster stories are always going to play a role in how you cash out hero narratives. And so, the hero is going to be defined differently. These stories are very popular now. For example, there is an uptake in zombie films recently. AMC has this new show called *The Walking Dead*. I like that stuff; I’m a sucker for it. And I’m sure there are many people who look down their noses at it and think “How lowbrow can you get?” But my view is that these are monster stories with hero narratives coded into them--like “How will I respond to the challenges that might befall us in life?” Of course, people aren’t actually worried about zombies, but they are interested in what would happen if there was a breakdown of urban life. And so you see all kinds of apocalyptic or survivalist films and stories, and I think they are doing important work because they not only console us but they also prepare us to imagine: “What would I be like if I was suddenly ethically challenged in some sort of severe way?”

Aegis: Radical vulnerability, utter powerlessness--the sense that we are, as you say, mere “impermanent ephemera”--is the primary emotion from which our imaginations birth the “more emotional, instinctual, paralinguistic, non-cognitive aspects of horror” (191). Do you think that this intrinsic “emotion” is expressed more purely or more wholly today, in an age when the universe and human nature alike are commonly viewed as irrational?

Dr. Asma: I think it is safer now to express this stuff than in previous eras. You would have repressed a lot more of this prior to the 20th century. It starts to open up in the 19th century as the literature of horror evolves. Frankenstein is written in about 1818, and by the time we reach Freud, we have a full on celebration of the irrational. I’m saying that, in a way, Freud was the tail-end of that. You have German Romanticism unfurling to get there--and Romanticism, generally, is the start of the celebration of the irrational, I think. It has existed in previ-

ous eras. You can think about medieval cities and villages where, one day a year, they would have topsy-turvy day where you could really get it out of your system and then go back into the box and continue your quiet, ordered, rational way of life. What the Romantics are saying is that truly authentic living is to let the emotions drive you--that even if you crash and burn, it's worth it because that's "real living," and all these shopkeepers with their rationality don't know what's going on. So I would agree that by the late 19th and early 20th century you actually had a kind of respectable culture of the irrational, where people could actually keep their jobs and argue that you should be more emotional and less rational. But where is this all going? Is there a limit? The Romantics had this idea that eventually it ends in something like the German idea of the "love death," in which you sacrifice yourself in this emotional storm--and that's better than becoming bourgeoisie, because the last thing you ever want to do is become middle class. And so I think there's an extreme, there's got to be a limit--although I suppose the arch can always go out to infinity on this stuff. Sadly, it's becoming more and more sadistic. What are the forms of emotion and image that are currently being replicated, reproduced for consumption? Today, it's frequently sadistic images. And all that stuff would have been images would have been censored in previous eras, and still is censored in other parts of the world. Now, I mean, we live in a culture in which the dirtiest word you could say is censorship, but you've got to wonder how, at some point, you don't want your kid seeing this stuff. An open society is, of course, what we want. But at the same time we must ask how we can steer these artistic genres in a direction that is more responsible.

Aegis: What about the "Why?" behind the tip toward sadism and violence and aggression, as opposed to the more humanistic and loving outlets for our irrational impulses?

Dr. Asma: Part of it could be that, as one thesis goes, if you have a very repressed culture in other regards, then this creates a pressure valve in which you can engage in these sadistic fantasies for the reason that the rest of your life is so repressed. That's one view. But what I really think is that, essentially, it's easy. For example, we talked in class today about how, in film making, you can make lots of profit by scaring people, and showing them things that titillate because they're sadistic and forbidden. And so people pay money so they can "go do it." There is this economic underbelly, which is expressed as "Well, what sorts of art make good money?" For example, in reality television, if you want to start a reality show, the pilot had better have some great fights in it, where people are throwing drinks on each other, and we get this melodramatic chaos. And so we're drawn to this really rather dumb melodrama, either because we're frustrated or because we're bored. One other explanation could be seen, for example, in people's reactions to subjects like the Octomom, and I remember how it seemed like everybody just piled on her, including myself. We were saying "Oh come on, what are you doing?" And then I thought how reality television and the news is increasingly filled with things for us to be outraged about. In fact, you rarely see information anymore. You just see: "Isn't it outrageous what is happening?" And then you are invited to scream at your TV, or just generally be angry. So, one way we can think about this is how we still have our emotions of guilt and moral outrage, and how electronic media is becoming the venue through which we can vent these emotions. It used to be religion, and now it's basically in the media. If you wanted to contemplate moral questions in the old days, it would be in the church. And there would be some poor soul who would get pregnant accidentally out

of wedlock and the whole town would be against her--that would be how everybody vents their moral outrage. Worst case scenario would be having someone accused of being a witch, and then it gets down to the stoning, and everyone feels good about it because "Look, God doesn't like her." Now, of course, we have reality television and the Octomom.

Aegis: What can we learn about ourselves from a work of art that "[infuses] the mundane, ordinary things of the world with an alienating, monstrous quality," like that of the Quay Brothers described in Chapter 12 of *On Monsters*?

Dr. Asma: For me, this is still mysterious, why I am so attracted to it. It may do nothing for you; you'll be like "What's the deal?" There'll be a spoon on a table and it'll just wobble. Then the camera will cut away, and then come back, and the effect is simply eerie. It is not scary like "monster scary"; it's more like all of a sudden you get filled with fear in a mundane situation. I guess this kind of stuff happens to people on hallucinogenic drugs. What the Quay brothers and similar artists have done is to give you this experience without having to drop any acid. They really know what they're doing and it's kind of haunting. And some of their stuff is just clever and weird, and some of it is really uncanny in the Freudian sense. It is the same thing that David Lynch does in his films. Some of the scariest stuff is not the action but the weird scenes or camera angles. Some of his stuff is just very nightmarish. His subtle psychology is created by the aesthetic. Both Lynch and the Quay Brothers are not just playing with fear, with a particular object of fear; they're interested in what Freud called "the uncanny," what Lovecraft called "cosmic fear," Heidegger called "angst"-- something that's hard to name and talk about. One of the things you learn from this is how much you, as a subject or viewer, bring to an experience. The ordinary way of operating is to think that my mind is a mirror or camera and that I'm basically taking in information and talking. But the truth is that you and I are altering our perceptions dramatically just by what moods we're in. For example, if you ask someone who has had a home invasion how big the person was, they'll describe someone much bigger than the actual person because fear shaped their perception. Philosophers are often interested in this idea, of how the mind shapes one's perceptions of reality. In these uncanny examples, it's as if you have these "doors of perception"-- to use the Aldous Huxley model, which you can adjust so that the external world seems different. And that's because the internal world has been changed slightly. One of the things you find in dreams is a huge reduction of serotonin levels. This is the same as occurs when someone takes LSD. There's actually some recent theory in brain science that says that one of the things you find in dreams is a huge reduction of serotonin levels in the brain. What they also find is that in hallucinatory drug experiences, like with LSD, serotonin drops dramatically. So the theory is that serotonin helps keep you coherent and understanding of your own mind, and that, if serotonin drops, your perception becomes more dream-like and "trippy." And I think that one day, if the research is done, we may find that many great artists have lower serotonin levels, that maybe their day-to-day experiences are more dream-like.

Aegis: At the close of the twelfth chapter of *On Monsters*, you remind us that the primary terror of our most modern monsters--those since Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Freud--arises from their inability to be "conquered," neither by divine righteousness nor "the light of reason" (202). You describe the monsters of our current age, so affected as we are by

philosophical pessimism, as “reminders of [our] theological abandonment and the accompanying angst,” as well as of “the irrevocable irrationality inside [ourselves] and outside in nature” (202). Do you believe that the philosophical pessimism so closely linked to our modern monsters is an incurable condition of having lost faith in an orderly universe that can be apprehended by reason?

Dr. Asma: Yes. Because there is a growing science rationalist movement called post-humanism/trans-humanism. It's often described as “moving towards the singularity”-- the singularity being a point in the future when we'll be able to interface the human condition with computers -- specifically robotics -- to such a degree that we will basically recreate ourselves as hybrids of human and artificial elements. They believe that the division between human and robot will no longer have to exist. In fact, they believe that we're actually half way there -- that soon we'll be significantly augmenting our bodies and then, they believe that we're going to be able to swap out our physical bodies by downloading our minds onto a computer so that, once the body starts breaking down you can swap for another that will last longer. The singularity is this ultimate place where you basically live forever. It's almost like a traditional religious immortality-view, but dressed up as a scientific enterprise. This movement is the attempt to avoid the alienation by re-installing rationality through the hope that science can fix all of these problems. I think this is pie in the sky, religion dressed up in a different format. My own theory is that we'd be better off learning how to live with vulnerability. I think you are going to be alienated; there is no going back to the enchanted garden we thought we lived in. But, if it was always a fantasy, then the best thing to do is to learn to live with it. There's this idea in the last decade that, In the face of terrorism, we need to make ourselves perfectly secure, but there is no such thing. There are always going to be the basic vulnerabilities, the accidents of being human. We shouldn't try to get rid of these things but rather to accommodate for them in a healthy way. Dealing with the vulnerability could turn you into a complete neurotic, or it could be something that you can entertain, and use, and maybe can use to develop policies to deal with terrorism or crime or deviance. But at the same time, you cannot be overtaken by fear or just give in to despair. So, I do think that ultimately there will always be a sense of alienation from wanting total security that can never exist. And maybe it would be dreadful if it did; it might be incredibly dull!

***Aegis*: Reflecting on the existential themes of *On Monsters*, I'd like to return to the topic of religion, as we've also noticed that the title of one of your other works is *Why I am a Buddhist*. Regarding religion, do you think it is important--vital, perhaps--for a person to find a way to satisfy the desire to feel absorbed into a larger, all-encompassing whole, and to have a sense of order and meaning to his or her life? Do you believe such a religiosity innate to human beings? If so, how might it be regained in a postmodern culture?**

Dr. Asma: What are the positive ways you do this? That's an interesting point. Instead of returning to the enchanted garden, what are other ways to have a transcendent experience? People have thought about transcendence in many ways even before monotheism, to feel like you're rising out of your little ego and being connected to something larger. How you interpret that is simply dependent on the culture in which you find yourself. For example, the Islamic tradition has people called Sufis. They do Dervish dances, twirling in circles for hours

to reach this state of meditation where their egos disappear and they become part of this trance and reach a state of communion with some larger reality. Christianity has figures like St. Theresa and God. Buddhism features meditation that can connect a person with the great emptiness of Śūnyatā. In the secular world, a lot of these transcendental experiences come in the form of art. Music is a great example: you can get lost in the experience of a song or a rhythm and your problems, your ego, can disappear for a little while. Religion has, of course, been a great source and repository for those feelings, but they can also exist entirely outside of religion, and I think the arts are a good example.

Aegis: Your discussion of monsters and mythologies often seems eclipsed by the book's weighty philosophical concerns, which take on an importance that transcends the interest in monsters for their own sake. Which of these two came first in the writing of the book?

Dr. Asma: Probably the philosophy was always the goal. It is a fair criticism of the book that there is not enough about the actual monsters. I felt like there was enough of that out there. The topic of the beasties is very accessible and much of it is simply the retelling of the folklore of the creatures. My goal was to see what people were afraid of in the particular eras. I wanted to find why they were afraid, and speculate about the origin of each monster. I guess I always had philosophical objectives. I think monsters as simply something that you're afraid of and run away from is not that interesting, you know? I tell this story about Tolkien, who responded to literary critics who said that Beowulf was just a dumb monster story by digging out a lot of fascinating stuff out of Beowulf that tells us about the culture of the time. I suppose I wanted to do something like that, with monsters both well-known and obscure. That was always my goal. The book was actually a lot longer, and even more theoretical, but my editor judiciously helped me to trim the extra information. Sometimes you just can't stop once you get going!

Aegis: In Chapter 14, "Torturers, Terrorists, and Zombies," you use the murder of Malim Abdul Habib as an example of why some people monsters, regardless of the sentiment against the notion of such labels. In our postmodern academic culture, how does one reconcile the desire for moral absolutes with the conviction that the universe is inherently irrational and amoral?

Dr. Asma: One way to resolve it is to just give up on the idea of these absolute universals. That's something you see in some theorists. You could read Derrida or perhaps Richard Rorty in this way. My own view is that what post-modernism did was that it asked us to be critical about ideas about human nature. In modernism, there is human nature -- it is rational, it is the pursuit of happiness, which is built into our biology. Post-modernism tells us that this is socially constructed. Notions of race and gender, for example, are seen by post-modernists as constructs used by the powerful to keep the oppressed down. This is one of the good things that Post-modernism did. The problem is that we are now in the Post-Post-Modern phase, and we're seeing that we do, in fact, know some things about human nature. We have learned a lot by studying biology, and for those of us in the humanities to ignore that is a huge mistake. The humanities have a history of ignoring biology because of ideas like Social Darwinism and sociobiology and the determinism of genetics. But biology hasn't been that

way for the past couple decades. You still hear the humanities railing against biologists, but biologists have a much more subtle view of how humans work. With the brain for example, scientists are now finding that it's not simply a matter of genetics unfolding and creating the brain. Instead it's something much more plastic. Instead of a direct flow from genetics to behavior, we have genetics to epigenetics. Epigenetics, then, is the influence of your environment and nurturing on your genetic coding. What brain scientists say now is that "what fires together wires together." You're born with certain aptitudes in the brain, but it's your experiences that then wire your brain. And this means that you are a mixture of biology and culture right from the beginning. What I take away from this is that there are biological universals about human beings. Absolutes have religious connotations but there are universal absolutes in our wiring. Our brains have been built in a way that we have generally similar affective emotional circuitry in the brain, and the neo-cortex evolved on top of this limbic system. If you are ever going to understand what is good for human beings, you must study the biological-cultural nexus in the brain, and brain development. So I am not someone who agrees with the sort of "hardcore" postmodernist who thinks that "everything is socially constructed." I think that's a very melodramatic response to scientific determinism. My view is what some call Critical Realism, which is a fancy way of saying that "I know there are useful critiques of science, but science does offer up facts about realities." That's the sort of combination of the humanities and sciences that I like.

'Let Other Pens Dwell on Guilt and Misery': *Mansfield Park* and Social Commentary >>> Chris Thayer

In the minds of many, Jane Austen in the quintessential romance novelist, the Regency queen of light, fluffy “chick-lit” fiction in which nothing of import ever happens, and perfect characters traipse through a gorgeous world of endless easy wealth where the most serious consequence is a poor marital match. However, when one considers her novels more closely, a careful reading of a book such as *Mansfield Park* reveals a much deeper concern with the world. The critical reader discovers that Jane Austen is in no way “chick lit.” In fact, the entirety of *Mansfield Park* acts as a self-referential criticism of the courtship or ‘female education’ novel for being focused on empty ‘accomplishments’ (such as embroidery or sketching), romance, and impossible ideals instead of social issues such as poverty and slavery. At the deepest level, it criticizes the overall social system of marriage match-making, positing the idea that romance is an illusion hiding both the courters’ true personalities and the lack of freedom for women in early nineteenth century society; it then attacks the beau monde the courters live, showing that it is only a mask over a heart of slave labor and economic turmoil.

As Mary Severance once so cleanly put it, “Jane Austen was the inheritor of a long and well-established tradition of ‘women’s novels’” (453). The common literature of the day was one of the proper conduct novel, which were works designed to show a perfect lead female character with an extremely strict moral code triumphing over adversity and the wiles of wicked suitors to marry the proper, moral man. They frequently were known to sacrifice character development and realism, as well as anything like a probable plot, in this quest to educate. These novels frequently included such outlandish scenes as a heroine handling an overaggressive, inappropriate paramour by, rather than breaking off the engagement, allowing herself to be abducted and then “escap[ing] by a solitary and epic canoe-journey, presumably down the St. Lawrence” (Waldron 87). This particular escapade appears in a novel of which Austen specifically “twice joke[d] about the improbabilities” (Waldron 85). Austen is on record as disliking this type of novel, calling one such contemporary work “full of unnatural conduct & forced difficulties, without striking merit of any kind” (Waldron 84). Furthermore, she specifically disliked the stiff, improbable characters within them, criticizing their too-perfect natures, and those that would think that all young women should be like the characters in such unrealistic novels. She comments to her niece in a letter that one such fellow who “wish[es] to think well of all young Ladies” and Austen herself “should not in the least agree of course, in our ideas of Novels and Heroines; pictures of perfection make me sick and wicked,” and that he, and by extension all who think like him, “deserves better treatment than to be obliged to read any more of my Works” (Chapman 198).

This attitude can be seen as not merely the product of a mind of clear intelligence

and wicked cleverness, but also as a response to the poor quality of the novels which preceded Ms. Austen. While valuing the idea of having a lesson folded into the plot, it was important for the novel not merely to be a moral tract with a bit of plot as window dressing. Indeed, “the novel of Jane Austen’s day was not just didactic. It was also seen as relevant to contemporary issues,” but that is not all (Butler 3). It must be a convincing world that the heroine moves through, for “fiction, Austen thought, though it must invent, should not lie” (Waldron 110). Hirsch explains that it is from this rich blend of tensions and concerns that *Mansfield Park* is born, a response to the mainstream “conduct books written between 1760 and 1840 ... texts that underwrite tradition” (251). While still offering a good and kind heroine for readers to admire, Austen gives Fanny Price character flaws -- even making one of the great goals of the conduct novel, meekness, a flaw, depicting the consequences of a character possessed by that “feminine meekness in demeanour described in the conduct-books,” and showing that, in fact, it “only serves to conceal from onlookers... a mind in very human turmoil,” (Waldron 95). Fanny only resolves her internal struggle when she begins to assert herself against the matrimonial designs of those, such as Sir Thomas (who advocates heavily for Crawford), that the standard conduct novel would have her obey without question. It is these flaws that make Fanny human, and fulfill the goal of this new kind of instructive novel, making “*Mansfield Park* [a novel that] aims to counteract an increasing tendency for fiction to sermonise through ideal object-lessons,” and thereby a crucial step towards greater realism in fiction overall (Waldron 86).

The first element of the ‘female education’ novel that *Mansfield Park* criticizes of is the “accomplishment.” Accomplishments were activities seen as appropriately feminine skills and qualities, such as singing lessons, piano-playing, embroidery, and drawing. A theme which certain novels of the day had begun to echo, and that Jane Austen fully proclaims, is that these genteel activities, while valuable in seeking a good match, do nothing to improve the moral character of the young ladies who learn them, supplanting real growth with the equivalent of a trained puppy’s (the wealthy lady’s companion and a mark of status, such as Lady Bertram’s pug) meaningless tricks. Starting around Austen’s era, “the novel of female education [newly] criticized superficial qualities, particularly accomplishments, which were too narrowly aimed at giving a girl a higher price in the marriage-market; accomplishments and mercenary marriages tended to be coupled together” (Butler 220). Austen is shown to be against both the practice of mercenary marriages on the whole and this ancillary practice of accomplishments, positions which can both be seen clearly in the story of Maria Bertram.

Maria Bertram is a perfectly well-groomed young lady, educated by both private tutor and solicitous aunt in everything a lady would need in the marriage market. In fact, when Fanny first comes to Mansfield Park, she is ridiculed by her more educated cousins for her lack of knowledge. She is criticized for not knowing “the chronological order of the kings of England, with the dates of their accession, and most of the principle events of their reigns... the Roman emperors as low as Severus...the metals, semi-metals, planets, and distinguished philosophers,” and likewise for not “know[ing] the difference between water-colours and crayons,” pointedly calling to the fine arts which were the frequent purview of feminine accomplishments at this time (Austen 17-8, 17). However, in the end, it is this very worldliness, absent of morality or restraint, that leads to both Maria’s marriage, and eventual ruin. She is extremely aware of the practicalities of life and money, and acts accordingly. Maria stalks

and captures a wealthy, if somewhat buffoonish and stupid (as shown by his oblivious obsession with capes while his fiancée flirts heavily with a rival), young man as easily as a hunting dog downs lamed prey. In this, she is assisted all the while by the watchful, yet ultimately useless, eyes of predatory Mrs. Norris, who neglects any deeper growth in the girls, and instead concerns herself with “promoting gaieties for her nieces ... displaying their accomplishments, and looking about for their future husbands” (Austen 33). After Maria goes through with the marriage, which is, as she puts it, “a duty; and as a marriage with Mr. Rushworth would give her the enjoyment of a larger income than her father’s, as well as ensure her the house in town, which was now a prime object, it became, by the same rule of moral obligation, her evident duty to marry Mr. Rushworth if she could,” the situation does not improve (Austen 33). On the contrary, her willful ways and disregard for any inborn sense of propriety, rather than just social niceties, leads to her running off with Henry Crawford, and thence her ruin. In the person of Maria Bertram Rushworth, Austen makes a compelling case against the previously-promoted accomplishments of feminine education, and the ‘female education’ novels that teach them.

The second area of critique Austen offers against the common conduct novel is twofold in nature. Austen uses *Mansfield Park* as a platform to decry the excessive focus on mere manners instead of real goodness, on improbable moral systems that crack when faced with a real-world situation. By offering examples of the failures of impossibly strict morals such as those in the feminine instruction novels of her day, she provides far superior moral lessons, concerned with actual issues of the day, issues that people of solid, down-to-earth values can solve, or at least lessen in severity. In the same action, she offers realistic characters in realistic situations that readers can connect with, and a better-quality reading experience overall. She accomplishes this extensive goal through criticism of two key social issues of her day: poverty and slavery.

The first of the two social issues Austen tackles in *Mansfield Park* is economic injustices and inequalities generally, through the misplacement of value. This economic misplacement of value, based in a skewed sense of worth born of immature or damaged morality, acts to echo the overall misplacement of value that Austen has been criticizing in other female education novels of her day throughout the breadth of *Mansfield Park* thus far. The major grounding of this mismanagement is found in the issue of waste.

Most grievous among the perpetrators of waste is that queen of frugality, Mrs. Norris. From the beginning, Mrs. Norris is shown to be misplacing her sense of value as regards Fanny Price. Norris is ever the first to treat Fanny “as an indigent niece and a financial liability,” and the last to recognize “Fanny’s transformation into a daughter ... [as being] a renegotiation of economic value,” and, in fact, assures Sir Thomas that this situation is sure not to occur when they first consider taking her on (Cleere 114). While being painfully concerned with wasting money on Fanny, Mrs. Norris convinces Sir Thomas to take on Fanny himself, although it is she who wished for the young girl to come to Mansfield Park, and she herself who offered to pay for the care of her. Indeed, she ignores the potential value that careful cultivation of Fanny could have, and instead insists on the very minimum being done for her, including forbidding even a fire lit in the room she frequents most, a room inherited from the governess, and thereby ever associated with the enforced lower regard of Fanny expected by Sir Thomas. They all fail to recognize Fanny’s unique value “as a spare daughter... a unit of value that draws worth from redundancy ... the niece is the ultimate domestic

resource, as she ... can be easily converted, in times of family crisis, from poor relation (a status dangerously close to ... governess) to daughter, sister, or, possibly, wife" (Cleere 122). Because of this failing to recognize Fanny's great potential, and their consequent mistreatment of and disinterest in her as anything but a stand-in servant for Lady Bertram, they commit a great act of waste. Indeed, this waste shows their inherent flaws as a family, which is merely one of "an economic unit connected not by biology or affect, but by a collective sense of debt and repayment," a clearly awry situation (Cleere 128). In Fanny, Mrs. Norris is the cause of all unhappiness of Fanny at home -- who considers "the little irritations, sometimes introduced by Aunt Norris" the only flaw of her life at Mansfield (Austen 350). When one considers that this means that she completely discounts her enforced silence and second-class-citizen status when compared to Mrs. Norris' treatment, it must be significant indeed.

Far worse, though, is Mrs. Norris' presence as the unintentional agent of waste in another young woman's life, and it results in far worse consequences than the mere misery of Fanny -- in Maria's case, it ends in ruin. Mrs. Norris encourages her niece's worst traits, guiding her in predatory husband-hunting and materialistic concerns, ignoring any deeper life or moral lessons, instead helping her in displaying her "accomplishments," which have previously been established to have been odious to Jane Austen's sensibilities of what was appropriate for real female education. The eventual result is a vain, waspish girl only interested in what her marriage to Mr. Rushworth can get her, happily carrying on with her paramour under his nose and, eventually, running off with said paramour, Mr. Crawford. Indeed, it is because of this grave waste of feminine potential that Norris is driven away at the end to live with disgraced Maria by an angry and bewildered Sir Thomas, who watches helplessly as his losses in Antigua are echoed by the waste at home of both his daughters. These daughters "are both emblems of their father's economic worth and important extensions of his power, and at eighteen and seventeen respectively, they are 'most interesting' because they are at the threshold of marriageability: the moment at which their value as exchangeable commodities will demand the most interest," and both are lost investments due to unfortunate marriage (one to poor Mr. Yates, the other to loveless Rushworth) (Cleere 118). In the end, "Aunt Norris is eventually expelled from the family because she is guilty of 'mismanaging' ... [this] domestic commodity: her nieces" (Cleere 115).

The cruciality of this conception of waste lies partially in how it directly ruins lives within the main plot, but far more in the idea that treating women as a commodity is itself a mismanagement, born of misguided morality. This is crucial in that it shows the inherent instability of "the flood of mid-Victorian conduct books that explicitly denounce wastefulness as the cardinal crime of inexperienced households," and likewise displays the flaws of the system that "*Mansfield Park* punctuates its story of family formation with," that is, "the very economic principles codified by later texts such as Sarah Stickney Ellis's *The Daughters of England*. 'The absolute waste of material... is an evil of a distinct nature, and can never be allowed to any extent, where it is possible to be avoided, without a deficiency of common sense, or of moral rectitude'" (Cleere 115). This obsession with waste is flawed, because "in keeping with the ideological work performed by such conduct manuals, *Mansfield Park* identifies the daughters of England themselves as sites of potential spoilage and, in the process of mingling Bertrams and Prices, puts forth a narrative of endogamy similarly concerned with the evils of waste," in this case the waste caused by underestimating the worth

of young women outside of mere marriage prospects (Cleere 115). By using the system the mainstream conduct novels put forth, Austen subverts their intentions by showing what failures and disasters their misaimed foci actually produce when implemented with the blind imbalance they contain in a realistic situation, and, thereby, Austen shows the inherent flaws of the form of the “courtship” or “feminine education” novel.

The second major social issue that Austen makes notable by its absence from discussion is slavery. It is well known that many of the wealthy of the Regency era and the shortly preceding period were wealthy only because of the labor of slaves in plantations such as Sir Thomas’ in Antigua. In a book that otherwise seems to be so centered around the subversion of its fellow-members in genre, we must wonder how this new element fits into the picture of subtle subversion that Jane Austen has painted thus far. It is indeed because “*Mansfield Park* ... has little patience with high-handed patriarchs, their eldest sons, Regency sexual mores, or traditional marital practices, and even England itself” that we must be careful to examine its deeper meaning in other areas, as well (Fraiman 815). When we consider that “Austen’s art [is] ironic and subtly allusive, we will find that the presence of slavery in *Mansfield Park* ... serves to undermine the moral and social pretensions of Sir Thomas Bertram and that Austen is far from condoning its practice on his Antigua plantations” (Stefes 24). Instead, she uses its presence, subtle though it is, to further highlight the inherent sickness of the established power order advocated by conduct novels, a power structure that supports such men who imagine themselves kind and generous while using the strength of their assurance in its order and might to abuse all those within their power, both slaves such as those in the plantations, and the young heroines of the conduct novels. These are the heroines (which Austen in her letters frequently mocks) that the carefully-controlled young lady readers of Austen’s day are meant to learn from, imbibing the accepted order along with all the other harmful lessons of accomplishment, impractical morality, and misaimed prevention of waste. Indeed, *Mansfield Park*’s subtle subversions and “irreverence [bear] out Austen’s earliest juvenile sketches, resonating with the other mature novels, and anticipating the final, unfinished Sanditon[,] suggest[ing] ... a less complacent view of power relations, especially gender relations” than the mainstream education writers would ever allow within their instructive fiction (Fraiman 815).

The connections between slavery and womanhood are numerous, and the general critique of slavery offered by Austen will be further explored later. Here, though, we are interested the connections between the conduct novel and slavery, as lampooned by Austen. We find the subject of our inquiry when we examine the morality of the education novel in greater specificity, for the key criticism being offered is one of the moral system proffered by the feminine education novel, and its failings to stand up to the real expressions of slavery, a great moral ill, in the more realistic setting *Mansfield Park* offers up.

The morality proposed by traditional conduct novels is frequently heavily patriarchal and Evangelical in nature, and absurdly impractical. The popular conduct novel *Coelebs In Search Of A Wife*, a particular target of Austen’s for mockery in all other ways, “was intended to demonstrate the strength of family values in the ruling class and in conscientious carrying out of its duties to its dependants. *Mansfield Park*, on the other hand demonstrates the weaknesses which More ignores” (Waldron 90). Sir Thomas clearly fails in his duties at home, having “minimal effect on most of his children” to improve their moral character (which leads to the debt of Tom, poor marriage of Julia, and adultery of Maria) and even less

positive effect on Fanny, who suffers under his insistent rule that maintains she be always aware that “she is not a Miss Bertram... they cannot be equals” (Waldron 90, Austen 9). This rule is supported by his his agent Mrs. Norris (figured by several critics as “effectively Sir Thomas’s overseer and [who] ... underlines his plantocratic style of administration”), who informs Fanny that “wherever you are, you must be the lowest and last” (Ferguson 70, Austen 227). The common conventions of the day linked plantation and home, in that “as domestic patriarch and colonial estate owner, [Sir Thomas] enjoys the sovereign power to impose what he regards as the appropriate order in each sphere,” and thereby he too is failing his slaves in Antigua, who by definition are, like his female relations, dependent on his variable mercies (Duncanson 192). This is further supported by the time in which *Mansfield Park* is set, that is, just after the passing of the Abolition Of The Slave Trade Act in 1807. This act meant that there would be no new slaves imported to colonies such as in Antigua, causing the plantation owners to have to treat their slaves better so that they wouldn’t die faster than they could reproduce, as had been occurring previously (Ferguson). It is clear that, given Sir Thomas had recently started to take losses in Antigua, losses severe enough to prompt a dangerous overseas journey, he too must have been practicing the maintenance of inhumane conditions. This mistreatment is the logical consequence of the vague, fragile conduct-novel morality when it is introduced to the harshness of the real world, and further shows that the proposed moral head of the family under the traditional setting is, rather, incapable of either maintaining a solid, realistic morality of his own, or of enforcing it on the minds of his own children. This is just one more way in which “the seemingly conventional courtship plot of *Mansfield Park* is ... capacious enough to embody a daring revision of Edgeworth’s tales of gentry education” (Easton 482).

On the larger level, though, Jane Austen is not just criticizing the flaws of the feminine education novel of her day. It is not mere conduct novels that fall under her wickedly sharp pen, but rather the whole social custom of courtship and romance, the flaws of which she lampoons through the foibles of her characters, and no novel more exemplifies this pattern than *Mansfield Park*. In *Mansfield Park*, Austen uses the plot to point out the pattern of romance being used as an illusion, in numerous contexts. Romance hides the actual personalities of courters and the lack of freedom of women in a marriage-oriented society, and the beau monde of the courting elite distracts the reader, and thereby society as a whole, from the abuses of slavery and the suffering of the working class as the innovations of the newly-begun nineteenth century, such as the abolition of the slave trade, the growing middle class, and new focus on capitalism, begin to reshape the world.

The first illusion of the practice of courtship and romance is that of the persons involved in the courting. Austen first puts the idea into the mouth of her favorite agitator, Mary Crawford, that “there is not one in a hundred of either sex who is not taken in when they marry” (Austen 46). In fact, “Austen’s novels assume from the outset that the courtship relation is spurious and misleading, distorting genuine human feelings and concealing important character traits. The passions generated by amatory gallantry are likely to be either transient and blind or, even worse, merely simulated,” for example, in the case of Henry Crawford, the worst offender of this sort, whose “gentle gallantry” is merely a mask serving his purpose of seeking “to have the glory, as well as the felicity, of forcing her to love him,” rather than from any real place of caring or interest in Fanny personally (Hinnant 306, Austen 231, 337). *Mansfield Park* serves to “address the apparent solidity and truthfulness-

to-experience of the language and habits of courtship acquired through centuries of practice and breaks them down before us, showing them up for the seductive illusions they always were, stratagems intended to divert us from the consequences of the encounter of desire with the real world" (Hinnant 308). It is this disingenuous pre-marriage system that prevents couples from actually getting to know one another in any real way, about which Mary can say that she "know[s] so many who have married in the full expectation and confidence of some one particular advantage in the connection or accomplishment or good quality in the person who have found themselves entirely deceived and been obliged to put up with exactly the reverse," which eventually resulted in the description of a couple as being "about as unhappy as most other married people," due to "marriage [being], of all transactions, the one in which people expect most from others, and are least honest themselves" (Austen 46, 374, Easton 472).

This process of codified, socially monitored and moderated romance of the Regency era was designed to reinforce the "cultural distinction between male and female that is both created by and assured in courtship" (Allen 42). Rather than joining a couple together to be equal partners throughout life, the courtship model enforced the disparity in power between the sexes, offering only submissive inequality and the silent affairs of the household for women, without consideration for a potential for any personal growth, or that a woman would want such growth. We see this especially in Henry's courtship of the uninterested Fanny. To Henry, Fanny's most attractive trait is her passivity, "her 'goodness of heart,' her 'gentleness,' 'modesty,' 'patience and forbearance'" (Hinnant 208). Henry is not interested in a life partner who can support him, nor in the personality of the woman he is pursuing, but rather "[fell] in love with Fanny's virtues. It is Fanny's perfect goodness and submissiveness that have won her the love of this rather shallow and selfish man -- who, of course, clearly sees the advantages of a compliant woman" (Hinnant 208). Likewise, Fanny is expected to do her "duty[,] to accept such a very unexceptionable offer as this," whether or not she is interested in Henry Crawford or in getting married at all, to silently move from the control of her father, to the control of her uncle, to the control of her husband, her dangerous womanhood carefully managed throughout the entirety of her life by male 'protectors' (Austen 345). This pattern of gallant who seeks to please without considering what might actually interest his intended, and reciprocal inability to speak outside of social boundaries, results in the many unhappy and mercantile marriages of the era that Austen was so very much against.

The sweet-scented ballroom haze of the beau monde also served to hide more than just the direct flaws of unequal courtship. The distractions of the comfortably wealthy and lavishly lazy minor aristocracy served to counterpoint the suffering of one of the main sources of the riches that allow the middle classes to purchase minor baronets -- slaves (Stefes 35). There are numerous comparisons to be made between the condition of women in England and slaves in the Colonies. These comparisons reveal standard linkages found in the literature of the era, such as those noting that "Sir Thomas, the slave-owner, seeks absolute rule over the women of his family. He regards them as his property, subject to his will and disposable for his profit, like his slaves . . . [and is ready] to put female flesh on the auction block in return for male status" (Wiltshire 304). However, the other essential half of the pairing of women and slaves is the consideration of the actual slaves. Much is made of the mercantile nature of the English aristocratic marriage market, but it is less often recognized,

by either the characters or the readers of romance novels, that “marriage – so crucial to the novel – was unknown among” the slaves (Wiltshire 309). The one area in which a woman of the era could be empowered had been stripped from the slaves, and they were considered to be better off that way, “that bringing slaves to the Carribean was a good deed, a way of civilizing those whose environment provided them with nothing but barbarism -- precisely the same basis for the justification of bringing Fanny Price to Mansfield Park” (Ferguson 72).

While certainly using slavery to criticize the position of women in England, at the same time Austen uses the -- extremely familiar to her readership -- limitations that society placed on women to, in turn, speak against slavery. This kind of activism is in no way surprising from Ms. Austen when one considers her connections to the abolitionist movement. In fact, “Jane Austen’s repugnance for the slave trade, moreover, is well documented -- her brother Francis was a vigorous abolitionist,” and she “once admitted to her sister Cassandra that she had once been ‘in love’ with the famous abolitionist” Thomas Clarkson, whose History is “the one book about slavery and abolition that Austen is widely thought to have read” (Ferguson 80-81, 70, Boulukos 371). This conviction of the evil nature of slavery lent itself easily to an inclination to write a novel set just after the Abolition Act, a significant victory for those seeking better conditions and eventual emancipation for slaves. More work would be needed, though, and so Austen built in, “for this and other domestic tyrannies, including the casual import and export of Fanny Price,” the bidirectional shorthand of women/slaves (Fraiman 812).

We can see, finally, the apparently innocent references Austen included to support this goal of reminding the genteel romantic of the very real suffering of slaves in the Colonies. The easiest, and most striking, to trace is the unexpected use of very specific names to convey hidden meanings to the reader. The first such name is that of one of the villains of the piece -- Mrs. Norris. Mrs. Norris’s name likely comes from that of “John Norris, one of the most vile proslaveryites of the day. Austen was well aware of Norris’s notoriety,” likely through the aforementioned History by Clarkson (Ferguson 70). By making such a vile character share a name with a well-known proponent of slavery, Austen further associates his position with infamy in the subconscious minds of her readers, so that every minor injury done to Fanny by her aunt, who is in criticism commonly figured as Sir Thomas’ overseer, reminds the Regency-era reader of the grave ills suffered daily by slaves. Secondly, the very name of the book, and its eponymous property, are more than likely references to anti-slavery “Lord Chief Justice Mansfield, who wrote the legal decision ... [that] stipulated that no slaves could be forcibly returned from Britain to the Caribbean, which was widely interpreted to mean that slavery in Britain had been legally abolished” (Ferguson 82). Furthermore, “Mans field for the title underscores the idea of property in the hands of a patriarch -- one man’s plantations -- and in its compression of several frames of meaning and reference, it connects the Caribbean plantation system and its master-slave relationships to tyrannical gender relations at home and abroad,” just the kind of reminder that would be perfect for restricted, wealthy young lady readers (Ferguson 82).

Most importantly, though, we must pay attention to the name of the protagonist herself, Fanny Price. Unlike the slaves with which she is frequently, and (to an extent) correctly, compared, “Fanny cannot be bought, there is no ‘fanny price’.... [which] also underscore[s] ... the analogy between Sir Thomas’ traffic in slaves in Antigua and his traffic in daughters at Mansfield” (Easton 472). This is not so with the slaves of Sir Thomas’ planta-

tion, about whom “dead silence” is generated -- not out of shame, but out of familial boredom with the topic, utter disinterest (Austen 203). In carrying this notion of the potential to be purchased within her very name, Fanny Price’s eventual triumph and happy ending with Edmund gains new poignancy, reminding the reader that she obtained that happy ending by being able to make a choice when it mattered -- to not marry the man, Henry Crawford, that the master of the house had selected. This victory brings readers back to the fact that the slaves lack this freedom to make even the most basic choice as to who they will lie with -- especially female slaves, who frequently were sexually abused by their white owners (Ferguson 78). Fanny’s pain, from being ripped away from her family at a young age to act as a servant to a rich white Lady, to being pressed by an unwanted suitor, all serve as intentional, miniaturized echoes of the horrible sufferings of Colonial slaves.

Finally, Jane Austen uses *Mansfield Park* to covertly explore her concerns over the recent, rapid changes in the socioeconomic status quo through the lens of the lives and private intrigues of the comfortably wealthy characters that make up the romance novel’s distracting main plot. In fact, “*Mansfield Park* embodies a sustained attack on the social costs of economic modernization and explores, through Fanny Price, the nature of plebian identity and social resistance” (Easton 459). Its era was a time of rapid growth and new markets, one of dubious fortunes and Smith’s *The Wealth Of Nations*, the premier free-market-capitalist manual, and one of lost traditions and political upheaval. These vast changes came in three interconnected forms: the erosion of previously accepted customs, the rise of materialist capitalism, and the rapidly changing status of the middle class.

Austen particularly disapproved of the slow decline of the quasi-feudal lord/laborer system of custom. This system was one of understood use privileges, that the poor surrounding farmers and herders could use the lord’s park to support their subsistence by way of ‘right of commonage,’ including such small but significant boons as leftover wood pieces from projects and tree-cuttings to “the gleaning of harvested fields” (Easton 464). In place of customary sharing came new, strict ideas about ownership, “sponsored by sympathetic jurists such as Lord Mansfield, the new notion of absolute property was private, alienable and liquid (monetary), and it was based in contract or grant, not custom or use. In concrete terms this meant that for many of the poor, subsistence independence was replaced by wage slavery” (Easton 464). This change in condition was certainly a concern of Austen’s, given the “choice of Northamptonshire for the location of the Bertram estate: Northamptonshire was ‘the county of Parliamentary inclosure’ because between 1750 and 1815 two-thirds of its agricultural land was turned from open fields and commons to enclosed farmland,” just the situation that caused the poor farmers grief (Easton 466). We can further determine that she disapproved of this practice by noting the position of the established villain of *Mansfield Park*, Mrs. Norris, who “is present as an advocate of ‘planting and improving’ ... Austen uses characters such as Mrs. Norris to dramatize the alliance of ‘taste and money’ responsible for the privatization of land,” and, consequently, “the overthrow of custom and the rise to hegemony of modern notions of property [that] placed a discontinuity at the heart of rural capitalism” (Easton 468, 463). Furthermore, we need only notice Fanny’s alignment with agricultural tradition, in her defense of the old church on the Rushworth property, and the use of “the word ‘custom’, the same word used earlier by Mary to describe country economic attitudes, [which] makes Fanny’s enthusiasm for the feudal past another echo of the plebian perspective on economic conflict,” and, thereby, likely the

generally morally correct position to have taken (Easton 474). The final proof of Austen's distaste for the apportioning of this important land is in its connections to slavery, which we have earlier seen Austen was firmly against. In fact, we see that "from the early 1790s the metaphor of slavery became prominent in working-class opposition to the wrong of English commerce," and "even boosters of the new economy knew that the metaphor of slavery was a byword for the exploitation of domestic labour. The attack on custom at Mansfield is presented on a continuum with the exploitation of slave labour abroad" (Easton 460, 479).

The second economic concern that Austen examines behind the glittering facade of beau monde life is that of purely materialistic capitalism, due to its widespread negative effects. In *Mansfield Park*, we see "a generational split based on an increasingly confident view of the land outside of customary (local) attachments and as an 'object' or thing (rather than a use). It was this attitude to property that provided the final impulse for the overthrow of the commons, despite the objections of local stakeholders. 'Country repose is artificially isolated from urban capitalism,'" and, in fact, as time passed, the general attitude shifted to one of "the estate as a form of capitalist speculation," which drove further apportioning, and thereby further plebeian suffering (Easton 465, 463). This new hyper-materialism also fueled literal slavery, in the search for cheaper products and labor, most commonly from the exploited land and people of the British Colonies, which Austen is well known for standing against. Last, but certainly not least, another of her major concerns becomes apparent in this morals-free capitalistic frenzy, that of the mercenary marriage. When material value is all one acknowledges, one is free to marry purely to obtain a larger income, furthering the very courtship trap that *Mansfield Park* tries to warn against through the plight of Maria.

The third socioeconomic concern that is central to a full understanding of *Mansfield Park* is that of the changing place of the middle class in the new social order. From the fear of dilution of their moderately well-connected bloodlines, the Bertrams and their "bodily fear of external 'infection' and the xenophobic sense of others as 'foreign' -- as well as the often noticed endogamy of the novel -- are as much about the defence of a property line as a blood line," such as when Ms. Ward was extremely enthused to snag a baronet, as opposed to her sisters' poorer marriages, suggesting that they may not have had prospects of any very high class (Easton 469). Although Sir Thomas is a baronet, in the new world of early nineteenth century economics, as Mary "assumes[,] there is a market in human beings: everyone -- like everything -- should be subject to exchange and available for a price," and in titles for human beings as well (Easton 470). The concern over the losses in Antigua likewise indicate he is new to his title and wealth, and thereby part of the emerging middle class, a social group struggling, in many cases, to disguise their past and join the upper classes through the purchase of meaningless titles without any particular interest in the well-being of the dependents of the area. He shows no notice of the responsibilities that having a place in the Parliament signifies, but is interested only in accrual of further wealth -- at least partially through "treat[ing] the land 'as a mere object of speculation'. These speculators would include such landowners as Sir Thomas, whose 'modern' English estate is, like his West Indian one, a recent creation," a greed which promotes mercenary marriages, all activities that have previously been shown to be against Austen's worldview (Easton 467).

Thus do we see the full situation of social justice, true morality, and economic change that Jane Austen is commenting on through the lives of the characters in her seemingly light and fluffy *Mansfield Park*. Rather than being merely for entertainment, when

examined at the deeper level, this courtship or 'feminine education' novel reveals itself to be a rich and complex commentary on both its own genre and on a wide variety of incredibly important social issues. While never devolving to the preaching that was common in similar novels of its time, *Mansfield Park* balances realistic, flawed characters and natural situations with crucial moral lessons about weighty issues such as morality, education, women's rights, slavery, and socioeconomic politics.

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Sham Populations: The Farce of the Revolutionary in Conrad's *The Secret Agent* and Greene's *The Comedians*

>>> Boris Hinderer

In a letter to his friend Cunningham-Grahame, Joseph Conrad argued that the monstrous anarchists from his novel *The Secret Agent* “are not revolutionists – they are mere shams” and that his novel had no political bearing on anarchism (Howe 98). Yet Irving Howe’s chapter on Conrad in his book *Politics in the Novel* claims that there is, in fact, a reason. *The Secret Agent* conveys some “fundamental truth” by casting its anarchist figures as incompetents (98). Theorists Howe and Ian Watt provide background context for both the period Conrad lived in and Conrad’s personal history which needs to be explored and taken into consideration when trying to determine whether a political agenda in fact exists in the novel, what the political agenda is, and how the actual message is delivered. Howe goes on to ask why Conrad “habitually populated the radical world with mere shams” (98). By doing so, Conrad gives his world a political tilt, which is precisely the critique Howe makes of Conrad’s self-proclaimed conservatism. I’d like to explore and expand this question, so as to argue that Conrad’s *The Secret Agent* as well as Graham Greene’s *The Comedians*, portrayal of radicals as shams gives these novels a political stake characterized by the use of humor

The Haiti in Graham Greene’s *The Comedians* is certainly a “radical world,” full of oppressive government, looming violence, and sham figures, particularly sham revolutionaries (98). Just like *The Secret Agent*, Greene’s novel has significant portions dedicated to the affairs of revolutionaries and their work to undermine the ruling government. These novels are also quite funny, which makes one ask whether it is merely coincidence that two novels written decades apart both adopt a jovial buffoon-like tone when dealing with plots revolving around revolutionaries. By making the reader laugh at the revolutionists, the novels reveal them to be inadequate and ineffectual. The radicals become comedic figures impossible to be taken seriously. Through comedy the radical’s political message is silenced thus putting an end to the established order the radical was opposing. The politics of each novel offer a critique of revolution or to take it a step further – a message that the figure of the revolutionary cannot be taken seriously and, therefore, loses a political stake. By subverting the political agenda of the radical, the politics opposed by the radical become less threatened.

When Conrad writes to his friends “The whole thing [*The Secret Agent*] is superficial and but a tale. I had no idea to consider anarchism politically” he denies the possibility for any political message (98). Comedy can work the same way, as a tool that denies or trivializes certain conclusions. Comedy is an evasive means of conveying potentially controversial or uncomfortable truths. In the course of daily social interaction, the use of humor can often

make certain statements more acceptable, and that is precisely what Conrad and Greene are doing in these texts. Greene reveals both the power and evasiveness of comedy when his character Captain Concasseur says "I am in favor of jokes. They have political value. Jokes are a release for the cowardly and the impotent" (Greene 145). Here the role of humor in both novels is accurately captured. Comedy allows the texts to make their critique of the revolutionary under a guise of levity. Because the reader's reaction to these revolutionaries is laughter, "access to the complexities of the radical mind" is denied (Howe 98). The humorous tone these authors apply to their characters influences one's perception of revolutionists so that their political beliefs are no longer considered – they have become merely comedians. Conrad and Greene have taken away the possibility that revolutionaries could be legitimate or successful political entities. Even the revolutionaries in *The Comedians* who are clearly fighting against an oppressive and evil government are mocked. Their members consist of Philipot Jr., the poet without a Bren gun; Joseph with his limp and skill, not with hand-to-hand combat but rather "rum punches" served to tourists; and their leader "Colonel/Major" Jones, who is a conman, only present because a local hotelier feared that Jones was seducing his mistress. The "political power" of jokes is that they make their subject powerless, like children playacting at politics. When Brown is talking to Philipot Jr., the poet begins to cry and Greene jokes by having Brown suspect that maybe these tears are "a child's tears for the Bren that no one would give him" (Greene 173). Greene creates a scene where a poet turned wannabe revolutionary cries like a child playing which is perhaps the exact opposite of what a revolutionary is expected to look like. Not only does this revolutionary not have a gun, but he is transformed briefly by humor into a mere child wishing for a gun.

When Concasseur states his aforementioned philosophy on jokes, he is talking to Mr. Brown, who is one of Greene's sham revolutionaries, while a second sham, Mr. Jones, is just a room away. It is ironic that the primary agent of the government in the novel – Concasseur – tells the sham revolutionary Brown about the power of jokes and his appreciation for them, since Concasseur expresses an awareness of the situation beyond what he could possess. At this point in the book he has no idea that Brown or Jones are shams or that they will become revolutionaries. Here Greene is directly telling the reader through Concasseur that Brown and the other revolutionaries have been cast as ridiculous figures that have no power to threaten the government.

As to the question of what motivates these authors to create entire worlds of sham revolutionaries, Howe proposes one explanation for Conrad's behavior. Conrad's father had been the leader of a group of political extremists and an embarrassed Conrad often concealed this, referring to his father as "merely a patriot" (Howe 77). Because of his father's political radicalism Conrad and his family were humiliated and exiled, so perhaps as Howe claims, this personal experience of the author is responsible for the revolutionary's lack of political stake in *The Secret Agent*.

Conrad's *The Secret Agent* is a novel about a group of incompetent saboteurs who have been infiltrated by an equally incompetent secret agent code-named Δ. As part of his role of secret agent he is charged with bombing the Greenwich Observatory but his as expected his attempt fails spectacularly. With this in mind, it should also be noted that there was an actual bombing of the Greenwich Observatory in 1894, over ten years prior to the publication of *The Secret Agent*. According to Ian Watt's essay "The Political and Social Background of *The Secret Agent*," Conrad "steadfastly denied any detailed knowledge either of

the explosion itself or of anarchism in general" (Watt 112). It seems impossible for these near identical terrorist attacks on the observatory, to be just a coincidental similarity between the plot of the novel and the actual act of terrorism, especially since Watt asserts that Conrad typically received inspiration for his work from some "germ of reality" (Watt 112). The years prior to the publication of *The Secret Agent* were full of numerous reports of Russian espionage in London, making it seem probable that Conrad, upon hearing of this espionage and terrorism, was motivated to mock both the anarchists and the Russian secret agents, which he does quite successfully in the novel. After all, in Conrad's version of the Greenwich bombing, the bomb is supplied by the Professor, a madman who lives in a "cupboard" of an apartment and is dedicated to making the "perfect detonator." The location to be bombed, The Greenwich Observatory, has been chosen precisely because no one will understand it, this bombing is to be as Mr. Vladimir says "an act of destructive ferocity so absurd as to be incomprehensible, inexplicable, almost unthinkable; in fact, mad? ...it must have all the shocking senselessness of gratuitous blasphemy" (Conrad 25). Since time-zones are based on Greenwich Mean Time, the bombing of the observatory could be thought of abstractly as an attempt to blow up the beginning of time, "the first meridian," which is just as absurd as Vladimir's desire to "throw a bomb into pure mathematics" (25-26). And of course the actual person who carries the bomb in order to bring about the final step in this act of terrorism is the simple minded Stevie who "stumbled within five minutes of being left to himself" (169). Every facet of this anarchist plot is overflowing with mockery which once again provides the reader with an image of revolutionaries as well as espionage agents, where the revolutionary is a brain addled teenager prone to stumbling and the mastermind behind the plot is a pig-gish madman.

The above analysis is a perfect example of how humor is applied to what could be considered the serious business of terrorist bombings and the clandestine influence of foreign powers, but also reveals Conrad's contempt for the political movements that as Watt claims, were current events around the time Conrad was writing the novel. His motivation therefore could have been an attempt to render the revolutionaries contemplating such bombings as the Greenwich observatory powerless, and to prohibit any attempt to seriously consider the "complexities of the radical mind" while at the same time hiding safely behind the veil of comedy (Howe 98). Conrad is making the statement that these sort of terrorist acts are the work of madmen and fools. Anyone thinking of conducting a similar attack runs a high risk of failure, because such an individual almost certainly a mad man or fool as well.

Greene's father however was not a violent Polish radical, and so other theories must be proposed in order to argue that there is indeed a political critique of the revolutionary behind the humor of *The Comedians*. In order to gather support for these theories one of Greene's nonfiction essays can be looked at – "Nightmare Republic." This essay is a journalistic report on Greene's experiences in Haiti during the rule of the oppressive dictator "Papa Doc," the same dictator who hides out of sight in *The Comedians* and from whom the miasma of fear spreads. Other passages are transferred from "Nightmare Republic" to form details and descriptions in *The Comedians*, for example both the essay and novel describe the burnt and bullet-riddled ruins of the house where Haitian marksman Benoit had lived. Both texts do this to illustrate the government's extreme and paranoid reaction to suspected dissent. After reading the two pieces it becomes clear that Greene had to do little in the way of fabrication to create the setting of *The Comedians*, the novel's Haiti is the same as the

actual Haiti Greene observed and reported on in “Nightmare Republic.” Also within the essay are some of Greene’s meditations upon the absurdity of Haiti’s ruling government, comparing the government to a deadly banana peel saying “the banana-skin is a deadly one, but it remains a banana-skin” (Greene 222). This idea of absurdity is precisely what the essay conveys. That even outside the novel’s fiction a similar laughable yet terrifying absurdity exists. He criticizes the bureaucracy for their backward sense of priorities and mismanagement writing that the Haitian people are “starving invisibly behind the decaying walls of ... the slums” and yet “an officer of the Tontons Macoute is building a large ice-skating rink” (Greene 226). The difference between these passages and certain scenes in the novel is that these lines do not evoke laughter, but more a feeling of frustration that such a “nightmare republic” could exist. The essay is careful not to glorify the revolutionaries opposing this government. Greene describes how a few of these revolutionaries killed some of the police, were then cornered into a cave by a small army and eventually “burnt out with flame throwers” (227). He does not describe these resistance fighters as heroic, but sees their efforts as futile because “the peasants now will never rise until photographs of the President’s dead body are nailed like Barbot’s photo on the walls of every police station” (227). In other words, the actions and deaths of those men changed nothing, and the only way to bring about an effective revolution would be to descend into the same barbarity of the current regime, brandishing the pictures of slain adversaries like some kind of primitive affirmation of power. Revolutionists are doomed to be ineffective unless they become just like the thing they are revolting against. This is perhaps the reason he makes the revolutionaries of *The Comedians* shams and figures of hilarity – their quest for change risks becoming not a change but rather a transfer of power, trading one oppressive rule for another. After all, at the end of the novel it is the government that is still in power while the revolutionaries are out of ammunition and retiring from the fight, they have not yet grown willing to fight in the same manner as their adversaries. It does not seem that Greene supports the government or the revolutionaries; rather his hope is for the “painters, poets, and heroes” Haiti produces (229).

Thus far I have argued that both Conrad and Greene have used humor in order to limit the way one thinks about revolutionaries, specifically to make these figures into clownish buffoons rather than legitimate political forces. A variation on this effect is that at times the leaders of revolutionaries are shown to be artificial, fantastical portrayals of revolutionaries, suggesting that those engaged in radical and potentially violent politics are merely giving some kind of theatrical performance. They are posturing and hoping that their performance is taken as reality because that is when their tactics can be effective. Conrad and Greene reveal the performance and name it a comedic performance. Mr. Verloc, who leads the revolutionary group in *the Secret Agent* is in reality an exceptionally lazy man, in fact “too lazy even for a mere demagogue, for a workman orator, for a leader of labor” (Conrad 10). Verloc is made to be the definition of useless, incapable of carrying out anything resembling a respectable occupation. Even the front he uses to disguise his anarchist/secret-agent position is a shady pornography shop rather than something reputable. In short, Verloc is everything the conservative former-mariner Conrad would have disdained and so Conrad happily has his character Mr. Vladimir strip away the “role” that Verloc portrays – the role of Δ . A role Verloc defends by mentioning his involvement with the French artillery and his theft of French weapon plans for his Russian masters. Vladimir immediately exposes this charade for what it is by reminding Verloc and informing the reader that the theft of the weapon plans was a

failure and resulted in Verloc's capture and imprisonment. Verloc's self-cited power, his voice, is also quickly mocked by Vladimir after Verloc makes a demonstration of his voice. Verloc opens a window and yells out into the street resulting in a "policeman [spinning] around as if he had been prodded by a sharp instrument" Vladimir's reaction however is to "burst into a laugh" and say "voices won't do. We have no use for your voice" (18-19). Vladimir concludes his systematic and hilarious breakdown of Verloc's failings as both secret agent and anarchist by mocking the man's physical form saying "you haven't even got the physique of your profession. You a member of the starving proletariat – never!" (16). Verloc's charade has been thrown out, his antics may have been acceptable in a different time, the time of his former employer Baron Stott-Wartenheim perhaps, but the modern era will only laugh at the performance of the revolutionist.

The very name, complete with title and hyphenated aristocratic sound, of Verloc's previous employer Baron Stott-Wartenheim, is evidence that indulging the revolutionary with political power is old fashioned. Greene takes up this labor of revealing the theatrics of the revolutionary and in the process making such theatrics look outdated when he writes one of Mr. Jones's finer moments of absurdity. Jones is on the run from the Tontons Macoute and in order to disguise himself he dons a dress. He is not uncomfortable in this attire in the least, because he has practiced such a disguise. He picks his skirts up "like a Victorian lady" and says "I played Boadicea once ... I had royalty in the audience...Lord Mountbatten. Those were the days" (219). All the same components that were present in *The Secret Agent* with Verloc are present again now with Jones. He recalls fondly an old aristocrat whose name is heavy with syllables, he was acting the part of the famous Celtic revolutionary Boadicea "in a skit" in order to "amuse" just as Verloc acts the part of "the famous and trusty secret agent Δ" (Conrad 20). In the politics of these novels, the era of Boadicea's heroics is past; all that remains are conmen in dresses.

Greene continues to make this distinction that there may have been a time for revolutionaries, but that time is most certainly in the past, only to be remembered by old relics. *The Comedians* and *The Secret Agent* insist on a modern political scene where the chaos of revolutionaries lacks any semblance of gravity and the actions of said revolutionaries are politically useless. Mr. Brown finds a medal belonging to his mother which he interprets to mean that she was "a heroine of the Resistance" (Greene 225). Though when a hypothetical situation where his mother is still alive during the current regime is proposed, both Brown and Dr. Magiot agree that she would be fighting with the revolutionaries but she would be doing so "uselessly of course" (235). Even the medal is never truly confirmed to have belonged to Brown's mother so Greene leaves it ambiguous as to there ever having been a period of heroic radicals, but there is no ambiguity for the current situation however, when even a heroine's efforts would be useless.

Once again, I look to Howe's analysis of Conrad's political leanings to support this idea that Conrad wanted to exclude the revolutionary or the anarchist from modern politics, preferring to leave them and their exploits to history, while at the same time concealing his own fear of revolutionary chaos with the application of humor. Conrad is retreating from the revolutionary and trying to take the political world with him – the revolutionary has no place there. Howe argues that the Russian author Dostoevsky had a profound influence on Conrad despite a report that Conrad "hated him as one might hate Lucifer and the forces of darkness" (Howe 77). Conrad, a political conservative who fled his family's life of exile in Russia,

felt that Dostoevsky “represented the ultimate forces of confusion and insanity”; the very things Conrad left his family to escape (77). Conrad even called Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamozov* “fierce mouthings from prehistoric ages” (77). Conrad wished to make political “insanity and confusion” a thing of the past due to his own early experience with revolutionaries (77). Because Conrad did not want to recreate the “terrifying atmospheres and emotional patterns of the youth he had escaped” and which Dostoevsky’s novels so reminded him of, humor must have come as the easiest way to communicate those feelings (77). The power of the joke allows such scarring memories to become so much more palatable. Those who see such views communicated as humor laugh rather than perhaps seeing some kind of weakness. Thus it seems only natural that upon hearing of the Greenwich observatory bombing, Conrad could have been frustrated by the news until he saw the absurdity and then the humor of it. The only way Conrad could have written *The Secret Agent* is with the abundance of comedic elements he included. The only political message he could not have left out based upon Howe’s argument and Conrad’s past is the one that transforms the revolutionaries into shams and consigns them to “the blackness of the prehistoric,” (77). This is the very same blackness into which Conrad would have liked to have sent certain “years of his youth” (77).

Watt also looks to Conrad’s letters for clues to the man’s hidden or unknown intentions. A letter from Conrad to Ambrose J. Barker strikes me, for in it Conrad writes that he knew nothing of the Greenwich bomb attack and that the “purpose of the book was not to attack any doctrine” but rather “the history of Winnie Verloc” (Watt 113). Once again it seems Conrad is being evasive. In fact, Winnie Verloc’s history is used just like the rest of the “simple tale”: to marginalize as well as mock the figure of the revolutionary. Winnie is arguably the most successful revolutionary in the novel, breaking free from her husband and life of domesticity. However this award is not much of a complement, as every revolutionary in the book must be laughed at before they reach some failure, Winnie included. Winnie’s history of revolt begins with defending her brother from their father, which while portrayed as noble, Conrad cannot help but parenthetically whisper that her actions were mostly futile – “she had a vision of the blows intercepted (often with her own head), of a door held desperately shut against a man’s rage (not for very long); of a poker flung once (not very far)” (Conrad 178). And of course the final climax of the novel – Winnie stabbing Mr. Verloc, is initiated by Verloc’s suggestion that Winnie was implicated in the act of terrorism that left her beloved brother Stevie dead, “it’s as much your doing as mine... It was you who kept on shoving him in my way” (189). If the novel is as Conrad claims and merely a story about Winnie rather than a critique of revolutionaries, then why at the last possible moment does he connect her to the anarchist’s plot? It could be argued that Verloc’s accusation that Winnie is responsible is ludicrous and said in haste due to his own anxiety and guilt, but the fact that the association is made at all creates the possibility and denies others. The reader must now consider whether Winnie did indeed have some role in the bombing. In the same way humor does, perceptions are being shifted and controlled.

And yet despite Winnie’s apparent success as a revolutionary, her final scene sees her mocked and belittled. Just as she is making her flight from her life of domesticity Conrad begins to test Winnie to see how successful her revolution has actually been. She grows concerned over the fact that she “left the shop door open” and left the light in the parlor lit (207). She and Ossipon skulk around increasing the risk of arousing the suspicion of passing

police officers only to properly lock up the house Winnie never intends to return to. In her moment of escape she is already attempting to tie herself to a man she believes can provide not love, which Conrad suggests she might have had if she had married the butcher's son, but security, telling Ossipon "I will live all my days for you" (218). She too is a sham revolutionary, so if *The Secret Agent* is as Conrad claims, about the history of Winnie Verloc then it is indeed about sham revolutionaries. As mentioned previously, making revolutionaries shams does not make the novel apolitical, rather it undermines their political agendas.

Novels like these should be approached with an awareness of not just what the novel conveys, but how the message is being conveyed. In this particular instance I was interested in how humor influences both the subject matter of the novel and the reader's perception of that subject matter. Since often jokes turn ordinary concepts into comedic objects it should not pass unnoticed when jokes are applied to politics. The application of jokes certainly does not render either of these novels completely apolitical, but rather adjusts the reader's comprehension of the political message, my argument being that this adjustment is to view the political subjects less seriously. They become minimized. And despite assertions from the author, in this case Conrad that the novel in question was intended to be devoid of any political critique, the text itself may provide evidence to the contrary. Such novels, as Howe says, "no matter what the author's intent, serve rhetorical ends, persuading toward one or another point of view" (Howe 98). Once again the reader should be made aware of what this "point of view" is that they are being persuaded towards, especially if such a point of view or persuasion is being concealed by comedy. I am not suggesting that Conrad or Greene have done anything wrong or deceitful, in fact Greene went so far as to title his novel *The Comedians* which demands that the reader consider the role of comedic elements within the text. Conrad may not be deceiving his readers but he is certainly being evasive giving his novel the simple title of *The Secret Agent* and the subtitle *A Simple Tale*. What I am suggesting rather is that there are legitimate grounds to consider these novels as political critiques, and to use them as examples for the subtle power humor can have in a political novel.

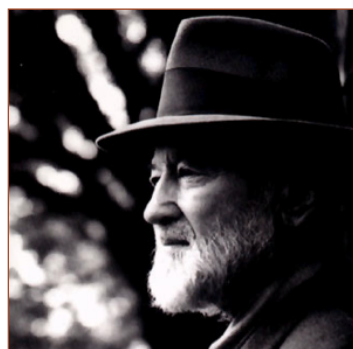
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Charles Ives's *Variations on "America"*: An American Original >>> Zachary D. Garster

Variations on "America," one of the early works by American composer Charles E. Ives, draws influences from a multitude of sources. Charles Ives was a very inventive and original composer who had an innate boyish charm about him, largely due to the influence of his father, George Ives. Exterior influences, of which Ives may not have been entirely cognizant at the time, and which included popular culture, western music, patriotism, and even gender roles, were also ingredients involved in the creation of his *Variations on "America."* This whirlwind of ideas and influences were put to effective use in his composition of this 1891 work.

Between the ages of 15 and 16, Charles's father, George E. Ives, studied counterpoint and harmony with German-born composer Carl Foeppl in New York. This was perhaps the start of his career as a very successful musician, studying four instruments and serving as a Civil War Brigade Bandmaster for the Union Army—in fact, the youngest bandmaster in the Union Army at that time.¹ Charles Edward Ives was born on October 20, 1874 in Danbury, Connecticut, in the same year of George Edward Ives's marriage to Mary Elizabeth Parmalee on the first of January. Two years later, their second child, J. Moss Ives, was born.²



Shortly following the Ives family's swift conception, they were established as one of Danbury's most prominent families. Despite the family's inherent lack of financial affluence, they were involved in local philanthropy and supported causes including the abolishment of slavery and overall public betterment.³ While the family was certainly well known and successful in business later on, George Ives was merely a bandleader. It cannot be asserted that George was ever successful in supporting the family financially; in addition, many members of the surrounding society found Mr. Ives to be plainly strange. George Ives was quite experimental by nature, commonly constructing odd contraptions and apparatuses that produced unusual sounds. For example, he loved quartertones so much that he retuned the family piano to quartertone tuning at one point as an exercise.⁴ As told by a witness and acquaintance of the Ives family, George had been remembered to set up two bands in separate ends of town, playing different tunes in non-similar keys and meters. They would then march through the town, eventually converging and clashing together into a musical whirlwind that many considered nothing more than noise.⁵ Even amidst the town's distaste for some of his bizarre hobbies, "George's free-ranging mind provided the ideal circumstances to stimulate his son's intuitive nature."⁶ Given his generous support and guidance, it's no secret why Charles's education, as provided by his father, gave him a supply of prolific ideas that, at the time of their use, were quite ahead of their time by all accounts.

American music in multiple genres was an integral part of the lives of rural New Englanders, and was similarly a huge source of inspiration to Ives. Aside from the fact that he heard this music in various venues throughout his hometown, including dance halls, churches, and town gatherings,⁷ it was part of his education and home life as well. Charles's childhood immersion in the songs that America knew and loved through the times of war and hardship created a resounding sense of patriotism in his music. The functioning harmonies of the music at the time served as a springboard for his harmonic imagination as well. Charles spent much of his childhood collecting ideas that he gained from the harmonic progressions in hymnals and through his study of the popular music of American composer Stephen Foster. Additionally, the music of country fairs, theater, and minstrel shows were staples of the popular music of the time.^{8 9} To combine such an immersion in popular music with the influence of George Ives was to create an unparalleled American original in young Charles.

To say, however, that Charles was familiar only with American music would be untrue. Charles, through his performance on the organ, was familiar with many different kinds of music, and much of his inspiration came also from his familiarity with western European classical music. Prior to the first performance of his original work, *Variations on "America,"* he followed the recital programming formula of organ historian Barbara Owen, which may be responsible for a large portion of his knowledge of western organ works. According to Owen, an accomplished organist would perform a concert split into thirds; one third of the concert would be old organ works such as those by Bach or Mendelssohn. The second part would consist of transcriptions of orchestral works such as Rossini's overture to *William Tell*, and the remaining third of the concert was to consist of more modern works. Often these included original pieces, many of which tended to be of the *theme and variations* idiom.¹⁰ He chose these works for performance quite often, and, inevitably, after likely writing several other smaller-scale pieces for organ, Ives happened upon several sources of influence for writing his own set of "popular variations on a theme." The first of those influences may have been American composer Dudley Buck, and his *Variations on "Home Sweet Home";*¹¹ the second may have been from a German composer named J. C. H. Rinck, in a set of serious variations on "God Save the King" (the same theme that would eventually grow into *Variations on "America"*).¹² It is likely due to his studies of organ works by Bach and other contrapuntal masterworks that his writing of counterpoint reflects a solid understanding of contrapuntal music theory.

Although Charles was a talented composer, composition was not the career that put bread on his table. In fact, the only time he was ever paid a regular salary as a musician was during the time he spent in his first position as a church organist.¹³ In his adult working life, Ives worked a regular, stable job as an insurance salesman, while composing on the side in his spare time. This, like so many other aspects of Ives's life, was a decision inspired by observing his influential father.

Charles Ives's observation of his father's inability to support his family adequately, and the critical way in which George was viewed by many around Danbury, influenced his decision to seek a career in a field other than music composition. It is ironic that many of the qualities George Ives established in his son, qualities that virtually guaranteed his failure as a composer at that time, all contributed greatly to his success in the insurance business.¹⁴

Because of his extraordinary talent as an organist and composer, Charles gained a position as a church organist at the ripe age of fourteen. While an organist, he wrote several occasional works, most of which have since been lost. In fact, only five of Ives's works for organ survive today, of which only two are still recorded and remain in print. Those two occasional works include a palindromic concert organ prelude on *Adeste Fidelis* and its counterpart, *Variations on "America,"* which Ives wrote at a mere seventeen years of age.^{15 16} The latter and better known of the two pieces, offers a great illustration of the various concepts that embody Charles Ives not only as a composer, but a human being who remained young in spirit for all his life. Ives wrote the variations with humor his goal, and, through experimentation with musical forces that would have been considered rebellious and somewhat outlandish in juxtaposition with the "standard" compositional practices of the time, he was simply "cutting up [and] being one of the boys."¹⁷ Using this piece as a medium, Ives's earliest influences are made evident to the listener, and the fearless, experimental nature inherited from his father is apparent.

Variations on "America" is a concertpiece for organ, virtuosic in all senses of the word. From start to finish, each of the five variations (not including the introduction and interludes, each of which presents its own technical challenges) exercises the performer's highest ability, while fantasizing on the theme in an often humorous or epic way.

The opening bars of the piece present the familiar theme, but in a way slightly departed from tradition. In a typical theme and variations, the opening theme would be the theme simply put, stated verbatim, conforming to what a listener might expect. Charles Ives instead states the "America" theme as a triumphal fanfare in full organ voice (*See Example 1*).

Example 1: Opening, mm. 1-6



Following this thunderous entrance of the altered theme (ending on a cadential V7), the theme as it is generally recognized is stated in its much quieter and conservative entirety. In some performances, it would have been during this statement of the theme that the audience would have joined in singing the words to "My Country, 'Tis of Thee."¹⁸

After the statement of the theme in its traditional, hymn-like form directly following the introductory theme, the first variation commences. It restates the main "America" theme in the traditional way, but this time with a running sixteenth note ornamentation that flows overtop of it. Up to this point, nothing incredibly jarring has occurred where harmony is concerned, but the technical elements that comprise the right hand playing are now much more demanding. As the left hand manuals and pedals work through the traditional melody, the right hand resembles the serpentine, winding chromatically through the theme, outlining melody and harmony alike (*See Example 2*).

Example 2: Variation 1, mm. 42-46

VARIATION I
Moderato

The musical score for Example 2: Variation 1, mm. 42-46, is written in 3/4 time. The right hand (treble clef) begins with a chromatically descending thirty-second note passage, starting on G4 and ending on G3. The left hand (bass clef) provides harmonic support with block chords and some moving lines. The tempo is marked 'Moderato'.

From here, the right hand complicates further still, beginning a passage of swiftly running, chromatically descending thirty-second notes that lend a light, playful mood to end the first theme.

The first four measures of Variation 2 (*See Example 3*) show Ives's prowess in writing harmonic counterpoint—perhaps not only a skill he cultivated through lessons with his father, but also through the studies of composers of counterpoint like J.S. Bach.

Example 3: Variation 2, mm. 58-61

VARIATION II
Andante

The musical score for Example 3: Variation 2, mm. 58-61, is written in 3/4 time. It features complex harmonic counterpoint between the right and left hands. The right hand (treble clef) has a melodic line with some chromaticism, while the left hand (bass clef) has a more rhythmic, moving line. The tempo is marked 'Andante'.

This variation departs from aural expectation, introducing the listener only briefly to the ideas that Ives would express much more completely later in his composing career. While his contrapuntal invention in Variation 2 is harmonically functional in some sense, and is not entirely discordant, the use of non-traditional dissonance is employed quite effectively for the purpose of this variation:

The purposes and compositional origins of contrapuntal ideas serve to reinforce the fundamental dualism between concert and experimental works. Frequently, the essence of a contrapuntal combination in a concert work is the texture that results, possibly a dense sound mass with indistinct linear components or a stratification of tonal, metric, or instrumental continuities.¹⁹

The contrapuntal harmonic structure Ives utilizes in this variation creates a sound that indeed blurs the linear flow of the main melody, perhaps creating linear movement of his own. The textural density also becomes much firmer here, and harmonic function begins to wane somewhat. As such, the fact that the work is experimental is clearly evident in its non-traditional harmonic functions and thick, inventive writing. Contrastingly, the challenges that it poses for the performer, though obvious within the first strains of the piece, are made further evident in this variation, and it is made clear that the work is not solely an experimental spectacle, but a concertpiece.

Just as in Variation 2, much of Charles's compositional ideas delved into the compositional realm of the atypical. One such idea was the example of George Ives's convergent marching bands in the Danbury Town Square. It may be from this origin that Charles drew

his first inklings of the concept of bitonality in his works. The notion of multiple tonalities playing together in tandem was one that his father encouraged from the beginning, though he was well aware that the untrained listener would not comprehend or appreciate it; it may be that initially, bitonality was intended to be more of an exercise for Charles than an actual technique for practical application in composition. George Ives also encouraged the use of bitonality because he believed that it strengthened the ear. In Charles's memoirs, he remembers occasions on which his father would have his family "sing, for instance, a tune like *The Swanee River* in the key of E flat, but play the accompaniment in the key of C. This was to stretch our ears and strengthen our musical minds..."²⁰

The first interlude included in *Variations on "America"* represents one of the two examples of bitonality in this work. As is shown, the right hand plays the "America" theme in F Major, varying in rhythm slightly from the "true" theme while the left hand begins the theme in D flat Major, a measure later. The pedal sustains softly through the whole section, playing interchangeably a D flat, C, and F, finally settling again on D flat. The dynamics clearly indicate that the F Major theme is to be emphasized (*See Example 4*).

Example 4: Interlude 1, mm. 72-75

Even as George influenced Charles to experiment, he also requested that Charles reign in the display of his experimentation on certain occasions. As an old man in 1948, Ives noted that his father often asked him to omit certain sections of the piece, including the two interludes, in public performances.²¹ Each of the interludes was written in two keys at once, providing what may have been the very first example of polytonality in music.²²

It has more recently been stated in other evidence that one or both of the interludes were added at a later date and were not actually composed at the same time as the rest of the work. Ives may simply have forgotten what had really happened, since it was not uncommon for his father to ask him to omit sections or variations of the piece at any given performance or venue with very little notice. For example, at performances in which Charles's peers would be present (e.g. venues in and near Danbury), George would generally request that the sections that would cause "the boys" to act out or laugh and cause problems, be left out. The period appropriate gender role inherent in this "boys will be boys" attitude was never otherwise discouraged by George, as it was humorous undertones such

as these that kept Charles from alienating himself from his friends and peers. Charles often wrote music with the intention of amusing his peers, and at the time of the composition of his bitonal interludes, Charles viewed his experimentation as “play,” and probably composed them solely in fun.²³

Example 5: Interlude 2, mm 139-142

In the second interlude included in *Variations on “America,”* the right hand is playing the “America” theme in A flat Major as the left hand and pedal play in F Major, contrasting both in key center and rhythm; note the different key signatures present in *example 5*. This time, in contrast to the first interlude, and given the dramatic dynamic contrast indicated, the bass clef parts are emphasized. The score indicates that both the first interlude and the second are to be played “Ad Libitum,” leaving the tempo and rubato expression relatively free to the interpretation of the performer.

The third variation seems to acknowledge yet again and expand upon Ives’s youthful male spirit, communicating the “awkwardness and breathless exuberance of youth”²⁴ inherent in his nature. The somewhat capricious third variation is in 6/8 time, and almost evokes a sense of “skipping,” or “galloping” along to the whimsical, dance-like music.

In the fourth variation, Ives creates a caricature of the theme—a great example of Ives’s personality as shown through music—by blending an American national tune with a Polish national dance. As shown in the first two measures, the rhythm itself is the obvious indicator that a grand Polonaise (a dance in triple meter: eighth note followed by two sixteenth notes and four eighth notes, with accent placed on beats one and three of each measure) has begun, even without the verbal indication at the opening of the variation. The third measure begins the familiar main theme in F melodic minor atop the stately Polonaise rhythmic motive (*See Example 6*).

Example 6: Variation 4, mm. 111-114

When this piece was performed in public, it is said that Charles’s father would sometimes play with him, occasionally even bringing in the whole brass band to play during some of the louder sections. On such occasions, George would insist that the whole fourth variation be omitted due to its Eurocentric thematic material that had “no place in this country, and also

was in a rather sad minor key” (as referenced in a letter from Charles’s wife, Mrs. Harmony Twitchell Ives, to famous American organist, E. Power Biggs).²⁵

The final variation of *Variations on “America”* begins with the main theme playing in the right hand, with an underpinning of running eighth notes in the pedal part. Ives would likely have used this variation as his “crowd pleaser;” having written the extremely difficult passages in the pedal part. The variation culminates in a grandiose statement of the first theme from the introduction of the piece. This time, however, running sixteenth notes in ascending arpeggiation and then descending through major and minor scales abound in the pedal part, and the organ is fully open. Ives’s wife later remembered that people “had more fun watching the feet play the pedal variations than in listening to the music.”²⁶

This piece of music is one of the first that Charles Ives wrote and it is true that many aspects of *Variations on “America”* are experimental by nature. Because of his youthful experimentation, patriotism, and the influence of his father, he imprinted the musical world with his own stamp of originality. It may have been the first time in the history of music that a composer thought to write in two keys at once, yet even at the end of his prolific composing career, he was misunderstood as a freelance composer that simply jotted down melodies with counterpoint and harmonies that bordered on bizarre as a hobby. Years later, however, this work would be arranged by William Schuman and published in the orchestral and wind band idioms to be widely performed, recorded, and admired. Arnold Schönberg was among the contemporaries of Charles Ives who saw him for what he truly was, an American Original. He recognized the great contributions that Ives made to twentieth century composition. In 1944, ten years before the death of Charles Ives, Schönberg poetically stated, “There is a great man living in this country – a composer. He has solved the problem [of] how to preserve one’s self-esteem and to learn [sic]. He responds to negligence by contempt. He is not forced to accept praise or blame. His name is Ives.”²⁷

Notes

- 1 J. Peter Burkholder. “Charles Ives.” Grove Music Online. <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/14000>.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 The Ives’s son, J. Moss would later go on to become a lawyer and a judge, further aiding the Iveses in establishing a firm foundation in the world of business and public improvement in Danbury.
- 4 Gary C. Mortenson. “Father to Son: The Education of Charles Ives.” *Music Educators Journal* 73, no. 7 (1987), 34.
- 5 Ibid., 35.
- 6 Ibid., 34.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 J. Peter Burkholder. “Charles Ives.” Grove Music Online. <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/14000>.
- 9 “It was his father whom he credited with teaching him the songs of Stephen Foster, whose tunes he would later borrow and whose simply diatonic lyricism informs many of Ives’s own melodies” (Ibid).
- 10 Gayle Sherwood Magee. *Charles Ives Reconsidered*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008). 22.
- 11 Ibid., 25-26.
- 12 Frank R. Rossiter. *Charles Ives and His America*. (W. W. Norton & Co. Inc., 1975). 45.

- 13 His career as an organist spanned several years, in many different cities, and in many churches of different denominations, but this was the only position in which he earned a regular salary.
- 14 Gary C. Mortenson. "Father to Son: The Education of Charles Ives." *Music Educators Journal* 73, no. 7 (1987), 37.
- 15 J. Peter Burkholder. "The Organist in Ives." *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 55, no. 2 (2002), 256. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/832050>
- 16 The two works, being the only two works for organ by Ives left in print, are published and sold as a pair today by Mercury Music Corporation. Further, recordings of the two are easily accessible today, often in a pair.
- 17 Burkholder. "Organist." 256.
- 18 Rossiter, 46.
- 19 J. Philip Lambert. "Ives and Counterpoint." *American Music* 9, no. 2 (1991). 131.
- 20 John Kirkpatrick. *Charles E. Ives: Memos*. (W. W. Norton & Co. Inc., 1972). 115.
- 21 Ibid., 115.
- 22 Rossiter. "*Ives and His America*." 45-46.
- 23 Burkholder. "Charles Ives."
- 24 Rossiter, 46.
- 25 Ibid., 46-47.
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 Alex Ross. *The Rest is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century*. (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 132.

Re-centering *Heart of Darkness*

>>> Justin McAtee

“After all, for a seaman, to scrape the bottom of the thing that’s supposed to float all the time under his care is the unpardonable sin.” – Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*

The figuration of Kurtz and Marlow as “adventurers of the soul” is by no means a new concept in over a century’s worth of critical responses to Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. Albert J. Guerard’s classic interpretation of the novel as a “night journey into the unconscious, and confrontation of an entity within the self” (Guerard 39) has been particularly influential since its 1958 publication, setting the groundwork for a subsequent psychoanalytic tradition in Conrad criticism that the deconstructive critic Perry Meisel has characterized as “[determined] to ground the text in specificity” (20). While Meisel’s own criticism is similarly concerned with the interior journeys of Kurtz and Marlow (as opposed to the external, political aspects of the tale), he sees the specifically psychoanalytical readings of the text as reflective of “a common predisposition among the novel’s critics to assign highly concrete meanings to the tale” (20). While this tendency to ground the text in certainty is only natural in Meisel’s eyes- as it follows a trajectory set from the very first critiques of the novel and proves that “*Heart of Darkness* creates the terms of its appeal by challenging us to specify the meaning Marlow tries to find in the character of Kurtz”- he nonetheless calls attention to the fallacy of its direction (20). Meisel rightly perceives that these constructivist critics either overlook or deny a deconstructive function coded into the novel as an exploration of the limits of language . to a sort of violence against meaning which, as indicated by the title of Meisel’s article, effectively “de-centers” the text from a ground in a moral message. Still searching for meaning, the psychoanalytic critics chase the “phantoms” of nonexistent answers “to what Marlow himself says he is unable to disclose: the substance, the essence, the details of what it is that Kurtz has done, and what it is that he represents” (20). Attempts to assign specific meanings to the figure of Kurtz “fall prey to the same epistemological temptations that Marlow is forced to overcome by the end of the tale” (21). *Heart of Darkness*, “rather than [being] a psychological work...is a text that interrogates the epistemological status of the language in which it inheres”- a violence that works to render all of that text’s potential meanings “problematic” (26).

Meisel, in his deconstructive analysis, however, stops short with Kurtz, and does not investigate other ways that the text of *Heart of Darkness* deconstructs meaning. Therefore, the first concern of this essay is to expand Meisel’s argument into its appropriate dimensions. It is not enough for Meisel to say that “*Heart of Darkness* creates the terms of its appeal by challenging us to specify the meaning Marlow tries to find in the character Kurtz”; there is a broader meaning being sought (20). The search for the essence, the “center,” of Kurtz is only part of a larger search- one which preoccupies Marlow’s through both ends of his framed tale. This second, larger quest is for the unseen wilderness “truth,” the source of a guiding,

transcendent moral nature that Marlow tries to locate beneath the superficial and illusory “surface reality” of the cultural and linguistic systems provided by civilization (74). In other words, what is true for Marlow’s search for the perplexing matter of Kurtz is also true for his search for matter— that is, meaning— within the watery depths of his notion of morality. It is this search, precisely, which makes Marlow a so-called adventurer of the soul, and which provides his most unsettling discovery—one which lies not in the abyssal nature of Kurtz precisely, but in what Kurtz, along with numerous other “absences” and contradictory notions, indicates about the lack of “matter” at the bottom of the notion of absolute morality.

Ostensibly, it would seem of no consequence to Meisel’s final argument -- that Marlow’s tale results in a “critique of our normal stipulation that being is presence” -- whether the ultimate goal of Marlow’s journey is an understanding of Kurtz or of absolute morality (“wilderness truth”) (27). However, the notion that Kurtz is not the actual end of Marlow’s search, but rather the means to understanding a larger philosophical and epistemological concern is vital to the remainder of my argument: With this reconfiguration of the novel’s central problem, Marlow’s story can become grounded in a meaning that is not, contrary to Meisel’s argument, outside the story itself (that is, a “lateral meaning”), but that is, rather, conveyed directly through the text.

The novel breaks free from the confines imposed by Meisel’s figuration, however, through the vessel of another critic’s solution to the text’s absence of given meaning. Peter Brooks’s theory of the Dialogic Relationship between tellers and listeners enables the re-establishment of meaning to the deconstructed text of *Heart of Darkness*, but only via the narrative’s relationship to its own retelling. Throughout the bulk of this essay, we will leave the text deconstructed at the hands of Meisel’s analysis, as this essay’s primary concern is to move Meisel’s reading into a stronger bearing upon the novel. However, at the end of our analysis, we will employ Brooks’s Dialogic Relationship to ground the text in subject/depth (rather than lateral) meaning, thus achieving a “re-centering” of *Heart of Darkness*.

The Dialogic Relationship (DR):

Brooks’s 1984 essay, “An Unreadable Report: Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*,” interprets the novel as a sounding board for “central questions about the shape and epistemology of narrative,” and takes as the premise of its argument the inconclusive nature of Marlow’s tale. Brooks’s concern is with the transmission of a story that contains no discernible meaning. For Brooks, the meaning of *Heart of Darkness* is found outside the story, precisely in its transmission—which, is to say, in the dialogic action of its telling. Brooks’s DR saves the novel from the abyss of meaninglessness only by appealing to an external source, the listener. Brooks states: “The impossibility of summing up, the impossibility of designating meaning as within the narrative explains why Marlow must retell his tale on board the *Nellie*, seeking meaning in the ‘spectral illumination’ of narrative transaction” (Brooks 383). Essential in the DR is the notion of the retelling, which is “potentially infinite...any closure or termination merely provisional. We have a feeling at the end of Marlow’s act of narration that the retelling of his tale will have to continue: that the ambiguous wisdom he has transmitted to his listeners will have to be retransmitted by them as narrative to future listeners” (383). It is precisely because of the lack of meaning that the story continues. The story must also continue because of the failures in its previous retellings, such as “Kurtz’s failure to narrate his own story satisfactorily [and] Marlow’s lying version of Kurtz’s story to the Intended...” (383).

Here we begin to see the implications for Meisel's notion of Kurtz's lack of meaning. The DR, with its potential for interminability, locates the meaning of Kurtz in the undiscoverable nature of -his content- in the lack of a "heart" to his story. Retelling saves us from the meaninglessness of Kurtz's contradictions because it does what Meisel aptly sums up as "[to make] of absence the ground of presence itself. Thus, it is the meaning of the story that keeps Kurtz's meaning absent" (Meisel 27). In other words, the point of Marlow's journey to Kurtz is that the story must always be retold. Brooks's DR secures meaning for the story heard aboard *The Nellie* precisely because the tale as a mere narrative gives no meaning; instead, because its narrative form is dialogic, the act of the interminable search (the dialogic relationship itself), becomes the meaning.

But this is not the only appropriate usage of the DR to attach meaning to a deconstructed *Heart of Darkness*. Nor is it the kind I am pursuing. For the purpose of this essay, the meaning of the story should be reestablished in the text itself, thus finally turning Marlow's tale into the very sort of matter that eludes him at all turns. However, this time the "matter" itself is not to be found in the DR, but in the reconfigured text. Still, we are not discarding the DR; instead of letting it remain a solution to the problem, we are using it as a bridge between Marlow's inconclusive search for truth and the establishment of an intro-textual depth of meaning.

The function of the DR changes for our purposes only if we reconfigure Meisel's conception of the inconclusively of Marlow's search for Kurtz as not his primary problem, but rather as part of the evidence for the larger, more important inconclusively of Marlow's search for a moral center beneath the "surface reality" that he tries to escape. Essentially, once we, as "Marlow's listeners," have divined the absence of the story's moral ground, we see that Marlow's retelling functions as more than the continuation of a search that failed in the Congo, but also as a voice reverberating outward from a heart of darkness with a warning for all other "adventurers of the soul." Marlow's warning is itself a meaning--one that is not contingent on the DR, but which can only be understood if the listener realizes that Marlow uses the DR to search for meaning only because he failed to discover his transcendental moral truth in the Congo. Realizing this failure is to hear the warning, which is the meaning, of *Heart of Darkness*.

In order to apply our re-centering of the meaning of Marlow's story, we must continue Meisel's line of argument by extending, from Kurtz to the larger issue of absolute morality, his claim that language "is in no position to discover the 'matter' which Marlow, like all interpreters, wishes to assign to the elusive object of his quest" (Meisel 23). For Meisel, the language of Marlow's tale is its own reality, separate from the notion of objective reality. This problematic relationship between the reality of language and that other elusive, indiscernible (or perhaps even nonexistent) interior of Marlow's tale reflects upon the relationship of culture to morality. As Meisel explains:

If language means by virtue of differential or oppositional relations within the system it constitutes, then meaning is the product of internal resonances within the system, rather than the effect of actual links between the system and real states of the world. Instead of a distance to be lamented and overcome, however, this distance between language and the world is a given since it is the signature of language--of culture--itself. (Meisel 22-23)

In other words, because both language and culture act as a sort of peripheral man-made reality, surrounding and concealing the possibility of a knowable objective reality, they are too self-referential to create anything but circular meaning. Thus, for an “adventurer of the soul” like Marlow, they get in the way of his ability to separate himself from their effects on his vision.

Marlow’s urge to find moral truths beneath “the surface of the abyss,” in the depths of a land that has been “slipped of its cloak of time,” is driven primarily by a desire for self-knowledge (Conrad 74, 76). This drive for wisdom arms Marlow with a nascent awareness of the falseness of the surface truths of language and culture. Marlow’s philosophical stake is essential to our re-centering of the text. Immediately, we know Marlow is neither a humanitarian “apostle” nor a greedy profiteer (Conrad 48). Instead, it is clear that Marlow is a wanderer, and his reason for wandering is, essentially, wisdom. From the very first pages of the text, the unnamed narrator makes clear that his seaman friend “[does] not represent his class.” Rather, Marlow is a spiritual explorer, unsatisfied with merely skirting the shores of far-flung continents. He looks for deeper meanings, driven to spin his reflective, philosophical yarns about “inconclusive experiences” in the effort to discern objective truth (Conrad 39-40). The multiple characterizations as a Buddha bring into focus the notion that Marlow is a man of meditation (he even remarks so himself) whose highest concern is wisdom. Finally, it is Marlow’s descriptions of himself as a child that betray an element of self-absorption to his thirst for understanding. His motivation to become a sailor is borne out of the persistence of his childhood tendency to “dream gloriously,” and it is the strength of his insistence to “go there!” that turns the mysteries of the maps into an adult playground for his curiosities (Conrad 42-43).

As a truth-seeking “Buddha,” it is no surprise that Marlow “hate[s], detest[s], cannot bear a lie” (Conrad 64). But in order to understand the full significance of his remark that lies are so odious because they carry the “taint of death” (64), we must look more closely at Marlow’s notion of restraint- that act of resistance to the deconstruction of surface reality threatened by the wilderness. As Marlow journeys upriver, his initially- elevated view of restraint as a symbol of civilization and order becomes complicated by the recognition that restrained behavior also functions as a kind of lie, as part of a larger effort to sustain a surface world of preoccupations useful for distracting a person from the nameless abyss below -- from the horror of hollowness that may be the only truth beyond that of the surface sheen. In Marlow’s shifting views on restraint, one begins to see the unraveling of his faith in the possibility of seeing beyond the systems of culture and language that obscure his apprehension of what lies below -- the truth, the matter, which he seeks.

The encounter with the accountant on the fringes of the jungle reflects an early Marlow who views restraint as a laudable, even virtuous, character trait. For a mind still in resistance to the deconstructing effects of the jungle upon the manners and morals of men, Marlow enthusiastically greets the surprising sight of the well-dressed accountant and his orderly books, tucked as they are into an outpost so far from the streets of Europe. Marlow’s nascent suspicion that the looming jungle harbors no discernible meanings in which the adventurer can ground himself compels him to cherish the restraint of the accountant as a last bastion of civilization- an assurance that such ordering systems as language and culture can survive despite existing on the edge of dissolution. To this early Marlow, the accountant is symbol of the triumph of man-made meaning over the threatening truths suggested by

the wilderness. And, although Marlow, the seeker and Buddha, wants to see beyond these constructs, he cannot help, at this early stage in his journey, to be enraptured by the formal elements of the accountant's dress. He sums up the tidy man's appearance as an indicator of "backbone" and "achievements of character," of resistance in the face of the "great demoralization" that seems to be affecting many of the Europeans who have left their orderly homes (54). Most of all, Marlow is inspired by the accountant's devotion to work and efficiency, to his diligent maintenance of the concerns of the surface. At this early stage in Marlow's journey, a man's performance on his respective "tightrope" is worth far more than his "half-crown a-tumble" (74). Marlow's awareness of the lie of restraint has not yet surfaced, but rolls with suspicion behind his efforts to maintain a buffer between himself and the wilderness.

Throughout his journey, Marlow maintains a devotion to all of the surface concerns that confront him. Both literally and metaphorically, it is his focus on the practical, business matters that ensure his survival, navigating the boat through danger and resisting the urge to run ashore and follow the allure of the unknown away from the safety of his personal island of the familiar- of the man-made ordering systems to which he is accustomed. Slowly, however, Marlow begins to perceive that his surface concerns are a distraction from the matter which he has come to divine, which is the mystery Kurtz eventually embodies. As he strains upriver on his mission, the jungle works upon Marlow's soul, divining to him slowly the notion that "the inner truth is hidden" beneath the surface (74).

Marlow's musing that "The inner truth is hidden- Luckily, luckily" is a proclamation of the risk of peering too intently into the murky depths beneath the pacifying surface existence of man-made meanings (74). It is a warning to listeners of an "unpardonable the sin" that results from "[scraping] the bottom of the thing that's supposed to float all the time under his care" (74). This conception of unrestraint as "sin" reflects the irreversible damage done to one's confidence in the absoluteness of surface truth after a glance into the wilderness. It also conflicts with Marlow's final admiration of Kurtz, who replaces the accountant as the object of Marlow's interest and admiration, indicating the eventual maturation of Marlow's understanding that the truth which he seeks cannot be found at the surface. Initially, Marlow grasps for restraint and is drawn toward the symbols of the surface world; at the end of his upriver journey, however, after the encounter with Kurtz that warns of the falsity of the surface world and the great threat of meaningless beneath, he regards restraint as utterly false. On his exit from the jungle, he encounters the buffoonish Russian, the only miracle on the river aside from the accountant, appearing in his distinctive colorful garb. For Marlow, the Russian's devotion to the seamanship handbook, a symbol of civilized surface sheen, is idiosyncratic and contradictory of his proclaimed allegiance to Kurtz. It is also reflective of the accountant's dedication to cleanliness, formal manner, and attire. Thus, Marlow dismisses the Russian by equating him with the accountant, whose new negative characterization reflects Marlow's matured, post-Kurtz view of restraint.

Marlow does not fully comprehend that his own restraint produces lies until after his encounter with Kurtz has ended and the artificial, surface world of Europe is once again imposed upon him. His new view reflects the discovery of some meaning at the bottom of his search for deeper truth. It is in his visit with Kurtz's Intended that a connection between restraint and lies is explicitly revealed. As his mind pulls him back into the Congo, and the impressions of Kurtz's final words reverberate upon his ear, Marlow resists their truth and

reverts back to the civilized restraint that now takes a distinctly false shape. Similarly, Marlow tells us- very briefly and without explanation- that before turning in Kurtz's letter to the Company, he tears off the postscript, discarding those words "of a glimpsed truth" (Conrad 117) in favor of a lie.

Despite being conscious of these (and other) lies, and despite his increasingly conscious association of restraint with the act of lying, Marlow never transcends the forces of language and culture from which Kurtz shook himself free and "kicked to pieces" (112). Even after staring into Kurtz's face and hearing his final pronouncement, his declaration of the "horror" of the "glimpsed truth," which implies both an absence of meaning beneath the surface and a revolt in the act of "summing up," Marlow knows the effort is vain. Kurtz, in his heroic summing up- which Marlow is sure reflects the truth of the matter (his vision was "wide enough to embrace the whole universe") - responds to Marlow's desire to confront the matterless matter of what lies beneath (Nothing?) the veneer of culture and language (Conrad 112). However, Marlow's sincere effort falls short in the very fact that the price of the declaration is an utterance of inadequacy. Kurtz's summation of "The horror!", though it indicates an answer by leaving an impression, explicitly says nothing--and not only that, but it reverts to the very language which in *Heart of Darkness* is a symbol for the culture that Kurtz and Marlow both have tried to see beyond (Meisel 23). An utterance of "careless contempt," Kurtz's final words may be a victory for one who has "stepped over the edge," but Marlow is not convinced of any answers except for one: that the price of "peeping" into the darkness on one's search for a truth beneath the surface is the burden of realizing that no conclusion can be made, and no explanation can be adequate. This conclusion contains his warning to his listeners. Here, at the end of his upriver journey, victory over the wilderness is the signal of defeat, for Marlow realizes that Kurtz's "victory" over speechlessness was made at the cost of reverting back to common, inadequate, man-made speech (hence the contempt in his voice), that lie of language, yet another surface construct (117).

Marlow further realizes that he does not have the strength or daring to run as far as Kurtz did from the man-made systems of illusions that he comes to regard, on his return to the civilization, with contempt (117). But having glimpsed, having encountered Kurtz, it is not necessary, as Marlow has seen the impossibility of apprehending moral truth, and of the consequent burden upon the listener of Kurtz's tale, and his own.

Here we return to Brooks's notion of the Dialogic Relationship, and see again that Marlow turns to it out of the need to transmit the inconclusiveness of his experience, even though he has seen the futility of the search and experienced the burden of admitting that futility. He fully admits at the end of his story that he has "[bowed] his head before...that great and saving illusion" of the faith of those who have not struggled free, and who will never hear his tale. For those who do hear, the final submissiveness of its posture before the demand to revert back to the systems of language and culture that it would try to transcend make it, most certainly, "a network of discourse in ironic relation to its own discoveries" (Meisel 27).

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The Concentration Camps of *Waiting for Godot* >>> Hannah Biggs

Samuel Beckett was a literary master who forever revolutionized existentialism, absurdism, and theater. His prose and plays take humankind on a journey into the realms of self-discovery, self-evaluation, and emotion. They also provide literary critics with much fodder for criticism. His absurdist plots, sparse stage, and lackluster characters give little to analyze on the surface, therefore making criticism all the more inviting to the curious thinker. Beckett himself, however, warned against focused, academic critique—one that blatantly and erroneously goes against the soul, heart, and theme of the piece for argument's sake. Hugh Kenner, one of his many critics, notes that:

[Beckett] denied ... the presence in his work of some hidden plan or key ... He ... suggested that over interpretation, which appeared to trouble him more than erroneous interpretation, arose from two main assumptions: that the writer is necessarily presenting some experience which he has had, and that he necessarily writes in order to affirm some general truth ... [If this happens in his works, it] happen[s] ... without the author's [Beckett's] knowledge. (Kenner 9-10)

Despite Beckett's warning, we know Beckett wrote most of his works in the aftermath of World War II, a war that changed the course of Beckett's life and work. Beckett wrote about the tragic human condition, a haunting reality during WWII, in his best-known work, *Waiting for Godot*. Although Beckett may have purposefully written *Godot* as a timeless piece, it was Beckett's experiences in World War II—a war that destroyed his Parisian home, took two of his friends to their deaths in the concentration camps, and introduced him to the tragedy of human suffering and loss of faith—that affected the creation of *Godot*.¹

Many critics claim *Waiting for Godot* was only partially influenced by Beckett's experiences in World War II. Lois Gordon insists Beckett's knowledge of philosophy and Existentialism had greater influence on the *Godot* (39), while Jerold Savory defends Christian texts had greater influence (9). But, I would argue that *Godot* was shaped entirely by Beckett's experiences during WWII. After all, Beckett spent "virtually half of his life witness to human degradation, suffering, and humiliation [resulting from WWII] ... The world might have seemed to Beckett an unrelenting campaign of slaughter rising out of religious and ethnic prejudice" (Gordon 35). How could WWII, a war that made him flee his Parisian home twice when the Nazis invaded (Black 552), took two of his best friends to the concentration camps (O'Toole), and showed him the suffering of humankind in the V. A. hospital of Saint-Lo in Normandy when he volunteered there (O'Toole) not have affected his writing, especially that of the "siege of the room" following WWII, the period that produced *Godot* (Gordon 32)? The war did affect his writing, namely what some would call the climax of all his works, *Waiting for Godot*.

Beckett's experiences in the war began on June 14, 1940 when Germany invaded Paris, France (Grun 516). By this time, Beckett and his soon-to-be-wife, Suzanne

Deschevaux-Dumesnil had settled in Paris. Beckett's close friend, Alfred Peron, whom he knew from their time together at Trinity College, had also settled in Paris (Knowlson 77). According to Vivian Mercier, Maignunes, a fellow colleague of Beckett's at Trinity, "attributed all these [personality] changes [Beckett became opinionated and eager to argue about intellectual matters] to the friendship with Peron" (35). James and Elizabeth Knowlson assert that Peron continued to have influence over Beckett because "it was ... Peron who persuaded him to work for a resistance cell of the British Special Operations Executive (SOE) called 'Gloria SMH!'" (77). The new Beckett wanted to "resist the German evil actively rather than accept it passively. Perhaps he thought, as Vladimir says in *Godot*, 'Let us not waste our time in idle discourse! ... Let us do something, while we have the chance!'" (Gordon 35). For Beckett, "the war suddenly became something 'personal and with meaning' ... he had many Jewish friends[,] and he was incensed 'by the constant public humiliations ... and the almost daily shootings by the Germans of innocent people taken hostages.' Beckett said, almost apologetically, 'I couldn't stand with my arms folded (q.t.d. in Reid 1968: 13-14)'" (Gordon 35). Despite Beckett's involvement in the resistance, he could do only so much and still stay safe since the Gestapo targeted resistance fighters such as Beckett and Peron. Nazi searches for such fighters "forced [Beckett and Deschevaux-Dumesnil to] leave Paris twice during World War II. The first time in 1940, they escaped days before it fell to German forces [this was before they joined the Resistance]. Upon returning to Paris a few months later, Beckett began working for the French Resistance ... In 1942, the two had to flee Paris again when Beckett's cell was betrayed. They escaped their apartment only hours before the Gestapo arrived" (Black 552). The couple was able to escape the Gestapo both times, but Peron was not so lucky. A telegram sent by Peron's wife alerted the couple of Peron's arrest and encouraged them to flee the second time. Beckett recalled:

[the telegram came] in August of 1942, [when] Suzanne and I were at home. Mania [Alfred's wife] and Alfred Peron were on a holiday at the time, when Alfred was picked up by the Gestapo. And Mania sent us a more or less uncoded telegram, which we understood to mean that Alfred had been arrested by the Gestapo. I remember we got it at eleven and we'd gone [from Paris] within the hour. (Knowlson 80)

The Nazi regime not only destroyed Beckett's Parisian home and forced the couple to flee for their lives, but it also took one of his dearest friends to his eventual demise.

Despite Beckett's resistance efforts, he still lost close friends to the Nazi concentration camps. Beckett's friend Paul Leon died in a concentration camp in 1942, and his "oldest French friend, Alfred Peron, [mentioned above] had survived Mauthausen [a concentration camp] only to die shortly after its liberation from the ill-treatment he had received there" (O'Toole). Beckett recalls that, "At the end of the war, it was terrible! The forces just opened up the extermination camps as they came through. They [the prisoners] had nothing to eat, those of them who were left alive. So, there was cannibalism. Alfred wouldn't do it. Amazingly, he got as far as Switzerland and then died of malnutrition and exhaustion" (Knowlson 80). How could *Godot* and other works he wrote after WWII not have been affected by such tragic memories? They were too potent to separate from the man's literature.

These tragic experiences fostered ideas for *Godot*, especially those for the creation of the protagonists Didi and Gogo. Beckett could never easily separate himself from the world around him. After all, Beckett himself said "I'm no intellectual. All I am is feeling.

Malloy and the others came to me the day I became more aware of my own folly. Only then did I begin to write the things I feel” (Mercier 36). Beckett’s best works, those written in the “siege of the room” following WWII, namely *Molloy* and *Godot*, stem from feeling (Gordon 32). Beckett admitted he felt “outrage[d] at the Nazis, ‘particularly in their treatment of the Jews and the fact that they were ‘making life hell for my friends’” (O’Toole). These feelings of outrage and sadness are found in *Godot*. Furthermore, many critics assert that Beckett was, unlike what his persona might portray, interested in politics—a discipline much attuned to feelings of citizens. James Knowlson, one of Beckett’s many biographers said that Beckett had a “private disappointment that the aesthetic forms in which he worked did not allow him to write directly about political issues” (O’Toole). Knowlson also notes that Beckett “did not allow his plays to be performed in apartheid South Africa ... [and] he instructed that all the Polish royalties for his work be paid to his Polish translator, the dissident Antoni Libera, who used them to fund underground publications and to help jailed writers” (O’Toole). This Beckett was not an apolitical Beckett; he was, as Vivian Mercier—a leading Beckett historian and critic—said, a man focused on “‘self-perception’ of the tragedy around him” (Mercier 4). Beckett was attuned to the atrocities in the concentration camps; the feelings of sadness and anger over the loss of his friends; the outrage of fellow Parisians over the destruction of their nation; and the frustration and fruitlessness of incessant waiting: the Jews enduring the slow passage of time in the concentration camps, the waiting of the Parisians for the war to end and Nazis to leave their city, and the waiting of wives, daughters, sisters, and mothers for their men to come home. Although Beckett’s works do not blatantly attack the government or call for resistance against Nazi forces, they do make us, the readers, aware of the horrors of our own social conditions and of those surrounding his, the author’s, life.

In *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett frequently alludes to the Holocaust and its suffering prisoners. For instance, Gogo’s “struggle to take off his boot [is] an effort so exhausting and exasperating that his first words seemed to take in more than a man’s confrontation with an inanimate thing: ‘Nothing to be done’” (Berlin 423). Surely such a statement represents the prisoners’, such as Peron’s, bleak outlooks in the concentration camps where there is literally “nothing to be done” about their fates. Mercier said of Beckett that “very early in his career, his characters became slave to fate” (Mercier 13). What other choice did camp prisoners have? They did not know what each day, hour, minute, or second would bring. Would it bring freedom? Would it bring death? Fate is the only thing the prisoner could put his/her trust in because it was the only thing on which he/she could depend.

Mercier goes on to say that in “Beckett[’s literature,] perhaps it [was] often no more than life itself, which compels us to leave the womb and journey toward the tomb. Suicide, the supreme act of free will, seems beyond the capacity of Beckett’s protagonists” (Mercier 13). In the camps, life turned into a stream-lined journey from capture to extermination. However, as many Holocaust historians would tell you, such as Thomas Bronisch, author of “Suidality in German Concentration Camps,” very few prisoners actually committed suicide (Goeschel). Didi and Gogo contemplate suicide by hanging twice but never commit to it. Gogo asks Didi, “Why don’t we hang ourselves,” to which Didi replies, “With what?” (Beckett 60). They express an interest in the idea, but they are ill-prepared and unable to fulfill the act they hypothetically wish to commit. Even though they say they will “hang [themselves] tomorrow” when they “can bring a good bit of rope,” we know that they will never commit to the act because they are waiting for Godot, someone or a metaphorical something who

keeps them bound to perpetual waiting (Beckett 60). The two continue living in wait for Godot even though he will never come, just as the camp prisoners continued living for each day, hoping that fate would bring them freedom—their own Godot.

Beckett gives Didi and Gogo similar feelings of hopelessness, exhaustion, and pain as those of the concentration camp prisoners. Many critics classify Beckett's characters as:

largely of a piece. They tend to be aging, homeless, in mental and physical pain, and isolated from those around them yet desperately trying to maintain a sense of connection. Their bodies are sources of anguish, and they are constantly plagued by some sort of difficulty or another. Their sense of disconnection from the outside world and from one another is a source of anxiety, as is the seemingly tenuous nature of their sterile existence. (Black 552)

Didi and Gogo are “aging, homeless, in mental and physical pain, and [are] isolated,” just as prisoners in the camps were. Death was a constant companion in the camps. These prisoners faced terrible “mental and physical pain” and suffered similar isolation as they were separated from their families and watched family members die before them. The characters' and the prisoners' circumstances line up too perfectly not to be related: the characters of Didi and Gogo represent staged versions of real, human suffering that happened not more than a decade prior.

Furthermore, Didi's and Gogo's destitute circumstances while they wait for Godot parallel the conditions in which the prisoners found themselves. Didi's and Gogo's “only possessions are their clothes. Certain of these are involved in the action: two hats (exchanged), one pair of boots (substituted for another), one pair of trousers (falling down), one rope, serving Estragon as a belt (broken) ... Consequently its inhabitants [Didi and Gogo] are thrown completely on their own resources” (Kenner 149). The two ‘tramps’ have ill-fitting clothing (like those worn by concentration camp prisoners), exchangeable clothing (like those taken from dead prisoners and given to the living), and are “completely thrown on their own resources” to stay warm, dry, and fed during their stint on the roadside (much like the prisoners). The two ‘tramps’ are no longer men of the material world; they are placed at the side of a begotten road on which the absurd, lonely, and forgotten travel. The clothes on their backs are their only source of connection to the material world of civilization from which they came, a world to which they will never go back. The prisoners' clothes were their only connection to the material world they had created for themselves before their arrest. Upon arrival at the camps, prisoners were stripped of all their possessions and clothing and given new striped clothes. These uniforms were all they had in regards to clothing, and they were left to their own resources to survive in the awful conditions of the camps.

Also, many productions of *Godot* dress Didi and Gogo in striped clothing, an alleged reference to the concentration camp uniforms. Lois Gordon, a renowned Beckett critic said “in the productions that have respected Beckett's detailed instructions in his notebooks ... often, one is dressed in striped pants, of the sort people in jail—or concentration camps—wear ... and the striped pants of one match the striped jacket of the other” (Gordon 36). Yes, one could argue from the philosophical standpoint that they are simply prisoners to fate, but keeping in mind the biographical facts of Beckett's life, the striped uniforms have too much of a place in Beckett's own memory to be used just merely in a philosophical sense. These

stripes are the stripes of the concentration camp clothing, the clothing his dear friends bore.

In addition to the resemblance of Didi and Gogo in the text to concentration camp prisoners, Beckett also indicates there is a lack of food on stage, a lack of food that resembles such lack of food in the camps. When Gogo complains of hunger, Didi gives him a carrot but warns him to “make it last, that’s the end of them” (Beckett 14). At the end of the play, we conclude that these two never leave their spot on the road. They never go home (if they even have a home), never travel into town for food, and they never go get better rope to hang themselves. When Didi says “that’s the end of them,” it really is the end of their food supply because they will never leave to get more. This setup closely resembles the shortage of food the prisoners would face; they could never alleviate the shortage because they too could never leave their post, or rather, their camp. To further the allusion, Gogo even tells Didi that he will “never forget this carrot” (Beckett 14). Yes, Gogo will never forget that carrot because it might be the last meal he has in a long while. Why would Beckett create a lack of food for his characters who he never lets leave the stage? The food reference does not contribute to the plot of the play in any significant way. The reason such a food reference is included is because Beckett is making an intentional parallel between the *Godot* stage and the concentration camps.

When *Godot* is performed, the stage is a place of unhappiness and never-ending hopeful waiting for freedom, just as the concentration camps would have been. The stage setup mimics the bleak, barren, grey appearance of a concentration camp. In Michael Lindsay-Hogg’s film version of *Waiting for Godot*, a performance thought to be one of the closest to Beckett’s own wishes, the stage is all bare except for piles of rubble, a tree, and a gravel road. This barren stage, minus the rocks, tree, and road, is therefore no mistake. The rubble resembles a bleak Holocaust work camp, bare of any life or light. The sky is a sullen gray, representing the gloom of the camps. The stage transforms into a physical embodiment of misery in a remarkable, terrifying way.

Furthermore, many scholars argue about the meaning of Lucky’s famous “Think” speech, giving it a Christian undertone and attempting to unearth why Beckett chose Lucky, out of all characters, to deliver such a speech. Jerold Savory proposes that “*Waiting for Godot* contains numerous and provocative biblical allusions,” particularly with the “most suggestive” references in Lucky’s ‘Think’ speech (Savory 9). To support his idea, Savory breaks Lucky’s speech into its barest form and achieves the following result:

Given the existence...of a personal God...with white beard...who from the heights...loves us dearly with some exceptions for reason unknown but time will tell and suffers...with those who...are plagued in torment...it is established beyond all doubt...that man in short...wastes and pines... abandoned unfinished... (Savory 9)

Savory boldly states that “the result sounds like a composite of speeches from Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar in *The Book of Job* [from *The Holy Bible*]” and that “Lucky, reduced to a captive servant [of Pozzo], may represent the God of indiscriminate retribution (reducing man’s existence to mere ‘luck’ (Savory 9-10). Some verses in the *Book of Job* do convey similar ideas of futility in life and fear and sadness over death. Job prays to God at one point in his mental struggle and says:

There is hope for a tree // if it is cut down, that it will // sprout again. //

and that its shoots will not // ease. // Though its root grows old in the // earth, // and its stump dies in the ground, // yet at the scent of water it will // bud // and put forth branches like a // young plant. // But mortals die, and are laid // low; // humans expire, and where are // they? // As waters fall from a lake, // and a river wastes away and // dries up, // so mortals lie down and do not // rise again: // until the heavens are no more, // they will not awake // or be roused out of their sleep. (Job 14: 7-12)

This pessimistic prayer to God is filled with anguish over the permanence of death. However, Job's prayer implies that life will resume once the Kingdom of Heaven opens again (ie: the second coming of Christ). But, Savory neglects to note that there is no redeeming value in Lucky's speech like there is in Job's. Lucky does not just mourn death and its permanence; he mourns that at life's end, it often feels "unfinished." Man can "waste and pine," in a life absent of God. Life is "plagued in torment" because of an absent God, and all life will eventually end "abandoned unfinished."

Lucky's famous speech instead clearly shows the influence of WWII on *Godot*. This speech presents the idea of an absent, omnipotent God who oversees our meager lives. It claims that life's end will always seem "unfinished" (Savory 9). Those living through WWII often felt the absence of God, and we know Beckett himself struggled with his faith after his arrival at Trinity College (Gordon 33). Concentration camp prisoners felt exactly the same feelings of abandonment, loss of hope, and sadness over premature death. This pessimistic approach to life's end is not one that resonates throughout the entire *Book of Job*; Job's relationship with God is restored at the book's end. In Beckett's play, however, no wonderful prayer is sent up to God, like later prayers in the *Book of Job*, to thank God for saving the human race in Christ's second coming. Beckett would argue that Lucky's speech conveys real feelings of abandonment, "wasting and pining," and loss at life's "unfinished" end, not joy as expressed in Job's later prayers. The speech's ideas resemble Beckett's views on life, a man who lost two friends to the Nazis—two friends whose lives would have seemed "unfinished" because of their premature ends.

Furthermore, Savory claims Lucky is so-named Lucky because his existence on mortal life is "reduc[ed]...to mere 'luck'" (Savory 10). I disagree. Surely Beckett named Lucky to make viewers and readers aware that Lucky really *is* lucky because only he, out of all the other characters, recognizes the fleeting nature of life and understands that no matter how hard one might try, life's end always feels "unfinished," a very common feeling of those who lost loved ones to the camps. Lucky is tortured by the merciless Pozzo throughout the play, and "the loudness and corpulence of Pozzo, whip in hand, reinforces the image of a master race persecuting its helpless victims" (Berlin 428). Lucky *is* the prisoner in this play and is characterized as so with a rope tied around his neck, a bundle of suitcases to bear, and a demeanor so woe-begotten that it arouses a curious fear in Didi and Gogo. Prisoner Lucky is a *lucky* prisoner for knowing how he will feel at life's end; such knowledge would have been a blessing for the concentration camp prisoners whose days were spent in agonizing questioning of how they would feel at their lives' ends.

Also, to contradict Savory further, when Beckett was working with the actors who were going to play Lucky in stage performances, he broke down Lucky's lengthy speech into five segments to help the actor remember it. This breakdown lends significant insight into the character of Lucky, the meaning of the speech--often just taken for a jumble of words--

and Beckett's take on life in *Waiting for Godot*. This breakdown makes Lucky look *lucky* for knowing what he knows about life's end, unlike the other hopeful 'tramps' who continue their waiting. The breakdown is as follows:

1. from the start to the first 'but not so fast:'
2. to 'waste and pine:'
3. to the first 'the facts are there:'
4. to 'the facts are there but time will tell:'
5. 'I resume alas alas on on' to the end. (Bradby 336)

Bradby goes on to say that Beckett wrote beside section one, "'Indifferent heaven.' Sections two and three were bracketed together with the comment 'Dwindling man.' Sections four and five carried the comment 'Earth abode of stones [and] cadenza.' This clear progression from an indifferent heaven through dwindling man to the conclusion of an earth that is the abode of stones give a clear thematic shape to the speech" (Bradby 336). From these notes, we know Beckett wanted to convey feelings of hopelessness for "unfinished" life.

Lucky's speech, then, is not one of Christian hope; rather, it emphasizes the loss of friends, the sadness of the "unfinished" life, and the feelings Beckett still harbored from his losses and experiences in the Second World War. Therefore, the *Book of Job* cannot be the basis for Lucky's speech. Savory's claim for a Christian undertone in the play, most significantly in Lucky's speech, simply cannot be sustained. If that were the case, Beckett's notes would reflect a more optimistic, Christian tone and language. Instead, "Beckett was moved to tears by an actor's performance of Lucky's monologue. If [*Waiting for*] *Godot* tortured him, it was only because it mattered to him so dearly" (McKeon).

Unlike many of my fellow critics, I insist Samuel Beckett was a writer influenced by the times. He had first-hand encounters with the tragedies and heartaches that struck almost every European in the Second World War. Thus, the tragic human condition permeates *Waiting for Godot*. *Godot* is an insight into Beckett's, Europeans', and humankind's suffering. He wrote about the feelings arising from the loss of his Paris home, his loss of friends to the concentration camps, and the loss of faith and a fate-driven wait for improvement in the human condition. Thus, because of Beckett's losses arising from WWII, Didi and Gogo come to represent camp prisoners perpetually bound to their suffering. The stage for *Waiting for Godot* becomes a staged concentration camp: bleak, bare, sad, and hopeless. Beckett's experiences in World War II are too potent, too powerful, and too painful to detach from the actual text when reading or watching *Waiting for Godot*. Thus, understanding Beckett's past and how his memories and feelings work themselves into the play only strengthens the play's power, intrigue, and performance. Beckett's experiences created the fodder for the fire of ideas that surged to their remarkable brilliance in his best-known work, *Waiting for Godot*.

Notes

The "Siege in the Room" is known among Beckett scholars as the time period dating from 1945-1950 in which Beckett wrote "nearly everything that has made his name celebrated," most of which was written in French. Works to come out of this time period include: *Murphy*, *Watt*, *Eleutheria*, "Premier Amour," *Mercier and Camier*, *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, *Waiting for Godot*, *The Unnamable*, and *Nouvelles et Textes Pour Rien* (Kenner 24).

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The Price of Privilege: How Freedom Disintegrates Characters and Narrative in Conrad and Didion >>> Christine Horvath

“Democracy is precisely what ruined your character.”

– Joan Didion, *A Book of Common Prayer*

Conrad and Didion are authors whose complicated tales of political and personal relationships have been challenging readers for decades. Many argue that Didion is recreating Conrad’s work by attempting to ask the same questions to a more modern audience. Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, the original text on which these other authors base their work, explores the relationship of the Imperial power to the peripheral countries upon which the Empire imposes its power. The journey to the center from the outside defines this novel the same way the narrator in Didion’s novel unrelentingly attempts to understand the character representing the colonial center. In this essay, I will explore how each character: Grace, Charlotte and Marlow, have been allowed to participate in the story and how his or her participation is in itself a political act. I will then discuss the political outcomes of their participation in the story followed by the implications and stakes that arise from these conclusions.

Capitalism is responsible for Charlotte’s privileged existence in Didion’s *A Book of Common Prayer*. Not only does it allow for Charlotte’s ability to play a role in the story but it also creates many of the major conflicts in the narrative. The freedom that capitalism provides allows Charlotte to maintain and direct her own life whichever way she chooses. One of the first things we know about Charlotte is that she is a tourist whose outlook on the world was created in her deluded mindset (12). Thus, Grace, Charlotte’s only American acquaintance in her new setting, begins a very critical depiction of a character whose ignorance keeps her from knowing any better. Charlotte’s inability to relinquish her American privilege outside of America certainly qualifies her for the reprehensible title of “nortemaricana” (48).

Her self-indulgent North American attitude prevents her from interacting normally with the outside world. Charlotte was looked down upon – and even hated – by many in Boca Grande. One character tells another early in the story, “capitalism is precisely what ruined your character” (81). Character can be used in many ways in this sentence. First, this character is speaking on a scale bigger than the person he calls into question, the Americanized woman from Boca Grande; he is implicating all of the American characters in the story as well as the nation itself. In particular, he implicates Charlotte, the figure of the capitalist nation in this text. Her ignorance became clear when she left America to vacation in Boca Grande. In a place like Boca Grande, a violent country run by corrupt leaders, the American Dream and mentality is unattainable and foolish. Charlotte’s character is painted as “realistic and optimistic,” in a place like Boca Grande that is so wrought with violence and destruction,

believing in both ideals simultaneously is foolish (68). We can also deduce that this is foreshadowing to the destruction of the character of Charlotte itself, ending in her death.

Charlotte is consistently described as an outsider in the place. Victor calls her a “silly woman” (44). Perhaps in the most scrutinizing paragraph, Grace tells us,

In these prayers the child Charlotte routinely asked that “it” turn out all right, “it” being unspecified and all inclusive, and she had been an adult for some years before the possibility occurred to her that “it” might not. She had put this doubt from her mind. As a child of the western United States she had been provided as well with faith in the value of certain frontiers on which her family had lived, in the virtues of cleared and irrigated land, of high-yield crops, of thrift, industry and the judicial system, of progress and education, and in the generally upward spiral of history. She was a norteamericana. (60)

Progress, virtue and the promise of a strong, effective government are ideals that do not exist in places like Boca Grande. Charlotte is not able to identify this issue – a failure which is exemplified by her belief of what Boca Grande “could become,” her spirit of hope, her deluded sense of progress, her capitalist mentality and her generally optimistic view of human nature (15). The corrupt leaders and government and the random guerilla violence in Boca Grande make Charlotte’s mentality obsolete, ignorant and offensive. Thus, the people of Boca Grande come to resent her – especially Antonio.

Perhaps the most offensive part of Charlotte is that she refuses to take a political stance or acknowledge the political part she plays. Grace tells us that “Charlotte hears but doesn’t listen” (240). Her “unaware inflection” creates the façade that she does not know what is going on around her (235). Shortly after this description, Grace explains how grammar and consciousness are connected. She says, “it occurred to me that I had never before had so graphic an illustration of how the consciousness of the human organism is carried in its grammar. Or the unconsciousness...if the organism under scrutiny is Charlotte” (234). Even the way that Charlotte speaks and constructs language is telling of her ignorance. Her unrealistic point of view that everything is okay all the time comes through in her speech as well as her actions. This is of course just another layer of her difficult relationship with the population and land of Boca Grande.

Furthermore, a series of serious political events occur to which she is completely oblivious. For example, a bomb goes off and all she can remember is that it happened when she was changing her tampon (250). She probably put the event out of her mind because it has no affect on her life at all. If the bomb had hit the Caribe Hotel where she stayed, perhaps Charlotte would have had a reaction. Since the event was completely out of her mind, not in her home country and not affecting her day-to-day visit in Boca Grande, “it doesn’t involve [her]” (198). Additionally, she continues to host political parties where people of equal privilege come to discuss “the existential situation of the Central American” (226). According to Grace, Charlotte never seemed to be listening to the conversation and then claimed, “actually I’m not ‘political’ in the least. I mean my mind doesn’t really run that way” (199). It is not possible for a person who hosts a gathering of “translators and teachers and film critics who supported themselves stringing for newspapers and playing at politics” to not have a political stake in the process (226). This is where Charlotte’s participation alone repeats itself as an act with a political motive, resembling her presence on the island itself. To

ignore her stake is a direct reflection of her privilege as a product of capitalism, picking and choosing what she will and will not acknowledge as reality which, I will argue, is the reason this character is killed.

Charlotte is characterized as the figure of the center traveling to the periphery. In other words, she is the imperial presence in the space of the colony. In this position, Charlotte is too free to choose and as a result chooses nothing. She chooses no identity, no place, no husband, no stance. Charlotte “speaks as though she has no history of her own” and refuses to make any connections to a land, a person or herself (46). She has no knowledge, she cannot identify places on a map, and above all, by her own admission, she “[doesn’t] see” (70). Charlotte becomes the Kurtzian figure of this tale by not allowing any of her acquaintances to access her own, personal center. In this way, she represents the neutral, uninvolved and quintessentially ignorant American stance. Once the characters believe that they are getting closer to the heart of Charlotte, she only becomes more obscured. Grace defends her despair over the impossibility of understanding Charlotte by saying, “I know how to make models of life itself, DNA, RNA, helices double and single and squared, but I try to make a model of Charlotte Douglas’s “character” and I see only a shimmer” (215). Because hers is ultimately a silent and unknowing political stance, Charlotte becomes a threat to the interests of Boca Grande. Grace reveals her suspicion that perhaps Antonio is behind the killing of Charlotte. Consequently, we are forced to ask ourselves what stake Grace, the self-described narrator with no motive role, has in the story (21).

Grace and Charlotte are grouped together as a pair that would “naturally” meet (29). Both were born in America and both refuse to take any motive stake in the story itself. However, Grace’s character assessment must begin with her admission that she is “an anthropologist who lost faith in her own method, who stopped believing that observable activity defined anthropos” (12). Grace is attempting to tell the story about a woman and it will inevitably conclude with a reading of Charlotte’s humanity. Grace later says, “the most reliable part of what I know, derives from my training in human behavior” (56). The discrepancy between what she believes herself capable or incapable of as a story teller turns her into an unreliable narrator. She believes herself unable, from the beginning, to tell Charlotte Douglas’s story yet relies on her training to draw conclusions. Because Charlotte and Grace are naturally connected, it is impractical to say that Grace plays “no motive role” in the action (21).

On the contrary, Grace controls the action. We never hear Charlotte’s voice and we see Charlotte only through Grace’s superior tone. At the beginning, Grace attempts to keep a very safe distance from Charlotte. Here, the difficulty for Grace is that she cannot tell Charlotte’s story without telling her own. In this way, she is much like Marlow. She tells us, “call this my own letter from Boca Grande,” but then quickly realizes the mistake and takes it back: “No. Call it what I said. Call it my witness to Charlotte Douglas” (16). As a result, the story becomes a confused project. Grace and the reader understand that Charlotte’s story cannot be told without Grace’s, yet Grace refuses to admit it. Complicating this relationship is the way that Grace associates Charlotte with the ignorance of Americans and the mistreatment of Boca Grande. The relationships become analogous as we come to understand that Charlotte uses Boca Grande as her vacation, a tour just as Charlotte’s story becomes a way for Grace to avoid her disappointments with herself. Grace projects her self-hatred onto Charlotte, giving herself a vacation from self-criticism.

For example, Grace considers, “It did not occur to me that day that I would ever

have reason to consider Charlotte an outsider of romantic sensibility. Possibly this is the question I am trying to answer" (29). Grace is an outsider of romantic sensibility in her own right for many reasons. She has "married into one of the three or four solvent families in Boca Grande" (18). Her family owns most of the land and her brothers-in-law are the rulers of the country, succeeding her deceased husband. Consequently, her wealth and status makes her an outsider to the population of Boca Grande.

Secondly, Grace herself is an American. Additionally, she admits to being a wealthy American, "Gerardo is the grandson of two American wildcatters who got rich, my father in Colorado minerals and Edgar's father in Boca Grande politics, and of the Irish nursemaid and the *mestiza* from the interior they respectively married" (20). Edgar's father made his money by marrying a woman from the interior and entering into a domain of politics in which an American did not belong. Here, we see capitalism creating opportunities for people where it is offensive and unnecessary to become involved. Edgar's father became rich by changing his physical location from the center to the periphery. There, in Boca Grande, he married one of the country's subjects and infiltrated the government to use both to his advantage. Grace's very ability to be married to a man such as Edgar comes from the privilege of the traveler to go to Boca Grande even if one, "on a blank map of the world... could not actually place the country" (60). Thus, her criticism of Charlotte coming to Boca Grande as an escape becomes an unintentional criticism of herself; she knows that she does not belong in the country yet does not recognize that she, too, lives there for the wealth and power that her husband has left for her.

Lastly, as the narrator, Grace is simultaneously outside of the action of the story as well as deeply involved in the telling of the story. The reader is forced to wonder about the qualities and actions that Grace leaves out about herself. She tells us that she has never met someone who lives a quite so unexamined life as Charlotte, yet she tells Charlotte's story as a mask for telling her own (112). In a moment of self-examination, Grace boasts that she prides herself on listening and seeing, that she hears because she "always listens" (243, 240). Grace is not even capable of examining her own life properly because although she prides herself on seeing and listening, she is not able to capture narrative truth of Charlotte, of herself or of Boca Grande. Moreover, she does not know whose story she is telling or the question she is attempting to answer. Subsequently, Grace exposes another conflict in the novel by asking which position is more effective: ignorance or false examination.

At first Grace refuses to admit her likeness to Charlotte; "one thing at least I share with Charlotte: I lost my child" (20). Grace insists that she is not similar to Charlotte by saying, "I revised my impressions to coincide with reality. Charlotte did the reverse" (195). After denying her similarity to Charlotte, the characters stories become increasingly difficult to separate. We start to see their stories merge when Grace tells Charlotte that one day it might be possible to consider her presence as "political" (198). The connection does not appear until later in the text when Leonard comes to save Charlotte from an "empty revolution" and Grace tells him, "I don't want you to think I'm involved here" (249, 243). Her response is chillingly similar to Charlotte's: "Actually it doesn't involve me in the least" (198). Grace does not revise her impression to coincide with reality. Instead, her privilege in telling the story allows her to manipulate the story to fit her conceptions.

Thus, Grace's democratic ability to tell the story and change the story to escape her self-hatred becomes the reason for Grace's mental collapse in the end. She finally begins to

admit their similarities: "It occurred to me that my attempt to grow roses and a lawn at the equator was a delusion worthy of Charlotte Douglas" (206). She continues, "I am more like Charlotte than I thought" (268). Finally, Grace discloses the hatred of herself in relation to the privilege of democracy, "Today we are clearing some coastal groves by slash-and-burn and a pall of smoke hangs over Boca Grande. The smoke obscures the light. You will notice my use of the colonial pronoun, the overseer's 'we.' (271). She becomes the overseer to the country of slaves to the colonial project and the overseer of the text; she holds the whip and controls the way the land and the story are formed. Grace admits to the lie, "I am less and less certain that this story has been one of delusion. Unless the delusion was mine" (272). Her admittance that she has not been true to the story, not the "witness[sh]e wanted to be," saves this character at the same time that it breaks her down.

Grace's privilege is responsible for her mental collapse and forces her to ask if it is possible to fix. At the same time, her recognition of her unwarranted criticism becomes the satisfaction that the reader is looking for. The humility and humanity that Grace proves at the end of this text is the achievement that readers search for in Marlow at the end of *Heart of Darkness*. Moral truth has not been found nor have we reached the center, but the teller of the lie has recognized her privilege in telling the lie itself. Grace's recognition of her ignorance alone ultimately leaves the narrative on a hopeful note and saves her from the same criticism that she gave Charlotte and possibly her own death.

Grace and Marlow both have the ability to take ownership of stories that are not theirs. Marlow tells us, "I was to have the care of [Kurtz's] memory. I've done enough for it to give me the indisputable right to lay it, if I choose for an everlasting rest in the dustbin of progress" (50). Grace is Charlotte's witness. Both characters go through similar experiences throughout their respective stories. Grace is arguably a rewrite of Marlow, but with higher stakes. We can examine this through three main stages of development: both tell stories to fit their conceptions of the world, they then realize that they have become (the same as the figure they despise), and then admit to the lie they believe to be true of themselves. As a result, the reader struggles to identify which, if either character is redeemed in the end.

Grace accuses Charlotte in *A Book of Common Prayer* of the unacceptable personality that she fears she possesses as well. In the conclusion, however she is able to turn the indictment inward and produce a sense that she has begun to see what she could not see in herself before. Marlow's intentions are no different. He is assigned to go to the center of the jungle to find a man who has voided social convention and let his natural, savage urges consume him. We get the sense of his fear of Kurtz's project from the start of his tale: "The utter savagery had closed round him – all that mysterious life of the wilderness that stirs in the forest, in the jungles, in the hearts of wild men... He has to live in the midst of the incomprehensible which is also detestable" (6). The all-consuming nature of the jungle's darkness can take over the minds of proper citizens of the Empire becomes a major trope in the book, another example of the relationship of the center to the periphery. As we navigate further through the text, we realize how intrigued Marlow becomes with the Kurtzian influence and how he is affected by it. He later explains, upon entering the jungle, "I remembered the old doctor – 'It would be interesting for science to watch the mental changes of individuals on the spot.' I felt I was becoming scientifically interesting" (20). Not a month into the trip, Marlow begins to give into the Kurtzian condition; his fear of becoming like Kurtz is already turning into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Grace and Marlow have both been sent to their respective mysterious, unreadable character to use their likeness to said character to appeal to his or her interests in order to remove their influence. Marlow is sent to investigate the death of a Captain yet his journey becomes a quest to gain Kurtz's trust and destroy him. Marlow hears much lore of Kurtz before he even meets him. The accountant tells him, "In the interior you will no doubt meet Mr. Kurtz. He is a first class agent and a very remarkable person. Sends in as much ivory as all the others put together" (19). Without even meeting him, Marlow is encouraged to admire Kurtz as a member of the Empire and look up to him as a mentor. When he finally arrives at Kurtz's camp, the Russian tells him that "you don't talk to that man, you listen to him... This man has enlarged my mind" (54). Furthermore, Marlow is also convinced that he has been instructed to be loyal to Kurtz, his chosen nightmare by those who sent him on the mission (64). In a way, Marlow's inevitable collapse was made just like Kurtz, contributed to by "all Europe" (49).

Meanwhile, Marlow attempts to remain true to his English nature, full of restraint and notions of progress. This is the same mentality that Grace and Charlotte are hated for in Boca Grande. Marlow talks of colonialist violence:

The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it... and an unselfish belief in the idea – something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to. (7)

Here, we see the origins of Grace and Charlotte's privilege. Marlow exhibits the same privilege that he believes will protect him from the evils of the dark jungle. The ideas of progress, development, idealism, et cetera can ease the burden of random violence towards innocent people. This is a very safe position to be looking into the darkness from, once he is exposed to this evil, however, it becomes much more difficult for him to control his wild urges free of consequence.

It is at this point in the story where Marlow and Kurtz's relationship becomes blurry, just like Grace and Charlotte's characters begin to run together. Marlow fears Kurtz for his "unlawful soul [that goes] beyond the bounds of permitted aspirations" (65). He also begins to criticize Kurtz's letters for being much better constructed before "his nerves went wrong" at the same time, Marlow's narrative is crumbling (50). Marlow then gives us contradicting opinions of Kurtz. He describes Kurtz's writing as "eloquent and noble" then tells us that he is a "tree swayed in the wind" (51). Later we find out that Kurtz is incredibly intelligent yet terribly mad (66). Here, 'the idea' is beginning to lose its potency.

The immediate cause for Marlow's transformation into Kurtz is his arrival at Kurtz's camp, the very appearance of the camp reflects the gradual degradation caused by uncertainty that Marlow is about to experience, "There was no enclosure or fence of any kind, but there had been one apparently, for near the house half a dozen slim posts remained in a row, roughly trimmed, and with their upper ends ornamented with [heads]" (52). Once he enters the camp, Marlow is subjecting himself to the influence of Kurtz. He is so deep into the jungle and too invested in the project to abandon it now. He reacts with "moral shock" to his actions yet defends Kurtz and takes on his story to tell to the rest of the world. He says, "Alright, Mr. Kurtz's reputation is safe with me. I did not know how truly I spoke" (62). He

could not possibly understand that when confronted with the responsibility of telling this story, that of Kurtz and his own, he would not be able to tell it truthfully. Marlow is the only person who knows the true story and he chose to tell it as a lie. Aside from his unreliable narrative, he also lies to Kurtz's intended. Also, he cannot know how true he was to say that Kurtz's reputation was safe with him because he has, in a sense, taken on Kurtz. When he returns to the city, he is filled with hatred for his fellow Europeans, "I found myself back in the sepulchral city resenting the sight of the people hurrying through the streets to filch a little money from each other, to devour their infamous cookery, to gulp their unwholesome beer, to dream their insignificant and silly dreams" (70). His former attitude of self determination, progress and idealism has changed to one of cynicism and anti-Empire. Because Kurtz has infected him so, as long as Marlow lives, he will carry the Kurtzian reputation with him.

Marlow is dishonest when Kurtz's intended asks him for his last words. For him, the idea behind the lie redeems him. He believes that telling the lie would hurt the girl too much, so, in an effort to shield her he lies which hurts the girl rather than protects her. Kurtz goes to the jungle and instead of colonizing the savages, he becomes one of them. The Manager tells Marlow, "Kurtz has done more harm than good to the Company. He did not see the time was not ripe for vigorous action. Cautiously. Cautiously. That's my principle...Upon the whole, the trade will suffer" (61). Marlow recreates the work of Kurtz in relation to his intended. The lie becomes a metaphor for colonialism. Marlow tells the story of colonialism as a lie. Kurtz and Marlow had intentions that were not carried out which harms each party involved: the Africans are encouraged of savagery by an Englishman who could not control his urges, the Empire is undermined by the failed missions and by Marlow's metaphorical renouncement of it, and the intended is lied to as a fool. Marlow admits to the lie and his participation in the telling of the lie yet turns the lie outward onto colonialism, the bigger system that has corrupted him not into himself. This is why the stakes are higher for Grace. She turns the lie inward in order to reexamine herself, how she is a *part of* the system, not merely a *product*. Marlow will continue to live in Kurtz's reputation and ignorance until he dies. While Grace navigates and compromises with the horror, Marlow chooses to ignore it. Grace is susceptible to more torture yet has more hope for a more contented future.

Although each character's participation in the story is, in itself, a political act, each character navigates the privilege differently. Charlotte and Marlow both choose ignorance. Their stories consist of weakness and unawareness. Grace's story, however, has a different ending. She emerges wracked with guilt and understanding that she must change, or else, she is exactly like Charlotte, the object of her disgust. Hope is lost for Charlotte and Marlow but Grace is still capable of redemption. It may have been impossible, even with the privilege they were granted, for these characters to penetrate the heart of the darkness but Grace's humanity, in the end, is the only way to find satisfaction at the end of these unreadable reports.

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Shakespeare's Shylock: The Enthusiastic Fanatic >>> Hannah Biggs

William Shakespeare is undoubtedly regarded as one of the best playwrights and poets of the English language. His plays have enraptured viewers and readers for ages with their three-dimensional characters, exquisite language, and accurate portrayals of human emotion, morality, and fallacy. Shakespeare gave incredible attention to the development of his characters; he made his characters' struggles, inner turmoil, happiness, and expressions of love easy to identify with, even for readers and viewers today. The emotions of Shakespeare's characters are so potent that one cannot but help to identify with the characters' fictional struggles and joys. Such a timeless, potent character is Shylock from *The Merchant of Venice*. Despite many critics' claims that Shylock is Shakespeare's embodiment of the amoral, devilish Jew of 16th century Europe, few of these critics have defended that Shakespeare wrote Shylock's character as an insight into the emotional struggles of a Jew facing prejudice, emotional abuse, and intense hatred from England's powerful, preeminent Christians. Shakespeare gives Shylock's character incredible depth—depth which lends insight into an altered mental state directing his actions, reactions, and skewed sense of morality. A closer psychoanalytical reading of Shylock's behavior reveals that Shylock suffers from the so-called "intellectual defect" known as fanaticism (Passmore 213). Although Shakespeare would not have been aware of the actual classification and naming of such a psychological defect (Freud, Jung, Lacan, and Horney developed their theories long after Shakespeare's death), Shakespeare was aware of human behavior and tendencies, behaviors he explored so well in this and other plays. The intense hatred Shylock feels from society and other characters because of his 'Jewishness' spurns this fanatic behavior that embodies itself in his intense hatred of Christians, his obsessive desire for revenge against Antonio, his narrow-minded fixation on acquiring and sustaining wealth, the inability to feel sympathy for others' struggles around him, and his insistent, passionate identification with his Jewish people.

First, what is fanaticism? The modern-day definition varies between psychologists, sociologist, and philosophers. However, in order to give an accurate definition of this altered intellectual, emotional, and mental state, one must take into the account the historical context from which the term was first coined. The word, "originally introduced into English ... to describe the Puritan sectaries, [has] its root in the Latin 'fanum,' meaning a place consecrated to a deity. From this the Romans themselves derived 'fanaticus' as originally meaning 'inspired'—the 'god-possessed' ... but later coming to mean 'wild' or 'frenzied' through its association with the worship of Cybele and Isis" (Passmore 215). Therefore, obsessive adherence to a religious dogma is a critical component of fanatical behavior.

But, to give a more succinct definition of fanaticism, one must understand that "'enthusiasm' and 'fanaticism' ... were for a time, synonyms." John Locke explains this overlap in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Passmore 211). Knowing this, psychoanalytical critics of Shylock's behavior must also look at dated documents describing the phenomenon of enthusiasm with an understanding that it is essentially the same disorder as today's fanati-

cism. Today, the best definition for fanaticism is a merging of enthusiasm's and fanaticism's definitions. The "Shorter Oxford Dictionary...defines 'fanaticism' as 'excessive enthusiasm, especially in religious matters'" (Passmore 212). In addition, this dictionary defines 'enthusiasm' as "'rapturous intensity of feeling on behalf of a person, cause, etc'" (Passmore 211). Therefore, "we must conclude that 'fanaticism' is an 'excessive degree of rapturous intensity'" (Passmore 212). Furthermore, "Scriber's Dictionary [says] a fanatic is a person who is 'wildly extravagant in opinion or views, as with religion or politics.' This makes it look, at least, as if fanaticism is an intellectual defect" (Passmore 212). John Passmore of Australian National University collected the above definitions to create his own definition of fanaticism. This definition is the most concise, clear definition of the disorder. He concludes that "fanaticism does involve an intellectual defect ... [and] a fanatic can be best described as a person who has a one-track mind ... [,] a person who, when the question at issue is what to be done, always takes into account only one type of interest, one kind of consideration" (Passmore 213). Shylock, in reference to his obsession with revenge; his absoluteness in his Jewish faith and subsequent hatred for Christians; his narrow-mindedness; and lack of sympathy, empathy, or pity for others classifies him as such a fanatic.

Fanaticism is characterized by unique symptoms and behaviors, many of which Shylock exhibit to a tee. At the most basic level, fanaticism is characterized by "a cluster of phenomena ... built on four basic properties, [sic] which can be summarized as 'extremism', 'externalization', 'opposition' and 'dogmatism'" (Goka). Shylock exhibits these four properties, all of which stem from the negative social conditions of hatred surrounding him.

Extremism is exhibited in Shylock's intense desire for the "pound of flesh" as repayment for the debt Antonio owes him. Rather than take Bassanio's money as repayment for the debt, an amount of money greater than the amount originally owed, Shylock exhibits *extremist* behavior by demanding flesh rather than monetary payment, a demand that seems extreme and unmerciful to the court. He is resolute that he wants the "pound of flesh" and tells the court, "You'll ask me why I rather choose to have // A weight of carrion flesh than to receive // Three thousand ducats. I'll not answer that; // But say it is my humor, is it answer'd?" (IV. i. 40-44). Shylock has been ill-treated by Christians for so long that he wants nothing more than to fulfill revenge against one of his biggest bullies, Antonio.

Furthermore, this court scene also exhibits the second property of fanaticism: *externalization*. When Shylock demands the flesh repayment, he thinks he is blameless in his desire to avenge his debt and that everyone else is wrong (and breaking terms of the contract) for chastising his actions or denying him his prize.

Thirdly, he exhibits *opposition* to the Christians around him through the potent, powerful emotion of revenge. He has an "inchoate impulse towards revenge which events, unexpectedly, transform into a real possibility" (Barton 285). Revenge is one of the most powerful forms of opposition, and Shylock takes his terms of revenge to extreme, murderous intentions. In his mind, such revengeful thoughts are at par with the hatred Christians have expressed against him. Yes, the Christians have been terrible to him, but his inability to feel mercy for the obviously emotionally-strained Antonio and Bassanio furthers the idea that Shylock is perpetually stuck in a mode of *opposition*.

Lastly, the fourth property, *dogmatism*, is easy to cite from the text. Shylock's feverous dedication to the Jewish faith produces a hatred of all other religions, namely Christianity. He refuses to have any personal, intimate relationship with the 'devilish' Christians and

says of them that “[He] will buy with [them], sell with [them], talk with [them], walk with [them], and so following; but [he] will not eat with [them], drink with [them], nor pray with [them]” (I. ii. 32-37). Comingling with Christians is beyond contempt and indicates that even associating with others of a ‘lesser’ faith is distasteful and heinous.

In addition, “C. G. Jung ... sees fanaticism as the ‘brother of doubt,’ as an overcompensated inner doubt. The more alarming the doubt, the more often it makes itself heard, the more compulsively it is repressed, and the more violent can become the affirmations and professions of the value and, above all, the more intense will be the defense against all attacks from the outside since these activate the inner doubt ... it is simply a resistance from the outside, the compulsion to prevail against a hostile environment, which requires fanatic intensity as resultant attribute” (Rudin 56-57). Shylock has faced years of hatred and “is an alien in a society whose religion, pleasures, aims, and attitudes are radically different from his own” (Barton 285). Years of such hatred and hurtful jests must have impacted his psyche. He must have, at one point or another, doubted his faith, culture, and ethnic origins. At times, it must have been tempting to give up his miser ways, characteristics which identified him with his ‘Jewishness,’ or recede into self-absorbed solitude. The fact that Shylock still remains in Venice, Italy is a wonder in of itself, as “Jews had been officially banished from England [a land not far from Venice] for three centuries, since the reign of Edward I” (Barton 284). But, he does not retract into solitude or leave for more a more hospitable nation with more welcoming people; he remains outwardly dedicated to his Jewish faith, his trade, and Venice. Nevertheless, doubt in his decision to stay and face more ridicule cannot be quieted so easily. His decision to be outwardly Jewish would constantly plague him. But, instead of letting his emotions manifest into an action to quit the terrible world he has found himself in, he turns to fanatical, tyrannical, violent behavior as a type of compensation.

One of the defining characteristics of the fanatic is that “[he/she] is proud of [his/her] differences and often withdraw so far as [he/she] can from the world ... because it is inhabited by the unenlightened” (Passmore 218). Although Shylock has not withdrawn from the marketplace, Venice, or society in general, he does withdraw from interactions with other Venetians, namely Christian Venetians. The fanatic “sees in tolerance a sign [sic] of weakness, frivolity, and ignorance” (Hoffer 87). Such withdrawal is exhibited when Bassanio invites Shylock to dine with them, and Shylock responds, “to smell pork, to eat of the habitation which your prophet the Nazarite conjur’d the devil into [I will not do]” (I. ii. 32). Not only is this an affirmation of the property of *dogmatism*, as mentioned earlier, but it also defends the idea that Shylock, in his fanatic state, has no desire to repair broken relationships with the Christians. He sees agreeing to their invitation as a kind of tolerance for their behavior towards him and his people, something that would show signs of “weakness, frivolity, and ignorance” in his character. Assimilating himself into the world of Christians is not an act he, the fanatic, wishes to pursue.

Fanaticism also “takes away both reason and revelation, and substitutes in the room of them the ungrounded fancies of a man’s own brain, and assumes them for a foundation both of opinions and conduct” (Locke). These “ungrounded fancies” are Shylock’s steadfast obsession for his desire for revenge, a desire that becomes the “foundation both of [his] opinions and conduct.” When Shylock talks of his right to enact revenge against Antonio, “there is no ease or warmth or levity [in his speeches;] [Shylock] hammers out his phrases and can find no way of varying them once they are uttered ... It is the utterance of

a man whose mind is concentrated, obsessed, focused upon a narrow range of fixed ideas [of revenge]. Shylock ha[s] the trick of compulsive repetition characteristic of the man in whom imagination, such as it is, forever sits on brood” (Palmer 417). Shylock’s mind sits on this “brood[ing]” hope for revenge, and the “stubborn logic of his mind still enables him to confound his enemies by justifying his own practice from a Christian example,” one that begs mercy of him (Palmer 433). Rather than embody the Christian characteristic of mercy, he rebukes Portia’s pleas to be merciful, and says, “On what compulsion must I? tell me that” (IV. i. 181-182). Shylock wants nothing more than flesh in his crazed, vengeful state of mind, and his fanatical obsessive wish for such flesh cannot be quelled.

The idea of revenge repeats itself multiple times throughout this play in “those stubborn, reiterated appeals to his bond of a man possessed by a single thought expressed in a phrase that has become almost an incantation” (Palmer 418). This incantation is evident in the famous “Hath not a Jew eyes?” speech:

He [Antonio] hath disgrace’d me, and hind’red me half a million, laugh’d at my losses, mock’d at my gains, scorn’d my nation, thwarted my bargains, cool’d my friends, heated mine enemies and what’s his reason? I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions; fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, heal’d by the same means, warm’d and cool’d by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall not we revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. If a Jew wronged a Christian, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why, revenge. The villainy you teach me, I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction. (III. i. 54-73)

Unlike other scholars who say it “sounds like a plea for charity, ... [if] taken in its context, however, it is something less, and at the same time something more. Shylock’s theme is not charity but revenge. He will have Antonio’s flesh ... Thus, what is commonly received as Shylock’s plea for tolerance is in reality his justification for an inhuman purpose” (Palmer 427). Yes, this speech evokes readers’ or viewers’ sympathy for Shylock, but it “reveals a mind so intensely concentrated upon itself, so constricted in its operation [in efforts to get revenge], that it can only express itself in repetitions of a rhythmic, almost hypnotic, quality....Neither in logic [n]or passion can Shylock be assailed” (Palmer 419-420). The fact that he says, “if a Jew wronged a Christian, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why, revenge” furthers the idea that even though he might want respect from his fellow Venetians despite his ‘Jewishness,’ all he can focus on now is the idea he has a right to revenge. Thus, Shylock the fanatic “victim grow[s] more ludicrous as he becomes more poignantly enslaved to his obsession” (Palmer 426).

Furthermore, Shylock believes he has a heaven-bestowed right to demand such flesh. This belief in a divine-endowed purpose is characteristic of the fanatic. Fanatic men are individuals “in whom melancholy has mixed with devotion, or whose conceit themselves has raised them into an opinion of a greater familiarity with God, and a nearer admittance to his favor than is afforded to others” (Locke). Shylock can back up his quest for revenge from Old Testament scripture, the basis of his faith-led life. In Deuteronomy, chapter 19, verses 16-21,

laws of rightful vengeance are discussed:

¹⁶If a malicious witness comes forward to accuse someone of wrongdoing, ¹⁷then both parties to the dispute shall appear before the Lord, before the priests and the judges who are in office in those day, ¹⁸and the judges shall make a thorough inquiry. If the witness is a false witness, having testified falsely against another, ¹⁹then you shall do the false witness just as the false witness had meant to do to the other. So you shall purge the evil from your midst. ²⁰The rest shall hear and be afraid, and a crime such as this shall never be committed among you. ²¹Show no pity: life for life: eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.

Here we see the famous “eye for eye, tooth for tooth” line. In Shylock’s fanatic mind, the loss of wealth (because of Antonio’s inability to repay his debt) is equal to the loss of life, so he wishes to take the life of Antonio. Money and the acquisition of it *is* Shylock’s life, livelihood, and means of sustenance. When his wealth and estate are taken from him at the end of the play, he proclaims in sobering emotion, “You take my house when you do take the prop // That doth sustain my house; you take my life // When you do take the means whereby I live” (IV. i. 375-337). Thus, to Shylock, the inability to lend out more loans is equal to the loss of life. But, in regards to Shylock’s belief in his heaven-endowed rights, he firmly believes his demand for the “pound of flesh” is justified under Biblical law. Fanatic “men[,] being most forwardly obedient to the impulses they receive from themselves ... [,reap justification for said impulses that are] heightened into a divine authority, in concurrence with [his] own temper and inclination” (Locke). So, Shylock justifies his contractual, Biblical rights for a fleshy repayment and consequent death of Antonio because of his fanatical sense that his quest is directed by divine, Old Testament authority.

Along this idea of a fanatic’s obsessive tendencies, Shylock also exhibits an obsession with money and other signs of wealth. Unlike other, un-fanatical men around him, “Shylock cannot see the human losses he has sustained apart from their economic consequences” (Barton 285). When he speaks “of Jessica’s elopement, he constantly confuses the material with the personal loss, ducats with daughters, in a fashion more grotesque than pathetic” (Barton 285). He cannot distinguish the emotional loss of his daughter, his only living relation since his wife Leah’s passing, from the loss of gold, jewelry, and other wealth Jessica took with her when she ran away from home. His grief is a twisted assimilation of mourning his daughter’s betrayal and the loss of wealth she took with her when he says “a diamond gone, cost me two thousand ducats in Frankford! ... Two thousand ducats in that, and other precious, precious jewels. I would my daughter were dead at my foot, and the jewels in her ear!” (III. i. 82-89). This quotation shows the obvious importance he places on physical embodiments of wealth, such as jewelry, above human relationships. He would rather see his daughter dead at his feet than have to worry about losing wealth again. Also, one cannot forget that his very first words in the play are, “Three thousand ducats, well,” a comment obviously focused on the business of money and money lending (I. iii. 1). Such obsessive tendencies are characteristic of fanaticism, and the lack of emotional turmoil over his daughter’s running away and the loss of wealth she took with her is evidence of his disorder.

Additionally, another defining symptom of fanaticism is the inability to feel any emotion other than those centered on the fanatic’s obsession(s). Josef Rudin, one of the leading experts on fanatical behavior says “fanatic intensity is clearly designated: intelligence and

instinct, with the absence of the middle layer, namely of the psychic, the empathetic, and the feelings" (40). Shylock has an intense perversion to forgiving Antonio his debt, showing mercy for others' sufferings, or identifying with others' sadness, namely Bassiano's and Antonio's when Antonio faces certain death at the tip of Shylock's knife blade. "Shylock will have nothing to do with the essentially Christian quality of generosity" (Barton 286) and cannot arouse a sense of mercy, a quality "above this sceptred sway, // It is enthroned in the hearts of kings, // It is an attribute to God himself; // And earthly power doth then show likest God // When mercy seasons justice" (IV. i. 193-197). Instead, Shylock the fanatic "'[inds] it difficult to understand the opinion of someone else. He d[oes] not have the capacity of identifying with another person[,] and he rashly consider[s] alien ideas devilish'" (Rudin 32-34). He cannot identify with the opinion that he should forgive Antonio nor can he sympathize with the fears and sadness surrounding the situation. He also cannot identify with the Christian concept of forgiveness and generosity because they are devilish opinions of someone else.

All of the above symptoms of fanaticism assert that Shylock is a prime example of a fanatic. John Passmore, a philosopher, says "the difference between the fanatic and the non-fanatic is that the 'non-fanatical ... although they take one issue to be of predominant importance, are ready to admit that other factors have to be taken into account'" (Passmore 216). Shylock does not take "other factors ... into account." He is steadfast in his prejudices against Christians, his obsessive desire for revenge, his absolute belief in his divine-endowed Jewish faith, his court rights that arise from Biblical law, and his fixated fascination on the acquisition of wealth. Thus, it can be concluded: Shylock suffers from fanaticism.

But, how does Shylock become subject to such an intellectual disorder? Surely this does not arise out of 'thin-air?' No; rather, Shylock develops this disorder because of the prejudices, hatred, and harmful social conditions he, a Jew, faces on a day-to-day basis. Shylock is "treated as something inhuman, a 'dog' of 'cur,' [so] Shylock not unnaturally responds when the opportunity presents itself, with tooth and claw," actions that characterize him as a fanatic (Barton 285). Shylock faces awful verbal abuse; he is called "old carrion" (III. i. 31-2), a "damn'd, inexcusable dog" (IV. i. 126-128), a "devil [who] can cite Scripture for his purpose. // An evil soul proclaiming holy witness // ... a villain with a smiling check, // A goodly apple rotten at the heart. // O, what a goodly apple rotten at the heart" (I. iii. 98-101), and a "wolf // ... [who] hath made the ewe bleak for the lamb" (IV. i. 73-74). With such constant berating, how could he not resort to such fanatical behaviors? His altered psychology is fostered by the angry social conditions surround him. He is a product of his society, a fanatical product that he could hardly help becoming. Shylock's psychological defect was bound to develop.

In an attempt to shelter himself from insistent hatred, Shylock resorts to fanatical support of his faith against all odds. Eric Hoffer claims "the fanatic is perpetually incomplete and insecure. He cannot generate self-assurance out of his individual resources—out of his rejected self [a rejected Jew in the eyes of the dominant Christians]—but finds it only by clinging passionately to whatever support [system] he happens to embrace ... The fanatic cannot be weaned away from his cause by an appeal to his reason or moral sense. He fears compromise and cannot be persuaded to qualify for the certitude and righteousness of his holy cause" (Hoffer 85). This holy cause is the defense of his faith, even though he, as mentioned earlier, cannot be persuaded to adhere to the morality of Jewish faith and show sympathy towards Antonio. But, Shylock cannot defend his faith alone; he learns to shield himself behind the safety of the Jewish people. Thus, kinship is fostered by the oppressor(s)

that results in camaraderie within a group of oppressed group of individuals. This kinship of great importance to the insecure fanatic, and “to share a common hatred, with an enemy even, is to infect him with a feeling of kinship” (Hoffer 92). Shylock exhibits this comradeship when he says, “Cursed be my tribe // If I forgive him!” (I. iii. 51-52). He relies on identifying himself with his fellow Jews, and this camaraderie leads him to defend his faith not only on his own behalf but also for the Jewish people. Identifying oneself with a collective is a common theme among fanatics, one which Shylock exhibits in the play.

Now that it has been asserted Shylock suffers from fanaticism, one must wonder: did Shakespeare make a conscious choice to portray Shylock as such a mentally-anguished character? Avid viewers/readers of Shakespeare know that Shakespeare endows incredibly potent, accurate human emotion on his characters. Shylock is no exception. Shakespeare gives the viewers/readers reason to feel pity for Shylock, the mentally-disturbed fanatic, much in contrast to what other 16th century playwrights do for their Jewish characters. Unlike other contemporary plays about Jews in Shakespeare’s time, Shakespeare’s Shylock is different from the other popular Jew in theatre: Christopher Marlowe’s Jew from *The Jew of Malta*. Anne Barton says, “in contrast to Barabas [of *The Jew of Malta*], Shylock is a closely observed human being, not a bogeyman to frighten children in the nursery” (285). Shakespeare gives Shylock depth to allow us to see his emotional and mental turmoil. He wrote Shylock as a *human* character, with human emotions and tendencies towards madness, much in contrast to the *subhuman*, ‘*other*’ status other playwrights of the time bestowed on their Jewish characters. Many critics assert that yes, “Shakespeare set out to write a comedy about a stage Jew involved in a grotesque story about a pound of flesh. But Shylock, to satisfy the author, must seem to act as a recogni[z]ably human being would behave in the given circumstances and Shakespeare has *humani[z]ed* him to such good purpose that this comic Jew has become for many brilliant and sensitive critics, a moving, almost tragic, figure,” one whom viewers and readers come to sympathize with and understand (Palmer 414).

Also, modern-day performances are beginning to recognize Shakespeare’s intentions to create sympathy and understanding for Shylock’s character. In the most recent stage revival of *The Merchant of Venice*, Al Pacino plays Shylock. *The New York Times* said “Mr. Pacino avoids the classic characterizations of Shylock as either devil or martyr. His interpretation ... starts with the ritualistic, tight-smiling manner that Shylock adopts for business dealings. But, we’re always conscious ... of the turmoil beneath the mannerisms. Shylock has spent his entire life cataloguing sneers of contempt and slurs against Jews; that he will explode is beyond doubt” (Brantley). Although the director of this revival probably would not pair fanaticism to explain Shylock’s turmoil as I have done, he at least directs Pacino to portray Shylock as a more human character with intense turmoil and mental anguish that will “explode” in violent, vengeful desires, harsh language, and unmerciful mannerisms—an explosion that mimics the explosions of fanatics.

After a close psychoanalytical reading of *The Merchant of Venice*, one concludes that Shylock suffers from the ‘intellectual disorder’ known as fanaticism. This disorder develops out of the hurtful, hateful social conditions in which he finds himself and leads to fanatical behavior that embodies itself in intense hatred of Christians, obsessive desire for revenge against Antonio, narrow-minded fixation on acquiring and sustaining wealth, the inability to feel sympathy for others’ struggles around him, and insistent, passionate identification with his Jewish people. Shakespeare, one of the greatest portrayers of human emotion,

made a conscious decision to give Shylock's character more depth than other playwrights allowed their Jewish characters, thereby allowing the viewer or reader to feel pity for Shylock and develop an understanding for the mentally-ill, enthusiastic, fanatic Shylock. Shylock is a tragic character in a comedic play, but his tragic altered mental-state is one which lends insight into the social conditions surrounding the time Shakespeare wrote. The suffering Jew is conditioned to react just as Shylock has done, with the development of the defect known as fanaticism.

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An Implicit Ethics >>> Zach Hopper

"I've worried some about why write books when Presidents and Senators and generals do not read them, and the university experience taught me a very good reason: you catch people before they become generals and Senators and Presidents, and you *poison their minds with humanity*. Encourage them to make a better world" (author's emphasis Bryan 5).

—Kurt Vonnegut

An Implicit Ethics

Over the course of his literary career, Kurt Vonnegut has subtly built an ethics centered on the notion of common decency. But despite the fact that he advocates this position in most of his novels, short stories, interviews and speeches, his ethics has been largely overlooked by scholars.¹ Todd Davis, in *Kurt Vonnegut's Crusade*, notes that "To date, only a small number of book critics have mentioned Vonnegut's desire to enact social change, and even fewer academic critics have examined Vonnegut's moral posturing" (140). Maybe this is because Vonnegut never explicitly states his ethical viewpoint in his works, but rather articulates it through his characters and their situations, making it difficult to identify a coherent system of ethics without a working knowledge of his canon.² Furthermore, critics have labeled him as a science fiction writer since his first novel was published in 1952, which identifies his work as something separate from—and inferior to—literature proper. Despite longstanding critical attention to Vonnegut, which continues today, his use of science fiction conventions and his recurring interest in questions of technology have caused many scholars to classify him as a writer of genre fiction and thus not as a serious literary figure.³ But perhaps the greatest obstacle readers face in trying to understand Vonnegut's ethics is that we do not really know what common decency is—a point that Vonnegut himself made and criticized time and again in his novels.

Common decency, it turns out, is not really all that common. If it were, then Vonnegut would not spill so much ink imploring us to embrace it as an ethical principle. In our everyday speech, we often use the term as a synonym for kindness, but this cannot be the definition in Vonnegut's case because the notion of kindness alone certainly is not sufficient to ground an ethics. A principle of kindness to others as the sole proviso of an ethical system oversimplifies morality, as it divides moral actions into those that are kind or unkind. This would commit us to saying things like 'murder is unkind' and 'self-sacrifice is kind,' when clearly these actions have a moral gravity that cannot be accounted for by appeal to a principle of kindness. Morality, it seems, is far too complex to be dissected in terms of mere kindness. Broad though it may be, the maxim 'be kind to others' excludes several important virtues—e.g. honesty, charity, courage and tolerance—that we value and consider essential to any account of ethics or morality. Equally problematic is attempting to define common decency by breaking down the term into its two constituent parts. 'Common' assumes the inherence of or capability for decency—whatever its definition may be—to humans, which is a very broad claim that, based on our experiences, we may have good reason to doubt. And 'decency,' whether it means kindness, adequacy, respect or something else altogether, does not seem like a good foundation for an ethical system on its own (for the same reasons as listed above for kindness), and hardly seems to be common in any sense of the word. Moreover, the notion of common decency is not action-guiding, which

is a necessary characteristic of any good ethical system. So what exactly does Vonnegut mean by common decency?

To answer this question, I will analyze Vonnegut's novel *Player Piano* and show how his ethics of common decency emerges through a critical reading of this text. My focus is to explore how Vonnegut's fiction teaches readers about common decency as an ethical principle and to elucidate the implicit ethics within his work. Understanding this didactic aspect of his work may provide new ways of reading his novels and shed light on what he hoped to achieve by disseminating his ethics through his fiction. Furthermore, I aim to construct a coherent picture of Vonnegut's ethics of common decency and discuss several relevant aspects of his personal philosophy that will help contextualize the notion of common decency. The end result will be an explicit articulation of Vonnegut's ethics, one that I hope will grant us a better understanding of his life and works, popularize his notion of common decency, and spur an interest in his moral views among scholars. In other words, it is time to take Vonnegut seriously.

Facades and Fictions: The Constructedness of Truth

Never one for moral certainty or objective truths, Vonnegut at once offers his ethics as a possible solution to the problems we face as humans, while at the same time he points toward the marionette strings that are attached to his own view. Although he is committed to an ethics of common decency, he admits that it is but one of the myriad fictions that we construct. However, for Vonnegut artificiality is not a problem, especially if it can be used to improve our quality of life. In an interview with David Standish for *Playboy* in 1973, he says that

Everything is a lie, because our brains are two-bit computers, and we can't get very high-grade truths out of them. But as far as improving the human condition goes, our minds are certainly up to that. That's what they were designed to do. And we do have the freedom to make up comforting lies. But we don't do enough of it. (77)

For Vonnegut, comforting lies are necessary for us to deal with the evil in the world, to feel a sense of purpose and to better our situation. For him, the ends justify the means, so these sorts of lies are not much of a worry.⁴ Despite strongly believing in the ability of common decency to change the world, Vonnegut never claims that he has all the answers or that his ethical system is correct.⁵ He designed it as another comforting lie to join the ranks of the others in which we already believe. Of course, his novels, essays, and speeches are evidence that Vonnegut considered his ethics to be more than just a comforting lie to make people feel better, that in fact he thought his ethics could change things for the better. We can read in Vonnegut's work a sense of purpose to communicate his views to his readers and show through his novels how common decency could ameliorate the problems in American society and the world at large. All the same, Vonnegut also recognizes the subjectivity of his position and layers the fiction of common decency *within* the fictitious world of his novels so that his audience does not misconstrue it as a moral certainty.

By acknowledging the constructedness of his own ethical view, Vonnegut avoids the absolutism that he believes plagues many of our institutions today. Religions and governments in particular deal in truths which, as is evidenced by his novels, are mere cat's cradles—intricately assembled facades that look solid but, upon closer inspection, are revealed to be substanceless.⁶ However, this in itself is not a problem for Vonnegut, as he admits in an interview with Wilfred Sheed for *Life* in 1969: "People need good lies. There are too many bad ones" (12). Vonnegut's

own ethical view is supposed to be a good lie, one that can help improve people's lives and address some of the issues they face. The problem, as he identifies in the interview, are the bad lies, i.e. those that cause people to do harm to one another and that masquerade as truth. The concept of biological racial differences is an example of a bad lie because not only does it breed hate and discrimination, but it also purports to be a concrete fact when in reality it is nothing more than a social construct. In the epigraph to *Cat's Cradle*, Vonnegut advises readers to "Live by the *foma*⁷ that make you brave and kind and healthy and happy" (viii). For many people, religion serves this purpose—as Vonnegut shows through the religion of Bokononism in *Cat's Cradle*—although it also has the potential for telling harmful untruths.⁸ Similarly, *Player Piano*'s Doctor Paul Proteus uses the *foma* told in fiction to escape the harsh reality of hyper-industrial America and to cope with his role as a cog in the great machine of society or, simply put, to make life more livable:

He was developing an appetite for novels wherein the hero lived vigorously and out-of-doors, dealing directly with nature, dependent upon basic cunning and physical strength for survival...he doubted that a life could ever be as clean, hearty, and satisfying as in those books. Still and all, there was a basic truth underlying the tales, a primitive ideal to which he could aspire. (137)

Ultimately, Vonnegut seeks to deconstruct truth in the hopes that his readers will embrace subjectivity. By realizing that most of what they consider to be objective truths are actually relative, people will be better able to distinguish between good and bad lies. This puts them in the position to eliminate those harmful untruths from their lives and commit to the *foma* that will help guide them through life.

Vonnegut's deconstruction of truth is apparent in each of his novels and is one of the defining themes that mark him as a postmodern author. Davis writes that "the exposure of modern metanarratives and the subsequent deconstruction of the illusory but controlling discourse that helps to propagate their myths of essential truth remain a consistent target for Vonnegut throughout his career" (17). But this is not to say that Vonnegut is skeptical of truth altogether. On the contrary, there are certain themes that recur throughout his work—the absurdity of the human condition, humankind's search and need for purpose, the necessity of taking care of ourselves and the planet, maybe even human reason—that indicate he has found some constants in the world. In *A Man Without a Country*, Vonnegut writes "You know, the truth can be really powerful stuff. We're not expecting it" (20). For him, it just so happens that one of the truths that we are not expecting is that truth is subjective. This is, perhaps, one of the reasons why readers are attracted to his work. They like Vonnegut because of his honesty, because with each novel he dismantles the beliefs that most people hold as foundational and exposes them as constructs. *Player Piano*, Vonnegut's first novel, began to build his fan base for this very reason. In it, Vonnegut attacks the peculiarly American notion that progress is inherently and necessarily good. In the section that follows, I will show how a reading of *Player Piano* illuminates several key tenets of Vonnegut's ethics of common decency, which he places in opposition to the narrative of progress and offers as a solution to the problems that ensue from an absolute commitment to this untruth.

Player Piano and the Rise of Common Decency

In *Player Piano*, Kurt Vonnegut introduces his ethics of common decency, which permeates the rest of his novels and transforms him from an unknown science fiction author

into “one of the most socially responsible writers of his generation” (*Kurt Vonnegut’s America* 4). Published in 1952, three years after Vonnegut began his literary career with a short story in *Collier’s Weekly* entitled “Report on the Barnhouse Effect,”⁹ *Player Piano* was heavily influenced by the author’s work in the industrial city of Schenectady, New York, where he was a publicist for General Electric.¹⁰ During his time there, Vonnegut wrote press releases for the company that, among other things, were intended to propagate and reinforce the idea that technological advancement is the key to a better future. It is this notion—what Davis refers to as “the American master narrative of progress”—that becomes the target of *Player Piano* and which Vonnegut seeks to deconstruct¹¹ (43). Scientific research has led to the development and use of technologies which have proven terribly destructive towards human life, all in the name of progress. For Vonnegut, creating more lethal ammunition and smarter, more destructive bombs can hardly be considered progress¹² and is certainly not consistent with the notion of common decency. So the denial and refutation of this narrative of progress is important for Vonnegut’s ethical theory because it allows him to both outline some of the features of common decency—kindness to others, collective responsibility for the actions of the human race, and a unity forged from the human condition—and show how this American obsession with progress conflicts with and even prevents the practice of an ethics of common decency.

In his conversation with Standish, Vonnegut expresses his worries about scientists who claim to be “simply unearthing truth” (70):

Many scientists were that way—and I’ve known a hell of a lot of them, because at General Electric, I was a PR man largely for the research laboratory...And back then, around 1949, they were all innocent, all simply dealing with truth and not worried about what might be done with their discoveries. (97)

In World War II, when Vonnegut survived the firebombing of Dresden by Allied forces—in which approximately 135,000 people died, making it “the largest single-event massacre in European history”—he saw firsthand how scientists’ discoveries were being put to use, and his disillusionment with technology and worries about morally indifferent scientists only increased with the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (*Kurt Vonnegut’s America* 4). However, Vonnegut does not directly engage with scientists or the scientific practice until *Cat’s Cradle* in 1963.¹³ *Player Piano*, on the other hand, is more narrowly focused on technological development and its misuses due to the circumstances surrounding Vonnegut in the late 1940s and early 1950s, as well as a result of his wartime experiences. His first novel is an attempt to show that America’s obsession with and reliance on mechanical progress is problematic and, if taken to its logical conclusion, will have dire consequences for the country’s future.¹⁴ Moreover, *Player Piano* lays the groundwork for Vonnegut’s ethics, defines several key aspects of common decency, and exemplifies how Vonnegut’s ethics operates as a moral principle in his novels.

Player Piano takes its title from the device of the same name, an automated piano that could be mass-produced. This is symbolic of humans being replaced by machines, which is the primary issue with which the text wrestles. Set in the United States of the future, sometime after the Second Industrial Revolution,¹⁵ the novel depicts a technologically advanced society where “almost all of American industry [is] integrated into one stupendous Rube Goldberg machine,” (5) and where “machines were doing America’s work far better than Americans had ever done it” (51). At the heart of the system is Epicac XIV, a massive supercomputer housed in Carlsbad Caverns that solves those problems too difficult for humans and controls almost every aspect of society, from calculating how many products need to be produced each year to satisfy the

demands of the American people to the standards of I.Q. and education that determine an individual's occupation, social status, and sense of self-worth. Although the machines did what they were ostensibly intended to do—make life easier and improve the quality of living—the cost is that most people are considered obsolete by the system, and their only job opportunity is to join either the Army or the Reconstruction and Reclamation Corps (the “Reeks and Wrecks”). There are some people who have not been replaced by machines, like bartenders and police officers, but only because machines do not yet exist that can perform those tasks efficiently. At the top of the social hierarchy are the engineers, the managers, and the research men responsible for running the country's plants and maintaining the smooth operation of the industrial system—the so-called “men at the head of the process of civilization, the openers of doors to undreamed-of new worlds” (221). Their faith in the system is matched only by their belief in the rightness of their actions and their desire to facilitate further progress. And yet, even among this core group of individuals, there are those who are dissatisfied with society's current situation.

Player Piano follows Doctor Paul Proteus, an engineer and the manager of the Ilium Works factory in Ilium, New York, whose father was one of the key figures in starting America's Second Industrial Revolution, as he loses faith in modern society and struggles to understand and cope with his disillusionment. Paul becomes increasingly frustrated with company politics and, like most people, feels that he does not have a purpose in life. These feelings are discovered and fostered by Paul's rebellious friend Doctor Ed Finnerty, a fellow engineer and manager whose discontent with the system drives him to quit his job and begin a life outside of it. At a bar in Homestead, the part of Ilium where the common people live, the two friends meet Reverend James Lasher, a minister with an anthropology degree and dreams for a future where humans are no longer alienated from one another by a paternalistic industrial system and where life is once again meaningful. Together they form the Ghost Shirt Society—named after the Ghost Shirts worn by Native Americans during their rebellion against white oppression—with the intention of rebelling against the machines. Paul is chosen to represent their rebel group, as his name is well-known and will help them gather the support necessary for their coup d'état, although Lasher remains the brains behind the operation. The Ilium Ghost Shirt Society establishes branches in all the major production cities in America, and on the scheduled date, the leaders of each branch rally their troops and revolt against the machines. However, the rebellions do not go as planned. Rebellions are swiftly quashed in most of the cities, while some failed to organize them entirely. After destroying some of the machines in Ilium, it becomes apparent that the masses do not want to replace the technocratic government, but are content to repair the broken machines because it restores their sense of purpose. With their attempts at usurpation having failed, the novel ends with the leaders of the Ilium Ghost Shirt Society turning themselves in to the authorities. Although defeated, Proteus, Finnerty, Lasher and the others regained their dignity and finally realized their purpose in life, and in so doing, they disturbed the equilibrium of the industrial system and exposed the flaws of mechanical progress.

Two closely related ideas become manifest upon a detailed examination of *Player Piano*: collective responsibility and the bond that forms from our shared condition as humans. Both, I maintain, are crucial aspects of Vonnegut's ethics of common decency and reappear throughout many of his works. Despite the borders we erect between us—divisions of race, sex, class, gender, nationality, religion—what all humans have in common is that we are united by virtue of our humanity. We are the only animals on the planet aware of our own mortality and

each of us is searching for a purpose in a universe that, to a great many individuals, appears to be purposeless.¹⁶ Vonnegut recognizes this unity and incorporates it as a salient feature of his ethics, and the machine-dominated world of *Player Piano* is intended to illustrate this point. Most of the people in the novel, save for the upper-echelon industrial figures, are united by their loss of purpose and dignity to the machines. Lasher, in an alcohol-fueled diatribe against the industrial system, explains this to Proteus and Finnerty:

Now, you people have engineered them out of their part in the economy, in the market place, and they're finding out—most of them—that what's left is just about zero...They can't participate, can't be useful any more. Their whole culture's been shot to hell. (90-1)

The engineers and managers, on the other hand, share a bond that stems from their faith in mechanical progress and the feeling of superiority over other people. Vonnegut writes that they, “seemed to feel the need of customs, of private jokes, of building up social characteristics to distinguish themselves—in their own eyes—from the rest of society” (46). And yet, despite their seeming differences, both classes are united by their relation to the machines that dominate society. Once engineers like Proteus and Finnerty come to realize what the people of Homestead already know—that everyone, regardless of social standing, is a slave to the machines—they are able to band together and fight back.

For Vonnegut, recognizing our common condition will do more than break down class walls—it will bring us together as a species. In *Player Piano*, at first we only see unity within the classes, but as characters become more aware of their situation by exposing the bad lies that have kept them under control, there forms a unity *between* classes. This connection grows to a national level when cities across the United States stage revolts against the machines. And at the end of this chain is a global recognition of our sameness through the human condition. Part of this recognition, though, involves acknowledging that we share collective responsibility for those aspects of our common condition under our control. Paul, in a conversation with his wife, Anita, recognizes this: “In order to get what we've got, Anita, we have, in effect, traded these people out of what was the most important thing on earth to them—the feeling of being needed and useful, the foundation of self-respect” (175). Although the engineers and managers are to blame for introducing and maintaining the mechanical system, the average American is at fault for continuing to believe in the narrative of progress and having faith in mechanization, despite the problems it causes. This notion of collective responsibility is even more applicable in the modern information age where, as Kwame Anthony Appiah notes in *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*:

The worldwide web of information...means not only that we can affect lives everywhere but that we can learn about life anywhere, too. Each person you know about and can affect is someone to whom you have responsibilities: to say this is just to affirm the very idea of morality. (xiii)

By showing that we have collective responsibility for certain aspects of our shared human condition, Vonnegut adds an action-guiding component to his ethics, which is why these two notions are such integral parts of common decency. Because our actions reverberate throughout the entire human race, we must be sure to make only those decisions that will impact the human situation for the better.

Another feature of common decency that Vonnegut implicitly articulates in *Player Piano* is kindness towards others,¹⁷ which is most evident through Paul Proteus's transformation

over the course of the novel. In the beginning, Paul is almost as insensitive and uncaring as the machines that he oversees. Before Lasher reveals himself to Paul as a revolutionary, he gives him a test to determine what kind of man he is. Pretending to be a father, Lasher tells Paul that his son is not intelligent enough to get into college, but enjoys working with his hands and repairing machines. He asks Paul for advice on behalf of his son, who must now decide between the Army and the Reeks and Wrecks for his career. Paul dismissively replies, "I really don't know much about either one. Somebody else, like Matheson [the testing and placement manager], maybe, would..." and then promises to call Matheson and ask his opinion (30). But when the two later encounter one another, Paul admits that he has not contacted Matheson, saying "I've been meaning to, but the opportunity hasn't come up yet" (88). Lasher then claims that, because his son had no reason to live and nothing to look forward to, he hung himself with an ironing cord. Paul is devastated, of course, because he knows that his lack of concern for the boy contributed to his death. Had Paul shown more compassion and interest in the problems of others, Lasher's (imaginary) son would not have committed suicide.¹⁸

This event, and the seditious conversation with Lasher that follows, mark a definitive change in Paul's character. He identifies the machines as the source of society's woes and becomes concerned with the negative impact they have on the average American. Once an uncaring automaton, discontented but continuing to function as just another gear in the technocratic system, Paul starts to distance himself from the industrial ideology, becoming kinder and more human in the process. After talking with Lasher in the bar in Homestead, Paul takes on a different attitude towards the common people and begins to feel empathy for them: "This was *real*, this side of the river, and Paul loved these common people, and wanted to help, and let them know they were loved and understood, and he wanted them to love him too" (author's emphasis 102). However, this emotional bond is oddly lacking in Paul's relationship with Anita. Vonnegut writes,

Anita had the mechanics of marriage down pat, even to the subtlest conventions. If her approach was disturbingly rational, systematic, she was thorough enough to turn out a creditable counterfeit of warmth. Paul could only suspect that her feelings were shallow—and perhaps that suspicion was part of what he was beginning to think of as his sickness. (17)

Eventually Paul realizes that not only have the machines stripped most people of their purpose, but they have also left human interactions utterly devoid of emotions. Even his own wife does not have genuine love for him, but instead focuses her attention solely on advancing his career. But, as with any relationship, there are always two sides to the story. When Anita leaves Paul for the ambitious Dr. Lawson Shepherd, she says "I'm sick of being treated like a machine! You go around talking about what engineers and managers do to all the other poor, dumb people. Just look at what an engineer and manager did to me!" (249). Unfortunately, Paul's change in character comes too late for him to salvage his relationship with Anita. However, shortly after their separation, Paul becomes fully committed to a new set of values¹⁹ and joins the Ghost Shirt Society in its fight against the machines.

Paul's relationship with Anita and his conversation with Lasher teach him the importance of being kind, and Vonnegut uses Paul's learning experience to educate his readers on kindness as a principle of common decency. In his ethics, kindness is intended to make life more livable, to help counter the feelings of purposelessness, despair and sorrow that every human experiences in the world. Kindness puts the 'common' in common decency, as anyone is

capable of performing it. As far as ethical principles go, it asks fairly little of agents but offers a high return of benefits. Of course, kindness in practice and kindness as a virtue are two different things, and Vonnegut seems to treat kindness as the latter. If doing nice things were what he meant by kindness—donating to charity or volunteering at a homeless shelter—then our focus would be on a person’s actions and not his/her character. In other words, this principle would reflect solely on what one does, rather than on whom one is. Paul, then, would be kind simply by offering to help Lasher’s imaginary son, even though he does not hold his word and the boy ends up dying. Furthermore, this principle would not require agents to value or understand kindness. Instead, it merely requires them to perform kind actions. But, as is evidenced from Paul’s reaction to the boy’s death—grief and recognition of wrongdoing—this cannot be what Vonnegut means. In addition to the problems this notion of kindness would have for an ethical theory, it also seems inconsistent with Vonnegut’s ethics of common decency as articulated through his novels.

Just *practicing* kindness is not enough for Vonnegut. Many people practice kindness out of habit, and even people whom we consider bad or immoral can practice kindness. In short, doing kind things does not necessarily make a person kind. After all, Paul practices kindness—he offers to help Lasher and he surprises Anita with his purchase of a farm, on which he hopes they can live happily together—but he still comes off as a callous engineer to Lasher and loses his wife to a man more attentive to her wants and needs and who values her as an individual. Vonnegut is a pragmatist, so he recognizes that this view of kindness is nothing more than a placebo that might make people feel better if it were practiced, but lacks the potential to really change the world and those who live in it. Throughout his novels, the brand of kindness that Vonnegut advocates is one that must be cultivated within individuals as a sort of virtue or character trait, which is what Paul is supposed to show readers. Developing kindness means that we will understand what makes some actions kind and others not, and we will recognize the value of performing kind actions over those that are harmful towards others. Moreover, kindness in this sense permeates a person so thoroughly that it influences their thoughts, emotions, interactions, desires and outlook on life. It is not until Paul Proteus realizes the negative impact of the machines on society that he begins to transform from an apathetic engineer and manager to a man deeply concerned with the well-being of others. Likewise, Vonnegut’s ethics of common decency will produce a shift in the characters of those who embrace it, and a majority of this change will concern developing kindness within us.

Despite its foundational role in Vonnegut’s ethics, *Player Piano* did not receive much critical attention when it was published. Although it did receive some praise in its own right, it was often compared to Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* and George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, published just three years before Vonnegut’s debut as a novelist. When stacked up against these landmark dystopian novels, *Player Piano* was almost always found to be lacking. Charles Lee, in a short article for the *Saturday Review*, writes of *Player Piano*: “Mr. Vonnegut’s glimpse of the future may strike some as being overdrawn to the point of grotesqueness, and wanting in Orwellian depth” (*Critical Essays* 30). While the novel may have suffered critically by being measured against the high standards for dystopian fiction set by Orwell and Huxley, the comparison with such successful authors must have been flattering and encouraging for Vonnegut at the beginning of his career. In fact, Vonnegut admires Orwell “almost more than any other man” (*Wampeters* 94) and, in an interview with Laurie Clancy for *Meanjin Quarterly* in 1971, he says “George Orwell interests me more than anybody else. I try to write a great

deal like him. I like his concern for the poor, I like his socialism, I like his simplicity" (Allen 52-3).

Comparisons and criticisms aside, *Player Piano* differs from *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in a major way. Todd Davis argues that because Paul Proteus lacks the ability to ameliorate the problems that afflict society and fails to subvert the system and establish a new order, *Player Piano* therefore deviates from the "modernist narratives of dystopian satire" put forth by Orwell and Huxley, in which the main characters have the potential but not the means to enact social change (*Kurt Vonnegut's Crusade* 44). He goes on to claim that "*Player Piano* offers no grand narratives to replace those that have been deconstructed; there is only an awareness that truth remains no more than a construct"²⁰ (44). However, it is statements like this one that threaten to undermine Vonnegut's ethical project²¹ and give him the unjustified reputation as a nihilist and moral skeptic, as they appear to hint that his only focus is to dismantle established beliefs and critique society without offering any solution of his own. While it is true that Vonnegut argues against the idea of objective truths and instead thinks that most of our knowledge about the world is subjective, *Player Piano* does offer a narrative to replace the ones it deconstructs—Vonnegut's own system of ethics, which is itself admittedly nothing more than a construct.

An Objection to Common Decency

One of the strongest objections to Vonnegut's ethical project states that the author's extreme pessimism²² conflicts with his optimistic ethics of common decency, making his position untenable. Kathryn Hume, in "Kurt Vonnegut and the Myths and Symbols of Meaning," writes:

Overall, there is a tension in his [Vonnegut's] work between the pessimism born of experience and the optimism stemming from background and values.

This tension confuses readers, and the class of values it reflects has made authentication of his artistic vision difficult for Vonnegut. (201)

If correct, this *reductio ad absurdum* refutes Vonnegut's ethics by showing that his negative outlook on life is inconsistent with his positive moralizing, as it leads to him maintaining an absurd position. For example, it seems that Vonnegut is committed to saying that the world is both hopelessly flawed and able to be improved through an ethics of common decency and that, in an inherently purposeless universe, humans somehow have moral duties to one another. Vonnegut, then, is seemingly unable to hold his moral beliefs in the face of his gloomy outlook on life. If these two opposing views are not entirely inconsistent, it is at least clear that they are radically opposed to one another. Consequently, Vonnegut's readers—potential practitioners of his ethics—are unable to reconcile the author's morality with his despairing portrayal of humanity and the world. This, in effect, undermines Vonnegut's ethics of common decency to the extent that it becomes impracticable.

Moreover, Vonnegut's pessimism often overshadows his positive message, causing many to view him as a terminal misanthrope whose lack of faith in the human race is matched only by his condemnation of the current state of affairs and his ominous predictions for the future.²³ Of Vonnegut's bleak outlook, Hume observes that reviewers "resent its inescapability and decry Vonnegut's indulgence in lamentation when he could make constructive suggestions instead" (201). As Hume shows, some critics are so disconcerted by Vonnegut's pessimism that they fail to notice that he *does* offer solutions to the problems he identifies. The negative themes that abound in his work—hopelessness, senseless violence, purposelessness, alienation—prevent critics and readers alike from discovering Vonnegut's implicit ethics. Instead, it is overlooked and

he is dubbed a doomsayer, a cynic, a fatalist, a black humorist.²⁴ This perception of Vonnegut is aggravated by his own admittance of, and commitment to, his pessimistic beliefs. In an interview with Robert Musil for *The Nation* in 1980, Vonnegut says, “I am mistrustful of most people as custodians of life and so I’m pessimistic on that account. I think that there are not many people who want life to go on. And I’m just a bearer of bad tidings really” (233). I maintain that one of the reasons why *Player Piano* is overlooked and underappreciated, despite its importance for Vonnegut’s ethics, is because it is also his first novel to manifest the characteristically bleak themes of his works. His overt pessimism seems to eclipse his subtle creation of an ethics, causing readers and critics to miss the latter and focus only on the former.

The foreword to *Player Piano* offers this grim pronouncement for the future: “This book is not a book about what is, but a book about what could be.” Before the novel even begins, Vonnegut separates it from other works of fiction by identifying it as a frightening alternate reality, a dystopian vision of America that is not only possible, but probable as well. His trademark pessimism permeates the text, manifesting itself through characters and key events in the story. When Checker Charley—the allegedly unbeatable checker-playing robot built by Fred Berringer’s father—catches fire and dies due to a loose connection with his wires, Fred asks why such an event had to happen, to which Vonnegut replies, “It was one more hollow echo to the question humanity had been asking for millenniums, the question men were seemingly born to ask” (59). This instance exemplifies the purposelessness of the universe and the indifferent fatalism with which events seem to unfold. Later on, Vonnegut makes clear the futility of trying to change the world when he says of Paul: “He knew with all his heart that the human situation was a frightful botch, but it was such a logical, intelligently arrived-at botch that he couldn’t see how history could possibly have led anywhere else” (115). This vein of pessimism is most apparent at the end of the novel, when the anti-machine revolution fails and the leaders turn themselves in to the authorities. When Paul asks Lasher what became of the original Ghost Shirt Society, he replies “they were killed or gave up trying to be good Indians, and started being second-rate white men” (333). Like the Indians, Vonnegut seems to suggest that we have two options in life: either resign ourselves to cruel fate, or succumb to defeat.

In Defense of Common Decency

Although Vonnegut maintained a consistently pessimistic worldview throughout his life,²⁵ it would be a mistake to think that his ethics of common decency is irreconcilably at odds with his bleak outlook. As Hume notes, Vonnegut’s pessimism stems from his personal experience, but what she fails to add is that his moral sentiments have the same source—indeed, his ethics is offered as a *response* to his negative life experiences. Vonnegut is a realist: he recognizes that the human condition is frightful, confusing and often hopeless, and that the amount of suffering in the world probably outweighs the amount of happiness. His ethics of common decency is a pragmatic solution to the problems that he identifies. So, the seeming inconsistency in Vonnegut’s thought between his optimistic moralizing and his pessimism are actually two sides of the same coin. Furthermore, Paul L. Thomas, in “*No Damn Cat, and No Damn Cradle*: The Fundamental Flaws in Fundamentalism according to Vonnegut,” argues that Vonnegut’s conflicting statements may serve another purpose:

Such apparent contradictions uttered often by Vonnegut are his devices for forcing his readers and listeners to step back from their assumptions (about religion, morality, and ethics, for example) and reexamine essential truths. (28)

By presenting his readers with these dilemmas, Vonnegut questions their beliefs and urges them to think deeply about their personal commitments. This probing creates a bond between Vonnegut and his audience born from a shared introspection and search for answers to the problems we face as humans, and common decency is one such solution.

A close reading of *Player Piano* refutes readers' and critics' assumptions and Vonnegut's own seemingly self-defeating admissions of pessimism by showing how common decency can be used to overcome the problems we face as humans. Throughout the novel, Vonnegut gives his characters hope for a better future. Despite his internal struggles and discontent with the dystopian society in which he lives, there is still room enough for Paul to be optimistic: "Somewhere, outside of society, there was a place for a man—a man and wife—to live heartily and blamelessly, *naturally*, by hands and wits" (author's emphasis 146). Paul's dreams become a reality when he begins practicing common decency—he finds renewed purpose and recognizes that he must take a stand against the machines. This change in thought is what moves him to join the Ghost Shirt Society in the hopes of overthrowing the technocratic society. Finnerty, who joins the Ghost Shirt Society for similar reasons, explains what they hope will happen if they succeed: "And then we get back to basic values, basic virtues! Men doing men's work, women doing women's work. People doing people's thinking" (299). What Paul teaches readers is that everyone experiences hardships and negativity in their lives, and one way to deal with these issues is to practice common decency. Lasher, too, has similar aspirations for the future: "Sooner or later someone's going to catch the imagination of these people with some new magic. At the bottom of it will be a promise of regaining the feeling of participation, the feeling of being needed on earth—hell, *dignity*" (author's emphasis 92). As Paul demonstrates, this new magic turns out to be Vonnegut's common decency.

Moreover, Vonnegut highlights specific instances of common decency throughout *Player Piano* to counteract his prominent pessimism and to provide readers with examples that show the importance of his ethical principle. In the beginning of the novel, Paul visits a bar in Homestead to purchase some Irish whiskey and encounters one of his former workers, Rudy Hertz. In one of his rare moments of kindness (for at this point in the novel, Paul is still a callous engineer), Paul says, "You were a damn fine machinist, Rudy." Vonnegut shows us the benefits of common decency through Rudy's response: "Knowing that, knowing smart men like you say that about Rudy, that means a lot. It's about all I got, you know, Doctor?" (28). Rudy then begins to proudly tell the other patrons that he knows Paul and, more importantly, that the influential Doctor Paul Proteus knows him. This exchange restores Rudy's sense of worth, providing him with a feeling of dignity and confidence despite the fact that he has been replaced by the machines. Admittedly, as some critics may claim, Paul's kind comment does nothing to change Rudy's situation—he is still unemployed and deemed useless by the standards of his society. However, it does change Rudy's perception, both of his own value and of the mechanical system. He realizes that he *is* a damn fine machinist, that other people think highly of him, and that he—and many of the other Homesteaders—have suffered a great injustice. Like Paul, Rudy undergoes a change of mind, which prompts him to leave the bar stool and join the Ghost Shirt Society. So, while Paul's words lack the power to change Rudy's situation, they do alter his way of seeing and prompt him to act—this, I maintain, is what Vonnegut hopes to achieve with his readers.

As bad as things may seem in *Player Piano*, readers should note that Vonnegut never goes so far as to take away all hope. Indeed, throughout the novel he offers readers consistent

signs of optimism for the future. Speaking of a dinner party held at the Country Club for engineers and managers, Vonnegut writes, “There had once been a movement to have the service done by machines, but the extremists who’d proposed this had been voted down by an overwhelming majority” (45). Even the engineers and managers, committed as they are to the goal of technological progress, do not wish to take meals from machines. This passage, often overlooked by critics of Vonnegut, shows that even the people at the forefront of industrialization are, to some extent, not fully committed to the machines. The discontent of the upper-echelon becomes more apparent when the unsuspecting Doctor Fred Garth, manager of the Buffalo works, strips the bark off the symbolic oak tree at a retreat for engineers and managers. These cases suggest that the engineers and managers are as dissatisfied with the machines as the lower class. But, like Paul, they are forced to hide their true feelings in order to keep their jobs and avoid accusations of sedition and sabotage. With this in mind, the ending of *Player Piano* no longer appears as bleak as critics claim. Although the Ghost Shirt Society’s revolution fails to replace the mechanistic society, it does succeed in restoring people’s sense of purpose and deals a minor blow to the industrial system. And, if there are other engineers and managers who hide their malcontent with the machines—as Vonnegut seems to suggest—then the Ghost Shirt Society’s revolt is just the beginning.

The theme of pessimism runs deep in *Player Piano*, but this does not mean that we should view the novel in a negative light. On the contrary, Vonnegut’s message is a positive one: he establishes his ethics of common decency as a remedy to the problems that the novel identifies, and he challenges us to be like Paul Proteus, to make a change in our lives for the better, be it by embracing the ethics of common decency or some other *foma*. Understanding the roots of Vonnegut’s pessimism and the function it serves in his literature can help readers who are disturbed by it move forward and focus on his ethics. While some might view the end of *Player Piano* as hopeless and depressing, this is in fact a misreading of the novel, an interpretation made without knowledge of Vonnegut’s personal experience or moral commitments. In fact, the end of the novel is where Vonnegut offers some of his most positive statements and where his ethics is most apparent. During his trial, Paul says, “The main business of humanity is to do a good job of being human beings” (315).²⁶ Vonnegut intends this statement as a counter to the hopelessness and lack of purpose that he identifies as problems for almost every person on earth. Part of what doing a good job of being human beings entails, for Vonnegut, is practicing kindness towards others, embracing and celebrating our shared humanity, and taking care of the planet for future generations—in short, common decency.

Notes

1 The specific focus of this paper will be on Vonnegut’s novels. I do not do a close reading of his short stories or nonfiction, although I suspect that his ethics will be implicitly formulated there as well. His speeches and interviews, however, did factor into the research for this paper, as he expresses himself more clearly there than in his fiction.

2 While recognizing the ethical system implicit in Vonnegut’s work may be complicated, it is by no means impossible. Indeed, it is hard to read his fiction *without* detecting the ethics behind his message. The difficulty lies not with being aware of Vonnegut’s ethics or getting his message, but with

actually articulating his ethical system and its principles in order to understand the philosophy that he offers as a solution to some of the problems we face as human beings.

3 Vonnegut rejects this label in *A Man Without a Country*: “I became a so-called science fiction writer when someone decreed that I was a science fiction writer. I did not want to be classified as one, so I wondered in what way I’d offended that I would not get credit for being a serious writer. I decided that it was because I wrote about technology, and most fine American writers know nothing about technology” (16). In *Wampeters, Foma & Granfalloon: Opinions*, he humorously states, “The feeling persists that no one can simultaneously be a respectable writer and understand how a refrigerator works” (1).

4 Lies told with malicious intent, however, do not fit into Vonnegut’s notion of common decency. Worse are those lies that conceal themselves behind a façade of truth—these become the target of Vonnegut’s deconstruction.

5 In fact, Vonnegut is apprehensive about his readers—particularly young college students, who have always made up a large portion of his fan base—taking his opinions as truths. As he says in an interview for the *Detroit Sunday News Magazine*, “I never dreamed of becoming a Pied Piper of the young. I don’t want to be a Pied Piper” (Noble 61). Although Vonnegut got more adjusted over the years to the idea that people would read his works and adopt his ideas, the worry remained that readers would take his views as indisputable truths. Layering his ethics within fiction is one safeguard against this happening.

6 In *Cat’s Cradle*, Newton Hoenikker’s frustration with the children’s game of cat’s cradle leads him to make this telling outburst: “‘No damn cat, and no damn cradle’” (author’s emphasis, 166).

7 These are what Vonnegut calls “harmless untruths,” or lies that have the potential to make one a better person and improve the quality of one’s life.

8 Although some think that *Cat’s Cradle* should be read as a satire on organized religion, with Bokononism being a farce of Christianity in particular, I do not agree with this interpretation. While Vonnegut himself was an atheist—or at least a religious skeptic or agnostic—he did believe that religion is a useful fiction that enriches many people’s lives by providing them with a sense of purpose and helping them cope with the tribulations of the human condition. In my reading of *Cat’s Cradle*, I argue that Bokononism is an example of a good lie, one of Vonnegut’s *foma* that can help improve our lives. Of course, the novel does warn against religion becoming absolute, but it is curious to note that the most damaging religion in *Cat’s Cradle* is that of science.

9 This and other short stories written before Kurt Vonnegut achieved commercial success were collected and published in *Welcome to the Monkey House* (1968) and *Bagombo Snuff Box: Uncollected Short Fiction* (1999). The latter is largely composed of short fiction writing during the 1950s, while the former spans from the 1950s until 1968, one year before the publication of *Slaughterhouse-Five* made Vonnegut a well-paid literary celebrity. The stories from both collections were originally published in various magazines—from *Ladies’ Home Journal* to *Collier’s* and *Playboy*—and cover a wide range of subjects and genres.

10 His brother, Bernard, worked as a scientist at the research laboratory there, where he discovered that silver iodide could be dispersed into the air in order to make clouds rain or snow.

11 Vonnegut continued to attack this and other myths concerning scientific progress—including the idea that it is redemptive, objective, and for the common good—throughout his career as a writer. The destructive power of technology is seen in *Cat’s Cradle* and *Galápagos*, in which the world is annihilated through human folly, and also in *Deadeye Dick* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, although the latter two novels depict a less bleak world than the former. Vonnegut’s essays on the subject were also published in *A Man Without a Country* and *Armageddon in Retrospect*.

12 “The next holocaust,” he warns in *Wampeters, Foma & Granfalloon*, “will leave this planet uninhabitable” (117).

13 Doctor Paul Proteus, in a discussion with Reverend James Lasher about the flaws within the industrial American system, says “‘You keep giving the managers and engineers a bad time...What

about the scientists?" Lasher replies: "Outside the discussion...They simply add to knowledge. It isn't knowledge that's making trouble, but the uses it's put to" (*Player Piano* 92). Lasher's response indicates that Vonnegut will not pursue Paul's worry over the moral culpability of scientists. In *Cat's Cradle*, Vonnegut will elaborate on this point and argue that scientists are responsible for ensuring their discoveries are not used immorally.

14 This is not to say that Vonnegut was radically opposed to industry or machines, although he does admit to being called a Luddite (*A Man Without a Country* 55). Rather than raging against industrialization or mechanization, *Player Piano* works against the absolutism with which most Americans at the time embraced these systems. Davis writes that Vonnegut "hopes that we will not be lost to absolutism, but instead will see the light of relativity," not just in social issues, but in all things—religion, morality, cultures, and etcetera (58).

15 While the first American Industrial Revolution "devalued muscle work...the second one devalued routine mental work" (14). The protagonist, Doctor Paul Proteus, speculates that the Third Industrial Revolution has already begun, with its aim to devalue human thought.

16 Charles B. Harris, in "Illusion and Absurdity: The Novels of Kurt Vonnegut," argues that "Vonnegut's belief in a purposeless universe constitutes his main theme" (131). Of *Player Piano*, Harris claims it "contains the seeds of Vonnegut's absurdist vision" (134). The idea that existence is meaningless appears throughout many of Vonnegut's novels, which suggests to me that he does indeed believe in it. However, his ethics of common decency is an attempt to fight against the purposelessness of the universe. As such, I maintain that Vonnegut's moral sentiments constitute his main theme, and that the purposeless universe is but one problem that his ethics are intended to solve.

17 This, according to Harris, is one of Vonnegut's solutions to the purposelessness of the universe. He writes, "Man may practice uncritical love, hoping through kindness and charity to lend some meaning to an otherwise meaningless human condition" (135). I agree with this stance, insofar as kindness is part of Vonnegut's ethics of common decency. His moral system, I maintain, is itself a sufficient response to the absurdity of the universe. Harris also claims that Vonnegut offers two other solutions to this problem: humans can embrace comforting lies or grimly accept their condition.

18 One might argue that Vonnegut inadvertently undermines common decency by using Lasher's lie to demonstrate the importance of kindness. In other words, it might be problematic that kindness as an aspect of common decency is grounded in Lasher's deception of Paul. However, this problem can be solved by appeal to Vonnegut's notion of truth. When Lasher lies to Paul, he does so not out of malice, but as a test of Paul's character and as a way to show him the importance of kindness. Lasher, being a former reverend, deals in good lies or, at the very least, harmless untruths. It would be mistaken, then, to see kindness as grounded in deceit. Rather, Lasher's untruth is a tool used to teach the importance of kindness and, for Vonnegut, the ends justify the means.

19 Among this new set of values are the central tenets of the Ghost Shirt Society, to which Paul readily commits. The Ghost Shirt Society, in a public letter to the engineers and managers, puts forth several virtues that they hold to be true—imperfection, frailty, inefficiency, brilliance and stupidity—all of which humans possess and the machines lack (302).

20 Vonnegut's deconstruction of truth continues throughout his career and is one of the recurring themes of his work. For an analysis of Vonnegut's morality through the lens of postmodernity, as well as a discussion of the specific concepts that he works to deconstruct in his novels, see Davis's book *Kurt Vonnegut's Crusade*. In this essay, I will not deal with the postmodern theory of Vonnegut's works, and will just briefly touch on his deconstruction of truth, as my main focus is on the ethical system that he advocates in his novels.

21 This is not to say that Davis himself undermines Vonnegut's ethics. On the contrary, he masterfully explains and analyzes the moral rhetoric of Vonnegut's novels. Indeed, Davis does not think that the ending of *Player Piano* should be interpreted negatively—although some critics do, and it is to them that I respond—but that instead it advocates change in the face of "a culture that so values material progress that it is willing to forfeit humanity" (47). While I agree that *Player Piano* does not end in

despair, I disagree with Davis concerning the content of Vonnegut's message.

22 As Davis observes: "many critics have labeled Vonnegut an indifferent philosopher of existentialism or a playful nihilist of comic futility" (*Kurt Vonnegut's Crusade* 2). While I do identify Vonnegut's pessimistic attitude in *Player Piano*, it is necessary to be familiar with the rest of his works in order to fully realize how deeply his negative sentiments run.

23 In a speech to the 1970 graduating class of Bennington College, Vonnegut says, "I predicted that everything would become worse, and everything has become worse" (*Wampeters* 161).

24 Thomas Marvin, in *Kurt Vonnegut: A Critical Companion*, writes of this last label: "In the 1960s, novelist and critic Bruce Friedman wrote a book called *Black Humor* that lumped together several contemporary authors, including Vonnegut. Friedman argued that...[they] could be considered 'black humorists' because they encourage their readers to laugh at hopeless situations" (15-16). Vonnegut, however, rejects this label as essentially meaningless. In *Wampeters, Foma & Granfaloon*, he says, "Certainly, the people Bruce Jay Friedman named as black humorists weren't really very much like one another. So critics picked up the term because it was handy. All they had to do was say black humorists and they'd be naming twenty writers. It was a form of shorthand" (258).

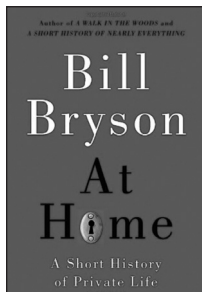
25 Davis, in his essay "Flabbergasted," observes that Vonnegut was also deeply devoted to his ethical beliefs: "Despite his prophetic pessimism, Kurt remained committed to random acts of human kindness right up to his death" (5).

26 Some reviewers object that Vonnegut's ethics is too simple, that it might make people feel better but that it does not accomplish much else. Davis writes, "Many critics have attacked Vonnegut's morality as sentimental balderdash, a sugar pill for an ominous future" (*Kurt Vonnegut's Crusade* 46). Paul's claim might be one example of the "sentimental balderdash" to which Davis refers. However, I think that this objection comes from a misunderstanding of Vonnegut's ethical commitments. Critics who argue this point have only skimmed the surface of Vonnegut's ethics of common decency and fail to realize both what it entails and its potential for change.

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Book Review >>> Hannah Biggs

At Home: A Short History of Private Life

Bill Bryson. New York: Doubleday, 2010. 497 pp.

For anyone familiar with Bill Bryson's witty humor, this book is not one to disappoint. His latest book, *At Home: A Short History of Private Life*, follows the same writing style Bryson has so creatively developed in his previous books—especially in his most well-known work, the nonfiction travel literature piece, *A Walk in the Woods*. *At Home's* language is intelligent, witty, and eloquent. With lines like, “Suddenly, George Washington and Thomas Jefferson come across as having the decorative instincts of hippies,” this book once again asserts Bryson's place as a comical, fascinating author (318). However, this approximately 500-page book is not for the faint-of-heart. Its premise is deep-seated in historical facts and trivia; in fact, history directs the entire course of the book. *At Home* takes the reader from room to room of a typical home and discusses the history, both its comedic and dark sides, behind each room of the house and the items each room might contain.

The book is ‘chock full’ of unique trivia - some fascinating and worthy to be put in your bag of trivia knowledge to pull out at the occasional dinner party. For instance, Bryson teaches us in “The Bedroom” chapter that the term ‘sleep tight’ stems from the idea that old support systems for mattresses “[were] on a lattice of ropes, which could be tightened with a key when they began to sag” (321). Or, in a chapter entitled “The Passage,” we learn that Thomas Edison, commonly known for his invention of the light bulb, had a fascination with concrete, and “his abiding dream was to fill the world with concrete houses” (223). Other bits are disturbing and make the reader look at the common American home in a completely new light. In “The Study,” Bryson informs us that still today, “hygiene regulations in most places allow up to two [mouse] fecal pellets per pint of grain – a thought to bear in mind next time you look at a loaf of whole grain bread” (240). Or, we learn from the aptly-named chapter “The Stairs” that “even on the most conservative calculations..., stairs rank as the second most common cause of death, well behind car accidents, but far ahead of drownings, burns, and other similarly grim misfortunes” (309). Bryson has taken a unique approach to the history of the home, and invites his reader into the tantalizing, interesting, yet sometimes dry details of the home and the common household items it contains.

At Home does not resemble a conventional piece of literature. Rather, it is a conglomeration of historical facts, all strewn together only by the organization of the common home. Bryson takes the reader through his own home, a “former Church of England rectory” in Norfolk (1). Unlike what the book's introduction suggests, Bryson instead spends a lot of time discussing the history of Norfolk, England rather than the actual, physical house. He discusses historical facts that have vague connections to the actual rooms of the home,

something quite frustrating for the reader. The book is divided into chapters that walk the reader through European and American history and then through the rooms or significant sections of his home such as the hall, the kitchen, the scullery and the larder, the fuse box, the drawing room, the cellar, the passage, the study, the garden, the plum room, the stairs, the bedroom, the bathroom, the dressing room, the nursery, and finally the attic. However, when Bryson attempts to connect the European and American history he has discussed in previous chapters or scattered throughout the home chapters, the transition is not easy to follow and leaves the reader grasping at straws for the overall meaning or theme. The book, despite its intrigue, is quite hard to follow.

Yet, this book, to Bryson's credit, gives an incredible overview of the history of material home life. He unearths fascinating, and often times humorous facts about the most commonplace objects in the home. For instance, who knew that once upon a time, "sofas were daring, even titillating, because they resembled beds and so hinted at salacious repose" (158)? After reading this book, the reader will find that he/she will look at even the most mundane household objects with a new degree of appreciation for the man/woman who created it and the history surrounding that person or item. Bryson informs us that Alexander Graham Bell, known for inventing the telephone, also "invented the iron lung and experimented with telepathy...He invented a metal detector [that was used at President James A. Garfield's bedside after he was shot]...but [it] gave confused results. Not until much later was it realized that the device had been reading the presidential bedsprings....Bell [also] helped found the journal *Science* and the National Geographic Society" (229-230). Just another bit of *Jeopardy* knowledge learned from this book.

All in all, this historical nonfiction is not one to be read like a normal, plotted novel. This book is better suited for shorter spurts of reading. History is ever present in this book, and rightly so; however, copious repetitions of dates, names, and facts make this book a slow, sometimes daunting read. This book requires the reader to be very present and active in its reading in order to appreciate or even recall the breadth of historical information in its chapters. This book is not *A Walk in the Woods*, both in the sense that it is neither extremely pleasurable to read nor as witty and entertaining as Bryson's best known work. However, if you are interested in knowing a little more about the history of say, your zipper, your bedroom doorknob, or the toilet, this book is for you. Overall, this book is one for the curious reader and will not disappoint the newly-emerging or well-seasoned Bryson fan. Bryson's level of commitment to historical accuracy and his interest in the home's details are not easily rivaled. For that reason, it is a fascinating, yet daunting, read.



Book Review >>> Christine Horvath

By Nightfall

Michael Cunningham. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010. 238 pp.

Spinning Unknowable Fantasies

Michael Cunningham's sexy and scandalous latest work is, if nothing else, a quick read. He chronicles the life of forty-something Peter Harris who, after a lifetime of fulfillment finally realizes that he is not satisfied. Peter lives with his wife Rebecca in New York City. They work equally impressive jobs, an art gallery curator and editor of a magazine, respectively. Years before the story begins, their estranged daughter Bea moves to Boston to attend school. Peter and Rebecca are then empty-nesters, left to long-distance parenting... until Mizzy arrives. Their new houseguest is Rebecca's brother Ethan. He is nicknamed "Mizzy," short for "The Mistake." What follows is a predictable tale about the hardships of housing a troubled youth, parental failure and mid-life crises.

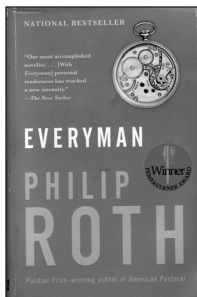
This novel's main plot is driven by Peter Harris's obsession with beauty. As a curator, he is exposed to various and sundry works of art on a daily basis; his job is to decide what is beautiful enough to be in his gallery. Through Peter, Cunningham echoes a popular belief of our time that real art is either commoditized or non-existent. Subsequently, Peter's preoccupation with finding real beauty creates his greatest conflicts.

As the reader navigates Cunningham's prose, he/she will begin to realize the extent of Peter's distorted conception of art. All good art should represent life, but the only art that Peter finds beautiful throughout the text can only occur organically in nature. For example, one of his clients describes a newly laid egg: "[it was] an impossibly, heartbreakingly pale blue-green, specked with scraps of feather, smeared along its obverse end with a skid-mark of red-brown blood. And Peter had said, ... I'd love to find an artist who could do something like this" (71). Exemplified here is Peter's unrealistic expectation of art that humans are capable of creating. One gets the sense that if an artist did create something similar to the newly-laid egg that Peter would not be satisfied with the synthetic creation. Therefore, it is not beauty that Peter yearns for in art, it is life. Because life cannot possibly be frozen into a piece of artwork, reality will forever fall short of Peter's expectations.

His inability to be satisfied with the subject of his life's work causes Peter to exaggerate, even obsess over the beauty that he finds in living things, especially youthful things. As the narrative progresses, Peter becomes infatuated with the idea of his wife's bygone youth. Youth becomes a major theme in the work, as Peter describes it as "the only sexy tragedy" (120). Matthew, Peter's older brother, died at a young age. Throughout the reader's glimpse of Peter's life, he struggles to overcome the grief of his brother dying but instead worships his unsalvageable youth.

More than anything, though, Peter is taken by Mizzy. Mizzy represents what it is to be in an early, unprepared stage of life. He treats Mizzy as a long-lost son and a recreation of his brother, among other things. Again, Peter misunderstands and romanticizes something that he perceives as beautiful. Mizzy had a chance at a very productive life but after a series of dropouts and mistakes, has let it all go. We're told, "[Peter's] aroused by Mizzy's youth... he's aroused by the memory of having been young" (117). Suddenly, Peter has forgotten the terror of being in a transitional stage in life. He has become intoxicated with the idea of youth and pines to be young again. He lives vicariously through Mizzy, yet fails to recognize that Peter has all that Mizzy can wish to have at this stage in his life: a good job, a solid relationship, stability. Mizzy explains, "I don't want to do *nothing*. But I seem not to have some faculty other people have. Something that tells them to do this or that. To go to medical school or join the Peace Corps. Everything seems perfectly plausible to me. And I can't quite see myself doing any of it" (191). While Peter should be telling Mizzy to grow up, he wishes to be young again. Rebecca tells Peter that she wants to be free like Mizzy. These adults casually ignore Mizzy's fear of becoming like them: middle-aged, unhappy and unfulfilled with a perfectly full life. His fear paralyzes him from doing anything so as not to have wasted his never-returning youth. Wanting to go back to the moment of terror that these characters have already transcended seems bratty and delusional. Seeing what they want to see is convenient for them, but for the reader it is utterly intolerable.

The characters leave much to be desired but the prose is undeniably brilliant. This book is not for the "Literarily Inept," that is, its highbrow references make this a rather intellectual read. Cunningham employs characters and settings from works such as *The Bible*, *Ulysses* and *The Great Gatsby*, among others. Cunningham's sentences are eloquently constructed and his wit shines in a few moments of brilliance. Specifically, one of Peter's clients frankly describes a work as "beautiful and nasty," a rare moment of intentional humor that the book has to offer (195). The writing is enjoyable and easy to read, yet the narrative occasionally drags. Cunningham includes much extraneous information regarding Peter's work, such as conversations between Peter and his clients that add little to nothing to the story itself. The themes become exhausted throughout the second half of the novel, irony and youth being laid on pretty thick by the end. Overall, the book is underwhelming at best and can even be aggravating, especially for college students who are tirelessly worrying about the next stage in their lives.



Book Review >>> Justin McAtee

Everyman

Philip Roth. New York: Vintage International, 2007. 182 pp.

When the septuagenarian protagonist of Roth's *Everyman* joins a seaside retirement community along the New Jersey shore, he does so by a promise made to himself immediately following the 9/11 attacks: to leave vulnerable Manhattan behind, along with all the anxieties of destruction that have made the city distasteful to him in his newly-reckoned old age. In idyllic Starfish Village, the Everyman hopes to reinvigorate the optimism and vigor of his working years through keeping company with some five-hundred affluent and elderly exemplars of well-adjusted old age, and thereby discovering that he too, a lonely old artist, might have the privilege of waiting for death with some semblance of inner peace. However, the Everyman soon discovers that his new neighbors can offer no consolation or distraction from mortality. Rather, they demonstrate a preoccupation with the worries of the dying body, "their personal biographies having by this time become identical with their medical biographies" (80). Such is the stylistic and thematic character of *Everyman*, a biographical account detailing one man's emotional relationship to death as told through the language of his flesh. Its 180-odd pages form a detailed and compassionate account of the struggle to maintain against final disintegration those organic operations and urges that comprise the first, and last, temple to selfhood.

Roth's short novel occupies a quintessentially modern setting, and from this familiar space conducts its articulation of the dying process, the title character evoking a palpable present-day Americana. The Everyman is a financially prosperous, non-religious, white-collar urbanite, and conceives his identity in strictly secular terms. His Jewish heritage lies discarded with the generation of immigrants who raised him, part of an obsolete past. He chooses to define himself, rather, by the shared meanings of a newer age. "[Holding] no grudge against either the limitations or comforts of conformity" (32), he becomes the follower of a distinctly present-day American Dream: He establishes a life free from illusions of posterity and religion in a secure, affluent world, believing in the virtues of building wealth, raising a family, and loving vigorously. Greatest among these is love, which grows from the very center of the Everyman's world: his own body. Interwoven with his anxiety over a failing heart is the desperate sexual yearning that struggles to defy the heralds of death as they grow louder throughout the novel. Becoming increasingly strained through the succession of terrifying surgeries and passionate liaisons, mortal anxiety and sexual yearning become a single desperate plea for more life, until, in the novel's twilight, the immediate pain--physical and emotional--of the dying body renders all else an "otherness," a lost life (130).

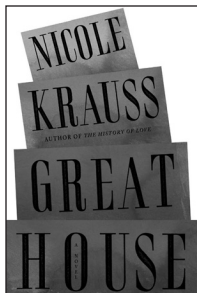
The novel's sense of the "otherness" experienced in death is articulated in a particularly poignant scene, and exemplifies the author's empathic capability: The dying Millicent

Kramer tells the Everyman, who comforts her upon his bed, "It's just that pain makes you so alone. The dependence, the helplessness, the isolation, the dread--it's all so ghastly and shameful. The pain makes you frightened of yourself. The utter otherness of it is awful" (91).

Roth possesses a historical and social consciousness to match his powerful combination of compassion and imagination. Although the novel comprises not the slightest moral or political message, it is acutely aware of the time, which functions as a central motif (the Everyman's father was a watchmaker, and watches were the son's first boyhood passion), and is associated with the aforementioned theme of identity. The life of the Everyman is framed by two of the defining traumas in recent American memory: WWII and 9/11. These two events create a sense of collective consciousness against which the Everyman's lifelong relationship with death can be read as reflective of that experienced by his society. The first encounter with mortality occurs at age nine, when, wading in the breakers along the New Jersey coastline, he bumps into the bloated body of a drowned German sailor, washed ashore from some distant torpedoed submarine. It is 1942, and WWII has been raging in imaginary realms, but suddenly feels menacingly close. Later that year, the young Everyman must be whisked to the hospital for an operation on an abdominal hernia, where, confined to a prison-like room with another boy who dies in the night, he experiences "a register of a death" even closer than the first (27).

Sixty years later, the Everyman's retirement coincides with the destruction of the Twin Towers. The collapse of several sections of his arterial wall soon follow, and the mortality of an aging, non-religious, white collar, urban American Citizen reasserts itself more unmistakably than ever. This is the landscape of Roth's novel: a hyper-aware modern America where even the most ordinary, stable, and secure denizen cannot forget that he, too, will die.

Why read *Everyman*, then? What does it have to tell us that we don't already know, or think we know about life, love, and death? Perhaps the answer is best found through another question: Why has Roth, an affluent, agnostic Jewish-American, raised on the Jersey shore, written this book at age seventy-one (precisely the same age at which his protagonist dies)? *Everyman* is an evocation of universal anxiety and desire told in a voice that is startlingly familiar, disturbingly near. The novel is a reckoning, a facing-up, an unsentimental and subtle, stoic and tearless account of a most common fate.



Book Review >>> Becky Woodruff

Great House

Nicole Krauss. New York: W. W. Norton &, 2010. 289 pp.

Upon my introduction to Nicole Krauss' *Great House*, I was told that it is a novel about a desk. It was not a particularly rousing endorsement, but the accompanying summary was enough to pique my interest. As it turns out, Krauss uses this desk, a hulking presence in the lives of each of the characters, as a tool for conveying the loss, failure, isolation, fixation, and madness of those who encounter it. The desk also demonstrates the excess of worth that people often place in material objects. The novel is told from several points of view including that of a disenchanted writer, a remorseful father, a doubting husband, an observant outsider, and an obsessed antique dealer. Most of these characters are complete strangers to one another, yet the desk means something vital to each of them, playing a distinct role in their individual lives.

It is difficult to adequately summarize as complex a tale as *Great House*. The novel raises more questions than it answers. The many plotlines interweave, creating a somewhat disjointed picture that the reader must piece together along the way. Given particular attention is the disenchanted writer, Nadia, who retains possession of the desk following the death of its former owner. When she must part with it, she faces not only the loss of her muse but the loss of her faith in her writing and in herself. Other characters face similar existential dilemmas and considerable losses. Weisz, a survivor of the Holocaust, obsesses over the reconstruction of his childhood home, which was looted and destroyed by the Nazis. He grows up to be an antique dealer and spends his entire life seeking out each piece of furniture that was lost and giving it a place in the house he buys with his wife. The one piece that continues to elude him? His father's desk.

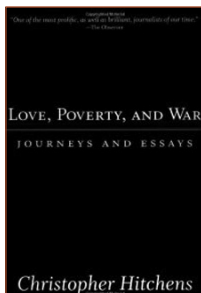
Still other characters face various challenges of their own. An aging father must come to terms with the loss of his wife and his own imminent mortality while making a last desperate attempt to reach out to the son he has never understood. Another man discovers his wife has kept an enormous secret from him and, following her death, decides to investigate. A young woman struggles to fit herself into the world of the man she loves, his sister, and their imposing father. Each of these figures tells a compelling story, and each of them bears some relation to the desk—some in a positive way, some less so.

Several voices in the book immerse the reader in Jewish culture, referring to locations and events that are directly related to it. The very title is drawn from the Torah, though the explanation is saved for the end as a means of tying all the threads together. Within the context of the novel, religion is not enough to sustain a person's sense of self-worth, and it is made clear that when a person ties her faith or inspiration to a physical object, it can only

lead to loss. This theme is reflected in the book's many plotlines as well as in the meaning behind its title.

Krauss' prose flows elegantly, and each page rings with the poetry of her words. Interspersed throughout the text are concise, acute observations that give the reader pause. In the midst of Nadia's reflection, she notes, "Imagination dies a slower death, by suffocation" (44). Later, the doubting husband observes, "We take comfort in the symmetries we find in life because they suggest a design where there is none" (82). These seemingly simple statements jar the reader; one is taken from the flow of the text and forced to consider the meaning behind them. Each remark demonstrates a deep understanding of human weakness and a bold assertion of reality.

A brilliantly conceived narrative, *Great House* holds interest for a wide audience. Any writer who has ever faced a loss of inspiration will identify with Nadia's ongoing predicament. The position of Weisz sheds light on a less-familiar aspect of the Holocaust, giving those with interest in it more insight into the subject. Beyond its roots in Jewish culture, the book's themes are universal. It would interest someone looking to reflect on the meaning humans ascribe to otherwise meaningless items and the role such items play in the search for or loss of identity. *Great House* is not just a novel about a desk; it is a fascinating read that manages to tackle a number of provocative themes and leave the reader wanting more.



Book Review >>> Vianca Yohn

Love, Poverty, and War: Journeys and Essays

Christopher Hitchens. New York: Nation Books, 2004. 475 pp.

Love, Poverty, and War: Journeys and Essays is a collection of Hitchens's essays, literary introductions, and articles organized into four sections: "I. Love," "Americana," "II. Poverty," and "III. War." Hitchens explains this organization in his introduction: "An antique saying has it that a man's life is incomplete unless or until he has tasted love, poverty and war" (xi); notably, however, the "Americana" section was included in the book yet exempt from numbering, presumably to emphasize Hitchens's love for the country even as he criticizes it. A British-American immigrant, Hitchens shares his experiences as a journalist and patriot via introductions to books by authors he admires, memoirs of his personal travels, and criticisms of political and religious figures. Through these tidbits, we learn that he is close friends with Salman Rushdie, has driven the entirety of the famous Route 66, and bravely questions the legacies of such revered figures as Mother Teresa and Winston Churchill (among others). While it may be true that most books were meant to be read cover-to-cover, however, this particular collection is almost too varied to read this way, and may be better appreciated when read selectively based on the reader's interests.

The first section of the book consists largely of introductions to and reviews of books, though Hitchens also includes some of his contributions to noted periodicals such as the *Atlantic*. For a reader unfamiliar with Winston Churchill, Leon Trotsky, Rudyard Kipling, and other political and literary figures, the "I. Love" section can be a bit challenging; Hitchens's reviews tend to rely on the reader's preexisting knowledge of many of the figures he discusses. With a little research, however, this particular section is navigable for a newcomer, and scholars who are already well-versed in these figures will probably enjoy Hitchens's passionate reviews. The remaining three sections rely less on academia and more on popular culture, making them somewhat more accessible to the average American reader. For instance, in our culture, images of Sunset Boulevard, Route 66, New York City, and Ground Zero are iconic, and Hitchens explores these and more in "Americana." Likewise, it is probably safe to say that many Americans have heard of Michael Moore, Mel Gibson, or Mother Teresa, some of whom serve as the subjects of his essays in "II. Poverty" – and all of us have been touched by war in some way, particularly after the 9/11 attacks that are the centerpiece of "III. War."

While I probably will not read the book again anytime soon (at least not "I. Love" without first better familiarizing myself with the subjects therein), I must admit that it is not without its merits; his somewhat presumptuous writing style – at least, to a twenty-something who is ignorant of the finer details of British politics and many of the works of the

authors he reviews, among other subjects he addresses – lends itself well to inspiring further research into the events, people, and places whose names he throws around as casually as most of us do “likes” and “ums.” (If you are in need of a pick-me-up and have this book on-hand, here is a game you can play: for every “obvious” point Hitchens makes that is, in fact, far from obvious, grab a cookie or other treat of choice. You may regret it later, but it makes the reading more enjoyable, especially if you do not have the knowledge base you need to understand Hitchens’s finer points. I still feel compelled to grab a handful of chocolate chips whenever I try to figure out how “felt very badly” is a “barbarous neologism” [84], which Hitchens does not feel he has to explain.) Also, stylistic idiosyncrasies aside – such as spelling out “aitches” (74) in one essay and then simply using the letter “h” in another (146) – Hitchens does have a sense of humor that relies on wordplay, with the title of one of his essays, “Unfairheit 9/11: The Lies of Michael Moore” one of the easiest instances to locate.

To be fair, Hitchens is clearly unconcerned with making friends, which – at least, as far as he would care – renders my earlier objections to his pedantic undertones moot. As a self-proclaimed, radically liberal, anti-theistic polemicist, Hitchens’s sole concern is to share his opinions, observations, and experiences as frankly as possible – readers’ hurt feelings be damned. And, love him or hate him, it is difficult to argue that he does not make at least a few poignant and universal points, such as this gem from the aforementioned essay on Churchill, “The Medals of His Defeats”: “We seem to have a need, as a species, for something noble and lofty. The task of criticism could be defined as the civilizing of this need – the appreciation of true decency and heroism as against coercive race legends and blood myths” (28). Whether a literature or social science *aficionado*, a reader with a strong background in French and an interest in the humanities may find an essay in *Love, Poverty, and War* worth reading, though again, I personally would not recommend the book as a front-to-back read.



Book Review >>> Jonna Stewart

August: Osage County

Tracy Letts. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2008. 138 pp.

Tracy Letts' Pulitzer Prize winning drama, *August: Osage County*, is the story of the dysfunctional Weston family told in three acts. One of the reasons readers will enjoy it is because almost everyone can identify with the family in some way. The prologue introduces the family patriarch Beverly Weston, an alcoholic former poet, as he interviews a potential caregiver for his wife, Violet. We get our first true glimpse of the Weston family as Beverly explains, "My wife takes pills and I drink. That's the bargain we've struck" (11). *August: Osage County* is a dark comedy that reveals the struggle of a family dealing with past mistakes and present regrets. In the first scene of the play, we learn that Beverly has been missing for five days. As a result of his disappearance, the family all gather in the Weston home. Letts prefaces *August: Osage County* with an excerpt from Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men*. The first line of this excerpt gives us an idea of the main theme, "The child comes home and the parent puts the hooks in him." Although composed of several different themes, this drama is very much about family.

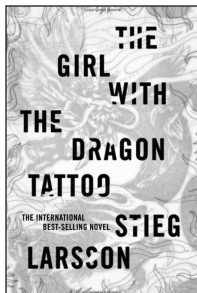
Readers will find that the dysfunction of the Weston Family is not so far from home. In this multi-generational collection of characters, readers will find someone with whom they can identify. Mattie Fae, is the overbearing aunt, who is just as harsh as her sister, Violet. Charlie is her henpecked husband. Their son, Little Charles, is the underachieving cousin who is respected only by Violet's middle daughter, Ivy Weston. Ivy is the only one of the Weston children who did not leave home. At age forty-four, Ivy is unmarried, and often chastised by her mother on that point. Her younger sister, Karen, arrives at the Weston home with her new fiancé, Steve, who is not the type of guy Karen thinks he is. Also, the oldest Weston daughter, Barbara, arrives with her husband Bill and her daughter Jean. For three acts these characters are trapped together in the same house on the brink of tragedy. As they each begin to unravel, they give the reader an intimate view of their desperation. As the plot develops we watch as these characters struggle with their insecurities as secrets are gradually revealed. There are quite a few unexpected twists in the story, which reveal even more about the characters.

The themes of *August: Osage County* are extremely relevant to readers, because they reach across generations. The plot shows the inner workings of an American family. The raw honest quality of the characters exposes the dark and buried issues with which each of them struggle. The theme of family issues is one that is inescapably relatable to readers. Although Letts presents this theme to an amplified degree, its authenticity will not escape the reader. Letts does a wonderful job of representing the fragility of humanity. Other themes are guilt, addiction, secrecy, and escapism, and it would be difficult to find a reader

that would not feel that these themes resonate with them. Each of the characters has some kind of discovery, whether it is a self-discovery or something they would prefer to have never known. Nevertheless, the characters grow, which is one of the qualities that gives the reader fulfillment in spite of the dark subject matter. The other quality that fulfills the reader is, of course, comedy. Letts is able to manifest such oppressive themes in a way that, at times, lets the reader laugh at the extreme dysfunction, while still leaving moments of disturbance, sincerity, and compassion.

August: Osage County is very similar to Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night*, which was also a Pulitzer Prize winning drama. Both of these dramas present the picture of a family dealing with addictions, secrets, and regrets. All of these themes that made *Long Day's Journey into Night* relatable to readers are present in *August: Osage County*, yet Letts' gives us a completely original story. Both of these wonderful dramas show not only an alcoholic patriarch and a drug addicted matriarch but also the effect of the dysfunction on their children. This portrait reveals an honest view of human nature.

Letts has a wonderful insight into human nature, and it is made apparent to us through his wit and talent as a playwright. Although it is a fictional story, it is an honest portrayal of life from which we can learn and recognize a bit of ourselves. This is what makes *August: Osage County* an important piece of literature. Of course, dramas are written to be performed. Perhaps the full impact of *August: Osage County* can only be experienced by watching a visualization of the action and characters. However, the characters are well-developed and the story is real enough to make this drama a very worthwhile read. *August: Osage County* is an essential read for anyone interested in modern theater or literature. Readers will find that *August: Osage County* is valuable and far from forgettable.



Book Review >>> Boris Hinderer

The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo

Stieg Larsson. New York: Vintage Books, 2008. 600 pp.

It feels like every book store I've walked into during the last couple months has featured a ziggurat built of Stieg Larsson's internationally-bestselling novel, *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*. Due to all the hype, I half suspected it to be some sort of epic on a scale with *War and Peace*. In reality, however, the novel is a fun and intriguing mystery about defamed journalist Mikael Blomkvist and his investigation into the disappearance of Harriet Vanger, a scion from a family of wealthy and sinister industrialists. Interwoven into this primary plot-line are two secondary plots. The first involves the nature of Blomkvist's recent libel conviction and his war against corporate corruption. The second is about the investigator-savant and ward of the state, Lisbeth Salander. Salander (who has a dragon tattoo) is an enigmatic figure, and the sections of the book dedicated to following her narrative hint that she has spent time in a psychiatric ward and has had problems with the police. She is described as going around "with the attitude that she would rather be beaten to death than take any shit. And she always [gets] revenge" (Larsson 229). She also happens to be a genius and a computer whiz. She eventually is hired to assist Blomkvist due to her skill as a researcher.

As I mentioned earlier, this is a powerfully intriguing mystery. I was hooked by chapter four, when Blomkvist is hired to conduct his investigation by Harriet's great-uncle, Henrik Vanger. Henrik tells Blomkvist: "I want you to find out who in the family murdered Harriet, and who since then has spent almost forty years trying to drive me insane" (92). That was the point when I abandoned any remaining reservations and began greedily turning pages. Larsson certainly has a capacity for crafting a potent mystery, partly due to his ability to put the reader in a "sandbox" so to speak. He creates an isolated and finite realm for the imagination to roam in search of the answers. For example, the Vanger estate is located on an island in a rural region of Sweden. On the day Harriet disappeared the one bridge to the mainland was closed due to an accident and all boats had been accounted for, and yet her body was never discovered. Therefore, her disappearance must have occurred on the family-owned island. Blomkvist, too, is isolated in one of these metaphorical "sandboxes" as he works out of a small cabin on Vanger's island where his neighbors consist almost entirely of a cast of shady members from the nefarious Vanger clan. Here, nestled right in the middle of the viper's den, Blomkvist, with the help of Salander, realizes that perhaps Harriet's disappearance is only one in a series of strange disappearances, and that something terrible persists within the Vanger family.

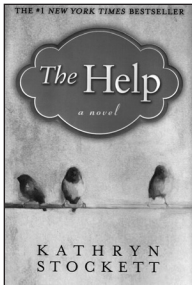
Beyond the central mystery, there are a couple of economic and social critiques that crop up in the novel. Salander serves as a useful tool for the first of these critiques, which focuses on bringing to light abuse against women. The original Swedish title of the book

was actually *Men Who Hate Women*, and each of the main sections of the book presents a brief national statistic such as “Forty-six percent of women in Sweden have been subjected to violence by a man”(127). These kinds of details reveal that Larsson intended his book to raise some awareness toward these concerns. I will make no attempt to confirm the validity of Larsson’s statistics, but true or not they certainly are alarming to read in what appears to be a book about an investigation. As for Salander, I won’t reveal anything specific, but I will reiterate that “she always [gets] revenge” (229).

The economic critique centers around Blomkvist’s libel conviction at the hands of a major Swedish industrialist and financial broker. Blomkvist’s journalistic focus, outside of his investigation into the missing Harriet, is exposing corrupt business practices and those who Blomkvist refers to as “financial gnomes that some tough reporter should identify and expose as traitors” (575). Certain passages describe situations remarkably similar to the subprime loan financial crisis of the past few years. In clear language, Larsson explains how he distinguishes between the economy and the stock market, writing “The...economy is just as strong or weak or weak today as it was a week ago,” while the stock exchange consists of “only fantasies...it doesn’t have a thing to do with reality or the Swedish economy” (574-575). Mikael Blomkvist is the solution Larsson proposes to such economic problems – a tough and dedicated journalist who can reveal these distinctions and expose those who would criminally exploit the economy to support their fantasies in the stock exchange.

I had no problems with Larsson’s politics until the final few chapters of the book, when the central mystery is solved. Rather than go further into Salander’s mysterious past – which at this point I was mildly interested in – the novel exhausts itself with several chapters of Blomkvist battling the corporation that had originally charged him with libel. The pages are filled with banking mumbo jumbo and dull email correspondence between the involved parties. No mystery is left, Blomkvist and the publication he works for are the good guys, and the big corporations they’re fighting against are the forces of evil. Here, in the last ten percent of the book, Larsson shoves it all right down your throat, no subtlety or ambiguity to be found.

Unsatisfactory ending aside, there is much to be enjoyed by picking out a nice comfortable spot on the bandwagon and reading *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*. Fans of escapist mystery novels are sure to enjoy it for the power of its primary plot, as well as for the depth of intrigue behind the social and political commentary.



Book Review >>> Chelsea Ferrin

The Help

Kathryn Stockett. New York: Penguin Group, 2009. 444 pp.

Kathryn Stockett's *The Help* is set in the early 1960's in the still very racially segregated city of Jackson, Mississippi where the words "negro" and "colored" are still used to describe people of African American decent, and the only place for a black woman in a white woman's home is as "the help." Three different women, two black maids and one young white woman, narrate this story. The three main characters, Aibileen, Minny and Skeeter, all take turns telling their stories in a journal-like fashion, their accounts paralleling and often times intersecting one another. Stockett attempts to mimic the dialect of both southern black and white women, which proves to be a challenge to read at first, but ultimately immerses the reader in the world of the story. Readers can imagine themselves standing in the kitchen with Aibileen, or listening to Minny complain about her employer. In this novel, Stockett attempts to show what life was like for black maids in the south, while interjecting what readers can assume is her own voice and perspective in the form of Skeeter (Eugenia Phelan). Skeeter, bothered by the way she sees her friends treating their maids, and moved by a love for her own maid growing up, decides she wants to write a book of interviews that shows what life is really like for black maids who work for white families.

The other two narrators, Aibileen and Minny, are both maids who have spent most of their lives working for white women, whose beds they have made and whose children they have practically raised. In her novel, Stockett attempts to show the contradictions that existed in society for these maids who were treated as unequal, and yet are given the full responsibility of raising white children. One such contradiction is the "Hilly Holbrook's Home Help Sanitation Initiative." Hilly, a long time friend of Skeeter's, takes it upon herself to create an initiative to help home owners install "maid toilets" in all the homes in Jackson that do not already have these "special" toilets installed because, as Hilly so eloquently states, "It's just plain dangerous. Everybody knows they carry different kinds of diseases than we do." (8) Hilly, of course, has a maid herself, and allows her maid to cook her food and care for her children, but the maid cannot use the same bathroom that Hilly and her family use because that would be unsanitary. Of course, not all of the white women Stockett's story are as racist as Hilly Holbrook.

Stockett has really tried to give a fair representation of the different attitudes expressed by both maids and employers (white women) alike. Some of the employers, like Cecilia Foote, Minny's employer, are practically color blind and want nothing more than to be friends with their maids. Cecilia even goes so far as to sit at the same table and eat meals with Minny, which is considered improper by Hilly and many other women in Jackson. On the other hand, some maids are represented as being just as racist as Hilly. One maid, Gretchen,

agrees to an interview with Skeeter, but when she arrives, instead of telling Skeeter about her experiences as a maid, she starts yelling “Say it, lady, say the word you think every time one of us comes in the door. Nigger” (295).

It is evident that *The Help* is a story about the differences that exist between people, both apparent and real, and the difficulties of overcoming these differences. Sockett highlights the fear and anxiety the maids experience when they give their testimony to Skeeter, at one point stating “they [maids] are scared, looking at the back door every ten minutes, afraid they’ll get caught talking to me. Afraid they’ll be beaten like Louvenia’s grandson, or, hell, bludgeoned in their front yard like Medgar Evers” (277).

The Help will make you feel uncomfortable at times, unsettled and disgusted by the way Hilly Holbrook and other white women talk about and treat their maids, and yet at the same time feel you will empowered by the resilience and strength of Minny, Aibileen, Skeeter and the many other maids who take huge risks in standing up against the repression of Jackson’s society. This novel is a great mix of history and fiction that tells an unforgettable story of compassion, which will move readers to tears at times, and lead into fits of laughter at others.

Contributors >>>

>>> **Samantha Bickerdt** is a Junior Religion major/Art History minor from Groveport, OH. Last year, she won the W.O. and F.E. Amy Award last year for religious studies. She regularly participates in the community service programs here at Otterbein.

>>> **Hannah Biggs** hails from the Hoosier land of Terre Haute, Indiana. She is a junior double major in English (concentration in literary studies) and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies (focus on gender and literature). Hannah works in the Writing Center, is an Admission's Office host and tour guide, serves on the editorial board for *kate*: Otterbein's feminist zine, and is social chair for Sigma Tau Delta: Otterbein's English honor society. She would first off like to thank Mrs. Grawbowski, her sophomore high school English teacher, who made her read Fahrenheit 451--a book that turned her into a lover of literature and convinced her to tread down an academic path which she has never looked back on with regret. She would like to send out a heartfelt thank you to her English professors who have helped her become who she is today and who she will become tomorrow.

>>> **Brittany Dorow** is an art major and Creative Writing minor at Otterbein and is involved in music as well as the Honors Program. She loves all things creative, and photography is one of her favorite mediums of expression. After college she hopes to find a career that allows her to travel and write, perhaps for a non-profit organization.

>>> **Chelsea Ferrin** is a senior Philosophy and Political Science double major with a minor in Legal Studies. Following graduation this June, she had the intention of taking a year off from college and then attending graduate school in Philosophy and ultimately pursuing a Ph D. in Legal Ethics. Contrary to popular belief, she is not mean.

>>> **Zach Garster** is a Music Education Major from Massillon Ohio, and part of the 2011 graduating class of Otterbein University. He currently works as the Otterbein Concert Choir's Bass section leader, as a director's assistant, and as an arranger commissioned by Otterbein Choirs. He is a Dean's List student, a member of the Alpha Lambda Delta/ Phi Eta Sigma Honoraries, and also the Senior Class Representative for Otterbein's chapter of the Ohio Collegiate Music Education Association. He hopes to teach vocal music at the high school level, eventually earning a doctorate in choral conducting and teaching at the collegiate level.

>>> **Boris Hinderer** is a junior double majoring in Creative Writing and Psychology. When not master-crafting essays, he enjoys biking, writing poetry, making self-deprecating jokes about writing poetry, and looking for turtles at Otterbein Lake. He eagerly looks forward to studying abroad in the Netherlands this fall, and after graduating, intends to continue his studies in psychology, while hopefully writing on the side. He would like to thank the Otterbein English department for providing nothing but great experiences.

>>> **Zachary Hopper** graduated from Otterbein in the Spring of 2010. His featured essay, *An Implicit Ethics*, was his Honors thesis.

>>> **Christine Horvath** is the Co-Editor of this issue of Aegis. She will graduate in June with a B.A. in English and a minor in Women's Studies. This year, she received a Student Research Fund award to go to Chicago to do research for her senior thesis about women's participation in comedy. She has also produced several comedy shows at Otterbein and with Wild Goose, a non-profit arts collective in Columbus.

>>> **Justin McAtee**, a junior, is majoring in Literary Studies, Creative Writing, and Psychology, with hopes of winning fame and fortune as a freelance literary critic and poet-psycho-therapist. He is involved with numerous campus organizations and societies, some of which are honorary. He also works for the Otterbein Writing Center and the Westerville Big Lots. After graduation, Justin plans on taking his next steps toward immortality in the direction of a graduate program in Creative Writing, with concentrations in fiction and/or serving espresso.

>>> **Chris Thayer** is a junior Honors double-major in Business Administration (Marketing focus) and English (Creative Writing focus) with a minor in Psychology from Austin, Texas. She is a member of Alpha Lambda Delta/Phi Eta Sigma (honor society), Torch & Key (honor society), and Sigma Tau Delta (English honor society), FreeZone!, and is secretary/treasurer of the Gamers' Guild. She also works at Otterbein's Writing Center as a Consultant. After graduation, she plans on pursuing a career in Marketing or professional Editing.

>>> **Danielle Wood**, originally from Marion, OH, is a senior at Otterbein this year. She will graduate this spring with a degree in Middle Childhood Education. Danielle is an active member of Otterbein's Middle Childhood Advisory Committee, as well as the current secretary for the National Collegiate Middle Level Association, an affiliate of the National Middle School Association. She has also participated in various music ensembles during her time at Otterbein. Danielle is passionate about advocating for all young adolescents and integrating arts and humanities into her teaching. This fall, Danielle plans to teach middle grades mathematics or language arts.

>>> **Becky Woodruff** is a junior Literary Studies, Creative Writing, and Theatre major with a minor in Women's Studies. She is secretary of Otterbein's newly-formed chapter of Sigma Tau Delta: International English Honor Society, and she was also recently inducted into Mortar Board and Torch and Key. Following her graduation from Otterbein, she intends to attend graduate school for a Master of Library Science degree. Becky would like to thank Dr. Steigman, Christine, and Justin for their patience.

>>> **Vianca Yohn** is a junior studying Literary Studies and Creative Writing from Madison, Alabama. When ze isn't reading, writing, or otherwise engaged in academic affairs, ze is busy with in zir extracurricular roles as president of the GLBTQA (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, ally) organization, FreeZone; vice president of Otterbein's Alpha Rho Upsilon chapter of Sigma Tau Delta, the National English Honor Society; and member of Mortar Board, Torch and Key, and Alpha Lambda Delta/Phi Eta Sigma. After ze graduates from Otterbein, ze plans to attend graduate school to pursue a Master's of Fine Arts and, eventually, a PhD in creative nonfiction writing.