

Beginnings and Endings: A Critical Edition

BEGINNINGS AND ENDINGS: A CRITICAL EDITION

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Nampa, Idaho



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This publication contains the work of College of Western Idaho students in Professor Liza Long's English 211 Literary Analysis course. In this course, students meet the following outcomes:

- Consider a wide range of alternatives to a habitual way of approaching texts
- Analyze literature with attention to style and form as well as content
- Use accepted methods of literary research and MLA documentation to integrate others' ideas respectfully, accurately, and critically
- Apply a variety of critical strategies in responding to literature
- Write literary analysis essays using critical approaches and incorporating the ideas of others
- Discuss the significance of cultural, historical, thematic, and theoretical perspectives in interpreting literature
- Deliberate over the kinds of political interpretations made when reading and writing about literature

The course is required for both [Creative Writing](#) and [English Literature](#) majors at CWI and also fulfills the research and writing requirement for the [Liberal Arts](#) degree.

Students complete this publication as part of a [group project](#).

For more information, please contact Liza Long, lizalong@cw.edu.

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[PART I]

"Terrific Mother" by Lorrie Moore

You can read Lorrie Moore's short story "Terrific Mother" at this link. <https://www.theparisreview.org/fiction/2033/terrific-mother-lorrie-moore>



Lorrie Moore was born in Glens Falls, New York. She attended St. Lawrence University. After graduation, she moved to Manhattan and worked as a paralegal for two years. She went on to win the 1998 O. Henry Award for her short story "People Like That Are the Only People Here."

"Lorrie Moore" by Zane Williams,
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lorrie_Moore.JPG, Licensed CC By Zane Williams

About the Authors

Payton McClelland

My major is Liberal Arts (I just changed it from Creative Writing and changed it many times) and I will be graduating with an associate's in Liberal Arts this summer! My astrological sun sign is a Scorpio!

Tania Agurto Lopez

My major is English with Literature emphasis. I'm graduating this Spring. Yay!!
I'm a Chilean International Student.

Laura Lax

My major is English: Literature, because the Creative Writing option wasn't available as an online only degree. I have one more class to take next semester but after that I'll have my Associate's in English!

I love animals and currently keep two dogs, a cat, two guinea pigs, a hamster, two turtles, a snake, a leopard gecko, an axolotl, and several fish tanks that total up to about 345 gallons of water in my house. Thankfully, I live in Illinois where earthquakes are rare!

Tyler Burke

What's up! I'm Tyler, and I am a Liberal Arts major graduating

in Fall 2021. My dream job is to get into sports journalism. I love football and would love to write for a football team someday!

Brittani Cooper

My name is Brittani Cooper and I am a Liberal Arts major. I will be graduating in May 2021 with my associate's degree, and then I will be transferring to Boise State University this fall to complete a bachelor's degree.

Lauren Kozup

Lauren Kozup has lived in Boise her whole life, spending most of her days reading and writing both stories of fiction and non-fiction. She has always enjoyed learning and will be earning her Associates degree in English Literature this Spring. She has been accepted to BSU and will continue her education in English Lit, planning to earn both her Bachelors and her Masters. When she's not studying, Lauren spends her time writing in her book about Naval Aviation, walking the greenbelt with her boyfriend, and is always reading.

Critical Introduction

The Terrific Critical Edition of “Terrific Mother” by Lorrie Moore

“The Individuation of Adrienne Porter” explores Lorrie Moore’s “Terrific Mother” through the psychological critical lens. Laura Lax uses Carl G. Jung’s theories of psychoanalysis in order to explore the psychological journey taken by Adrienne after the death of the Spearsons’ baby. Lax proposes that the death of the baby forces Adrienne onto a path toward what Jung calls “individuation”: the attainment of wholeness of the psyche only possible by a complete balance of all of its parts. Adrienne deals with her trauma, Lax says, by herself regressing into childhood and living out, so to speak, the death of the baby that she failed to prevent. Only through this harrowing psychological journey is Adrienne able to forgive herself for the accidental death of the newborn and finally achieve individuation.

In her “Reader Response Analysis”, Brittani Cooper proposes that Lorrie Moore has created a short story that elicits many responses from readers, but a realization of the societal norms that are placed on women is a prominent one. Moore uses her main female character, Adrienne, to demonstrate to readers the societal norms that need to be broken, such as men being the scholars while women are just the spouses, women are not the intellectuals in the group, and that every woman has to be a dutiful wife and mother. Adrienne uses the artistic retreat that she and her husband are on as a means of finding herself again,

and she breaks down these societal norms from the inside, not just the outside.

Payton McClelland explores Lorrie Moore's "Terrific Mother" from the feminist criticism lens. In this, we investigate what it means to be a success of a woman and what it may mean to be a failure. The short story has suggested themes of motherhood and the purpose of a wife which will be explored as well. McClelland finds a deeper meaning in the guilt and shame that comes with failing to be a good wife and caretaker that society raises women to believe is their main purpose in life.

Tyler Burke explores Lorrie Moore's "Terrific Mother" through a deconstruction lens, analyzing different gender roles in society today and also how relationships in today's society are. The story talks about the main character Adrienne and how she dropped her friend's baby and how she feels like a failed woman. Burke goes into detail about parenting and gender roles with not only mothers but fathers as well and their roles of parenting and roles if they are single parents.

Tania Agurto delves into Lorrie Moore's "Terrific Mother" through Historical / Biographical Criticism lens in order to explore the context in which this short story was written. What events could have influenced Moore in the development of Adrienne and Martin's character or what aspects of Moore's life or personality are reflected in Adrienne. It is an invitation to have a broader vision at the magnificent work of Lorrie Moore.

Lauren Kozup's essay covers "Terrific Mother" using the New Criticism lens to show that the main character, Adrienne, is the epitome of a failed women. Lorrie Moore gives her audience a story of raw struggles and mistakes through the life of this young woman. Through both summary and analysis, this essay navigates what it means to be a good mother and an exceptional woman in society.

Annotated Bibliography

Canin, Ethan. "Lorrie Moore: Stories That Make You Cry—until You Laugh". *Esquire*, vol 126, no. 2, Aug. 1996, p. 92. [EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/cwi.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ipcid&custid=ns149246&db=a9h&AN=9607253026&site=ehost-live](https://search.ebscohost.com/cwi.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ipcid&custid=ns149246&db=a9h&AN=9607253026&site=ehost-live).

This is a short review of Moore's short stories by Ethan Canin. The article describes humor and sadness as a common and endearing trend in her short story pieces. The article exclaims Moore is a great read for something that feels authentic.

Falfoul, Nadia Boudidah. "Humoring the Context, Contextualizing Humor in the Short Fiction of Lorrie Moore." *International Journal of Humanities and Cultural Studies*, 29 Mar. 2016, ijhcs.com/index.php/ijhcs/article/view/383.

This article provides an overview of how Lorrie Moore uses humor in her writing and the effect that it can have on her readers. Lorrie's use of exaggeration, understatements and puns can help the reader relate the inner demons that Adrienne is facing.

Fordman, Frieda. *An Introduction to Jung's Psychology*. Penguin, 1953.

Frieda Fordham gives an overview of the theories of Carl Jung and the terminology used within them. The book covers, as proposed by Jung, theories on people's different psychological types, defining them as either introverts or extraverts; archetypes of the collective

unconscious, explaining the concepts of both and describing some of Jung's more prominent archetypes; religion and the individuation process, which proposes that religion is a manifestation of the collective unconscious and is rife with archetypes and explores its connection to individuation, or Jung's theory of how a person becomes "whole"; the practice of Jung's theories in psychotherapy; the application of archetypes to the dreams of psychoanalysis patients; the relationship between the psychological development of children and their educators; and a biographical sketch of Jung himself. The text is useful in acquiring a working knowledge of Jung and his theories in order to prepare one for more in-depth reading of Jung's own writings.

Jung, C. G. *Collected Works of C.G. Jung, Volume 9 (Part 1)*. Edited by Gerhard Adler. Translated by Annotation: Hull R F C., Princeton University Press, 2014.

A collection of essays written by Jung giving in-depth explanations to his psychoanalytic theories. Jung defines and describes the collective unconscious and its archetypes, and then gives more in-depth discussion of the specific archetypes of the Anima, Mother, Child, Kore, Trickster, and Spirit archetypes. He also discusses the concepts of rebirth and individuation. Each of these ideas is tied back into the practice of patient psychoanalysis. The text is useful in understanding the concepts of Jungian psychology so that they may be applied to literature.

Lee, Don. "About Lorrie Moore." *Ploughshares*, vol. 24, no. 2/3, [Ploughshares, Emerson College], 1998, pp. 224–29, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40380939>.

Don Lee gives us a small brushstroke of what we could call a biography of Lorrie Moore. He briefly details her work, talks a bit about her childhood and her parents, and gives us an idea of the nature of her character. Lee details her career as a writer and tells us a bit about Lorrie's journey to rise to prominence as one of the greatest short story writers in America. In the case of

“Terrific Mother”, this source gives us a bibliographic focus and gives us context that could influence her work. “Lorrie Moore”. *Canberra Times*, 15 Feb. 2014, p. 19. EBSCOhost.

This is a short article on Lorrie Moore which was press for the book “Bark”. The article asks Moore what she thinks about and why she chooses to write short stories. It explains some of her inspirations for her short stories and for her writing styles.

Lynn, Steven. “Chapter 6, Connecting the Text: Historical and New Historical Criticism.” *Texts and Contexts: Writing About Literature with Critical Theory*, Seventh Edition ed., Pearson, 2017, pp. 145–193.

Chapter 6 of Text and Contexts takes us into the importance of context and how external influences do matter and complement the final result. Knowing when, where and by whom a piece of art was written will give us a broader look at the reality of the author, and will probably give us a greater understanding of the objective and intellectual perspective of the subject matter. In the case of “Terrific Mother” by Lorrie Moore, it leads us to delve into what was happening in the world when this short story was written and the events that may have influenced it, as well as having additional information about Moore’s life helps us understand her vision in the development of the story.

Lynn, Steven. “Chapter 7: Minding the Work: Psychological Criticism.” *Texts and Contexts: Writing About Literature with Critical Theory*, 2016, pp. 195–219.

Chapter 7 of Texts and Contexts explains the concepts behind using psychology as a lens for literary analysis. The chapter mostly focuses on Sigmund Freud, as Freud’s theories form, in some form or another, the basis for most modern psychology. It explains Freud’s theories of psychology and briefly mentions how Freud’s followers built on them. It also supplies useful terms to help think psychologically about literature and provides examples of psychological criticism. This resource would

be helpful for the reader to acquire a brief and generalized knowledge of psychological criticism.

Lynn, Steven. "Chapter 8: Gendering the Text." *Text and Context: Writing about Literature with Critical Theory*, Seventh Edition ed., Pearson Education, 2017, pp. 221–256.

In this textbook by Steven Lynn gives insight into critical theories within the literature. Chapter eight focuses on gender criticisms including feminism, post-feminism, and queer theory criticisms. The chapter touches on political approaches within the criticisms and how to approach literary texts.

MacPherson, Heidi. "Escape from the Invasion of the Love-Killers: Lorrie Moore's Metafictional Feminism." *JSTOR*, Aug. 2012

MacPherson published her academic article in August of 2021 that is titled 'Escape from the Invasion of the Love-Killers'. This is a credible article due to it being published in JSTOR. In this article, the author, like Liza Long, heavily focuses on the theme of Feminism throughout Lorrie Moore's writing. Although no direct quote is used in my analysis essay, it was a great article to read before diving into my own lens and themes

Understanding different themes in academic articles is vital to understanding the original text, especially when writing your own analytic essay on the matter. Reading academic articles helps to understand how arguments are brought in through writing. This technique can help spur you into writing your own argumentative thesis for an analysis essay.

McClelland, Payton. "The Feminist Perspective." *Beginnings and Endings A Critical Edition*, College of Western Idaho, 14 May 2021, <https://cwi.pressbooks.pub/beginnings-and-endings-a-critical-edition/chapter/feminist-2/>

Payton McClelland writes an analysis using the Feminist lens on the short story *Terrific Mother* by Lorrie Moore. This is a great article that includes sentences that are summarized, but that is not her main focus. Long navigates how this story is viewed through the Feminist lens, portraying how the main character, Adrienne, is the

epitome of a failed woman. Long explores what it means to be a failed woman in society and provides excellent background and sources that support her argument

This article is supported by many sources and authors which is why I felt confident in using it as one of my main sources. The author has a beautiful way of speaking to her audience and was very eloquent in her writing. I used this article because it mainly included analysis, with only small parts being a summary. This was important in the way that she assumed her audience had read "Terrific Mother" before she began writing her piece. McClelland applied the lens of Feminism to her analytical argument. Parts of this article and lens helped to support my main argument as well.

McNally, Joel. "Masterfully Bittersweet: Lorrie Moore Finds a Way to Move Readers and Make Them Laugh at the Same Time." *Writer (Kalmbach Publishing Co.)*, vol 118, no 12, Dec. 2005, pp. 20-23. *EBSCOhost*, [Search.ebscohost.com/cwi.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip.cpid&custid=ns149246&db=a9h&AN=18875325&site=ehost-live](http://search.ebscohost.com/cwi.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip.cpid&custid=ns149246&db=a9h&AN=18875325&site=ehost-live).

This article is packed in reviews of Lorrie Moore and her writings packing tragedy and humor into many short stories. She is interviewed with questions about her writings and what she believes about writing. Moore brings up social types contrasted with individualizing a character, which is something she uses to bring her own characters to life.

Moore, Lorrie (1992). "Terrific Mother." London: Faber & Faber.

This is a short story by Lorrie Moore about a woman who kills a baby then hastily gets married and runs away to Europe with her husband on an academic retreat. The story follows the main character, Adrienne, who is dealing with the grief of the event.

"New Criticism." *Poetry Foundation*, Poetry Foundation, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/learn/glossary-terms/new-criticism>

This was a short article that I referenced in my analysis essay. Being assigned the lens of New Criticism, I deemed

it important to educate my readers on the definition of New Criticism in literature. A short definition is given, and that was the only reason I used this article. New Criticism is a lens that helps to focus on close reading of a text. In a way, it is heavily analyzing a reading, finding out the intentions of the author and how it is significant. Using new lenses on analysis essays can be tricky, so it is always important to understand the definitions first and foremost.

O'Malley, Sheila. "The Books: 'Birds of America' – 'Terrific Mother' (Lorrie Moore)." *The SheilaVariations*, 04 April. 2008. www.sheilaomalley.com/?p=7930.

This source talks about the opening scene and how humorous it is. It talks about how Lorrie Moore has the perfect touch of comedy while talking about serious situations. With Adrienne being single and 35 there is a quote from the book where at the garden party someone says that she would look like a terrific mother. I think Moore's perfect touch of comedy in a really serious incident with Adrienne and the baby.\

Passaro, Vince. "Unlikely Stories." *Harper's Magazine*, vol. 299, no. 1791, Aug. 1999, p. 80. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost, cwi.idm.oclc.org/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,cpid&custid=ns149246&db=a9h&AN=2081851&site=ehost-live.

This source is a review regarding the rebirth of the short story in America, and it is a kind of chronology of the evolution of American short story. The author speaks of the beginning of the short story in the 1930s and then the second Hemingway or "minimalist" period. It also highlights the economic benefits it brought. This essay speaks of the tremendous contribution of Lorrie Moore to the evolution of the American short story, enriching it with his particular and realistic way of writing.

Wekes, Karen " Identity in the Short Story Cycles of Lorrie Moore," *Journal of the Short Story in English*, 39, 2002, 109-122.

This source delves into the changes to which women were exposed in past decades and, as a consequence,

the expectations that society was generating on them. It highlights a group of writers who have brought to the fore, through their works, the changes and challenges of women from a few decades ago until now and the search for identity amid the multiple roles that women are fulfilling. Regarding Lorrie Moore, her work stands out in six of her books and how her female protagonists, who are usually in their thirties or a little older, deal with their different challenges and their multiple roles and defy pre-established social standards.

Yarrow, Allison. "How the '90s Tricked Women Into Thinking They'd Gained Gender Equality." *Time USA*, June 13 (2018).

This source is an article on a magazine website that talks about the 1990s and the evolution of female empowerment. It gives us a background of how the woman was positioning herself in areas that were previously denied to them and they had success and control over her new roles. However, a criticism is made of what promised to be the result of the feminist struggle, which was equality between men and women in all areas. This article reveals the deception of the triumph of Feminism over Patriarchy and the adverse effect that this produced through hostility towards the female gender.

New Criticism

Terrific Mother

By Lauren Kozup

Lorrie Moore published *Terrific Mother* in 1998, a short story that centers on a young woman who makes the most fatal mistake known to mothers: causing the death of a child. This story navigates a life of loss, guilt, and forgiveness told through the perspective of a young woman who is too fearful to let go of her guilt. Through the use of the New Criticism lense, it is concluded through multiple situations that Adrienne is the epitome of a failed woman.

The beginning of *Terrific Mother* starts with a baby being thrust into Adrienne's arms, a baby that did not belong to her, nor did she want to hold. However, as a thirty-something year old woman without a husband or a child, the woman figured that this would be an instinct. Surely, all women are made to be mothers. Adrienne had gently coddled the baby, fearful she might cause harm or drop it. No matter how careful she was, it wasn't enough. Shooing a fly away, Adrienne lost balance and the old, rotting wood bench split beneath her, toppling both her and the baby. Falling to the ground, Adrienne noticed a jet in the distance, the clouds in the blue sky, the frozen faces of those surrounding her. But reality set in and she hit the concrete, hard and fast, bruising her spine. But looking over was the most painful part for her. There, laying in blood, was the baby, still and unmoving.

After the death of the child, the main character of the story falls into a seven month-long depression, where her only access to the real world is through the cracked door of when her boyfriend visits. Adrienne deals with sadness and fear and loneliness, however, there is always something much worse behind her eyes: guilt. Adrienne's mind becomes ridden and overwhelmed with guilt from the death of the baby. This guilt is buried so deep within her that she becomes completely disconnected from society.

Martin, Adrienne's boyfriend, is unsure of how to help. Seven months after this accident, his best offer is a proposal of marriage where the two would travel to Italy for an academic retreat. His hope is that perhaps a change of scenery and community will heal this broken woman. Through many instances Adrienne has opportunities to heal, however, guilt and unforgiveness towards herself always conquer the potential of good.

This is a story of a woman who makes a fatal mistake, and while every time she tries to seek forgiveness and put an end to her self-destruction, guilt and society overpower her, crushing her, forcing her back into the dark cave of torture that she once forced herself to reside in.

Analysis

New Criticism is applied to this short story to see it through a different light. "The New Critics emphasized 'close reading' as a way to engage with a text, and paid close attention to the interactions between form and meaning" (Poetry Foundation). Close analytical reading is where hidden meaning is found, along with expanded perspectives.

The story begins with a woman in her mid-thirties who is unmarried and childless. Already, she is placed into a category of failing to meet society's standards. In fact, she ultimately becomes the epitome of a failure when she causes the death of a baby. This begins a spiral as soon as this mistake occurs. Tunneling into a seven month-long depression, she fully relies on her boyfriend for basic needs, such as food and water. This society sets the standards of women that are to cook and clean, and Adrienne performed none of these duties. Suggesting to marry and travel to Italy, Adrienne accepts the invitation. The

rest of the short story is set in the Italian countryside where the main character fights against forgiveness.

Once in Italy, Adrienne begins to spend time at her husbands' conferences and dinners, however, she also begins to meet with a masseuse who immediately recognizes the pain she is in. "Adrienne began quietly to cry, the deep touching of her body, melting her down to some equation of animal sadness, shoe leather and brine. She began to understand why people would want to live in these dusky nether zones, the meltdown brought on by sleep or drink or this. It seemed truer, more familiar to the soul than was the busy complicated flash that was normal life" (Moore 23).

The woman touches her soul, helping her release the internal distress and discomfort that Adrienne is battling. Further into the story, the masseuse speaks to Adrienne, saying, "'You have a knot here in your trapezius,' Ilke said, kneading Adrienne's shoulder. 'I can feel the belly of the knot right here,' she said, pressing hard, bruising her shoulder a little, and then easing up. 'Let go,' she said. 'Let go all the way, of everything.' 'I might die,' said Adrienne" (Moore 23-24). This last line shows the main character and her struggle with self-torture. Adrienne believes that she will never fully recover and forgive herself for the sin she has committed. So, when the masseuse offers her advice to let go of this self-hatred, Adrienne can't. Guilt has become such a big part of this woman that it has become her identity. And without her identity, then who is she? Losing such a big part of herself is frightening, after it has taken over so much of her life.

Essentially, one of the main themes throughout the story is self-torture. Using the New Criticism lense, examples of self-torture are found in almost every paragraph. Ultimately, Adrienne hides herself away due to guilt and shame. However, through a long period of healing both physically and mentally, she seems as if she is ready to find forgiveness. "Adrienne lies down, feeling free, symbolically stripping her guilt alongside her clothes. She lays without shame until she is suddenly awakened by a tour guide and a group of tourists who are all staring at her, shaming her for being naked, seemingly like society throwing guilt back onto her for not tormenting herself for her past mistakes" (Long). As Adrienne is metaphorically

about ready to fling herself off the cliff to face forgiveness, she shrinks away, continuing to run back to who she has been for so long.

The story ultimately ends with Adrienne learning that her husband has been cheating on her with the masseuse. "...when Adrienne is cheated on, it is in no way any fault of hers but she is heavily associated with guilt and shame that makes her feel like it is" (Long). This is sort of the last straw, where this woman has now completely failed. She has failed at the potential of being both a nurturing mother and a fulfilling wife. The story leaves the audience with the understanding that Adrienne is now trapped in a loveless marriage, being put to shame due to her past mistakes.

Terrific Mother is a story that captures the harsh reality of what failing to be a woman and a wife is like. The main character, Adrienne, continually battles with herself between self-torture and forgiveness, finally coming to the conclusion of being wrapped up in mistakes. This story navigates a life of loss, guilt, and forgiveness told through the perspective of a young woman who is too fearful to let go of her guilt.

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Reader Response

Reading “Terrific Mother” as a Woman

Brittani Cooper

The short story “Terrific Mother” is a fantastic example of who women are supposed to be and what they are supposed to think, but it also provides readers with a chance to live out their response to this text. All of the feminist twists and turns in this short story allow readers to reflect on their responses and decide how they will use what they take away. Lorrie Moore’s short story elicits responses of realization that women can fill many roles, and not just the ones that society has normalized.

For centuries, women have been told who they are, what they are, and what they can and cannot do. They have certain expectations that are placed upon them by society, and Lorrie Moore has effectively demonstrated them for her readers in this short story. For example, in the very first paragraph of the story, the main female character, Adrienne, is faced with something that she used to think was natural, “holding a baby” (Moore 3). For some women, this is natural to them and they accept that, but the reader can relate to the apprehension that is described in the story. There is pressure on Adrienne to fill her role in society as a mother and caregiver, but Adrienne is in that “demographic moment – whatever it was – when the best compliment you could get was: You would make a terrific mother” (Moore 3). For the reader, this is a pressure that is 100% recognizable, whether male or female, not just to be a parent, but to be a good one.

At one time or another, society and societal norms have placed pressure on one to do one thing or another, in this case, become a mother. Another role that Adrienne is supposed to fill in the short story is that of the dutiful wife and “a trailing spouse” (Macpherson 571). On the artistic retreat that Adrienne and Martin take, Adrienne is often asked by the guests “Are you one of the spouses?” (Moore 6). This is another recognizable role that Adrienne is fulfilling, but she doesn’t waste time in pointing out that her husband would be considered a spouse too. She also points out to Martin that all of the spouses are the women, and all of the scholars at the retreat are the men. Adrienne doesn’t care for being “patronized by a pompous academic” and in this scenario, Adrienne is subtly pushing back against the roles that society has in place for her, which is reflective of the response that a reader might have to this situation (International 300). Instead of large, drastic pushes, she keeps those societal norms within arms reach, as many people do today.

The reader’s response to this can be a sense of empowerment. In order to take something down, or destroy these societal norms, sometimes it is better to work from the inside, as Adrienne does, rather than the outside. Adrienne gets the chance to do a lot of self-exploration throughout the short story. Martin had brought her to this retreat in hopes of her becoming more life herself again, or like “a snake getting back inside of its skin” (Moore 27). This is a relatable occurrence that many readers would have a response to. At one time or another, likely every reader has attempted to do some self-exploration, and usually becomes better because of it. The reader could take this demonstration of taking a break from societal norms as an example of how Adrienne does not let these societal norms hold her down. She does not let anyone tell her who she has to be or how she has to behave, and if she did, then she probably wouldn’t have woken up in a field, naked, on pages 26 and 27.

Societal norms are placed on human beings from the second they come into this world. They will be a mother, a father, a scholar, an athlete, a good person, etc. They are expected to follow the norms and rules that society has placed in front of them, but it doesn’t always happen. Rules are meant to be broken, and sometimes it’s easier to break them from the inside

than from the outside. Reading this short story can elicit a number of responses from readers, many of which will be for or against these societal norms. Realizing that women can fill any role they wish to, whether it is in line with societal norms or not, is just one of the many responses that Lorrie Moore's short story elicits.

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Texts and Contexts.

Deconstruction

Deconstruction of “Terrific Mother”

Tyler Burke

“Terrific Mother” is a story with a really big twist. At first it has this super horrible scene where Adrienne is asked to hold a baby at the picnic party. She stumbles and rolls her ankle and she kind of thrusts the baby on her fall down to the ground. The baby hits his head on the wall very hard and dies shortly after. Obviously, Adrienne is really scarred by this event and basically cuts herself out of everyday life and interactions for a while. The next few months of Adrienne’s life she becomes super depressed and blocks herself out from basically everyone except for her boyfriend Martin. Martin suggests to Adrienne that they get married and that Adrienne should go with him on his academic retreat, to hopefully take her mind of the horrific scene with her friend’s baby. Martin and Adrienne end up getting married and the rest of the story takes place in the beautiful Italian countryside. Adrienne is slowly but surely getting over the crisis of letting her best friend’s baby die while in her arms. In the end, women are supposed to be the rock and backbone for their children, especially at infant ages; this is when they learn who their mother is and know that they are safe with family so, in society’s eyes, Adrienne failed miserably.

Every little girl dreams of starting a family and having kids of her own and being able to watch them grow up into smart, caring and loving adults. “The best compliment you could get

was: You would make a terrific mother" (Moore 3). Society has the image of women being "the perfect mother" meaning they do everything in their power to make sure their kids are fed, have good hygiene, are nice to people, and most importantly showing love. Moms do all of this while also balancing their own life and even their jobs. This can be very stressful for moms. This is where boyfriends or dads come into the picture to help with that "perfect mother" work load. In the book that is where Martin comes into play.

With Adrienne falling into a severe depression, Martin is practically the only person that is by Adrienne's side throughout these depressing last few months of her life. Martin convinces Adrienne to marry him and to go with him on his academic retreat. At first Adrienne was not convinced, but Martin keeps saying, "I'm gonna marry you until you puke" ("The Books Birds of America" – "Terrific Mother"). So, they get married and the rest of story takes place in Italy. Martin came in with the marriage card, in a way at the perfect time. This in my eyes was a distraction to get her mind off of things and slowly make her forget about what she did months ago.

In today's society it is almost like people tend to forget that there is a such thing as stay at home dads or single dads that have kids. Fathers in a way take on the "perfect father" job, if they are single dads or stay at home dads. It is a gender role where normally mothers do most of the work with the kids while the dads work a lot to pay bills and provide for the family and the mothers would cook, clean, etc. Parenting is a rough challenge at the beginning of it. There is no manual on how to be the best parent, you just have to figure that out on your own. "This particular parenting experience has been like a large nuclear bomb on the small village of my life," this was said by Lorrie Moore about her own parenting experience (Lee, 1998). This speaks volumes because sometimes being a parent is not planned and it just kind of sneaks up on you out of nowhere; you kind of have to try and be calm and prepare yourself. Even when you want to start a family, once you have kids you have to adapt to a new lifestyle, in a way. You have to make sure they're fed, diapers changed, and the most hassle of them all is stopping them from crying at 3 in the morning while the rest

of the family is sleeping. I think a great example of first-time parenting, I guess you would call it, is from *Avengers Endgame*: Tony Stark is reunited with his own father and Tony notices his dad has flowers. His dad says they are expecting a baby (Tony) and Tony tells him that he has a daughter of his own. Tony's dad asks him if he felt qualified to operate his baby and if he was nervous. Tony replies with that he literally just pieced it together as he went along, which honestly is probably the best way to do it.

There is one other huge gender role in the story around the dinner tables at the academic retreat. Adrienne is talking to some of the men at the academic retreat, and the men, of course, just assume that Adrienne is one of the spouses. So, Adrienne asks Martin about the fact that all the spouses are women "Why are all the spouses here women? Why don't the women scholars have spouses?" (Moore 14). To me this was huge just because of how society is today with gender and their roles in society. In today's society women wanted to be treated more equal like men. In that particular part of the story, Adrienne is wondering why women cannot be scholars and have spouses of their own. Today's society is all about how women can do things that men can. To some extent this is very true; for example, a mechanic. If a woman can fix a car just as well or even better than a man can, she should be able to be one of the best mechanics. Even this year with Kamela Harris being the first woman vice president, that was a huge statement for women all across the country that they can do anything they put their mind to.

Another part of society and relationships, relates to the last few pages of the story where Martin has been cheating on Adrienne with the masseuse. The masseuse is the one person that Adrienne has talked to, to try and relieve all this tension she has had built up since the horrible accident with her friend's baby. "But in the middle of the meadow, something came over her- a balmy wind, or heat from the uphill hike, and she took off all her clothes" (Moore 26). This quote showed me that Adrienne was finally opening up and letting go of her guilt. The part about Martin cheating on Adrienne relating to today's society and relationships is big because in today's society it almost feels like nobody wants a legitimate relationship anymore. People

just want to hook up and have multiple one-night stands with someone or if they are in a relationship, they just almost randomly “lose feelings” for someone they said loved or someone they have been dating for years. This is almost the norm of relationships in society today I feel like. Personally, I absolutely hate people who cheat in relationships. You seriously cannot just grow up and tell the other person that the relationship is not working out and that you think you should break up? Instead of going behind that person’s back and ripping their heart out of their chest making them wonder what they didn’t have that person did, or what they did wrong in the relationship that made the other person cheat. It honestly disgusts me that people do this in relationships. Especially in the case of Adrienne where she starts going to the sessions with the masseuse and relieving her tensions and she does not even know that her own husband has been cheating on her with the person she has been getting treatment with for weeks.

Society has many images of the way that things should be in today’s world: the perfect mother, gender equality, and relationships, to name a few. Adrienne feels such tremendous guilt with the death of her friends’ baby that she falls into a deep depression and in doing so she gets relieved by marrying Martin and going on an academic retreat with him only to find out that he was cheating on her with the masseuse. In my eyes, this raises questions about society and why some things are the way they are in today’s world.

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Historical/New Historical

The Terrific Critical Edition of “Terrific Mother” by Lorrie Moore: The New Historical Perspective

Tania Agurto

Motherhood has been a source of discord in recent decades for being a concept that is exclusively associated with women, and it turns out to be for some people or societies a kind of meter that helps to pigeonhole women or rank them depending on whether they have decided or managed to be mothers. Lorrie Moore’s “Terrific Mother” presents us this reality through Adrienne, a woman in her mid-thirties, single, childless, which due to her personal circumstances receives compliments such as, “You would make a terrific mother” (Moore 3). Adrienne attends a gathering of friends and by accident, her friend’s baby she holds falls along with her when the picnic bench toppled on her, and sadly the baby dies, which leads her to make decisions such as seclusion for months and later marriage, as an escape route from her pain and guilt. This is how Adrienne, despite being a woman who breaks with the socially established canons, cannot get out of the vicious circle established for women in those years

Through the lens of New Historical Criticism, we can appreciate the external influences that shape Moore’s work and at the same time understand the reality experienced by women in the late 1990s. At the end of the nineties the world was already seeing a change concerning the established social

model; this could be appreciated in the delay in the age of marriage and childbirth due to prioritizing the pursuit of a professional career, the joining of women to the workforce or simply seeking independence without the need for marriage. These changes were reflected in the increase in the average age of women at the time of marriage, which had risen from 20 – 22 years in the early nineties to 25 years at the end of 1997 (Yarrow). This is how the author manages to bring to the fore the important social events that were happening worldwide through Adrienne, a single and independent woman. Regarding that, Karen Weekes declares that “protagonists in Moore’s short stories cycles are constantly exploring and pushing against the social boundaries that they and others have established” (3).

A characteristic of the social change of the nineties is the recognition and the requirement of women as a multifaceted beings; however, in *Text and Contexts* Steven Lynn acknowledges that having equal opportunities is good, but it is not fair when the woman is responsible for taking those opportunities while taking care of everything else (223). Weekes also refers to this and points out that “females’ identities are continually formed and reformed, allowing women to fluctuate between stages of development in response to the sociological demands of relationships and maternal nurturing.” However, we can see to this day that, even though things have become the same through the years, the demand has always been greater for women or the reward for the opportunity has been uneven.

Although we know that the historical context will shape the result whatever the work, the author’s background will also do it. Steven Lynn points out “We can hardly understand one person’s life without some sense of the time and place in which he or she lived, and we can hardly understand human history without trying to think about the individual humans who made it” (148). As part of Moore’s life story, she comments that as a child she was very thin and that made her feel fearful of her environment; she even shared that she was afraid to walk over the grates. Once she became an adult that was not an exception since Moore, like Adrienne, broke with the established pattern, but she continued with his fearful personality. Don Lee comments that “her expectations for herself were modest.

Entering St. Lawrence, she hadn't been exactly bursting with ambition." Later Moore adds, "I think I probably went to college to fall in love" ("About Lorrie Moore"). The influence of her environment and pre-established social patterns have likely helped her to feel that way concerning her personal abilities and expectations. How did this fearful girl become the successful writer of "Terrific Mother"? It is probably her personality that has helped in a great way since this influences her way of writing which is detailed as follows: "Many of her stories are fairly traditional in structure, but there is always that quickness of movement, that slightly skewed narrative perspective that keeps you alert and a little uneasy —she could pull something anytime, and you don't want to miss it" (Unlikely Stories). Moore herself catalogs her life as "conventional" and that is what makes her strangely close in her way of writing.

However, despite not feeling too trained or not being completely sure of the path she wanted to follow professionally, she broke all standards and has even been highlighted as one of the best authors of American short stories. In an article that talks about the rebirth of American short stories Vince Passaro declares, "When volumes like those from Lorrie Moore ...a new kind of work stepped out onto the American literary landscape, more psychologically rich and confrontational than that of the minimalists" ("Unlikely Stones").

The time period in which the story was written tells us a lot about important social changes concerning the visualization of women as defiant beings of the unilaterally established rules. In the late 1990s, it was the Post Feminist movement that was gaining momentum; however, it seems that Adrienne remains to live only First Wave Feminism, since it only leaves the parameter of breaking the scheme, but does not advance further.

The foregoing is explained in her decision to marry Martin, who offers her the option to accompany him to his academic retreat in northern Italy, then in this way "she could be a spouse" (Moore 4). The emotional situation that Adrienne experiences does not allow her to see further and she thinks that this decision will allow her to resume her life; to try to live again because she "is a bushwoman now" (Moore 4). As a consequence

of this decision, Adrienne becomes emotionally subjugated to Martin, which makes her dependent on him emotionally and does not help her with her previous mental-emotional situation.

“Terrific Mother” is a complex story in which Lorrie Moore takes us along surprising paths and we can see how the historical context influences the development of this work; however, it should be mentioned that Moore’s background also affects the setting of the stage in this story. Just as she admits to leading a very conventional life, she also leads Adrienne to try to follow the same path, because “Marriage it’s an institution”, which means that at this time in a historical-social environment, surpassed currents of equality, equity, and liberation.

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Psychological

The Individuation of Adrienne Porter

Laura Lax

Jung defines the collective unconscious as a shared part of humanity's psyche in which exist certain archetypes based on collective human experience, represented by consistent imagery which appears in art and dreams throughout human history. It is differentiated from the personal unconscious in that while the collective unconscious is inherited and shared by all, the personal unconscious is acquired via individual experience and unique to each person (56-57). This is a fundamental aspect of Jungian psychology.

Within the collective unconscious exist specific archetypes which must be in balance with each other and with the conscious psyche in order for a person to achieve *individuation*, or to become "whole" and live in a balanced state where neither the conscious nor the unconscious is repressed (Fordham 77). This wholeness signifies a sort of enlightenment; the ultimate knowing of oneself so that one can achieve ultimate discovery of self and purpose. Not everyone achieves individuation (or even desires to) but for those who try it is often an arduous journey of self-discovery.

This is the journey which is represented in Lorrie Moore's *A Terrific Mother*. Adrienne begins the story in a frightfully unhappy place, having just experienced the unthinkable: the accidental death of an infant at her hands. Much in the way

that she is flipped onto the ground by the rotten wood of the picnic bench, her entire psyche is upended by the death of the newborn she held; this trauma begins a journey of reluctant self-discovery in which she metaphorically regresses to childhood and then once more becomes an adult as the individual pieces of her psyche finally fall into balance. Adrienne's journey demonstrates that the pursuit of individuation, whether we set out to discover it intentionally or are forced onto the road with no other choice in the matter, is not a burden to accept lightly; it very well may drive us to the brink of insanity, and only if that precipice can be carefully and softly trodden do we have a chance of catching our balance and becoming whole.

Adrienne's moment of trauma is the catalyst for her journey, but it is not the beginning; at 35 she begins to be *watched* as she holds babies and so it makes her uncomfortable to do so. She has no children, but society thinks that by this age she should, so she feels like they are observing her — grading her on her potential motherliness. Because of this scrutiny, holding a baby is “no longer natural” and she equates it with “womanliness and earthly skills” (Moore 2). She has entered the years in which people are trying to pigeonhole her into the Mother archetype by emphasizing her waning fertility (Jung 90) but she, ironically, is moving out of it.

The beginning of the story is where we see the start of the imbalance of Adrienne's animus, this subtle shift represented by her sudden discomfort with holding babies. When she loses her grip on the baby and he dies, this much less subtle event signifies a complete loss of the control a woman must have over her “male principle” (Fordham 56) in order to achieve a centeredness of “self” (Fordham 63). The self is often represented in Jungian theory as a child (Fordham 64) and therefore the loss of the baby symbolizes Adrienne's loss of self. After this event she becomes much more controlled by her animus as she begins to completely reject the feminine role of caretaker and becomes, instead, the cared-for, somewhat regressing into the role of a child herself.

Adrienne's loss of self is further exemplified by lapses in her persona. She tells Martin, “Normal life is no longer possible for

me. I've stepped off all the normal paths and am living in the bushes. I'm a bushwoman now." She feels "big, like a beefy killer in a cage" and describes her own hand as "something murderous and huge" (Moore 4). These are responses to her trauma — she has done the unthinkable and broken that which is most fragile, despite doing everything she could to prevent it — but they also represent the encroachment upon her psyche of her shadow, the "uncontrolled, animal part" (Fordham 49) of herself. This is a definitive shift from the persona she exhibits at the picnic when she coos at the baby and acts as though she is perfectly motherly (Moore 2).

It is actually in Martin that we see the Mother archetype that Adrienne's peers had tried so hard to find in her, as Adrienne sinks into a depression and Martin becomes her caretaker. Hinting at his own unbalanced self with the overt presentation of his anima, he makes sure that she eats and, in his monumental effort to shake Adrienne out of her depression, even offers to marry her so that she can accompany him to Italy. He even falls for a moment into the negative aspect of the Great Mother archetype, which can lead to feeling that everyone around oneself is "helpless or dependent" (Fordham 61): "I'm going to marry you, whether you like it or not... I'm going to marry you until you puke" (Moore 4). The assertion is meant facetiously — Martin's words are spoken as he disrobes and treats Adrienne gently — but Adrienne is psychologically in no position to decline, even in jest.

As Adrienne becomes more childlike ("*Whales* got my crystal") Martin begins to pull out of the caretaker position he has created for himself. "He'd been better when they were just dating, with the pepper cheese" (Moore 5), she laments as they arrive in Italy and he begins to treat her indifferently. This is not solely Martin's doing, however, as Adrienne also projects her own behavioral changes on him — it is not only that he is becoming less capable of understanding her, but also that she is becoming more erratic and difficult to understand as she continues to regress into childlike behavior. Martin does not consistently retreat from his self-assigned caretaker role, but alternately pulls back and then reasserts himself, refusing Adrienne's request for a divorce immediately after needing to

be cajoled into complimenting her dress (Moore 6-7). Similarly, Adrienne does not fall headlong into a childlike state, but is one moment childlike and the next not, such as looking for an opportunity to show off new knowledge in the company of the academics (Moore 6) and killing spiders as an art project (Moore 7) not long before astutely coming to the realization that Martin “needs” her (Moore 8). This back and forth on the parts of both Adrienne and Martin exemplifies the difficulty of forward progress; growth is not a straight line, but a progression of hills and valleys.

Adrienne’s full regression into a childlike state happens at the hands of Ilke, the American masseuse. Her first visit to Ilke takes place in a “baby’s room” (Moore 15), the back room of Ilke’s business, decorated with clouds, stars, and snowflakes, and gently lit with a blue light. As Adrienne climbs naked onto the massage table, Brahms’ lullaby plays from the speakers, and she realizes that she is to “become an infant again” (Moore 16). Ilke becomes, in this moment, a mother figure to Adrienne, replacing Martin in the caretaker role. This role lasts for significantly less time for Ilke than for Martin, however, as Adrienne goes through a rebirthing process during this first massage; Ilke is briefly a mother figure before becoming a representation of regrowth, as what began as a calming and nurturing experience becomes, at least for Adrienne, almost sexual (Moore 16). She even feels more adult as she exits the building and buys ice cream, comparing the liqueur-like ice cream of Italy with the cookie-filled ice cream of America (Moore 17).

Adrienne experiences a metaphorical maturation in successive massages until finally, in her second-to-last encounter, as the imagery of sexuality replaced that of infancy, imagery of infirmity and death replaces that of sexuality (Moore 23-24). She meets metaphorical death naked and vulnerable in the field near her studio in a representation of a funeral rite, surrounded by grass and staring at the sky in an echo of the death of the Spearsons’ baby (Moore 26). She has only one last brief appointment with Ilke after this, filled with imagery of witches, ghosts, and vampires – imagery of things which have

no right to exist, echoing Adrienne's discomfort at returning to Ilke when she no longer needs to and thus has no place there.

It is after this last appointment that she discovers that Martin has also been seeing Ilke, and the conversation runs much in the vein of the discovery of an affair – but it is her relationship with Ilke over which Adrienne is protective, not her relationship with Martin. It is in this instance, with Martin deflated and in tears, that he is fully relieved of the caretaker role. Adrienne, however, does not take up this mantle. She comforts him, but she does not mother him, as she has finally managed to balance her psyche, forgive herself, and achieve individuation.

Adrienne's journey to become whole begins with the death of a newborn. In order to overcome her trauma, she feels the need to metaphorically travel the same road that the Spearsons' baby did, regressing through childhood to birth before “dying” and being reborn a fully actualized adult. It is only after this brush with insanity and psychological rebirth that she is able to return to life as a functional, and perhaps more enlightened, human being.

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Feminist

The Terrific Critical Edition of “Terrific Mother” by Lorrie Moore: The Feminist Perspective

Payton McClelland

Lorrie Moore’s “Terrific Mother” is a short story packed full of shocking tragedies intercut with laughter. The beginning of the story starts with Adrienne, the protagonist, at her friend’s house who has just had a baby. She hears whispers of how women that are deemed to be good mothers have the greatest honor. As Adrienne holds her friend’s baby, she goes to swat a fly when the baby falls from her hands to a terrible death. Adrienne then falls into a months-long depression until her boyfriend suggests getting married and coming along on an academic retreat with him. The two get married quite sporadically. The rest of the short story takes place in the Italian countryside where Adrienne is beginning to heal from the trauma of being such a terrible woman that she let a baby die in her care, which seems to be the ultimate failure of a woman. Through the lens of feminist criticism, Adrienne is the epitome of a failed woman. As she journeys through her healing process to overcome this stereotype of women’s purpose revolving around childcare, she ultimately gets shamed for trying to forget the guilt of not conforming to societies standards for women.

Lorrie Moore, the author of “Terrific Mother”, writes from the perspective of Adrienne, a mid-thirties woman who is unmarried and childless. The story’s first paragraph sets the

scene for gender roles by saying, “the best compliment you could get was: You would make a terrific mother” (Moore 3), insinuating that being a woman is judged on motherhood and being a wife. Adrienne feels nervous of being judged by her peers when she is passed her friend’s baby regardless of being around babies before. When she fatally drops the baby, her womanhood and dignity go along side it. The next few months Adrienne spends in her apartment withdrawn from society. She drowns in guilt and sorrow even after being forgiven by the mother of the child. We see that Adrienne feels she has failed at being a woman and refuses to forgive herself, going as far to say, “Normal life is no longer possible for me” (Moore 4).

As the months pass, Adrienne and her current boyfriend, Martin, decide to get married rather quickly and head on Martin’s academic retreat. Here is where Adrienne finds that every evening at dinner, she converses with someone new from the world of academia, mostly men, who always end up assuming she is one of the spouses. Adrienne even goes as far to ask Martin, “Why are all the spouses here women? Why don’t the women scholars have spouses?” (Moore 14). While women can be scholars, they are not desirable wives for men. The story’s underlying tones of sexism and the standards for women begin to become more apparent with subtle hints such as this. Another being the spouses talking about feminism themselves, “I think there’s something wrong with the word *feminist* and *gets the guy* being in the same sentence” (Moore 22). Adrienne points out the uncertainty she has of what feminism is and the standards that are created for women revolving around men, furthering the standards that women should fit into.

Then, a little past midway through the story, Adrienne begins to talk about the late child again around the time when she decides to see the masseuse. The masseuse begins to work out her physical tension while Adrienne begins to try to work out her emotional tensions. Adrienne begins with admitting to the masseuse that she had killed a baby. As she continues her therapeutic sessions, the protagonist begins to feel less guilty, slowly healing from the guilt and trauma she experienced with the baby. “But in the middle of the meadow, something came over her- a balmy wind, or heat from the uphill hike, and she

took off all her clothes" (Moore 26). Adrienne lies down, feeling free, symbolically stripping her guilt alongside her clothes. She lays without shame until she is suddenly awakened by a tour guide and a group of tourists who are all staring at her, shaming her for being naked, seemingly like society throwing guilt back onto her for not tormenting herself for her past mistakes. Adrienne grabs her clothes and runs away feeling shame while the people stared. Adrienne tries to strip away her trauma of being the failed woman with which she has been branded, but as soon as she tries society guilts her for doing so.

In the last few pages, it is revealed that Martin has been cheating on Adrienne with the masseuse. Ending the story with a nail in the coffin, Adrienne feels she has failed as a woman, to keep her husband "satisfied". Adrienne even says she wants a divorce, but Martin demands they stay together and work it out as he was only waiting for her to heal the entire time. She once again remembers the baby, feeling the rush of guilt wash over her and says out loud "Please, forgive me" (Moore 31) which Martin responds, "Of course. It is the only thing. Of course" (Moore 31) and ends the story. Not only was Adrienne not speaking to Martin, but he also was led to believe that Adrienne was responsible for apologizing for her husband's infidelities. This leaves us with the belief that Adrienne is left in an unhappy marriage, confined and boxed into the archetype that society has made for her simply because she is a woman.

While the entire story's plot sets Adrienne up to heal from the idea that womanhood is about being a caring wife and mother, we see her begin to question the standards that are set for women during the story. She then symbolically gets shamed for her naked and womanly body, only to return home to come to the realization her husband has been cheating on her with a woman she trusted in her healing process. The theme of the story seems to be one of a woman trying to defy the norms of womanhood only to be shamed back into her dark place for not being womanly enough. While Adrienne is caring, she does not seem to be caring *enough* for the society she resides in. Time and time again Adrienne seems to fail the tests of being a good woman such as taking care of her husband or a baby.

The story is one of a woman's shame in not being woman

enough but underneath it creates the question of why it may not be enough to simply be a person without fitting into the roles of their given gender. Lorrie Moore creates an authentic character that is likable without making her excel in any typically woman-like characteristics. The audience grows to love the humor of Adrienne regardless of the fact that she is not a good caretaker. This begs the question of why Adrienne seems so shameful for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. The protagonist never wanted to hurt a child but was only involved in a terrible and misfortunate event. Similarly, when Adrienne is cheated on, it is in no way any fault of hers but she is heavily associated with guilt and shame that makes her feel like it is. The shame comes from the outside, from society and peers, and the common opinion of women. Adrienne is a great person, she is likable, but by not embodying the characteristics of a perfect woman she must live in the feelings of guilt and shame of being a *failed* woman.

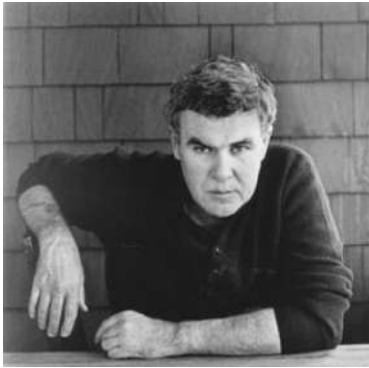
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[PART II]

"A Small Good Thing" by Raymond Carver

You can read Raymond Carver's short story "A Small Good Thing" at this link: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40348924>



Interviewed by Mona Simpson & Lewis Buzbee. "The Art of Fiction No. 76." The Paris Review, 24 Feb. 2020, www.theparisreview.org/interviews/3059/the-art-of-fiction-no-76-raymond-carver.

Raymond Carver was born in Clatskanie, Oregon and grew up in Yakima, Washington. After graduating from Yakima High school in 1956 Carver went on to work as a delivery man, janitor, library assistant, and sawmill laborer. Carver was nominated for the National Book Award for his first major-press collection. Carver Also won five O. Henry Awards.

About the Authors

Jasper Chappel: Editor

“Cats and caffeine are this English major’s dream.”

Kasey Johnson: Critical Introduction and Copy Editor

“Sleep deprived, caffeine addled and underpaid.”

Elijah Nelson: Project Manager

“Writing major and rain enjoyer; feverishly watches the weather channel.”

Rachel Rees: Critical Introduction and Copy Editor

“Writing major still trying to figure it out. Specializing in insomnia.”

Benjamin Smoldon: Annotated Bibliography Editor

“Secondary education major, Taylor Swift obsessed, I may be a mess but I ‘guess I’ll just stumble on home to my cats.”

Tim (Shadow) Stanton: Designer

“Furry, gamer, author, Dragon-wolf king of turning anything into an adorable fluffy creature or object of impossible cuteness, if you need something floofed, spikeified, or turned into a

dodecahedron, then look no further (disclaimer: dodecahedron might be limited to 8-12 sides if structural integrity demands).”



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Critical Introduction



"Chocolate Cake with Maple Peppermint Chocolate Frosting (Paleo)" by paleodulce is licensed under CC BY 2.0

In our analysis of Raymond Carver's "A Small, Good Thing," published in 1983, we each took a different perspective. Each essay is a lens of critical theory that we have used to look deeper into "A Small, Good Thing," and the themes, ideas, and structures it employs. These lenses range from New Criticism to Deconstruction, including essays on the historical, psychological, and gender views of Carver's short story.

New Criticism

"A Small, Good Thing," by Raymond Carver, uses empathetic plot devices and takes advantage of the classic Three Act

Structure in a story that explores our relationship with tragedy and acceptance. Starting with vague descriptions of characters meant to act as vessels for the reader to fill with themselves and disrupting the projected plot with the shocking accident of a hit and run, tension is set in both the story and the reader. This tension finds its climax at the moment that Ann and Howard finally confront the baker, where their anger and irrationality peak using him as a scapegoat and an outlet of frustration. However, as the baker steps down and comforts them as someone who also experienced loss, a new door is opened to them and the couple comes to accept the death of their son with the help of his bread and words. This ending is used to foster a bit of hope in the reader as it leaves them with this scene, reminding the reader that they too have the strength to look at the events and circumstances of their own lives and accept the outcomes of what they could not control.

Reader Response

The Reader Response essay expands on the overall impression and observed connections in “A Small, Good Thing” by Raymond Carver. While this story is about fear, loss, and grief, the story’s main focus and theme is misunderstanding, particularly between the baker and the grieving parents, Ann and Howard. However, this theme is consistent with all the characters. From Ann and Howard, to Franklin’s family and Ann, to Doctor Francis and Ann and Howard, and finally and most importantly, the baker and Ann and Howard. These connections are all made possible by the emblematic character, the child Scotty, who is the main focus of the confrontations and misunderstandings after his accident. Some interesting parallels exist between indirectly connected characters such as the baker and Doctor Francis. There are also some biblical symbolisms that can be found in the last few lines, along with a sense of healing, comfort, and hope.

Deconstruction

The essay of deconstruction shows that Raymond Carver’s short story, “A Small, Good Thing” highlights the importance of

treasuring the time we have with loved ones, and that even strangers can help us heal after hardship. However, there are several examples in the story that fail in their attempts to support this idea and even others that seem to contradict it.

Historical

The historical analysis essay connects “A Small, Good Thing” to previous versions of the story and Raymond Carver’s own interpretation of himself as a writer. It places the story in the context of the AIDS epidemic at the time and how power structures such as capitalism reveal their flaws during times of crisis. The story expresses fear towards healthcare professionals not always having the right answers, and anger towards the upper class who seem safe from tragedy because of their financial stability. There is also a stark contrast between the message of the first published version of this story, “The Bath,” and the story we are analyzing. Once the audience understands some of Carver’s thought process while writing each story, and the politics dominating this time period, “A Small, Good Thing” appears to encourage fellowship in the audience rather than fear and estrangement.

Psychological Criticism

“The Grieving Mind” essay looks deeper into how the short story, “A Small, Good Thing” by Raymond Carver connects with the five-stages of grief model and the ways it may step outside of it. The five stages of grief are: Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Acceptance. The essay draws parallels in moments that the characters, Ann and Howard, go through each stage of grief. It ventures into the insights of the character’s mindset and explains why they are relatable and understandable to the reader and how their emotions during one of the five stages affected their actions.

Feminist

A Feminist Analysis of “A Small, Good Thing” discusses how gender stereotypes come through in different authors

perspectives. It establishes that stereotypes are the way our mind sees the world and how these stereotypes tend to be the definers of our “facts.” Overall, this essay examines the stereotypical perceptions of gender and how they are expressed through Ann Weiss and the other female characters in the story. It explores the power dynamics between male and female characters and shows how constantly male characters are asserting verbal and physical dominance over female characters. This essay covers “mansplaining,” gender roles, and female emotions through the perspective of the male author. Many of these things may have been done intentionally since stereotypes are often the lens through which we view the world.

While we each had a different perspective for analyzing Raymond Carver’s “A Small, Good Thing,” and perhaps came to different conclusions, after looking deeper into it using our respective lenses, one thing is clear. We each enjoyed this short story and regardless of what lens or perspective a reader looks through, that is the most important reason to read anything. We hope that those who read our collaborative works are just as thrilled about this story as we have become.



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Annotated Bibliography

Bolden, Lori A. "A Review of *On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief Through the Five Stages of Loss*." *Counseling & Values*, vol. 51, no. 3, Apr. 2007, pp. 235–237. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1002/j.2161-007X.2007.tb00081.x.

Lori Bolden has written a review *On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief Through the Five Stages of Loss* written by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross and co-written by David Kessler. The review goes into the five stages of grief. The article also speaks on the personal aspects that both Kubler-Ross and Kessler bring to the book in the case of their own experiences with loss. The review also goes into how Kubler-Ross and Kessler go over how coping with holidays also affects things. Bolden also reviews the expectations that the five-stage model sets. Going over how critics have taken in the book and how Kubler-Ross has written that grief is different per person. Bolden essentially agrees that the five-stage model helps with those who are dealing with loss to better understand what they are going through and feeling. The article has many uses in a psychological criticism of Raymond Carver's "A Small, Good Thing." The review helps with showing the Kubler-Ross five-stage model that the main characters -Howard and Ann- face throughout the story. It also is a good article to delve into how Ann and Howard don't follow the model, that

they veer off from it. The article is specifically used to define the five stages of grief.

Brier, Jennifer. "‘Save Our Kids, Keep AIDS out:’ Anti-AIDS Activism and the Legacy of Community Control in Queens, New York." *Journal of Social History*, vol. 39, no. 4, Oxford University Press, 2006, pp. 965–87, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3790237>.

In this article, Brier documents a protest movement in Queens, NY, in 1985. Parents banded together to protest children with AIDS being admitted to public schools. This article delves into how the fear spread among parents, the rhetoric they used, and how they responded to policy and public officials.

Carver, Raymond. "The Bath." *Columbia: A Journal of Literature and Art*, no. 6, Columbia: A Journal of Literature and Art, 1981, pp. 32–41, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42744338>.

Aside from stylistic changes, there are significant changes to the story in the 1983 version. Carver adds characters, adds race to characters, and includes a moment of reconciliation with the baker, Ann, and Howard after Scotty’s death.

Carver, Raymond. "A Small, Good Thing." *Ploughshares*, vol. 8, no. 2/3, 1982, pp. 213–240. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/40348924.

Conner, Berkley, et al. "Explaining Mansplaining." *Women & Language*, vol. 41, no. 2, Winter 2018, pp. 143–167, EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/cwi.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ufh&AN=134089765&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

"Explaining Mansplaining" by Berkley Conner and others sets out to explain the cultural construct of mansplaining. It defines what mansplaining is and how it is used to assert male dominance during interactions with women. It explains that many men mansplain to women as they feel their dominance is threatened or feel as if they will lose social status as a result of potentially being overpowered by a woman. Due to this, they feel the need to remain dominant in conversations with a woman. The article explains that there are four factors

that define the construct of mansplaining. These factors include dominance from a man during an interaction, information that is incorrect from a man, information that was unsolicited by a woman, and female expertise on a topic. This article explains that mansplaining takes place in education, place of work, technology, and other settings. Conner shows how the concept of mansplaining got popularized and how the 2016 presidential election further brought the issue into the mainstream. This article also discusses gender dynamics in the communication processes and cites research about what gender tends to speak more in conversations. It addresses how even women in authoritative positions tend to get more backlash than a man when they speak. This text can be used to understand the construct of mansplaining to find the significance it has in society. Overall, this article compiles research of male to female social interactions to further explain the construct of mansplaining.

Facknitz, Mark A. R. "‘The Calm,’ ‘A Small, Good Thing,’ and ‘Cathedral:’" Raymond Carver and the Rediscovery of Human Worth." *Studies in Short Fiction*, vol. 23, no. 3, 1986, pp. 287. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/cwi.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=f5h&AN=7357970&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

In an essay titled "Raymond Carver and the Rediscovery of Human Worth," Mark Facknitz reviews Raymond Carver's most popular works, from "The Calm" to "A Small, Good Thing." This is done through a critical review of each work and an overarching analysis of common themes found in each, Facknitz is quick to show that he isn't biased toward Carver's works. Opening with a quick introduction that summarizes the awards and accolades received by Carver, Facknitz then dives into the debate as to whether or not he's even earned those accolades, citing either side as either claiming he's achieved it through stellar writing and story design while the other may simply enjoy false realism and basic characters. He then takes each piece and deconstructs each scene for craft and author intent,

essentially judging each story for worth as a piece of literature. His points regarding virtue in “A Small Good Thing” are very similar to mine in that he deconstructs each scene to show the underlying concepts of a couple struggling with grief.

Good, Wendy. “Raymond Carver’s ‘A Small Good Thing’.” <http://thresholds.chi.ac.uk/raymond-carver%E2%80%99s-a-small-good-thing/>.

Wendy Good focuses on “A Small Good Thing” within the *Cathedral* collection and its theme of misunderstanding, his use of dramatic tension, and portrayal of human emotion. She says that Carver was interested in displaying a plot where “dialogue between people who aren’t listening to each other” drives the story. Good maintains that the story is not driven by action, referring to the “restrained” nature of Scotty’s accident. She believes that the dialogue is the most impactful, specifically the baker’s calls to the house. Good praises Carver’s use of movement and body language to convey emotional tension, giving the reader insight into the character’s state of mind. She also notes Carver’s use of food as a “cultural object” and how he utilizes “the social interactions behind food and nourishment to structure his story.” She also observes the religious connotations and symbolism of the last lines and the comfort that food brings in this context. She continues to praise Carver’s poignant style and credits it to the more powerfully emotional scenes. Good believes that an argument could be made for “A Small Good” thing being the most traumatic story within *Cathedral*, as it haunts the reader with its quiet and slightly ambiguous ending.

Kingston, Albert J., and Terry Lovelace. “Sexism and Reading: A Critical Review of the Literature.” *Reading Research Quarterly*, vol. 13, no. 1, 1977, pp. 133–161, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/747592.

“Sexism and Reading: A Critical Review of the Literature” by Albert Kingston and Terry Lovelace examines 78 articles that investigate sexism in text. This

article looks at many different kinds of texts from children's literature and other texts. This source analyses the different careers of men and women in literature and shows how men typically have positions of power compared to a woman. It also addresses how the different sexes are depicted. Literature typically shows men as having very productive and physically assertive behavior. They also tend to have problem-solving behavior. Women in stories typically have behavior focused on conformity or they tend to be more verbal and less physically assertive. This source also shows sexism in reading throughout history as looking at historical contexts allows for analysis of the change between the past and the present. This article not only addresses the text itself but also the illustrations within texts. This text looks at the ratio of male/female authors used in schools and finds that there should be more female authors. This text can be used to inform audiences of sexism that is prevalent in literature and help schools make a change to include more female authors in the curriculum.

McCaffery, Larry, et al. "An Interview with Raymond Carver." *Mississippi Review*, vol. 14, no. 1/2, 1985, pp. 62–82. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/20115387.

In this interview, Raymond Carver talks about his life experiences while writing, especially with alcoholism, and how he has changed his view on what kinds of stories he wants to write. His evolution as a writer and a commentator on the world is evident in the difference between these two stories, both published at different points during the AIDS epidemic.

Myers, D. G., & DeWall, C. N. (2020). *Psychology in Everyday Life* (Fifth ed.). Holland, Michigan: Worth.

A psychology textbook, Chapter 3 in particular is used. The Chapter is "Developing Through the Life Span." The section that is used in the essay is "Death and Dying" pages 3-23. The section goes into how people deal with grief, that some people deal with severe grief in an unexpected death- usually when someone has an accident. It also goes over the process of grieving, that

some will have a prolonged experience over others. The section delves into the sort of help provided such as therapy, self-help groups, the passing of time, and support of friends. The article also mentions that terminally ill and 'grief-stricken' do not go through Kubler-Ross's five-stage model in the same way. There is also a mention of how people perceive what to feel when facing death, or rather what they expect that another person is going through than what those people actually are feeling. The section then ends about facing death with dignity and being open to it also helps people have a sense of meaningfulness. The source in particular used regarding Raymond Carver's story, "A Small, Good Thing," has a focus on the way parents may deal with the loss of a child. In particular how 'acting strong' can be something that can prolong the grieving of the parent putting up the act.

Schweizer, Harold. "On Waiting and Hoping in Raymond Carver's 'A Small, Good Thing.'" *At The Interface/Probing the Boundaries*, vol. 55, Jan. 2009, pp. 7–20, EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ufh&AN=58843700&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

Harold Schweizer's article starts with an abstract of Carver's short story "A Small, Good Thing," and then proceeds to have four main points of elaboration where he discusses what he takes away from the story and why he thinks it's important. The four points that Schweizer's article focuses on are the Introduction, the Waiting Room, the Parking Lot, and the Cathedral. Schweizer's Introduction section covers the time in the short story before the boy goes to the hospital; it also uses several supporting texts to help make his point. The second part of Schweizer's article is the Waiting Room, this section covers the boy's early stay in the hospital as well as the parents' trips back home and the mysterious caller. The third main section of the article called the Parking Lot, further covers the boy's coma and but also elaborates on how the mother feels and has a more psychological

feel. The fourth and final section of Schweizer's article is the Cathedral; this section focuses on the events after the boy's death. Schweizer's article is very clearly marked into five sections, those being the Abstract and then the four main body sections, and each section is well defined on its particular focus from the story and is easy enough to keep track of when reading. While the third main section of Schweizer's article may be more psychological, I still see promise in the other sections as well as a few possible talking points from the third that I might be able to use in my essay.

Taub, Gadi. "On Small, Good Things: Raymond Carver's Modest Existentialism." *Raritan*, vol. 22, no. 2, 2002, pp. 102–119. <https://www.proquest.com/openview/4ce25bf619778dc185e116d8d0731996/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=30927>.

"On Small, Good Things: Raymond Carver's Modest Existentialism" by Gabi Taub focuses on existentialist philosophies that proliferate both Raymond Carver's "Small, Good Things" and what it means for his work. Taub also contends that with this lens he's separated from many of his literary colleagues in the message, as instead of viewing characters for self-affirmation and self-worth, he attempts to simply portray them as unique individuals. This difference in character focus also changes how the story is told, as instead of viewing a character's past or present with the intent to analyze it or prove some political point, Carver simply shows the life of a character without any commentary or projected beliefs onto them. It's through this that we see the foundations of existentialism being sewn little moments, like when the baker feeds the parents after the death of their child, are what reconnect those characters back to life. This is what holds more value to him than most of his fellow writers at the time would place in it, as that existentialism plays a large role in not only his personal values but also what he treasures in a story as both reader and author.

Trevor, Douglas. "Stories We Love: 'A Small, Good Thing' by

Raymond Carver." *Fiction Writers Review*, 27 May 2013, fictionwritersreview.com/shoptalk/stories-we-love-a-small-good-thing-by-raymond-carver/.

Trevor reviews and responds to Carver's "A Small, Good Thing," with an analytical eye, more as a fellow writer, than as a reader. He notes the arcs and plot points and themes that might have been used had anyone else been writing the short fiction. Trevor notes that Carver has used some but modified them in unexpected and different ways. For example, "delimit initially the scope of loss that the story explores" by connecting characters who have no direct connection to Scotty. Trevor also stipulates that the baker is a "reader" as well in the story and that the virtue of the narrative makes him a better character. Trevor believes that "A Small Good Thing" in terms of overarching story and characters is Carver's biggest story. He states that "A Small Good Thing" is less about death and more about people's efforts to relate to others with similar experiences. What Trevor is most interested in is that Carver uses a more expansive field to tell his story of loss. Trevor also focuses on how Carver uses his characters and what they might embody, loving the story for displaying how much more a short story can be.

Wolff, Cynthia Griffin. "A Mirror for Men: Stereotypes of Women in Literature." *The Massachusetts Review*, vol. 13, no. 1/2, 1972, pp. 205–218, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/25088222.

Cynthia Griffin Wolff's "A Mirror for Men: Stereotypes of Women in Literature" takes a look at common stereotypes of women in literature. She covers how literature often reflects social attitudes towards women and how these attitudes are primary from a masculine or male presence. She shows that this often leads to the devaluation of women, female hobbies, and female concerns. This piece covers how in society there is a large number of masculine problems and in literature stereotypes of female characters are portrayed in such a way to respond to masculine needs. Furthermore, Wolff explains that in literature there is a tradition of women

being portrayed as emotional. Since women are portrayed this way, they are seen as “purely emotional” and that they lack rationality. Wolff explains that the characterization reinforces the stereotype of them being helpless. She then uses examples from several novels and stories to back up her claims. She also addresses the stereotypes of women in literature that happen in different periods. This reflects the certain values of society during these times. This text might be used to inform others how gendered stereotypes are prevalent in literature. It may also be used to critically analyze female characterization in stories. Overall, she shows that female characters are developed in order to meet the masculine needs which assert that women are living in a man’s world.



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New Criticism

A Small, Good Thing: Critiques of Suffering & How We Respond to it

Elijah Nelson



"Baker" by Theodor Hensolt is licensed under CC BY 2.0

"A Small, Good Thing" by Raymond Carver uses heavy irony, imagery, and subversion to highlight both the unjustness and tragedy as well as the simple joys that seem to make life one huge contradiction. From birthday cake to the death of a child, the story takes both of these extremes and presents them in a real-life application, thus giving the reader an example or reference to look back on their own life and find similar themes emerging. One example of this is the very early contrast

between the opening actions of the mother getting a cake for her son, then only 2 pages later having a child become the victim of a hit and run. This stylistic choice throws what had originally seemed like the intended theme entirely off the rails in potentially the most dramatic way possible, setting the stage for the rest of the story in contrast with the first two pages. This abrupt and early change in tone is meant to do more than just shock the reader, however. The associations with, say “Ordering a Birthday Bake for Your Child” and “Your Son Falls Victim to a Hit and Run” are directly opposed to each other and through those associations produce almost parallel universes that converge in an area of what may be interpreted as a cruelty or injustice of life. Let’s break those associations and expectations down.

The opening scene of the mother (Ann Weis) ordering a cake for her child’s birthday is, as previously mentioned, sets the first part of the three-act story structure with the intent to instantly end it a few pages later. The three-act story, as it’s come to be known, is most likely something you were taught in middle school. Stemming from Aristotle’s studies on storytelling, the theory that each story has a Setup, Confrontation, and Resolution (Acts I, II, and III respectively) is one of the most common ways of writing or analyzing a story. The first few pages of “A Small, Good Thing” appear to set a pace for that three-act template, introducing significant characters and setting, and through that sets expectations for an entirely different kind of story. This technique is known as “subverting reader expectations” and relies heavily on stereotypes and the three-part structure to catch the reader off guard, usually to the effect of emphasizing what breaks the flow of clichés. In this case, expectations are set with the first few lines of the first page: “After looking through a loose-leaf binder with photographs of cakes taped onto the pages, she ordered chocolate, the child’s favorite.” (Carver, 1) You will notice here that there’s hardly anything that stands out about this quote. The introduction of a birthday instantly puts on a front for the story as a simple slice-of-life, not only using cliched subject matter but also riding on the basic notion of a birthday or party. A birthday is a regular thing, coming around once a year in a time of (typically) vaguely

pleasant celebration. It seems as though the unspecific imagery is meant to emulate in a reader their own experiences with birthdays, to drive home that classic “slice of life” theme. So summarizing the words one can tie to this, we have Routine, Nostalgia, and Contentment.

All of this falls out, of course, with the directly following hit and run. Not only using opposite associations for its shock factor, but this scene also uses different narrative techniques to communicate those associations. While the opening two pages seem to begin setting up Act I of the narrative structure, it’s harshly interrupted by the sudden cut to Act II, in which the conflict is introduced. The sudden shift of scene and character focus, rather than seeing it through one of the two characters already introduced, emphasizes the sudden change in the narrative tone. In this scene, much more direct language is used than the pages preceding it, not stopping to dive into what characters looked like or may have thought. Instead, the pages recording that moment are doing just that: recording. It’s very impersonally portrayed, fitting as the moment recorded is an entirely random and impersonal act. So, if one could take three descriptors or associations out of this, it would be; Random, Impersonal, and Shocking.

Notice how there isn’t even time to introduce all main characters before tragedy hits, (or in this case, a car, I suppose) destroying, or at least majorly shifting, the three-act structure. Not only was Act I not completely set up, but the early Act II also shifts the time spent on each act, making the first few pages more of an introduction to the resulting plotline that introduces characters, conflict, and resolution in a more traditional way. But why start with such a subversion? What is the work emphasizing? This circles back to the first point: highlighting our interactions with life and how we perceive injustices.

Looking back at the associations we had tied with each of the first two “Meta-Acts” we see opposing styles in both subject matter and narration style, creating a sharp contrast that highlights the unexpected and unfairness that Scotty’s (the child) parents must have felt in that moment and throughout the rest of the story. Comparing the associated words with each section, for Act I, there’s (Routine, Nostalgia, and Contentment)

and Act II (Abnormal, Impersonal, and Shocking). These words are quite literally antonyms of each other, making up two sections that open the story for the reader seem somewhat incongruent. This subversion is used to catch the reader off guard in the same way Scotty's parents were caught off guard by him getting hit by a car. Through this subversion and clash of two "Acts" is meant to lead the reader along with a wordless argument focused on one end: that the child didn't deserve to be hit by the car on his birthday, a usually comforting and reliable day being put to a swift halt by a shocking, random, and (as the driver sees him and drives away) even cruel action. The narrative pulls one into the parents' viewpoint and rationale using a pathos-centered argument. It translates their emotions onto the reader, helping them view how "unfair" life could be as if they'd experienced hardships such as that firsthand.

Another way this story puts the reader into the character's shoes is through the design of the father and mother characters. Both are introduced without any physical description and from then on, the only adjectives given is their actions, or qualities about them, rather than focusing on any specific physical characteristics. Take, for example, the most in-depth description we ever get of Howard, the Father: "His eyes were bloodshot and small, as if he'd been drinking for a long time. His clothes were rumpled. His beard had come out again." (Carver, 72) The most one can make out from this is the fact that he A) is tired, B) wears clothes, and C) has a beard sometimes. Ann, the mother, isn't given a name until the second page, establishing her as a mother before an individual. Indeed, neither seem to be entirely fleshed out as unique characters, even at the end of the story, as though they may have changed it's simply a change from a state that they were originally thrown into at the beginning of the story. The audience has no idea what they've changed from, or changed to. It's through this intended vagueness that the reader projects themselves all the more easily into the parents, experiencing their trials and tribulations associated with the death of a child not just with them, but firsthand. No beginning or ending character establishment is given because the text functions in a way to put the reader's own character at the beginning and end of the story. Working one

through the same struggles and emotions as these rather empty focus characters, the reader is changed in a similar way as the parents are. Put through their suffering and life experiences, the reader adopts the same emotions as the parents and with that their response to life's hardships, following and growing with them through the plot arc.

As the plot progresses and Scotty's situation gets worse, the reader adopts similar emotions and reactions as the parents in response to the perceived injustices. The initial shock and frustration at the undeserving accident displayed in mock-acts I & II is heightened by the slow frustration and seeming indifference displayed by the hospital, before being turned into a directed rage toward the baker as his incessant calls and Scotty's death unfortunately coincide. This tension intended to carry over to the reader reaches its height as both parents confront the baker, a seemingly justified action even given the threat of lethal force. The reason this rather irrational action seems much more rational is primarily that tension and buildup of "injustices" that Howard and Ann face throughout the building arc of the story, and the baker, whether intentionally frustrating them or not, became more of an outlet or a symbol for their injustices than anything else. Of course, with this way of thinking came the inevitable "snap back" to reality, in which the baker steps down from the position of demonized indifference and reveals himself to be just as much a human as the parents are. Mark Facknitz, when critically reviewing "A Small, Good Thing," summarized this moment with the claim that "through imperceptible and trivial dishonesties we create large lies that can only be removed by superhuman acts of self-assertion" (293). Essentially, Ann and her husband had, in their blind mourning and regret, attached the misguided anger stemming off of their personal tragedy onto the baker, fabricating the assertion that the baker was in fact an evil man in an attempt to ease their suffering.

However, in this study of how people react to difficulties and hardships and life does not come with an ending that simply highlights the irrationality of it all. No, by having the baker step down and help them Carver showed the other, later response to grief that may come in time after a traumatic accident like

the death of a child. In an analysis of this scene by Gabi Taub, the moment is broken down as “The baker helps to connect these people, in their shock, to the very need to eat, to the need to talk, to his own empathy for them, indeed-for he talks of his own loneliness-to their empathy for him. And it is, if it is small at all, a good thing. The best one can do then and there.” (Taub 8) Here we finally see the baker as someone who had experienced suffering as well, having come to terms with it a while ago but still dealing with the suffering that comes with it. Not only does this reveal him to be human, but it also serves as a reminder that there is hope in a life outside of suffering and injustice. By talking to the couple, the baker helps them see that hope, empathizing with them in their low and guiding them along to what it took him months to find: acceptance. As the couple cries over warm rolls, they come to the realization that “unjust” or not, Scotty is dead and they have to live with that fact. It’s a sad truth, a grim truth, but the fact that they come to that conclusion produces a note of hope that the story ends on. It’s the reminder that we as a species are adaptable creatures, capable of processing and coming to terms with even the most tragic moments of our lives.

That’s really what the story attempts to foster in the reader: by putting them into the parents’ shoes, and leading them through the same arc of suffering and acceptance, Carver reminds them that they too have the strength to look at something in their own lives, whether that be “as tragic” as what the parents went through, and accept it as something that they never had any control over.

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Reader Response

Connection Through Loss and the Comfort of Broken Bread

Kasey Johnson



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"A Small Good Thing" by Raymond Carver is a story of loss, grief, misunderstandings, and kindness. Revolving around the birthday of Scotty and his accident, it pulls the reader into a family's experience as their child is hit by a car on his birthday and they can only wait until Scotty awakens, hoping their son is going to be alright. In the midst of this, much to the parents, Ann and Howard, irritation and anger, the baker who was commissioned a cake for Scotty keeps calling. These calls are

only made all the more hateful after Scotty dies, as the caller, the baker, asks “Have you forgotten about Scotty?” Neither the parents nor the baker realizes how hurtful and enraging they are in these exchanges. The parents in not knowing that it is the baker calling, don’t realize it until three days after Scotty’s hit and run. For his part the baker has no knowledge of what’s happened to the boy whose name is on the cake, feels taken advantage of, and angry at being insulted when inquiring about said cake.

The story resolves with the grieving parents deducing the baker as the source of the calls and confronting him. The baker, understanding finally how he had unintentionally hurt them, invites them to sit in his kitchen and feeds them his baked goods, sharing his experiences and apologizing for his actions and contributions to their grief. He also shares that he is glad to be feeding people, and that his trade can bring comfort.

While this story is about fear, loss, and grief, what struck me most about this story is that the story’s main focus and theme is misunderstanding, particularly between the baker and the grieving parents, Ann, and Howard. But the theme is consistent with all the characters, with the Doctor and his interactions with them, as he tries to placate them, it seems as if he isn’t really listening to their concerns. Along the same lines, Ann is mistaken for a nurse after encountering another family waiting for news on their son, Franklin.

This family, as I see it, serves as a literary tool for the readers, not only brining us out of monolithic story and fleshing it out with parallels, but providing us with foreshadowing. To clarify, the family is also grieving, waiting, and mirrors Ann’s own state of mind, allowing her to see outside of her own pain briefly. At the same time the reader is given a wider view of the setting and “world”. They serve to remind the reader and Ann herself, that this is not Ann’s experience alone, that other’s experience these feelings, this pain. At the same time, Franklin’s family, and Franklin himself, act as foreshadowing for Ann and the reader. The moment she returns and inquires on his condition, Ann is saddened to hear that Franklin has died. I also wonder if Carver’s decision to make the family a black family wasn’t premeditated as well, to firmly fix them in our minds eye as

mere paragraphs later, Scotty also dies, and Ann and Howard grieve.

The character of Scotty himself is one of great interest to me. Throughout the story, he is not given much by way of character development but is rather an emblematic device, used to further the plot and the development of the other characters, like his parents. Scotty himself isn't given a character arc, nor is he given much for likes, dislikes, or even any dialogue, but he is the focus of Ann and Howard and the baker's character arcs as his condition unfolds. His death is impactful, not because we as readers are invested in Scotty himself, but we are invested in Ann and Howard and how this impacts them and how it will affect the upcoming events and the eventual confrontation with the baker. To me what was a most impactful image in the depth of loss that was felt by Howard and Ann was not through any dialogue. What really illustrated the depth of the emotion beautifully was Howard hugging his son's bike to his chest awkwardly, turning the wheel as he did. When I read this image, I couldn't help but imagine the man crying as he did so, even though there was nothing written in regard to tears. And yet that sense of grief was so profound in the writing that it was almost an inevitable image to conjure.

I also find it interesting how the symbolic character becomes the connection force for all of the character interactions. This is what I think masterfully sets up the story and the subsequent events, particularly the baker and Ann's connection when they first meet. In her article "Raymond Carver's A Small Good Thing", Wend Good says that Ann disliked the baker at first sight and speaks to Carver subverting this preconception by the end of the story by making the baker a source of comfort. While I agree but I would like to take this a bit further. The baker wasn't simply disliked, but unimpressive and while Carver makes a point to go into great detail to describe him, making him important to the reader, the baker initially is not important to Ann herself. He is to her a perfect stranger, without any merit, but as the events unfold and Ann realizes the baker is the one calling the house, he becomes a source of profound rage and grief. What's more the baker ceases to be arbitrary and continues evolving his character in Ann's last encounter

with the baker towards the end of the story. And this is entirely without any true knowledge of Scotty and who he was. Yet, as Doug Trevor points out in his article, “Carver decides to delimit initially the scope of loss that the story explores by very conspicuously placing characters in the story who do not know the central figure, the boy, at all. This would seem, potentially, to make the story less emotionally resonate, but of course the effect is the opposite.” (Trevor, Doug, *Stories We Love*). Carver was incredibly successful at weaving together character arcs with Scotty as the main thread, from the parents, to the baker, to the doctor, and even Franklin’s family. The intertwining of these characters, rather than detracting from the story, to me make the short story a far fuller and satisfying read.

Something I also noticed was how the preconceptions of both Doctor Francis and the baker are reversed, as Good also points out “In contrast, the doctor at the hospital is described as handsome, big shouldered and tanned. He is someone to trust in a crisis. By the end of the story, though, Carver switches these presuppositions of character. The doctor will disappoint. The baker will bring comfort.” (Good, Wendy, *Thresholds*). I had mentioned earlier that the doctor’s unsatisfactory answers and somewhat lacking approach in his attempts to comfort Ann and Howard. Yet the story doesn’t paint the two as complete opposites either, both, in their own way, are unsympathetic to the plight of Ann and Howard, whether it is through ignorance or apathy. I would also like to point out that the baker is not named and yet Doctor Francis is, making me wonder if Carver chose to do this for a reason. Was it to trick the reader into painting the baker as the villain? Was it to reinforce our possible conception about the doctor’s importance to the story? In a way it is as if the doctor and the baker are two sides of a coin, yet their outcomes are different for Ann and Howard, who find no comfort in the doctor’s words, but find it sitting in the baker’s kitchen eating the baked goods he offers.

In these last moments, as the baker starts to talk about his life and experiences, sharing his baking and talents, we the reader start to feel a sense of peace and tranquility. Ann and Howard are invited to sit down and are given cinnamon rolls, fresh from the oven, after a tense confrontation. While the baker

apologizes, he offers no platitudes, or easy answers. He can only offer them these two things, his experiences, and his baking. In this way we do not get a tidy resolution to the story of “living happily ever after” but as we read, we feel that things are going to be okay. The reader understands fully that Ann and Howard are by no means finished in their grieving process, but are on their way, thanks to the baker.

It was during this scene of baking and eating between the baker and Scotty’s parents, that the baker offers a piece of a freshly baked bread loaf. “‘Smell this’ the baker said, breaking open a dark loaf” (Carver, “A Small, Good Thing”). The use of the word “breaking” caught my attention. Carver could have used “cut”, “sliced”, or even “tore”, but he used “breaking”. Now it does bring to mind an image of a crust cracking and breaking apart, but it also, for me brings to mind the term “breaking bread”, which is religious in origin, the braking of bread done by Jesus as he sat with his disciples to share his meal, and the breaking of bread is symbolically used in the Last Supper. Typically, the term, “breaking bread” is used as an idiom to indicate sharing a meal. In his own criticism Mark Fracknitz also notices these more religious aspects, “They accept his life story as consolidation, and while eating and listening achieve communion. Carver ends the story at dawn, with hope, and pushes forward symbols of sanctified space and the eucharist.” (Fracknitz, Mark Wendy Good also states that food is used as a “cultural object” also noting the religious undertones of the breaking of bread but continuing on with her observation that “Carver also draws upon the social interactions behind food and nourishment to structure his story. He starts with the excitement of the child’s birthday cake, ‘a spaceship and launching pad under a sprinkling of white stars...’ and finishes at the other end of the spectrum, food to comfort the grieving, or as the baker describes it: ‘Eating is a small, good thing in a time like this.’” (Good, Wendy, Thresholds). Whether Carver was alluding to the biblical or simply using the term for the imagery it created, we can only speculate. However, as religious images and religion itself is used often for comfort, the idea of religion would potentially add to the sensation of comfort for the reader that Carver seems to have been going for.

Within “A Small, Good Thing,” Carver masterfully intertwines his characters together with misunderstanding after misunderstanding. Much like the baker he writes about, he has kneaded this story to the perfect consistency of character interaction, imagery, and dialogue, to create a beautifully balanced loaf of a soft hope, predicated by the gut-wrenching loss. The language that is used gives the reader insight, yet still leaves ambiguity to the end, which while hopeful, remains open for further thought. While a story of loss, grief, and misunderstandings, “A Small, Good Thing” is also a story of connection, kindness, and comfort and should be forever treasured for its sheer elegance.

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Deconstruction

Deconstruction Lens: “A Small, Good Thing”

Tim Stanton



“Family Dog” by Richard Elzey is licensed under CC BY 2.0 Original pic

Raymond Carver’s short story, “A Small, Good Thing,” starts with a mother ordering a space themed cake for her son’s earth birthday. The story then goes through the heart ache of the child being hospitalized after a car accident and his eventual death from medical complications. It ends with a heartfelt reconciliation between the mother and baker. I believe that “A Small, Good Thing” can help remind us both to treasure the time we have with loved ones and the importance of other people (even strangers) to help us through times of sadness.

Carver pushes the point of treasuring time with family and loved ones when we read about the boy's parents' time at the hospital. "... 'Doctor, how is he?' Howard said. 'What's the matter with him exactly?' 'Why doesn't he wake up?' Ann said. ... 'My God, he feels so cold, though, Howard? Is he supposed to feel like this? ...'" (Carver 67). These lines of dialogue show that the boy's parents care immensely for his safety and health. We get an even stronger confirmation of the parents' love for their son, and their wanting to spend time with him even when he is unconscious. "They waited all day, but still the boy did not wake up. Occasionally, one of them would leave the room to go downstairs to the cafeteria to drink coffee and then, as if suddenly remembering and feeling guilty, get up from the table and hurry back to the room," (Carver 69). This section perfectly shows the desire of both parents' to stay with their son as much as possible especially when it says "feeling guilty," even though the son would not know if they left for a little bit to get food or drink.

The doctor tries to make all of the procedures sound normal and under control even though they do not know why the boy is still asleep and eventually dies. "'We need to do some more pictures, and we want to do a scan.' ... 'I'm afraid we need some more,' he said. 'Nothing to be alarmed about. We just need some more pictures, and we want to do a brain scan on him.' ... 'It's perfectly normal procedure in cases like this,'" (Carver 68). While saying this is a normal procedure, is an attempt to calm the parents down, it only proceeds to worry the mother and give her more distress. "'What's that?' Ann said. 'a scan?' ... 'I thought you'd already taken all your X-rays'" (Carver 68). Carver brings the importance of spending time with loved ones to its greatest point when the father and mother remember the things that they need to do at home but can't decide which of them should go first. "... 'Alright,' Howard said. After a while, he said, 'Honey, why don't you do it? Why don't you go home and check on things, and then come back? It'll do you good. I'll be right here with him. Seriously,' he said. ... 'Why don't you go?' she said. 'Feed Slug. Feed yourself.' ..." (Carver 71-72). This, like the "guilty feelings" earlier, helps to show the importance that

the story is trying to put on spending time with loved ones and also treasuring that time.

In spite of his efforts, Carver fails to make his points in several ways. At the end of the short story, the parents of the child go to the baker that they ordered the cake from because of continuous calls that they are receiving regarding the cake. After some time talking about how the son is dead, the baker apologizes for his calls and asks for forgiveness. The baker talks with the parents until the morning which helps the parents to “heal” from their loss. “... ‘Smell this,’ the baker said, breaking open a dark loaf. ... They talked on into the early morning, the high, pale cast of light in the windows, and they did not think of leaving” (Carver 87-89). However, even with this heartwarming ending, the phone calls that the baker made while he did not know of the boy’s death or hospitalization were very harsh and unfriendly. “... ‘There’s a cake here that wasn’t picked up,’ the voice on the other end of the line said. ‘What are you saying?’ Howard asked. ‘A cake,’ the voice said. ‘A sixteen-dollar cake.’ ... ‘I don’t know anything about a cake,’ he said. ... ‘Don’t hand me that,’ the voice said” (Carver 63). Even if the baker doesn’t know that that the boy is in the hospital at this time, the calls, like this one, give a very negative impression and might make a reader think that the baker only cares about money. The harshness impedes on Carver’s main points.

Harold Schweizer, Mark Facknitz, and Christina Lake also have points and opinions on how Carver’s “A Small, Good Thing,” might fail to show how others can help comfort us in times of sadness. “... the baker speaks in malicious metaphor when he says to the desperate woman, ‘Your Scotty, I got him ready for you. Did you forget him?’ This is language of an extraordinary kind. ...” (Facknitz 291). Mark Facknitz also makes the point that the parents are not much better at the start of their interaction with the baker at the end of the story. “... ‘My son’s dead,’ she said with a cold, even finality. ‘He was hit by a car Monday morning. We’ve been waiting with him until he died. But, of course, you couldn’t be expected to know that, could you? ... But he’s dead. He’s dead, you bastard!’” (Facknitz 291). While it is understandable that the parents would be extremely upset about the constant calls and the death of their

son, one should also take into account the position of the baker, who has to bake food for hours every day to make ends meet and also knows nothing of what has transpired just days prior to this confrontation.

Harold Schweizer points out several other failings of Carver showing the importance of others comforting us when we are in pain. Schweizer decides to show the failings by using what he calls “temporal markers” to add to his writing (Schwizer 9). “Carver’s story is full of temporal markers, not only of time and hours but also of prepositions and temporal pronouns ...” (Schweizer 9). Schweizer continues to use the idea of temporal markers throughout his article. “The measured, timed, and sequential succession of Carver’s sentences, as of the doctor’s actions, simulate a world of order and predictability. Likewise the doctor’s appearance ... are welcome visual distractions – messages as if from a world impervious to death – in the midst of deepening dread” (Schweizer 11). Here Schweizer shows ways that Carver tries to reinforce the point of caring and supporting each other in times of hardship by a calm and trustworthy expert, the doctor, who tells the parents that the boy is okay and should wake up soon (Schweizer 11). This is quickly defeated by the selected dialogue for the doctor. “By contrast with such temporary markers of reassurance, the doctor’s subsequent interpretation of the boy’s condition reveals, however, his profounder sense of uncertainty and the disjuncture between their and the boy’s temporal realms: ‘He’s all right... . he could be better.... I wish he’d wake up. He should wake up pretty soon’ (Schweizer 11).

One of the best examples that Schweizer discusses is the fact that the doctors continually say that everything will be fine and that the parents should not worry. “The doctor’s initial evasions and denials cannot conceal his forebodings. ... If the doctors’ assurances were once offered entirely within the dimensions of measurable time – it being just a matter of time until the child would wake up – his qualifications ‘not yet,’ ‘it is not a coma yet...,’ deny closure. This “denial of closure” or saying that it is not a coma and the boy just needs to wake up is arguably worse than just saying that they do not know what is wrong yet and that it is possibly a coma. As it stands, the boy dies and the

parents are devastated, one reason being that they were told by the doctors that everything was fine and that there was no major or significant danger. This attempt to keep the parents calm and in high spirits ultimately back fires and quite possibly leads to even worse heartache and sadness than if they had kept more possibilities open in their discussions.

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Historical

“A Small, Good Thing” by Raymond Carver and the 1980s AIDS Epidemic

Jasper Chappel



“Inauguración del Hospital Municipal de Chiconcuac” by Presidencia de la República Mexicana is licensed under CC BY 2.0

Raymond Carver’s short story “A Small, Good Thing” was published in 1983, in his collection *Cathedral*. In 1983 in the United States, the AIDS epidemic was barely beginning to be understood by the CDC and the general public. Under President Ronald Reagan since 1981, anti-communist and pro-capitalist sentiment was expected of Americans because of tense relations with the USSR. This political climate informed Carver’s writing of “A Small, Good Thing,” and the previous

version of the same story published in 1981, titled “The Bath;” Carver’s personal life partially influenced the drastic changes between each story, and so did the emerging political tensions caused by the AIDS epidemic and relations with the USSR. “A Small, Good Thing,” despite being written in a turbulent time, encourages people to value each other, put less trust in institutions such as government and healthcare, and ultimately come together in times of hardship.

The baker is a criticism of capitalism and excessive labor with unfair pay. He has lost part of his humanity to his work, because maintaining financial security is a more immediate concern than forming relationships; he and other unnamed employees represent the proletariat. His behavior throughout the story shows his lack of feeling towards other people, and at the end, he admits as much, saying, “I’m just a baker. I don’t claim to be anything else... [M]aybe years ago I was a different kind of human being” (page 26). Industry has forced the characters to lose their individuality – none of the nurses are named or physically distinguishable from each other, and they do not offer Ann and Howard comfort or answers. When asked questions about Scotty’s condition, they simply say, “Doctor Francis will be here in a few minutes,” (page 6). Doctor Francis has reached a high enough class that he can retain some humanity while still doing his job, which is why he is afforded a name. However, he is nearing the status of the bourgeoisie, which is ultimately why he fails to give Scotty the correct diagnosis and treatment. He and Howard are somewhat similar in this regard; because Howard has the privilege to leave his job in the middle of a work day, and for an indefinite amount of time when Scotty is hospitalized, the audience can assume Howard is nearing a high-class position. He is not expendable, like a nurse or a baker would be.

Ann appears to be a full-time mom, and while this is unpaid labor, the reader is led to understand her emotions the most because she retains the most humanity in her job; she simply has the privilege to not work

for a company. Her trade is motherhood, and when this is stripped from her, she feels more aimless than the others; just like if the nurse or the baker lost their positions, Ann forms her identity around the job of being a mom. The difference is that it is her job to empathize with others, to care for others, and she can find another niche to fill without sending in an application first. Her grief manifests in being unable to care for her son, despite her skills; she knows Scotty is in a coma and that something has gone horribly wrong, but because the bourgeoisie does not value self-employed, unpaid labor, her concerns are brushed aside.

From one perspective, Ann benefits from being a mother. From another, her characterization has reduced her to being only a mother. The only outside information we have for another main character is what Howard and the baker tell us about their lives. While Howard is driving home from the hospital, he reflects on his life and his good fortune, or his privilege. Ann does not do the same – the audience is unsure of whether Ann thinks the marriage is successful, if she went to college, or if she gave anything up to become a mother. She is only a mother and wife – a loving one, but

a one-dimensional character. It seems that Ann is defined only by the fact she has a son. Ann's designated role to help the men in the story remember their humanity is a stereotypically feminine role that is largely informed by Raymond Carver's identity and life experiences, but is also in line with the idea that motherhood is a full-time job unrecognized by capitalism.

The bourgeoisie in this story are best represented by the hospital and doctor, and the situation with Scotty exposes the flawed system the proletariat have to live under. Scotty represents its most vulnerable victims, and the family Ann meets in the lobby of the hospital represents how tragedy can touch all our lives regardless of class or race. Ann and Howard learn through the events of the story, despite being middle-class and white, that certain tragedies touch all lives; this is a translation of the AIDS epidemic into literature. Disease does not discriminate based off class, sexuality, or race, but institutions and governments do.

Scotty has no speaking lines – the narrator only supplies information on what he saying, so the audience doesn't have access to his exact words. All we know about him is that he probably likes aliens, has one friend he used to

walk to school with, and “howls” before he dies, a very inhuman noise. Even though the story revolves around his injury, he only serves as a character who affects other characters. His injury allows the audience to see the contrast between employees who take care of people as a job, and people who take care of others free from industry interference. He also serves to bring the baker and Ann together; the baker needed to be reminded of his humanity and have a reason to turn his back on the capitalist system for a while. Ann is the most likely character to help him reconnect with his humanity, and in her grief she is more human than any other character. Although Howard also shows his humanity in his grief, it is Ann who helps him along, “‘There, there,’ she said tenderly. ‘Howard, he’s gone. He’s gone now and we’ll have to get used to that. To being alone’” (page 22). When Scotty’s death makes his parents feel alienated, just as capitalism alienates people from each other to prevent an uprising, they start to accept this; then the baker calls again, and Ann’s anger at his behavior pushes them into action, and eventually reconciliation and comfort.

When Ann encounters the black family in the waiting room, they serve

as a mirror for her situation, and represent understanding each other's humanity despite differences. There is a previous version of this short story called "The Bath," which does not specify the race of the family, does not include the two dark-skinned orderlies, and lacks the reconciliation with the baker. Part of the fear around AIDS was due to the uncertainty about how it spread, but there was also an element of stigma around African-American populations and their inaccurate image in the media as drug users (therefore, re-use needles and spread AIDS). Early on, it became clear that AIDS was spreading through bodily fluids, but more information than that tended to be conflicting.

In 1985, according to the article "Save Our Kids, Keep AIDS Out" by Jennifer Brier, black and white families would unite in Queens to protest the CDC regulations stating that children diagnosed with AIDS should be allowed in public schools. We can see this sentiment represented before this occurrence in Ann's desire to connect with the black family in the waiting room. Just like the mothers in the article fear their children being exposed to AIDS at school, a hospital must have been a nightmare for a mother in this time period. Seeing

Scotty have his blood drawn, and other needles inserted into his veins, probably caused her panic each time; not only because his condition was not improving, but also for the risk of contracting AIDS the longer he stayed in the hospital. Scotty's hospital stay can be considered a metaphor for how AIDS was considered during the time of publication. It comes out of nowhere, just like the car that hit Scotty, then disappeared without a trace. Those who are hit seem fine at first, but progressively, their condition declines. The doctors and nurses do not know enough about the disease, and sometimes, their intuition is wrong, causing tragic deaths. The message the audience is left with is this: a mother knows best for her child. This is echoed in the later movement in Queens, "Thus, parents and local communities, not a dishonest city bureaucracy or out-of-touch scientific establishment, were better able to make decisions about local children" (page 4, "Save Our Kids").

In "A Small, Good Thing," instead of exploiting the fear people had around the AIDS epidemic, Carver encourages people to find common ground and come together. Doctor Francis expresses his regrets in not being able to save Scotty, the family in the waiting room symbolizes connecting with each other despite differences, and the baker is able to acknowledge his loss of humanity over the years after witnessing Ann and Howard's grief. This short story is a touching addition to the literary

time period, and handles each political undertone with care and empathy.

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Psychological

The Grieving Mind: Psychological Criticism

Rachel Rees



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Literature gives us an insight into the human mind through the characters and the messages that the author has written. Raymond Carver's "A Small, Good Thing" is one of those literature pieces that has many elements that help readers grasp and understand the emotions that people go through with dealing when lives are disrupted through injury and grief. The characters, husband and wife Howard and Ann, experience an assortment of emotions at varying times that correlate with

Kubler-Ross's five stages of grief as well as perhaps other set emotions and moments outside of those five stages.

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross investigated human grief and narrowed it down to five denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. This is a set-up that we fall back on to help us understand the emotions we feel during an intense time in our lives. In "A Small, Good Thing" these stages don't start when Ann and Howard's son, Scotty, dies. Now the characters show these signs when Scotty has been admitted to the hospital and shows no signs in the tests why he doesn't wake up. In Bolden's review of Kubler-Ross's *On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief Through the Five Stages of Loss* denial is defined as "symbolic in that they cannot believe that their friend or family member will not, for example, be calling to say hello or returning from work at a certain time." We see this in the mother's thoughts as she leaves the hospital to go home for a while. "She wished she were that woman and somebody, anybody, was driving her away from here to somewhere else, a place where she would find Scotty waiting for her when she stepped out of the car, ready to say Mom and let her gather him in her arms." (Carver, 7) This wish is a moment where Ann wants to deny what is happening. The reader of course can easily sympathize with the sentiment, no one wants to imagine the pain these parents are going through with the unknown. I believe that, in a way the father shows his own Denial when he also takes a moment to stop by at home to shower off. There are moments where he seems to be denying what is happening by his son by focus on himself.

The two cycle through these emotions at different rates, and then have to face denial once more when their son dies and isn't merely in a coma-like state. This comes out in the same moment, when they are leaving the hospital. For the mother it starts right off "She began shaking her head. "No, no," she said. "I can't leave him here, no." She heard herself say that and thought how unfair it was that the only words that came out were the sort of words used on TV shows where people were stunned by violent or sudden deaths." (Carver 12) On the same page its mere seconds later when it appears that the father starts on this same denial "An autopsy," Howard said. Dr. Francis nodded.

"I understand," Howard said. Then he said, "Oh, Jesus. No, I don't understand, doctor. I can't, I can't. I just can't." His lack of understanding is part of that denial. The logic is likely there but the comprehending that its happening to his son, is too much. These two respond with the dysphoria that most would in this position.

The next stage in the five-stages model is Anger. This can be narrowed down to "A person's anger is directed at the person who died or at oneself for being unable to prevent his or her loved one's death. The authors contend that once individuals are in this stage, they recognize their ability to get through this difficult time." (Bolden) It is clear that these parents don't blame their son. No, they place blame on the driver who didn't even stop to take any sense of responsibility for harming Scotty. We first see this anger come out when the dad gets home and the phone rings. As a reader we can make the connection that it is the baker calling, as the cake was supposed to be picked up today. To the father it seems like a mean and crude joke and thus his reaction is anger (Carver, 3). The anger also comes out when the mother goes home and answers the phone, also forgetting about the baker and the order and seeing it as the same cruel joke that her husband warned her of. "Your Scotty, I got him ready for you," the man's voice said. "Did you forget him?" "You evil bastard!" she shouted into the receiver. "How can you do this, you evil son of a bitch?" / "It was him," she said. "That bastard. I'd like to kill him," she said. "I'd like to shoot him and watch him kick," she said." (Carver, 13) Here she takes the assumption that the caller is the driver who had hit their son. This can also be seen as a step outside of the model.

They aren't really past denial and Ann and Howard can't really see past their grief on how to carry on and live past this trauma. The parents reach anger once again, after their son's death when once again the baker calls. Even as Ann recognizes it as the baker her anger doesn't recede, nor does the father's but hers is expressed more potently "There was a deep burning inside her, an anger that made her feel larger than herself, larger than either of these men." (Carver, 14). Their anger is a driving force to their actions, it is what is keeping them going in the face of their sons' death. They don't want to hurt alone and thus

intend to bring a type of hurt on another. I feel like this is also a moment when the couple is trying to show the other that they aren't weak, however this has a possible backfiring effect towards the grieving process as "Grieving parents who try to protect their partner by "staying strong" and not discussing the child's death may actually prolong their grieving" (Myers & DeWall, 102). It is possible that by not communicating with one another the parents will be extending their grief even more. Especially as the story itself seems to circle through the stages more than just the once going from when Scotty was merely ill to his actual passing.

Bargaining isn't really a stage that is easy to detect in this story. "Kubler-Ross and Kessler talk about the "what if" and "if only" mind-set wherein individuals who are grieving believe that they may have been able to control and thus prevent the loss of their family member or friend." (Bolden) It could be seen that when Scotty is still alive the mother is considering that her being at his bedside, never leaving, is a sort of bargaining. That if she remains, he'll wake up and everything will be alright. This same sentiment also feels like a sense of denial. Ann then comes to think the opposite,

She tried to think about it, but she was too tired. She closed her eyes and tried to think about it again. After a time, she said, "Maybe I will go home for a few minutes. Maybe if I'm not just sitting right here watching him every second, he'll wake up and be all right. You know? Maybe he'll wake up if I'm not here. I'll go home and take a bath and put on clean clothes. I'll feed Slug. Then I'll come back." (Carver, 8)

The father doesn't seem to negotiate or bargain so much, and if the character is going through this Carver has left it out to the reader's imagination. Perhaps it is because this moment is more important to see from the mother. For the reader to better understand and sympathize the mother's reluctant feelings and what she forces herself to think of just so that she leaves.

Our fourth stage following the model is Depression. "In this stage, the authors discuss the normalcy of feeling depressed and affirm the idea that such feelings are necessary for the healing process to begin." (Bolden) We can see that this depressed state also isn't entirely easy to define when Scotty is merely in bed.

Once more we get a better sense of this through the character's just going through the motions. "They waited all day, but still the boy did not wake up. Occasionally, one of them would leave the room to go downstairs to the cafeteria to drink coffee and then, as if suddenly remembering and feeling guilty, get up from the table and hurry back to the room." (Carver, 6) I believe that Carver expresses that 'depression' through the guilt of the parent being away from their child. That just in that moment to go to get a drink of coffee they feel as if it'll be their fault should Scotty wake up and they not be at his bedside waiting.

The stage of depression becomes more distinct for the mother as the wait for Scotty to wake continued. "She felt she was in some obscure way responsible for what had happened to the child." (Carver, 10) In this moment it feels like she feels that guilt despite the fact that she personally had no part in the car incident. Then things take on a shift towards after Scotty's death, when the parents have left the hospital and are at home. It becomes clear in the father's actions on page 13, "In a little while, Howard got up and began moving aimlessly around the room with the box, not putting anything into it, but collecting some things together on the floor at one end of the sofa." He reaches this state before the mother.

When the mother finally seems to reach that depressed state it is when they have confronted the baker. After the anger that had driven them to the bakery. "Just as suddenly as it had welled in her, the anger dwindled, gave way to something else, a dizzy feeling of nausea. She leaned against the wooden table that was sprinkled with flour, put her hands over her face, and began to cry, her shoulders rocking back and forth. "It isn't fair," she said. "It isn't, isn't fair." (Carver, 15) In this sense the father hadn't followed the set stage as he had gone from his depression to his anger of the baker calling them, as if the baker was mocking them. It is also a show of how people move through grief at different rates and that Ann seems to process emotions further than the father.

The fifth stage in Kubler-Ross's model is Acceptance. Bolden goes over how "At this stage, individuals are at a point where they recognize the current state of their lives, without their loved one, as the reality and can live with that understanding."

Now it is clear that neither Ann nor Howard reaches this state by the end of the story. But there are moments of a sort of pseudo-acceptance set. "Over his sobs, she could hear the coffee-maker hissing in the kitchen. "There, there," she said tenderly. "Howard, he's gone. He's gone and now we'll have to get used to that. To being alone." (Carver Page 13) This is important how Ann acknowledges that her son is gone. It is a start towards acceptance. The true path towards acceptance is shown to the couple through the Baker. He acknowledges their grief and understands it even as if he never personally experienced this. "You probably need to eat something," the baker said. "I hope you'll eat some of my hot rolls. You have to eat and keep going. Eating is a small, good thing in a time like this," he said." (Carver 16) I think this really sets apart from the five-stage model, as instead of a counselor or the parents themselves we have a baker giving them those steps on how to keep on living even after a hard time such as losing a child.

Raymond Carver has written a story that has character's going through a trying time. He has written a story that goes over grieving in a way that seems to follow Kubler-Ross's five stage model and also doesn't. People grieve and process at different rates, this is also shown with Ann and Howard. If the story continued on it would be more likely that the characters would cycle through the five-stage model as much as they would also fall outside of it. Still the story itself is a great study of what the human mind deals with when suffering through an unexpected loss.

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Feminist

A Small Good Thing: Feminist Perspective

Benjaman Smolden



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The most interesting thing about stories is the different perspectives from which they are told. These perspectives often include many stereotypes. Albert Kingston and Terry Lovelace, explain in the article "Sexism and Reading: A Critical Review of the Literature" that "stereotypes are the spectacles through which our minds see the world; they are the definers of our 'facts'" (135). The characters made by authors tend to reflect

stereotypes of gender from the author's perspective. Looking at these perceptions you can find interesting power dynamics and how each gender views the other. By looking at "A Small, Good Thing" by Raymond Carver, you can see how stereotypical perceptions of gender are expressed through Ann Weiss and the other female characters throughout the story.

Throughout the story, there are a few female characters, but it is important to note that there is only one main female character the story tends to follow. That character is Ann Weiss. Even though she is the only main female character, she interacts with a few other women throughout the story. The first of which is Franklin's mother, Evelyn, and what can be presumed as her teenage daughter. Next are the nurses that work in the hospital. These women play a very minor role in the story, but they do help the story progress through the different tragedies that happen in the hospital. One thing that all of these female characters have in common is the stereotypical power dynamic they have with a man. All of these women are living in a man's world where they have a man who has power over them.

Every woman in this story is in some way being controlled by a man. Looking at the nurses, they are under the control of doctors. The doctors in this story are males and the nurses are females. The reason for this can be seen by how males are generally perceived in stories. Kingston and Lovelace explain that in stories, "Adult males had significantly high constructive/productive behavior and physically assertive behavior; and they engaged in problem-solving behavior" (146). This narrative is continued based on Carver's explanation of Doctor Francis. "The doctor was a handsome, big-shouldered man with a tanned face. He wore a three-piece suit, a striped tie, and ivory cufflinks. His grey hair was combed along the sides of his head, and he looked as if he had just come from a concert." (219). Carver painted the doctor as a very masculine and physically assertive character and since he is a doctor his focus is on problem-solving. This is very stereotypical for male characters and this dynamic places him above the female nurses. Cynthia Griffin Wolff in "A Mirror for Men: Stereotypes of Women in Literature" explains that, "The stereotypes of women vary, but they vary in response to different masculine needs" (207). The

way that nurses are portrayed in this story not only contributes to the stereotype that women must be nurses and men must be doctors, but it also establishes who has authority. Furthermore, these women are left without a name making them less significant despite them being around more than the doctor in the story. These stereotypes of nurses being female are established to respond to the masculine needs of the male doctor. This in turn creates a power dynamic in the story where the female nurses are there to serve the needs of the doctor. This narrative is also expressed by one of the nurses in the story. Carver states, "I don't understand this," Ann said to the woman. 'Doctor's orders,' the young woman said. 'I do what I'm told to do. They say draw that one, I draw'" (222). This shows that nurses are there to serve the needs of the doctor and they do not have a say in the reason behind certain situations.

The next situation of a woman being controlled by a man is very subtle but speaks volumes. In the story, Evelyn, the mother of Franklin was projecting emotions of angst in anticipation of what would happen to her son. Wolff continues by stating, "There is a long tradition which maintains that woman is essentially emotional" (210). Carver states when talking about Evelyn that, "She was trying to rise from her chair, but the man had closed his hand over her arm. "Here, here," he said. "Evelyn" (226). With this, it is clear that the man is establishing power over his wife. He is essentially telling her to calm down by establishing authority over her and her emotions. Her being emotional is intentional because it allows for a masculine response from her husband. This shows that men view themselves as problem-solvers and that they have the solutions to a women's problem. They feel the need to step in the way of a woman. Moreover, with Evelyn's husband putting his on her he is establishing physical dominance over her. Even though this was most likely not the author's intent to perpetuate these stereotypes, they came through in the authors intentionally as it relates to how the man views society.

When it comes to the main character, Ann, she is being controlled by male authority from many different angles. The masculine control of Ann comes across through Dr. Francis, her husband Howard, and the baker. All of these characters or

figures establish some sort of masculine control or dominance over her. It is vital to recognize that Ann is dealing with the hardship of her son being in an accident. This naturally would cause her to be emotional. Wolff states, "With this obsessive focus on emotionality, women came increasingly to be defined as purely emotional, without rational competence..." (211). These perceptions that an emotional Ann having a lack of rationality comes across pretty clearly with her conversations with male characters as her emotions make her question male authority. The reason for this also stems from a man trying to maintain dominance over her. Berkley Connor states in the article, "Explaining Mansplaining" that, "men must embody male dominance or else risk losing social status as a result of being overpowered by a woman. As a result of the male need to remain dominant in conversation in public discourse women's voices are constantly silenced ..." (147). The first example of this is Ann's interactions with Doctor Francis.

Doctor Francis's respect for an emotional Ann is very limited. This can be seen with the doctor's physical and verbal interactions with her. When talking to a nurse Ann states "I want to talk to the doctor. I don't think he (her son) should keep sleeping like this. I don't think that's a good sign" (218). She insists that there is something wrong with her son and due to the incident, she is very emotional. As the doctor enters the picture it is clear that he does not have the same respect for her as he does her husband. This is shown when Carver states, "Doctor Francis came in and shook hands with Howard, though they'd just seen each other a few hours before. Ann got up from the chair. "Doctor? "Ann," he said and nodded" (218). The way the doctor shakes Howard's hand but not Ann's signifies that he maintains a level of respect for her husband but not Ann herself. He only greets her with a nod signifying that he does not have as much respect for her as compared to the man by her side. As Ann addresses her concerns with the doctor he states, "He's all right... Nothing to shout about, he could be better, I think. But he's all right. Still, I wish he'd wake up. He should wake up pretty soon" (219). With this, the doctor's attempt to mitigate an emotional Ann and paint her as incompetent is abundantly clear. She is questioning his authority which makes him want to

establish his dominance and silence her concerns. He does this by telling her, “nothing to shout about.” He is telling her that she is being irrational in this situation. This mansplaining from the doctor reaffirms his male authority over her and perpetuates the stereotype that a “man is always right.”

The second example of this comes from Howard as he is essentially demanding Ann to go home. “Maybe you should go home and get some rest. I’ll stay here... You go on now.” She shook her head. “No,” she said, “I’m fine.” “Really,” he said. “Go home for a while” (217). With this instance, Howard is asserting dominance over her as he feels he is in better judgment to make decisions for her. She insists that she is okay, but Howard constantly persists to push her to go home. This further perpetuates the stereotype that an emotional woman lacks rationality as explained by Wolff. Her husband recognized that she is emotional, so he feels as if he needs to be the “problem solver” to her problems. Another way Howard asserts power over her is by mansplaining issues that address her concerns as the doctor did. This is seen when Ann puts her hand on her child’s forehead, and she determines that it seemed odd that her son felt cold. She expresses her concerns with Howard, and he mansplained to her, “I think he’s supposed to feel this way right now... He’s in shock, remember?” That’s what the doctor said. The doctor was just in here. He would have said something if Scotty wasn’t okay” (220). This shows that Howard feels the need to explain the most basic concepts. He reminds her that the doctor was just in the room as if she was not there. He also talks down on her by stating, “He is in shock, Remember?” It seems that Howard attempts to dumb down the situation in an attempt to mitigate her concerns. This example further perpetuates the stereotype that men are more competent when a woman is emotional. In reality, you find that Ann’s concerns are valid, but they are always mitigated by a man who assumes some sort of power/authority over her.

The third example of Ann being influenced by a masculine character comes from the baker. The baker does not have malicious intent but given the circumstances and the stereotypical perceptions of gender he comes across as hostile. As explained by Kingston and Lovelace, stereotypically in

stories “males were portrayed as more physically aggressive than females, more verbally aggressive, more competent, angrier” (146). Despite women in stories stereotypically being painted as competent, due to the fact Ann was also painted as emotional it was perceived that she lacked a rational competence as explained by Wolff. Over the phone, Ann and her husband did not know the baker was the one calling and they thought it was some random man that was harassing them. This caused Ann to act out in a verbally aggressive and angry manner. “‘For God’s sake,’ she said. ‘Who is this?’... ‘Your Scotty, I got him ready for you,’... ‘Did you forget him?’ ‘You evil bastard!’ she shouted... ‘How can you do this, you evil son of a bitch?’... ‘Have you forgotten about Scotty?’...” (234). This showcases Ann acting in a very stereotypical angry manner. The author portrays in a way that is irrational and verbally aggressive. This could show the author’s subconscious stereotypical perceptions of how a woman in tough times acts in an emotional state. The main reason stories portray women as “madwomen” or overly emotional is due to stereotypes associated with a women’s menstrual cycle. This in turn makes women vulnerable allowing a masculine influence to assume power over them.

Stereotypes are perceptions as to how our minds see the world. In stories, gendered stereotypes by authors often come across unintentionally. In “A Small Good Thing” we can see how female characters are stereotypically developed to suit the needs of a man. These stereotypes come across in characters’ careers as seen by the male doctors and the female nurses. These nurses are built to meet the needs of a male doctor. Furthermore, male characters constantly assume authority over female characters as seen by Evelyn’s husband, Ann’s husband, and Doctor Francis. Women are stereotypically portrayed as overly emotional and lack rationality which then require a response from a man. These stereotypical perceptions of gender make it seem that the women in this story are living in a man’s world.

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[PART III]

"Sonny's Blues" by James Baldwin

You can read James Baldwin's short story "Sonny's Blues" at this link. <https://uwm.edu/cultures-communities/wp-content/uploads/sites/219/2018/01/SonnysBlues.Baldwin.pdf>



James Baldwin was born in Harlem, New York. By the age of 13 his educators deemed him gifted; in 1937 he wrote his first article, titled "Harlem—Then and Now," which was published in his school's magazine. Baldwin's essay "Down at the Cross" landed Baldwin on the cover of *Time Magazine* in 1963. He moved to Paris and lived his life there.

"James Baldwin" by Allan Warren,
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:James_Baldwin_37_Allan_Warren_\(cropped\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:James_Baldwin_37_Allan_Warren_(cropped).jpg), Licensed CC BY Allan Warren

About the Authors

Chelsea Yates

Born in Boise, Idaho and is a student in her junior year at College of Western Idaho. She is only majoring in creative writing and does not plan on transferring to a four-year university. Her interests are in television writing/work, script writing, and true crime/crime work involving hunting down serial killers. After completing her degree in creative writing, she plans on pursuing a career in script writing for television and book writing.

Majel Coxe

Born in Boise, Idaho and is currently pursuing an English degree at the College of Western Idaho. As an aspiring writer, she studies the craft by reading and observing the world around her. Her most promising ideas are drawn from personal experiences, as well as interpreting our connection to nature and animals. She currently lives a comfortable life with her husband in central Maryland.

Netanya Hitchcock

Born in Perth, Western Australia and moved to Boise, Idaho in 2015. She is currently studying for an English degree and will be graduating from the College of Western Idaho in May 2021. Although she has enjoyed reading and writing from childhood,

she is grateful for the refinement she has attained through studying literature at CWI.

Aubrey Howell

An Idaho native who is finishing an English degree at the College of Western Idaho, and plans afterward to transfer to Idaho State University to study law. Her experiences come from her personal life, where she spends time doing volunteer work within the community with an emphasis on addiction and family. She also enjoys the outdoors, and likes to use it as an outlet to stay grounded as a single mother of twin girls. She loves to read to learn about new viewpoints and opinions. She also strives to continue to mature with writing which she believes can be an incredible tool in connecting people despite their differences.

Dillon O'Donnell

A student at College of Western Idaho, currently in his freshman year. He is majoring in philosophy at CWI, and after transferring to Boise State University, plans on completing his bachelor's degree. His interests are in social reform, creative writing, and people. After completion of his undergraduate education, he plans on pursuing a career either in law or community organizing.

Lauren Bilby

Born in Palm Springs, California, and moved to Idaho in 2022. She majored in Liberal Arts while at CWI, and completed her degree in Spring 2023. She is transferring to Boise State University, where she's majoring in English. Her interests are reading, writing, and staying at home where she spends her time playing video games, playing Dungeons and Dragons, or playing with her dogs.

Critical Introduction



James Baldwin taken in Hyde Park London. Rolliflex twin reflex. 2 1/4
kodak 400 black & white negative film

“Sonny’s Blues” written by James Baldwin, is a short story that was published in 1957. It follows the life of an African American algebra teacher in 1950s Harlem, who shares the experiences he has had with his brother, Sonny, an aspiring jazz musician who has seen his fair share of struggles. Conveyed with a soulful style, the themes of alienation, racism, and the search for identity, resonate today thanks to the attentive humanity of Baldwin.

The feelings of striving for independence and understanding in “Sonny’s Blues”, were heavily inspired by the setting and time that Baldwin lived in when composing the story. The story’s

milieu of post-World War Two New York, which in the 1950s saw artists congregate ranging from the painter Jackson Pollack, writer Jack Kerouac, and musician Charlie Parker, help conjure to the reader the fictional Sonny desiring to be one of these creative minds.

It cannot be forgotten that “Sonny’s Blues” takes on the sorrowful task of depicting the bleak realities of people of color in inner cities. The struggles Sonny faces in the story reflected the disillusionment of many African Americans during that time, and unfortunately, even today. Although, it should be noted that aside from the confrontations with darkness in the story, there lies undertones of hope. Not only does the conclusion see this ray of light, but it is a story that seeks to ask each one of us what our identities are. And most importantly, why should we give up with this one life we have?

New Criticism By Netanya Hitchcock

In “Saving Sonny’s Brother”, I analyze “Sonny’s Blues” as a story of intergenerational trauma, exploring the way in which the tension between the brothers over jazz reveals the narrator’s fear of suffering and subsequent isolation from the Black community. Parallels emerge between the narrator and his father, as well as between his attempt to protect Sonny and the loss of his daughter. These similarities reverse the brothers’ roles and render Sonny more capable of being a protector than the narrator because of the former’s strong ties to the Black community. Conversely, the narrator’s disapproval of jazz and his fear that Sonny will be ruined becomes blatantly ironic, for his fear functions as a self-fulfilling prophecy that only Sonny can cure. Whilst a surface reading of the story suggests that Sonny needs rescuing, his enthusiasm for jazz and his commitment to the community enables him to strengthen his older brother.

Historical Criticism By Aubrey Howell

James Baldwin’s short story “Sonny’s Blues” puts a microscope on the social and racial climate of Harlem during the 1940s. Specifically, Baldwin addresses the hardships and struggles

within the African American culture post World War II. Baldwin starts the story with a nameless narrator that tells the story of his younger brother Sonny who is struggling to find himself and express himself during this revolutionary time. Sonny, a musician, is able to tap into the importance that jazz not only had on him and his family, but for thousands of other African Americans who sought music as a beacon of light in the darkness of a tumultuous society.

Feminist/Queer Theory By Chelsea Yates

“Hear Them Roar” is my analyzation and exploration into the depth of “Sonny’s Blues” by James Baldwin to try to find and explain the Feminist and if present, Queer qualities of the story. With limited queer insights in this story, there are numerous women in the narrator and Sonny’s life that led them down a path that not only helped them in life, but also helped them find the good in each other in impossible ways. Their mother, the narrator’s wife and even Gracie, the daughter of the narrator, who isn’t mentioned more than a couple of times are strong forces in their immediate circle. Throughout the story they do powerful acts to help impact Sonny and the narrators’ lives. Having such a strong familial bond from women who take the lead by being strong pillars in their family, can only strengthen bonds and provide excellent feminine role models for the characters’ children, and even Sonny and the narrator himself.

Deconstruction By Majel Cox

I used deconstructive criticism to explore James Baldwin’s short story, “Sonny’s Blues.” The aim is to show the text’s inability to present two opposing characters learning to gradually empathize and connect with each other. Beginning with an examination of the first-person perspective, I show how the narrative structure is ineffective for the indented purpose because it portrays unreliable details. I identify the narrator’s inability to acknowledge suffering as a source of significant tension and aggression between the two characters. The aim is to show that the intended interpretation favors the perspective of the narrator, which encourages a sympathetic response

towards Sonny instead. Consequently, the reader is positioned against the narrator and is unable to effectively empathize with him. I conclude by claiming that the text encourages the reader to validate one character's perspective instead of learning to understand the extent of both character's suffering.

Reader Response By Dillon O'Donnell

In my essay, I analyze the theme in "Sonny's Blues" of searching for identity and redefine this often-used phrase to include the quest of understanding others as well as ourselves. Starting with the search for personal understanding, there is much emphasis in the story on the plight of Sonny and how coming to know yourself is an arduous task. After I discuss this portion of the story, I move on to how the character of Sonny's brother acts as a symbol for the theme of external understanding of others. In closing, I tie the two searches of identity together and explain how these themes in "Sonny's Blues" exist on a continuum and are not wholly separate.

Psychological By lauren bilby

This essay takes a look at James Baldwin's short story "Sonny's Blues" by analyzing how both Sonny and the narrator process their grief surrounding Sonny's addiction to heroin. As they both process their grief, they go through Bill Flatt's theory of "Some Stages of Grief," which this essay delves further into. These stages are: shock and panic, lamentations, withdrawal, depression, detachment, adaptation, reinvesting, and growth. Every single one of these stages is reflected by Sonny and his brother at one point or another in the story.



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Annotated Bibliography

Albert, Richard N. "The Jazz-Blues Motif in James Baldwin's 'Sonny's Blues.'" *College Literature*, vol. 11, no. 2, Spring 1984, pp. 178–185. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/25111592.

Richard Albert's article explores the significance of jazz and blues music in James Baldwin's short story, "Sonny's Blues." The article offers a close reading of the story that shows the author's use of specific allusions and motifs to emphasize the themes of individualism and alienation. The examples used focus on the history of Creoles, popular jazz musicians of Baldwin's time, and the background of the song "Am I Blue?" by Ray Charles. These historical details aim to strengthen the author's interpretation of the older brother's alienation, emphasizing his attempt to separate himself from the African American community. The author then compares the functionality of the allusions made in the beginning of the story to those made at the end, aiming to consider possible counterarguments to his claim.

The article uses New Criticism to further explore the tension that divides the two, comparing the way the older brother and his younger brother, Sonny, each struggle with their own feelings of isolation. There are references made about their contrasting interpretations of jazz and blues music, their individual acceptance of identity, and ultimately their interpretations of their positions in society. The conclusion credits the narrator's

willingness to experience Sonny's blues to be the first step he takes towards reuniting with his African American heritage and to ultimately unify him with all of humanity.

Brim, Matt. *James Baldwin and the Queer Imagination*. United States, University of Michigan Press, 2014. *Google Books*, books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=NphFDwAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PR11&dq=Scholarly%2Barticles%2BJames%2BBaldwin%2Bsexuality&ots=YfRcqNGl4l&sig=alxfmRyQPObdyV5K97PS2hLK8vc#v=onepage&q=Scholarly%20articles%20James%20Baldwin%20sexuality&f=false.

Matt Brim's book on *James Baldwin and the Queer Imagination* adequately describes James Baldwin's work as an author and how his sexual identity influenced his work and what his being queer did for the community around him and his influence it had on others in a similar way. Brim aims to argue how Baldwin and queer theory do not fit together. James Baldwin was and still is a pillar in the community and Brim coins the term "Baldwinization" in direct reference to "queer theory in the form of black queer studies" (Brim, 1). Queer theory and Baldwin's work is a huge focus in Brim's book and he also goes on to explain that Baldwin has a deep understanding of identity and how he understands queer theory and its intense complexity which helps shape his ideas in writing. Baldwin is a notable member of the queer writers community, paving the way for others to study and making the seemingly impossible, possible. Brim notes that Baldwin's writing and queer theory mesh well, and Brim's book goes into his argument that there is more to imagine than that especially because Brim is fascinated by how Baldwin can make queer and unqueer go well together in relation.

Byerman, Keith A. "Words and Music: Narrative Ambiguity In 'Sonny's Blues.'" *Studies in Short Fiction*, vol. 19, no. 4, Fall 1982, pp. 367-372. EBSCOhost, <http://web.a.ebscohost.com/cwi.idm.oclc.org/ehost/pdfviewer/>

pdfviewer?vid=3&sid=18a47879-f498-4f6e-9663-985add4eb925%40sessionmgr4006.

Keith Byerman reads into “Sonny’s Blues” with the inquiry that the prose of the story can reveal the journey of Sonny’s brother. He shows how a pattern exists in the story where the narrator, when confronted by severe emotional weight, tends to deviate from usually logical, clear prose, to metaphorical and escapism-filled prose, often practicing tactics of evasion and deflection in his narration, wishing to understand Sonny but failing to listen when he has the chance. This back-and-forth pattern continues until he finally witnesses his brother, Sonny, perform in the jazz club. When he watches him, the prose becomes a blend of the logical narration and the symbolic one, showing the internal growth of the narrator. The narrator does not oscillate without control anymore. He now can coexist with these former warring entities.

Byerman’s analysis uses a blend of historical criticism and deconstruction in picking apart the prose of the story to seek an original interpretation. He explains how the debate between critics over whether the narration belongs to Sonny or the brother limits other possible readings of the text. One should not necessarily seek confirmation of the meaning of the story, but simply explore the text and try to connect the dots. In addition to employing a deconstruction lens, Byerman uses historical criticism in his acknowledgement of the story’s fame as a hindrance to a unique interpretation. He states that his purpose for the essay is to take a different path than others have before, and search for a universal theme instead a unilateral one.

Flatt, Bill. “Some Stages of Grief.” *Journal of Religion and Health*, vol. 26, no. 2, 1987, pp. 143–48. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27505917>.

Bill Flatt, the Professor of Counseling at Harding Graduate School of Religion in Memphis, at the time of publication, documents his findings after studying grief in 500 widows and widowers. In the article, he states that

grief is a non-linear process, and that any individual's grief work is not permanent, as going through grief, emotions fluctuate. The article focuses on Flatt's theory of "Some Stages of Grief" being: shock, lamentations, withdrawal, frustration, panic, depression, detachment, adaptation, reinvesting, and finally growth. Shock is described as one of the shorter stages with a strong physical response ranging from dizziness to heart palpitations. Lamentations are described as when an individual experiencing grief starts to vent their resentment and anger towards the tragedy, or the circumstances. Withdrawal is described as the action of separating oneself from others in an attempt to process the loss on their own. Frustration is described as the process of dealing with the death mostly in a financial or social setting. Panic occurs at any time in the process, but appears earlier than other stages, and is described as a general feeling of dread. Depression is the stage in which an individual feels at their lowest and struggles to maintain their typical routines. Detachment is the stage in which someone attempts to disconnect their feelings from their grief in an effort to maintain normalcy. Adaptation is when someone begins to adapt to their life, coexisting with their grief. Reinvesting is described as overcoming the negative emotions, and beginning to invest in the positives. Finally, growth is described as the ideal final stage, in which an individual accepts their grief and moves on to live a productive life.

Written as a publication for the Journal of Religion and Health, the document is divided into paragraphs for each corresponding stage of grief, describing common physical and emotional reactions. The paragraphs themselves are short, approachable, and informative. The stages are well depicted and would do well for anyone attempting to research griefwork.

Golden, Timothy Joseph. "Epistemic Addiction: Reading 'Sonny's Blues' with Levinas, Kierkegaard, and

Nietzsche.” *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, vol. 26, no. 3, Penn State University Press, 2012, pp. 554–71, <https://doi.org/10.5325/jspecphil.26.3.0554>.

Via comparing and contrasting the ideologies of James Baldwin, Emmanuel Levinas, Søren Kierkegaard, and Friedrich Nietzsche, Timothy Joseph Golden explores “Sonny’s Blues” as a critique of society, culture, and Christianity. To underscore the religious themes in “Sonny’s Blues”, the essay begins with the biblical story of humanity’s fall, in which inappropriate means of seeking knowledge creates a moral dilemma. Golden shows this biblical story to relate to the older brother in “Sonny’s Blues” in that the brother lacks the correct means of knowing Sonny, wishing only to accept Sonny on conditional terms. Freedom from suffering is the objective in the brother’s case, but his inability to know Sonny results in further suffering, just as Eve’s inability to understand good and evil resulted in the same.

Using New Criticism to perform a close reading of Baldwin’s short story and a summary of the philosophers’ ideology, Golden reveals the older brother’s attempt to make Sonny like himself, an effort that is detrimental to his desire to know his brother, being incapable of preventing suffering. Readers will not only obtain a better understanding of why Sonny is distanced from his older brother but also how the older brother is the cause of this distance. Whilst this suppression of Sonny negatively impacts the narrator’s role as the older brother, suffering bridges the gap between them, transforming the narrator’s values and resulting in a fulfillment of knowledge.

Goldman, Suzy Bernstein. “James Baldwin’s ‘Sonny’s Blues’: A Message in Music.” *Negro American Literature Forum*, vol. 8, no. 3, Autumn 1974, pp. 231–233. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3041461>.

Goldman writes about the connection between James

Baldwin's short story and music itself. This story has music as an important theme, and the format of the story correlates four parts within the story to the four time sequences in music. This article stresses the importance that music can have at a deeper level. The four movements listed in the article tell the song of tragedy for the generation before and the current generation. The connection of music creates a bond between the brothers amongst all the turmoil that they endure. Goldman ends the article with the note that although the blues that Sonny creates are a way to hold memories for the brothers, it also is a powerful catalyst for everyone. The music is an example of the beautiful mourning from those who feel unheard and discarded. This article can be used to understand the impact that music had on life during this time by seeing the picture of poverty during 1957 in Harlem. This includes the impact that music had to dramatically draw people closer together across any social lines. The different layers that Baldwin weaved into this story, including the irony of how the story is written, make the point that the story itself is a work of music. We also see that in the streets where there was little to hope for, music was an outlet and joy for all.

Gustafson, Donald. "Grief." *Noûs*, vol. 23, no. 4, 1989, pp. 457–79. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2215878>.

Written for *Noûs*, a peer-reviewed academic journal published by Wiley-Blackwell, Donald Gustafson pens a lengthy discussion on grief. The article itself is a philosophical analysis of grief, and a collection of data that support Gustafson's claim that grief is its own emotion, separate from pain and sorrow. Gustafson discusses cognitively impenetrable emotions, which he writes are feelings in which the individual has no say in having, and by contrast, cognitively penetrable emotions are feelings in which the individual has a factor in feeling them. The idea that emotions serve an adaptive function is also played with as both physical and physiological advantages and actions are proposed and discussed. Emotions themselves are also discussed, and their

functions for the sake of how they are perceived by both society and from a scientific standpoint, of which grief does not fit the typical confines of other emotions.

The article itself is difficult to grasp from its diction, but also its format. While the article contains wonderful thinking points, and a philosophical view of the emotion and process of grief, it is written academically to the point that it's almost sterile. The article does have some wonderful information and insight towards grief and the process of grieving. For an individual dipping their toes into researching grief work, this article wouldn't be a starting point, but would be a good way to further support any already gathered information.

Hodge, James R. "They That Mourn." *Journal of Religion and Health*, vol. 11, no. 3, 1972, pp. 229–40. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27505129>.

Dr. James Hodge writes an alternative to Emily Kubler-Ross's theory of the five stages of grief, instead researching his own stages of grief: shock and surprise, emotional release, loneliness, physical distress with anxiety, panic, guilt, hostility and projection, lassitude, gradual overcoming of grief, and readjustment to reality. Not only does Dr. James Hodge pen his own stages of grief, but he also writes of the management of grief as not only an individual, but also as a family. Dr. Hodge also brings in the idea that the process of grief is not only limited to the loss of a loved one, but any kind of major loss or separation.

Written as a publication for the *Journal of Religion and Health*, the document is divided into six major sections: the personal loss, the grief work, the individual pattern for grief, stages of grief, the management of grief, and grief as a separate reaction. At the end of the document is a summary, and a short conclusion. All of Dr. Hodges research and depictions are detailed and would do well for any individual looking into an alternative for the Emily Kubler-Ross stages of grief, but also for any individual seeking information on how grief affects individuals and families.

Laird, Susan. "Musical Hunger: A Philosophical Testimonial of Miseducation." *Philosophy of Music Education Review*, vol. 17, no. 1, Spring 2009, pp. 4-21. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/cwi/idm.oclc.org/stable/40327307.

Susan Laird's study of music as sharing the same metaphorical quality present in food and education offers fascinating parallels to the redemptive aspect of jazz in James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues". Laird's remarkable insights on music as a necessity of life for bearing suffering offer an invaluable perspective of Sonny's passion for jazz. Exploring her own philosophical studies of food and education, in addition to referencing various theories regarding music, and drawing from personal experience, Laird assesses the effects of a musically deprived childhood. She begins by describing and analyzing hunger and its stages, including appetite and satiety and unhealthy relationships with food, addressing food's addictive quality and comparing it to music as a form of nourishment in its own right, possessing particular benefits for spiritual and emotional wellbeing. Her brief interpretation of "Sonny's Blues" serves to strengthen her theory that music's sustaining nature makes it a necessity in the lives of all children, as Baldwin's story falls neatly in line with her perspective, illustrating the consequences of a life grounded in pursuing the creation of music versus one that relies on an education system devoid of art and, subsequently, the power to bear suffering. Readers of Laird's article will not only gain a better appreciation of Sonny's craving for music but also perceive the spiritual and emotional disadvantage the older brother has imposed on himself through his disapproval of jazz.

Lamb, Vanessa Martins. "The 1950's and the 1960's and the American Woman: the Transition from the 'Housewife' to the Feminist." *HAL*, 2011, dumas.ccsd.cnrs.fr/dumas-00680821/document.

Lamb's article is a wonderfully in-depth look at the way that women were viewed and expected to be in the 1950 and 1960's. Women were expected to be at home

after university and run the household and raise the children, rather than have a life free to do as they pleased. Women began to wonder if that life was all there was and would be. Lamb explains that just after the Second World War, it was as if girls just thought their only goals were to get married right away and start a family as, if they did not do that, then what good were they? Until it wasn't their main goal any longer. Women felt trapped like they were being kept in the dark about something magical: Freedom. It was not that women were not free—there was just a lot of expectation to carry out the legacy they followed from their mothers before them and theirs before that. Women in the 50's and 60's felt restrained, tied down and held back from certain things and interests. Women were done feeling like the perfect housewife. They wanted more and were beginning to lose their sense of self. Vanessa Lamb explores the transformation of women starting with who they were expected to be into becoming who they were meant to be instead.

Lee, Dorothy H. "The Bridge of Suffering." *Callaloo*, no. 18, Spring 1983, pp. 92-99. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/2930529.

"The Bridge of Suffering" by Dorothy Lee explores the in-depth relation between James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues" and his metaphorical bridge that helps one's suffering and keeps one from essentially suffering in isolation. This explains thoroughly what's important between the form of "otherness" Sonny experiences in his life—whether it has to do with race, religion, community or even identity. Lee explores the concept that Baldwin's other works intertwine the concept of suffering into each of his other stories and how they all seem to connect with each other. The concept of suffering and its pitfalls appears in Baldwin's other works, such as in "Another Country" in which it takes the form of Guy's isolation, or Arthur's journey for self-acceptance in "Just Above My Head." It is genuinely astounding just how well James Baldwin can intertwine such an intricate concept such as suffering repeatedly over several

different stories to correlate with one another, and readers are able to find clever similarities between each of his works in some shape or form. Through the theme of suffering an individual can come to understand more about themselves and the world that surrounds them, giving them a better understanding of not only themselves, but others as well.

McParland, Robert P. "To the Deep Water: James Baldwin's 'Sonny's Blues.'" *Interdisciplinary Humanities*, vol. 23, no. 2, Fall 2006, pp. 131-140. EBSCOhost, <http://web.b.ebscohost.com/cwi.idm.oclc.org/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=6&sid=965dabb9-849e-4d03-8356-d7fd2888dfc2%40sessionmgr101>.

Robert P. McParland explores the metaphorical quality of music in James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues", offering a unique perspective of Sonny's withdrawn nature and the redemptive quality of jazz. Referencing Baldwin's own experiences with music and the ideas he presents in his essays, McParland illustrates the way music establishes a connection between individuals and their community. He notes that the story even flows like music, stopping and starting, with repetition of thought and memory. Music is the heart of the story, underscoring the brothers' relationship and explaining Sonny's struggles. Beyond this, McParland shows that jazz represents the ups and downs and unpredictability of life itself.

McParland's essay hinges on Baldwin's lived experience with and ideas of music, which fuels the complex relationship between Sonny and the jazz community, shedding light on both literature and music and the culture of Baldwin's day. Whilst McParland references Baldwin's essays to strengthen his interpretation of "Sonny's Blues" and focuses on music as a culture, he demonstrates employment of the New Criticism lens via his exploration of how music unifies the story's ambiguities. Readers will not only learn more about the relationship between Sonny and his older brother, but understand the appeal of jazz for Sonny, as well as how the story symbolizes any individual's

struggles in the process of regaining control of or redefining their life.

Mitchell, Koritha. "James Baldwin, Performance Theorist, Sings the 'Blues for Mister Charlie.'" *American Quarterly*, vol. 64, no. 1, Mar. 2012, pp. 33–60., JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41412831?seq=1>.

In this article, Koritha Mitchell aims to show how James Baldwin uses his writing and theatre abilities to encourage his fellow Americans to recognize one another as equal human beings. By first bringing attention to the country's failure to acknowledge the nation's violent and unjust past and present, the author is introducing a critical approach that can be applied to Baldwin's writing. Mitchell identifies Baldwin's aim as an attempt to gradually break down the United States' distorted reality and the dehumanization that results from enforcing social hierarchies. By using art as a means of deliverance, Baldwin hopes to "re-create" America into a country that recognizes our connection to one another. Mitchell shows that Baldwin consistently engages the meaning-making power of performance to deconstruct false consciousness and resist dehumanizing social categories. Baldwin believed that the art of theater created a space for fulfilling the ethical mandate to unite all Americans. Audiences experience the tension as the actor brings the character to life while remaining recognizably themselves, ultimately demonstrates the capacity to recognize the connection between self and others. Like audiences, readers of Mitchell's essay are enabled to see Baldwin's writing in a new light, as contributing to the literary discourse on social injustice.

Murray, Donald C. "James Baldwin's 'Sonny's Blues': Complicated and Simple." *Studies in Short Fiction*, vol. 14, no. 4, Fall 1977, pp. 353–357. EBSCOhost, <http://web.b.ebscohost.com/cwi.idm.oclc.org/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=9&sid=965dabb9-849e-4d03-8356-d7fd2888dfc2%40sessionmgr101>.

In his essay, Donald Murray explores and posits two types of readings of James Baldwin's seminal work. The

first is that “Sonny’s Blues” does not possess a feel-good quality that stems from the sole self-expression found in art. Rather, the story’s themes of light and dark illustrate to the reader that life is a non-negotiable affair, and we must learn to love what we are dealt. This part of the work is what Murray calls in the title “complicated”. The second reading, which he calls “simple”, regards the story’s symbolisms and the inner workings of the characters, such as the profession of Sonny’s brother, an algebra teacher. Murray explains how this occupation in the story is not a random detail, but a symbol of the rigid and orderly nature of his brother, and also a greater symbol of the world around Sonny that is rigid and unartistic.

The essay presents an alternating analysis of both the complicated and the simple. Murray does not pause in this essay to give extensive historical context, nor draw conclusions from it by analyzing Baldwin’s life. Murray shows an immediate dive into the analysis without much in the way of introduction. This work is brief in length and in style, tending to colloquially “jump right in”, versus teasing out information.

Nelson, Emmanuel S. “James Baldwin’s Vision of Otherness and Community.” *MELUS*, vol. 10, no. 2, Summer 1983, pp. 27–31. *JSTOR*, <https://www-jstor-org.cwi.idm.oclc.org/stable/467307?>

Emmanuel S. Nelson’s article explores James Baldwin’s vision of the relationship between self-discovery, suffering, and community. He analyzes common themes in many of Baldwin’s works—such as “Go Tell It on the Mountain”, “Tell Me How Long the Train’s Been Gone”, “Another Country”, and “Sonny’s Blues”, amongst others—exploring the way that the denial of one’s causes of suffering is associated with the denial of one’s community, preventing the experience of shared identity with others and, subsequently, the discovery of self. Baldwin believes that self must be formed through the acknowledgement and acceptance of the sufferings shared by oneself and others. This philosophy appears

through much of his writing, showcased in multiple characters whose redemptive self-discovery is determined by how they handle suffering.

Nelson surveys a wide range of Baldwin's fiction and plays, focusing on how each contributes towards the idea of individuals knowing themselves through culture or community. The article's close-reading of "Sonny's Blues" and presentation of key concepts from other works indicates it is employing a New Criticism lens. Whilst Nelson references "Sonny's Blues" very briefly, the article's unification of the versatile experiences described in Baldwin's work sheds light on the complicated relationship between the brothers and offers insight for life in general.

Reilly, John M. "James Baldwin's Image of Black Community." *Negro American Literature Forum*, vol. 4, no. 4, July 1970, pp. 56-60. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3041352>.

Reilly starts the article with a thesis stating that the history had a direct correlation with the short story that James Baldwin wrote. The impact of Baldwin's involvement in civil rights with the Black movement is communicated and is linked while telling the story of the streets of Harlem in this story. This article discusses the importance of music, especially jazz, and the connection it made historically for African Americans during this time. This article connects the first-person narrative that is also common in Blues music. Sonny uses his music to make something of himself, in a place and time when he is oppressed because of the color of his skin. In addressing music as a main theme of the story, the article not only shows the influence that the blues had on the story but it also makes the point that the blues are a universal way for humans to just be human together. This article speaks to the common place of desperation during this time and how the music and this story were all tools used to spread a message and work on creating awareness of the quality of life, as well as the rich culture that music created for the Black man.

Sherard, Tracey. "Sonny's Bebop: Baldwin's 'Blues Text' as

Intracultural Critique." *African American Review*, vol. 32, no. 4, Winter 1998, pp.691-705. JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2901246>.

Sherard writes about the breakdown of "Sonny's Blues" while looking at the story with a different take to that of others, as she mentions in her thesis. This article argues the difference between Jazz, Blues, and Bebop and the impact they had specifically in African American culture. This article talks about the relationship that these types of music had to Harlem during this time, but also the social ramifications and connections to the African American culture. Sherard also makes the tie that the narrator is not able to make a deep connection to the free style of this music (thus also supporting the idea that it is Jazz). It is only after his daughter's death and he experienced heartbreak that he understands the deep hearted connection of despair. This article digs deeper into the quality of life that Sonny and the narrator were experiencing in Harlem. This includes the impending doom that happened to anyone who got stuck in the ghetto. As the Blues became more popular, the culture moved towards the Bebop and Jazz that gave the freedom to self-express without the traditional constraints of music. This article makes the correlation between the story itself and the history of the African Americans during this time.

Tackach, James. "The Biblical Foundation of James Baldwin's 'Sonny's Blues.'" *Renascence*, vol. 59, no. 2, Winter 2007, pp. 109-118. EBSCOhost, <http://web.b.ebscohost.com/cwi.idm.oclc.org/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=12&sid=965dabb9-849e-4d03-8356-d7fd2888dfc2%40sessionmgr101>.

James Tackach argues in his essay that a biblical interpretation of "Sonny's Blues" is valid for two primary reasons. One, James Baldwin had a close relationship with the Christian church and the bible. And two, the story itself bears resemblances to the bible's fables of the Prodigal Son and Cain and Abel. By comparing "Sonny's Blues" to the bible, Tackach shows that the story is a

modern incarnation of the biblical fables. “Sonny’s Blues” demonstrates the use of biblical symbols and images in presenting a story of a son who distances himself from home, undergoes a baptism—or a change of values—showcased in the scotch and milk, which imitates the “cup of trembling” in the book of Isaiah (Tackach 117), and an older brother who struggles with being his younger brother’s keeper. These biblical themes represent the process of developing forgiveness and acceptance between the brothers, but deviates from the traditional fables in that the younger brother is accepted on his own terms in the end.

Tackach begins his essay with a detailed historical background on Baldwin’s upbringing, which centers on his religious history. He does this to strengthen his interpretation of the biblical influences in “Sonny’s Blues”, and afterward he makes comparisons between two famous bible fables that resemble his short story. The essay is primarily a historical criticism and offers much history on Baldwin and the intricacies of the biblical text. Overall, readers can learn from this essay how Christian ideology shaped Baldwin’s writing and his contribution to the literary discussion of religious matters.



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New Criticism

Saving Sonny's Brother

Netanya Hitchcock



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James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues" is a story of intergenerational trauma in which two brothers strive in very different ways to escape their parents' suffering. On the surface, the objective is to save the younger brother, Sonny, who has been incarcerated for drug abuse, but his older brother's failure to recognize jazz as the cure shows otherwise. Rejection of jazz in the story parallels fear of suffering, revealing signs of intergenerational trauma in the older brother and placing him in danger of becoming like their father. He flees suffering by avoiding any context in

which it occurs—specifically, his community—but, ironically, one must face suffering in order to overcome it. In Baldwin's story, jazz is the means for doing so. As Emmanuel S. Nelson writes, jazz is "a musical form that has evolved out of the African's nightmarish experience in America" (29). Subsequently, jazz is not a cure for Sonny alone. By establishing ties with the Black community through a shared story of suffering, jazz delivers both brothers from their fear. The older brother is able to heal from intergenerational trauma when he recognizes his community's suffering as his own through Sonny's blues.

Sonny's brother has been afraid of suffering since childhood. As a child, he would listen to his parents and grandparents tell stories of their experiences with racial prejudice. The stories frightened him, but he was more frightened by the prospect of the stories becoming his own. When the grown-ups would stop talking for the evening, he always sensed that he was moving closer to the darkness they had "come from" and "endure[d]". He realized they stopped talking "because if he [knew] too much about what...[had] happened to *them*, he'[d] know too much too soon, about what...[would] happen to *him*" (Baldwin 131). He wished they would go on talking because, for as long as they talked, the stories were only stories, and the darkness the grown-ups had come from remained within those stories. But with the silence came growing fear, and fear, bringing the darkness, made his troubles real (134). His solution, then, is to suppress all fear with denial.

He spends his adult life refusing to believe trouble when he encounters it, consistently striving to prevent his parents' stories from happening to him. The death of his daughter symbolizes his characteristic denial. Her fever seemed to be no cause for concern, so he did not call the doctor, but her death came unexpectedly (139). In a similar way, he underestimates Sonny's situation. Attributing the "menace" of hardship solely to others—to Sonny's friend, the barmaid, and the community in general (125)—he naïvely promises his mother that he will never let anything happen to Sonny. However, such a promise is impossible to keep because it denies reality. In the end, he forgets his promise anyway, even failing to "let [Sonny] know [he]'s *there*" for him (133). The consequence of his error in the

case of his daughter's death serves as a harsh lesson, foreshadowing what will happen to Sonny if the brother remains willfully ignorant of suffering.

However, the brother's denial not only threatens to harm Sonny but also himself. Similar to Sonny's drugs, the brother's mindset is incompatible with healthy living. Ironically, willfully blinding himself to suffering renders him incapable of escaping it, let alone protecting Sonny, for he cannot flee what he does not see. When he learns about his uncle's murder for the first time, he cannot bear the implication that the world is just as hateful as it ever was and that Sonny could also be in danger (133). Even Sonny's drug abuse and incarceration remain unreal to him until the day when his little daughter dies, forcing him into undeniable grief and suffering for the very first time and making Sonny's troubles real (139). This experience reveals that denial prevents the brother from finding solutions to both Sonny's troubles and his own, for problems cannot be solved if they are misunderstood. Subsequently, the brother's neglect of Sonny is also the neglect of his own needs.

The brother must recognize suffering in order to survive it. In "James Baldwin's Vision of Otherness and Community", Emmanuel S. Nelson observes that accepting suffering and identifying with one's community are crucial to self-discovery (27). The brother's unwillingness to listen to Sonny's music symbolizes his denial of the sufferings he shares with Sonny. Beyond this, his disapproval of jazz and his inability to know Sonny underscore his distance from the Black community, being the consequence of his fear of suffering, indicating that both Sonny and the Black community are instrumental in making suffering real for him. This separation and the compounded lack of understanding prevent the brother from knowing himself. Learning to listen to Sonny's music, then, is not only about getting to know Sonny or the community. Rather, it is about the brother accepting himself and his life with all its difficulties and sorrows.

Just as music is a medium of healing for Sonny (Baldwin 138), Sonny is a medium of healing for the brother. However, the brother does not realize this for some time because he refuses to acknowledge that the sufferings of both Sonny and the Black

community are his own. His obligation to protect Sonny blinds him to his own downfall and, while his narration consistently implies that Sonny is doomed to become like their uncle, it is far more likely that the older brother is becoming like their father or that his denial will cause him to lose Sonny, rather than save him, just as he lost his daughter. On the surface, he resembles his father simply in that his love and fear for Sonny leads him to misunderstand and seek to restrain Sonny (130). Additionally, he disapproves of jazz players and believes that the life of a musician is not good enough for Sonny (134). However, his tendency to associate jazz with bad outcomes (127) and his fear that Sonny will “die...trying not to suffer” (143) reveal a more serious similarity to their father’s story, hindering his recognition of Sonny’s ability to help him.

The image of the uncle’s “busted guitar” haunts the brother just as much as it haunted the father. Until his dying day, the father was tormented by the uncle’s murder. Because he did not trust white men (133), he feared for Sonny and tried to control him (130). Likewise, the brother fears that Sonny’s love for jazz will cause history to repeat itself and render the brother’s suffering undeniably real. Ironically, the brother’s fear that his parents’ stories will become his own—because of Sonny—directly causes suffering. Like their father, he projects his fears onto Sonny. Sonny will not die in the effort to avoid suffering as the brother fears he will—rather, that is exactly what the brother is in danger of doing. In his own words, the brother is “dying to hear [Sonny] tell [him] he [is] safe”. In the same way, their father was always searching for safety and security, “but he died before he found it” (130). The brother’s similarity to the father indicates that, rather than Sonny being in danger of becoming like their uncle, the brother is in danger of wasting his life like their father if he continues to be governed by fear.

The brother unknowingly shares similarities with Sonny as well, which renders his confidence in his ability to help Sonny particularly ironic. His narration consistently suggests that Sonny is the one fleeing from suffering, but this conceals the brother’s tendency to do the same and misrepresents Sonny’s objective. Each brother harms himself to some degree through escapism. Sonny falls prey to drug abuse, and the brother

practices denial. Both outlets alter reality and impede their quality of life. However, the brothers differ strongly in their ability to fix the problem. The solution lies in jazz, which Sonny plays “for his life” (138), whereas the brother is frightened by it (134). His decision to make Sonny stay in Harlem—when Sonny wanted to leave to escape drugs (144)—symbolizes his inability to know what to flee from. He assumes he has escaped because he is a school teacher—he even thinks that Sonny has escaped by eventually leaving Harlem (129)—but he fails to understand that fleeing only brings suffering closer. Sonny’s view of education being useless compounds the brother’s error (136). Just as algebra fails to help the brother’s students (123), the brother fails to solve Sonny’s problems, for he inaccurately perceives reality.

The brother’s fear of history repeating itself is the ultimate self-fulfilling prophecy, symbolized by his rejection of jazz, which separates him from the Black community. Just as he has always feared that his parents’ stories will become his own, his rejection of jazz is tantamount to rejecting the stories of his community. Jazz is a “communal experience”, as Robert P. McParland says (131)—“a means of collective intentionality” (132). By playing jazz, Sonny is telling a story, and it is a story of the suffering he shares with others. This is exactly what the brother has always feared—telling his own story. The “old folks” are no longer sitting around, talking of bygone days (Baldwin 131). Instead, Sonny, a member of his own generation, is the storyteller, and this close proximity in age, “as a bridge” (128), makes the stories of suffering to be the brother’s also. In this way, whilst the brother’s experience of losing his daughter makes Sonny’s suffering real (139), Sonny’s suffering also makes the brother’s suffering real because Sonny possesses the means to express it for both of them. Telling their stories is key to making suffering bearable.

Sonny possesses the means to heal because he recognizes that acceptance of suffering is crucial to surviving. He knows that “trouble is the one thing that never does get stopped” (127) and he knows that telling one’s story and the stories of others is crucial to bearing hardship. Subsequently, he is not what his brother says he is—he is not one of the “good-time people” (134), he does not want to die (126), and he is not going to

“die...trying not to suffer” (143). Sonny’s mindset is best summarized by his brother’s dislike of the books he used to read about India. They gave accounts of people braving bad weather and “walking barefoot through hot coals” in pursuit of wisdom. But the brother “used to say that it sounded...as though they were getting away from wisdom as fast as they could” (128). As a child, Sonny admired people who went through great difficulties to grow in strength and endurance. Whilst his older brother fostered determination to prevent suffering, Sonny began to develop the means to bear it.

Just as the brothers’ suffering stems from the shared experience of their community, the cure lies in joining themselves to the community rather than separating themselves from it. Sonny’s decision to do so through jazz saves him from drugs and his reclusive nature. As McParland writes, the “communal experience” of jazz is, for Sonny, a way to escape “from the isolation within the self alone” (131). Likewise, the older brother’s distance from Sonny and the community reveals his own isolation, a consequence of denying his association with them through suffering. Acknowledging his suffering not only enables him to bear it but establishes a stronger tie between himself and others, enabling him to identify with others. So then, the brother discovers that grief, rather than fear, is instrumental in his relationship with Sonny and his community. For grief creates a connection where fear builds a wall. By identifying with his community through jazz, the brother can acknowledge both Sonny’s suffering and his own. Through Sonny’s blues, he can finally bear the telling of his own story, and he will tell it without fear—“at the risk of ruin, destruction, madness, and death...For, while the tale of how we suffer, and how we are delighted, and how we may triumph is never new, it always must be heard. There isn’t any other tale to tell, it’s the only light we’ve got in all this darkness” (Baldwin 147).

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Reader Response

Searching For Identity In “Sonny’s Blues”

By Dillon O’Donnell



Divine Jazz Emotions

A typical painting by Vincent Messelier. He gives all his works their own name.

It is not an anomaly, that anyone has felt feelings of alienation and perpetual longing. However, there is something to be said about the pain found in artists, and how the scope of their isolation is measured by a world that is often orderly and logical. “Sonny’s Blues” by James Baldwin, is one such story on this unique struggle (Baldwin, James. “Sonny’s Blues”). It is a tale about an aspiring jazz musician, Sonny, who is struggling to find his place in the world. We are related the events through the

perspective of Sonny's brother, who narrates his experiences and memories of our protagonist, who we view with a constant detachment. Although as I read along, I soon found that Baldwin's story was not focused exclusively on the pangs of a tortured artist. The story grows out from the spotlight on Sonny, to show how we all struggle in our own ways on the quest of articulating our identities.

The different interpretations that will be discussed in this work show the conclusions I've drawn from my reading. As the title and most of the story show, Sonny is indeed the engine that keeps the plot going. However, there are subtle gears in the form of Sonny's brother-the narrator-that illustrate how identity is a struggle for all. Starting with Donald Murray's "James Baldwin's 'Sonny's Blues': Complicated and Simple", the focus on Sonny's personal pains of trying to find a place in society can be analyzed. Nevertheless, even in the passages that are about Sonny, the writing of Baldwin is so exquisite that the themes can still be applied to anyone.

Murray frames his analysis of "Sonny's Blues", by pointing out the use of both complicated and simple imagery in the story. The use of light and darkness is one such instance. He writes, "Images of light and darkness are used by Baldwin to illustrate his theme of man's painful quest for an identity. Light can represent the harsh glare of reality, the bitter conditions of ghetto existence which harden and brutalize the young" (Murray). When thinking about Sonny in relation to this theme of light and darkness, it is fitting. For we learn throughout the story that Sonny has been living in the light of a harsh reality his whole life.

His character is introduced to us for the first time, with his brother reading about his having been arrested for the possession and use of heroin. His home life is no better, for he has been a source of friction among his family; with fights with his father, tensions over skipping school with his sister-in-law, and a brief estrangement with his brother. While this registering of Sonny's struggles with the themes of light and darkness made sense, I wanted to figure out what was causing him to end up in less-than-ideal situations. Murray highlights a more complicated passage that offers a view into Sonny's

psyche. The scene is where Sonny shares his personal demons with his brother, and says, "I wake and feel the fell of darkness." Sonny goes on to describe his own dark night of the soul. "I was all by myself at the bottom of something, stinking and sweating and crying and shaking, and I smelled it, you know? My stink, and I thought I'd die" (Murray).

Here Murray interprets that Sonny views himself as a sacrifice almost to his craft of being a jazz musician, and that this arrival at his talent seems to scare him. I think it is right that Murray draws this conclusion, for considering the evidence of escapism with Sonny's use of heroin and the irritability that he has with his family about his future, it all aligns. I also could not help but feel a personal conviction upon re-reading this passage from the story. As someone who has struggled with trying to find out what path to take in life, I can relate immensely on the paradoxical trouble of wanting to discover one's destiny, while also being fearful of the answer. The choice of words by Sonny, especially that of "stink", speak of a self-critical mode of thinking with artists, and it is one I am familiar with.

Aside from the study of Sonny's artistic struggles, how do the shared general themes of pursuing identity manifest themselves in other parts of the story? Keith Byerman's article, "Words and Music: Narrative Ambiguity In 'Sonny's Blues'", makes an interesting point on how the oscillating narrative style of Sonny's brother between the metaphorical and the simple, represents his inner struggle for realization of those around him.

Byerman states his main premise as such, "The story, in part, is about his misreading's; more importantly, it is about his inability to read properly. The source of this inability is his reliance on a language that is at once rationalistic and metaphoric" (Byerman). Now, while this sums up the personal growth of Sonny's brother, I also read this point by Byerman as a synopsis of Sonny's search for identity. I mentioned before how Sonny describes his own love of jazz as a sort of "stink", and it would be natural to wonder why someone would describe what they love to do as such. But I believe it is the rational part of anyone searching for identity, that they will be uncomfortable with the harshness of reality. It can become

difficult to come to grips with the truth, and here I saw that just as Sonny is apprehensive about truly embracing his calling of jazz, his brother struggles with reading others in his environment.

This point of view by Byerman is emotionally poignant, for it paints Sonny's brother as an individual who is just as lost as Sonny (albeit with less arguments and tribulations). Byerman discusses how Sonny's brother struggles more with the understanding of others, versus the journey of Sonny who embarks on discovering who he is. An example Byerman uses is when he encounters a drug addict who had been an acquaintance of Sonny. He places emphasis again on how the language used shows the inner turmoil of understanding others. "Again, there is distancing through figurative language: 'But now, abruptly, I hated him. I couldn't stand the way he looked at me, partly like a dog, partly like a cunning child'. Such language prepares us for, while guaranteeing, the failed communication of this episode" (Byerman). This passage selected by Byerman is important for a couple of reasons: one, as he stated, the brother sees in this drug addict the visage of Sonny. He recognizes his condition and can to a degree, understand. But, as for reason two, he still demonstrates a wall of ignorance and misunderstanding about this drug addict and the corollary one of Sonny.

This article by Byerman challenged the way I viewed the concept of identities. Perhaps the search for identity is not immediately what we believe to be, that of an internal strife. Maybe, it can also be extended to the search for understanding others and attempting to empathize. It is with this thought here, that brings me to a final source that I think blends these two searches of identity that exist on a continuum.

James Tackach's article, "The Biblical Foundation of James Baldwin's 'Sonny's Blues'", makes the case for the biblical influences of Christianity in "Sonny's Blues". He extracts a couple examples from the story that mimic some of the concepts and story arcs from the biblical fables. The first, is the similarity in response by Sonny's brother to the character of Cain (the murderer of his brother Abel) when he is asked what he will do about Sonny being in prison. Sonny's brother

responds, “Look. I haven’t seen Sonny for over a year. I’m not sure I’m going to do anything. Anyway, what the hell can I do?” (Tackach). This response mirrors the one in the bible, where Cain retorts to God, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” (*Bible*, New International Version).

Considering the frustration of Sonny’s brother on this topic, paired with his struggles to totally understand those around him, it is easy to understand why this would be his reply. I thought of how this response was more than just a flight of rage, and how this answer represents the years of trouble Sonny has been one with, and how helpless his brother feels. However, Tackach goes on to show that later in the story Sonny’s brother decides to fully acknowledge his role as his brother’s keeper, and here the shared theme of Cain and Abel ends. During a scene when the two brothers are observing a street performer and sharing personal thoughts, Sonny’s brother narrates his change of heart about Sonny, and concludes his search for the identity in others.

He says, “And I wanted to promise that I would never fail him again. But it would all have sounded—empty words and lies. So, I made the promise to myself and prayed that I would keep it” (Baldwin, pg. 21). I found that the striking message here is that Sonny’s brother is not trying to fully understand everything there is about his brother, or like he said, make a parade of promises. Instead, he realizes that his brother is not just blood, but a part of his life that he must maintain.

The second example of a biblical influence, and where Sonny finally finds and solidifies his identity, is at the jazz club at the end of the story. After Sonny’s band takes a break from their performance, a drink is placed on Sonny’s piano, which according to Tackach holds a certain significance. Sonny’s brother narrates, “he (Sonny) sipped from it and looked toward me and nodded. Then he put it back on top of the piano. For me, then, as they began to play again, it glowed and shook above my brother’s head like the very cup of trembling” (Baldwin, pg. 25).

Tackach explains that the phrase of “cup of trembling” originates from the book of Isaiah, where God declares that despite the people of Jerusalem’s sins, even “the dregs of the

cup of trembling”, they are forgiven (*Bible*, New International Version). So, for the cup of trembling to glow, is to Tackach a sign of surpassing the past of mistakes, and that the cup acts as a sort of halo for Sonny (Tackach). This biblical connection to the ending moved me for two reasons: the first, is that we see Sonny is symbolically redeemed and has grown beyond his younger troubled self that sought refuge in drugs and mischief. And two, he is an individual who is one at last with his identity, and finally has a relationship with his brother who also is committed to knowing his brother more.

“Sonny’s Blues” is a story that is painfully human, and wonderfully crafted. For these reasons, it focuses intently on the personal search for identity that every individual must take. I learned from the different sources I found, and the multiple readings I undertook, that the quest for identity is one that is both internal and external in how we learn more about those around us. I think that only traits of goodness can be harvested, the longer we apply ourselves to this internal and external duty. And regardless if we face setbacks, we can always rest assured knowing our cup of trembling can glow one day if we try.

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Deconstruction

The Importance of Understanding Both Sides

Majel Coxé



Broken Mirror

James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues" is a short story that follows two brothers through their journey of contending with their own hardships while learning to acknowledge each other's struggles as valid causes for suffering. Sonny's older brother makes persistent efforts to guide his younger brother's life after learning about his drug addiction and incarceration, in hopes to save Sonny from what he considers to be a life of unnecessary suffering. However, Sonny opposes his brother's opinion of a

“respectable” life, one that he sees as being driven by fear, and resists his attempts to help. Instead, Sonny is determined to pursue his passion as a jazz pianist, despite his brother’s objections. The tension that is caused by their contrasting perspectives becomes a focal point of the story, temporarily leaving both characters to resent the other and feel misunderstood. The ending then aims to show that their connection to each other, and to those family and community members of theirs who have suffered in similar ways, is essential to overcoming the feeling of isolation that results from suffering alone. The text’s aim, therefore, is to depict two people, whose understandings of the world are binary opposites, gradually learning to empathize and connect with each other to encourage readers to recognize their connection to others in the real world. However, the first-person narrative structure favors a specific interpretation of the story that instead encourages a sympathetic response towards Sonny. The structure then positions the reader against the narrator, making it impossible to truly empathize with and understand both characters.

“Sonny’s Blues” is structured through the perspective of Sonny’s older brother because the source of tension from his character arises in his initial inability to acknowledge the reality of suffering altogether. Curiously, though the narrator is well established in the story, he remains unnamed. By positioning the reader in this character’s mind, it is possible that the hope was for “Sonny’s Blues” to inspire readers to consider their own willingness to acknowledge the suffering that is being ignored in their lives. Koritha Mitchell’s examination of Baldwin’s work supports this theory, revealing his intention to use writing as a platform to encourage Americans specifically to recognize each other as equal, given the nation’s unjust past (1). Perhaps the intention behind withholding the narrator’s name contributes to this theory, aiming to present his character as a more generic representation of someone living in denial to try and further his relatability.

However, by positioning the reader there, their initial understanding of the circumstances within the story are subject to his perception of the world. While the reader comes to understand that the older brother has good intentions to ease

Sonny's suffering, the narrator's inner thoughts, which the reader is subject to, reveals how judgmental he can actually be. The consequences of his mentality are shown throughout the story but is most crucial to the reader's first impression of Sonny, which becomes the backdrop of how the readers are *actually* meant to perceive these characters and the story overall.

Consider how the story begins: the narrator has just discovered that his younger brother has been incarcerated for drug use. He read about it in the newspaper on his way to work and is unable to ignore the thought. "It is not to be believed," he keeps telling himself, "and at the same time I couldn't doubt it. I was scared, scared for Sonny. He became real to me again" (Baldwin 122). The thought continues to haunt him throughout his workday and eventually materializes itself into, what he metaphorically refers to as, a block of ice that seeps into his veins. The ice, he says, will expand to the point where he is about to choke or scream when he recalls his memories of Sonny; specially memories that portray him as a gentle, opportunistic, bright-eyed child. But these visions are immediately contrasted by the narrator's imagination of "what he will look like now" after having been incarcerated and addicted to heroin. He tries to reason with himself, admitting that Sonny may have been *wild* but not *crazy*, that he had always been a *good boy*, never *hard, evil, or disrespectful*. His final defeat is realizing that Sonny may have "come to nothing" (Baldwin 123), that the light may have gone from his face, and that he may have become like every other hopeless addict he knows. These thoughts permeate the reader's mind into the rest of the first scene, when the narrator runs into Sonny's childhood friend- a character that embodies all his worst fears of what Sonny may have become. The structure of this scene reveals a lot about the narrator's concerns for his younger brother and ultimately about how the reader is meant to initially perceive Sonny.

The initial portrayal of Sonny is centered around his brother's memories of him as a child. By impressing these images of innocence and potential in the forefront of the reader's mind, the contrasting details that follow are seemingly exaggerated. This structure aims to gradually alter the way Sonny is perceived as the details regarding his addiction are revealed.

The endearing image of the young boy is then replaced by an expectation of him that is formed solely off his implied shortcomings. His brother becomes overwhelmed by the thought of his condition and consequently begins associating the negative traits he sees in those around him to Sonny. He hears Sonny in the “mocking and insular” (Baldwin 123) laughing from his students, he sees Sonny in the face of his childhood friend who is always “high and raggy” (124). Even the perceived attempts to redeem his character have backhanded insinuations. By describing Sonny’s levelheadedness through a series of oppositions, the narrator is also revealing his fears of what Sonny may be becoming, and therefore reinforcing the privileged perspective of his questionable reputation.

However, by considering the reader’s relation to the text, it becomes clear that the aim of this structure is to encourage an initial aversion to Sonny in hopes that his actions will challenge the reader’s assumptions of him, then as the story advances, learn to sympathize with a character that they initially disdained. The image that succeeds the initial is one of seemingly genuine remorse from Sonny in the letter he sends to his brother while incarcerated. He goes as far as to admit that he is glad that their parents are dead so that they “can’t see what’s happened to their son” (Baldwin 127), then further confesses his guilt for not understanding how he was hurting those around him. The organization of events here is important to the idea of readers gradually learning to build compassion for Sonny. The letter introduces him through his own words for the first time, allowing the reader to interpret his character for themselves, as opposed to viewing him through the altered perception given by the narrator. It exposes a particularly vulnerable side to Sonny right off the bat, as he acknowledges the harm that he has caused others because of his addiction. Perhaps the intention behind his willingness to admit his mistakes upfront is to show that he is also insightful and compassionate, making it difficult for readers to consider him to be totally helpless.

Sonny’s charismatic demeanor continues to penetrate through the initial impression of him in various ways. His furthered relatability all culminates towards the final scene where the reader and narrator both experience Sonny’s

captivating potential for the first time. The image initially created of him is ultimately undermined by the insightful, authentic, and simply misunderstood character that he becomes understood as. As his true personality is revealed, the reader begins to see how this first-person narrative structure alters their opinions and it becomes clear that the details proved by the narrator are unreliable. The initial regard for each character then flips and the privileged interpretation now favors Sonny over his older brother, as a character the readers have grown to understand and admire.

Undermining the narrator's credibility emphasizes the other adverse aspects of his character that give the reader the impression that his perspective is unreliable. Throughout the story, the narrator's denial to acknowledge the suffering in his life causes him to be controlled by the fear of even potential hardships. The restrictions he imposes on himself to try and preserve that false comfort ultimately alienates him from Sonny and from his community. Author Richard Albert's article, "The Jazz-Blues Motif in James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues" explores certain allusions in "Sonny's Blues" that emphasize the themes of individualism and alienation. The article offers a unique perspective that considers possible interpretations of the significance behind the brother's contrasting opinions on famous jazz musicians. This scene, in which Sonny reveals his desires to become a jazz pianist to his brother, includes the pinnacle argument that damages their relationship. The day of their mother's funeral, the narrator approaches his younger brother to find out what he plans to do in life. "I am going to be a musician." (Baldwin 133) Sonny claims, "I think I can play piano" (134). His older brother frowns at his response, thinking that a career as a musician might be "alright for some people but not for my brother Sonny" (134). The narrator's impartiality towards his pursuit in music is not explicated explained beyond saying that it somehow seems "below" him. Though according to Albert, the allusions made in this scene to the famous jazz musicians Louis Armstrong and Charlie Parker may reveal differences in both character's comfortability in themselves as African Americans. After feeling let down by Sonny's response, the older brother suggests,

“helpfully,” that perhaps Sonny aimed to be like Louis Armstrong. “No. I’m not talking about none of that old-time, down home crap” (Baldwin 134) Sonny replies; then instead, expresses his admiration for Charlie Parker. In his article, Albert compares the history of the two musicians, ultimately aiming to present Louis Armstrong as an outdated jazz icon who appealed to a predominately white audience. When considering the narrator’s fear of suffering at any cost, this interpretation draws attention to his dissociation from the African American community. Albert’s examination suggests the narrator has adopted a fear-based personality that is aimed to reject his identity; “He was careful not to do those things that he felt whites expected blacks to do” (Albert 4).

In conclusion, the text’s aim to encourage readers to learn to empathize and connect with two characters that represent binary opposites, in hopes to inspire a change in American behavior, is impossible. The intended interpretation suggests the reader is inclined to support the narrator, and consequently, show an aversion to Sonny. However, the first-person narrative structure reveals the avoidant tendencies and judgmental nature of the older brother, therefore encouraging a sympathetic response towards Sonny instead. The tension that is created between the narrator’s inner thoughts and the reality of the situation positions the reader against the narrator, ultimately using his character as an example of “what not to become.” By minimizing the significance of the narrator’s suffering, the reader is denied the opportunity to understand him entirely. Rather, the reader is encouraged to validate one character’s perspective over the others.

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Historical/New Historical

The Historical Context of African American Culture as seen through James Baldwin's Short Story Sonny's Blues

By Aubrey Howell



A group of African-American children gather around a sign and booth to register voters. Early 1960s.

The year 1952 brought turmoil and chaos to the city of Harlem, but out of the wreckage came James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues", which tells a story of hope and fighting against all odds. "Sonny's Blues" is a representation of African American culture,

specifically the impact of music and the chance for someone born into poverty- despite hardship- to have the chance to feel alive and connect. This story's depth is especially impactful, since it was on the heels of the Great Depression, the Great Migration, the beginning of World War II, and in the middle of the Civil Rights Movement. Throughout this short story, Baldwin displays personal hardships, traumas, and endeavors, all reflective in the characters that historically align with African American culture during this era.

The narrator and his brother, Sonny, grew up in a predominately black neighborhood in Harlem, dealing with the hardships that many African Americans faced at this time. Drugs, alcohol, and especially racism littered the streets of Upper Manhattan. Baldwin connects the fear that racism had during this time with two specific instances. The first example was the death of their father's brother by intentionally being hit by a car and the despair felt knowing that there was never any justice. "Your father says he heard his brother scream when the car rolled over him, and he heard the wood of the guitar when it give, and he heard the strings go flying, and he heard them white men shouting, and the car kept on a-going and it ain't stopped till this day" (Baldwin 132). The second example is Baldwin also writes how Sonny had been skipping school and been into a white woman's apartment. The reaction of Sonny's family is that of anger, concern, and fear. During the early 40's it was still common to see "White Only" signs placed in businesses and shops throughout the country, to have a young black man in a white woman's apartment was socially unacceptable during this time. Both the narrator and Sonny after being raised in this toxic environment went on to serve in the war giving them more depth of loss but also a feeling of misplacement when they returned. It was a shared experience with thousands of African Americans who also felt tossed aside after the war.

The impact that racism had on Baldwin as a kid, and seeing the racial atmosphere daily eventually led him to escape Harlem. In 1948, when he was 24, he fled to Paris where he spent the majority of his life. The story connects to a similar storyline where Sonny, despite being a good child, fell into the traps of drugs and the criminal justice system. The narrator then relates

a period of time where he did not have contact with Sonny. It was not uncommon for an African American during this time to have to work harder than a white man to create some success, especially someone born into poverty. Suzy Bernstein Goldman explains, "Agitated though he is about Sonny's fate, the narrator doesn't want to feel himself involved. His own position on the middle class ladder of success is not secure..."(57). The narrator feels the need to protect himself and his hard work without getting involved with his brother and losing any status he might have within the middle class world.

The death of the narrator's daughter was a turning point in changing this thinking. The abrupt realization that death is finite and what matters is not money or status, most likely allowed the narrator to have a change of heart for his brother especially since they connected a loss of a mother together before. "Thus guilt for not fulfilling their mother's request and a sense of shared loneliness partially explains the older brother's feeling toward Sonny."(Sherard 693) During the car ride through the streets the brother's tumultuous relationship was evident. The absent years of communication brought a subtle sense of tension in the car ride. However the streets they both wanted so badly to escape from ended up being the very thing that started to bring them back together, they both connected with the memories of the projects alone in silence, lost in their own thoughts. Once again, however, Baldwin stresses the place of the conventional set of the narrator's mind in the complex of feelings as he has him recall scenes from the time when Sonny had started to become a jazz musician. The possibility of Sonny's being jazz rather "seemed beneath him somehow" (Bernstein 57).

During Baldwin's time in the United States, especially his younger years, many of the emotions and the characteristics of Sonny suggest this is what Baldwin experienced with other young black men. Sonny would retreat into the depths of his mind, or sit alone at a piano, isolating himself from society and the negative atmosphere they lived in. Baldwin endured a neglectful childhood with a stepfather who treated him more harshly than the other children. He often spent many hours alone in libraries where others found themselves entangled in

the oppression of Harlem. "The oldest of nine children, he grew up in poverty, developing a troubled relationship with his strict, religious stepfather. As a child, he cast about for a way to escape his circumstances" ("James Baldwin Biography"). This can be directly linked to the character of Sonny and the emotions that he had as well as the narrator.

During this short story we learn of Sonny's ambitions to be a pianist, not one of classical music but of the historical new jazz called bebop. The narrator tries to understand the ambition of Sonny and ask who he wants to play like. Sonny replied Charlie Parker who is credited as being one of the originators of this new jazz music of the 40s called Bebop. Throughout the story Baldwin tries to relay the importance of music specifically for the African American culture during this era. Bebop was created as a resentful representation to how the African American musicians were being treated. This new jazz was often faster paced with less cohesion amongst the other instruments, a separation from earlier jazz that was conceived with the idea it would be danced to. "Baldwin is advocating the necessity of African American self awareness of the context of their own cultural forms and particularity of the hybrid narratives that can result from their appropriation" (Reilly 693)

The impact of Jazz on the culture of Harlem is not fully comprehended by the narrator until the final scene. This new Jazz had become an escape from societal racism as well as a new expression. Sonny's brother sitting at a table watching his brother play and hearing it for the first time, was like unlike anything he experienced before. In that moment you sense the shame, guilt, and pride in the narrators thoughts. He had shame for not having more connection with the African American culture, and the suffrage they all experienced. The guilt for not being able to save his brother, the promise he made his mother he knew he wouldn't be able to keep. The way he treated his brother when he found out he wanted to be a musician. "Playing his own song, Sonny finds a way to listen, though he confesses that heroin sometimes helped him release the storm. Now he wants his brother to hear the storm too." (Bernstein 233) The next emotion that the narrator feels is the pride he gets when his brother so effortlessly, moved his fingers across the

keys producing a sound that you not only could hear but feel every essence of what it meant to be African American.

The intense connection and opportunity to have meaning in life gave Sonny a way to feel ecstasy without drugs. "He hit something in all of them, he something in me, myself, and the music tightened and deepened, apprehension began to beat the air" (Baldwin 147). The different layers that Baldwin weaved into this story with the irony of how the story itself is written, make the point that the story itself is a work of music and, in the streets where there was little to or hope for, music was an outlet and joy for all. "For, while the tale of how we suffer, and how we are delighted, and how we may triumph is never new, it always must be heard. There isn't any other tale to tell, it's the only light we've got in all the darkness" (Baldwin 147).

Baldwin is able to capture the true essence of being an African American during the 1940s in this story. Due to the dehumanization that was created from societal racism, the spectrum of pain and suffering that Sonny and the narrator experienced, including James Baldwin, was difficult to mitigate. From childhood to becoming adults and finding a place in the world to understand themselves life was a struggle. They all had to learn how to escape the abandonment and shame of being a African American man and find a way to feel alive. Eventually though the powerful connection of music they were able to bond, creating a sense of redemption within the psyche of the characters within the story. This enabled them to break free from shackles of racism and feel a sense of true purpose and self-identity using the horrors of life to create something beautiful.

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Psychological

Good Grief

By Lauren Bilby

James Baldwin's short story titled "Sonny's Blues" is a story that, within 14 short pages, tells the story of two brothers reconnecting after the younger brother becomes addicted to heroin, and goes through the process of rehabilitation. On the surface, this story is a beautiful piece that gives the reader a sense of hope and connection with humanity, and family. Diving deeper into the story, it instead tells a bittersweet tale of grief, and what it takes for a family to escape the grief of their lives. Similar to the "Five Stages of Grief" brought on by Emily Kubler-Ross, Professor of Counseling at Harding Graduate School of Religion in Memphis Bill Flatt writes of a process he calls "Some Stages of Grief." Some Stages of Grief relates closely to the Five Stages of Grief, but instead of the usual denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance, Flatt separates his stages into shock and panic, lamentations, withdrawal, depression, detachment, adaptation, reinvesting, and finally, growth. Flatt's theory of Some Stages of Grief even acknowledges that grief is a messy process, and oftentimes does not follow a linear path. Within "Sonny's Blues," these stages of Flatt's theory are apparent within both the narrator, Sonny, and their families.

While grief is usually seen as the loss of a loved one, it can also be portrayed as a significant loss of some kind. The story itself

begins with the narrator learning of Sonny's arrest, of which he describes the feeling by saying, "A great block of ice got settled in my belly and kept melting there slowly all day long... It was a special kind of ice. It kept melting, sending trickles of ice water all up and down my veins, but it never got less" (Baldwin 122). The narrator is currently going through what Flatt would describe as shock. When learning about Sonny's arrest, the narrator even takes note of his own shock as Baldwin writes, "I read it, and I couldn't believe it, and I read it again" (122). Flatt describes the stage of shock as typically the first stage of grief, but depicting it as one of the shorter stages of grief, explaining that it "may last from a few hours to several days" (Flatt 143). In detailing and discussing the stage of shock, Flatt mentions how the body reacts to shock, explaining that the body is attempting to protect itself from the grief by manifesting itself physically instead of emotionally. In his article titled, "They That Mourn," Dr. James Hodge pens his own stages of grief, of which shock is also mentioned as the first step. Dr. Hodge writes, "At that point, he typically feels numb and anesthetized. This can actually be a helpful response, because he does not have to comprehend immediately the magnitude of his loss" (233).

Flatt would describe lamentations by simply writing, "one laments and vents resentment and anger" (143). This stage of grief is prevalent in the narrator's reaction towards Sonny's friend in the very beginning of the story, of which had historically had been cordial and even pleasant, but turned cold with the narrator explaining, "...now, abruptly, I hated him. I couldn't stand the way he looked at me, partly like a dog, partly like a cunning child. I wanted to ask him what the hell he was doing in the school courtyard" (Baldwin 124). Sonny's friend had intended to share the news that Sonny had been arrested with his brother, however, the narrator continues to treat the friend harshly throughout their interaction as Baldwin writes using specific diction such as "sharply," and "poor bastard" (125). Despite the narrator's sharp tongue and assumptions about Sonny's friend, who is an addict himself, the narrator still gave him five dollars and sent him on his way.

In struggling to deal with the aftermath of Sonny's arrest

and reintroduction back into society, the narrator makes his choice to disengage with Sonny altogether, which leads into another of Flatt's proposed stages of grief: withdrawal. Not only is withdrawal present at this moment in the story, but it's also present later with Sonny as he lives with Isabel's family. During this time, as Sonny is still struggling with his addiction, he decides to learn the piano with the intent of being a pianist. The narrator disagrees with this life decision, but is incapable of changing Sonny's mind. Eventually, Isabel confesses to the narrator that it's not like Sonny is living there at all, instead "it's was like living with sound... [Sonny] moved in an atmosphere which wasn't like theirs at all. They fed him and he ate, he washed himself, he walked in and out of their door... it was as though he were all wrapped up in some cloud, some fire, some vision all his own; and there wasn't any way to reach him" (Baldwin 137).

Within the story, depression and detachment roots itself in both Sonny and the narrator. Sonny is typically depicted as the narrator's younger brother, full of wit, charm and charisma, despite a private attitude, but only once does he let this mask slip. Sonny and his brother look down on a group of people singing religious songs and Sonny discusses his journey with his addiction, admitting that he wanted to escape Harlem to leave behind the drugs on the streets. Whilst discussing the woman singing, Sonny remarks, "While I was downstairs before, on my way here, listening to that woman sing, it struck me all of a sudden how much suffering she must have had to go through—to sing like that. It's *repulsive* to think you have to suffer that much" (Baldwin 142). When asked if there was a way not to suffer, Sonny simply answers no, but people try their best not to. This conversation between the narrator and Sonny show how much pain Sonny had been through the past few years during their separation and fights, but also segues into adaptation and reinvesting.

Flatt writes of adaptation and reinvesting that, "one adjusts to the life situation, overcomes the negative, accepts the reality, and goes on with life," and "reinvesting is initiating the positive" (146). As the narrator adjusts to Sonny being back in his life, he also struggles to accept that Sonny is truly fully grown into a

man. When the two discuss the woman singing on the streets, it provides the reader with a cathartic moment of recognizing the fact that the two brothers are slowly repairing their relationship. This all comes to a point when Sonny asks the narrator to come to a nightclub downtown to hear him play the piano. Instead of scolding Sonny for continuing what he sees as a fool's dream, the narrator recognizes Sonny as a full grown man and agrees to visit the nightclub with him.

Grief is by no means an easy process, but according to Flatt, it culminates in growth: "...people who successfully work through it often become stronger, more mature, and more well-rounded as a result of the struggle" (147). When Sonny and the narrator are welcomed into the nightclub, the narrator immediately takes notice of how Sonny is received, explaining that, "here, it was not even a question that his veins bore royal blood" (Baldwin 145). The narrator finally gets to witness his brother play the blues, and following the set, the narrator waves down a waitress and asks her to send drinks to the band. Baldwin writes, "There was a long pause, while they talked up there in the indigo light and after awhile I saw the girl put a scotch and milk on top of the piano for Sonny. He didn't seem to notice it, but just before they started playing again, he sipped from it, and looked toward me, and nodded" (148). While the two brothers might continue to have conflicts in the future, the narrator accepting Sonny as he is a musician and a recovering addict, the two have made room for their relationship to grow beyond the expectations laid upon them from their parents.

Dr. James Hodge includes a well-known blessing in his article, "May those who mourn become happy" (229). Both Hodge and Flatt agree that while griefwork is a difficult process, it is a necessary one for those who wish to continue their lives with a sense of hope and normalcy. While Flatt's theory of "Some Stages of Grief" pays homage to Emily Kubler-Ross's theory of the "Five Stages of Grief," Flatt provides more substantial stages that provide those with a blueprint to process their own grief. Within the story "Sonny's Blues," both the narrator and Sonny come to terms with Sonny's addiction, and both find comfort and growth through Sonny's musical talent. Despite all of the struggles the two have gone through, from childhood

to adulthood, the two process their grievances together. Sonny, himself, marvels at the balance of it all, exclaiming, “all that hatred and misery and love. It’s a wonder it doesn’t blow the avenue apart” (Baldwin 145).

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Feminist/Gender

Hear Them Roar

By Chelsea Yates



"Women's Liberation" meant addressing specific challenges for black women in the 1960s.

James Baldwin's "*Sonny's Blues*" takes place in Harlem, New York as the narrator who is a teacher who finds out his brother was incarcerated due to the drug use and selling of heroin and gets back in touch with him after the passing of his daughter, Gracie, by writing a letter. The narrator mentions having thought a lot about sonny after Gracie died because his own suffering made him realize that Sonny's was just as real after this intense life-changing event. The narrator seems to want to reconnect and be closer to his brother Sonny because you just never know who

you might lose the next day. Several letters later and Sonny gets out of jail to end up living with Isabel's family (the narrator's wife) where we learn that Sonny's creative "outlet" ends up being the piano, as it's mentioned in the story about how he loves Jazz, perhaps this is what his form of art is that takes heroin's place instead. There are certain stereotypes in place within this story as well that aren't as easily displayed. For instance, to start, let's talk about a possible underlying theme that isn't prominent but possible, nonetheless. James Baldwin was a gay man, and as an author, what could that mean for the story and its characters? In a way, it could mean a lot. There are lots of subtle things in every story that could hint towards gay/queer tendencies maybe for fun or to casually bring awareness. Are there any similarities projected from author to page? There might not be any queer characters (that we know of. It's never actually stated or mentioned) but feminism is definitely present within *Sonny's Blues*.

Grace, the narrator's daughter who passed away early on from polio is the reason this story took off in the direction it did. Her passing ignites something in the narrator, giving him cause to reach out to his brother as a form of reconnection. Almost as an act of "grace". She isn't mentioned much throughout the story, but her passing brings out the narrator's "motherly instinct", as well. His need to protect the people he cares about begins showing once he lost his daughter. After Sonny's return to the outside world and the reunion of the narrator and Sonny, memories of their mother are referred to in relation with the immense worry that the narrator feels for his drug-addicted brother. Baldwin writes his mother very well, making her seem saintlike and the narrator makes that quite obvious. Her role is key in this story, because the narrator recalls a memory where she basically predicts her own death because of her age and talks about how she worries very much that Sonny will lose his way and have no guidance in life, knowing something could and/or would happen to him without her there to have someone for him to lean on when he needs help. The mother is an extremely caring and compassionate role in this story, lighting the path for the narrator to take her role as a "maternal" figure, protecting and guiding Sonny from here on out after her death.

“I want to talk to you about your brother,” she said, suddenly. “If anything happens to me he ain’t going to have nobody to look out for him.” (Baldwin, 131) The “motherly instinct” of the male narrator begins to show after the death of his daughter Gracie and the new beginning of his brother’s life out of incarceration. Women are a force of nature. The narrator’s father had a brother who died young, and the narrator’s mother hid this fact so well that neither of the boys knew about him. She was their fathers’ shoulder to lean on. She was the stronger of the two and it was his sibling and not hers. It’s another fact that women are stronger because she had to be the bigger person and let him lean on her in his time of need. Not that men can’t be just as strong, but there is a certain fire inside women that burns just a little bit brighter in times of distress.

Another example of femininity in the story is when Isabel’s character is mentioned in the story. Isabel is the narrator’s wife, his safe haven and rock in troubling times. Baldwin does a lovely job of writing Isabel as a character who is both gentle and caring. She serves as a protector for the narrator and watches over her husband and children in the same way that the narrator’s mother did for her family as well. This added strong female character helps the narrator navigate his feelings of helplessness when it comes to Sonny and the feelings of letting both Sonny and his mother down for not keeping Sonny on the right path in the first place. Another touch of femininity is when Isabel is first mentioned. Isabel is the narrator’s wife, a safe haven it seems for the narrator. Baldwin wrote her in in such a subtly gentle way and she definitely serves as the narrator’s protector and seems to watch over him and their children in the same way the narrator’s mother did as well. Though there’s one thing about this particular character that stands out above the rest. Stereotypically, most women are cautious and guarded as when it comes to criminals, especially one like Sonny, yet she felt at ease with Sonny around, and vice versa, even getting him to come out of his shell and feel more at home that very first night also joking with him in ways that the narrator couldn’t in such a short time. This adds to her strength as a female character who is not only caring for those she loves, but the loved ones of the people she loves as well. She does not run at the first

sign of trouble or faltering ideals when Sonny comes back into the family's life, but instead takes on the protective role for all characters to feel loved.

Baldwin says, "your suffering does not isolate you; your suffering is your bridge." (Lee, 1) With this, Sonny's mother and Isabel want to help Sonny with his sense of "otherness" that he feels such as isolation and he need for co-dependence but also his isolation of familial, racial, religious and sexual and community needs and feelings. They are all linked in some way or another. Since he lacked all of these things for so long, it is definitely harder for him to feel needed, wanted or loved because he just hasn't had any of these things for so long and that is what his mother feared while trying to help him as much as she could before she passed. Isabel and her family, along with the narrator as well are there to recover the protection and love that Sonny was lacking. Sonny's family, starting with his parents up until it's the narrator and his family, become his "bridge" so to speak.

James Baldwin seemed to have a pretty good outlook on the role women took within his stories from what they are "expected" to do, versus what they really wanted to be doing. In this particular era, women were expected to be the perfect wife. They were sent to school and then everybody presumed they'd get married and just become this perfect ideal housewife while raising children and waiting on their husband hand and foot. "Maintain the house, prepare meals, take care of the children, help them with their homework, be the ideal wife, do the dishes and the laundry while remaining elegant; that made the day of most American women in the 1950's." (Lamb, 1) It doesn't seem like Baldwin wrote his women this way. Perhaps it was because he didn't see them that wait himself while growing up. He wrote the women in his story with a strong sense of independence but also a gift for nurturing their families without flaw. The difference in the way Baldwin wrote these women and how women were expected to be back then is that they did a lot of the expected things because they wanted to not people assumed they should and/or would. These women were strong, self-sufficient women who were the backbones for both of their families. They carried burdens not many women would have

or would have wanted to in similar situations like this. Sure, a mother might say she'd do anything for her son, as Sonny's own mother would have and probably did, but when it comes down to it many mothers would turn on their children out of shame. Baldwin's characters absolutely shine above these stereotypes in the brightest light and create a positive outlook on women in this era.

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Vanessa Martins Lamb. "The 1950's and the 1960's and the American Woman: The Transition from the "Housewife" to the Feminist." *History*. 2011. ffdumas-00680821



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[PART IV]

"Saint Marie" by Louise Erdrich

You can Read Louise Erdrich's short story "Saint Marie" at this link. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1984/03/saint-marie/376814/>



"Louise Erdrich" by Alessio Jacona,
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Louise_Erdrich_\(19303274788\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Louise_Erdrich_(19303274788).jpg),
Licensed CC BY Alessio Jacona

Louise Erdrich was born on June 7, 1954, in Little Falls, Minnesota and studied at Dartmouth College. Here she was a part of the first class of women at the college to earn an A.B. in English. Erdrich has written 28 books and is one of the most significant writers of the second wave of the Native American Renaissance.

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Kenna McGerty has lived in Boise, Idaho her entire life. In her spare time, she enjoys writing and reading fiction. She is

pursuing an English degree with an emphasis on Creative Writing from the College of Western Idaho. After graduating, she is hoping to attend Boise State University to further her education and start working as an editor while writing fiction on the side.

Kassy Roberts

Living in Meridian, Idaho for her whole life, Kassy likes to spend time traveling to surrounding areas and taking hiking adventures in Idaho's wilderness. When she is at home, Kassy likes to spend her time writing poetry and short stories, and reading any fantasy book she can get her hands on. Her plan is to graduate from Boise State University with her Bachelors in English Teaching, and to return for her master's program in English.

Critical Introduction

A short story that regards many different themes throughout its pages, “Saint Marie” by Louise Erdrich is the story of a girl named Marie and the hardships that come with entering a nunnery as well as the conflicts that come from within, both mentally and physically. A tale regarding religion, history, culture, and the nature of humanity, this novel is one from which many deeper connections and themes can be found. These several analytical essays shall discuss the deeper meanings and ideas behind this story in every regard. With several personal takes and analyses of the stories, as well as deeper insights on already existent literary analyses of the work, each aspect within “Saint Marie” shall be discussed in-depth and thoroughly.

Diving into the psychological analysis, we look to the driving force behind the actions of Marie and Sister Leopolda who are pitted against each other in a battle of wills, both spiritually and physically. In lacking a mother figure throughout her early adolescent life, Marie suffers from the consequences of her path to religious freedom and domination; instead of attempting to obtain these things in a healthy way, her obsession with God and the Devil lead to her believing that she embodies both. Jess Lupton digs into the subconscious mind and seeks to justify the complicated behavior displayed by both women in the story.

Kenzie Knutson tackles the feminist analysis and talks about contextual methods that can lead to abusive situations. The Catholic church still does not recognize women as ordainable

to this day, leaving them only positions in serving men who are ordained. This is a tradition that has stood since the origins of Roman Catholicism- which provides clear evidence of sexist roots within their spiritual hierarchy. The normalization of sexist ideals and lack of accountability for leaders within the Catholic church leads to violence against women and particularly women of color.

“Taking Holiness by Force” is a New Criticism essay by Andrew Barbour that breaks down the purpose of good and evil, the tension between the internal and perceived self, and the reversal of the protagonist and antagonist in “Saint Marie.” It makes the case that holiness, in the eyes of Marie, is a battleground of dominance, and whoever sits at the top of the hierarchy must be the highest of them all. It uses evidence from the text to support a narcissistic view of the protagonist, and her transformation from internal innocence and outward lowliness into internal corruption and outward holiness.

Starting in the late 1800’s American Indian children have been subjected to a boarding school system. This system stole their cultural identities and gave them new assimilated ones. “Saint Marie” is a product of that assimilation culture. The abuse and hatred Marie faces throughout the story is a retelling of the trauma Native children faced throughout their schooling. Lindsey Weaver explores her response as a Native woman to this tale of generational trauma in *An Echo of Boarding School Assimilation*.

Within “The Power of History and Belief, an Analysis of “Saint Marie”, concepts of historical value found within the cultural, religious, and beliefs are discussed and analyzed by Tobyn Shaw. Looking more in-depth into what concepts may affect the story and the overall background of where this story may have come from. This essay looks into what “Saint Marie” draws inspiration from, and its place in both historical, and new historical value as a whole.

Kassy Roberts’s essay covers “Saint Marie” and how gender and feminism drive the main character, Marie, through the story. This essay covers the reasons why this story is isolated to the female experience, and how religious guilt is a main factor in the story. Taking a look at quotes and moments that show

the true intent behind the author's work, this essay creates a conversation surrounding how two women in one story can be so influenced by their own gender roles, that they go against feminism itself.

Kenna McGerty's essay covers the religious symbolism and the character traits and actions of the characters Marie and Sister Leopolda using a deconstruction lens. Using these, it shows that Marie is the more Christ-like one of the two, which is uncommon in stories such as this. The religious symbolism and mythology of both the Christian church and Native American culture show how each of the characters have symbols of both cultures. Marie, as the underdog in this story, takes the power from Sister Leopolda and is more merciful towards her adversary showing that she is a better representative of Christ than Sister Leopolda. The paradoxes shown in this story show how the balance of power can shift.

"Saint Marie" holds within it many deeper connections to the world throughout it. Covering concepts such as trauma, vengeance, faith, belief, and many other ideas that can be found within our modern world. Into the depth of this story, we have traversed, thinking about its religious, historical, cultural, and ethnic ties. Taking looks at concepts that matter in this modern-day world and many that can still be found all around us commonly. This story took a deeper glance into the life of the struggles both within and outside of a girl and gave each of us a new view of these issues and how deep they might go.



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Annotated Bibliography

Burnette, Catherine Elizabeth, and Charles R. Figley. "Historical Oppression, Resilience, and Transcendence: Can a Holistic Framework Help Explain Violence Experienced by Indigenous People?" *Social Work*, vol. 62, no. 1, Jan. 2017, pp. 37–44. <https://academic.oup.com/sw/article/62/1/37/2447839?login=true>.

This scholarly article from Catherine Elizabeth Burnette breaks down different levels of oppression, how they are interconnected, and why one can lead to another. Specifically, Burnette talks about the experience of Indigenous people in the United States. She provides a "holistic lens," a new way of looking at the systems of oppression in place. It is important to note that observation alone does not solve an issue. However, acknowledgment of an issue can be the first step to solving it. In this article, Burnette talks about the concept of historical oppression of Indigenous populations and ways we can see the effects of that today. This is particularly helpful for our analysis of "Saint Marie" because she is discriminated against for her Indigenous heritage. Violence is inflicted upon her, and due to historical oppression on the many levels talked about in this article, Marie believes she deserves this. This article provides an additional frame of reference for the social and historical oppression of Indigenous people.

Castillo, Susan. "Women Aging Into Power: Fictional

Representations of Power and Authority in Louise Erdrich's Female Characters." *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, vol. 8, no. 4, 1996, pp. 13–20. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/20739367.

The author, who studied American literature at Oregon State University, attempts to rationalize Erdrich's texts into useable and understandable language. This particular source is helpful in determining power and authority, which is key to understanding the psyche of the characters in this story and what they may be repressing on a subconscious level. The main idea here is that power does not necessarily mean authority, and women will often experience a blockage in this category as they are predominantly written as both when circumstances do not suit them. This source does fall short in establishing a psychological analysis purely based upon Saint Marie; It encompasses all of Erdrich's work in order to take a more feminist viewpoint. However, the central idea that Marie and Sister Leopolda hold no authority in a story revolving around religion is rife with content from which we can interpret and sets a good basis for analysis. This is a biased article, as it pertains specifically to Erdrich's work, but it does exhibit the repression of emotion and startup people may face and how they can supersede their reality in order to establish a sense of normality in whatever capacity they can achieve.

Humbert, Anne Laure, et al. "Undoing the 'Nordic Paradox': Factors Affecting Rates of Disclosed Violence against Women across the EU." *PLoS ONE*, vol. 16, no. 5, May 2021, pp. 1–24. <https://helda.helsinki.fi/dhanken/handle/10227/414904>.

This is a scholarly article describing different contextual factors that affect rates of violence against women across the European Union. The author, Anne Laure Humbert, explores these factors, including social equality, and their relevance to legal protections for women in the surveyed area. Humbert also looks into how data was collected and how the surveys were conducted each time. These are just a few of the factors that Humbert explores throughout this article. I believe

this article is relevant to our short story *Saint Marie* because Marie is subjected to continual violence in the name of holiness. Violence against women has always been a prevalent issue, and even more so in the time period this story is set in. This article helps provide cultural and social context today as to why so much violence against women takes place and will help provide context that can be traced back in time to the setting of *Saint Marie*.

Kristianto, Bayu. "The Notion of the Body and the Path to Healing." *International Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Society*, vol. 2, no. 3, Mar. 2013, pp. 41–53. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=86933791&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

Kristianto explores the damages done to Native children through the boarding school system. The author explores Native stories of healing through the body and how these schools hurt a student's body to save their spirit. Using healing as her backdrop, Kristianto explores the ideologies of the Native children and the colonizers. By exploring the differences in ideology, Kristianto explains how trauma experienced by Native children can be healed. Recalling the tales of the boarding schools, we see a reflection of them in *Saint Marie* as a Native child is torn down because of the "dark" in her. This is a direct parallel to the trauma Native children experienced.

Leahy, Rachel. *The Devils of Cultural Conflict in Louise Erdrich's "Saint Marie."* Faculty Mentor: Diya Abdo, Guilford College. <https://uncw.edu/csurl/explorations/documents/volume%209%202014/leahy.pdf>.

Leahy's analysis goes deeper into the historic cultural and religious values behind Saint Marie. By including information about the Chippewa and European motifs and symbols found in the piece, as well as allusions to Christianity and Chippewa folklore, she shows how Marie's embodiment of double consciousness is founded in and affected by both.

“Louise Erdrich.” Poetry Foundation, Poetry Foundation.
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/louise-erdrich>.

This source is the biography page from Poetry Foundation’s entry on Louise Erdrich. It covers the highlights of her bibliography, as well as a detailed rendition of the woman’s life story, including her cultural heritage and her internal struggles between her family’s Ojibwe traditions and Catholicism. The reason I think this will be useful is that it highlights the tension she noted between those two cultures, and it will be enlightening to compare her personal opinions to the actual text my criticism is evaluating.

Metzl, Marilyn Newman (2003). Review of *The Reproduction of Mothering; Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory; Femininities, Masculinities and Sexualities; The Power of Feelings* by Nancy Chodorow. *New Haven: Yale University Press*. PP. 55-60.

Newman is a Doctor of Philosophy in psychoanalysis, solidifying this as a source of direct information that pertains to the type of analysis that this paper utilizes. This provides both historical context as well as proof of psychological criticism as the author appropriately plays off the work of Nancy Chodorow, a well-established psychoanalyst herself, and furthers the thought process behind the inherent upbringing that children will receive in response to the treatment they should have received from their mother. Such treatment will determine how the adolescent will perceive themselves and the world when they reach adulthood.

This source is a good starting point for those looking to dive into psychological criticism and how it can pertain to a specific text. However, the sheer amount of information and conceptualizations in this book review are hard to process unless one is promoting a very specific idea led by Chodorow. It is relatable in lending support to the methodology behind this short story and allows us to choose a type of psychological analysis that best fits the power dynamic represented between Marie and Sister Leopolda. As Chodorow bases her methodology off of Freud’s we can further establish

motive in using such an article, as the Oedipus complex shines through and translates over into female territory, allowing us to establish a new thesis surrounding Saint Marie: We learn that early childhood development usually has a sexual undertone that will carry on into adulthood, affecting the thought processes of each character.

Norris, Christopher. "Chapter 2: Jacques Derrida: Language Against Itself." *Deconstruction*, Taylor & Francis Ltd / Books, 2002, pp. 18–40. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lfh&AN=17445745&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

Norris' article explores Jacques Derrida's ideas on philosophy and literary criticism while applying it to the lens of deconstruction along with other writers' views. The use of language and paradoxes in texts characterizes deconstruction. Derrida's ideas regarding priority of the traditional relationship of creative and critical language. The spoken word, not the written word, is more prioritized for Derrida, as there is no language without speaking it first.

This chapter shows the process and origin of deconstruction. The main aspects of deconstruction featured are explained thoroughly and are helpful in applying the lens to *Saint Marie*. The extensive explanation of Derrida's philosophy regarding deconstruction and how to apply it makes it a good method source. The philosophies used by other writers bring other perspectives demonstrates how deconstruction came to be and the contentions regarding it. The informative tone Norris has in the chapter makes it a good resource for those working with deconstruction.

Padgett, Tim. "Robes for Women." *TIME Magazine*, vol. 176, no. 13, Sept. 2010, pp. 53–55. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/cwi.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=voh&AN=53787794&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

This article by Tim Padgett discusses a sexist tradition within the Catholic church: the refusal to ordain women

as ministers. In a quote from the Vatican in this article, the church calls ordaining women a “delictum gravius” which means a “grave crime.” This was the same term they used to describe pedophilia. This begs the question—according to the “official” Catholic church, is ordaining women equal to molesting children? Padgett talks with females who were ordained by an organization founded in Europe called Roman Catholic Woman-priests. These female priests are not welcome in usual churches for Catholic worship and often hold their masses in makeshift spaces or Episcopalian churches. According to the article, though there has been a severe decline in men volunteering to be priests in the past thirty years or so (it dropped by over a third), they are more likely to allow married men than women into “legitimate” priesthood. Furthermore, according to a poll conducted by the New York Times, more than half of the population supports the ordination of women. The hope is that it will eventually become normalized and accepted. This is relevant to *Saint Marie* because the story displays a clear bias against women in the Catholic church. This creates contextual and logical tension: why would a woman endure such abuse and strife for a community that treats her like a second-class citizen due to her gender?

Riley, Patricia. “There Is No Limit to This Dust: The Refusal of Sacrifice in Louise Erdrich’s *Love Medicine*.” *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2000, pp. 13–23. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20736959>. Accessed 2 May 2023.

Riley’s article discusses Louise Erdrich’s use of religious symbolism in both the Christian Church and Native American cultures to show the clash of cultures her characters face. The role of the sacrificial victim that Erdrich’s characters that reflect the stereotype of those living in mixed cultures are refused. The article uses the story of *Saint Marie* as an example of this clash of cultures. The heroine overcomes her adversary who wants to silence the Native American side of herself and rises above the expected role of victim. She wins by

listening to the Trickster associated with her tribe and not letting her culture get erased.

This article is supported by a variety of other sources and is knowledgeable about the topic. The argument is sound and supported. This article is well-written and concise and provides some good insight into the short story. The author's knowledge of both the Christian and Native American mythologies make the argument clear and support it. This article is very easy to read and comprehend.

Rowe, John Carlos. "Buried Alive: The Native American Political Unconscious in Louise Erdrich's Fiction." *Postcolonial Studies*, vol. 7, no. 2, July 2004, pp. 197–210. EBSCOhost, <https://doi-org.cwi.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/1368879042000278870>.

John Rowe is a professor of humanities and English and a known Americanist. He has a lengthy list of books published from the 1990s into the 2010s. Rowe's intention with this article is to highlight Erdrich's political views in her novel "The Master Butchers Singing Club." Rowe discusses how her politics in this novel connect to her other works. Rowe focuses on postcolonial study and how this can apply to Erdrich's work. This article is intended for students of his and those who seek out Erdrich's political views and wish to understand Native American studies more. Rowe decides that there is a miracle in Erdrich's writing and that she is able to take hardships and create new lives for her characters.

Running Bear, Ursula, et al. "The Relationship of Five Boarding School Experiences and Physical Health Status among Northern Plains Tribes." *Quality of Life Research*, vol. 27, no. 1, Jan. 2018, pp. 153–157. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1007/s11136-017-1742-y.

Ursula Running Bear performed a scientific study of 771 participants to see the effects of boarding school abuse on the health of American Indians. This study was conducted to prove whether students in the boarding school system generally have poorer health than students who were not exposed to such an environment. The article includes charts and data about the

participants in the study. The results show that boarding school attendees have a lower average physical health than their peers who did not attend boarding school. This article will provide data as an example of trauma to Native people. By providing data for physical abuse, this article will further the point that Native culture was seen as an evil practice and needed to be eradicated.

Sanders, Karla. "A Healthy Balance: Religion, Identity, and Community in Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*." *MELUS*, vol. 23, no. 2, 1998, pp. 129–55. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/468016>. Accessed 2 May 2023.

Sander's article discussed Louise Erdrich's characters and how they manage to create a healthy balance between Christian influence and Native American culture. Two of the heroines are used as examples as how they achieved this balance. Their life experiences living in two vastly different cultures. Their beliefs and desires may be different but in the end they both attain a healthy balance in their lives. The balance is not only between differing cultures, but a sense of self and empowerment as well.

This article is well-written, with sources supporting the argument. The author's knowledge of the book and the characters' lives make the argument clear and concise. The language is easy to read and comprehend. A lot of details are provided and aid the argument. All in all, this is an excellent source to use.

Shaw, Tobyn. "The Power of History and Belief." *Historical/new historical*. Beginnings and Endings A Critical Edition. 14, May 2021. <https://cwi.pressbooks.pub/beginnings-and-endings-a-critical-edition/chapter/historical-new-historical-4/>

Tobyn Shaw was a college student at The College of Western Idaho and published an analysis of Louise Erdrich's "Saint Marie". Shaw took a historical/new historical approach to his analysis, showcasing his skill and understanding of this criticism approach. Shaw focuses on the belief aspects of the story and provides examples of how religion and history form the belief of the characters in the story. Written for his classmates,

instructor, and for other scholars to read, Shaw is concise and explains his ideas behind colonialism and the historical values of the short story. His complete understanding is that this story is one directed towards Native Americans and those alike who have found prejudice in religion and how much influence religion has on the historical value of this story.

Schultz, Lydia A. "Fragments and Ojibwe Stories: Narrative Strategies in Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*." *College Literature*, vol. 18, no. 3, Oct. 1991, p. 80. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/cwi.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ehh&AN=9603085698&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

This article analyzes the intersection of Ojibwe and Western cultural and religious symbolism in *Love Medicine*, a larger work by Erdrich which includes Saint Marie. I selected this article as a source to address the cultural clash going on behind-the-scenes in the short story, and how the behavior of each character can also be seen through the lens of cultural criticism in addition to my own criticism that focuses far more extensively on the relationship the characters have with morality both within and without.

Stock, Richard T. "Native Storytelling and Narrative Innovation: Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine* as Fictional Ethnography." *Brno Studies in English*, vol. 41, no. 1, Jan. 2015, pp. 175–193. EBSCOhost, doi:10.5817/BSE2015-1-11.

This article dives deeper into the cultural implications of Saint Marie, including political meanings and arguments baked into the story. It argues that the piece can be utilized as a sort of "fictional ethnography" with which to examine Native American history in the 1900s. This article was selected for similar reasons to the last. My criticism was largely among moral lines, and since the story itself had little detail concerning Marie's past, I thought it beneficial to dig a little deeper and learn more about that aspect of the work.

Tanrisal, Meldan. "Mother and Child Relationships in the

Novels of Louise Erdrich." *American Studies International*, vol. 35, no. 3, 1997, pp. 67–79. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/41279516.

This source was vital in establishing the motive that possessed Erdrich to dip into Psychological analysis. Sister Leopolda is said to be carried over from several of her other novels, along with other prominent mother figures, which becomes the goal of the article; credibly determine whether characters in this short story create outlandish figures (in this circumstance, the devil) as a coping mechanism. This plays heavily into psychoanalysis and in evaluating whether the characters may be justified in their rationalizations of reality. This author has a Ph.D. in literature and is certainly qualified to weigh in on Saint Marie. This article is the most relevant of the three as it connects the questions of power and authority to the psychology behind Erdrich's decision to write Marie the way that she did. This supports the argument that Marie may have a connection to the Sister as a mother figure as it questions the basis of mother/child relationships and how this affects the child later in life. The information remains pertinent as mother and daughter relationships are further digested throughout Erdrich's other works, signifying a pattern that tends towards maternal love being dynamically significant in supporting or opposing a child's experience of life.

Taylor, Marie Balsley. *The Religious Symbolism of Louise Erdrich*. 2009. Lucy B. Maddox, Graduate School of Arts and Sciences of Georgetown University. 2009. <https://repository.library.georgetown.edu/bitstream/handle/10822/558055/taylorMarie.pdf?sequence=1>

This author breaks down religious symbolism in four of Erdrich's novels. She focuses primarily on the use of water, symbols of the Virgin Mary, and Priests. In particular to my purposes, she dedicates an entire section to the use of water and the symbolism of baptism and religious conversion. While my paper is a new criticism that considers the text the ultimate authority, it is profitable for me to consider how other critics wrote

about the story and the details they have noticed that I may have missed. It also provides me with an opportunity to tackle other opinions and counterarguments to my own.

Wellington, Rebecca. "Girls Breaking Boundaries: Acculturation and Self-Advocacy at Chemawa Indian School, 1900-1930s." *American Indian Quarterly*, vol. 43, no. 1, Winter 2019, pp. 101–132. EBSCOhost, doi:10.5250/amerindiquar.43.1.0101.

Wellington looks at Chemawa Indian School in Salem, Oregon from the year 1900 into the 1930's, where female students advocated for better educational opportunities. These students lead a small rebellion to reach the goal of a better educational system and a more diverse curriculum for female students. The essay explores the history of boarding schools funded by the federal government. It also explores the student's view of their environment and how they strived to change it, knowing the barriers they faced. This article is an example of young women working against the system they have been placed in. Likewise, Marie makes her own decision to ascend the mountain, enter the convent, and fight against the same oppressive system.



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New Criticism

Taking Holiness by Force: A Close Reading of Louise Erdrich's Saint Marie

Andrew Barbour

Louise Erdrich's *Saint Marie* is a work of fiction permeated by deep and often conflicting symbolism. It tells the story of a teenage girl in the tutelage of one Sister Leopolda and tracks her progression from a poor native girl on an Indian reservation to an apparent saint to the nuns at Sacred Heart Convent. Marie finds the only path to holiness is through dominance, and proof of being the most righteous of all is found in the utter subjugation of others. In her eyes, to be evil is to be lowly, and if she can scrape her way to the top, then she has become holy. This paradox of pursuing outward holiness by evil means is central to the piece, and as far as the protagonist is concerned, her pursuit is utterly vindicated as she rises to the status of a saint. This conclusion is built up through the story by increasing tensions between the inner and outer self, good and evil, as well as the reversal of roles between Leopolda and herself.

Marie sees herself (as the title and opening paragraph would suggest), as a saint. To Marie, she is worthy of the highest honor, and deserves to be worshiped by those beneath her. "But they were going to have me. And I'd be carved in pure gold. With ruby lips. And my toenails would be little pink ocean shells, which they would have to stoop down off their high horse to kiss" (Erdrich, 1). By the end of the story, Marie revels in the

fulfillment of her fantasy, as she becomes, in her eyes, the most sacred of all the members of the convent. As she sits on the pure, white pillows, she begins to pity and look down her nose at the one who had abused her up until then (15).

Marie blends her views with her perception of the convents early on. She sees the convent as a shelter for arrogant, holier-than-thou people who look down on others. In that way, she begins to adopt those views as her own. Her homeland is described as a place "Where the maps stopped. Where God had only half a hand in the Creation. Where the Dark One had put in thick bush, liquor, wild dogs, and Indians" (2). She takes in the teachings of Leopolda and depersonalizes herself from the physical abuse she is subjected to in school. She sees the "Dark One" as influencing her, causing her to do things for which she receives punishment. When they are making bread together and she knocked a cup onto the floor, for example, she narrates "he'd entered my distraction" (7). It was the devil inside her that cause her to fail.

However, this acceptance of the convent's teachings is merely surface level. The religious concepts she internalizes are as shallow as the excuses Leopolda gives for punishing Marie. To Marie, sanctification came by way of the appearance of holiness. A constant metaphor in the narration is physical height as good: the convent is up on a hill (1), she climbs up to it to join the mission (2), and she wishes to have the highest person she knows beneath her: Leopolda (10). Rising becomes her achievable means of salvation. "I was that girl who thought the hem of her black garment would help me rise" (3).

One of the strongest tensions in this story is between good and evil. Marie's values are directed toward herself, and it would appear that whatever is good for her in her quest to become a saint is what is good, and what is truly evil is failure, and the fault lies in the devil's influence and not her own self. When she is on the verge of passing out from the scalding hot water Leopolda pours down on Marie's body, her egoistic values come to the forefront of her mind as a vision. "She was at my feet, swallowing the glass after each step I took. I broke through another and another. The glass she swallowed ground and cut until her starved insides were only a subtle dust. She coughed.

She coughed a cloud of dust. And then she was only a black rag that flapped off, snagged in bob wire, hung there for an age, and finally rotted into the breeze" (10). It becomes clear, following her attempt to murder Sister Leopolda by ironically casting the nun into a personal hell⁽¹²⁾, that Marie absolves herself of all guilt. After her altercation with Leopolda, she wakes up to gladly receive the adoration and awe of the other sisters in the convent. "Receive the dispensation of my sacred blood," she proclaims to the women kneeling for her (15). Her achievement of her fantasy, not any moral character, was what justified her to herself. "I was being worshiped. I had somehow gained the altar of a saint" (13). It is in this culmination of her desires that the piece unifies good and evil into equal boons to Marie's self-actualization and self-worship.

Other critics of this piece have pointed out the clash between cultures in the story as well. The ostensibly Catholic concepts of good, evil, God, and Satan are in sharp contrast with what Marie was raised with. In "Fragment and Ojibwe Stories: Narrative Strategies in Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*" author Lydia Schultz describes how Catholic notions of Satan are used to justify Leopolda's abuse of the protagonist. "Sister Leopolda personifies what goes wrong when Catholicism meets the reservation," Schultz writes. "She clearly rejects her Ojibwe upbringing (as seen in *Tracks*), but she cannot behave in ways that coincides with modern Catholic practices, either. While training the potential novice Marie Lazarre (later to become Marie Kashpaw), Leopolda scolds her, hits her head with a poker, and impales her hand with a sharp fork, all because she thinks that Marie has "the Devil in [her] heart"" (Schultz). When speaking of the Devil, Marie claims Leopolda "knew as much about him as my grandma, who called him by other names and was not afraid" (Erdrich, 3). The supernatural concepts of Marie's former culture and her present one are far from in agreement concerning the nature of the "Dark One," and it seems he may have even been a friend to her grandmother's culture.

Yet more critics have likewise associated the symbolism in Saint Marie as signifying the conflict between Catholicism and Marie's ethnic spirituality. According to Marie Balsley Taylor,

Erdrich's use of water in this text symbolizes the intersection of the Ojibwe's religious reverence for water and Catholicism's sacrament of baptism. "In her novels, her portrayals of baptism allude to a violent history of Christian conversion as well as an Ojibwe fear and respect of the water as a powerful force" (7). Taylor claims the Ojibwe would have seen Baptism not as a rebirth, as the missionaries did, but as a rejection of their cultural heritage (8). In this sense, Leopolda pouring boiling water over Marie's body was not just physical abuse, but a sort of forced conversion, intending to rob Marie of her former identity and to force the Sister's values upon Marie against her will.

There is, finally, a reversal built into the story as well. The consecrated Sister Leopolda begins the story above Marie, the young girl brought in from her "low" status. Leopolda chastises Marie, telling her "You have two choices. One, you can marry a no-good Indian, bear his brats, die like a dog. Or two, you can give yourself to God" (Erdrich, 5). Leopolda, at least according to our narrator, more than lives up to Marie's judgment of arrogant pretentiousness. The nun looks down on others and is considered holy despite her cruel intentions, words, and deeds.

Marie begins as a young girl in a desolate corner of the world. "The sky is just about the size of my ignorance. And just as pure" (1). She was thirteen years old and, from what the reader witnesses in the beginning of the story, rather innocent. She is taken as the lowliest of sinners in Leopolda's mind and physically abused and tortured into a demented notion of purity. She internalizes pieces of Leopolda's instruction and becomes determined to beat the Sister at her own game as she first conceives her twisted goal: "The real way to overcome Leopolda was this: I'd get to heaven first. And then, when I saw her coming, I'd shut the gate. She'd be out! That is why, besides the bowing and the scraping I'd be dealt, I wanted to sit on the altar as a saint" (5).

By the story's end, Leopolda is bowing down to Marie just like she envisioned, and the two have entirely switched places. Leopolda has an inner sense of guilt revived and is internally more moral than she was before. She is humbled and rendered lowly and subservient, having raised her attempted murderer

up before the other nuns. Marie, on the other hand, had her soul thoroughly corrupted, gloating to herself as she looked down her nose at those who now see her as above themselves (15). Perhaps the emptiness Marie feels in the final lines of the story is how Leopolda had felt the entire time: No heart, no joy, only dust. Finally, at the very end, even Marie's attempt at murder became a means of achieving holiness by the sheer force of her will.

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Reader Response

St. Marie: An Echo of Boarding School Assimilation

By Lindsey Weaver

The short story “St. Marie” by Louise Erdrich is a recalling of boarding school assimilation of Native American children. Native children were ripped away from their homes and forced to abandon their culture in favor of Christian beliefs. The child, Marie, is a great example of generational trauma and how the mindset of an entire culture can be forced to change how they see themselves.

Right in the first paragraph, we see that Marie is Native. She states, “No reservation girl had ever prayed so hard” (1). In that same paragraph, we see Marie degrade herself by saying she was just as good as the nuns “because I don’t have that much Indian blood” (1). It sounds contradictory to say she was degrading herself when she states she’s just as good as the nuns, but by looking down at her own people she believes herself superior over the nuns and the other reservation members. Marie claims that “None were any lighter than me” (1) and by claiming this the reader can assume that Marie is paler than others; this is confirmed with her talking about her blood as well. This gives her a sense of entitlement that Native children like her use to this day and call “white-passing.” By pushing aside her culture and embracing the culture of the nuns Marie denies an integral part of herself that Native children have been told to repress since colonization began. Marie’s attitude comes directly from

assimilation culture. According to Ursula Running Bear “The American Indian (AI) Boarding School Era began in the late 1880s, and the purpose was to hasten the assimilation of AIs by altering their identities through instruction in the English language, Christianity, and Euro-centric cultural values, norms, styles of dress, and manner” (153). This is directly reflected in Marie as she makes her way to the convent for schooling.

Marie describes the people of the reservation as bush people, in a place where the map ends. She describes her own soul as “the mail-order Catholic soul” (2) implying that she doesn’t quite believe in the teachings, but she’ll use them to get out of her situation. The church is just giving her and the others something to do when there appeared to be nothing else to do but drink. Marie also sees the stereotype of the “drunken Indian” in the adults around her. The adults drink to lessen the burdens of their life, and in many cases, drinking is used as a coping mechanism for trauma. “Boarding school attendance is widely acknowledged as one of the major historical traumas that contribute to current-day AI [American Indian] health disparities” (Running Bear 154).

Sister Leopolda’s attitude toward Marie is a reflection of how the boarding school teachers saw their students. She is a woman who teaches children, and she uses that authority to rule over them using fear and intimidation. Marie describes that Leopolda has a hook that she uses to catch the devil, and that at one point she became violent with Marie and that was the first time Marie became afraid. This is just the beginning of the traumatic events that take place at the convent. “There seems to be an acute hatred toward the human body on the part of the perpetrators of violence in the boarding school, i.e. the nuns and the priests, across Christian denominations, which made them think that the education of children could be performed utilizing the instruments of violence in the most arbitrary form. By the word “arbitrary,” I mean the most painful and degrading treatments that boarding school children had to undergo...” (Kristianto 42). Native cultures see their bodies as sacred, and as such, they take great care of themselves. When colonizers began to force European views on the Native people, they were prude about their own bodies and disgusted by the Native practices. To

the colonizers, it looked like devil worship, when in fact it was a spiritual practice that made them more aware of themselves and everything around them, and how to respect the things Great Creator gave them. Sister Leopolda is simply echoing the ideals of the colonizers and claims that it is love that she strives for and the salvation of Marie's soul. Sister Leopolda uses this love as an excuse to further harm Marie.

I would like to argue that because the practices of Natives were seen as "devil" worship Natives and their culture, in general, is represented as the "Dark One" in Marie's world. "Before sleep sometimes he came and whispered conversation in the old language of the bush. I listened. He told me things he never told anyone but Indians" (3). This line indicates that the Dark One only speaks to the Natives, implying that it's because of a cultural connection that only they have. Assimilation was a brutal process that denied the "Indian" parts but tried to save the man. "In school, Indians were to acquire at least a basic knowledge of how to manage a small farm— from caring for livestock and equipment to knowing when to plant and harvest" (Wellington 104). When the settlers came, wasn't it the Natives who taught them how to survive? Why was this a necessary part of their schooling when it was taught through Native cultural practices? This erasure of a culture made Natives dependent on the colonizers for everything, including housing and food. Through Sister Leopolda, Marie is seeing the direct erasure of her cultural identity, and every time Marie tried to access it, she was punished.

Marie is at a stage where she wants to make her own way through life, but because of what she is seeing she thinks the only way out is at the convent as a saint. If she is a saint no one can look down at her, no one can tell her she's wrong, no one can tell her she doesn't belong. When she is making bread with Leopolda, Marie begins to realize that the woman she idolizes as a woman of God may be more consumed by the devil than she is. Marie does not see the devil as Sister Leopolda does. Marie does not see her culture as the devil, she sees the devil as the evil he is described as. In Marie's eyes, anything like drinking and not praying are evil acts. This is why she puts so much trust in Leopolda. Marie believes that Leopolda will lift her up and away

from all the trauma the adults on the reservation are facing. Marie doesn't know that Leopolda has a prejudice against her. Leopolda wants obedience from Marie, and when she is met with defiance and ego she lashes out by pouring boiling water in Marie's ear. "I heard the water as, it came, tipped from the spout, cooling as it fell but still scalding as it struck" (8). In the end, Marie gets what she wants, to be a saint, but was that true ending or the ending Marie prayed so hard for? After all, in the end, Marie is dust and her final thoughts are "Rise up! I thought. Rise up and walk! There is no limit to this dust!" (15).

The generational trauma of boarding schools still haunts Natives to this day. Marie was not ripped away from her home like so many, but she still experienced the pain of being assimilated. Marie chose to ascend the hill to better how she sees herself. She may not have gone for righteous reasons, but her experiences show a small fraction of what Native children experienced when forced to assimilate. Sister Leopolda is the compilation of every horrible Catholic nun who lashed out at her students. Marie is the embodiment of every Native child who suffered through a program designed to destroy them.

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Deconstruction

When Darkness is Light

By Kenna McGerty

Louise Erdrich's *Saint Marie* features the story of a Native American girl Marie, wanting to be seen as a saint going up to a convent and winning the battle against an abusive nun, Sister Leopolda. This outcome is unique, as the expected roles are swapped between the two. Sister Leopolda being a nun, is expected to be a representative of Christ, but in reality, is a representative of a darker entity. Marie, despite being viewed as impure by Sister Leopolda and the Church for her heritage, is the more Christ-like of the two. Religious symbolism and mythologies from both the Christian Church and Native American culture are prevalent throughout the story. The subversion of this religious symbolism along with the characters' traits and actions deconstruct the traditional interpretation of morality, showing that Marie is the Christ-like one with power, not Sister Leopolda.

Marie's wounds resemble Christ's, the burn on the back and the hand injury alluding to His wounds when he was getting crucified. Yet this symbolism is undercut by Marie's more vengeful side, "But I wanted her heart in love and admiration. Sometimes. And sometimes I wanted her heart to roast on a black stick" (Erdrich 5). Despite her wanting to have Sister Leopolda's love and admiration, there is also a side of her that wants to cause harm towards Sister Leopolda. While this

vengeful side of Marie cannot be attributed to Christ, it can be attributed to a part of Native American mythology, the Trickster. Patricia Riley in her article "There is No Limit to This Dust: The Refusal of Sacrifice in Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*" mentions this Trickster as the force that fuels Marie's resistance towards Sister Leopolda. While the Trickster in her is quelled by Sister Leopolda for a short time, it comes back with a vengeance towards the end of the story. Despite the Trickster's presence, the taunt it levels towards Leopolda still falls flat with the Christ-like attributes of Marie intervening. In fact, the text along with this religious symbolism rejects the idea that Western culture has power over any other culture (Norris 19). Marie gaining power and authority over Sister Leopolda shows that.

Marie is not the only one who has contrasting symbolisms in both Christian mythology and Native American Mythology, Sister Leopolda also has a paradox of two cultures surrounding her. While as a nun, she may represent Christ, there is another symbol in Native American culture that she could represent, the Windigo. The origin of this creature comes from the belief that the Windigo is created by starving oneself to death, as Riley attributes to Jennifer S.H Brown and Robert Brightman. The indication that Sister Leopolda could be one of these Windigos is shown through her immense strength. "She took my hand. Her fingers were like a bundle of broom straws, so thin and dry, but the strength of them was unnatural" (Erdrich 6). Marie even notes that this strength is a "kind of perverse miracle, for she got it from fasting herself thin" (Erdrich 6). The idea that fasting can give the righteous strength in the Christian church but can give the evil strength in Native American culture is a paradox. The fact that fasting can be defined as the same thing in both cultures but the power that one is thought to gain is not the same, and in fact are the exact opposites of each other.

At the beginning of the story, Sister Leopolda holds power over Marie. Convinced she is harboring the devil inside of her, Leopolda makes Marie go through painful trials in order to release him. These trials are sadistic, involving pouring hot water over Marie's back while she is looking for a cup that fell under the stove, resulting in painful burns. Feigning concern for

Marie and even tending to her burns after the fact, Leopolda is still convinced that the devil was still there. When Marie has enough and tries to throw Leopolda in the oven, she reacts by stabbing her in the hand before knocking her out. After Marie holds power over her, Leopolda lies to protect herself from facing the wrath of her sisters, “‘I have told my sisters of your passion,’ she managed to choke out. ‘How the stigmata...the marks of the nails appeared in your palms and you swooned at the holy vision...’” (Erdrich 17). Even though she has sworn to be a representative of Christ as a nun, she does not behave like it. Her actions resemble more of the Devil than Christ, a contrast to her status as a nun.

While Sister Leopolda is cruel and sadistic when having power and authority over Marie, the latter is the opposite. Marie pities her instead, is more merciful towards her, “‘Receive the dispensation of my sacred blood,’ I whispered. But there was no heart in it. No joy when she bent to touch the floor. No dark leaping” (Erdrich 15). This shows that despite gaining power over her tormentor, it does not bring happiness and satisfaction like she had wanted. There is no payback for the abuse she suffered through, the one taunt by the Trickster is the only attempt to show who was in control and even that doesn’t change how Marie felt. The rage from earlier is gone, replaced with pity. Karla Sanders in her article “A Healthy Balance: Religion, Identity, and Community in Louise Erdrich’s *Love Medicine*”, calls Marie’s victory “hollow” and that her dream of becoming a saint before Sister Leopolda was empty. She does not even try to reveal that Sister Leopolda was lying to save herself and tell the other nuns what actually occurred in the kitchen. There is no gloating about how she was the one who prevailed, and even instead of wanting to stay and continue holding onto the power she received, Marie’s thoughts are wanting to leave. The very last line of the story is “Rise up! I thought. Rise up and walk! There is no limit to this dust!” (Erdrich 18). Unlike Sister Leopolda, once Marie has the power, she does not think about keeping it, her only thoughts are that she wants to leave.

Saint Marie is a story of the underdog Marie winning the battle over Sister Leopolda, an unexpected and uncommon outcome.

Religious symbols such as Christ, the Devil, the Trickster, and the Windigo show two cultures coming together, yet still entirely separated from each other. The nun that has sworn an oath to be a representative of Christ and the Native American girl seen as impure and unclean do not remain in their original roles, and instead swap with each other. The power each wields is swapped as well, the one who had it in the beginning loses it to the one who had none. How each one deals with that power shows their true colors, the righteous nun using it cruelly while the impure girl uses it with mercy and grace. The paradoxes in this story are numerous, light versus darkness, the rising and falling of status, and so many more. Marie turns out to be the one who is the most similar to Christ than Sister Leopolda shown by a deconstructed interpretation of traditional morality through subverted religious symbolism and the traits and actions of the characters.

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Historical/New Historical

The Power of History and Belief, an Analysis of Saint Marie

Tobyn Shaw

When we take a look at Saint Marie, it is very much a story about belief. Overall, that faith will bring judgement to those who you find issue with life. However, alongside this, we see human nature as it ties in more deeply with the overall story. Things like vengeance, anger, and hatred are shared amidst characters to bring forth conflict. We see how these mingle with the concepts of religious history, but the primary question is; what are the primary historical values present in this story and how are they represented? Saint Marie incorporates concepts of religious faith, particularly that of the catholic church through the representation of the beliefs held by the convent of nuns of heaven and hell, as well as acts of vengeance and the devil.

Saint Marie follows the story of a girl named Marie who is a member of a convent of nuns. Within this convent is the abess named Sister Leopolda, a religious woman that Marie has mixed feelings about at the start, but quickly dissolves into a hatred shared between the two. If we look deeper at the values of religious communities in Catholicism and Christianity as a whole, we can perhaps draw even more from what historical values can be found. A convent is typically a community overseen by the Christian church in which people undertake religious vows to spend their lives serving the church. Typically, abbeys are tight-knit communities, and the word convent is

used to describe a group of women or nuns. These communities of course value the faith of the bible above anything else, factoring in things like sin, repentance, as well as heaven and hell. These are values that have existed for as long as any human can recall, thousands of years, and have influenced our world in dramatic ways. The values in which the church holds can be seen plenty throughout the text. From Marie's desire to get into heaven before Sister Leopolda to shut her out, to the infatuation that Sister Leopolda has with the devil. As well as through the extreme actions she takes to act against this so-called "devil" growing within all around her.

Human nature plays a lot into the concepts of religion, as well as emotion in this regard. With the use of Leopolda's belief that the devil lies deep within those beneath her drawn from the bible and history, she is often seen giving into her fears of Satan mulled by these emotions. It gives this almost witch trial feel to it, where Maria is singled out for most of these actions because of the fear throughout the convent of the devil. A message that even Leopolda seems to believe fully, that it exists in people and that it must be purged through often extreme measures. We see elements of the concept of ruling via fear of religious persecution that have been often seen throughout history. Also, the concept of vengeance, a tale as old as time, plays a major part as Maria and Leopolda find themselves locked in a repeating conflict driven by deeper hatred. Vengeance is enacted, retaliation for each vice committed by the other, until finally, a resolution draws around. Ironically many of these actions go against what is taught in the bible, therefore making most of the belief portion obsolete, or ironic in a way.

The overall historical value that lies within this story lies primarily with the religious text, however, in some parts it also lays with the deeper background of the characters. In the article, *The Devils of Cultural Conflict in Louise Erdrich's "Saint Marie"* by Rachel Leahy, discusses the deeper meanings and a deeper look at the historical representation between the story and "the conflict between the Anglo-American (Christian) colonizers' and the Native American, or colonized, ways of life." (Leahy 1) through the heritage represented by Maria, and the Anglo-American colonizers being represented as Sister Leopolda and

her beliefs. This is an interesting take on the story that provides a deeper view into perhaps the historical basis in which it is represented. Stating that its meaning is an analogy towards the conversion of the native population to Christianity with the colonization of America. A process that has often been forced, with little regard to the beliefs of said people. The behavior of Sister Leopolda as such a tyrannical and controlling person further backs this point and adds to both the historical and new historical value of the story.

THE RELIGIOUS SYMBOLISM OF LOUISE ERDRICH by Marie Balsley Taylor, provided an interesting thesis paper written about symbolism in many of Louise Erdrich's works. This article brought up the religious symbolism throughout, the importance of the religious value in which the Virgin Mary, a subject of desire from which the characters wish to draw from. Something pure and ideal from which to draw from. As stated by Balsley in her paper; "The Virgin Mary's image has historically been seen as a standard of female perfection and ideal sexuality which makes the perception of the Virgin Mary, as statue of idol, intimately tied into ideas of gender and female sexuality." (Taylor 25) It is an icon that is commonly seen in these ways, tying back to the concepts of the devil and ideals being represented both historically and personally. This story covers far more values in history than the simple conflicts between nuns, but also religious values in culture, equality, and religion.

Showing the prior struggles of people as well as the ideals forced upon them often by the church, we see throughout this story that it is a matter of a battle between the changing of the world and cultures. This story draws its historical values from the deeper connotations and messages found in the writer and her overall works, as well as this piece. We have seen representation to the Christian shifting of the Native American communities in the past, the concepts of past beliefs of women held within the church and the idealization of what they should be, as well as how it has shifted with time, and overall, just the effect of passed ideals of religion and their effects on the beliefs and actions of a convent of nuns.

But what can be taken from all of this? Well, one message

that can be drawn overall from all of this is the power of belief. Relating back to the ideas of Sister Leopolda's tyrannical and extreme actions against the devil she saw around her, and the actions of Marie of vengeance, we see just how powerfully the influence of religion has on the characters. The ideals of purity found within as well as the deeper historical meanings that all tie together to make this story about the sudden changes in the world that have been overall driven by the strength of religion. In conclusion, we saw the ways that Saint Marie incorporated concepts of religious faith, particularly that of the catholic church through the representation of the beliefs held by the convent of nuns of heaven and hell, as well as acts of vengeance and the devil, and how it tied into the overall historical value of the story.

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Psychological

Psychological Criticism

Jess Lupton

On the surface, Louise Erdrich's short story "Saint Marie" details the journey a young girl takes in order to seek religious retribution and a higher power. She staunchly tries to obtain both of these things through want and prayer; the reader can credit her journey to the obsessive mind of an adolescent compelled to serve God, unlike her family before her that was unable to fully do so; this becomes her main and only goal that the reader can understand as a fact. But is this an appropriate goal for an adolescent, given her ambitious mindset, to want to ascend into the respectable territory of heaven despite any obstacles that she might face? We come to question her stability in achieving such a feat; she is either incredibly determined or stifled by her upbringing and consequent patterns of upbringing which are deeply rooted, leading her into both a chaotic start and end that destabilizes her narrative into something more tragic.

From the age of 14, she visualizes climbing up the hill to the convent and nothing much else. She believes that she is only seeking the spoils of what has been dangled in front of her for her entire life; however, her actual goal is to embody the power of both God and the Devil, which are reoccurring figures. She wants to "sit at the altar as a saint" (Erdrich 7) and be worshiped; this is truly in order to rationalize the mistreatment she has

received throughout her short life. She falls flat here and begins to show the reader that there is an underlying tone of mania that causes her to fluctuate in reasoning, using these figures to justify her behavior and that of those around her, and seeks to further her agenda through her staunch religious dedication. She has a god complex from the very beginning; she intends to make the other saints worship her, and in particular searches for the love of Sister Leopolda, who she perceives to be both her greatest friend and enemy. This relationship marks the turning point in the story, where the motivations of both carry them much farther than their initial declarations would allow.

We look to the beginning of this story to determine her motivations. She mentions that her father did not frequently “unharness” (Erdrich 2) her and her siblings, unconsciously admitting here to feeling stifled in her childhood. Marie’s statements lead us to believe that she is repressing a large part of her emotional upbringing in response to this small bit of information; the roadmap is laid. With this in mind, we look to her mental state instead to determine further if her actions match her persona. She says that she is covered in “veils of love, which was only hate petrified by longing” (6) and juxtaposes the idea of love versus hate. This is a heavy theme. God is also pitted versus the Devil, which becomes prominent in the story and in regard to Sister Leopolda, who senses the devil inside of Marie (whilst Marie senses inside herself God). Marie comes to view the Sister in an almost mother-like way, sparking confusion and isolation that does not agree with her logic.

It is safe to say that Marie was tortured psychologically by the Sister, causing these issues to spring up in the first place. But is there inherent meaning in the fact that while Sister Leopolda began the cycle of abuse and let Marie finish it, that the unconscious mind truly does play off of the idea that it is connected, inherently, to a higher power? Perhaps in this circumstance, the higher power is a mother figure? There is no mention of a mother made by Marie, only her father, which is noteworthy. Nancy Chodorow, a renowned psychoanalyst, believes that a child will “define aspects of itself in relation to internalized representations of aspects of its mother and the perceived quality of her care” (Metzl) which fits into the

perceived relationship between the Sister and Marie. She plays off of Freud's concept of id, ego, and superego, effectively displaying each within the realm of Marie's conscious mind. Where the id represents her hidden memory and connection to the Sister through their female bond, this projection becomes the forefront of the conflict created within the story. Sister Leopolda may have claimed to have loved Marie in her own way, but the abuse was too prominent. Marie could not resist the feelings of maternal obligation she felt.

The potential connection to the only impactful female may have a sexual undertone that further supports her disillusion. Marie sees in a vision of herself that she "was rippling gold. My breasts were bare and my nipples ashen and winked. Diamonds tipped them" (Erdrich 10) and this inclusion speaks towards more than simply wishing to be accepted by the other nuns, or serving god; she transcends into her ideal self directly in response to the abuse she suffers from Sister Leopolda. The repressed sexuality is stark in response to this revelation, as she does not intend to sexualize herself. This is again expressed when she claims to want the Sister's heart in "love and admiration" (5) whilst simultaneously wishing to "roast [it] on a black stick" (Erdrich 5); her confusion springs from the continual id of her ploys. Her superego is on full display as her attempts to remain calm in the face of aggression fail, which eventually results in the disfigurement of the Sister.

Ultimately, her moral conscious is compromised by her lack of perception of reality. Susan Castillo, an English professor specializing in American literature, further supports this thesis by establishing that Erdrich will oftentimes "portray women of power, though not necessarily of authority" (Castillo 2) in her texts, so the power struggle is extremely present after springing from the lack of control she held in her adolescent life. By attempting to intellectualize her feelings she creates more problems; her obsession with figures of light and dark isolate her from the Sister and other ladies, who perceive her to be a well-behaved young girl. Both women here undeniably express power, but neither holds any authority over the other. Authority is virtually gone aside from the hold that the Sister does place, through the devil, on Marie and her flimsy sense of self-

proclamation. Her reality is completely altered by light versus dark, good versus evil, and Sister Leopolda versus Marie.

Marie classifies herself as “ignorant” (Erdrich 1) but later describes this as being “pure” and that “the pure wildness of my ignorance” (Erdrich 2) fueled her story. This is likely the most accurate statement that was made by Erdrich in regard to Marie’s true personality and understanding; contradictory. As she falls into the Sister’s twisted version of love, she is further entangled into confusion and self-denial disguised as rational thinking. As the sister has her foot pressed upon Marie’s neck she claims that “you’re just like I was” (Erdrich 8), projecting onto Marie the thoughts of evil despite the lack of evidence or claim to such a declaration. But she will believe it, despite her hatred, because Sister Leopolda holds dominance over such a young and impressionable person. The power struggle is one-sided in that Marie is unaware of her mental perceptions, instead completely focusing on the ideal sense of self.

As far as whether or not one represents God and the other the Devil, we find that both women appear to assign and play both roles for themselves. We come down to the “shambles of love” (Erdrich 15) which are merely the broken pieces of the conflict between two connected women seeking validation and acceptance, if not from each other than from a higher power, which also failed in its estimation. “Tears glittered in her eyes, deep down, like the sinking reflection in a well” (Erdrich 9) signifying an underlying reversal that leaves Marie with a false sense of reality in ascending without thought to why. In the end, there is no journey to self-betterment; only a decline into the mundane realities of worship, and once again the flimsy foundation that Marie received through a lack of structural childhood and direction.

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Feminist/Gender

The Women Who Worship

By Kassy Roberts

Louise Erdrich's short story, "Saint Marie," leaves a significant impression on its reader, and presents a large field of content to study and pick apart. Dealing with extreme abuse, evil darkness, racism, and religious beliefs, Erdrich creates a strong main character who becomes a saint-like figure to her fellow 'sisters. The story follows a woman named Marie who joins a convent filled with other women and decides to cast aside the prospect of marriage for life in this religion. Marie undergoes torment from another woman in the convent, leading to her surviving a wound that makes those around her believe she is a saint. Leopolda, the woman who abuses Marie, sees a reflection of her younger self in Marie and wishes to exorcise the devil from her, as if making up for her own past mistakes. If it were not for the absence of men in the story, nor the guilt of Leopolda, Marie would not have gone through the abuse Leopolda put her through, which would lead to Marie being worshipped in the end.

At the start of the story, Marie makes a comment stating that her younger self was "ignorant." She then goes on to tell the story of how she joined the convent. When she was younger, Marie was heavily influenced by Leopolda. "She had a string of children who could breathe only if she said the word. I was the worst of them" (Erdrich 2020). Without Leopolda being such

an intimidating figure, Marie would not have the confidence or the ego that she developed. This drove Marie to want to “beat” Leopolda at her own game. From this section of the story, “I’d get to heaven first. And then, when I saw her coming, I’d shut the gate. She’d be out! That is why, besides the bowing and scraping I’d be dealt, I wanted to sit on the altar as a saint” (Erdrich 2020). From Marie’s inner dialogue and narrative, it is obvious that she has a competitive nature.

Marie is someone who values herself and does not want to be looked down on. Now that Leopolda has challenged and embarrassed her, she feels the drive to leave behind the prospect of marriage and seek out a life in the convent in the hopes of one day being a saint that Leopolda would have to look up to. There is no hesitation in her mind. Marie is well aware that she could lead a normal life at home on the reservation, but now her mind is set on pursuing this spite against Leopolda. She explains her thoughts on joining the convent here, “I could have had any damn man on the reservation at the time... But I wanted Sister Leopolda’s heart... Sometimes I wanted her heart in love and admiration. Sometimes. And sometimes I wanted her heart to roast on a black stick” (Erdrich 2020). This is one of the strongest examples of how the female gender is a constant in Marie’s life, and how she finds no fear in giving up a life where men are involved in order to seek out something that she wants. She knows her worth and is aware that she can easily find a man to love her, but instead, she seeks out a life where she competes with a woman, showing that Erdrich’s writing is heavily feminist-based.

Marie then joins the convent, where she begins her journey to becoming a saint. I find that there are some very interesting feminine relationships shown in the convent. Alongside the fact that each woman refers to each other as ‘sisters,’ there is a tightly woven group of women here. In the convent, Marie learns much about how all of the women live together. Meldan Tanrisal, a professor of literature, makes this analysis in her article covering the mother and child relationships in Erdrich’s work. Tansiral states, “In Erdrich’s novels, women and especially mothers bear the enormous responsibility of family relationships that sustain both individual and community”

(Tanrisal 1997). This analysis of Erdrich's work resonates with my own assessment of this story. I feel that even though the women in this story do not bear children, they still carry this responsibility to sustain their community/family. It seems that coming from the reservation, Marie is excited at some of the riches she finds at the convent, "Inside were all kinds of good stuff. Things I'd tasted only once or twice in my life." (Erdrich 2020). Marie is excited at the prospect of her new life; despite the abuse she knows she will endure from Leopolda. The environment is kind and exciting, yet there is a shadow of religious issues looming behind Marie.

Leopolda is an interesting character, as she claims she wants to show Marie love and care, yet threatens her and abuses her. From my perspective, it is very obvious that Leopolda's abuse does not come from a place of hate or disdain toward Marie, rather it is the product of guilt. Intense guilt that she carries from her own youth, where she felt the pull of the devil. The first instance I see Leopolda's violence towards Marie be clearly displayed as a way to punish her old self is when Leopolda tries to burn the devil out of Marie, and tells her the devil wants her just as much as he wanted Leopolda to. "'You're like I was,' she said. 'He wants you very much.'" (Erdrich 2020). Leopolda is referring to the devil in this situation. She believes that Marie is someone that the devil likes and that Marie worships him as well. In this situation, I see Leopolda as a scornful mother. This is a common trope in stories where one older woman is a role model or mentor for a younger girl. Leopolda displays character traits that resemble a mother figure who is jealous but also scared for the young girl she is watching over. When she was younger, she had her own experience with this 'darkness' that she sees Marie beginning to engage with. Now, she finds it is her responsibility to be the one who punishes and quite literally burns the devil out of Marie.

As previously mentioned, Marie is not one who scares easily. Her confidence and drive to prove herself as worthy is what saves her from falling into a dark place while Leopolda abuses her. While there were moments where her mentality faltered, ultimately Marie has a vision that pushed her forward, "I was rippling gold... She was at my feet, swallowing the glass after

each step I took” (Erdrich 2020). When the abuse should bring her down, it instead fuels Marie’s ideas of being a saint and wishes to be worshipped by Leopolda. Because of this, Marie then gets the courage to try and hurt Leopolda physically by shoving her into the oven. Instead, Leopolda is able to bounce back from her fall being stopped by one of the oven pokers. As an act of anger and revenge, Leopolda then stabs Marie through the hand with a fork. I see that the fork Marie is stabbed with resembles the nails that went through Jesus’s hands, it seems that this is also thought by the women in the convent, because Leopolda does not tell the truth that she stabbed Marie, instead she is guilt ridden and ashamed and claims that Marie must be a saint who magically developed the marks of the nails in her palms. Leopolda’s guilt leads to Marie being worshipped as a saint.

Tobyn Shaw, a published student, wrote an analysis on this story, specifically how the historical text surrounding religion is so important to the story of Marie. When regarding how the guilt and fear of Leopolda affects her, Shaw states, “With the use of Leopolda’s belief that the devil lies deep within those beneath her drawn from the bible and history, she is often seen giving into her fears of Satan mulled by these emotions” (Shaw 2021). Shaw does a great job at explaining how the idea of the devil effects the actions that Leopolda takes. If it were not for the shame that she feels, Marie would not have been abused and pushed to becoming a saint through Leopolda’s own mistake and shame regarding her abuse.

How can we understand all of this, and how does Leopolda’s gender play a role in her religious guilt? Throughout history we see women rarely take the spotlight when it comes to running a religious group. Now that Marie has come along with her beauty, Leopolda is convinced the devil is in her, like it is in her as well. Through Leopolda’s jealousy and fear of this new young woman, she makes the mistake of abusing her and creating Christ like marks on Marie. This leads to Marie becoming a saint like figure, and ultimately being more worthy to Christ than Leopolda is. The relationship between the two characters can be viewed as an abusive mentor or parental relationship, ending

with the victim eventually overcoming their abuser. It is seen with clarity that Marie's success is due to the guilt of Leopolda.

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[PART V]

"Monstro" by Junot Díaz

You can read Junot Díaz's "Monstro" at this link:

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/06/04/monstro>



Born in the Dominican Republic and raised in New Jersey, Junot Díaz has become well known for his writing based on the experiences of being a Latino immigrant. He's written 11 published works comprising of short stories, essays, a children's book, and a novel. In 2008 his novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, and he was inducted into the American Academy of Arts

and Letters in 2017. Today Díaz is a fiction editor at the *Boston Review* and the Rudge and Nancy Allen Professor of Writing at MIT.

Image: "Junot Díaz" by Christopher Peterson at English Wikipedia, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons

About the Authors

Kasper Herdt – *Secondary Education Major*

Reader Response Lens

Kasper Herdt is a Secondary Education major at the College of Western Idaho, focusing on English with aspirations of becoming a high school English teacher. His essay focuses on “Monstro” through a reader response lens. He is a passionate writer and looks forward to working as an educator; he is excited for the opportunity to share his love of reading and writing with others.

Michael Shay – *LIBERAL ARTS MAJOR*

Psychological Lens

I’m a Liberal Arts major focusing on English Literature. I spend my free time reading and riding my motorcycle.

Eric BARbaroza – *english major*

New Criticism Lens

I am an English major with a literature emphasis. My plan is to graduate with a BA and use that to become a certified teacher in Idaho through ABCTE or Teach for America. I live in Caldwell, and own about ten acres in Homedale where I have about sixty cows. I enjoy coaching youth sports, camping, video games, and reading. I keep my athletes in check, and they return the favor of keeping me in check.

James Halma – *English Major*

New Historical Lens

James Halma is an English major at the College of Western Idaho. He intends to graduate summer of 2022 and transfer to Boise State University in the fall. He has always had a passion for both writing and reading. He hopes to use his degree to enter the publishing field and become a content editor along with bolstering his own skills.

Helen Neves – *Liberal Arts Major*

Deconstruction Lens

Helen Neves is a Liberal Arts major planning to go into geology after getting her degree at CWI. As a writer, she primarily writes her own original stories and contributes to media analysis with her friends. Outside of writing she loves paleontology, creating digital art, and playing sandbox games.

Grace Hug – *Liberal Arts Major*

Feminist Lens

Grace Hug is a Liberal Arts major at College of Western Idaho, expecting to finish her degree in December of 2021. Grace is writing in the feminist lens about “Monstro” for her critical edition. Since high school, Grace has loved learning about literature and writing. She participated in several competitions to showcase her love for writing in high school, including NaNoWriMo, Scholastic Writing Awards, and National History Day where she submitted a variety of collections of writing which involved mostly creative pieces as well as essays.

Critical Introduction

Each member of our group has analysed Junot Diaz's, "Monstro," in a different critical lens. These lenses introduced a unique approach to analyzing themes, characters, setting, structure and other elements of the short story. Each essay offers a unique and nuanced perspective of Diaz's short story.

READER RESPONSE

Kasper Herdt's reader response essay takes a dive into Junot Diaz's short story "Monstro," connecting it to the real-world threat of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although released in 2012, well before the coronavirus pandemic swept the world, the grim and dry comparisons between a fictional zombie-plague presented in "Monstro" and the real-world virus are clear for any contemporary reader to see. Taking on issues of political response to crisis, and a stark class divide, the story pulls no punches when discussing the reality of a global pandemic. The force of ambivalence on the world at large, as well as the main protagonist, result in those with the least being harmed the most. Rampant climate change compounds this issue, making it clear that people who are not born into well-off families would face undeserved consequences. With these very real problems comes the analysis of real-world responses to our own pandemic, with quantifiable academic research to show that government responses have been lackluster at best, and negligent at worst.

POST-COLONIALISM

The reality of the modern Western world has left former colonies in a circle of self-hatred. In this analysis of Junot Díaz's short story "Monstro," James Halma explores the masked intentions of foreign aid, the interested gaze of far-away audiences, and the purpose of race in Díaz's Haitian earthquake-inspired short story.

DECONSTRUCTION

This essay explores how "Monstro" is a deconstruction of both the zombie horror and apocalypse genres. By noticing the way "Monstro" is unlike popular depictions of zombies in media, Helen Neves explains how Junot Díaz has used deconstruction in his short story to change the genre to reflect modern fears surrounding sickness and the cause of the apocalypse. By discussing how the zombie is not a static creature, its relation to fears of marginalized people in "Monstro", and the ways in which Díaz's protagonist doesn't fulfill the standard apocalypse narrative, this paper illustrates Díaz's deconstructive intentions with his story.

FEMINIST

Grace Hug takes on Díaz's "Monstro" through a feminist lens. Before analyzing the actual text of "Monstro," she speaks briefly about Díaz and what his audience can learn about his character through his actions. In July of 2018, Díaz was accused of sexual assault. Before the accusation, Díaz's stories were seen as "sexist" and "misogynistic." The combination of his reputation, as well as his writing, has led several individuals to believe Díaz is a misogynist. Grace provides evidence from Díaz's "Monstro" to showcase his misogynistic approach to writing.

NeW CRITICISM

Eric Barboza gives his take on Díaz's "Monstro" through a New Criticism lens. Junot Díaz's "Monstro" explores the complexities of identity, masculinity, and family dynamics through the lens

and perspective of a Dominican-American boy growing up in New Jersey. Employing a variety of literary techniques, Diaz delves into themes of power, the body, and the fluidity of identity. This critical analysis, through a New Criticism lens, examines the narrative techniques Diaz uses to convey confusion and fluidity of identity within the story. “Monstro” serves to be an example of exploration of identity within the context of immigration and cultural hybridity. By analyzing this story through a New Criticism lens, this analysis illuminates the narrative techniques Diaz uses, revealing the profound layers of meaning embedded within the story. Through language, symbolism, and imagery, Diaz creates a powerful portrayal of the challenges faced by young immigrants as they navigate their dual identities.

Psychological

Michael Shay’s paper “A Freudian Analysis of Monstro by Junot Díaz: Trauma and the Psyche” offers a comprehensive Freudian psychological analysis of “Monstro”. The paper delves into various aspects of Freudian theory, such as intellectualization and the Oedipus complex. The paper underscore the significance of considering Díaz’s personal experiences, including his childhood trauma and accusations of sexual assault, as these experiences may have influenced the story’s development and provide key insights into character understanding. This multidimensional approach, blending Freudian theory with the author’s personal experiences, yields a nuanced exploration of the psychological depths embedded in “Monstro”.

Each member of the group was required to examine, analyze and think about Junot Diaz’s “Monstro” through a different lens, therefore creating a major difference in perspective of the story for each of the writers. It is easy to say that, as each of us conducted our research, we learned something new that we may not have learned without being required to analyze the short story. We hope that others will understand the importance of diving deep into literature, to take it beyond the surface level.

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This journal article examines feminism in *The Brief Wonderous Life of Oscar Wao* by Junot Díaz. The author, Kaitlin Andres, describes the purpose of feminism in literature very well, as well as the difference between true feminism and what feminism is perceived as in our current world today. She also describes how Díaz uses feminism in his writing.

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Emma Jane Austin's thesis paper is a look into the zombie's place in cinema and how it has evolved over time. By going into the history of the zombie, not only through cinema, but through culture and history. Austin gives special focus to specifically the American cinematic zombie and how it compares to other historical depictions both from the US and across the world. Points such as these work in support of her initial criticism of the supposed canon of zombie films, arguing that choosing the canon through popular critiques by both fans and academics has created a fractured genre.

Through her in-depth study Austin presents a thorough look into the cinematic zombie's place in history and how it has changed over time in response to its intended audience evolving.

Chakraborty, Chandrima. "Disrupting the Dominant Discourse: Junot Díaz's 'Monstro' as a Critique of Masculinity, Race, and Power." *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States* 42.1 (2017): 61-77

This article is a critical analysis of Junot Díaz's short story "Monstro." In this article, Chakraborty argues that the story provides a critique of the dominant discourse surrounding masculinity, race, and power. Specifically she focuses on the use of English and Spanglish throughout the short story. She explores how Díaz challenges the traditional stereotypes associated with race and language in American society. Chakraborty's analysis is well-researched and provides valuable insight into the ways in which Díaz's work challenges dominant narratives and stereotypes. Overall, this article is a valuable resource in exploring intersections of race, gender, language, and power in American literature.

Champion, Giulia. "Imperialism Is a Plague, Too: Transatlantic Pandemic Imaginaries in César Mba Abogo's 'El Sueño De Dayo' (2007) and Junot Díaz's 'Monstro' (2012)." *SFRA Review*, 3 May 2021, <https://sfrareview.org/2021/04/22/imperialism-is-a-plague-too-transatlantic-pandemic-imaginaries-in-cesar-mba-abogos-el-sueno-de-dayo-2007-and-junot-díazs-monstro-2012/>.

Giulia Champion writes a post-colonial analysis of science fiction short stories about viral pandemics within the third world of Africa and Dominican Republic. She explains the pandemic within each story to expose colonialism as a widespread disease of its own.

Díaz, Junot. "Junot Díaz: The Legacy of Childhood Trauma." *The New Yorker*, The New Yorker, 9 Apr. 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/04/16/the-silence-of-the-legacy-of-childhood-trauma>.

In this article, Junot Díaz shares his experience of childhood sexual abuse and the impact it's had on his

life and writing. He discusses the difficulties he's had with acknowledging and coping with trauma, predominantly within the lens of masculinity in our society. He also explores the connection between trauma and power, with references to the challenges men face when seeking help. Overall, the article is a powerful exploration of the lasting legacy of childhood trauma, and the ways it can shape our lives and our writing. The article has been praised for its honesty and vulnerability.

Edwardes, Martin P. J. "What Is a Self?" *The Origins of Self: An Anthropological Perspective*, UCL Press, 2019, pp. 1–28. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv13xprvd.6>. Accessed 1 May 2023.

The first chapter of "The Origins of Self" introduces the concept of self from an anthropological perspective. Edwardes examines the various approaches to studying the self, including Freud's approach. He also outlines key theoretical frameworks and concepts that are important to studying the self such as culture, social construction of reality, and the relationship between the individual and the collective.

Flaherty, Colleen. "Rift among Scholars over Treatment of Junot Díaz as He Faces Harassment and Misconduct Allegations." *Inside Higher Ed | Higher Education News, Events and Jobs*, Inside Higher Ed, 5 May 2018, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2018/05/29/rift-among-scholars-over-treatment-junot-d%C3%ADaz-he-faces-harassment-and-misconduct>.

This article discusses the controversy surrounding Junot Díaz's behavior toward women, and his *New Yorker* article chronicling his own sexual assault. Flaherty explores the ways in which Díaz's identity and trauma intersects with his treatment of women. Flaherty makes the claim that Díaz's brand of masculinity is grounded in experiences of race and ethnicity, and contributes to his disregard of women. The article also explores sexual harassment in the broader context of academia, and the challenges faced by women who speak out against it. Flaherty argues that Díaz is a great example of why

nuanced conversations are necessary about these subjects.

Gates, Henry Louis. "The Dominican Republic: 'Black behind the Ears.'" *Black in Latin America*, NYU Press, 2011, pp. 119–45, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qfpmh.8>.

Henry Louis Gates reports on his sociological study of the Dominican Republic and how they view race. The country was a former colony of Spain alongside Haiti until Haiti had gained independence. Soon after, the DR broke free and created a rift between the two countries. The DR's citizens thus see themselves as "indio" rather than black or African. They take ownership of their first peoples heritage over their more-prominent African roots.

Hale, T., Angrist, N., Goldszmidt, R. et al. A global panel database of pandemic policies (Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker). *Nat Hum Behav* 5, 529–538 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-021-01079->.

This article written by Thomas Hale and his peers provides a quantified look at the policies enacted by global powers. This article provides empirical evidence to support the claim that governmental responses to the COVID-19 pandemic have been inconsistent at best. It shows the ebb and flow of policy changes over time via the measurement of a factor called the Containment and Health Index, abbreviated CHI. These policies include school closings, contact tracing efforts, and economic support. This article effectively attaches concrete numbers to the perceived lack of commitment to virus containment that some countries have had since as early as march 2020.

Hale T, Angrist N, Hale AJ, Kira B, Majumdar S, et al. (2021) Government responses and COVID-19 deaths: Global evidence across multiple pandemic waves. *PLOS ONE* 16(7): e0253116. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0253116>.

Another article written by Thomas Hale and his peers, this piece concerns the relationship between government responses and deaths to COVID-19. This article shows that there is a substantive, palpable relationship between

these two factors, and that increased policy responses to COVID-19 decrease deaths to it. This is a particularly useful article when paired to the previously cited report on wavering government response, showing that consistent and robust action is needed to save lives. The data in the article holds true for multiple waves of disease, and that civil adherence to these policies is integral to their success.

Hallbäck, Geert (1993) How to read an apocalypse. Deconstruction and reconstruction, *Studia Theologica – Nordic Journal of Theology*, 47:1, 91-100, DOI: 10.1080/00393389308600134.

In his paper, Geert Hallbäck explains how apocalypse fiction as a genre does not follow normal literary rules. Referring to John J. Collins' analysis on the apocalypse genre, Hallbäck says there are two fundamental levels to the genre. Referring to them as 'the level of the recipient' and 'the level of the revealed', he says that "when reading an apocalypse, it is essential to distinguish between these two levels at first, because the basic, significative structure of an apocalypse is the connection between the levels, but that connection presupposes their distinctiveness." The apocalypse genre to Hallbäck is defined by gaining knowledge, having revelations, and involvement in the narrative process. There is also "the relationship of the Creator to his creation, and, in particular, it is about the change from one – present – state of things to another, quite different – future – situation." While Hallbäck's examples are all religious in nature, his insight into the genre can be applied to modern apocalypse stories as well even if his writing was intended to be on religious apocalypse.

Kirsch, Thomas D, et al. "(PDF) Analysis of the International and US Response to the Haiti Earthquake: Recommendations for Change." ResearchGate, Oct. 2012, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/232281517_Analysis_of_the_International_and_US_Response_to_the_Haiti_Earthquake_Recommendations_for_Change.

This report recounts the international response to the

Haiti earthquake in 2010 and reveals where the response could be improved. The UN provided care above the country's healthcare standard without the Haitian government. Without the proper supplies and an influx of other agencies, their response was crippled. The massive military presence of the US had gone beyond their supply task when they were untrained to aid humanitarian efforts.

Leyshon, Cressida. "This Week in Fiction: Junot Díaz." *The New Yorker*, *The New Yorker*, 27 May 2012, <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/this-week-in-fiction-junot-daz-2>.

In an interview with "Monstro" author Junot Díaz, Cressida Leyshon looks into his inspirations behind the story and what he plans to do next. Through it, Leyshon learns about Díaz's creative process and why the short story is the way it is. Themes such as blind spots in the world, ecological collapse, and genre expectations all influenced his work. At the time of the interview, Díaz had noticed the short story was beginning to grow into a full novel, saying that "at the moment, I'm seeing how far I can take that elaboration [on world building] without turning the story into one long data dump." Since the interview's publication in 2012, "Monstro" has not been published as a novel.

Hallbäck, Geert (1993) How to read an apocalypse. *Deconstruction and reconstruction*, *Studia Theologica – Nordic Journal of Theology*, 47:1, 91-100, DOI: 10.1080/00393389308600134.

In his paper, Geert Hallbäck explains how apocalypse fiction as a genre does not follow normal literary rules. Referring to John J. Collins' analysis on the apocalypse genre, Hallbäck says there are two fundamental levels to the genre. Referring to them as 'the level of the recipient' and 'the level of the revealed', he says that "when reading an apocalypse, it is essential to distinguish between these two levels at first, because the basic, significative structure of an apocalypse is the connection between the levels, but that connection presupposes their distinctiveness."

The apocalypse genre to Hallbäck is defined by gaining knowledge, having revelations, and involvement in the narrative process. There is also “the relationship of the Creator to his creation, and, in particular, it is about the change from one – present – state of things to another, quite different – future – situation.” While Hallbäck’s examples are all religious in nature, his insight into the genre can be applied to modern apocalypse stories as well even if his writing was intended to be on religious apocalypse.

Porter, Tom. “To Teach or Not to Teach? Nadia Celis on #MeToo and Junot Díaz.” Bowdoin, 14 Oct. 2019, <https://www.bowdoin.edu/news/2019/10/to-teach-or-not-to-teach-nadia-celis-on-metoo-and-junot-d%C3%ADaz.html>.

This is an article written by Tom Porter, where he talks to Nadia Celis about the Junot Díaz controversy and her internal debate whether to teach his writing or not because of the sexual misconduct allegations.

Romo, Vanessa. “MIT Clears Junot Díaz of Sexual Misconduct Allegations.” NPR, NPR, 21 June 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/06/20/622094905/mit-clears-junot-díaz-of-sexual-misconduct-allegations>.

This article, written by Vanessa Romo, describes the facts surrounding Junot Díaz’s controversy with sexual misconduct allegations. This article describes what happened and who was involved. It does not share any opinions, just facts and statements about the situation.

Rosenthal, Debra J. *Climate-Change Fiction and Poverty Studies: Kingsolver’s Flight Behavior, Díaz’s “Monstro,” and Bacigalupi’s “The Tamarisk Hunter,” ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, Volume 27, Issue 2, Spring 2020, Pages 268–286, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isle/isz105>.

Debra Rosenthal’s article is a multi-pronged analysis on climate change fiction, or “cli-fi” as the term is coined, specifically in relation to poverty. For my purposes, the exploration of the story *Monstro* is especially relevant. The article delves into *Monstro* and its author, Junot Díaz, whose fascination with outbreak stories influenced his work. The article explains *Monstro*’s themes of

inequality, climate change, and the prominent effect that disease has on the impoverished. Rosenthal's work provides a solid foundation for my own analysis, helping me parse out and organize the tightly woven themes and critiques of wealth inequality during the climate disaster.

Serrano, Joshua. "Specters of Diaspora: Trauma and Identity in Junot Diaz's 'Monstro'." *MELUS*, vol. 41, no. 3, 2016, pp. 81-102

This scholarly article explores the theme of diasporic trauma in "Monstro" and how it affects the characters' sense of identity. The author argues that the characters are caught in a state of liminality, unable to fully assimilate into either American or Dominican culture. This supports the thesis about the struggle of self-identity and the struggles of trying to find your own identity. This source is useful for understanding the theme of identity and the impact of diaspora in the story. Serrano also offers personal experiences of his own battle with identity. The article offers insight as to what struggles people can go through when trying to assimilate into a new country or culture.

New Criticism

Between a Rock and a Hard Place

Eric Barboza

In “Monstro” by Junot Diaz, the author explores the complexities of identity, masculinity, and family relationships through the perspective of a Dominican-American boy growing up in New Jersey. The author uses a variety of literary techniques to explore themes of identity, power, and the body. Using New Criticism as a theoretical lens, this essay will analyze the narrative techniques Diaz uses to convey the ambiguity and fluidity of identity in the story. Through the use of language, symbolism, and imagery, Diaz creates a powerful and nuanced portrayal of the challenges faced by young immigrants as they navigate their dual identities.

The story is told from the perspective of Yunior, a young boy struggling to reconcile his Dominican heritage with his American upbringing. Diaz uses a nonlinear narrative structure that shifts back and forth between different time periods in Yunior’s life. The reader is not experiencing Yunior’s life in chronological order at all. This is to reflect the fragmented nature of his own identity. This writing style also serves to foreground the central themes of the story, which include the struggle for self-discovery and the tension between cultural traditions and assimilating into a new culture or country. One of the key themes in “Monstro” is the relationship between power and the body. Michael O’Sullivan argues that the body is a site

of resistance against dominant power structures in the story. He points out that the characters use their own bodies to navigate the fluidity of identity formation and to assert their own beliefs in the face of oppressive figures. For example, Yuniór's father uses his body to assert his dominance over his family, while the mother and Beli use their bodies to resist this dominance and to create their own spaces within the family (O'Sullivan). Combined with the most significant literary device used in this story, being language, Diaz uses a blend of English and Spanish, known as Spanglish, to reflect the cultural differences of Yuniór's experience. This language also highlights the power dynamics at play in the story, particularly between Yuniór and his father. Yuniór's use of Spanish and Spanglish is a means of resistance against the father's strict and almost patriarchal values (Chakraborty).

Another important literary device used in the story is symbolism. The symbol of monster or "monstro" appears throughout the story, representing Yuniór's struggle with his masculinity and identity. The monster is a physical manifestation of Yuniór's fear and uncertainty about his own masculinity and his struggle to conform to his father's expectations. The most prominent symbol in the story is the monster that appears in Yuniór's dreams. This monster represents the fear and uncertainty that young Dominican-American men, and even young immigrant men face as they navigate their dual identities. This symbolism is particularly powerful in the scene where Yuniór and his brother discover a monster in the basement of their home, which serves as a metaphor for Yuniór's own journey of self-discovery. The monster is both terrifying and alluring, suggesting that the process of identity formation is also both frightening and irresistible. In addition to the monster, Diaz uses imagery to convey the fluidity of the characters' identities and to describe the surroundings of Yuniór.

Diaz uses vivid and sensory imagery to create a strong sense of place and atmosphere. The descriptions of the Dominican Republic and the New Jersey neighborhood where Yuniór grew up are rich in detail and evoke a strong sense of nostalgia and longing. The imagery also reflects Yuniór's sense of

displacement and the tension between his Dominican and American identities. For example, when Yunior describes the “carpeted staircase” leading to his bedroom, he is subtly highlighting the cultural differences between his home in New Jersey and the more humble living conditions of his relatives in the Dominican Republic. Diaz also uses imagery to describe other character’s fluidity with their identity. For example, when Yunior describes his friend Rafa, he notes that “he was as black as could be but he had a Chinese grandfather, which meant that he had straight hair and those angled Chinese eyes” (Diaz 16). This image of Rafa highlights the ways in which identity is constantly shifting and evolving, hence the fluidity. Diaz uses vivid language as well to paint a picture of Yunior’s experiences, from the “glittering skies” to the “rotting beach houses.” This attention to detail creates a sense of realism and immerses the reader into Yunior’s world, emphasizing the weight of the themes and issues being explored. Additionally, the imagery of the monster, with its “bloated belly” and soulless eyes,” creates a sense of dread and unease, reflecting the emotional turmoil that Yunior is experiencing (Chakraborty). Aside from symbolism and imagery, there are other literary techniques being used.

In addition to symbolism and imagery, Diaz uses character development along with the theme of diasporic trauma and how it affects the characters’ sense of identity to also help convey the fluidity of identity in the story. Joshua Serrano argues that Diaz uses the theme of diaspora to highlight the ways in which identity is constantly in flux and that the characters in the story are unable to fully assimilate into either American or Dominican culture. Serrano suggests that the characters are caught in a state of perpetual liminality, in which they are neither fully Dominican nor fully American. This creates a sense of anxiety and dislocation that pervades the story and contributes to the characters’ struggles with identity (Serrano). Yunior, is a complex character who struggles to reconcile his Dominican heritage with his American upbringing. Throughout the story, Yunior’s identity is constantly in flux, as he tries to navigate the expectations of his family, his peers, and essentially his culture. When Yunior visits the Dominican Republic with his family, he is extremely aware

of his American accent and feels like an outsider. He feels like he has become too “Americanized” to fit in with his peers in the Dominican Republic. However, when he returns to the United States, he is still equally aware of his Dominican background and still feels like he doesn’t belong. This constant sense of displacement highlights the ways in which identity is a fluid and evolving process. Another noteworthy thing to consider is how the story is told.

The narrative structure of “Monstro” is important. The story is told from Yunior’s perspective, giving the reader insight into his inner thoughts and emotions. Diaz employs a nonlinear structure, with the story jumping back and forth in time, mirroring the chaotic and disjointed nature of a fluid identity. The narrative structure also emphasizes the cyclical nature of trauma, as Yunior is haunted by the memory of the monster long after his encounter with it. The use of tone is also an important literary element. Diaz uses a melancholic and reflective tone throughout the story, underscoring the weight of Yunior’s experiences. The somber tone is sometimes dissipated with moments of humor highlighting the resilience and humor that fluid communities often possess in the face of adversity.

“Monstro” is a powerful exploration of identity, masculinity, and family relationships. Through the use of language, symbolism, imagery, and tone, Diaz creates a complex and layered portrayal of the challenges faced by young immigrants as they navigate their dual identities. The story is a poignant reminder of the importance of self-discovery and the power of resistance against oppression. Diaz challenges the reader to question their assumptions and biases about the protagonist’s identity and the events that occur in the story. The nonlinear structure of the narrative, with its jump between past and present, further emphasizes the idea that the past is never fully resolved and continues to shape the present. The use of Spanglish throughout the story also underscores the idea that identity is fluid and multifaceted, and can’t be neatly categorized or defined. By highlighting the struggles faced by Yunior and other immigrant youth, Diaz has created a story that resonates with readers of all backgrounds and cultures. Ultimately, “Monstro” offers a complex exploration of identity,

trauma, and resilience, and invites readers to reconsider their own assumptions and biases about these issues.

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Reader Response

“Monstro” and COVID-19: A Reflection On Outbreak Fiction From Mid-Pandemic

KASPER HERDT

“Monstro,” a short story by Junot Díaz is a unique and timely entry into a subgenre of speculative fiction known as climate fiction, sometimes referred to as ‘cli-fi’. While the story itself was written in 2012, well before COVID-19 became a hinging factor of daily life across the world, there are numerous parallels between events that take place in the story and what’s happening now. “Monstro” is a pandemic story that has only become more relevant the further we move from its initial publication.

Monstro takes place in the Dominican Republic with a particular emphasis on the area where it borders Haiti. It follows a group of young people who are reaching adulthood in the wake of severe climate change, war, and disease ravaging the planet. The story intersperses observations on a highly contagious virus sweeping through the country with a personal narrative of the main character’s life, focusing quite regularly on his struggling relationship with his mother and his attraction to a woman who doesn’t share his romantic interest. There’s a large emphasis placed on how the characters, particularly the narrator, are just trying to live their lives regardless of what’s taking place around them as their world continues to degrade.

The characters’ ambivalence toward a uniquely deadly virus is

something I find particularly interesting. One reading prompts us to assume that they're stupid young adults just out of highschool, trying to go to college to find friends and fit in. The main character admits that conceptualizing the end of the world wasn't the most pressing thing on his mind at the start of the story when he states, "These days everybody wants to know what you were doing when the world came to an end. Fools make up all sorts of vainglorious self-serving plep— but me, I tell the truth. I was chasing a girl" (Díaz 1). This succinctly informs the reader that our main character is something of an average contemporary person, albeit one with skewed priorities. He has no interest in starring in an apocalypse story, he's interested in romance, and living a normal life.

However, there's another way to analyze this element of the story. Debra J. Rosenthal wrote an article titled, "Climate-Change Fiction and Poverty Studies: Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior*, Díaz's *"Monstro,"* and Bacigalupi's *"The Tamarisk Hunter"*." In this article, she explores the unique relationship that climate fiction – the subgenre of speculative fiction that I mentioned earlier – explores between climate change and poverty, with an emphasis on the toll outbreaks of disease take on impoverished communities. According to the author, "*"Monstro"* cleaves a difference between the impoverished victims and the uninfected wealthy. "[...] Alex, comes from such a wealthy family that [he] was kidnapped and ransomed as a child. In contrast, the poor are forced to live in relocation camps in Haiti" (Rosenthal 281). The burdens of a warming climate and a ravenous zombie plague are clearly faced the most by those with the least. People with little space, money, or support are left behind to rot in the zombie infested camps as the wealthy continue to exist in relative safety.

While the themes of *"Monstro"* may feel sensationalist to readers who don't have a shared experience to relate with, the story explores aspects of life that are quite common for people who live in poverty or otherwise disadvantaged communities. For example, when ruminating over how people initially perceived the virus, the narrator of *Monstro* points out that, "Everybody blamed the heat. Blamed the Calientazo. Shit, a hundred straight days over 105 degrees F. In our region alone,

the planet cooking like a chimi and down to its last five trees—something berserk was bound to happen. . . . This one didn't cause too much panic because it seemed to hit only the sickest of the sick, viktimis who had nine kinds of ill already in them. You literally had to be falling to pieces for it to grab you" (Díaz 2). Díaz draws a line here with distinct clarity, one that connects the worst damage done by pandemics directly to those who larger forces across our world care less about. As media and public attention shifts to focus on some groups, in inherently leaves others out of the public consciousness. As a result, these groups receive less support an every way, and their quality of life and safety diminishes.

There is one distinct place where "Monstro" is eerily comparable to what has taken place over the past couple years through the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. An article written by Thomas Hale and some of his peers titled, "A global panel database of pandemic policies (Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker)" provides tangible, quantifiable evidence that the responses various governments have had to COVID-19 have been, at best, inconsistent. According to Hale and his compatriots, initial response to the pandemic was fierce and strong, however, it weakened over the coming months, "In subsequent months, however, countries lifted policy restrictions, then, in some cases, reimposed policies in a policy see-saw as the epidemic waxed and waned" (Hale 531). As populations experienced mounting pandemic fatigue, less and less people have been willing to abide by safety measures, resulting in increased spread of the virus. This, combined with the resistant anti-vaccine sentiment held by some demographics, and by extension some public officials, has made it difficult to get the virus under control.

Díaz draws this into "Monstro" with painstaking emphasis. The narrator states early on that, "[B]ut when the experts determined that it wasn't communicable in the standard ways, and that normal immune systems appeared to be at no kind of risk, the renminbi and the attention and the savvy went elsewhere. And since it was just poor Haitian types getting fucked up—no real margin in that" (Díaz 3). Even later, Díaz writes, "In the hospital that day: one Noni DeGraff, a Haitian

epidemiologist and one of the few researchers who had been working on the disease since its first appearance[,]” (15) it is made brutally clear that there has been no consistent or supportive stance taken on the fictional pandemic. Does this start to feel familiar? Is the framework starting to come together to show us the larger picture, to hold the mirror up in front of us and reflect back?

In another article written by Thomas Hale and some of his peers titled, “Government responses and COVID-19 deaths: Global evidence across multiple pandemic waves” Hale brings up the fact that there is a noticeable relationship between government responses and the amount of deaths related directly to COVID-19. Hale says that “Our data show that government responses do indeed have a statistically robust and substantively significant relationship with deaths related to COVID-19. Moreover, this relationship endures across multiple waves of disease.” (8). According to the actual practitioners of the study, we hear that government lockdowns quantifiably save lives. This, combined with the policy flip-flop mentioned in Hale’s other work, makes a strong case that governments have handled the pandemic poorly and, as a result, have cost some denizens their lives due to mishandling of the virus. The mixture of infighting between policymakers, an adapting threat, and public fatigue have made it particularly difficult to implement an effective counter to the encroaching virus.

This article is particularly useful in relation to Thomas Hale’s other work, pointing out distinctly that consistent strong action is needed to mitigate the hazardous effects of a pandemic. This is true particularly when multiple waves of disease are consistent with such viruses. Once again, this can be seen in “Monstro” — not in a picture painted of a world where governments can unite against a virus, but in an image drawn of how the world might fracture under the weight of their nations’ inability to work together.

This is what makes the end of the story so eerie. When “Monstro” so aptly reflects how COVID-19 is affecting the world as we know it, the conclusion of Díaz’s short story is a warning.

Because she was a God-fearing woman and because she had no idea what kind of bomb they were dropping, Dr. DeGraff

took the precaution of keeping one eye shut, just, you know, in case things got Sodom and Gomorrah. Which promptly they did. The Detonation Event—no one knows what else to call it—turned the entire world white. Three full seconds. Triggered a quake that was felt all across the Island and also burned out the optic nerve on Dr. DeGraff’s right eye. (20)

How does Díaz predict the end of the world? Not with a whimper but with a bang, a world turning on the most disadvantaged parts of itself and eradicating its own mistakes without hesitation.

“Monstro” is a story I won’t soon forget. The themes of economic inequality during a global crisis are frighteningly predictive of what we’ve seen during the coronavirus pandemic. My further research into government responses tells a tale of uncannily familiarity to Díaz’s work. One of inadequate, sluggish response to a sweeping threat. If I had read it at initial publication or even a few years ago, it certainly wouldn’t have had the impact on me as a reader that it has now. Junot Díaz excellently manifests our broader contemporary fears in his writing as well as the reality of what it’s like to live in an ever-warming world for people who don’t have the benefit of luxury. “Monstro” was certainly relevant when it was written and relevant when it was published but it is now, many years later, more important than ever.

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Deconstruction

Deconstructing the Zombie: A Look at Junot Díaz's "Monstro"

Helen Neves

Stories of the apocalypse have been something that fascinate people for centuries. In recent decades, one popular tool for storytellers has been the zombie. Like others before him, Junot Díaz also uses them in his short story "Monstro." Unlike contemporary depictions of zombies and the disasters surrounding them, Díaz employs them in a different way. Shifting away from common depictions with zombies and their destruction being the main focus, Díaz deconstructs the zombie apocalypse genre through his focus on the mundane lives of those not yet affected by the incoming apocalypse, leaving their reactions to seeing the horrors first-hand unknown as he changes what it even means for a zombie to be a zombie.

Readers are likely familiar with popular depictions of zombies from the last few decades. TV shows, movies, comics, books, and videogames with examples such as *The Walking Dead*, *World War Z*, and *The Last of Us* have found massive commercial and critical success. Despite this popularity and their place as a classic monster, there's very little explanation of what actually qualifies as a *traditional* zombie. Emma Jane Austin's doctoral thesis "A Strange Body of Work: the Cinematic Zombie" provides a point of reference as she explores in her work how the defining characteristics of zombies are not as static as American zombie

films and fans may make it seem. As she says, zombies are “how fear is structured within cultures, positioning the Zombie as an embodiment of the abject and, ‘other’, placing the creature as both an extension *and* a development of previous horror narratives” (Austin 7). This sentiment seems to ring true for most zombie depictions regardless of their popularity.

Díaz challenges popular notions of what zombies are in “Monstro.” A full explanation of their origins is never given. Perhaps this would have been explored if he had gone on to flesh “Monstro” out into a full novel, but at the time of this analysis it continues to be a stand-alone short story. The infection (known as La Negrura) is described to cause massive black pustules on the body of those who have it, and the ability to fuse victims together if they stay too close together (Díaz 2-3). Comparisons to black mold/fungus are common as well. These descriptions may remind readers of depictions that are seen in *The Last of Us*, with its cordyceps-inspired zombies. Already straying away from the genre’s tropes though, Díaz’s victims don’t become all-out zombies overnight. They don’t turn to violence until much later, and cannibalism is only mentioned at the very end. Instead, Díaz paints a picture of marginalized groups of people in pain who have been neglected as the disease spreads until it’s too late to stop. Race, class, and region all play a part in why they were ignored. This sentiment is explicit from the beginning of the story, as the narrator comments that people found it funny that there was a disease that could make Haitians blacker (Díaz 1). Neglect is a core part of “Monstro,” and something that isn’t usually found in the works considered the canon of zombie apocalypse. The horror of zombies spawns from their status as being an ‘other’ (Austin 7), but in Díaz’s story, the first victims were already othered due to their status. This was an intentional part of his creative process, with him saying in an interview that, “a couple years ago I got to thinking that our world has so many blind spots, so many places and people it intentionally doesn’t want to see ... It struck me that many of these very spaces were also the most neglected, mistreated, vulnerable areas of our world—areas on the global body where an opportunistic infection could and would take root” (Leyshon). Díaz’s zombies reflect how they are not a static

creature, but are something that changes with the cultural contexts surrounding them (Austin 3).

The accepted canon of zombie media has largely been influenced by fan culture, with these sentiments even bleeding into literary analysis of them as discussed by Austin. Something to note is that, “the reliance on pictures and stills of Zombies reinforces the importance of the image within these films: the physical presence of the Zombie is valued over the subtexts or intended meanings in the film’s storyline”, meaning that many discussions of zombies are on them as a creature rather than story meaning or symbolism using them (Austin 12). In a purely written format like “Monstro,” this focus is more difficult. Díaz spends considerable time exploring the behavior of his zombies though, something that would satisfy fans of the genre. Perhaps this detail has more to do with the concept of zombies being based around fears of the undead body (Austin 21), but in Díaz’s case the fear is surrounding sickness and marginalized groups. While his methods may satisfy worldbuilding-enthusiasts of the zombie genre, they may, at heart, actually be a deconstruction of how the zombie works, changing these fears of the dead to people’s anxieties on those who are sick or otherwise different from them. Díaz continues to use “the Zombie body as corpse is an inherent threat to societal order” (Austin 32) but shows the audience this place that comes before corpses; sickness. Instead of the zombie leaving its place at the graveyard and breaking social orders (Austin 32), Díaz’s zombies leave their quarantined area and spread until the entire world order is destroyed in apocalypse.

As Díaz twists the themes that make zombies what they are to suit his own purposes, he also moves on from the norms of the apocalypse. Referring to Geert Hallbäck’s exploration of the apocalypse genre, it’s interesting to note how the narrator and protagonist of “Monstro” does not fit the patterns explained. One part of the process he describes is when, “the crucial point is that, thanks to what has been disclosed to him, the human recipient obtains knowledge formerly denied to him” (Hallbäck 3). The narrator of “Monstro” goes directly against this. Knowledge had been presented to him in the form of reports on the situation, but he actively ignored the disease in favor

of his sick mother and the girl he's pursuing (Díaz 2). As a fundamental part of the apocalypse genre is gaining knowledge, it's interesting that the narrator never truly qualified. Self-admittedly busying himself with family and romance, Díaz's narrator fails to have a moment of true revelation and knowledge gained as he learns the truth of the situation surrounding him. His revelations and involvement are only implied and briefly mentioned by himself. As the short story reaches its conclusion, he commented that "no one [knew] what the fuck was going on in the darkness. No one but us" (Díaz 14). Revelation occurred in the form of his direct confrontation with the zombies, but the reader doesn't see it first-hand. With zombies being described as "a warning of plague, sudden death and decomposition" (Austin 33), that very moment where the narrator comes face to face with one of them would have qualified as apocalypse-knowledge gained. It's a fascinating move compared to the obvious choice of having an impactful scene as the narrator and his friends see the zombies for the first time, and his choice is not the one those who follow the typical apocalypse and zombie genre guidelines would take.

It's unquestionable that Díaz's story is one about the apocalypse. While past stories in the genre may have dealt with religion, monsters, aliens, nuclear warfare or dozens of other reasons, Díaz uses modern worries in his apocalypse-ridden world. He had "wanted the story-world to be on the cusp of a catastrophic ecological collapse" (Leyshon), a setting that was effective for the situation. Like how his zombies reflect the audience's fear of disease and groups of people unlike them, his story-world is also about modern worries. It's impossible to not be somewhat aware of climate change and the issues surrounding it. Díaz's world is not unlike our own, and he described it as taking place in a potential possibility of the twenty-thirties (Leyshon). People love to think about the end of the world, and as real-life scenarios get worse, so do their counterparts in fiction. Díaz is one of many writers using our modern fears to change the norms of what causes the apocalypse in stories, and just like his sick people turned zombies, climate change is another old favorite turned into something new.

“Monstro” is in a unique place among other stories like it. With its new takes on how to handle both zombie genres and apocalypse, it brings something satisfying to the table that leaves readers wanting more as Díaz teased a future novel set in the world. Through challenges of what makes a zombie, their treatment by the world both before and after the infection, and his unique take on a protagonist within a world of zombies, Díaz (de)constructed a well-established and loved genre very effectively. His work shows the exact kind of fluidity that surrounds the zombie and how its usage changes throughout history and how it can be utilized by creators for something more than just a scary monster. Zombies are as versatile as their history, and Díaz has taken full advantage of this. Gone are the days of zombies representing our fear of the dead and decay. In Díaz’s deconstructed world, they’ve become something more to show what scares modern people today.

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New Historical

The Selfish Nature of Colonization: How Junot Díaz's "Monstro" Demonstrates The Superiority Complex of the Wealthy

james halma

January 12th, 2010. The small Caribbean country of Haiti was hit with a 7.0 magnitude earthquake. The 43 seconds it lasted had rendered the country's capital to rubble. Several government buildings had collapsed during a disaster that lasted less than a minute. The US and UN initiated full-scale humanitarian efforts to aid the small country. Twenty-six nations had given military aid, with the US taking up the majority. This tragedy marked a worldwide response, earning sympathetic eyes from across the Western world. Two years later, Junot Díaz released a post-apocalyptic short story known as "Monstro."

Díaz begins a tale of a mold-derived plague beginning in Port-A-Prince, the capital of Haiti. Despite this setting, the three protagonists are in the prosperous Dominican Republic. The three young characters range from upper-middle class to the highest of the bourgeoisie. Due to their higher status, apparent lower-class health crises are seen as entertainment. Much like the Western power's overflow of support, "Monstro" demonstrates how the wealthier societies can make entertainment of the subaltern.

The narrator is a 19-year-old man spending his summer with

his sick mother who owns rental property in New Jersey. His mother had rented out their home in order to pay for her medical bills while she lived with her family in the Dominican Republic, "I'd come down to the D.R. because my mother had got super sick... No chance she was going to be taken care of back North. Not with what the cheapest nurses charged. So she rented out the Brooklyn house to a bunch of Mexos, took that loot, and came home" (Díaz 3). The narrator comes from a poor family as evident by his mother's sacrifice of their American home. His lack of connections to a wealthy family "We ran in totally different circles back at Brown, him prince, me prole, but we were both from the same little Island that no one else in the world cared about..." (Díaz). The distinction between their behavior shows a visible difference between their actions. The fact that their brotherhood stems from their home country offers an insight into how race is viewed in the DR. Alex has considered him a friend while the other parts of their group see him in a different light.

The narrator is introduced to the rest of Alex's friends, who are described as, "slim, tall, and wealthy, every one doing double takes when they saw the size of me and heard my Dark accent..." (Díaz). The surprise in their response comes from DR's view of their neighbor, Haiti. Black prejudice within the DR has been hidden beneath the label of "indio" (Gates 120). The DR's roots stem from the African slave trade with a large part of their ancestors coming from Africa. Their rejection of black heritage stems from Haitian intervention.

In 1822, Haiti had, "...moved into the former Spanish colony that had just proclaimed its independence, as "Spanish Haiti," from imperial Spain in December 1821," (Gates 137) and birthed anti-black views. During their occupation, Haiti "needed money, so it taxed Dominicans and their institutions..." and "...imposed French as the language of instruction, when it had been Spanish for centuries..." (Gates 137) to increase the gap between the two neighbors. The DR is composed largely of black heritage and yet, the lighter-skinned inhabitants are seen as superior to darker individuals due to the negativity associated with Haiti. The pandemic within Díaz's short story begins in Haiti's capital, Port-A-Prince, to an apathetic response

from their lighter-skinned neighbors across the island. The infection received the nickname, “La Negrura...The Darkness,” (Díaz) as the first symptom is a dark spot on black skin. The epidemic is regarded as the “joke of the year” (Díaz) for its ability to “make a Haitian blacker” (Díaz). Such a disease received some attention but not enough due to “...it was just poor Haitian types getting fucked up—no real margin in that” (Díaz). Darker individuals are a common target within the DR. Their ability to make light of a serious disease ignores the real effects on other lives, “For six, seven months it was just a horrible Haitian disease—who fucking cared, right?” (Díaz). Haiti’s occupation had deemed black persons as “other,” to lessen their importance within society. The narrator himself regarded the victims in a humorous tone, “When I came back from my outings I’d say, fooling, How are los explotao?” (Díaz). In spite of being “one of the pro-Haitian domos” the narrator finds humor in their plight despite their claimed sympathy. Thus, their sympathy is nothing more than performative. Their sympathy goes no further than words, much like the outpouring of support from other countries.

At the start of the plague, the narrator talks about how other powers had put it in the works to fix the virus, “The medicos formed a ninety-nation consortium, flooded one another with papers and hypotheses, ran every test they could afford, but not even the military enhancers could crack it. In the early months, there was a big make do, because it was so strange and because no one could identify the route of transmission—that got the bigheads more worked up than the disease itself.” (Díaz 2) The interest stemmed from how mysterious the disease was. Few of the medical scientists truly cared about the people it was hurting, “A huge rah-rah, but when the experts determined that it wasn’t communicable in the standard ways, and that normal immune systems appeared to be at no kind of risk, the renminbi and the attention and the savvy went elsewhere” (Díaz 2). Their interest was lost which revealed their efforts to be a façade. The patients at risk were more than lab rats, as they were being used to further advance medical science. This outpouring of support would vanish as soon as they gave up. Many see their pity as a sign of a superior nation. They were

required to care for the disenfranchised when they saw it as a “horrible Haitian disease” (Díaz). Their response echoed the Haitian earthquake as governments, medical organizations and military efforts had poured into the country.

Of the efforts within the earthquake, the US military provided the most personnel among the “Twenty-six countries provided military assets” (Kirch, Sauer, Saphir 203) to the country. It is important to note that, “...victims of the event included the Haitian government...” (Kirch, Sauer, Guha 200) as the quake devastated the capital city. Their aid, in its immensity, could be considered a demonstration of strength and ownership, “The Haitian response was more like a US domestic response, in which resources are prepositioned and “pushed” into the field and are not based on needs assessments but rather on a historical knowledge of a specific disaster’s impact” (Kirch, Sauer, Saphir 203). Military involvement in a humanitarian effort can be suspicious because, “...the military is not impartial, as required by humanitarian principles, leading to concerns in the humanitarian community about political motives.” ((Kirch, Sauer, Saphir 206) Their rapid response may be due to their history with Haiti, “When World War I cut off the United States’ European sugar supply, leading to terrible shortages, the United States rebuilt and expanded Dominican sugar plantations to meet its domestic demand. The United States had only one problem: a shortage of labor.” (Gates 137) This labor came in the form of Haitian immigrants. Their support for the small country could be to protect their interests and resources, should they need to use them. The sudden outpouring of support is a lingering sign of the “white man’s burden.” None of the western countries needed to provide support had the US refrained from using a weaker country. “Monstro” echoed the sentiment of the earthquake in a more permanent response.

There was no lasting support or cure for the impoverished country within the story. The medical personnel which could very well save hundreds of lives had given up. The savior sent by the United Powers arrived in, “bomber wing scrambled out of Southern Command in Puerto Rico” (Díaz). Instead of rescuing their labor force, the fictional US has chosen to

destroy the humans which they had given up on. This action is no doubt an act of genocide, although the violence began long before, “The Detonation Event—no one knows what else to call it—turned the entire world white” (Díaz). Díaz’s statement of “turning the world white” can be considered a callback to the DR’s dislike of the darkened skin. The racism of the extermination shows the third world’s importance to Western post-imperial society. In many ways, “Monstro” can be seen as a realistic and brutal take on the Haitian Earthquake. Few outsiders within the country truly care about the government. The support of the international community was a method to maintain a flow of cheap labor and performative sympathy.

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Psychological

A Freudian Analysis of *Monstro* by Junot Díaz: Trauma and the Psyche

Michael Shay

“Monstro”, a short story by Junot Díaz, delves into the complexities of human nature and the consequences of trauma on the psyche in the midst of a zombie-like pandemic. Being a character driven story in the midst of this setting, “Monstro” provides an ideal opportunity for an in-depth analysis through the Freudian psychological lens. This analysis will focus on various aspects of Freudian theory, including intellectualization, parental relationships, sexuality, and repression, to reveal the layers of meaning within the story. Additionally, it is crucial to consider Díaz’s personal experiences, particularly his childhood trauma and accusations of sexual assault, as these aspects may have influenced the story and provide valuable context for understanding the characters. By employing a Freudian approach and considering the author’s personal experiences, this analysis will offer a comprehensive and nuanced analysis of “Monstro” and the psychological depths of its narrative.

“Monstro” is a story set on the border of the Dominican Republic and Haiti, focused on the experiences of a young group of friends amidst the devastating impacts of a mysterious disease plaguing the region. The narrative weaves between telling the story of these young people and the story of the world and its reaction to this pandemic. The main character and

narrator of the story goes unnamed. He is in the Dominican Republic because his mother has become sick with a parasitic disease, different to the one causing the pandemic. He does not come from a wealthy background, and is only there because his family could not afford medical treatment in the United States. The story also focuses on Alex, a very wealthy friend, and Mysty, a friend of Alex, who becomes the narrator's love interest. The three friends attempt to live a normal life amidst this pandemic setting, which could be viewed as a byproduct of intellectualization.

Intellectualization, a Freudian defense mechanism, is a process through which individuals distance themselves from their emotions by focusing on abstract thoughts, generalizations, or logic. This psychological tactic is evident early on in "Monstro", particularly in the narrator's relationship with his sick mother. The narrator admits, "...if you want the truth, I didn't feel comfortable hanging around the house with Mom all sick" (Díaz, 2012). He justifies his feelings by explaining that his mother has a nurse, and a woman who cooks and cleans, so there is nothing he can do. He also exhibits some self-awareness of his intellectualization, stating, "Maybe I'm just saying this to cover my failings as a son" (Díaz, 2012). Intellectualizing behaviors can be seen in all the main characters in this story. The three friends respond to the traumatic scenario by withdrawing to Alex's luxury apartment, where they simply hang out and smoke weed all day. This tendency to intellectualize their emotions serves as a precursor to the examination of deeper psychological themes, such as the role of parental relationships and the Oedipus complex, which further illuminate the intricacies of the characters' emotional landscapes in "Monstro".

The Oedipus complex is a psychological concept first introduced by Sigmund Freud. On a basic level, it refers to a child's unconscious desire for their parent of the opposite sex, as well as the desire to replace the same-sex parent as a rival. In "Monstro", a Freudian interpretation of the narrator's actions, particularly his decision to leave his sick mother and pursue Mysty, could be viewed as representative of the Oedipus complex. The narrator is infatuated with Mysty, stating, "In

those days she was my Wonder Woman, my Queen of Jaragua..." (Díaz, 2012). Freud might argue that this infatuation symbolizes the narrator's unresolved Oedipal complex, as he projects his desire for his mother onto Mysty, especially in light of his mother's illness.

Towards the end of the story, the narrator shares a passionate moment with Mysty, in which she stops abruptly. In response the narrator almost says, "...I forgot to bring your dad with me" (Díaz, 2012), a reference to Alex's earlier comment that Mysty was raped by her father until she was twelve. This thoughtless remark not only highlights the narrator's insensitivity but also exhibits a manifestation of the Oedipus complex. The narrator's envy of Mysty's father could be interpreted as a projection of his envy towards his own father's relationship with his mother, symbolically represented by Mysty. This leads into a deeper analysis of the themes of sex and trauma within "Monstro", and how some of these themes could be a representation of Junot Díaz's own experience.

In April of 2018, Díaz published an essay in *The New Yorker* titled, "The Silence: Legacy of Childhood Trauma", in which he shares his experiences of childhood sexual abuse and its impact on his life and writing. In it he writes, "That violación. Not enough pages in the world to describe what it did to me. The whole planet could be my inkstand and it still wouldn't be enough" (Díaz, 2018). Díaz's willingness to confront his own traumatic past in "The Silence" offers an additional layer of understanding when analyzing the characters in *Monstro*. For instance, Mysty's history of sexual abuse by her father and the guarded nature of her character could be seen as a reflection of Díaz's own struggles with trauma and its long-lasting effects. Mysty's abrupt end to the kiss parallels Díaz's inability to be intimate when he was younger, "We never had sex. Not once. I couldn't. Every time we would get close to fucking the intrusions would cut right through me..." (Díaz, 2018). Díaz's personal insights into the complexities of relationships in the face of trauma contribute to the emotional depth and psychological realism of the characters in *Monstro*.

Colleen Flaherty's article, "Junot Díaz, Feminism and Ethnicity," presents critical insights that enrich our analysis,

adding an additional layer of complexity. In her article, Flaherty details some of the uncomfortable interactions that Díaz has had with female colleagues, “Soon after the essay’s April publication, a small group of female writers publicly accused Díaz of unwanted physical contact, sexual harassment, and bullying behavior throughout his career” (Flaherty). These accusations shed light on a darker side of Díaz’s interpersonal relationships, which cannot be overlooked when exploring his work. While it is not within the scope of this analysis to pass moral judgment on his actions, they offer a compelling avenue of exploration when viewed through a Freudian lens.

Moreover, the accusations against Díaz offer further insight into some of the complex relationships depicted in “Monstro”. If we consider that an author’s experiences can influence their work, then it is plausible to suggest that Díaz’s personal interactions could inform the dynamics between his characters. We can use a Freudian lens to view these actions and see some commonalities between Díaz’s experience and that of the characters.

Freud would likely consider Díaz’s behavior to be a manifestation of his unresolved trauma stemming from his experiences of childhood sexual abuse. He might consider this behavior to be a neurosis stemming from a conflict between the id and the super-ego (Edwardes 12). The behavior discussed in Díaz’s essay and Flaherty’s response could be connected to “Monstro” by considering the role of Freudian defense mechanisms, such as intellectualization, in shaping the narrative and the author’s personal life. Freud might argue that Díaz’s exploration of this defense mechanism in “Monstro”, as well as his own use of intellectualization in coping with his traumatic experiences, reflect the author’s unconscious efforts to process his own history and the complexities of the trauma he faces. Examining “Monstro” through a Freudian view gives the reader a more nuanced understanding of the story, and it underscores the importance of engaging with multiple perspectives when analyzing literature.

Using a Freudian lens to explore “Monstro” and considering Junot Díaz’s personal experiences reveal the psychological depths of “Monstro”, uncovering the complex interplay of

trauma, sexuality, and relationships. Examining defense mechanisms and Freudian concepts, such as intellectualization and the Oedipus complex, has demonstrated the unconscious desires and conflicts shaping the characters' actions. This comprehensive and nuanced analysis illustrates the value of integrating Freudian psychological theories and personal experiences into the study of literature, which allows for a profound exploration of narratives like "Monstro."

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Feminist

From Author to Narrator: Analyzing Junot Díaz's Presumed Misogyny in "Monstro"

Grace hug

Junot Díaz, *New York Times* bestseller and Pulitzer Prize winner, has written a variety of works focused on gender and sex. However, one work that may not be the first thing a reader would define as "feminist literature" is Díaz's "Monstro." "Monstro" takes place in a newly-apocalyptic world where an infectious disease resembling black mold called "La Negrura" is spreading. The infection takes over the individual's body with a debilitating, black fungus. The disease is part of the main setting in the story; however, there is a large focus on the relationship between the narrator and a girl named Mysty. Mysty's role in Díaz's "Monstro," as well as the way she is described by the narrator, reflect the controversies of Díaz's presumed misogyny presented not only in his other works, but his real-life actions as well.

Before diving into "Monstro" and the themes it presents under a feminist lens, it is important to understand Junot Díaz not only as a writer, but a person as well. There are many works Díaz has written that have a heavier focus on sex and gender than "Monstro." Some of the most popular, and controversial ones include *This Is How You Lose Her*, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, and *Drown*. All three of these novels have received backlash from critics, calling Díaz a misogynist because of the

characters he has written. Adding to the controversy, Díaz was accused of sexual and verbal harassment towards a few female writers in the peak-time of the “Me Too” movement. In July of 2018, Zinzi Clemmons came out and claimed that Díaz cornered her in a stairwell and “forcibly kissed” her (Romo 1). On Twitter, Clemmons posted a tweet, writing, “I’m far from the only one he’s done this 2. I refuse to be silent anymore.”

Following the traction from her account, other writers such as Carmen Maria Machado and Monica Byrne came forward with their own experiences with Díaz. While not physically assaulted, they were still subjected to his misogyny through verbal actions. This prompted Díaz to acknowledge inappropriate behavior he participated in in his past, but he was careful not to mention anything specific. In a statement provided by Díaz’s literary agent, he stated, “I take responsibility for my past. I am listening to and learning from women’s stories in this essential and overdue cultural movement. We must continue to teach all men about consent and boundaries.” With his controversy, questions have been raised that cause a more critical look at Díaz’s writing and the insight they may bring to him as a person.

As Díaz’s allegations grew more prominent, teachers began debating whether or not his writings should be taught. While a talented writer, his work now raised questions. As Nadia Celis, the Director of Bowdoin College’s Latin American Studies planned to teach Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, it seemed as though the story’s themes of toxic masculinity and abuse of power structure became true. Although MIT cleared Díaz of sexual misconduct allegations, questions and controversy surrounding his behavior still exist today. Díaz had been accused of misogyny before because of his writing, but these allegations riled his audience up even further. Díaz has claimed countless times that his characters may show misogynistic behavior, but he himself is not a misogynist. Because of the allegations, this claim can be questioned and has been by those who analyze Díaz’s work.

Although “Monstro” is not primarily seen as a work focused on feminism, it does speak to the ideas of feminism and the troubles of misogyny. The narrator of the story boldly states from the very beginning, “So what was I doing, if not helping

my mom or watching the apocalypse creep in? Like I told you: I was chasing a girl” (Díaz 2). The world is seemingly coming to an end and the narrator is focused on a girl; Mysty. The narrator speaks about Mysty in ways that contradict one another. At first, the narrator speaks highly of Mysty and sees her as his dream girl, saying that “Well, I certainly dreamed big with Mysty. In those days she was my Wonder Woman, my Queen of Jaragua...” (Díaz 7). While reading the first half of this story, the reader may begin to question what the author, Díaz, truly thinks about women due to how he portrays Mysty. If the reader is aware of his other pieces of literature, as well as his controversy, they may be left confused. Because Díaz has been labeled as a misogynist by several critics, the narrator’s descriptions of Mysty, in the beginning, are difficult to fully understand. As the story continues, Díaz’s misogynistic approach to the narrator’s character becomes more clear.

The narrative begins to change a bit, as the narrator is heavily focused on the beauty of Mysty. The narrator describes her as tall and “copper colored.” She has long, black hair. She is curvy while simultaneously being athletic. Although focusing on a woman’s beauty is not inherently misogynistic, and in fact can be seen as a way to praise women, this is the start of understanding the narrator’s true intentions with Mysty. The reader learns more about her appearance before they know of her personality or background. A focus on a woman’s physical self, and only her physical self, is objectifying as the woman is seen only for her body which is of less value than a woman’s intelligence or personality. It’s only later in the story that her character is described for her personality rather than her physical attributes, which seems to be the only reason the narrator is interested in Mysty after all. Through the words of the narrator, it becomes apparent why Díaz has been labeled as a misogynist. If the narrator only cares about Mysty’s physical attributes, plainly, he is objectifying her. This objectification can lead readers to question the character of the author himself, rather than just the narrator, especially considering his past with female writers.

The next description of Mysty can be broken down into several parts for analysis. The first section of the quote states,

“Dear dear Mysty. Beautiful and bitchy and couldn’t wait to be away from the D.R. A girl who didn’t let anyone push her around, who once grabbed a euro-chick by the hair because the bitch tried to cut her in line,” (Díaz 9). This quote in itself makes the reader question how the narrator actually feels about Mysty. He calls her beautiful, and follows it up with a derogatory term directly pointed in the direction of misogyny. Then, he seems to be admiring her because she won’t let anyone push her around. This makes the reader question, does the narrator like Mysty for her looks, as he seemed to be so infatuated with in the beginning? Does he like her for the fact that she doesn’t let people push her around?

As the quote continues, the narrator makes it seem as though he finds Mysty to be a girl full of flaws and not much else, now saying that she, “wasn’t really a deep person. I don’t think I ever heard her voice an opinion about art or politics or say anything remotely philosophical...Chick was as much a loner as I was,” (Díaz 9). Perhaps the narrator likes Mysty because they are both flawed in the same way—they are loners. However, prior to that statement, the narrator digs into how Mysty wasn’t deep; she wasn’t smart. The narrator seems to pick and choose what he likes about Mysty, rather than just liking her, flaws and all. This demonstrates Díaz’s misogynistic approach because the narrator is only willing to love the “glamorous” parts of Mysty, but the second she is flawed, his admiration changes. The next part of the quote states, “She never bought anything for anyone, didn’t do community work,” (Díaz 10). In this specific line, the narrator is implying that Mysty is selfish because she does not do things for others.

The final part of the quote states, “...and when she saw children she always stayed far away. *Ánimaes*, she called them—and you could tell she wasn’t joking” (Díaz 10). This section of the text is very interesting when it comes to feminism. For a long time, women were seen as beings that were meant to bear and take care of children. In this quote, the narrator tells the audience how Mysty relates children to “*Ánimaes*” and stays far away from them. Perhaps the narrator finds Mysty undesirable as a long-term partner because of this. She falls away from the “traditional” role of women because of her dislike of children.

Towards the end of the story, the narrator admits he knew nothing about women and that he didn't deserve a girl like Mysty. However, what the narrator truly thinks about Mysty is unclear throughout the entirety of the story. The audience knows that the narrator desires Mysty, but he constantly contradicts himself by being critical of her. Then, he contradicts his criticism by saying he doesn't deserve her. Was this internal conflict of physical desire versus personality an intentional choice, or did it simply reflect what Díaz himself feels?

Throughout the entirety of "Monstro," what the narrator truly thinks about Mysty is unclear, but Díaz's presumed misogyny shines through when the narrator makes claims such as Mysty not being intelligent, or that she is selfish and has no friends. There are several instances in "Monstro" where Díaz's writing, through the narrator, can reflect misogynistic behavior. Although it may never be clear whether Díaz is a true misogynist or not, through his writing, behavior and actions, it is clear as to why he has been so widely perceived as a misogynist.

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[PART VI]

"The Drone King" by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.

You can read Kurt Vonnegut's short story "The Drone King" at this link. www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/10/kurt-vonnegut-the-drone-king/537870/



After serving in the US Army during WWII, becoming a prisoner of war, and surviving the Dresden bombing in a meat locker; Kurt Vonnegut (1922-2007) became a husband to Jane Marie Cox and a father of three biological children and his four adopted nephews. Throughout his career as an American writer, he published 14 novels, three short story collections, five plays, five nonfiction works; and further works have been

discovered and published after his death. Vonnegut continues to make an impact in the world as one of the most important contemporary writers in America.

Image: Unknown. "Kurt Vonnegut." *JSTOR*, <https://jstor->

org.cwi.idm.oclc.org/stable/10.2307/community.2962773.
Accessed 8 Dec. 2021.

About the Authors

Donald Lewis

Donald Lewis is currently a student at the College of Western Idaho. He is working towards to associate degrees, one in Philosophy and the other in Education. He hopes to eventually work in secondary education as an English teacher. Some of Donald's other interests would involve cooking and bowling. If he is not in the city; he'll be somewhere in the mountains in close proximity to a body of water.

Ethan McCall

Ethan McCall is a full-time college student pursuing his bachelor's in creative writing. After graduating from the College of Western Idaho, he plans to transfer to a university to complete his degree. Growing up, he was always enamored by the works of fiction that he read and their expansive worlds. His dream is to graduate and become an author who creates stories that inspire a new generation of writers to go out and tell their own tales.

Kaetlynn Sanford

Kaetlynn Sanford is a full-time college student at the College of Western Idaho, she plans to transfer to Boise State in the fall to work towards her bachelor's in elementary education. After obtaining a bachelor's in teaching and an endorsement in English, she plans on teaching at an elementary school in Caldwell teaching first grade. Kaetlynn's interests include playing volleyball and doing anything with younger children.

She cannot wait to start teaching in a classroom of her own and helping little children work toward their future goals!

Karissa Haskin

Karissa Haskin is currently a student at the College of Western Idaho and plans to transfer to a university to continue through to her master's degree in creative writing. After obtaining her master's degree, she plans on becoming a college professor teaching creative writing. Karissa's interests are in philosophy, psychology, drawing, and creative writing; and she works to combine all of these elements to create her own works of art.

Kyler Evanovich

Kyler Evanovich is a student at the College of Western Idaho studying creative writing. He has a passion for imagist and confessional poetry and hopes someday to have published his own chapbook. Kyler gathers his inspiration from the natural world, particularly birds and the average American backyard. His interests beyond writing include weaving, painting, and gardening.

Sarah Cool

Sarah Cool is currently a student at the College of Western Idaho. She's working on her associate's degree in literature but plans to transfer to a university to obtain a master's in library science. After graduating, she hopes to become a librarian. Her interests (besides dusty old books) include history, creative writing, and music. Her main goal is to avenge the decline of literacy.



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Critical Introduction

The Buzz about Kurt Vonnegut

Our group's analysis of Kurt Vonnegut's "The Drone King" looks at the story from five unique perspectives. These perspectives are not only creative, but showcase our knowledge of the history, ideas and mechanisms Vonnegut uses. The essays employ different critical lenses including deconstruction, psychological, and new historical to attempt to break down the meanings behind Vonnegut's intriguing and somewhat emotional work.

New Criticism – Kaetlynn Sanford

The new criticism lens looks at all of the allusions in Kurt Vonnegut's "The Drone King" and how they can relate to the things that happen in today's world. In the story, we are given a real-world problem of money and wanting everything that the world has to offer without really having to work for it. Throughout the story, we learn that not everything is about money and sometimes we have to look past what other people are doing to work for what we want. We learn very quickly that the analogy of bees that we are given can relate to a lot of the things that we see in today's world.

Reader Response – Ethan McCall

The reader response essay looks at the striking similarities

between Kurt Vonnegut's "The Drone King" and how it relates to a reader from the online Incel community. In the story, Mr. Quick echoes many of the same thoughts and ideas that Incels hold; he views women as tyrants who have kicked men out of power, and he thinks it's his job to do something about it. However, throughout the story, Mr. Quick has his opinions (and thusly the opinions of Incels) proven wrong, showing that the beliefs of Incels are inherently wrong.

Deconstruction – Kyler Evanovich

This essay uses Deconstruction Theory to examine the theme of gender within the short story, "The Drone King." This is done by examining the relationships of the main character, Sheldon Quick. The absurdity of gender is expressed in the relationship Quick has with his bees. In an attempt to create an all-male beehive, Quick's logic is undone by him taking on the role of worker and queen to care for the drones. The writer then points out that in an attempt to whisk them away to give them a new life the bees cannot escape their fate as they follow their instincts to mate. Male and female define each other and therefore one does not exist without the other. The idea of black and white thinking is refuted within the story based on the fact that failure in the story is based on sidedness and the ignorance of the whole.

New Historical – Sarah Cool

The new historical analysis looks at "The Drone King" from a historical perspective, connecting it to both world history and the life of Kurt Vonnegut. It discusses the possible links between Vonnegut's short story and obstacles that may have deterred him from achieving his goals, such as the Great Depression, WWII, and the Vietnam War. It also touches on inequality and Vonnegut's possible opinions on the subject in relation to "The Drone King". The essay seeks to prove that Vonnegut's work is sort of an ode to everyone who didn't achieve the "American dream".

Psychological – Karissa Haskins

This perspective uses Carl Jung’s Archetypal Theory to perform a psychological analysis of Kurt Vonnegut’s “The Drone King.” It is said that writers are more sensitive to the woes of man, and through their literature, people can interpret issues and psychological conflicts in society before the general public will see it within themselves. This essay explores this idea by using Jungian Theory to analyze what Vonnegut’s subconscious is saying about the human race and what the human psyche needs to find happiness.

Feminist – Donald Lewis

In analyzing “The Drone King” from a feminist perspective, Lewis finds Vonnegut’s brilliant and opinionated nature reflected in the story. The inequalities between men and women, long prevalent in society, are highlighted, drawing parallels between human follies and the natural order of the world. Vonnegut’s disdain for the egoism rampant in affluent tiers of society is evident. However, it is important to note that interpretations of this text can vary. Lewis thoroughly enjoyed reading “The Drone King” and writing this analysis, hoping it proves useful and enjoyable for others as well.

Although our papers had varying perspectives and opinions, it’s obvious that we all loved this story. This project helped us learn a little more about Vonnegut’s life and contribution to society, and what it truly takes to be a great writer. We feel truly privileged to be able to be published. Whatever our differences, we had one thing in common: we all thought this story was “the bee’s knees”! We hope you enjoy reading our critical edition!



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Annotated Bibliography

“Calvin Coolidge.” *Whitehouse.gov*, 16 Jan. 2021, www.whitehouse.gov/about-the-white-house/presidents/calvin-coolidge/.

This article is useful for those who are unfamiliar with the legacy of Calvin Coolidge. Starting with his election in 1923 and his retirement in 1933. The article takes us through his term as president, his personality, and politics. We are told of his popularity in what they were calling the “Coolidge Prosperity.” His popularity was reinforced by him taking 51% of the popular vote. At the same time, the article takes into account the President’s flaws. The article calls him one of the most “Distant and Negative presidents.”

Drăgan, Nicolae Sorin. “The Emotional Arcs of Political Narratives.” *Bulletin of the Transilvania University of Braşov, Series IV: Philology & Cultural Studies* 13.Suppl (2020): 69-86. doi.org/10.31926/but.pcs.2020.62.13.3.6.

This article uses the “emotional arcs” idea proposed by Kurt Vonnegut to analyze political speeches and use it as a scale to measure the emotional responses that these speeches elicit. Emotional arcs are different from the plot in that they measure the emotional response from readers or listeners. Whereas the plot is more focused on how a story works and why.

Farnam Street. “Kurt Vonnegut’s Letter to the School Board that Burned His Books.” Farnam Street, Farnam Street, 29 Mar.

2017, <https://fs.blog/kurt-vonneguts-letter-book-burning/#:~:text=McCarthy%3A,that%20my%20work%20is%20evil.>

This is a letter Vonnegut wrote to a school board in North Dakota in response to their banning of some of his books. Vonnegut states that these books were destroyed by ‘the furnace of the school’ and proceeds to explain how insulted he is at this action coming from a group of people who are supposed to be academics but act quite the opposite. He expresses concern that they are promoting the opposite of an open educational environment and even that these actions support censorship.

Ferguson, Rex. “Blind Noise and Deaf Visions: Henry Green’s Caught, Synaesthesia and the Blitz.” *Journal of Modern Literature* 33.1 (2009): 102-116. www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/jml.2009.33.1.102.

This article talks about the metaphor of a bomb and how you can hear it, but you cannot see it. A lot of this article talks about the imagery of experiencing things blind. There is lots of talk about color and explosions, and how you cannot inhere to any of the colors that are described. Rather, you hear the sounds that come from the bombing.

Free, J. B. “The Food of Adult Drone Honeybees (*Apis Mellifera*).” *Brit. J. Animal Behaviour* 5 (1957): 7-11. www.cabdirect.org/cabdirect/abstract/19571403994.

This article discusses the eating habits of adult western honeybee drones. The article also gives information on the worker bees’ roles in relation to the drones. This study was conducted on marked drone bees with two pairs of drones being examined twice a day. It’s presumed “unemployed forager” workers feed the inactive drones on the first few days of their birth. This is then followed by a time where they are both fed by workers and themselves. After about a week we are told they feed themselves completely. This article would be useful for those interested in learning more about the roles of drones in the hive.

Freese, Peter. "Kurt Vonnegut's" Jailbird": Recent American History and the Failure of the American Dream." *Amerikastudien/American Studies* (1999): 137-165. www.jstor.org/stable/41157440.

This article is about the different parts of life that Kurt emulates within each of his works. This source also goes into play the failure of the American Dream. If you know what the American Dream is and what it consists of then this is a fantastic source for you. This source talks a lot about the characters that Vonnegut brings to life. He goes through their failures and what their life story is all about. It also talks a lot about how people cannot "discover" the meaning of life. They have to invent their own in order to survive in this terrible world. This citation would be helpful in the sense that you could connect the American Dream to almost anything. This citation would be useful if you wanted to focus on the history or the struggles of Americans over several years.

Glance, Alyssa M., Tessa L. Dover, and Judith G. Zatzkin. "Taking the black pill: An empirical analysis of the "Incel"." *Psychology of Men & Masculinities* (2021). doi.org/10.1037/men0000328.

This article takes an in-depth view of incels and their views on many different topics that relate to being an incel. Such topics include toxic masculinity, misogyny, racism, and suicidal thoughts. By downloading and analyzing posts from the Reddit forum r/Braincels, this article has found many odd dualities in the incel community. Such as Incels intensely desiring sexual intercourse, but at the same time, they incessantly shame women who are sexually active. Along with that, they talk about how much they desire to be in a relationship with a woman, but mock any man who is in a relationship because they believe he is just being controlled by his lust. This study dives into the polarizing community of incels to try and find out just exactly what it means to be one.

"Jung and the Behaviorists." *Redefining Reality*, episode 17, 2015, cwidaho.kanopy.com/video/redefining-reality-intellectual-implicati-16.

In this video, Dr. Steven Gimbel discusses Carl Jung's theory of the universal collective consciousness. He discusses how this extended from Freud's ideas and changed psychology. It explained Jung's theory about the collective subconscious that includes human knowledge gained by our ancestors. He explains that we see similarities in cultural myths and religions between groups that appeared to have no contact. Jung's theory explains these synchronicities by using archetypal patterns which can be seen and studied through literature. This video is useful in understanding Jung's theory and applying it to literature.

Greer, Creed. "Kurt Vonnegut and the Character of Words." *The Journal of narrative technique* 19.3 (1989): 312-330. www.jstor.org/stable/30225260.

Greer talks about the struggles between an author and a character in Vonnegut's works. The article also explores how Vonnegut's novels are personal. They directly talk about the characters' struggles so the audience can then relate to them and bring them to life. This source illustrates what it is like for a character to have the life that the author wants them to have. This lets the audience have real-life connections with each character. The nice thing about giving characters real-life characteristics is that as an audience, we are going to be able to relate in one way or the other. Vonnegut does a good job at bringing characters to life. It gives the audience a reason to keep coming back to read. This would be a wonderful source for anyone wanting to make that connection between an author's work and the characters that are brought about in each novel.

Gross, Thomas F. "The Promise of the Personality Theories Course." *Teaching of Psychology* 9.2 (1982): 113-114. [10.1207/s15328023top0902_20](http://dx.doi.org/10.1207/s15328023top0902_20).

Thomas Gross discusses in this journal article the importance of studying personality theory in literature and how it helps give students a base understanding of psychology. This article discusses the three basic models of personality theory and the nine assumptions that

theorists make about human nature. It discusses how when looking at Kurt Vonnegut's writings through this psychological lens, a reader can interpret that he does not believe people have free will and that people need to believe in dignity to survive. This article is useful in helping understand personality theory and human nature. It will also help in finding possible interpretations of Vonnegut's text.

Kokonis, Michalis. "Intermediality Between Games and Fiction: The "Ludology vs. Narratology" Debate in Computer Game Studies: A Response to Gonzalo Frasca." *Acta Universitatis Sapientiae, Film and Media Studies* 09 (2014): 171-188. www.cceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=65944.

This article discusses the emergence of video game critics who have separated themselves into two schools of thought. Narratologists, who believe that the narrative in video games should be looked at very carefully and that reviewing their narratives should be treated in much the same way as one would analyze literature or movies. The other is Ludologists, who reject analyzing video games as narratives and instead focus on the mechanics and gameplay of video games. The article goes on to say that both of these viewpoints are valid, but a wider theoretical approach is needed to fully understand video games. The article recommends the semiotic approach, which will enable the use of both narratology and ludology, while also aiding communication between theorists who want to communicate with and understand each other while delving into the dual nature of video games.

Morse, Donald E. "Kurt Vonnegut: The Representative Post-World War II American Writer." *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies (HJEAS)* (2015): 195-210. www.jstor.org/stable/44790638.

This article discusses how Kurt Vonnegut's work connects to a post-WWII America. The author reflects on historical aspects and themes in Vonnegut's writing and points out that although Vonnegut makes post-war life seem somewhat bleak, there is an underlying note of positivity in his stories. Vonnegut filtered out some of

the negativity to create his version of a better future for America.

Myers, David G. *Psychology in Everyday life*. Macmillan, 2011.

In this Textbook, Myers and DeWall introduce psychology. It gives a basic overview of many psychological theories including personality theories in chapter 11. It gives a basic understanding of what these theories are and how they can be applied to better our understanding of the human mind. This textbook is useful in understanding psychological theories. Once these theories are understood, then they can be applied more accurately to interpret a text.

Reilly, Charlie, and Kurt Vonnegut. "Two Conversations with Kurt Vonnegut." *College Literature* 7.1 (1980): 1-29. www.jstor.org/stable/25111286.

This article is actually less of an article and more of an interview. It provides further insight into why Kurt Vonnegut wrote what he wrote and how. It also goes into great detail about certain aspects of his life, such as his job at General Electric and how working there sort of pushed him to write. This article is not only another primary source but also shows how relatable Vonnegut's writing still is.

Sandford, Christopher. "Kurt Vonnegut Would Still Be Amused." *America*, vol. 227, no. 4, Nov. 2022, pp. 52-55. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=159646721&site=ehostlive&scope=site.

This article begins by explaining Vonnegut's illustrious and diverse career as a writer and many other things. Vonnegut's diversity of life experiences led him to develop a more cynical perspective of life's trials and tribulations, which shone through in his work. Vonnegut earned a reputation for criticizing the more elitist affluent people in society and in government. Sandford discusses the stylistic differences in each of his works, tending to change genres from book to book between science fiction and war horror. Ultimately, Sandford sought to discuss whether Vonnegut would have sided

with the liberals or conservatives considering recent social rights movements and COVID restrictions. He speculated that Vonnegut would likely side with more liberal perspectives, but in all honesty, we could not actually know for certain.

Vonnegut, Kurt. "Fates worse than death." *The North American Review* 267.4 (1982): 46-49. www.jstor.org/stable/25124347.

This article is from "...the oldest literary magazine in the US." In the article, Vonnegut details a number of things he thinks are "worse than death" and discusses some of his world views. Because it is somewhat opinionated, this article may not be conducive to finding out more about the historical aspect of Vonnegut's work, but it shows more of his style as a writer and some of his thoughts about different things going on at that time.

Vonnegut, Kurt. "Why You Can't Stop Me From Speaking Ill of Thomas Jefferson." *Nation*, vol. 298, no. 15, Apr. 2014, pp. 22-25. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=95116096&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

A speech was written by Vonnegut himself to give on Sept 16th, 2000, at a Civil Liberties union. Vonnegut discusses his high school background and social setting. He grew up in Indiana and explains the advantages of being a white male in this segregated and patriarchal society. Vonnegut illustrates the divide between black and white schools and the allotted opportunities undoubtedly favored folks with white skin. Also, he explains how society has been unfair to women, considering Vonnegut was strongly influenced by many brilliant female teachers during his academic career. He ends his speech criticizing the ambiguity of the Bill of Rights in not equitably protecting the rights of all men and women.

Ward, Joseph J. "'Oh, the Humanity!': Kurt Vonnegut and Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy's Existential Rejoinder to the Irrationality of the Human Condition." *The Humanistic Psychologist* 39.2 (2011): 105. [10.1080/08873267.2011.540151](https://doi.org/10.1080/08873267.2011.540151).

In this journal article, Joseph Ward uses a multidisciplinary approach, including literature,

existential philosophy, and humanistic psychology, to discuss Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT). This article delves into Kurt Vonnegut's works to analyze the human condition and existentialism. Ward seems to suggest that studying fiction in this way is essential in understanding ourselves and the world around us. This will lead to self-awareness which will ultimately lead to human freedom. This text is useful in acquiring an understanding of how to interpret the human condition through literature. It also gives a wonderful insight into possible ways that Vonnegut's works can enhance understanding of the human condition.

Whitlark, Jim. "Literature as Early Warning." *Dynamical Psychology: An International, Interdisciplinary Journal of Complex Mental Processes*, Jan. 2009, pp. 1–16. [cwi.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=49126899&site=ehost-live&scope=site](https://search.ebscohost.com/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=49126899&site=ehost-live&scope=site).

This article takes a psychological approach to authors such as Kurt Vonnegut and how they are essential to society. The article discusses how Vonnegut views authors and artists as being more sensitive to things that are happening around them, and through this, they can warn others who are less sensitive of things before they are aware of them. This article discusses how the author's pain reflects societal woes, which will then reflect in their writing whether intentional or not. This text is useful in acquiring an understanding of how societal changes and affect an author's individual view of the word and thus affect their writing. This article clarifies how Vonnegut viewed authors and possibly his own writing, which will lead to a better interpretation of his work.



New Criticism

My Money or Your Money?

Kaetlynn Sanford

The American Dream is a well-known story throughout history. This can be a difficult piece if you are not familiar with the American Dream and other events in past and present times. This poem gives us a small look at Sheldon Quick and him wanting money and only thinking about money. While some readers can relate to wanting money and relying on others to give you money, other readers can relate and know the struggles of not having money. Those readers who do not know what the American Dream is may stick to “fighting” with the narrator and “fighting” about whether or not the narrator worked for the money or not. One of the many big ideas throughout this book is that you have to work hard for the things in your life; not everything just comes right in front of you. A lot of what we experience in life is blind-sided, meaning we do not always see it right in front of us, but we can hear it. Kurt Vonnegut’s personal experiences of World War II, the fire bombings, and The American Dream are important factors in determining his audiences or writing styles.

One of the first allusions that I was able to draw from this story is Vonnegut’s personal experience of World War II. Throughout the story of “The Drone King” was his idea of bees, and it seems like the idea behind this was to bring people together as bees come together in a beehive. Now his ideas with bees connect

with the idea that Vonnegut wanted to change the world with the ways that he wrote and the things that he experienced. The narrator's experience with World War II affected the way that he wrote; his main goal was to communicate his ideas and thoughts about the world to the average person. "What is it? I said. 'A bee war?'" (Vonnegut). With the narrator's experience with the war, he can put things in that they were able to see. For everyone else looking at the bees, it looks like it is a swarm of bees that were ready to attack, while to others it seems as if it could be that allusion to the war. Later on in the story, it talks about the different kinds of bees and what they think that they should be doing. If we look at this from the perspective of the war, we can make similar observations about the war too, whether those are observations about who should be fighting and who should not be fighting and what certain people should be doing. The allusion to World War II helps the audience to make those connections with the things that have happened in the past, things that affect an individual or a group of people.

The allusion to the war helps the reader to understand what happened in the past and how it can be applied to today. The examples from Vonnegut's life, while they may affect his writing, he does a good job of making sure to connect with his audiences by using these examples. When the narrator writes about the bees, the reader tends to not be able to make different connections with different events that have happened in the past. The swarm of bees that the narrator talks about can be compared to that of all the soldiers that fought in the war and continue to fight in the war. As soon as the audience questions whether they are going to be attacked by these bees they can make the connection of how they are not sure if the soldiers are going to attack them or if they are going to die.

Another good allusion that can be made throughout this story is the fire bombings that the narrator has experienced in one way or another. The point of this section is to get the reader to understand that bombs are heard and not seen. A lot of the examples that the narrator gives us throughout the story are things that we can hear about more than we can experience them. "The devastation of London during the Blitz was wreaked upon the city by bombs never seen by their victims" (Ferguson

103). This can be connected to the bees in the sense that it is easy to hear the sound of a bee sometimes instead of finding it. A lot of the examples that we are getting throughout the story are more of a listening skill rather than that of seeing it right in front of us. Sometimes a lot of the things that we experience in our life are things that are heard rather than being seen. I love the example given that bombings are a blind noise because sometimes it is easier to know what is going on if you just stop and listen to the things that are going on around you or the world. The story "The Drone King" talks about saying goodbye when people promised to stay: "He sat up, blinking blindly" (Vonnegut). He is blinded because he was told that nobody was going to say goodbye, and everyone is leaving. Now with the bees, it is easy to say that we heard them and now we don't; things come and go in their life and just like the bombs, we are blinded to the fact that they came in the first place.

The allusion to hearing things as a reader was something that I could relate to as a reader because a lot of what Vonnegut and the narrator talk about is seeing things from a blind perspective, which was interesting. As part of connecting to the reader, Vonnegut wants to be connected with their audiences and part of this is understanding who the reader is and what they may be going through. A lot of what different people go through depends on the sound of things; what they hear. Vonnegut uses this example to get to the reader and to get them to experience life through just listening to the sounds around us because we cannot always be there to experience it with our eyes.

One of the last pieces of allusion, and my personal favorite throughout the story, is the allusion to the American Dream, which most audiences are aware of. The American Dream is something that Vonnegut seems to write a lot about, whether or not the reader can pick it out: "... Starbuck's individual life refracts the development of larger historical forces from the turn-of-the-century labor fights through the Nuremberg Trial... aberrations of recent American History and the failure of the American Dream" (Freese 137). Throughout the short story "The Drone King" the narrator talks about getting money from family members and wanting to be a successful businessman making millions. This fits hand in hand with the American

Dream because this dream was all about making money. The only thing that mattered in a person's life was money and if they were going to be successful. The narrator does a wonderful job describing what this character wants and talking about how he wants to be this rich person and make money and eventually do that for the rest of his life.

The allusion that is made to the American Dream can be a sign of what our world is turning into and what people can be so concerned about. A lot of people rely on money whether it be that they get it from someone else or that their family directly gives to them. The thing with the American Dream is that so many people can relate to it and expect it to happen to them, that they do not understand that it can take complete control over them. When the narrator tells us about Sheldon, they may not understand the American Dream or what is going on with Sheldon. They may see it as a family just supporting him and helping him throughout the process of business. The bees, when compared to the American Dream, can be something along the lines that the bees can represent the amount of money that Sheldon, or really anyone, can have when they are just given everything until at one point, they all disappear and there is nothing left.

One of the big ideas in this story is that you have to work hard in life because nothing comes easy in your life. We see that with Sheldon everything came easy for him up until when it comes to wanting to make and run his own company. In the story "The Drone King" by Kurt Vonnegut there are many great examples of things that have happened and affected the world in one way or another. It can be hard to understand this story and what is going on if you do not have the experience or the understanding of these events. When it comes to the narrator, they do an amazing job giving clear and concise examples of some of these events for us to understand what is going on and how it can affect our lives today. Vonnegut's experiences when writing stories and connecting to the audiences are what help his audiences to connect on a personal level to what is going on. I love that Vonnegut's goal is to connect real-life problems with his audiences to bond better with the average person. Kurt Vonnegut's personal experiences of World War II, the fire

bombings, and The American Dream are important factors in determining his audiences or writing styles.

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Reader Response

The Bees Without a Queen

Ethan McCall

When reading Kurt Vonnegut's short story "The Drone King," most readers would come away from the story with the idea that Sheldon Quick is just a crazy businessman who invested in the wrong idea. I mean, what sane person would think that inventing carrier bees in a world with the wireless telegraph is a good idea? That's just the thing though. No sane person would think that it's a sound business idea. However, this story by Kurt Vonnegut likely speaks differently to a particular audience. This story's implied readers are a specific demographic of men who call themselves Incels. While it at first appears to be a story that reflects with and represents the ideologies of Incels, it eventually reveals itself to be a critique of their worldview and ideologies.

Now, before I go any further, I must first shed some light on what an Incel is and the community that they belong to. Incel is a term that means "involuntarily celibate." This online community of Incels is comprised of men who are bitter about their lack of sexual experience, and they blame women for it. The men belonging to this group also blame women and feminism for the "downfall" of society. They believe that women have dominated the world and now unfairly discriminate against men, thus robbing them of the social dominance in society that they believe men should have (Glance 288-289).

The character of Sheldon Quick in Vonnegut's story is eerily similar to these men who call themselves Incels. Sheldon Quick is a man who has enjoyed a significant level of success and wealth throughout his life. One would think that given his circumstances, he has almost everything that he could ever want. However, from his first appearance, his biases become clear. When the stockbroker enters the Millennium Club to meet Mr. Quick, he is stopped at the front desk and informed that there are no women allowed into the club (Vonnegut). As a reader, this immediately sets off alarm bells in my head and paints an unflattering picture of Sheldon Quick. The Millennium Club and its patrons very clearly have some very negative views on women if they won't even allow them to enter the building. However, someone from the Incel community would very likely agree with and praise this rule for how it puts women back into their place.

Rather than women dominating men and taking over their spaces as Incels believe women have been doing for quite some time now, they aren't even allowed in the same spaces as men anymore. This lack of proximity lets men be themselves and innovate as they are supposed to without being disturbed by the lesser sex. To Incels, women have no inherent value aside from being able to have sex with men. This mindset can be seen in Glace's article on Incels. When women have expressed that men who only want sex are disgusting, Incels have responded callously: "[W]hat the fuck else is there to want from such a vapid shell of a person? Your only redeeming quality is that you can lay still and take a dick. Why are you surprised?" (Glace, *Taking the Black Pill* 294-295). However, these roles are swapped within the world of the bees. The male bees are exterminated once they fulfill their only function of mating with the queen (Vonnegut). The reason that Mr. Quick, and by extension the Incel, are so interested in the plight of the male bee is because they are being discriminated against in the same way that Incels discriminate against women.

This is another sentiment that Incels latch onto and agree with. They believe that men are the wrongfully oppressed gender, and women have stolen their rightful place in society (Glace 288-289). This idea that men are being oppressed by

women is further expanded upon when Mr. Quick takes the stockbroker up to the roof where his bees are being kept. When they arrive on the roof, they come across the scene of large bees stumbling out of their hives being hunted and killed by smaller bees. As Mr. Quick saved the large bees, the stockbroker asked him what was happening. Mr. Quick replies that it's a bee war between the large males and the smaller female bees. When the stockbroker asks which bees the hives belonged to originally, Mr. Quick says that "Your question is good enough to be chiseled in granite for all time to ponder" (Vonnegut). From this scene, it becomes very clear how Mr. Quick feels about the plight of the male bees, and by extension, the human males of our world.

Mr. Quick believes that males have constructed society as we know it. They've worked tirelessly to construct the foundation of the world. However, now women have come in and pushed the men out of their positions of power, thereby taking the world for themselves. An Incel reader reading this would most likely be agreeing with Mr. Quick and his views on the world. This way of thinking about the role of women is very much in line with how Incels think about women. They have unrightfully taken the roles of leadership that men used to have, and are now discriminating against them, exactly how the male bees from the hives that they built are being pushed out from their homes and being torn to pieces by the female bees.

Much like Incels, Mr. Quick has determined that men are under attack from women, and drastic measures need to be taken in order to save the male species from this unrightful persecution. Due to this unfair exclusion of male bees from their hives, Mr. Quick is determined to save them, because much like the human male, Mr. Quick believes that male bees will be safe from female tyranny if they are kept away from women. He does this by creating a new hive for them that consists only of other male bees that have been forced out of their hives. In their new hives, they aren't forced to do anything or be productive. According to Mr. Quick, the reason that the male bees can enjoy their lives in such leisure is that they are free from the demanding and thankless females (Vonnegut). This is very similar to the Millennium Club to which Mr. Quick

belongs due to the fact that in both the new hive and the Millennium Club, no women are allowed. Mr. Quick's observations about bees have poisoned his views on women.

From this point on, a reader from the Incel community would likely expect that Mr. Quick would continue to fight against the female rule that the world has come to be subjected to. However, subverting these expectations of the reader, the story starts to slowly show that Mr. Quick's philosophy is incorrect. When Mr. Quick tells the stockbroker that they will only have to provide each of their bees with a penny's worth of honey for an entire year, the stockbroker asks a very astute question: why don't the male bees make their honey? This is when Mr. Quick reveals that it's only the female workers that make honey. The stockbroker then points out the obvious. "Huh. I guess that's why the female workers knock off the males, eh? The males are nothing but a drain on the community" (Vonnegut). This is a key moment in the story that shows just how biased Mr. Quick is. Even though he knows that these male workers contribute nothing and instead are only a burden on the colony, he still believes that the female bees clearing them out of the hive is unjust.

This echoes back to his situation. He was left a large sum of money by his father and has spent his life doing anything but work. Mr. Quick sees himself in the male bees. They're both useless and provide nothing to their respective societies, yet Mr. Quick thinks that they both deserve a respected spot in the societies that they've contributed nothing to. A reader from the Incel community would likely be affected negatively by this development in the story. While the story was at first reiterating and reaffirming Incel ideology, all of a sudden, it's pointing out flaws in their beliefs.

The ideals of Mr. Quick, and by extension the Incel, continue to be challenged, and ultimately proven wrong, at the press conference that he holds to demonstrate how bees can live in a male-only hive. According to a study by Nicolae-Sorin Drăgan on political narratives, telling a story means to lie or speak falsely. This story is a distortion of an otherwise uncomfortable reality and lying (70). This sort of story is exactly what Mr. Quick tells to the press during his conference. He goes on about how

the only crime that male bees have committed is that they can't make honey, yet they are discriminated against and killed for it. He declares that this system needs to be stopped for the safety of bees, but it's obvious at this point that Mr. Quick is also talking about human women as well as bees.

However, despite his grandiose speech to the press, when Mr. Quick releases the bees so that they can go to their all-male colony, they don't. Instead, they go back to the colonies that are run by the female bees and are subsequently killed. It's at this point in the story that it subverts the expectations of the Incel reader about where the story was going. They were most likely expecting the story to praise Mr. Quick as a hero who was liberating men from the tyranny of females, but rather, the story shows Mr. Quick as a bitter old man who can't accept his shortcomings and instead blames all of his problems on women and society as a whole. Thus, condemning Incels and their hatred of women, showing them that their lack of importance in society is their fault rather than a malicious plot by women to overthrow men.

While this story first appeared to agree with and support Incel beliefs, painting Mr. Quick to be a wise old man who has realized that women are the problem with society, as the story progresses, it shows that Mr. Quick is a lot of things, but wise isn't one of them. Instead, he's a man who was frightened by the social power of women increasing. Seeing this as a threat to men everywhere, Mr. Quick, in his attempt to prove that women were unnecessary, proved only that the ideals he and many Incels believe in are undeniably flawed and fundamentally wrong. This story uses the sympathy that Incel readers initially had for Mr. Quick as a way to challenge their beliefs. By the end of the story, when the character they supported so much is proven to be nothing but a sad man whose judgment was clouded by hate, Incel readers are encouraged to look inward and examine the beliefs that led Mr. Quick to this point and think about where their beliefs will take them. The story uses the downfall of Mr. Quick to inspire a change from the hateful ideology of Incels to something kinder and more tolerant.

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Deconstruction

What's All the Buzz About? Deconstructing the Binary Themes in "The Drone King"

Kyler Evanovich

Vonnegut's "The Drone King" seems to be a story of a man's decline and ultimate failure in a rapid amount of time. Mr. Quick has run out of money and in a fit of desperation, he formulates a plan to use bee drones as messengers. He intends to create an all-male hive, a "bee Millennium Club" (Vonnegut), free from the tyranny of what he seems to perceive as a cruel world. A world run by heartless female worker bees. To no one's surprise, the project fails as all the drones return to their original hives to fulfill their breeding purpose and therefore die. Mr. Quick leaves in disgrace. However, there is a single bee, battered and worn, who delivers the message successfully. This whole event, however, would not be possible without the roles of both female workers and male drones. The theme of male vs. female is broken down quickly by the fact that they define each other, and therefore one is useless without the other. The text deliberately undercuts its meaning to showcase the absurdity of gender constructs by demonstrating the fluidity of their proposed roles. The idea of things being black or white is undone by the demonstration that things are more fluid than that binary.

The prosperity of the millennium club is a facade. The investment counselor says, "Prosperity beat me to the

Millennium Club by about 100 years" (Vonnegut). What he seems to be saying is that prosperity lingers there still. Further on, he mentions that the place has him feeling at peace. He says, "I felt as though I'd just finished two brandies and a good cigar" (Vonnegut). Does he feel sedated? Relaxed? We could take "at peace" to mean at rest, as in dead. This could be taken as the Millennium Club being a grave. There seems to be a slowness. So, there is this underlying theme of decline in the description of the club. This decline can be reinforced if we consider what could be meant when the old man guarding the foyer says, "No Woman and No flowers past the desk" (Vonnegut). Flowers could be looked at as a verb, which would mean for something to prosper. The clock was stopped at the time of President Coolidge's death. Coolidge's term was marked by general prosperity in what they were calling the "Coolidge prosperity" (Friedel). At the time of his retirement "the time the disaster of the Great Depression hit the country" (Friedel). Considering this, the slow progress and even the idea of a grave could be reflected in the grandfather clock, and by extension, Coolidge's death. So here we are in the Millennium Club, a place for gentlemen only, that seems to be falling apart. This undermines Quick's later idea of creating an all-male hive by making Quick "eat crow" when his boastfulness of ideas and innovation of man fall flat. So, when he proposes that his all-male hive will be the next big thing, Mr. Quick fails to recognize that he is setting himself for failure because he is creating the same environment for the bees that he finds himself in. No flowers or women. One without the other falls apart. Mr. Quick when he asks, "when is a drone not a drone?" We can conclude that a drone is not a drone when there is no worker bee.

Sheldon Quick's disdain for the females of the animal kingdom proves his reliance upon them. In the spirit of insects, his relationship can even be considered parasitic. We can say this because Quick's disdain for the female bees defines his plan. His schedule revolves around the time when the Queen takes flight. He does not take the males before the mating ritual. He takes advantage of the natural order of the bees and seeks to find a new purpose for the males. Without the female bees, he has no one to save, for no one is in danger. Without the spiral

dance of death, there is no moment for him to be the Scarlet Pimpernel. The drones, when given their task, do not separate themselves from the natural order and when given the chance they take a flight to mate with a queen. This also mirrors the reliance on the opposite gender to define their purpose. They then return home, and the “slaughter” of the bees takes place. His plan falls to the mercy of nature just as he had relied upon it to save him. The stereotypical belief that women rely upon a man is undercut by the reversal of the roles seen here. Even this binary of a woman needing a man can be further dissected in that the “drones rely upon the workers for food” (Free).

Sheldon Quick’s portrayal appears to be similar to that of the drones, but alternatively, he can be seen fulfilling the role of a worker or even a queen. Both Quick and the bees are described as lazy when they meet for the first time by the unnamed investment counselor. When watching the mating ritual, he remarks on how he thinks the bigger ones should be stronger and defeat them. Mr. Quick replies with “The big ones have no sting” (Vonnegut). It could be said that the tall Mr. Quick also has no sting. He is near the end of his time at the club and lacks any punch and pizzazz. We see that he himself has been stung. What is interesting further about this fact is “The behavior of workers toward a drone appears to depend upon his age.” (Free). Older drones are attacked and forced out of the hive, and his old age Mr. Quick must also leave the millennium club, his own hive. In the similar fashion of drones, we are told by the old waiter that Mr. Quick lounges around the club just like the drones who “spend nearly threequarters of their time whilst inside the hive in periods of apparent inactivity” (Free). However, this can be broken up by looking at Mr. Quick’s actions. Mr. Quick is more like a Worker Bee in his ferocity. This tenacity is even reflected in his name, Quick. He is eager to save his fortunes and so he takes on this matronly role as he scoops up the drones before they are murdered. He even builds his hive to raise and feed them. He feeds them because, once again, drones cannot make their honey. These actions separate him further from the role of a lay about drone as he takes on these traditional feminine qualities of nurturing and being more receptive to the bees.

The opposition created between Mr. Quick and the

investment counselor gives us insight into the tension caused by idealism and cynicism. These two ideas' focus and their focus on the opposite extremes prove their uselessness in progress. The two opposing forces fail to come together to create a solution. The investment counselor appears to be more privileged in the sense that he can see through what he perceives to be an awful business venture. However, he is somewhat pessimistic in opposition to Quick's ideas. The counselor: his job is to "counsel", but he offers no advice, only criticism. He does not even point out the flaws; he merely asks a set of broad questions to almost mock Quick. He is privileged to have the experience and information as to what a successful business premise looks like but fails to show this. Alternatively Quick is a bit foolish, and he recognizes this. Rather than diversifying, he is narrow-minded and thinks that a great idea alone will be what makes him money. But a great idea needs equally great action. Quick is all talk and his narrow-minded thinking that optimism alone will carry his success is misplaced. The failure of both parties falls on their polarization and their lack of acknowledgment that there has to be a middle ground.

The venture is unsuccessful because the whole project relies on one part of a whole. It is this glorification of a primary aspect that ultimately fails because that which defines the other is absent. In this sort of symbolic way, this Idea in Deconstructionism that things are not black or white but rather black AND white is seen when the drones take flight and join the queen. We can spend time deciding the hierarchy of importance between drones and workers, but at the end of the day they are both bees and the hive needs both. Quick works hard to define their purpose in a task, but he is doing just what despises. When it comes to communication and gender, there are no "quick" fixes: This act of him giving a "purpose" is no different than their one purpose of mating with the queen. So in the end, the reliance on the extreme in a proposed binary ignores the necessity of one to define the other. Thus, the unavoidability of the use of both parts as a whole.

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New Historical

Kurt Vonnegut's "The Drone King": A World in Conflict

Sarah Cool

"The Drone King" by Kurt Vonnegut is a hopeful yet sorrowful tale of someone trying to grasp at something just out of their reach. It is a story about Sheldon Quick, a man with his head in the clouds, and a momentarily rebellious hive of only male bees. Quick has an innovative solution to a communication problem but doesn't think about how the problem has already been solved. He wants people to send messages using drones. Quick attempts to show the world his idea, but it backfires on him when his bees chase after a queen they find. Quick is distraught after watching his dream crushed before his eyes. Not only is "The Drone King" about our longing for the American dream, but also the many obstacles that have always been (and probably always will be) obstructing our path to it. Both Vonnegut and his protagonist, Sheldon Quick, were on that path.

One of the obstacles the author had to face was the Depression. At one point in the story, George, the waiter, asks Quick if there's anything else he wants before George leaves. "Anything else I wants?" said Quick. He rolled his eyes unhappily. "Wealth, George? Power? Instant success?" (Vonnegut) This may have something to do with the fact that the author didn't have much money to begin with. He may have felt like something was still missing in his own life, even after

achieving his success. It could have also been a way of pointing out that humans can be greedy and selfish. Even when we have enough, we still want more.

Vonnegut himself didn't necessarily want more, but it seems like he was happy to have it. Quick mentions how "I felt as though I'd just finished two brandies and a good cigar. Here was peace" (Vonnegut). This says that wealth or material possessions also give a sense of peace to Quick. Having these things probably also gave Vonnegut peace (at least in knowing that he was financially stable). But while Vonnegut achieved his dream, his character failed.

Kurt Vonnegut did reach his goals, but he wasn't always famous. He didn't have a lot of money when he was younger. He worked at General Electric for a while, where he earned a "solid salary" of \$90 a week. So that was when he started to write. In one of his interviews with Charlie Reilly, he pointed out that "...there was almost a short story industry". He started writing for *Colliers*, a magazine, and soon received a check for \$750 and then got another for \$900 after sending in another story directly. He eventually quit General Electric when the money started "piling up" (Reilly 3). Vonnegut also talked about how the company threw parties for people who were fired, but since he just quit, they didn't throw him one. Reilly then mentioned how he seemed to have thrown "...[his] own party in Player Piano" (Reilly 3). General Electric had some kind of place where their young male employees working their way up the ladder could go to party...Vonnegut said *Player Piano* stopped it. The partying at General Electric may have also had something to do with his character, Sheldon Quick, and Quick's time at the Millennium Club.

Like many Americans, Sheldon Quick is a dreamer. He makes grandiose plans only to have them come crashing down in the end. Quick writes "What...hath God wrought?" on the notes tied to the bees because to him, it just seems like life isn't fair (Vonnegut). It's as if he already knows his idea will fail before the press conference is held. During the Depression, it probably felt a lot like that, especially if you were not wealthy to begin with. People jumped from high buildings following the crash because they were so terrified of what their lives had suddenly turned

into. On the other hand, the Depression was caused by peoples' actions, and Quick sort of caused his inevitable failure as well. Americans' mistakes only led to more obstacles following the Depression.

Vonnegut also lived through WWII and the Vietnam War, two other harrowing events that may have inhibited his progress towards his dream. These events may or may not have influenced "The Drone King" in some ways. For example, the methods of communication described, such as telegrams, were used during WWII. The telegram may have had something to do with Quick's innovative (albeit lackluster) idea for the "beegram". It wouldn't have been so bad if Quick had thought of the beegram before the telegram, as the narrator points out in one part of the story, or if the bees hadn't flown after the queen instead of doing what Quick wanted them to do at the end. Although war may not have influenced this story directly, it did give the author ideas for some of his other writings.

In his article "Fates Worse than Death", Vonnegut makes some points about war while spinning a kind of satire. He shares some deep thoughts on hydrogen bombs, poisonous Kool-Aid, and death: "If our government sees that we are facing fates worse than death, it will shower our enemies with hydrogen bombs, and then we will be showered in turn. There will be plenty of Kool-Aid for everyone..." (Vonnegut 1). It seems like he knew what obstacles the Americans were facing at the time and chose to add a little dark humor to the situation. This is a lot like the writing in "The Drone King", which is also somewhat humorous in an odd way. Perhaps Vonnegut wanted to face some obstacles, like that of war, by laughing at them.

Another thing that may have been an obstacle to the American dream, especially at the time that this was written, was inequality. Quick discusses the rights and freedoms that he thinks the male bees deserve. He says that female bees kill the drones. He also mentions that "If you get yellow fever, you'll have the female mosquito to thank. If a black widow spider does you in, my boy, again—*cherchez la femme*" (Vonnegut). *Cherchez la femme* means "look for the woman" in French. It's saying you can blame the problems on the woman.

Quick also talks about how he thinks it's a "woman's world".

This may be relevant to the author's own opinion about women being in charge. The author may have been trying to make a point about feminist ideals. He wasn't trying to say that women were obstacles, but perhaps that some women think of men as steps on a ladder rather than equals. At the time that this was written, men more likely thought of women that way. Although it seems fairly progressive, maybe these remarks from Quick were a way of pushing for equality for both sexes? But the bees don't have or need the rights and freedoms Quick thinks they do. Their process is part of the natural order of things.

Quick thinks he can defy the natural order of things. His vision of the American dream is lost and the narrator, along with the audience, watches a broken man secede from his ambitions. However, it is apparent that over time, Vonnegut gained his sense of the American dream and achieved great success. Having lived through the Great Depression, WWII, and Vietnam, he understood what it was like to experience some terrible events that are deeply ingrained in American history. Because of his work at General Electric, he also understood what it was like to be in the working class, and he was even able to change some elements of the actual corporation for the better. He used his knowledge to not only write some of the greatest stories of all time but also to subtly point out the human condition and the obstacles that stand in the way of very real dreams.

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Psychological

Delving Into Kurt Vonnegut's Psyche

Karissa Haskin

It is said that writers are more sensitive to the woes of man. According to Jim Whitlark, a professor at Texas Tech University, in his article "Literature as Early Warning," states that Kurt Vonnegut has been quoted to believe this very thing. Whitlark states that the writings of authors are often warnings that come from the subconscious, and it is important for humankind to study literature in order to improve society (Whitlark). Keeping that in mind, this essay will perform a Jungian Archetypal analysis on "The Drone King," by Kurt Vonnegut to attempt to find what Vonnegut's subconscious is saying about society.

Within this story, the character Mr. Quick seems to have many odd fears and psychological conflicts. It makes the reader wonder what is going on in his head. Why does Mr. Quick hate women? What is he afraid of regarding the outside world? And why bees? The first answer that most readers would probably reach is the idea that Mr. Quick is a rich white male who is prejudiced against women. At first glance, this story could represent the stereotypical man's world. But then why do the female characters, such as the bees, seem to take on stereotypical male characteristics of being heartless and only caring about work? Do the females even represent women at all, or do they symbolize something else from Kurt Vonnegut's subconscious?

In the video “Jung and the Behaviorists,” produced by The Great Courses, Dr. Steven Gimbel discusses Carl Jung and his theories. He stated Jung was a student of Sigmund Freud. He took Freud’s idea of the ego, subconscious, and Id and expanded on it. He believed that humans have a collective subconscious, thus changing Freud’s theory of the human consciousness to the ego, personal subconscious, and collective subconscious. He uses this theory to explain why there are so many similarities in cultural myths throughout time and across the world between cultures with little to no interaction. He believed that this collective subconscious and universal world views manifest through different archetypes seen through mythology and lore throughout the world. Jung seemed to believe that literature is one of the ways that we can see hints of the author’s subconscious, which would lead to a better understanding of that person’s psyche, and thus ultimately lead to a better understanding of the collective subconscious. (“Jung and the Behaviorists”)

According to Whitlark, Vonnegut believed that artists are more sensitive to cultural shifts and the collective feelings of the society around them. This sensitive understanding of society, or the collective subconscious, often comes out subconsciously in literature (Whitlark). This brings me to the question, what is Kurt Vonnegut’s psyche saying in “The Drone King”?

With Jungian Archetypical Theory regarding the self, persona, shadow, and anima/animus, we can start to analyze the text to find the underlying message from Vonnegut’s psyche. By taking a look at “The Drone King” as either a dream or the manifestation of Vonnegut’s subconscious, we can assign different characters within the story to these different archetypes. According to Whitlark, the conscious and subconscious often play against each other to create contradictions within a person. He states, “each unconscious state is complementary and compensatory to its conscious state, but naturally, contains memories of earlier states, thereby contributing to that mental self-contradiction of which Vonnegut, Kafka, etc. complained. Each unconscious state has a complex, almost amorphous configuration, but in reaction against that seeming limitlessness, when consciousness

perceives these depths, it usually does so in terms of images, limiting and defining them" (Whitlark). In Jung's theory of the collective subconscious, a person's mind will take these complex contradictions and create simplified archetypes to try to make sense of these ideas.

According to Gimbel, the first archetype is the self. It is a combination of both the conscious and the subconscious resulting in the symbol of the person's true self ("Jung and the Behaviorists"). The narrator of the story could be interpreted as this archetype. He seems to be the most logical character and the story is seen from his perspective. The next archetype according to Gimbel, is the persona. This is the conformity archetype. It is the part of the psyche that adapts to the environment around it and reaches for convenience. It symbolizes the mask a person wears to appear a certain way and hide the unexcepted parts of the self ("Jung and the Behaviorists"). This could be assigned to the waiter, and at times, Mr. Quick. The waiter seems to be a character that accepts his role in life and resists change. He shows distress in the fact that Mr. Quick is going to leave. By this, I could argue that the waiter symbolizes the part of the psyche that resists change and fears what will happen if other parts of the psyche are revealed to others. The character Mr. Quick seems to flow in and out of many different archetypes throughout the story, and at times he can also be seen as the persona. He seems to put on an air of a person who wants to be seen as a gentleman, inventor, and even a historian. These are the masks that the self puts on.

Then there is the shadow. This archetype is often seen as the unknown dark side of a personality originating in the personal subconscious. This archetype often projects itself onto others, and at times, even the world around it ("Jung and the Behaviorists"). Though Jung often believed this manifested as a character of the same sex as the self, this might not be the case for this story. The shadow archetype can be assigned to either the female bees or the outside world. With the female bees, this works especially well if they are not viewed as females, but as an opposing force. If interpreting the female bees to represent women, that would work better when analyzing this

story from a Freudian perspective but doesn't seem to fit within Jung's archetypes. This is why it can be debated whether the female bees symbolize females in this story.

The females are portrayed as everything negative in the world. They are described as ruthless beings that only seem to care about production. In this case, the production of their honey, though it is hard to miss the parallels to the word money. Anyone else that doesn't have qualifying skills is worthless and is killed. This interpretation reveals the possible fear that Vonnegut has of being worthless. The outside world can also be interpreted as the shadow. It could symbolize either stepping into what Vonnegut sees as the dangers of the unknown or the fear of removing the persona. It can also symbolize death. If society only deems humans successful when they have money, then the loss of money would be his metaphorical death from society. Like the drones, once he has completed his basic duties in life and can no longer live up to expectations, he will be killed.

Lastly, there is the anima/animus. Gimbel states that this archetype usually appears as the opposite sex from the self and portrays the opposite stereotypical characteristics of that sex. In this case, the self is a male, which would mean this archetype would be the anima. It would be the eros and exhibit femininity, passivity, and have nurturing characteristics ("Jung and the Behaviorists"). Though the female bees are the only characters of the opposite sex, they do not exhibit these characteristics. This leads back to Mr. Quick himself. At times, he seems to take on the archetype of the anima. He is caring while he coos and nurtures his drones. He shows sympathy for their plight and tries to help them.

Mr. Quick is an interesting character in this story. He seems to flow and shift between the persona and anima archetypes. He seems to personify the psychological conflicts going on both inside Vonnegut's head and in society. This psychological conflict seems to be the feeling that society places on a person to put on a mask to play the part of a productive human being and live up to the societal requirements of making money to be successful, and if not, the person becomes worthless. This conflicts with the true self and finding his self-worth. Through

Mr. Quick, the root of the psychological issue is revealed. The inner turmoil between who he feels he should be, what he fears he is, and who he actually is. He fears being nothing more than “a drain on the community” (Vonnegut).

If the shadow is what is perceived as the negative or unacceptable aspects of the psyche and that is represented by the heartless female bees who only care about the production of honey (money), then does Vonnegut fear that the societal direction of money is dangerous because it will create people who are ruthless and monsters who kill off anyone, they deem unworthy or who gets in their way of obtaining more money? But then why would the drones be more satisfied in life when fulfilling their prescribed roles and dying versus working for Mr. Quick and living a longer life? What does this say about the human psyche? Is this a message from the collective consciousness about what makes humans happy? Mr. Quick seems to describe the drones when working for him, as being in the front lines of an army. He states, “We’re going to teach them to carry interoffice memos, to carry orders from foxhole to foxhole on the front lines” (Vonnegut).

This seems to suggest that just fulfilling a meaningless task to live a longer life does not make someone happy. If the female bees represent the personal subconscious that is buried and hidden within the person, but the drones are only happy after interacting with it, then maybe it holds the key to human happiness. When the narrator, or self, sees the last mangled drone coming back from the beehive right before he dies, he is described as having a “buzz of a soul fulfilled” (Vonnegut). Maybe it is shedding light on the importance of finding your self-worth and meaning in life, no matter how society sees it. Joseph J. Ward with the University of Florida in the article “Oh, the Humanity! Kurt Vonnegut and Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy’s Existential Rejoinder to the Irrationality of the Human Conditions” states, “to experience the human condition is to endure its extensive irrationality. Our response to that ever-expanding irrationality determines the quality of our experience” (Ward 105). Maybe what the psyche perceives as negative aspects of the self, is in actuality, just what society is saying and completely irrational.

It is said that writers are more sensitive to the woes of man, and through their literature, people can interpret these issues and psychological conflicts in society before the general public will see them within themselves. Kurt Vonnegut's "The Drone King" can enlighten the reader to these psychological conflicts whether Kurt Vonnegut wrote it consciously or subconsciously. This story can pull back the layers to the collective subconscious and teach us how humans can reach happiness in life and find their self-worth.

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Feminist

Killer Bees On the swarm

Donald Lewis

Kurt Vonnegut was a prolific American essayist, author, public speaker, and professor he was born in 1922 and lived to see the year 2007. Vonnegut is most known for his novels and short stories. Most of his works are heavily influenced by his time as a prisoner of war during World War II. Many academics would agree that Vonnegut is known for his dark humor and absurdism, as well as his fearlessness when it came to confronting controversial social topics. In the words of Christopher Sandford, a historical author, and biographer, describes Vonnegut's personality and works:

But perhaps his greatest contribution to humanity, and the quality that runs as the throughline of his public career, was the way he relentlessly mocked the presumptions of the ruling elite... he was not the sort of man who believed that anyone should impose his or her own concept of the guardrails defining the limits of acceptable behavior on anyone else. (Sandford page 52)

Although he never outwardly claimed to be a feminist per se, many of his stories addressed gender inequality and other themes related to certain feminist issues. In this analysis, I will first discuss the author as well as the context of the time it was written before I tear into *The Drone King*. *The Drone King*, a short story published after his death Although America has typically

been a patriarchy of sorts, Vonnegut uses *The Drone King* to illustrate the limitations of men and drones alike and highlights human society's flaws in contrast with the very laws of nature.

In a speech he gave in September of 2000, he was explaining the social disparities between people during his youth and later in his life and how despite the social constructs of the patriarchy in American society. Despite the bias towards men, women played a crucial role in many career fields during the mid-1900s. Whilst discussing his educational experience he exclaims about the exceptional teachers of his youth, "Our teacher of ancient history, Minnie Lloyd, should have been wearing medals for all she did at the Battle of Thermopylae... My English teacher, Marguerite Young, went on to write the definitive biography of Indiana's own Eugene Victor Debs." ("Why You Can't Stop Me"). Vonnegut clearly sees the vital role that women played during the great depression and during and after WWII. During this time society severely limited the careers women could pursue, but pursuing a career as a teacher is one way a brilliant women could shine and further their own education. To Vonnegut, this was proof that women have been unfairly held back by society for a long time.

An extremely hot topic in society, and in some of Vonnegut's stories, is the ever-present inequality between genders. In his lifetime he developed a distaste for people in the affluent reaches of society, and always spoke quite highly of women in general, "Most of my best teachers were women and, holy smokes, were they ever bright. So why have women barred them from so many jobs they now hold with distinction? Because of what was then believed to be a law of nature, a natural law." ("Why You Can't Stop Me"). According to the pretext of this story, *The Drone King* was written in the 1950s, but again I reiterate it was published more than a decade after his death. In the 1950s and onwards women and others in America have been fighting an ongoing battle for equality in rights and opportunity between men and women. The Natural Law that is referred to was brought to prominence because of a 13th-century theologian, Thomas Aquinas. This theory states that every human is put into nature to observe what natural rules nature presents, and humans can use these 'rules' of nature to

guide their lives (until they find God, but that is not relevant here). Vonnegut jests that under Natural Law our American founding fathers, “were able to write ‘all men are created equal,’ while meaning only white males – not women, God knows – all while owning slaves” (“Why You Can’t Stop Me”). During this period slavery and mistreatment of women were only ‘natural’ as males dominated society.

Despite all the diverse kinds of nature (plants, animals, etc.) that clearly demonstrate the intrinsic and implicit power of females in general. It is important to note, as far as bees are concerned, female bees are the only ones with the ability to sting. Comparing the male and female bee sizes, you would note that the males are bigger, and they cannot sting. So, if you are ever running away from a swarm of bees, the females are the most dangerous. *The Drone King* points out that there are a handful of species in which the female is the dominant one in that respective species’ society. Mr. Quick explains the reproductive process of bees to the narrator, quite obviously from the perspective of a man, “ ‘This wholesale extermination of the males takes place after the males have performed their most basic function’ he swung his arms around, portraying a swarm of drones chasing the queen, ‘One lucky devil gets her, the jewel beyond price. He dies instantly. And when the rest go home, they are murdered.’” (*The Drone King*). Quick is so unwilling to see the fact that, in nature, once your purpose is served that may be all she wrote for you. Nature is just as cruel as it is beautiful. In the case of the bee, the praying mantis, the black widow, and the tarantula the reproductive process is one of the last things the male aids in before their deaths, by the hand of their counterparts. Long live the Queen (bee)! Quick refers to the queen as a jewel which may be true, but he is referring to the queen as only if she was an object. This reflects how many affluent men viewed and view women (people in general) more as items to be possessed rather than treating them as worthy respectable peers.

The Drone King is about a man named, Sheldon Quick billionaire (or former billionaire), and a last-ditch attempt at a business venture involving bees. A desperate idea based on a profound pity for the life of a drone (male bee). This story

illustrates the fragility of the male ego and a man's utter worthlessness without our female counterpart, at least in the bee world. This tale is narrated by a nameless and genderless human that Vonnegut uses to highlight the follies of men dedicated to being the manliest of men and those who endlessly pursue wealth. One might say this is a pretty sweet story about bees and an exclusive male-only club. When analyzing the components of *The Drone King* through a feminist lens with a focus on queer theory, it is noteworthy that Vonnegut never claimed to be much more than a writer and a very opinionated one when it came to gender inequality or just inequality in general.

In *The Drone King*, Vonnegut does not divulge much information about the narrator of the story other than their profession. One could not surmise the narrator's gender, but upon entering the Millennium Club the narrator explains what they see, "The foyer was guarded by an elegant old man behind a rosewood desk. I gave him my card. 'Mr. Quick? Mr. Sheldon Quick?' I said. 'He asked me to come over.'" (*The Drone King*). The doorman is defined as elegant not just old, which would imply a sort of superior stature held by this character, or 'elegant' is alluding to the monument that is the male ego. So fragile but elegant, nonetheless. The doorman then stops the narrator with a surprising inquiry, "He caught my sleeve. 'Sir...' 'Yes?' I said. 'You aren't wearing a boutonniere, are you?' 'No,' I said guiltily. 'Should I be?' 'If you were,' he said, 'I'd have to ask you to check it. No women or flowers allowed past the front desk.'" (*The Drone King*). Here the doorman questions the narrator's gender, it is unclear why exactly given what we know about the narrator. The narrator is guilty for one reason or another but carries on regardless of the doorman's reaction. The 'no women or flowers past the front desk' is just a sign of the times, at least relative to the setting of the story. It implies that women do not have a place here or need to be involved in any of our business without our knowledge of it. Even a sort of fear of inferiority to women in the face of the way of the world, considering that all men are born from a woman. Vonnegut begins to illustrate the ideal man, albeit a fragile, and proud, house of cards that can be the male ego.

At the beginning of *The Drone King*, there is mention of a clock

that was stopped the day Calvin Coolidge died by Mr. Quick. Firstly, Coolidge was the 30th president of the United States, and according to the White House's records, "the political genius of President Coolidge... was his talent for effectively doing nothing." According to these records, President Coolidge was a pro at maintaining a public image while effectively doing nothing governmentally speaking. He was still hailed for his "distinguished character and heroic achievement" ("Calvin Coolidge"). Coolidge led the country in a time of prosperity after WWI and his laissez-faire attitude when it came to governance allowed many corporations to grow, monetarily speaking. This would lead to a generation of people inheriting millions, like Sheldon Quick. Mr. Quick idealizes Coolidge as a role model or a man to aspire towards. He even hoped to end his time at the Millennium Club on a similar note as Coolidge ended his presidency. Mr. Quick does seem to enjoy all the benefits of luxury, with his cigars and scotch, hidden away in his male-only beehive. Ignorant to the fact that he has more similarities with the male bee than anything else, he just bumbles around with no purpose.

As we know Vonnegut has never been fond of these sorts of men, men like Quick and Coolidge. Who live in their own little house of cards far away from the winds of truth. *The Drone King* illustrates the flaws of what society once considered an ideal man through the narrator's attempt to, gently, shut down this egotistical man's foolish plan. Whilst discussing the concept of messenger bees, the narrator deftly suggests that this business venture would not compete with carrier pigeons or other forms of communication Quick expressed a small agreement with this truth. Nonetheless:

He raised his chin bravely. "very well," he said. "I have gone this far – I will go the rest of the way. I will put my findings before the greatest jury of all, the American public, and let them decide: Have I got the seeds of something useful to humanity, or have I not?" (*The Drone King*).

This is a prime example of how Vonnegut is portraying men to be stubborn and pigheaded fools that cannot leave well enough alone, because their male ego just wants it all. Despite

the reasonable proposal against doing thing this, our favorite guy, Mr. Sheldon Quick proceeds forward will the unveiling of all male-hive of messenger drones. In all its pomp and circumstance this groundbreaking event certainly was astonishing. Especially when all the drones returned to their original hive to be welcomed back by a killer swarm of bees. The only thing that broke that day was Quick's ego and his heart. It goes to show, that you cannot go against the grain of nature or as Vonnegut would say, "So it goes." (Sandford).

The crux of the matter is, Kurt Vonnegut's *The Drone King* is a thought-provoking short story that illustrates the limitations of men in contrast to the ways of nature. Despite being published posthumously, the story is a testament to Vonnegut's views on gender inequality and social issues. Through the lens of feminist theory and queer theory, we see how Vonnegut recognized the role of women in society and how they have been held back by societal constructs. The story also highlights the fragility of the male ego and the importance of recognizing the worth of each gender. As Vonnegut once said, "There's only one rule that I know of, babies—God damn it, you've got to be kind." Ultimately, *The Drone King* is suggesting we recognize everyone's inherent value and strive for a society that values equality and kindness.

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[PART VII]

"*BD* 11 1 86" by Joyce Carol Oates

You can read Joyce Carol Oates's short story "BD*11 1 86" here:
<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2005/08/-bd-11-1-86/304109/>



Joyce Carol Oates is a prolific American writer born in 1938, with a published writing career that spans from her first published novel in 1963 to the present, in which she has published 58 novels and a bounty of short stories, poetry, non-fiction and plays. Among her 16 writing awards are the likes of the PEN/O. Henry Award (1973,1976), National Book Award for Fiction (1970), and National Humanities Medal (2010) to name a few. A well-known work of her short

story fiction is "Where Have You Been, Where Are You Going," that has been adapted into a film in the 1980s called Smooth Talk.

Image: Larry D. Moore, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons,
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/
File:Joyce_carol_oates_2014.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Joyce_carol_oates_2014.jpg)

About the Authors

Damarus Chereji

This is Damarus' final semester, and then she will be graduating with her Creative Writing associates! Next semester she will start her degree in Studio Art, so that when she attains both these degrees, she will transfer to get her bachelors in both realms. Damarus' goal is to become a published author and mangaka who works at the library part-time. Writing, art, music, traveling, aesthetics, and good conversation are what make her happy. She is a Christian and wants to be the first manga artist/writer to write a Christian-themed manga.

LaUrie Boesch

Laurie is an English Major with a Creative Writing focus. She lives in Boise with my husband, daughter, my dog and nine Koi. She enjoys writing, reading, and spending time outdoors. She recently took up bird watching as a hobby and hopes to take up gardening as well.

Lindsey Mathews

Lindsey Ryan Mathews is a lover of literature, and her passion is reading. She enjoys reading everything from high to low-brow literature and children's books. Some of her favorite authors are Stephen King, Alice Hoffman, William Blake, and John Steinbeck. When not reading, Lindsey enjoys spending time

with her two daughters and three cats. She is finishing her last semester at CWI and will continue her education at Boise State University (BSU), pursuing a bachelor's degree in secondary English teaching. Lindsey loves learning and has future plans on obtaining a master's degree in English.

LUKA DENNEY

Luka is a Creative Writing major who plans on graduating in a year or so. She has three cats and possibly two more coming her way later this summer. She also has a family dog who is the craziest dog she has seen in a while, in a good way of course. Luka's animals are her saving grace when she gets too locked down in a writing project. It's great having easy access to pet mayhem and drama when you need it.

Sarah Rhoads

Sarah is currently working on a double major in English Literature and Spanish. She will graduate with both in the spring of 2022 and plans to transfer to Corban University for a degree in Secondary Education Language Arts. Hoping to change the American education system for the better, Sarah intends to teach high school English while advocating for changes in educational standards.

Savanna Gerlach

Savanna is an English major who is currently twenty-two years old. She aspires to become a screenwriter for television. She lives in Nampa with her family while she attends College of Western Idaho. Savanna likes to write, watch television, play video games, cosplay, listen to music, and loves everything that is pink.



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Critical Introduction

Youth: A Right or Privilege in response to “*BD* 11 1 86” by Joyce Carol Oates

“BD 11 1 86” is a story about a young boy named Danny who has unclear origins. Near the end of high school, he is enrolled into a special program. However, it’s revealed to be part of a body donation with him as the donor. The story is about the ethics of human cloning and having a purpose in life given Danny was engineered and raised to be an organ donor. Given the complex subject matter, there are quite a few different ways of analyzing and interpreting this text.

Reader Response by Lindsey Ryan Matthews

The essay “Reality, Identity, and Ethics: Philosophical Complexities in “*BD* 11 1 86,” Lindsey Ryan Matthews, examines and analyzes Joyce Carol Oates’ short story “*BD* 11 1 86.” Reviewing this work through the critical analysis lens of reader response, Matthews scrutinizes Oates’ story from a philosophical approach, reflecting how philosophy majors could read and interpret this short story. Viewing the story through multiple philosophical theories Matthews expounds on the reality, identity, and ethical implications abundant in Oates’s writing. Matthews compiles philosophical questions students could discuss in relation to their study. “*BD* 11 1 86” is a story philosophy majors could connect to various philosophical

theories, gaining new perspective into the ethical dilemmas that revolve around modern science.

New Historical/Class Criticism by Damarus Chereji

In “Joyce Carol Oates and Society,” Damarus Chereji explores the science fiction short story “*BD* 11 1 86” written by Joyce Carol Oates, through the critical lens of New Historical/Class Criticism. Through this lens, Damarus connects the events and cultural ideas that took place in the year 1986 as it connects purposefully with Oates’ story that is written based upon that time in history, showing the influence of the foster care systems and human body rights on literature, which causes its readers to ask themselves introspective questions regarding humanity through the lens of class.

Deconstruction by Sarah Rhoads

“BD 11 86: Duality and Contradictions” looks at the short story “BD 11 86” through a deconstruction lens. Sarah Rhoads presents how Joyce Carol Oates uses irony to write a story with no concrete meaning, arguing that the multitude of meanings leads to more compelling and constructive discussions for both the story and the questions it poses.

Psychological Criticism by Savanna Gerlach

The lens used in “The Five Stages of Grief Through the Eyes of a Body Donor” by Savanna Gerlach is psychological lens. Primarily it uses the five stages of grief to analyze the mindset of Danny in the story. The five stages of grief are the emotions a person feels when going through times that give personal grief such as illness and death. The five stages are denial, anger, bargaining, fear and acceptance in that order. As he is set to be a donor, the essay chronicles how he starts at denial before ending up at acceptance at the end.

New Criticism by Laurie Boesch

In the analysis of “BD 11 1 86”, Laurie Boesch asserts that the

adults that surround Danny Neuworth, all shield him from the immoral, brutal truth that he is a body donor. They lie to him and protect him from his confidential file. They tell him a ruse; that he has become a recipient of a “Good Citizenship Scholarship”. Boesch compares this behavior to that of parents of small children who shield them from the death of a pet, like a hamster or a goldfish. To protect them from the lie, they try to replace the pet with an identical one before the child realizes the original pet has died. Boesch further explains her analysis with a quote from Joyce Carol Oates, which confirms that this is the writing style she likes to render. The essay gives examples of the many adults in Danny’s life that either lie to him or avoid telling him the truth about who he is all together. Oates speaks of speaking to adolescents, saying one thing, and then meaning another, or thinking the opposite of what she tells them. This is how the adults in “BD 11 1 86” act, until Danny meets Cale at BIOTECHINC. It’s the first time any adult is ever honest with him about who he truly is. Cale tells him that BD is the acronym for body donor. In the end, Cale seems to sympathize with Danny and tells him he’s joking, which is another lie. Cale tells Danny he will be prepped for TV, when, in fact, he will be prepped to die and have his body donated to another man. In effect, Cale becomes just like the parents who ran to the pet store. “See, darling child, Fluffy is perfectly fine.”

Each of these essays investigate the subject matter of “BD 11 1 86.” It is a complicated story that explores the idea of being raised your whole life to become a body donor for someone else. The story is one that leaves the audience thinking about what they had read and leaves many ethical questions. These essays give different perspectives based on the text. The story leaves so many questions and dilemmas after reading it. These essays show these different viewpoints of how the tough questions the story proposes can be taken and explored.



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Andrews, Lori B. "My Body, My Property." *The Hastings Center Report*, vol. 16, no. 5, [Hastings Center, Wiley], 1986, pp. 28–38, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3562693>

The article "My Body, My Property," written by Lori B. Andrews, goes in-depth about issues like the autonomy of donors and recipients' bodies not being respected and how this can be managed as well as its effects on all the people involved and on society. It is a good source to use when looking at Joyce Carol Oates' science fiction short story "BD 11 1 86," for the lens of new historical criticism because this article was written in the year 1986, which is the year that Joyce Carol Oates specifically used for her short story, which is written around a teenage boy who was raised to become a full body donor against his will.

Araújo, Susana. "Joyce Carol Oates Reread: Overview and Interview with the Author." *Critical Survey*, vol. 18, no. 3, Sept. 2006, pp. 92–105. EBSCOhost, [search-ebscohost-com.cwi.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=23933974&site=ehost-live&scope=site](https://search.ebscohost.com/cwi.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=23933974&site=ehost-live&scope=site)

In this interview, Oates answers quite a lot of questions concerning a wide range of topics. She discusses specific stories she has written, general writing ideals, plans for future books, style, and much more. Because of how many topics the interview covers, it is useful for a wide range of lenses and opinions. It can be used to add

context to the author's opinions and experiences, thus arguing for a specific interpretation of a text. It can be used to add depth to specific styles, themes, and patterns that might otherwise have gone unnoticed. More specifically, with a deconstruction lens in mind, it offers further insight into the contradictions, irony, and paradoxes seen throughout "BD 11 1 86" thus showing what and how different interpretations and perspectives co-exist. It is a fascinating interview with information to aid in all types of arguments or simply to enjoy and keep in mind while reading Oates' many works.

Bender, Eileen T. "Between the Categories: Recent Short Fiction by Joyce Carol Oates." *Studies in Short Fiction*, vol. 17, no. 4, Fall 1980, p. 415. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip.cpid&custid=ns149246&db=a9h&AN=7134668&site=ehost-live

Eileen T. Bender's article, *Between the Categories: Recent Short Fiction by Joyce Carol Oates*, examines several Oates short stories to demonstrate Oates' ability to move "between the categories" (Bender, 415). In this essay, she expounds on Oates' artistic prowess to write in both traditional contexts and her power to create new inventive approaches in literature. Bender analyzes three of Oates' short story collections, focusing on the different methods and writing techniques that Oates employs. The first collection is *The Hungry Ghosts*, in which multiple souls haunt a university. "The university has become the testing ground for cultural values" (Bender, 416). These stories scrutinize academia and the people that inhabit it. *The Poisoned Kiss* is presented as translated parables from Portuguese. This collection discusses meta-fiction and its death. The last collection of short stories that Bender examines is from *The Goddess*, where Oates writes of femininity and the creative power of women's minds. This essay illustrates Oates capacity to write in polymorphic forms that push the boundaries of fiction.

This essay effectually establishes Oates propensity to reimagine literature and create new methods, keeping

her writing diverse. Any student researching Oates and her fiction will find this essay as an invaluable resource. Dissecting various short stories and the writing techniques involved will give insight into Oates' compositions and her experimentation with new creative forms. This essay not only emphasizes Oates' ability to write in diverse styles, but there is also a central focus on the characters within the stories, illuminating their dispositions, which lead to a deeper comprehension of Oates and her writing.

Carroll, Rachel. "Imitations of Life: Cloning, Heterosexuality and the Human in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*." *Rereading Heterosexuality: Feminism, Queer Theory and Contemporary Fiction*, Edinburgh University Press, 2012, pp. 131–48. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt3fgtnm.10>. Accessed 29 Apr. 2023.

This article explores the concept of cloning in Ishiguro's novel *Never Let Me Go*. The author of this article, is using the Feminist and Queer Theory critical lenses to look at the main characters struggles with identity and the rights the society they live in refuses to give them. Carroll argues that Ishiguro uses the concept of cloning to critique heteronormative culture in the real world.

Corr, C. A. (2018). Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and the "five stages" model in a sampling of recent American textbooks. *OMEGA – Journal of Death and Dying*, 82(2), 294–322.

Elisabeth Kubler-Ross and the "the five stages" model in a sampling of recent American textbooks" is an article that discusses how the five stages of grief is viewed in a modern lens. The article is about showing the different viewpoints that are had on the model as well as giving the own personal thoughts and conclusions of the writer. It also discusses the five stages of grief and helps to clear up some misconceptions such as that the five stages are not always in one set order and that it is more complex than that. The sources used are cited at the end and there is listed info on the author. The article's purpose is to show conflicting viewpoints on the matter and if it is

something that is still worth studying and using in the modern day with the author making their own points and observations. It is to inform the reader of modern viewpoints as well as allow them to make their own conclusions as to what to think about the five stages of grief. The article is a mix of being objective as well as personal since it is the author putting in their own commentary as well.

Curry, Linda Cox, and Joy Graham Stone. "The grief process: a preparation for death." *Clinical Nurse Specialist CNS* 5.1 (1991): 17-22.

The grief process: a preparation for death" is an article that chronicles the process someone goes through when they are afflicted with a terminal disease and how they learn to cope with such a serious situation. It discusses the five stages of grief and how it can help someone eventually get to that point of accepting their death. It documents how it affects both the patient and those close to the patient as the grief of death is looming near. It observes a case of this on a personal level concerning someone with a terminal illness and their family, showing how even in loss there can be some good on an emotional level. It has mentioned the authors' credentials in the field that they are studying in along with a listing of their sources that were used for the paper. It is a case study that uses a real-world instance to tell the reader a situation that they or someone they know could be in one day. It is primarily observational with the authors making their own conclusions about their observations to make their point on how acceptance can be important even if the patient ends up deceased by the end of it.

Daly, Brenda. "Sexual Politics in Two Collections of Joyce Carol Oates's Short Fiction." *Studies in Short Fiction*, vol. 32, no. 1, Winter 1995, p. 83. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=9507233937&site=ehost-live&scope=site

This article looks at 2 works by Joyce Carol Oates and discusses the common threads between them in regards

to how women and men are portrayed on the wide spectrum of sexuality. This author of the article also discusses the style in which her stories are written and how minor choices like ambiguity and fragmentation are used to reference sexuality and gender.

Felski, Rita. *Uses of Literature: A Positive Aesthetic*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2011.

Felski's book delves into the subject of how and why readers engage with literature. She explores the engagement teachers and students have when reading literature. Felski has become discontented with academic analysis and evaluation; instead, she contemplates why readers are "drawn to certain texts more than others." She focuses on why readers are attracted to particular texts while reflecting on why certain works of literature become significant or consequential. Felski proposes that readers engage with literature in four primary ways.

In *Uses of Literature: A Positive Aesthetic*, Felski examines contemporary critical theory within literature and argues that they all have one thing in common, and that is "disenchantment" (Felski, 58). She writes of dissatisfaction with literary critics and their critiques. Instead of focusing on "the act of reading" (Felski, 3), she wants to place value on the "objects read" (Felski, 3). *Uses of Literature* is divided into four categories, recognition, enchantment, knowledge, and shock. Felski illustrates the power of literature, how it can change lives and what readers experience while becoming absorbed in a text.

Felski's book is essential to reader-response criticism examining and reflecting on why readers engage with literature. Felski uses multiple texts to illustrate readers' engagement with literature in the four themes that she outlines and elaborates on the capacity literature has to change lives. Felski's four foundational categories are ideal examples of the emotions readers experience while reading "BD* 11 1 86," leading to a cognizance of how readers will receive and absorb this text. Students of academia will find Felski's book crucial to studying literature in any genre.

Johnson, Carl Nils. "If You Had My Brain, Where Would I Be? Children's Understanding of the Brain and Identity." *Child Development*, vol. 61, no. 4, Aug. 1990, pp. 962–972. EBSCOhost, doi:10.2307/1130868

As the title suggests, this article discusses a study done to test children's understanding of identity by asking them various questions about transplanting different body parts. The study found that the younger the children were, the more challenging time they had understanding personal identity as opposed to physical attributes. They also found that the answer to what would happen to a person physically and mentally changed depending on who was receiving the transplant. Specifically, the children showed that they believed if their mind or other body part were transplanted into another person, the other person would become more like them. However, if the roles were reversed, they believed they would not be affected by the other person's body part. These findings are beneficial in analyzing "BD 11 1 86" because it presents the nuances and different ideas surrounding brain transplants and their implication, all of which are essential things to consider from a deconstruction lens due to its focus on multiple interpretations. A lot of ideas come to contradictory conclusions based on predetermined assumptions, which this article displays quite thoroughly.

Lynn, Steven. "Chapter 4, Creating the Text Reader-Response Criticism." *Texts and Contexts: Writing about Literature with Critical Theory*, 7th ed., Pearson, Boston, 2016, pp. 73–107.

Steven Lynn's *Texts and Contexts: Writing with Literature with Critical Theory*, is a text that assists students in writing and understanding literature with contemporary critical theories. This text guides students with a step-by-step process on how to analyze and write literature through various critical lenses. *Texts and Contexts* offers example essays for students to study, enabling them to employ critical writing methods on their own, enhancing their reading, writing, and comprehension of literature.

Any student wanting to study the subject of reading

and writing literature with critical theory will find this book an indispensable resource. Steven Lynn encourages students to engage and examine literature with close readings. Learning this technique allows students to view literature in new creative ways. With a close reading and comprehension of new theories, students will be prepared to survey and discover valuable information within literary works that remained hidden before reading and applying the methods within this text. Chapter four of this text focuses on reader-response criticism. Any student writing under this critical lens would find this text to be full of insurmountable information.

Lynn, Steven. "Chapter 6 Connecting the Text Historical and New Historical Criticism." *Texts and Contexts: Writing about Literature with Critical Theory*, 7th ed. Pearson Education Inc., New York, New York, 2017, pp. 145-193.

Steven Lynn's book *Texts and Contexts* offers a comprehensive introduction and explanation of many of the major critical lenses used for literary analysis. Each lens has its own respective chapter and attention. In addition, each lens comes with example pieces that connect to that lens and example essays set up around a specific lens. What makes this book most comprehensive is that Lynn goes through all the steps of crafting each essay so that the reader can learn through the whole process of using new lenses and plugging them into essay formats effectively. There are lively notes and examples that are not merely a bullet list of characteristics and rules regarding the lens but in-depth usage and explanation that makes connections that readers and students can resonate with and understand. Though this book is written for an academic audience, it has a conversational style that doesn't bore the reader or lose the reader's attention, for it is intriguing as well as thorough.

Specifically, Steven Lynn's chapter six of *Texts and Contexts* that covers Historical and New Historical Criticism is great for connecting the use of New

Historical critical lens, which is the lens that I am using for my analysis of *BD 11 1 86. This chapter thoroughly explains the critical lens of New Historical. Moreover, it comes with examples and step-by-step methods of using the lens within an essay, which benefits me well in this literary analysis course.

Moo, Jessica Murphy. "The Art of the Unconscious." *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 6 July 2005, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2005/07/the-art-of-the-unconscious/304150/>

Jessica Murphy Moo writes on the subject of Joyce Carol Oates' short story "*BD* 11 1 86" and interviews the author in *The Atlantic*. The article summarizes "*BD* 11 1 86" and writes of Oates' accomplishments in literature. Jessica Murphy Moo inquires about Oates' writing techniques and brings a new nuance to the story. In the interview, she asks Oates multiple questions that led to the writing of this short fiction.

This article takes a deep dive into Oates' story "*BD* 11 1 86," starting with a short summary of the story. Jessica Murphy Moo displays Oates' aptitude by referencing several of Oates' novels and other short stories, such as *We Were the Mulvaney*s and *Zombie*. The interview questions Oates and how she came to write "*BD* 11 1 86." Murphy Moo inquires about the protagonist, Danny Neuworth, and his character development. Murphy Moo discusses with Oates the subject of the story, giving insight into Oates' inspiration. The interview brings forth understanding into Oates' thought process and her views on human nature, along with her preferred genre, while illuminating some of her early work. Any person studying or researching Joyce Carol Oates and her short story "*BD* 11 1 86" will find this article to be a beneficial source. It highlights Oates' writing process and the influences that led to this story's creation. Oates discusses her early work, offering acute information that assists in comprehending Oates' complex writing and her thought processes on multiple issues concerning literature.

Jessica Murphy Moo interviewed Joyce Carol Oates

about her thoughts behind BD 11 1 86. "Joyce Carol Oates talks about modern science, the writing life, and "BD* 11 1 86," her short story in the fiction issue." (Moo). The article gives a short summary of the Oates story, BD 11 1 86, including the ending, which explains the dates on Danny's confidential file. The first one, 11 1 86 is what Danny understood to be his birthdate. Instead, it is the day a crop of BDs, himself included, were engineered in a biotech lab. (Moo). The second date, 6-2-05 is the date that the BDs are harvested. In the interview Moo inquires about how Oates came up with the idea behind the story of BD 11 1 86. Oates responds by saying that she often identifies with adolescents. She says it's a time in life when everything is volatile. (Moo.) Moo writes about Oates' many works that are meant to intrigue her readers and give a mind-boggling experience. Moo asks Oates how the premise of the short story came to her. She asks how she begins her writing process. Moo even asks if her story meant to be her way of expressing her political views, as Oates is accustomed to doing. Oates' answers should be found to be very intriguing indeed.

Oates, Joyce Carol "BD 11 1 86" The Atlantic Magazine.<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2005/08/-bd-11-1-86/304109/>. 2005

Joyce Carol Oates' short story was published in the July 2005 issue of the Atlantic Magazine. The story challenges futuristic science as well as our imaginations. It provokes the imagination and makes us wonder if we could ever find ourselves in this head-turning situation. BD 11 1 86 is a story about Danny Neuworth, who seems like an average teenager about to graduate from high school. He's been asked to see the school counselor, but for what he doesn't know. He second-guesses everything. He thinks he's in trouble, but for what? For having average grades, for being an average athlete on the track team? What could he have possibly done? The adults all around Danny seem nervous or uneasy about something but no one seems to want to say what it is that they are so concerned about. Then, Danny's principal gives him the

news he's been waiting for. He's not in trouble, in fact, it's just the opposite. He's been granted a scholarship, the Good Citizen Scholarship! Suddenly, the colleges he applied for will accept him with open arms where before his grades meant closed doors. It's confusing to Danny, but eventually, he accepts this as great news. Even as the bus with the other scholars takes him away before his graduation, Danny feels like he's been given an opportunity. But the adults are hiding something about who he really is and who he is meant to be. In BD 11 l 86, we find out exactly what that is.

Mughal, Saba, Yusra Azhar, and Waqas J. Siddiqui. "Grief Reaction." (2018). In *StatPearls*. Treasure Island (FL): StatPearls Publishing; 2021 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK507832/>

"Grief Reaction" is an article that talks about grief in specific scenarios such as grief over the loss of a loved one and grief over a terminal illness. It dissects the specifics of grief, using specific terms and making distinctions in how grief happens. It also discusses the five stages of grief as well given it is a model that is used to better understand the feelings that go into grief. It is an article that helps explain the info for those who need specifics on grief and how it may be of use depending on the grief that is affecting them both physically and mentally. It lists its author and their association which is with Drexel University and shows it has been reviewed by others as well. It also lists its bibliography at the end, showing each of the sources that were used. It is more of a straightforward article since it is more about going into the specifics of grief and takes an objective tone throughout, showing the author is not taking any specific sides when it comes to the topic. Its purpose is to inform the reader and give them a better understanding of the subject matter.

Phelan, James, and John Frow. "Reading Characters Rhetorically." *Narrative*, vol. 38, no. 3, May 2022, pp. 1–14. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/

login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=157058746&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

This article goes over the various ways in which different works of literature and media can be viewed through the Rhetorical Analysis Lens. The authors of the article also argue what other factors can be considered from the reader's perspective based on background and ethnicity.

Simone, Lisa. "Interview: Joyce Carol Oates Discusses Her New Collection of Short Stories, 'Faithless: Tales of Transgression,' and the Importance of Setting When Writing Fiction." Weekend All Things Considered (NPR). EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/

login.aspx?direct=true&db=n5h&AN=6XN200106242008&site=ehost-live&scope=site. Accessed 27 Apr. 2023.

Lisa Simone wrote this article for "Weekend All Things Considered NPR, the April 27, 2023 issue. In it, she speaks to Oates about the numerous short stories of Oates' career, as well as her many accomplishments as an author. Oates speaks of her writing style as well as how she comes up with the subjects she writes about. The main subject of the interview is of her book, *Faithless: Tales of Transgression*, which chronicles much of her work from 1966 to 2006.

However, it is in this interview where we see what lies behind the mind of Joyce Carol Oates. It is here that we see that she likes to play with the extreme and wave it around for everyone to see. BD 11 1 86 shows us a future that could one day become our reality. Body donors may seem very immoral to us now, but if cloning technology takes off, could this be our new reality? Given Oates writing style and the fact that she doesn't shy away from controversy, BD 11 1 86 was a story she most likely wanted the world to hear.

Wulczyn, Fred H., and Robert M. Goerge. "Foster Care in New York and Illinois: The Challenge of Rapid Change." *Social Service Review*, vol. 66, no. 2, University of Chicago Press, 1992, pp. 278–94, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30012166>

The article "Foster Care in New York and Illinois: The

Challenge of Rapid Change,” written by Fred H. Wulczyn and Robert M. George, is about the rapid growth of foster care caseloads that grew in the 1980s among infants and children under ten years old. This particular article is primarily going over these changes through the East Coast at that time. This article follows trends that implied that this steady growth would double in the coming decade. The exact year is uncannily connected to the main character of Oates’ character and this time of birth is also important to the other “BD” individuals who were also put into foster care in this year, which makes this source fitting and helpful for my analysis through the lens of new historical on Oates’ short story.



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New Criticism

New Criticism: BD 11 1 86 by Joyce Carol Oates

Laurie Beosch

Danny Neuworth is constantly second-guessing himself in Joyce Carol Oates' *BD 11 1 86*. He asks repeatedly "What's wrong with me?" and "What is in the confidential file?" He notices the uncomfortable looks on the faces of the adults he interacts with. He doesn't find them trustworthy. They always seem to know something secretive about him and none of them want to let him know what it is. It's likely that the adults in Danny's life are trying to protect him from the truth, and that seems to be what this short story seems to be all about. In other words, is it better to tell the truth even if the truth is devastating? When I analyze *BD 11 1 86*, most all the adults in Danny's life all find it easier to lie to him rather than tormenting him with the truth. The truth for Danny, after all, is terrifying. No one in their right mind would want to give news like Danny's to a young 18-year-old man. It's a lot like when parents have to tell their young children that their beloved pet has died. Many parents resort to running to the pet store to find the hamster or goldfish that looks just like the one that got into the rat poison or ate too much fish food. They can't bare to see their children sad or grieving. So, they lie to their children because it's better than letting them know that pets die.

"Well, I like to render experiences that may seem to be marginal and extreme in a very realistic and direct way, in

other words, so that we are having the experiences, and, for the duration of the fiction, we are these people,” said Joyce Carol Oates. (Simeone). BD 11 1 86 is one of those stories that is marginal and extreme in a very direct and realistic way. The story seems so realistic, the reader begins to believe that it could really happen in the not-so-distant future.

Danny Neuworth is a clone, raised to be a body donor, hence the initials BD next to his birthdate, 11-1-86. When the story begins, he is sitting in the guidance counselor’s office at Mt. Olive High school. He is unsure why is there. The counselor carries his file with her. He can see “BD 11 1 86 written on it. He recognizes his birthdate, November 1st written on it, but he doesn’t know what BD possibly could be. He begins to wonder. He wasn’t a troublemaker. His grades were fine, B-/C+.

When he first entered Mrs. Jameson’s office, she was frowning at a document in the file. She glanced up at him then with a look—veiled, startled. “Oh, Daniel. Come in.” Their conversation was stiff, awkward. If he didn’t know better, Danny would have thought the guidance counselor didn’t know him at all. Finally, he asked if there was something in his file: “I guess you couldn’t tell me, huh?”

Mrs. Jameson said quickly, “There’s nothing wrong, Daniel. Of course. What could be wrong?” A deep flush rose into her face. Her voice was oddly flat, toneless. (pg. 2)

Mrs. Jameson is very nervous when she discovers what is in Daniel’s file. She can’t reveal it to him, or she won’t. She’s not alone. When Danny approaches his teachers and his track coach for letters of recommendation for college, they act similarly to Mrs. Jameson, off putting and awkward.

There was Coach Diedrich, who became embarrassed and uneasy when Danny asked if he would write letters of recommendation for him, laying a hand on Danny’s shoulder with a warning not to be disappointed if he didn’t get accepted: “‘The race is not always to the swift.’”(pg.5)

Mr. Fackler, who’d often encouraged Danny as a reporter on the school newspaper, smiled strangely, sighed, and said yes, he supposed he could recommend Danny—“If you really want to go to college.” (pg. 5)

Danny wondered what both men meant by the words spoken

to him as well as the other adults acting so strangely. Just like Mrs. Jameson, they couldn't or wouldn't reveal the truth. Was it to protect him from an ugly horrible truth or was it because they were restricted from doing so?

Mrs. Jameson finally scrambles up from her seat and quickly grabs some brochures of nearby state colleges and suggests that Danny apply because some of them don't require high SAT scores.

"Remember, Danny," she said, "You just have to be you." (pg. 5)

Soon, the principal, Mr. Bernard asked Danny into his office. With a quavering voice, he told Danny that he was the recipient of the "Good Citizenship Scholarship". (pg. 9) Even Danny, as naïve as he was, didn't seem to quite understand how this could be. He wasn't the best student nor was he the best athlete. The principal convinced him of the scholarship's legitimacy by telling him that the school district implemented the program a couple of years earlier. This cover-up, this like that Mr. Bernard told was a lot like the classic story of "Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus". In our culture, there seems to be a need for a "Santa Claus" or "Easter Bunny" and the like. It's the big lie, the falsehood that no one seems to mind telling our children because it's fun to see the excitement in our children's faces. The idea of Santa Claus coming to our homes to deliver gifts on Christmas Eve is such a powerful fantasy, it seems *everyone* is in on the collaborative lie. It's also so heartbreaking when it comes time to tell the children the truth. Yet, the truth is not so horrible; Mom and Dad are "Santa Claus".

"Adults say things to you, and they seem to mean something else. Now, I'm an adult and I'm a professor, and there certainly are times when my students want to know if they should continue as writers, and secretly I'm thinking, *Well, probably, you shouldn't*. But I never want to discourage anyone, so I say positive things. You know, the way they do to the boy in the story. *I have* to; I'm a professor. Also, I don't really know them, much less the totality of their talent—and I feel that I can be wrong. In the story, I am both the boy and one of the teachers who's not exactly lying to him but not telling the truth," said Oates. (Moo)

In Danny's case, Mr. Bernard tells Danny the "Great News" to shield him from the horrible truth. He even tells Danny that

he can go to any college he wants, and his tuition will be paid for, plus room and board. He wouldn't have to worry about a thing. The truth is, Danny would be sent to BIOTECHINC, where Danny would be examined and prepped to be a body donor, along with 55 other "scholars".

Danny arrives by bus with the other "Citizen Scholarship" recipients at BIOTECHINC. He's instructed to get on the bus, missing his graduation. He was told there would be a big news telecast about the Good Citizens who won the award at the end of the bus ride. When they arrive, they see that there is no news story to be had. He is sent into the BIOTECHINC building where he is given a full physical exam. As expected, they find him to be in excellent health. Finally, Danny meets a technician named Cale. For the first time in Danny's life, an adult is being completely honest with him.

"BD. 'Body donor.' That's why you've been brought to our Hardyston headquarters." "Body donor? What's ... that?" "A body donor is a specimen who has been conceived, born, and cultivated for harvest. Your body was contracted for by a client of *BIOTECHINC*. Presumably a male whose brain will be transplanted into your head and attached to—well, the body that comes with it." Cale said, unwaveringly. (pg. 13) If we were to use the example of the pet that passed away from earlier, the conversation Cale would have with his children might be just as uncaring and nonchalant.

"What happened to fluffy?" his child would ask.

"He got out of the cage, got into the rat poison, and croaked. So, I picked him up with the broom and dustpan and threw him in the trash," he might say.

Danny was shocked and scared at the news Cale explained to him. Yet he was finally told the truth. Although the truth is devastating, there may be something refreshing about it. Cale may be the first adult to ever be honest with him. It may be exactly what Danny was needing.

"My belief is that art should not be comforting," Joyce Carol Oates wrote in her introduction to *The Best American Essays of the Century*; "for comfort, we have mass entertainment and one another. Art should provoke, disturb, arouse our emotions, expand our sympathies in directions we may not anticipate

and may not even wish.” (Moo). Danny’s truth certainly is not comforting, but there is a provoking, disturbing emotion to it. It could be the disturbance Oates was trying to convey in her art.

On the other hand, it may be that the lie is what comforts us, it’s what we yearn for, like Santa Claus. In the end, Cale lies to Danny, possibly to hide him from the fact that he was about to die, and his body would be donated to someone else.

Danny shivered. In the distance he heard a sound as of amplified voices, or muffled thunder. He laughed. This was so weird! His throat was sore with laughing. “Okay, I get it. You’re joking? This is some kind of weird initiation, and people are laughing at me on TV?” Cale said, relenting, “Sure, Danny. I’m joking. That’s my job here, to joke. Prep you for TV. Next thing, you’ll want to lie on this table. Just relax, stretch your legs, and the makeup girl will be coming in. On TV your natural skin tone bleaches out. Guys don’t like makeup on their faces, but believe me, you need it. Even you.” Cale laid a warm, consoling hand on Danny’s shoulder. In that instant Danny felt comforted. Cale likes me. Cale is my friend. (pg. 15). Maybe sometimes the lie is more comforting than the truth. As soon as Danny heard Cale say he was joking, Danny was more relaxed, calm, comforted. Hooray, Fluffy is still alive, his fur just looks a little lighter than yesterday. That is a relief.

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Reader Response

Reality, Identity, and Ethics: Philosophical Complexities in “*BD* 11 1 86”

Lindsey Ryan Mathews

“*BD* 11 1 86” a short story by Joyce Carol Oates will leave many readers shaken, questioning reality along with their ethical and moral perpetuity. This story focuses on the debate surrounding one of the most controversial matters of our time; the capabilities of science and bioengineering for humanity’s benefit. Modern science has pushed the boundaries of what was once inconceivable. Oates pushes science extremities over the edge in this short story. Written in third person from the protagonist’s point of view, we follow a teenage through the last few months of his difficult senior year of high school. The mystery of the story will engage readers demanding their attention until the shocking conclusion. The perturbing climax of the story results in a disclosure that makes us question humanity and ourselves. Any reader could become engrossed with this story, but philosophy students would find this reading especially captivating. The story brings to attention numerous philosophical topics and debates that encompass their career. Oates’s story initiates discussion into metaphysics, epistemology, ethical theories, and philosophy of the mind including identity and body theories; making readers inquire about the fundamental questions that have plagued philosophers for centuries.

When a person reads there are various mechanisms at play that affect how a reader engages with a text. Much of literary criticism revolves around “the act of reading” (Felski, 3) instead of the “objects read” (Felski, 3). In Rita Felski’s book, *Uses of Literature* she places value on the reader, how and why readers engage with texts. Felski divides reader engagement into four categories, recognition, enchantment, knowledge, and shock. Readers of “BD” 11 1 86 will experience all of these emotions. The protagonist Danny Neuworth is a confused teenager, the majority of adults remember this time in their lives and will be in a position to relate. The uncertainty within the story enchants readers making them continue to the next page. The disconcerting conclusion leaves readers shocked and questioning humanity. The most prominent category that readers, philosophy students in particular will experience is knowledge. After reading “BD” 11 1 86” students will be presented with creative insight into the ethical matters they are confronted with. This story could reinforce their philosophical beliefs or call into question the beliefs held, leading to new perspectives and considerations.

One of the primary studies of philosophy is epistemology, the study of knowledge. Without epistemology there would be no reason to believe in our thoughts, beliefs, or actions. It explains how our minds relate to reality. Can Danny understand reality since he was bioengineered in a lab? Is his reality true or false; is he a real being or not? Epistemology predicates cognitive sciences and mind-brain theory. Cognitive sciences search for answers to questions such as, are mental states only held within the brain or do other materials help construct identity and reality? Philosophical readers are left to ruminate about Danny’s reality and identity.

Danny’s plight will set in motion discourse into idealism and rationalism, a branch of epistemology, that states reality is made up within the mind. Danny is a body donor that was designed in a laboratory. Readers are left to question Danny’s state of reality. Philosophy students will be introduced to contemporary notions associated with Descartes and his rationalism claim of “cogito ergo sum” I think therefore I am. Danny can conceptualize himself without a physical body, the mind and

body are disparate. What happens when the two are completely separated? If reality is entirely within the mind and constituted by ideas, is it murder to remove a brain from a body donor; even though Danny was created by scientists for that precise objective? Danny is “the property of *BIOTECHINC*, and not independent entities. Without *BIOTECHINC* you’d [Danny] never have been born” (Oates, 14). Danny’s reality and entity might be illusory but according to Descartes; Danny is a thinking being. In philosophy the direct opposition to idealism is materialism, all reality is reduced to physical states. Is Danny’s reality constructed by physical states? If materialism is an actuality then Danny’s reality would be definite. The physical world continues to exist no matter if a being is fabricated or authentic. What reality is and how it is perceived remains a fundamental question and debate in philosophy. In Oates’s short story dubieties emerge regarding humans and their reality. Is this reality achievable for scientifically engineered beings? If all reality, knowledge, and identity is reducible to the mind and ideas, what role does Danny’s body represent in identity and reality?

Danny Neuworth is to be detached from his body, his brain will be shut down humanely and eliminated for an older or terminally ill man, who will then inherit Danny’s pristine eighteen-year-old body. Identity theory centralizes on who a person is and what constitutes the essential self. This theory is notable while examining “*BD* 11 1 86.” Is Danny’s identity established in his mind or body, is it an amalgamation of both? This a question that will intrigue philosophy majors. According to body theory, reality and identity are restricted to the physical body inhabited throughout life. If Danny’s body is his principal self, will the contracted owner of Danny’s body be affected by this and incapable of relating to the body? Will an elemental part of Danny remain after the procedure? Memory theory alleges that the self and identity is embedded in consciousness and memories. If memory theory is accurate the arranged owner of Danny’s body will be in the position to maintain his identity, even with a new body that he was not born with. The owner’s brain will stay intact with its consciousness and memories. There by postulating memory theory as the

dominating concept regarding identity theory. What happens to Danny's brain and consciousness? The imperative ethical dilemmas within this story lead to careful deliberation in response to morality and humanity. Philosophy majors will be tantalized with the ethical queries abundant in “*BD* 11 1 86.”

A substantial amount of Joyce Carol Oates writing involves controversial matters in an imperfect and unfathomable world. She explores ethical standards and morality, with complex situations concerning humanity and its influence and manipulation throughout the world. In *The Atlantic* Oates is interviewed by Jessica Murphy Moo in the article “The Art of the Unconscious.” Oates delves into the ethical implications of her story and her interest in biotechnology. Oates states, “Most of my stories and novels have some turning point that involves an examination of morality” (Oates, 5). In “*BD* 11 1 86” philosophy students will have much to ponder regarding the ethical controversy that arises in this story. In modern science we now have the capability to genetically engineer and alter DNA, clone, perform organ transplants, along with harvesting them. Perhaps brain transplants will be the next advancement in modern science. But what about the body donor in this situation? Is it moral to harvest a body for the intent of someone else's needs or desires? Oates is exploring the ultimate moral predicament when she writes of a character that is intentionally engineered for one objective, to sacrifice his entire body and life for another. “*BD* 11 1 86” stimulates ideas and rouses passionate emotions in readers. It will prompt any reader to question their ethical values and morality, but philosophy students will be highly enticed by the ethical implications surrounding this short story.

In philosophy ethical theories cover the principles of morality, the standard of what is right or wrong and how this prescribes to human character. Ethics are concerned with what is right or wrong for individuals and society. In Oates's story we are confronted with the question of, is it ethical to harvest organs? We can also reflect on this question in regard to animals. In Danny's case we have to consider if it is ethically moral to genetically engineer a being who will essentially be murdered for another individual? Ethical theories are divided into two

groups, teleology, and deontology. Teleology revolves around the rightness of an act and depends on the consequences. The emphasis in teleology is concerned with morality and is orientated towards the certain end goal or act. Viewing Danny's situation through a teleological lens readers are left with an irresolute response to these questions. The consequence of ending Danny's life is erroneous but what if it saves another human being? Readers will experience the same ambivalence concerning deontology. With deontology the rightness of an act depends on the intent and the fulfilling of a moral or duty. Deontology asserts that actions are morally right or wrong and are independent from the consequences. Is it moral to scientifically engineer a being, even if the individual is created to save a life? "**BD* 11 1 86*" is copious with philosophical questions that are enigmatic leaving readers with uncertainty.

Similar to philosophical questions "**BD* 11 1 86*" is unable to find explicit answers due to the contestable and contrasting views regarding the complexities of the inquires. Tantamount to philosophy this story holds no absolute truths. The felicity found in this story revolves around the close inspection of questions that have no definitive answers. Readers can question themselves and what their beliefs are, while also querying humanity and society. Oates is no stranger to writing about the problematic and perplexing circumstances of human existence. In an article written by Eileen T. Bender, she expatiates Oates expertise to write "of the human spirit in an imperfect and chaotic universe" (Bender, 423). In "**BD* 11 1 86*" readers observe Oates at her most compelling. This story takes humanity and scientific progress to new levels, making readers, philosophy students in particular; question reality, morality, what is right or wrong in an 'imperfect and chaotic' world.

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Deconstruction

"*BD* 11 1 86": Duality and Contradictions

Sarah Rhoads

The short story "BD 11 1 86" by Joyce Carol Oates is incredibly compelling and filled to the brim with questions for the reader to ponder and debate over long after they have read the story. Danny Neuworth, the protagonist of the story, challenges readers to consider the morality and significance behind both his life and death. However, the story does not argue the point one way or the other, instead leaving it open to interpretation and discussion. With all of the contradictions, duality, and irony within the story, people will inevitably interpret the story differently and walk away with entirely different experiences. Because of these contradictions, the plethora of conclusions drawn all have their own merits and flaws, leading to a more nuanced discussion rather than coming to an absolute conclusion about the story. Joyce Carol Oates' "BD 11 1 86" is a prime example of a work filled with contradictions and possibilities for opposing interpretations, elevating its quality and providing the opportunity to debate and broaden ethical horizons.

Sometimes ambiguity in a story is unintentional, but as Oates explains in an interview with Susana Araújo written in the article "Joyce Carol Oates Reread: Overview and Interview with the Author," the possibility for continuation and different ideas are built into her stories. She aspires for her characters to

become more human and go beyond the restrictions of typical storytelling.

When you write a story, there is an ending that seems inevitable, but then when you think about it and leave with the story or the novel for a while, it seems to be possible to go on a little further... I feel that my characters... have a livingness and a psychology that overlaps the formal constraints of the fiction. So the characters can still keep on living (Araújo 5).

Oates' characters continue to exist long after the story is over, and thus, their fate is left up to the readers to look at the evidence in the text and decide for themselves how the story ends. Is it a happy ending? A sad ending? What does it all mean? The answers will vary greatly depending on the reader and which aspects of the story they chose to focus on. There are so many different things that duality can represent, and none of them are necessarily wrong interpretations of what is happening. Contradictory interpretations can exist side by side, just like the contradictions in the story itself.

This diversity of conclusions works incredibly well for "BD 11 1 86." The emotions, events, and conclusions contradict themselves in every sense of the word, leaving room for infinite meanings and no fixed significance. The duality of the story provides ample evidence for many arguments. Some of these arguments will be similar to each other, while others will be polar opposites. For example, within the context of this particular story, there will be people who will argue that it describes a bleak dystopia. In contrast, others will argue that the process for brain transplants is entirely reasonable and humane. It all depends on which aspect of the story is looked at, as it presents both of these arguments as equally viable possibilities. These coexisting contradictions provide the opportunity for a fascinating exchange of ideas and debate.

There are different ways people use irony and dualism in their writing, but for "BD 11 1 86," duality is used in a very specific way. In their article "Between the Categories: Recent Short Fiction by Joyce Carol Oates," Eileen T. Bender describes how dualism is often used to show the line between savagery and civility and how often that line becomes blurred. In the article, they note how "[t]he work of Joyce Carol Oates also registers this

pervasive dualism... the interpenetration of old pieties and new visions" (Bender 1). In other words, Oates' stories, particularly "BD 11 1 86," show what happens as old ideas and new ones collide, their balance, contradictions, and similarities. Within this collision, deciding where to draw the line between right and wrong becomes incredibly difficult and often impossible, depending on the interpretive stance taken. The story offers many questions, contradictions, and ambiguities, but it does not and can not provide a definitive answer to any of those questions.

Looking at the specific contradictions within "BD 11 1 86" yields a clear vision of how one story can have polar opposite meanings existing at the exact same time. The first and one of the most apparent dualities within the story is the contrast between life and death. Danny spends his life in fear of it being meaningless. Even though he is alive, he is not truly living. In contrast, it is only once he is dying that he believes he is truly living. He was dead in his life and alive in his death (Oates). This irony carries over into the rest of Danny's existence and "BD 11 1 86" as a whole. From the behavior of the adults in Danny's life to the emotions portrayed and felt, dualism is central to how this story is able to operate the way it does and becomes as compelling as it is.

The duality is there, but how does Oates so expertly craft it, and how does it compel the reader to ask more questions and search for answers? Despite their differences, some aspects of the human mind and perception remain relatively constant, and writers take advantage of that constant to invoke emotions, ideas, and questions within their readers. One such concept is in the idea of self, which Carl Nils Johnson explores in his study "If You Had My Brain, Where Would I Be? Children's Understanding of the Brain and Identity." The study found that "judgments of consistency are more readily affirmed when transformations are hypothetical rather than perceived, when referring to the self rather than another, and when concerned with attributes such as gender rather than psychological attributes" (Johnson 2). People develop a specific sense of self and often draw different conclusions on what would happen depending on who will be affected. Oates uses that knowledge

to prompt questions within her readers and propose several meanings and answers without leaning definitively one way or the other, thus compelling critical thought and discussion.

One benefit of this duality and lack of a concrete meaning is that the story is able to attract a wide range of readers. This variety comes from the interest sparked through the different interpretations. It can connect with a lot more people because they can gain different things from the story depending on how they interpret it. Araujo points this out in her interview with Oates, noting “the way [her] work is able to target a double readership – both a popular and an academic readership” (Araujo 10). Not only is there duality in her writing, but Oates also has a sort of duality in her readership, as the story attracts both high and low-brow readers. Naturally, having a variety of readers lends itself to a variety in discussion and interpretation, which is incredibly beneficial from both an academic and practical standpoint. The fact that there is no absolute answer in “BD 11 1 86” makes it so that there will constantly be debate and growth through it.

Joyce Carol Oates’ “BD 11 1 86” provides readers with several possible interpretations, all equally plausible due to the irony and duality of the story. She does this intentionally and uses her understanding of human nature to present a captivating story that questions the lines of good and evil. All of this results in an intriguing and thought-provoking discussion that leads to growth and understanding. The ambiguity and dualism in “BD 11 1 86” allow for multiple interpretations of the text, leading to more compelling and nuanced discussions.

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New Historical

Joyce Carol Oates and Society: New Historical Analysis of *BD* 11 1 86

Damarus Chereji

In the later decades of the twentieth and up to the present twenty-first century, there has been change and debate over the fine lines of humanity and what it means to have rights over one's body. Looking back to 1986, we can see the evolution of how society reacts regarding scientific use of human bodies and reproductive sciences, including taboos such as cloning and freezing human eggs for scientific research, taking human organs and fluids without consent of the patient and so on. We see the individual's rights regarding the greater good and who gets to have a say in what is morally correct or societally beneficial and which voices are heard or considered, and of course how class contributes to those decisions.

We can also see how in the year 1986, there was an explosive change in numbers of children and infants entering the foster systems in the United States, which naturally can raise questions to why these two things were happening at the same time. These historical events and ideas connect well to author Joyce Carol Oates who writes about subjects such as these in her science fiction short story taking place around 2005. Joyce Carol Oates's science fiction short story "*BD 11 1 86," written in the middle of an era that saw income inequality rise to unprecedented levels in America, asks problematic questions about humanity

and autonomy when considered through the lens of class. Using the lens of New Historical Criticism, we can see the conscious decisions that Joyce Carol Oates made when placing her story around the year 1986, considering what was happening at the time, which must have inspired the story. Let us take the 1980s, specifically what was happening in foster care. In the article "Foster Care in New York and Illinois: The Challenge of Rapid Change," by Fred H. Wulczyn and Robert M. Goerge, their article addresses strange trends since 1986, such as the sharp increase in the rate of placement among infants, towards a trend they dubbed as "no-parent" families. This article states that, "Infant admissions were stable from 1984 to 1986 and then increased at a rate that far exceeded the total caseload rate of growth" (Fred H. Wulczyn and Robert M. Goerge). In Oates' story "**BD 11 1 86*," when the main character Daniel Neuworth is in the sketchy BIOTECHINC one-way glass examination room, near the end of the story, he is with a worker for BIOTECHINC named Cale, who says, "Eighteen is the optimum age. A great crop of you were born in '86" (Oates).

It is stated that Danny was in foster homes and group homes since he was a day-old infant, and he was told by one of his earlier caregivers, Mrs. Hurst, that his mother must have been an afraid young girl who dropped him off in a public area where he would be safe and cared for, though it seemed to him like a fairytale story, to which the scene where it is all told to him that it is not true leads to questions of the other foster infants that were admitted in the year 1986, all without parents, making it all too sinister. These infants being born only to be used as a "**BD**," or body donor. The alarming increase in "parentless" infants and the fact that in Oates' story many infants were born and admitted around the same time, for the same purpose has an uncanny connection that must have been conscious considering the historical event of the time.

Something that deserves some attention when looking at the connections of class and autonomy as well as human rights in the time Oates' story takes place, is all the examples of prejudice and dehumanization as well as ostracization that Danny experiences from the adults in his life, who clearly know of his fate and of his worth as far as his existence goes. Mrs. Jameson,

Danny's high-school counselor, tells him, "Not everyone can be outstanding, Danny. In our American republic everyone is created 'equal,' but only politically-as citizens. Not as in other respects. At your age, you must know that" (Oates). The fact that she is telling him that he is lower than others to his face and then tells a young boy that he should just know that he is lesser and that is how it is, is clearly an act of prejudice and shows that Danny is not important enough to be considered one of those who are worthy to be equal with the common citizen.

Similarly, his teachers are openly reluctant to write recommendations for him as he seeks out college applications, and they give him no support or encouragement, in fact they give him the opposite and tell him it is not even worth shooting for state or community colleges, like that is unrealistic for him even though he is slightly above the average student intelligence and is dependable and ambitious, as these teachers openly encourage students with worse grades than his. He is made to stand back and watch all this happen in front of him and wonder why. Not only is Danny treated like this, but the whole class of foster children are treated like passing shadows. Danny's foster family, the Stampfels consider, "Processing kids into and out of their lives like clipping toenails" (Oates). These kids are considered something as lowly as bodily debris, which is a mindset towards parentless children not only in this story but also in reality, for kids with a family are looked upon with more promise and yes, with more privilege. Without a family to back someone up, their voices may not be heard over those who do, those who have more promise, more worth, more chance than those who are discarded at an early age, or in Danny's case, who was cultivated for purposes that he had no say in.

Sadly, Danny is looked upon as lower than his fellow foster children. In Oates' story, Danny recalls that in the Newark home he was in as a young child, that he was the one of the few that never got adopted, even the children with disabilities were picked over him, to which he realizes that he was never even assigned interviews for prospective parents. He was denied even the possibility of adoption because his life is not his own, for his autonomy and choice are nonexistent; him and the other boys who were born the same day as him.

In 1986, a prominent ethical issue was the question of body rights under medical circumstances such as organ donors and patients who were having their bodies exploited without adequate consent or knowledge, which inspired the article “My Body, My Property,” written by Lori B. Andrews. Andrews brings some interesting points to the conversation of whether bodies should be deemed as property or not. Andrews goes into the history of body rights and how for a long time we have not had property over our bodies with shocking examples. An example that Andrews included was that in the in 1890 there was a man who sold the rights to his body after death, however, he tried to refund the money and to cancel the contract. Within this lawsuit, “the court held that he must turn his body over to the Institute and also ordered him to pay the damages for diminishing the worth of his body by having two teeth removed” (Andrews).

Andrews goes on to make the rounding point that, “It is one thing for people to have the right to treat their own bodies as property, quite another to allow others to treat a person as property” (Andrews). Something that strikes as odd is that Danny is made to have so many physical examinations, and of course his last examination, two days before graduation where they do unimaginable test on him with internal probes and nude photos of his body from all angles. There is also the way the doctor addresses him in such a weird way, “Neuworth, Daniel S.,” instead of something more casual like Daniel or Danny. In this exam, they do hours of x-rays and draw his blood. These are all things they have been doing to him throughout all the years of his life that he overlooked as part of the foster care experience, when really, they are taking advantage of him like property, and grooming him for their own monetary gain, like he is something to be cultivated, a crop, a source of fortune, not human.

The dialogue between Cale and Danny over the rights of Danny’s body tells what worth Danny has in his society. Cale says, “See, it isn’t as if your body was ever yours, Danny. You were planned, engineered, copyright *BIOTECHINC*, just like me (Oates). Danny begins to piece things together and think that he has worth still, to which he says that this would be considered

murder, to which Cale answers by saying, “No. You and your siblings are property of *BIOTECHINC, and not independent entities. Without *BIOTECHINC* you’d never have been born” (Oates). This statement alone addresses that this *BIOTECHINC* institution throws all human rights out the window in the name of some scientific rights over human lives, cultivated for a purpose that serves others, and yes for monetary gain, which is cruel and cheapens the idea of the cultivated people’s lives.

Steven Lynn, in his book *Texts and Contexts*, specifically chapter six, which covers the critical lenses of Historical and New Historical Criticism, says some important points that contribute to Oates’ story in the regard of class and who and how people are heard through history and how that affects society through this specific lens. The Marxist theory could be applied to Oates’ story since “*BD 11 1 86” deals much with class and society dealing with monetary gains and differences in social classes, with higher status clearly benefitting from all the classes lower than them, however, that idea is capitalist, and this story also shows how people delude themselves into thinking that that they can all be the same, like no one is special, that “You can only be you,” as one of Danny’s teachers liked to say, which is a lot like Socialism rather than capitalism that is more about going for your reams no matter where you start. According to Lynn, “Marxism is a theory of history, a way of thinking about labor, society, and economy that predicts the inevitable demise of capitalism” (Lynn, pg. 156). Lynn goes on to say that “The work of Marxist analysis involves understanding how a culture’s ideology creates the individual’s self-perception” (Lynn, pg. 156-157). In Oates’ story, there is a direct example to the exploitation of one human for another human’s gain, which could be in the example where Cale is explaining to Danny that a neurosurgeon is going to saw his skull open and replace his brain with someone else’s brain. Who that someone is, and their status makes much sense with the type of person one would have to be to afford such a procedure or want such a procedure. Cale when addressing the ‘client’ who is taking ownership of Danny’s body says:

“I’m guessing he’s an old fart who claims to feel

eighteen in his heart. Or he's terminally ill in his worn-out crap body. Or he's just turned fifty, megamillionaire getting paunchy, slow reflexes, losing his hair and his wind, can't depend on his dick. Your dick-that's worth the 1.8 million just by itself, Client wants a new body, and if he can afford it, who could blame him? Hey, man, not me" (Oates).

This example definitively shows the type of class that this sort of experiment applies to. Those who have money and that are in higher positions than the average person, however, in this story, the common people turn their face away at the evil in front of them, the cultivation of humans for the sake of selling them, the sake of monetary gain that somehow is seen as an understandable, if not something that people find a desirable, investment.

The fact that Joyce Carol Oates' story was written around the year 1986, in a year that saw an alarming increase in parentless foster home admissions, and a time where people were arguing the values of body rights and autonomy and what that meant, and how these events and cultural ideas connected so well with "BD 11 1 86" shows how through Oates' story we are not merely entertained by a science fiction coming of age story, but of how as a society we view the worth of human lives in the relation to monetary gains and what humanity means, what makes a human's life their own and what laws and money can do to influence the answers we give to those answers, as seen through our own histories which also have an influence on our self-perceptions and ideas regarding humanity viewed through the lens of class.

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Psychological

The Five Stages of Grief Through the Eyes of a Body Donor

Savanna Gerlach

The idea of being raised to be a body donor is a terrifying and confusing concept. The idea that it is to be your life purpose and that it will most certainly end in your death so you can be harvested. A lot of feelings and emotions would be running through someone's head if they were to go through all of this. Grief would be a part of this given it is natural. In the article "Grief Reaction" by Saba Mughal, Yusra Azhar and Waqas J. Siddiqui, it details grief and its symptoms in particular anticipatory grief: "Anticipatory Grief is a response to an expected loss. It affects the person diagnosed with a terminal illness as well as their families." (Mughal, Azhar and Siddiqui) All of this occurs in the short story "BD 11 1 86" by Joyce Carol Oates is a story that covers this topic through the perspective of a young teenager named Danny who ends up in this scenario. The story shows his mindset and emotions as he unknowingly gets closer and closer to what is supposed to be his fate. The story shows him going through the five stages of grief upon a closer look. The five stages of grief are denial, anger, bargaining, fear, and acceptance. These five stages are observed in those dealing with grief in situations such as death, grieving and illness. It is shown how Danny goes through all these stages as he is to be a donor as seen in the instances before the graduation date and his harvesting at the end of the story.

The first stage of grief is denial. Denial is denying what is going on and is hesitant to accept the current situation. It is a way to not focus on the current matter, to not have the mind fixed on it. A huge part of the story's suspense and tension before the reveal at the end is how Danny is purposely put into a state of denial of the people around him such as his favorite teacher and foster parents who say that everything is fine, and he has nothing to worry about when he keeps finding strange things that show he is being left out or some sort of focus is on him. They do not want him to know what is going to happen to him given they already know he will die when he becomes a donor. They could be doing to be humane so Danny can keep living his life as normal as he can before the day comes to harvest him and he will not have to have the worry about dying in his mind. The other reason they could be doing it is to not have him interfere with the results of what is going to happen so that he does not refuse or run away from it. Because of these factors, Danny is in denial at the start of being forced into it. Near the end, he ends up in denial again as he tries to process what is happening when he is given all the info about what is going to happen to him. "You're kidding right? What's actually happening here? This is some sort of joke?" (Oates) He tries to question it and says that it is just a joke because he wants to deny what is currently happening. He keeps running through his head that is not real and it is just a prank, or someone will save him even as he is told increasingly about who he is and what will happen to him.

The second stage of grief is anger. Anger comes from feeling angry at what is happening saying how it is not fair or should not be happening. It can also come from feeling angry that things cannot be changed. After learning about some strange things that are occurring around the graduation date for Danny along with the teachers' behaviors towards him, he begins to become frustrated and ignored. He feels like the teachers have no faith in him for the future. While they are acting the way they are to not tip Danny off to his fate, he takes it as they don't think he is good enough for college or a good paying job since his grades are not great, being average at best. He feels like all the adults in life have turned on him, which contributes to

his growing anger. At the end of the story, he becomes more and more insistent that this can't be happening to the point of laughing till he hurts his throat, becoming more emotional and unrestrained about his harvesting.

The third stage of grief is bargaining. Bargaining is desperately wanting things to change to the point they would say they would do anything for things to change. It is the desire for things to be different from what is causing grief. Danny wants to have things be different as the adults begin to act weird towards him as well as him being turned down from the places he applied to. It's clear he wants some sort of change and answer. At first, it seems his bargaining is accepted when he is given a good citizen scholarship. When he gets it, it seems everything is turning around for him and he is excited about the future, he does not know about the looming danger that occurs when the graduation date appears. At the end of the story, he goes into bargaining as he is pleading for something to change. He keeps cycling through different ways that maybe this is all a joke or maybe he will be saved. This can be seen when he latches onto Cale, the one telling him about what will happen. He is somewhat comforted by him and thinks of a scenario where Cale changes his mind and rescues him. "But a second way, which was beginning to be exciting to contemplate, was that Cale would defy his *BIOTECHNIC* employers and help Danny escape from the compound into the hills of North Central New Jersey." (Oates) He thinks of a scenario seen in fiction and hopes that maybe it will come true which unfortunately does not happen to Danny, no matter how much he bargains for it to happen.

The fourth stage of grief is fear. Fear comes from being afraid such as what can occur during grief and a fear of the unknown. It can also come from fearing death such as the moment of it and what occurs after it. Danny goes through fear when he ends up in the building of *BIOTECHNIC*. He has no clue as to what is going on since everything seems contradictory to what he was promised. It's clear that the fear is starting to seep in, and he is lost since things have taken a turn that he was not expecting. He ends up in fear again as he learns what is going to happen to him. Fear becomes worse for him when the air

seeps through the vents and there is no way out of this for him. He is faced with the moment of death and that this is the end. Despite the promises that it will be humane and painless, it is still terrifying to be faced with the end of life, especially at such a young age. "He was anxious, shivering. A tinge of nausea of the kind he felt before a race." (Oates) He is forced to confront the terrifying prospect of what everything has been leading up to. This moment is filled with fear, though he slowly begins to let go of that fear as he heads to the final stage of grief.

The final stage is acceptance which occurs in the very end. Acceptance is a way of making peace with what is happening and even trying to find the positive in what has happened. It can be seen as moving on from grief. As the air starts to fill the room, Danny slowly begins to let go of being scared as seen in the previous stage. He reflects on his life and mentally reframes the fact that he will be a body donor. He sees it as having a purpose in his life for once after spending it wondering who he is. His body will be harvested and given to someone else which will help them. It can be seen as an act of kindness from him to this person. He also seems to not be alone since the story has shown he is rather isolated and feels lonely. In this sense, his body will always be with someone else. He also mentions how this meant he was always being watched by this organization and thus there was someone always looking over him. Danny's overall fate is tragic given his life is forfeit at this point. In "The Grief Process: A Preparation for Death" by Linda Cox Curry and Joy Graham, they observe a patient who is dying and how they and their family handle it: "If a strict disease-oriented viewpoint is adopted, then the case was a failure: the patient died. From an emotional and spiritual viewpoint, however, this individual and his family achieved success, as they had time to complete their journey to acceptance." (Curry and Stone, pg.1) In his last moments his mind focuses on making his own peace so that it won't be miserable at the end by coping and rethinking things through. The last line of someone calling out his name is ambiguous as it could be him coping by thinking of a voice or someone coming to comfort him.

The five stages of grief are a concept that applies to the story before the reveal of Danny's purpose as well as the end when

Danny realizes what happens to him. The story is about Danny as he progresses through these stages and shows his changing mindset. The five stages of grief are not always in a set order. In “Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and the “Five Stages” Model in a Sampling of Recent American Textbooks.” by C.A. Corr, the article highlights how the five stages are complex and it can be potentially out of order: “It is not clear whether the individuals interviewed by Kübler-Ross did or were obliged to “go through” all of these stages in the order given.” (Corr, pg.2) At first, the first free stages are more at his feelings towards how people are acting and treating him which he goes through. He then goes through the first three stages again when he is confronted with the full truth of who he is and what his purpose is along with the last two stages, being forced to confront them now. The impending loss of oneself is a terrifying concept but, the story explores the way someone’s feelings towards their grief and loss can evolve.

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Feminist

Your Body, Your Rules: At Least, That's How It Should Be

Luka Denney

In Joyce Carol Oates's short fiction story, "BD 11 1 86" a boy named Danny is getting ready to graduate high school. He has just turned 18 and suddenly all the adults around him start acting strange. Just the adults. "It wasn't Danny's friends and classmates who behaved strangely with him, just adults." (page 1) We move through the story as Danny thinks about each parental figure in his life and how everything was fine until they saw his file with the label "BD 11 1 86-6 21 05" at the top of the first page which is his birth date combined with the day he's supposed to graduate. He has good grades, behaves well, and even aspires to go to a good college. In the end, it is revealed BD stands for Body Donor. Danny was created in a lab and purchased by a millionaire somewhere, and once he turns 18 and graduates high school, he is off to be put down like a beloved pet at the vet and his body preserved or "harvested" for the millionaire who purchased him 18 years ago. In "BD 11 1 86," The concept of bodily autonomy is seen as optional rather than a requirement when Danny learns his whole existence is out of his control. We have to look at stories like this with a Queer theory lens because of the near future coming our way, so that we are better prepared to give anyone and every one the power over their own body, the way it was always meant to be.

Cloning is an implied theme in "BD 11 1 86." In the article,

"Imitations of Life: Cloning, Heterosexuality, and the Human in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*," Rachel Carrol talks about the possibilities that come with the science of cloning other human beings, like another option for couples who can't have kids as well as the original idea behind the novel which was having a clone of your organs ready for if you need them. The thing is though, there's something here that she's missing. How and where are we supposed to draw the line based on ethicality and morality? If some groups of people don't want to kill animals for the meat, skin, and other aspects how are the same groups of people and more so going to be ok with doing the same thing to people? You might bring up the excuse, "Oh but they're just clones, they're not real people, right?" Well, that's where I would say you are wrong. Look at the way Danny thinks and processes what's going on around him in "BD 11 1 86." This line for example, "they don't have any hope for me. they don't like me." (6) Look at his anxieties and the way he rationalizes the othering behavior from people he idolized or saw as parental figures. Doesn't it feel as if he's the same kind of human as the rest of us? So, with that in mind, think about what it takes to create an individual replication of a person. Just like with robots and AI in our reality, there is time, thought, and work put into making them look and behave exactly like we do. So, once the ability to recreate life has been achieved, it's easy to see how wrong it is to take away the power over someone else body.

To add more to the concept of ownership of one's own body, "Bodies That Matter," by Judith Butler goes over how someone's body is defined by their own choices rather than the social norms enforced by surrounding culture. In "BD 11 1 86," however, this concept has become problematic because of the idea that a body copy can be made but it has its own consciousness attached leaving many to wonder who owns this body. It's easy to look at Danny throughout the story and say he is in charge of his own body considering how well he takes care of it most of the time, "Sometimes he cut himself shaving out of carelessness... He wore his usual clothes... Much of the time he wore his Walkman, and his mind was totally elsewhere." (1) but by the end, especially with that reveal of what BD stands

for, "BD. 'Body Donor.' That's why you've been brought to our Hardyston headquarters." (13) You not only start to question who exactly it is that owns Danny's body but you know for certain it's not Danny. So, to own someone else's body through the science that is cloning where do you draw the line between staking a claim on something that logically shouldn't be claimable and a way to extend the life you've assumably worked very hard to accomplish for yourself and your family. Let's be clear in case I wasn't clear already. I'm not against the art of cloning as a whole, I'm against the injustices that follow if you go about it the wrong way.

When I think of cloning there are 2 brilliant examples from highly popular movies that come to mind. Two movies have impacted the way I think of Fantasy and the real world, especially concerning the many ways they merge and flow in between. With these movies, I will give examples as to better alternatives to ways to make a clone more ethically than what's been demonstrated through "BD 11 1 86." The movies in question would be "The Fifth Element," directed by Luc Besson, and "Avatar," directed by James Cameron.

Firstly, in *The Fifth Element*, an alien being implied to be much smarter and superior to humans is transporting a very important statue that is supposed to save the human race from destruction, when they are inevitably killed. The catch here though is a piece of this alien was found and preserved, then taken to a lab where there is a lot of fancy technology, or as fancy as you can get with 90's movie props, and a piece of DNA was sampled and converted into human DNA where the science people then made a completely new body from this single strand of DNA. I might even add this scene in particular where the body is being made is exceptional, especially considering it was made in the 90's and could be considered ahead of its time. The point here is they made a new body from an existent piece of DNA from the original life form, which means with the right mindset and goal in mind it could be possible to make a copy of your own body like they did in Oates's story but with an alternate perspective on the consciousness issue at hand.

The viewpoint of consciousness has been a big deal here and

the true reason for that is because I have a very important idea in mind that changes the very thing I have a problem with in this story. When created a human body the Consciousness does not have to come with the body. The proof of this concept is in *Avatar*, where one of the goals of the main characters was to blend in and walk among the alien species they were working with. how did they do this? By making a custom alien body for each person with no existing consciousness so they could transfer the person's consciousness back and forward as many times as they pleased or needed. With this idea in mind, it is completely possible to recreate this type of science and technology to make a clone for the exact purpose described in the short story, without the main issue at hand.

In conclusion, the importance of looking at stories like this one with a queer analysis lens and an open mindset will further lead us to a future where cloning becomes a normal part of life just like robots and it will be closer to the dream future where most people will get along with one another.

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Avatar. Directed by James Cameron, Lightstorm Entertainment, 2009.

Daly, Brenda. "Sexual Politics in Two Collections of Joyce Carol Oates's Short Fiction." *Studies in Short Fiction*, vol. 32, no. 1, Winter 1995, p. 83. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=9507233937&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

Carroll, Rachel. "Imitations of Life: Cloning, Heterosexuality and the Human in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*." *Journal of Gender Studies*, vol. 19, no. 1, Mar. 2010, pp. 59–71. EBSCOhost, <https://doi-org.cwi.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/09589230903525445>.

For this essay, I used Chat GPT as a resource to give me a summary of the feminist and queer theory analysis lens, "Feminist queer theory is a critical analysis lens that combines feminist theory and queer theory to examine how gender and sexuality intersect and shape social power dynamics. This approach challenges the dominant cultural norms that promote heteronormativity, gender binary, and patriarchy, which result

in marginalizing individuals who do not conform to these norms.” With this, it helped me better understand the material so I could write better essays. This information was accessed on, May 6th, 2023.

[PART VIII]

"Recitatif" by Toni Morrison

You can read Toni Morrison's short story "Recitatif" at this link:



<http://ToniMorrison.com/Recitatif>

https://www.cusd80.com/cms/lib/AZ01001175/Centricity/Domain/1073/Morrison_recitatifessay.doc.pdf

Toni Morrison was born Chloe Ardelia Wofford in Lorain, Ohio in 1931. She attained a bachelor's degree from Howard University, and a master's degree from Cornell University. She

worked as Random House's first black female editor while continuing to write and went on to receive the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2012. After her death in 2019, she was posthumously inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame in December of 2020.

"Toni Morrison" Public Domain via Wikimedia Commons
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Toni_Morrison#/media/
File:Toni_Morrison_\(The_Bluest_Eye_author_portrait\).jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Toni_Morrison#/media/File:Toni_Morrison_(The_Bluest_Eye_author_portrait).jpg)

About the Authors

Amy Stroud

Amy Stroud is graduating from the College of Western Idaho with an associate's degree in English. She plans on transferring to Boise State University to continue her education in education. After BSU, Amy wishes to pursue teaching high school English. Amy has a passion for creative writing. While she is working towards a career in education, she aims to take on creative endeavors when the opportunity is present. She believes that you can never know where creativity could take you if you do not try.

Charlie Russell

Charlie Russell is graduating from the College of Western Idaho with a dual major AA in the Spring of '22 and will be transferring to an undetermined University in the fall. She does not have any specific career goals, but she is looking forward to using her writing skills in any job she finds herself in. She likes to read, play video games, and watch dark comedies. She lives life like she does most things, chaotically but with love.

Faith Cornell

Faith Cornell is a student at the College of Western Idaho, studying to earn her AA in English Literature. Afterward, she plans on transferring to a university to get her bachelor's degree.

Presently, she is considering editing or teaching as a career and hopes to publish her stories someday as well. Faith enjoys writing sci-fi and fantasy fiction, reading, drawing, and playing classic video games. She approaches life with the desire to grow from her experiences and to treat others with love.

Kayley Dodd

Kayley Dodd is a student finishing her Liberal Arts Major program at the College of Western Idaho. Some of her favorite books are written by novelists, such as Grace Livingston Hill and Leo Tolstoy. Throughout the week, she enjoys driving her car and listening to music. However, she also finds pleasure in working on cars and watching shows about classic cars. As a major family person, Kayley loves movie nights with her loved ones, watching action and comedy movies. Many of the hobbies she does include baking cakes, paddleboarding, ice skating, and playing tennis and basketball.

Phoebe Caringella

Phoebe Caringella is currently a student at the College of Western Idaho studying Liberal Arts who has plans to transfer to a university after she completes her AA. Even though she does not know what she would like to do with her education, Phoebe plans on having fun and exploring the options available to her. She loves to read, write, take care of her numerous plants, hike, and listen to true crime documentaries whilst drawing. Her biggest aspiration in life is something she already achieved, to live every day excited about the next.

Ryn Kowallis

Ryn Kowallis is graduating from the College of Western Idaho with a Liberal Arts AA in the spring of 2022. She will then go on to complete a STEM AS the following year. Once she has completed both degrees, she has plans to transfer to another university out of state. She enjoys spending time outside with her cat Chloe and swimming when she has the energy. Ryn is looking forward to using the skills she acquired through the

Liberal Arts program in her daily life. Her goal in life is to take things one step at a time, making sure to stop and smell the roses along the way.

Critical Introduction

In our writings about Toni Morrison's "*Recitatif*," which was published in 1983, each one of us found a unique perspective. Each of these essays are done through a critical lens that helps bring deeper meaning to the messages that are in "*Recitatif*." Some of the lenses include New Criticism and deconstruction. There is an ongoing discussion of how racism affected both the author and her characters, along with other potential struggles such as the need for feminism.

New Criticism

In Amy Stroud's Essay "Why Maggie", Amy discusses the importance of Maggie's role in "*Recitatif*" for Twyla's and Roberta's journey as they face their past trauma from their childhood and Maggie's overall role in representing themes of discrimination and victimization. Amy explores the purpose and importance of removing racial identifiers to create an atmosphere of self-reflection for the readers while having Maggie have specific physical identifiers that expose her disability to the readers. She also examines why Twyla's and Roberta's connection is deeply intertwined with their treatment of Maggie and how each of them approaches the situation when faced with the reality of their past actions and experiences at the orphanage. She concludes how Maggie's role allows the exploration of the complexity of discrimination while not hindering the self-reflection of unconscious biases the readers

face when reading and how Maggie became an outlet for Twyla's and Roberta's feelings towards their mothers.

Reader Response

Perceptions can shape how a reader views a text through their own personal background, culture, and experiences associated with race. Toni Morrison's literary works explore the Afro-American experience, the meaning behind race, and the historical elements of societal boundaries. In her short story "Recitatif", she demonstrates this through the complex interracial friendship between two girls who experience parallel stages of life from childhood to adulthood. The story takes place during the civil rights movement era, emphasizing racial strife as a major factor that shapes their lives. Morrison does not reveal the race of each girl in order to ingeniously expose the racial codes that the world and individuals confine themselves to. Therefore, "Perceiving Racial Inferences in 'Recitatif'" by Kayley Dodd examines how racial speculations in "Recitatif" confront a reader's own predispositions concerning racial identity.

Deconstruction

In her essay, "Deconstructing Race in *Recitatif*", Charlie Russell attempts to portray the push and pull of race and the dichotomy of class between the two main characters. The purpose of the essay is to show the futility of assigning a race to either girl in the story and to expose Morrison's endeavor to make the reader acknowledge the racial biases that we all have due to history and society. Her aim in the essay is not to assign race but to point out the contradictions and tangles of what is a very real, although fictional, experience.

Historical / New Historical

In this essay, Phoebe Caringella discusses Toni Morrison's impact on the world through her literature and the overall message that she has instilled in *Recitatif*. The author has garnered respect all over the world and uses her platform to

deliver thought-provoking messages on the psychological trauma experienced by African Americans. The main characters, Twyla and Roberta, are both established to be from different races, but they are kept racially ambiguous by Morrison. This essay examines why she chose to use racial ambiguity and her larger picture of community, examining overall the purpose it serves to unite people. The story is set in an orphanage with a broken and fragile community fraught with psychological trauma from the discrimination present in the '60s and '70s. As time passes the girl's friendship is torn apart by the disagreement about what happened to Maggie and frustration from racial tension. The connection between Maggie and the historic events becomes more apparent when the essay dives deeper into the reader's perception coupled with those of Twyla and Roberta.

Psychological

In "Childhood Experiences and the Development of Identity in Toni Morrison's 'Recitatif,'" Faith Cornell analyzes the short story "Recitatif" through a psychological lens using Eric Erickson's theory on human experiences and exposures in various stages of life that determine how people develop cognitively. This analysis examines the adverse childhood experiences and socioeconomic statuses of two children in Toni Morrison's short story. These women, Roberta and Twyla, spend a portion of their childhood living in an orphanage, away from their distant mothers. Throughout moments in their lives, their actions demonstrate the influence from their experiences that shape their identities and strain their friendship and recollection of the past.

Feminism

Racial feminism in "Recitatif" is an essay by Ryn Kowallis that tackles the idea that not all women have the same experiences in life but that all women deserve to have the same benefits. The essay broaches topics such as racial discrimination and how our perceptions of race can cause more pain and difficulty for women, how women's relationships with each other can help

strengthen perceptions or tear them apart and, that despite all that, women stand strong for their beliefs and can learn to be true to their own perceptions of themselves.

Each of these topics and lenses gave us different perspectives and windows into the lives that Toni Morrison created in her work "*Recitatif*." But despite the variety of our lenses, we can confidently say that this was a meaningful short story. We were each able to learn more deeply what it was like to be a woman in those times, and especially what it meant to be a black woman. We all hope that these essays will help those who read our works to gain an appreciation of the story as we have.

Annotated Bibliography

Caringella

Harris, Trudier. "Toni Morrison: Solo Flight Through Literature Into History." *World Literature Today*, vol. 68, no. 1, 1994, p. 9., doi:10.2307/40149836.

Trudier Harris takes a historical approach as she looks at Toni Morrison's work. Harris begins by addressing Morrison's reputation as an African American female writer who has received multiple awards, including a Nobel prize in literature, acknowledging her for her style and messages within her for works. Morrison's works are a staple in American Literature and represent the African American experience for many students and scholars around the world who use her work as a lens for American Literature. Harris focuses on some of Morrison's[AS1] works to pick out pieces of history for discussion on the racial tension and prejudice prevalent in American history, drawing to her conclusion that these pieces have united people all over as her audience and understand hardship under her tutelage. The author states in their conclusion that Toni Morrison has taught people the futility of thinking only in absolutes, to trust ancestry and intuition, and to question preconceptions. Closing with the idea that Toni Morrison was a pioneer who received a reputation and then used it to stay rooted in the community , her commitment is seen in her

willingness to teach others and raise funds for the humanities. As the author has declared repeatedly, Toni Morrison has been the ambassador of diversity to American literature and she continues to be an inspiration to future generations.

Bennett, Juda. "Toni Morrison and the Burden of the Passing Narrative." *African American Review*, vol. 35, no. 2, 2001, p. 205., doi:10.2307/2903253.

In Juda Bennett's article, she focuses on the broader portion of Toni Morrison's work in correlation with the larger shifts in culture, politics, and aesthetics. During the time this paper was written, there was an "explosion" of analysis, criticism, autobiographies and biographies, studies, and pieces on the topic of passing for white. Bennett places Toni Morrison's most known books and short stories into three categories: characters not physically capable of passing for white, fully capable of passing for white, and the refusal to reveal the racial identities of the characters. In this article, the author discusses six stories and "Recitatif" falls under her third category about the refusal to reveal the character's race, it allows the reader to understand that while this story may encourage them to figure out the racial identity of the characters it never allows for an answer to be reached. Juda Bennett explains that the racial ambiguity in *Recitatif* requires the readers to be active and not passive in their engagement with this story. Additionally, she points out the symbolism embedded in Toni Morrison's work directed towards America's contradictions in the laws and hierarchies. In Bennett's conclusion, she states that the symbolism of Maggie in *Recitatif* adds to the theme of "removal of racial codes", with this there is a sense of involvement and curiosity that makes us believe in an alternate possibility. Because of this desire to figure out which character belongs to each race, the reader becomes involved in the story and more susceptible to epiphanies geared towards reading rather than plot. The passing narrative is used to paint the larger picture of the effects of racism upon the

African American community and expose this to white America.

Morrison, Toni, and Nellie McKay. "An Interview with Toni Morrison." *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 24, no. 4, 1983, p. 413., doi:10.2307/1208128.

Nellie McKay interviews Toni Morrison on her life and writing process, this includes how Morrison's writing settings have evolved by reaching greater distances from the United States [AS5] to Europe. Toni Morrison discusses how she creates and writes about the characters; she explains that their story is not completely known but their outcome has already been determined. Nellie McKay reaches into the complexity of Toni Morrison's characters, especially the women's weaknesses and the multiple layers of Morrison's male characters. The "haunting" nature of Toni Morrison's stories is a source of pride for Morrison because it is her goal to create these long-lasting memories that make readers think and feel. In the interview McKay questions Morrison's desired outcome for her literature and the criticism of black writers, Morrison replies that she wants African American stories to be heard and reflected in the books without the fact that the characters are "black".

The interview concludes with Toni Morrison's music analogy, Lena Horne or Aretha Franklin do not give their listeners everything but leave them with the desire for more. Likewise, Morrison aims to make her readers want more of what she has and to never completely satisfy them.

Li, Stephanie. *Toni Morrison: a Biography : A Biography*, ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2009. ProQuest Ebook Central, ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/cwidaho/detail.action?docID=497247.

In this book written by Stephanie Li she goes over the life of Toni Morrison. Li discusses the early years of Morrisons life and throughout her writing, editing, and teaching careers in exploration of Morrison's inspiration for her stories and what makes her a powerful African American writer. Stephani Li presents old interviews of

Morrison, information about her personal life, her novels, achievements, and awards to tell the story of one of the most influential writers in American literature. The topics that are presented in Li's book are as follows: early life and family, education and early career, editing and mentorship, early literary career, critical recognition, later novels, and collaborations and cultural critiques. Toni Morrison's short story "Recitatif" is mentioned and brings forth Toni Morrison's philosophy of life and beliefs on racism. Morrison uses all of her characters, women, men, children, and their relationships to explain to her audience the importance of talking about racism and how it is depicted in a white society.

Morton, Marian J. "The Transformation of Catholic Orphanages: Cleveland, 1851-1996." *The Catholic Historical Review*, vol. 88, no. 1, 2002, pp. 65-89., doi.org/10.1353/cat.2002.0038.

Marian J Morton's article is a historically centered account on the evolution of Catholic orphanages from the mid 1800's to 1996. It was a traditional practice to take in orphans or dependents when their parents could not take care of them, and as events like those of World War II struck the nation the Catholic childcare institutions were present to take in the growing number of children in need of shelter. The events that took place in this large time frame shaped the way orphans were taken care of, this includes laws that were enacted for the welfare of children, the mental trauma children experienced from these institutions, and the deinstitutionalization movement and child advocacy pushes that ultimately made the orphanage system crumble. Adoptions services were founded and child welfare acts were placed down as a push to eradicate the child abuse found in orphanages. The emergence of foster families and victim protection programs for the children who were sexually assaulted ended the American orphanage institutions and redefined Catholic charity services.

Cornell

De Neve, Jan-Emmanuel. "Personality, Childhood Experience, and Political Ideology." *Political Psychology*, vol. 36, no. 1, 2015, pp. 55–73. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/43783834. Accessed 26 Apr. 2023.

"Personality, Childhood Experience, and Political Ideology" examines the 'big five' personality traits modeled by possible character dimensions and how they affect political ideology. The five traits are openness, conscientiousness, agreeableness, extraversion, and neuroticism. Independently, these traits have no inherent influence on ideology. However, when paired with environmental and social experiences from childhood that create lasting developmental impacts, these traits potentially shape one's ideology. The political views referenced, including liberalism, conservatism, right-wing authoritarianism, and social dominance orientation, are associated with varying prevalence levels among personality traits. Author Toni Morrison writes on political views surrounding mothers and segregation among African Americans and whites in her work "Recitatif". This source provides an understanding of which ideologies Morrison's characters fit, as suggested by their personality types, life experiences, and actions.

Farah, Martha J., et al. "Environmental Stimulation, Parental Nurturance and Cognitive Development in Humans." *Developmental Science*, vol. 11, no. 5, Sept. 2008, pp.793–801. *EBSCOhost*, [doiorg.cwi.idm.oclc.org/10.1111/j.1467-7687.2008.00688.x](https://doi.org/cwi.idm.oclc.org/10.1111/j.1467-7687.2008.00688.x). Accessed 26 Apr. 2023.

This journal discusses a cognition study on children from lower socioeconomic spectrums (SES). Due to the higher stress and poverty levels in these lower classes, exposed children receive less emotional warmth, involvement, and responses from others, especially caretakers. One category of neurocognitive function affected by experiences in childhood is memory. Through the study, experts discovered that while SES

does not significantly affect memory, there is a one in three difference between the memory abilities of children with and without proper parental nurturance. Two grown women in “Recitatif” cannot agree on what truly happened during a troubling event they experienced as children. As suggested by the findings from this study, their faulty memory could be due to the influence of their distant mothers and the negative figures from the children’s home they spent time in.

Wang, Dan, et al. “Long-Term Neighborhood Effects on Adolescent Outcomes: Mediated through Adverse Childhood Experiences and Parenting Stress.” *Journal of Youth & Adolescence*, vol. 49, no. 10, Oct. 2020, pp. 2160–73. *EBSCOhost*, doi-org.cwi.idm.oclc.org/10.1007/s10964-020-01305-y. Accessed 26 Apr. 2023.

The authors of this journal provide insight into the connections between neighborhoods, parental stress and the behaviors of adolescents. Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are any exposure to dysfunctional, abusive, or neglectful caretakers that cause negative effects on the development and behavior of children. This study particularly benefits the analysis of Twyla and Roberta’s thoughts and actions in “Recitatif” because of the circumstances posed by their mothers and childhood community that meet ACE criteria.

Dodd

Abel, Elizabeth. “Black Writing, White Reading: Race and the Politics of Feminist Interpretation.” *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 19, no. 3, Spring 1993, p. 470. *EBSCOhost*, doi-org.cwi.idm.oclc.org/10.1086/448683. Accessed 26 Apr. 2023.

The academic journal examines how a reader can interpret literature based on the insights by an author’s ethnicity. The author’s message can convey a variety of meanings depending on the relation between the audience and author’s shared or different racial identities. Toni Morrison’s writings exhibit the role of societal norms in influencing character and

psychological portrayal. Culture, history and personal background form an individual's interpretation of a text in how race and class is perceived in "Recitatif". Feminism is observed in the literary elements of "Recitatif" with the interconnectedness between race and a woman's role. Investigating the racial codes found in Morrison's depiction of racial identity is the premise that this journal emphasizes. The journal reviews the deconstruction method, cultural criticism and historicity in how race and class can take on meaning in literary compositions.

These critical approaches are expanded upon with the intention of determining the associations that "Recitatif", among other literature, are seeking to help the reader understand in how they come to certain conclusions. Through this journal, Bennett gives reasoning into Morrison's intent for the audience to recognize and develop their own self-awareness of racial predispositions. This academic journal serves as a literary analysis that focuses on the relationship between points of view through a cultural and critical lens.

Harris, Trudier. "Toni Morrison: Solo Flight through Literature into History." *World Literature Today*, vol. 68, no. 1, 1994, pp. 9–14. *JSTOR*, doi.org/10.2307/40149836. Accessed 28 Apr. 2023.

Trudier Harris' article "Toni Morrison: Solo Flight through Literature into History" delves into Morrison's background in being a well-known writer who has contributed to the world of literature. The author presents information on Morrison's achievements, such as being a Pulitzer Prize recipient, that provides a new outlook on African American experience in western literature. The style of writing and plot structure seen in Morrison's compositions are explored in the article. The integration of African American and American elements in Morrison's literature is examined in how it addresses diversity and the framework behind American postulations on race. The history of race in the texts of literature, its impact and conceptual meaning, are

researched through the interpretation of conventionality. An overview of Morrison and the history behind her writings are stated in their applicability of the times, both in the past and the present.

Moya, Paula L.. *The Social Imperative: Race, Close Reading, and Contemporary Literary Criticism*, Stanford University Press, 2015. ProQuest Ebook Central, ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/cwidaho/detail.action?docID=4414760. Accessed 28 Apr. 2023.

The book *The Social Imperative: Race, Close Reading, and Contemporary Literary Criticism* by Paula Moya analyzes the relationship between the reader and a literary text. Observing cognitive and social constructs through literature forms and alters the interpretation by the reader. By examining the meaning and purpose behind close reading, Moya discovers the implications and cultural boundaries that exist in many literary works, such as Toni Morrison's. The reader's personal history, background and culture shapes the way they receive or understand the message of a passage. How one reads literature will determine how they form their own meaning and connection to it. A reader's response to topics that encompass race, gender, culture and society are influenced by their personal ideas and relationship to those concepts. The characters in Toni Morrison's short story "Recitatif" form their own cognitive ideas based on their personal histories and backgrounds. Whether in fiction or reality, an individual's history and culture shapes their ideas on how they perceive the world around them. This is the central focus of this book as it provides a fundamental study into these approaches for a variety of literary compositions that includes Toni Morrison's.

Kowallis

Androne, Helane Adams. "Revised Memories and Colliding Identities: Absence and Presence in Morrison's 'Recitatif' and Viramontes's 'Tears on My Pillow.'" *MELUS*, vol. 32, no. 2, 2007,

pp. 133–50, www.jstor.org/stable/30029727. Accessed 28 Apr. 2022.

Helane Androne references both Toni Morrison's 'Recitatif' and Helena Viramontes's 'Tears on My Pillow' to draw our attention to their struggles for personal and collective power. She brings in the aspect of parenting and how the mothers can influence the main characters in their developments of those powers. The memories that the two girls have in Recitatif continue to change how they view their past, and by extent, how they view themselves. This source will be beneficial to my essay because it shows how people are shaped by their lived experiences, regardless of what those memories show. It also gives a good breaking off point for the different upbringings in different cultures and situations.

Morris, Susana M. "Sisters Separated for Much Too Long': Women's Friendship and Power in Toni Morrison's 'Recitatif.'" *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, vol. 32, no. 1, 2013, pp. 159–80, www.jstor.org/stable/43653369. Accessed 28 Apr. 2022.

Susana Morris's work shows the connection that these two women have through their life, in a perspective of need. Not only was their connection brief in their girlhood, but it was lasting even in their brief encounters. Morris shows the need of that relationship and how they both developed alongside each other. She also sheds light on the inherent power that friendship can have in a person's life, especially a friendship that crosses lines in the 1950's. This source will help bring in the start of a racism aspect of feminism and how women are viewed depending on which side they are on in that. This could show how femininity is treated differently on either side, and what feminism means for women in general.

Wyatt, Jean. "Toward Cross-Race Dialogue: Identification, Misrecognition, and Difference in Feminist Multicultural Community." *Signs*, vol. 29, no. 3, 2004, pp. 879–903, www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/380629. Accessed 28 Apr. 2022

In Jean Wyatt's essay she talks about how race affects how people are perceived, with care paid to a feminist view. This essay is not specific to Recitatif but has a great

many things to offer to the perspective of those two women. It brings up questions about real vs. perceived identities and how to properly identify with one's own culture. This particular source will be used as an aid in understanding the more in-depth topics that are hidden in Recitatif's words.

Russell

Abel, Elizabeth. "Black Writing, White Reading: Race and the Politics of Feminist Interpretation." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 19, no. 3, Spring 1993, p. 470. EBSCOhost, doi-org.cwi.idm.oclc.org/10.1086/448683.

In Abel's piece, "Black Writing, White Reading: Race and The Politics of Feminist Interpretation", she touches on the underlying theme of black and white feminism, examines the dichotomy of both lenses and critiques the simplicity of narrowing them down. In this text, Abel compares her reading of "Recitatif" with black feminist Lula Fragg's reading, even going so far as to write to the author, Toni Morrison. The reply does not satisfy her questions, and instead, Morrison explains that the story is built to make the reader recognize their own preconceived ideas about race and class traits. Abel goes on to deconstruct and magnify the issue of being a white person that is critiquing writing that deals with race, making points like the white reader and the acknowledgement that must be made that they will have had a different experience in life.

Li-Li, Wang. "Decoding racial identity of the characters in Recitatif." *US-China Foreign Language* 9.12 (2011): 812-816.

In this paper, Li-Li argues that Morrison is attempting to show the idea that both black and white people identify themselves with the differences between them. They attempt to assign race to both characters in the story, taking clues from Morrison as to which is which. Li-Li finds that most clues could possibly work for either race or could be more easily attributed to stereotype. Li-Li concludes with the idea that Morrison's "Recitatif"

allows the reader to confront their own ideas of race and challenges them to rethink and re-examine their own tendencies of thought. They propose the idea that Morrison has created a story that requires outward participation in the deciding, and in the deciding, learning more about oneself and growing in the process.

Halpin, Brian F., et al. "Literature: An Exercise in Futility or the Way to Save the World?" *The English Journal*, vol. 95, no. 6, 2006, pp. 28–32, doi.org/10.2307/30046623. Accessed 29 Apr. 2022.

This essay explores how we can teach students and ourselves how to use writings like Toni Morrison's "Recitatif" to understand and write about race and class. Halpin confronts issues like "whitewashing", classism, and class blindness in schools and how to combat the apathy it breeds. He tackles other issues like school politics and critiques the independent school while focusing on how to better teach and understand how literature can affect and even change the world.

Stroud

Miehyeon, Kim. "Sympathy and Indeterminacy in Toni Morrison's "Recitatif"" *Oak, Feminist Studies in English Literature*, Volume 23, Issue 1, April 2015, p133-166, oak.go.kr/central/journallist/journaldetail.do?article_seq=20110&tabname=mainText&resource_seq=-1&keywords=null

Toni Morrison's goal is to experiment in removing all racial codes from the narrative in a story and challenges readers to examine their morality through self-reflection. Miehyeon argues that morality cannot be reduced to abstract societal norms. Recitatif in its goal to be ambiguous to generate sympathy and to have readers self-reflect on their own morality, limits itself to the constraints of societal stereotypes. In doing so, this allows Morrison to generate the desire to self-reflect due to the emotional connection between the two main characters while also generating feelings of sympathy from distant

relationship of the two as they grow up. Miehyeon's essay not only discusses how Morrison's removal of racial cues generates the act needed to motivate one to self-reflect but how the relationship between Twyla and Roberta creates sympathy as they grow distant. At the epicenter of Twyla's and Roberta's divide is Maggie, a conflict that cumulates overtime due to the revelation of how each of them remembers and thinks of their mistreatment of Maggie. Not only does the audience have to self-reflect on their viewpoints and unconscious stereotypes due to the removal of race, Twyla and Roberta are both faced with the same problem as they do not remember Maggie's race or how certain events occurred.

Sklar, Howard. "What the Hell Happened to Maggie?" *Stereotype, Sympathy, and Disability in Toni Morrison's "Recitatif"*. University of Helsinki, December 2011, web-s-ebscohost-com.cwi.idm.oclc.org/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=1&sid=767b9bf8-0481-4377-a9d1-564c87e61cd1%40redis

Sklar's article examines how while the 'no pity' approach when writing disabled characters reinforces the stereotype of weakness in the disabled population, Morrison's approach while depending the narrative on Maggie for Twyla's and Roberta's growth, "Recitatif" paints Maggie's identity more complexly. Morrison generates a sympathetic engagement from the readers that transcends Maggie's role from her prosthetic role for Twyla and Roberta. Sklar's article dives into how Morrison's vagueness on Maggie's disability and race, just as she removed the racial cues for Twyla and Roberta, allows the audience to self-reflect on disabled characters and perceived stereotypes one might hold for disabled people. Maggie is the crux for Twyla's and Roberta's divide, yet her role is more complex than just her disability. Her presence is felt throughout the story as Twyla and Roberta come to their own terms on how they treated Maggie and what truly occurred.

Stanley, Kumamoto Sandra. "Maggie in Toni Morrison's "Recitatif": The Africanist Presence and Disability Studies"

Oxford Journals, Oxford University Press, Vol. 36, No. 2, Summer 2011, p71-88, www.jstor.org/stable/23035281

Stanley examines how Morrison's "Recitatif" and its role in exposing society's unspoken racialized codes, bringing it to the foreground. Stanley primarily focuses on the one character who generates a sense of difference from the others, Maggie, who's disability ostracizes her from being perceived like everyone else. He questions why Morrison places Maggie in the foreground, evident in the last line "What the hell happened to Maggie?" which paints the importance of her role. When critiquing "Recitatif" critics should not be analyzing how they read Twyla and Roberta, rather how do Twyla and Roberta read Maggie? Stanley's focus on Maggie brings in the question of her role and why she is the only character to have a perceived otherness in the story all about removing perceived notions about people. Maggie plays a crucial role in "Recitatif" while only appearing in Twyla's and Roberta's childhood, Morrison placing her in the epicenter of their moral epiphany and the divide in their relationship. Maggie's purposeful ostracization has Twyla and Roberta analyzing their own biases as they don't remember what truly occurred or her race alongside the readers self-reflection on their biases towards Twyla and Roberta.

New Criticism

Why Maggie

AMy stroud

In “Recitatif” by Toni Morrison, the two main characters Twyla and Roberta when first introduced do not initially enjoy each other’s company. Only when they both participate in the harassment of Maggie, the kitchen woman, do they form a friendship. While Maggie’s physical presence is only during the girl’s stay at the orphanage, her impact is felt throughout the story, being mentioned each time Twyla and Roberta meet throughout their life. With the purposefully placed mention of Maggie at the end, being cried out by Roberta, “When she took them away she really was crying. “Oh shit, Twyla. Shit, shit, shit. What the hell happened to Maggie?” (Morrison 20), it is clear Maggie’s role in this story is significant to Twyla’s and Roberta’s story. In “Recitatif” Morrison uses Maggie to represent the issues of discrimination and victimization while keeping the ethnicities of any characters discreet so readers can reflect on personal bias and connect with Twyla’s and Roberta’s inner turmoil with their past.

From the beginning, the intentional exclusion of specific racial identifiers for Twyla and Roberta is notable. When Twyla first meets Roberta she states, “It was one thing to be taken out of your own bed early in the morning-it was something else to be stuck in a strange place with a girl from a whole other race.” (Morrison 1) or “ I liked the way she understood things

so fast. So for the moment it didn't matter that we looked like salt and pepper standing there and that's what the other kids called us sometimes." (Morrison 1). While racial identifiers are never mentioned throughout the story, racial stereotypes are frequent, done purposefully to make the audience decide who is Black and who is white. In the beginning the racial stereotypes were unapologetic and purposeful:

Mary (Twyla's mother) dropped to her knees and grabbed me, mashing the basket, the jelly beans, and the grass into her ratty fur jacket. "Twyla, baby. Twyla, baby!"... She was big. Bigger than any man and on her chest was the biggest cross I'd ever seen. I swear it was six inches long each way. And in the crook of her arm was the biggest Bible ever made. (Morrison 4-5).

In this example, the reader's unconscious biases come to the forefront: Do they decide Twyla is Black because her mother is overreactive, or do they decide Roberta is Black because of her mother's heavy stature and her pronounced religious presence? Both women portraying common African-American stereotypes that at first might seem to undermine the purpose of removing race but considering that Morrison's purpose is to pull from known biases, the ambiguity is clearly intentional. Miehyeon mentions in her article "Sympathy and Indeterminacy in Toni Morrison's "Recitatif," "the subject inaugurates its reflexivity and ethical agency in the context of an enabling and limiting field of constraints in relation to a set of imposed norms" (Miehyeon, section 1). The stereotypes being used need to be recognizable for the majority to understand what they are alluding to while encouraging the readers to question why those stereotypes, whether they believe in them or not, are being thought of. The removal of racial identifiers allows the readers to self-reflect on unconscious biases and stereotypes. However, this device limits the narrative in its discussion with its main themes discrimination and victimization. Maggie's role within "Recitatif" reconciles these limitations.

Maggie is the only identifiable character in "Recitatif" whose physical traits are mentioned: "Maggie couldn't talk. The kids said she had her tongue cut out, but I think she was just born

that way: mute. She was old and sandy-colored... I just remember her legs like parentheses and how she rocked when she walked" (Morrison 2). She is ostracized by all the kids in the orphanage because of her disability, even by the main characters Twyla and Roberta. As Sandra Stanley states in her analysis "Maggie in Toni Morrison's "Recitatif": The Africanist Presence and Disability Studies," "Disability studies shares with multicultural studies. Both draw from current theories emphasizing the multiple constructions of otherness and the exploration of often articulated, potentially oppressive social codes" (3). Maggie's role can be interpreted to represent discrimination of ethnicity and disability, and the connection between the two allows Morrison to explore the complexities of discrimination has on the victim and the perpetrator through Maggie while allowing the audience to self-reflect on their unconscious biases through Twyla and Roberta. While Twyla and Roberta endure their own discrimination at the orphanage for being the only "orphans" with living mothers, Maggie is not a character they find commonality with. Rather, Twyla and Roberta join in on the discrimination against her: "'Let's call her,'" I said. And we did. "Dummy! Dummy!" She never turned her head "Bow legs! Bow legs!" Nothing. She just rocked on, the chin straps of her baby-boy hat swaying from side to side" (Morrison 3). A moment that originally united the girls ends up setting a course of personal reflection for both characters as they question the actions of their past. Perhaps this is done to reflect on the readers own self-reflection, being joined by Twyla and Roberta. This reflection creating a divide between Twyla and Roberta as they try to come to terms with their past.

Twyla's path in self-reflection vastly differs from Roberta's path as they question their actions. In the end, their reason is the same: Maggie reminded them of their own mothers. Twyla's mother was never fully present in her life, even if she was around. Twyla's description of her mother's first appearance paints the reality of her relationship with her mother, "she smiled and waved like she was the little girl looking for her mother- not me" (Morrison 4) and "Mary would have kept it up-kept calling names if I hadn't squeezed her hand as hard as I could. That helped a little, but she still twitched and crossed

and uncrossed her legs all through service.” (Morrison 5). Twyla is forced into the role of being the adult in the relationship, managing her mom as if she was a toddler. This connects to the same reasons why Twyla hates Maggie: “Even for a mute, it was dumb-dressing like a kid and never saying anything at all” (Morrison 2). In Twyla’s eyes, Maggie is just as childish as her mother.

Maggie’s inability to speak also reflects the distant relationship between Twyla and her mother, Twyla never having the ability to communicate with her mother. This is revealed by Twyla herself in her last encounter with Roberta: “Maggie was my dancing mother. Deaf, I thought, and dumb. Nobody inside. Nobody who would hear you if you cried in the night. Nobody who could tell you anything important that you could use. Rocking, dancing, swaying as she walked.” (Morrison 19). While Roberta also comes to the same conclusion, “I thought she was crazy. She’d been brought up in an institution like my mother was and like I thought I would be too.” (Morrison 19). When Roberta looked at Maggie and saw the reflection of her mother, perhaps she feared going down the same road as her mother. Maggie became a reminder of her potential fate. For her, it was easier to push the thoughts away from herself and blame Twyla by accusing her of being the girl to push Maggie down in the orchard instead of addressing her feelings against Maggie. For Twyla, she embraces her reason for disliking Maggie believing even though she didn’t physically injure Maggie, she wanted to, just as she wanted to hurt her mother every time she saw her: “All I could think of was that she (Twyla’s mother) really needed to be killed.” (Morrison 5).

“Recitatif” is a story of self-reflection and the exploration of discrimination. The readers go on their own journey of self-reflection on their unconscious biases and reflect on stereotypes. They are joined by Twyla and Roberta throughout the story as they reflect and struggle to face their past traumas, ostracization, and their treatment of Maggie. Maggie’s role is more complex than just symbolizing Twyla’s and Roberta’s mothers, she represents the struggles of discrimination and victimization due to societal codes that oppress ethnical and disabled communities in America. Maggie may be a minor

character in the surface story, but her role in the reader's journey of self-reflection and influence on Twyla's and Roberta's story is present throughout "Recitatif." This is why Maggie's role is important to Twyla's and Roberta's growth, giving them an avenue to face their childhood trauma.

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Reader Response

Perceiving Racial Inferences in “Recitatif”

Kayley Dodd

Toni Morrison’s short story “Recitatif” captures the time period that the story is set in during the civil rights movement era. The story guides the reader to form their own perceptions through the societal influences that have shaped one’s ideas pertaining to race. Through clever wording throughout the narrative, the reader is directed to construct their own views as character and background information develop. The life stages of two eight year old girls are paralleled through time, initiating the assumptions that a reader may formulate. Through a society’s depictions and conventionalities associated with each race, a reader sees what they believe to be true in literature. However, Toni Morrison ingeniously exposes these preconceptions through a reader’s response in regards to psychological knowledge and ideas displayed through descriptions, imagery and social constructs.

In “Recitatif”, the foundation to constructing schemas between the character’s race and personal history evolves from the first line of the narrative. In this first line, two girls named Twyla and Roberta were introduced as children who were placed into the St. Bonaventure orphanage though they were not orphans. Twyla narrates how she was at the orphanage because her mother danced all night and Roberta was there because her mother was ill (Morrison 1). Through the

parallelism of Twyla and Roberta's journey's, inferences were made based on their upbringings and stages of life. One of these inferences is when Twyla first met Roberta, noting her dissatisfaction by being "sick to [the] stomach" because she was in the same room with "a girl from a whole other race" (Morrison 1). Not knowing the race of Twyla and Roberta, who were called "salt and pepper" by the orphans, posed an interesting dynamic in revealing my own ideas in regards to who they seem to be. However, "people do not look out and naturally "see" race; rather we learn from our societies and from each other how to "read" it onto the body of the other" (Moya 162). As the story progresses, it becomes evident that Morrison chooses to not reveal the race of each girl, but gives the reader an opportunity to form their own ideas from various clues.

These clues that suggest the primary characters' ethnicities are the descriptions of their lifestyle, family members and social status. By manipulating the expected racial codes that are implied through associations, Morrison exposes the boundaries that form the consciousness in terms of racial classifications (Abel 3). It is interesting to see how the concept of a point of view resonates with the influences that society and culture has in forming it. When it comes to each of their lifestyles and perspectives, Twyla stated that the orphanage "wasn't bad" as she was already lonely since her mom was always gone due to dancing. She even mentioned how the food served at the orphanage was good compared to what she would typically eat. Noticing how Twyla thought the "hot mashed potatoes and two weenies were like Thanksgiving" caused me to assess her very low income household, eating what she could find for sustenance. With Roberta, she wanted to leave the orphanage and be with her mother. When Twyla had depicted Roberta's disgust with the food, it is because she was "adequately fed and thus can disdain the institutional Spam and Jell-O that Twyla devours as a contrast to the popcorn and Yoo-Hoo that had been her customary fare" (Abel 4). My assumptions continued to alternate as I read that Roberta did not know how to read. Morrison explores race relations through the complexity of these children's stories in order to demonstrate the "futility of thinking only in absolutes" (Harris). Understanding the era of

this story, my ideas pertaining to reading caused me to guess that Roberta was black. As it was known during that time that black children were not afforded the same opportunities in learning as white children due to segregation, I presumed that she was black based on my cultural knowledge. A reader will form their expectations while engaging in a novel through their previous experiences, cultural knowledge and educational awareness (Moya 56). However, my point of view was taking shape as the mothers had arrived on the scene.

The depictions and descriptions of the mothers brought a whole new perspective in how I viewed Twyla and Roberta. When Twyla's mother Mary and Roberta's mother, whose name was not stated, were described in manner and attire, the stereotypes of society had formed my opinion in a few ways. Mary was wearing make-up, green slacks, Lady Esther dusting powder and a fur jacket (Morrison 4). In pondering this, my mind instantly thought of Mrs. Hannigan from the movie *Annie*. Though Mary danced at night, she may have wanted to come across as successful even though it reveals the hard reality that she is not providing for her daughter as she is spending it on herself. The idea of dancing at night shaped how I saw Mary as being black or white, but reading about her unwholesome behavior at church made me wonder even more if she was white. It becomes more perplexing when Mary did not bring food for Twyla as Roberta's mother had with the "chicken, ham sandwiches, oranges and box of chocolate covered grahams" (Morrison 5). With Roberta's mother we find a complete contrast of character. Roberta's mother was characterized as a tall woman who had a massive cross necklace and Bible. Roberta's mother was depicted as a God-fearing woman who cared for her daughter even in the midst of being ill. Roberta could be thought of as one who came from a loving family that was cared for. Contrary to Roberta, Twyla was neglected by her mom who was more concerned about vanity and appearance than her own daughter. In comparing these two characters, I had believed that Roberta and her mother were black as I associated the big cross necklace and Bible with the Bible Belt in the South, even though the setting is in New York. This challenged me as I pondered how and why I was quick to

assume a person's race based on simple descriptions. Thus, Morrison's goal for a reader to see and to examine the preconceptions of race, identity and social cues (Harris) was clear as I had read this story. I did not realize how much my own thoughts had been molded and conditioned to have certain points of view due to cultural influences and racial codes.

As I examined this story's progression, the anticipation in knowing how Twyla and Roberta would be as adults based off of their formative childhoods was different from what I had expected. As teens, Roberta and Twyla would encounter one another at the Howard Johnson's where Twyla was a waitress. Roberta was with two guys, wearing clothes and makeup that would have seemed to have resembled Mary's appearance. When Roberta mentioned that she and the fellows were going to see Jimi Hendrix, Twyla did not know who she was referring to. Jimi Hendrix was a well-known musician in the black community and Twyla may not have known who that was if she was not exposed to it due to the effects of segregation. For Twyla to not know who Hendrix was as a musician is understandable since she grew up differently. The relationship between Twyla and Roberta emerges over the course of societal implications with race. The racial perceptions of the 1950s to 1970s had dramatically altered how they viewed societal topics and one another as adults. This was not as prevalent of an issue when they were children as they became friends regardless of background and race.

As an adult, Twyla's life as one who lived in the middle class was shown through her station wagon and marriage to a firefighter named James who had a big family. On the other hand, Roberta was living the rich life with expensive diamond jewelry, an upscale limousine, fancy water and an outfit that was a showstopper even in its simplistic form. Roberta married a computer genius widower and was living in a newly developed neighborhood with intelligent people who were doctors and IBM executives. Twyla lived in an old neighborhood that had seen change over the years and was surrounded by people who were on welfare. Considering each status, I could see either one being white or black. My thoughts on what defines poverty and

richness does not exactly point to a specific race as either one can be both rich and poor.

When they crossed paths and reminisced on the prior years, Roberta said to Twyla that she acted unfriendly when they were teens because of the tensions between blacks and whites. Twyla did not understand as she perceived that relationships between black and white people were on friendly terms. Through analysis, it seems that Roberta encountered and experienced the impact of segregation as a black person in which Twyla would not fully comprehend as a white person. Twyla only saw black and white people coming off the bus together, but what she did not see was the segregation on the bus that Roberta may have been confronted with.

As parents, Twyla and Roberta's perspectives regarding choice would be shaped by their own interactions with society and their mother's influences. When the issue arose in regards to children being integrated and bussing to another school, Twyla was not concerned as Roberta was in sending their children to a school that was not in the best condition. "Recitatif. . . restructures the drama of ambiguity. . . [involving] the reader in the impulse to fix racial meaning and to know the racial status of its characters" (Bennett pp. 211-212). As they disagreed on the matter, Roberta made a sign that said "Mothers Have Rights Too" while Twyla's sign said "And So Do Children". These revealed how their views had been shaped by the upbringings and their mothers. With Twyla fending for herself as a child, she saw the value for children to have a say in the matter as they have rights just as any adult. As Roberta's mother decided what was best for her since she was ill, Roberta believed it was the mother who had the right to her choice. However, understanding perceptions becomes clearer when Twyla and Roberta have their own points of view about Maggie.

Maggie was an elderly kitchen lady at the orphanage who had bowed legs and did not speak. The children at the orphanage assumed that she was deaf and mute, but no one really knew. She was described as having "sandy-colored" skin and was noted for her wardrobe that were kids' clothes. When Maggie had fallen down, the events behind her falling down were examined against racial intent. After Roberta accused Twyla of causing

Maggie to fall, she would later state that it was the mean orphan girls that had pushed Maggie down. The color of Maggie's skin was Roberta's way to say that Twyla had shown racial hate to Maggie who was black. The color of Maggie's skin posed the questions if she was white or black, but they did not reason that she could be both if she had parents who had an interracial relationship as I saw it to be. Based on their ideas of who she was, it changed the way they remembered the circumstances in how she was injured. "Morrison intentionally abandons linear narration for a structure that duplicates memory, a pattern in which associative connections inspire the relating of [certain] instances" (Harris). The perspectives of Twyla and Roberta had evolved my own opinion and point of view as I understood theirs.

Through the Reader Response criticism, my analytical lens adjusted to see how context, descriptions, imagery and culture shapes a person to view life and people. Understanding how racial codes that society has made and abided by in many terms was questioned, exposed and demonstrated through Toni Morrison's work. The unconventional structure of character portrayal through life experience and societal inclinations have revealed another side of close reading that can expand one's own ideas. As a white woman, "Recitatif" has taught me that one can not judge a book by its cover. Rather, I aim to examine my own predispositions that I have learned and adopted through racial categorization. Therefore, analyzing the depths of this story reveals the nature and implications of racial inferences that should be challenged as one understands their own sense of self and the world they live in.

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Deconstruction

Deconstructing Race in *Recitatif*

CHARLIE RUSSELL

The one, glaring question we all have when reading “Recitatif” is: *which character is which race?* There are many context clues given by Morrison in the story, but in most circumstances, these clues cannot be used to determine the race of either girl in the story because of the ambiguousness of the specificities she gives us. This essay’s purpose is not to determine which character is which race; but to discuss the contradictions that arise in the context and descriptions of each character.

We are first introduced to Roberta and Twyla when they are eight years old and are “dumped” (Morrison 2) at St. Bonaventure shelter. Twyla often comments that they “weren’t real orphans with beautiful dead parents in the sky” (Morrison 2). Our first clues to which girl is which race appears in the first page of the story. Twyla’s mother preferred to dance to caring for her daughter, and Roberta’s mother was sick. When the two girls are introduced, Twyla thinks to herself that she is unhappy to be placed in a room with a girl of another race, and remembers her mother saying, “they never wash their hair and they smell funny” (Morrison 1). These context clues are not enough to place either character in either category. A neglectful mother or a sick one do not denote race. In both cultures, there is commentary akin to this about hair. Twyla’s first comment can be taken in many ways. Would her mother be upset that she

was put in a room with a girl of another race, or would she be upset that Twyla was put in a dirty, dank room, and the race of Roberta was merely what she saw and thought about first?

In Elizabeth Abel's piece, "Black Writing, White Reading: Race and The Politics of Feminist Interpretation", she points out that in this first section of the book, "The racial ambiguity so deftly installed at the narrative's origin through codes that function symmetrically for black women and for white women intensifies as the story tracks the encounter of its two female protagonists over approximately thirty years" (Abel 1-2). This racial ambiguity is also present in both character's mothers. Where Twyla's mother is beautiful but self-centered, Roberta's mother is large, wears a large cross, and carries a bible. Mary also has a habit of drawing out the syllables and vowels of her daughter's name, following it with "baby", and forgets to bring her food for lunch. Roberta's mother is attentive and feeds her daughter well while reading to her from the bible.

It is possible that we may think of Roberta's mother as a black woman, someone who was ill and therefore simply unable to care for her daughter. She seems loving and nurturing and religious in a stern but soft way, feeding and caring for her daughter where she can. It is also possible to think of Twyla's mother as a black woman, someone who dances all night without a care in the world, who has a drawl and is not terribly bright, leaning into the racism of the day in which the story was written. However, we tend to think of big, strong women who love Jesus as black women because of the media we consume and the way the black woman has been portrayed as a mother figure; and we also tend to think of wispy thin women that ride on the back of other's kindness as white.

Abel comments that while she was certain that Twyla was white, the person who introduced her to the story was sure that she was black. Wanting an answer to her question, she contacted Morrison and asked. She reports that Morrison did not have a direct answer to her question but did make a few pointed comments on how her "project in this story was to substitute class for racial codes" (Abel 7). Abel finds that examining the class of both women throughout the flashes of their lives that

we are made privy to seems to point in the direction of Twyla's whiteness, but we can never know for sure.

What I think gets missed is Morrison's desire for us to read this piece with the awareness that we all assume race based on class. Twyla ends up working class, and Roberta marries a man who is a part of the middle class. In the time in which the story is set, our gut instinct would be to assign Twyla as black and Roberta as white, solely based on the fact that Twyla must work harder than Roberta, and because Twyla remarks later, "Easy, I thought. Everything is so easy for them. They think they own the world" (Morrison 9). Roberta feels more carefree in her older years, even as a young adult, meeting Twyla again for the first time in years where Twyla was waitressing while she sits in a booth with two bearded men. Roberta is described as wearing large hoops and having big hair (which could be a sign of either race in the time of Hendrix), while Twyla makes a faux pas when she pretends to know who Hendrix is, probably due to the fact that her life was hard work and little play. It is hard to say here where each clue points. Jimi Hendrix, according to Abel, was not as popular with African American people at the time as he was with white people. Both races of men wore facial hair, but black men are better at growing it. Twyla works hard, while Roberta seems to be skimming along in life without a care. Each point of interest contradicts the other, and because of this, it is impossible to determine the race of either girl, even if we used base assumptions determined by stereotypes.

In their essay, "Decoding Racial Identity of the Character in 'Recitatif'", Wang Li-Li concludes that "she [Morrison] illustrates how the difference between the races in American culture at large is dependent on blacks and whites defining themselves in opposition to one another" (Li-Li 1). Li-Li goes on to attempt to "decode" Morrison's created paradox by examining their names, eventually establishing that both names are simultaneously both black and white; even going so far as to try to resolve the question as to what Twyla's mother does when she dances all night, wondering whether that could mean she was a stripper. Most people may assume that Twyla was black simply because of her unconventional name. However, Abel argues in her journal, "...if Twyla's name is more characteristically black than

white, it is perhaps best known as the name of a white dancer, Twyla Tharp, whereas Roberta shares her last name, Fisk, with a celebrated black (now integrated) university" (Abel 7). The push and pull of each name and the weight of race it carries is impossible to decode.

Later in the story, after the meeting in Howard Johnson's and after meeting in the grocery store years after that, the women meet again by chance while Roberta is picketing with a crowd of mothers against having her stepchildren bussed to a school outside of the neighborhood. In this scene, racial tensions run high to mirror the "racial strife" (Morrison 14) that is occurring elsewhere in the country. Twyla originally has no opinion on the change because her son didn't seem to mind it, but after seeing and speaking with Roberta, her mind changes. When Twyla tells Roberta that it is a silly thing to worry about, Roberta tells her that it is a free country, and Twyla retorts with, "Not yet, but it will be" (Morrison 15). Twyla could be realizing here that if she is indeed black, she is not treated with the same respect as a white woman. As the women argue, Twyla begs Roberta to see the women as she does, and Roberta sees them as simply mothers. Roberta says, "I used to curl your hair" (Morrison 15). This line switches up the race of both again, because if Twyla were black, her hair would most likely already be very curly.

The conversation comes to the subject of Maggie, the "kitchen woman with legs like parentheses" (Morrison 2). Maggie comes up in quite a few of their conversations and is as racially ambiguous as both the girls. Roberta tells Twyla that she was black, and when she fell in the orchard, it was because she was pushed. When the women argue in adulthood about the school situation, Roberta insists that when Maggie was pushed, they all kicked her while she was on the ground, saying, "...you kicked her. We both did. You kicked a black lady who couldn't even scream" (Morrison 16). When they meet for the last time in the diner where Twyla goes in to have coffee after frantically looking for a Christmas tree, Maggie arises again with Roberta when she comes in wearing a shiny evening gown. Roberta seems to be feeling as guilty as Twyla does about her. Roberta cries when she makes excuses for both of them and how they grew up. She seems to know even less than Twyla does about

Maggie, and although she has such a small part in the story, suddenly the story has always been about Maggie. Maggie has been the embodiment of the two characters all along.

I would be remiss if I did not turn the lens to myself, as well. As a white woman, am I doing the work I need to be doing to understand that I know only half of this story? Even then, that would still only be true if Twyla were in fact white. If Twyla was indeed a white working-class woman, then I could understand some of her life experiences as a white working-class woman. I do not and cannot understand the situation in either case of the black person. As I first read this story, at different points, I was convinced that either girl was either race. I flip-flopped back and forth, trying to decide based on what little, if anything, I know about any other person's life experience. I concluded that therein lay the reason that Morrison wrote this story in this particular way: to simply turn your gaze within yourself and observe how you attempted to determine the race of the girls. Most of us use the context that Morrison gives us, and we cannot guess in the end because they interweave and contradict one another until they are both and neither. The point of the story is not to try to assign race; the point is to learn about yourself and how you view the world and make the necessary corrections.

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New Historical

Racial Ambiguity in A Transparent Society

Phoebe Caringella

Toni Morrison's short story "Recitatif" was originally published in *Confirmation: An Anthology of African American Women* in 1983. Her story follows the complicated relationship between two girls—Roberta and Twyla—that spans across three decades and centers on the racial strife present in the United States during the '60s, '70s, and '80s. This story stands out amongst numerous novels about interracial friendships because this unique piece does not give the readers any insight on which girl is Black and which one is white. Instead, Morrison places a racially ambiguous character named Maggie in the center of their disputes to display the weight of cultural stereotypes within the reader's own perception. Her story setting sets the girls in St. Bonny's orphanage that has an ironically broken community that is cleverly contrasted with her own tight knit one. The historical significance of Morrison's life, her values that she has instilled in her writings, and her touch on psychological trauma affecting children in orphanages, all contribute to her brilliant piece "Recitatif" and bring to light the belittled value and often the true version of community.

Toni Morrison's writings have created a newfound interest in American literature. Students, scholars, and many more avid readers have directed their attention to her work dedicated to psychological trauma caused by slavery, racism, segregation,

and war. Furthermore, Morrison has been noted in biographies to use her status in the literary society as a public intellectual for exploring the ways in which racial groups affect people as well as their ideas about national identity (Li). Fellow writer Trudier Harris wrote about Morrison's reputation in her article stating: "Around the world, she has offered a new lens through which to view American literature and African American experience." Toni Morrison's expertise allows readers to see a female African American author's views on the impact racism and prejudice have had on the black community. During the Civil Rights Movement, Toni Morrison stayed up to date on the events but did not get involved in the protests because she believed in a different type of advocacy. Instead of projecting the same message as Black Power—whose advocates used symbols of African authenticity—Morrison urged African Americans to rediscover strength in their families, in their communities, and within themselves (Li). Her message to Black people was to not try to make themselves heard through the loud chants of equality and justice but to surround themselves with people they loved and respected. Unity goes beyond mere symbols because it can be shared by everyone regardless of race and social class, it is something to be shared with across the cultural and racial boundaries that people have created within society.

Morrison's own definition of community resembles the one she grew up in where closeness between each other garnered respect from everyone in that community, in this community all had a part in raising the children and instilling that generational respect for everyone (Li). In stark contrast to Morrison's picture of her own community, the orphanage setting in "Recitatif" is lacking the closeness of community that is reflected in the author's own life. Within the grounds of St. Bonny's there is no community, the children and adolescents that live in the orphanage are divided by the tense atmosphere where hostility is being bred. The gar girls are Twyla and Roberta's tormentors inside St. Bonny's; the gar girls pull the girls' hair and twist their arms if they catch either Twyla or Roberta watching them dance and smoke underneath the apple trees. The other children throw out insults directed at Twyla and Roberta for their contrasting complexions: "So for the

moment it didn't matter that we looked like salt and pepper standing there and that's what the other kids called us sometimes" (Morrison). Twyla herself was sick to her stomach and against sharing a room with Roberta because of her skin tone, noting that "[i]t was one thing to be taken out of your own bed early in the morning-it was something else to be stuck in a strange place with a girl from a whole other race" (Morrison). The atmosphere of St. Bonny's was no stranger to discrimination amongst its residents; it is likely from the segregation and racism that was taught by society. Mrs. Bozo seems to have offered no love to the girls, because when she does talk sweetly and smiles at Twyla and Roberta while complimenting them, they are too stunned to move. The sad fact is that the hostility in Catholic Institutions was not limited to settings in Toni Morrison's well written stories.

Readers may speculate that the bitterness and hostility were spurred by current events revolving mostly around discrimination, psychological disturbances, and sexual abuse. In connection to the historical events within this story and information on Catholic childcare institutions, the lack of community these two girls experience influenced their cognitive development. Just like the children at St. Bonny's, these children were cast into orphanages because their parents were either unable to take care of them or they had passed away. Children often came to the institutions harboring aggression and anxiety, their frequent lashing out only stimulated more aggression from the other children. Twyla's interactions with the other children and the Big Bozo indicate that the environment in the institution mimicked the same hostile atmospheres that were found in orphanages during the same time periods this short story takes place. In 1955 a caseworker stated: "The 'normal child-caring institution'... no longer exists because the children entering institutions had serious behavior and personality problems that needed to be addressed by trained psychiatric social workers" (Morton). The reader may gather that within Twyla's narration she expresses possible psychological problems when she mentions that most of the children are "real orphans with beautiful dead parents in the sky" (Morrison). She divulges her recurring wish that she would

rather her mother be dead after her mother repeatedly embarrasses her, which is a concerning indicator about her psychological state. It only gives value to the statement that psychiatric care was needed in these facilities and Mrs. Bozo was ill equipped for this role.

During 1983 when this short story was released, Reverend John. H. Leahy, the director of Parmadale System of Family Services, described the 221 residents living in the institution as “multi-problemated; those problems included chemical dependency, truancy, unacceptable school behavior, and delinquency; a vast majority... are at least mildly emotionally disturbed” (Morton). Similar acts of delinquency and psychological problems can be viewed in the gar girls as well as both Twyla and Roberta. Their hostile behavior is directed towards one individual who is too weak and helpless to fight back: Maggie, the mute kitchen lady. The account of Maggie’s fall changes each time the two women meet each other throughout the story, the reader can even speculate that Roberta’s memories of the incident get more violent from being a bystander to her and Twyla kicking Maggie. Not only do Roberta’s stories get more violent but Maggie’s skin tone changes from sandy colored to black: “Like hell she wasn’t, and you kicked her. We both did. You kicked a black lady who couldn’t even scream” (Morrison). Twyla becomes conflicted and grows mad over the fact that she cannot remember any of the events that Roberta is mentioning and feels that she would remember doing something so cruel. The answer comes to Twyla in an epiphany, and it seems that Roberta shares the same sentiment upon their last meeting.

The epiphany makes Twyla realize that Maggie was her mother who danced all night. It was within her frustration for her own mother that she wished harm upon Maggie: “Deaf, I thought, and dumb. Nobody inside. Nobody who would hear you if you cried in the night. Nobody who could tell you anything important that you could use” (Morrison). Maggie was just a symbol of the neglect that Twyla’s own mother inflicted upon her, she was the person who took the beating for her mother’s abandonment. Neglect is only part of the equation to the events leading up the accusation, discrimination is the

player behind the scenes. Discrimination is not something directly mentioned within *Recitatif* but rather skillfully implied through bits of conversation and actions. The children jeer at Twyla and Roberta's interracial friendship, Twyla talks about Roberta "smelling funny" (Morrison), and the gar girls pushing Maggie who is a mute and disabled woman. Later on, Roberta's attitude towards Twyla in the diner is evaluated by the two who sit down for lunch, "Oh, Twyla, you know how it was in those days: black-white. You know how everything was" (Morrison). Even though no one is identified as belonging to a specific race, the girls see themselves as belonging to a group and allow the discrimination to infiltrate the friendship that they had built in rebellion of such labels.

Toni Morrison made it impossible to figure out which girl is Black and which one is white, and she creates Maggie who could be easily identified as either Black or white. Therefore, she creates ambiguous characters because the racial ambiguity of these girls was intended to cause readers to engage in the story rather than base their opinions on race or racial tension. An article written on Toni Morrison's writing style goes further to point out why she places these details in her stories: "Morrison's experiment succeeds in inviting the reader to examine the reading process by seeing our own interest in fixing racial identity in relationship to the concern to fix Maggie's identity" (Bennett). The strain that racism puts on Twyla and Roberta's friendship and the stereotypes surrounding their characters put in perspective the way readers use the perception of one's race to determine their own conviction. Not only does Morrison's writing point out the importance of looking at how each person looks at race individually, but it points out the lack of community people have with each other because of their tendency to racially profile. Within this short story, Twyla and Roberta created a bond from a common experience independent of race and it shows in Roberta's reconciliation with her friend: "And you were right. We didn't kick her. It was the gar girls. Only them. But, well, I wanted to. I really wanted them to hurt her. I said we did it, too" (Morrison). They were both two very young girls who were handed over to an

orphanage filled with hurt children who resorted to hurting each other.

Racial strife during the '60s to the '80s and a picture of the psychological trauma within Catholic Orphanages are arguably the two most defining historical aspects of Toni Morrison's "Recitatif." Toni Morrison saw literature as a tool she could use to showcase history, carried from person to person in story form so that it could "nurture and critique community life" (Li).

In an interview Toni Morrison was asked about her desired response from readers and she answered with this: "I don't want to give my readers something to swallow. I want to give them something to feel and think about, and I hope that I set it up in such a way that it is a legitimate thing, and a valuable thing" (McKay). Because of Toni Morrison's strategic move to create racially ambiguous characters, readers can see the sickly nature of racism and discrimination by looking at their own tendency to place labels upon both girls. Inside "Recitatif" they can see the importance of community and how they—just like Twyla and Roberta—are guilty of trying to figure out the race of another based on stereotypes that are cleverly ambiguous; it almost causes a headache to try to figure the two girls out.

Toni Morrison's focus is to challenge the reader to see their own tendency to place a label upon another and then to show it to others.

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Psychological

Childhood Experiences and the Development of Identity in Toni Morrison's "Recitatif"

Faith Cornell

Undoubtedly, due to the complex nature of personality, no two people are alike. What makes each person unique extends beyond innate traits. According to psychological theorist Eric Erickson, personality develops through a series of psychosocial stages, characterized by conflict or crisis arising from social environments. These stages occur through the developmental years and into adulthood. Ideally, healthy outcomes result from these tests. However, occurrences and situations, such as adverse childhood experiences, unhealthy relationships, unsafe physical environments, and socioeconomic status, negatively affect development. Not only do these factors influence temperament, but also cognition. Through her short story, "Recitatif", Toni Morrison explores how the experiences and backgrounds of two girls growing up during the civil rights era, shape their actions and beliefs throughout their youth and adulthood, demonstrating the lasting impact of social and cultural influences on social-emotional and cognitive development.

Healthy psychological development depends critically on the early years of a person's life, as outlined by Eric Erickson in his Psychological Development Theory. Each stage tests whether a person's sense of identity develops healthily or leads to feelings of inadequacy or confusion. Over half of these phases occur

from birth until late adolescence, making these early years the most important for development (McConnell, 1966). What children face and witness may positively or, unfortunately, negatively impact them. For example, Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE), or any exposure to abusive, neglectful, or dysfunctional situations, directly affect childhood development and behavior. Appropriate attitudes and actions go unlearned without positive role models or proper care (Wang et al. 2020).

Throughout “Recitatif”, Twyla describes aspects of her childhood with Roberta, yet without her narrative, the girls’ challenges remain excellently established by the story’s opening line: “My mother danced all night and Roberta’s was sick. That’s why we were taken to St. Bonny’s” (Morrison 1). St. Bonny’s houses orphaned girls, and although no mention of the characters’ fathers exists, the orphanage temporarily watches Twyla and Roberta during their mothers’ incompetence through their prolonged illness and dancing, likely erotic. These situations cause neglect and may even expose Twyla to sexual assault, thereby contributing to the girls’ adverse childhood experiences. Twyla also faces malnourishment, as implied by the event of her and her mother, Mary, eating only Twyla’s jelly beans after an Easter service as they watch Roberta eat a full-course meal her mother provided. St. Bonny’s also provides little to eat, but Twyla enjoys the food. She compares her mother’s cooking to the orphanage food, thinking, “Mary’s idea of supper was popcorn and a can of Yoo-Hoo. Hot mashed potatoes and two weenies was like Thanksgiving for me” (Morrison 2). Another aspect putting the girls’ development at risk is the people at St. Bonny’s. The caretaker, Mrs. Itkin, talks condescendingly, such as the time she says, “Good. Maybe then she’ll come and take you home”, after Twyla complained her mom would not like having her rooming with Roberta (Morrison 1). The teenagers, called the “gar girls”, also belittle and shove around the younger girls.

Throughout Twyla’s narration of her time at St. Bonny’s, there are behaviors and traits she and Roberta exhibit attributed to their ACEs. “We...got F’s all the time. Me because I couldn’t remember what I read or what the teacher said. And Roberta because she couldn’t read at all and didn’t even listen to the

teacher" (Morrison 2). Insufficient development explains the behavior issues of distracted minds and an unreliable memory. "Environmental Stimulation, Parental Nurturance and Cognitive Development in Humans" connects issues in cognitive development to a lack of parental nurturance or any other reasons for stress and unhealthy experiences (Farah et al. 2008). A second behavioral problem the girls share could not only be from a lack of nurturance but also from the toxic teenagers at the orphanage. The older, pushy girls enjoy ridiculing the disabled cook, Maggie; and later, Twyla and Roberta join, calling her insulting names such as "dummy" and "bow legs" (Morrison 3). Even without the negative influence of the gar girls, the little to no demonstrations of love from the adults at the orphanage contribute to this sort of misbehavior.

Aside from ACEs, other aspects that determine the girls' temperament are settings and socioeconomic status. A child's home and neighborhood are considered the most "influential, immediate setting in which primary caregiver's parenting and family interactions" impact child development (Wang et al. 2020). Socioeconomics also matters due to the link between status and cognitive growth. Children can only advance well with access to proper food and education, even with caregivers willing to nurture them (Farah et al. 2008). Twyla narrates little on St. Bonny's physical environment besides the uncrowded rooms, available meals, accessible education, and a beautiful orchard. Aside from the smoking teenagers who roughhouse, no other threats to the girls' safety exist. The only dangerous environment for Twyla is her home. The text never mentions where Mary dances, but if she ever takes her work home, she places her daughter in a risky situation. Also, Twyla and Roberta come from opposite socioeconomic and racial backgrounds, something influencing their treatment and opportunities. Twyla reflects on how kids called her and Roberta "salt and pepper" (Morrison 1), but there is no mention of who is white and African American.

Upon first meeting her orphanage roommate, Roberta, Twyla tells Mrs. Itkin, "My mother won't like you putting me in here" (Morrison 1). Afterward, she wonders if Roberta assumes Twyla's mother disapproves of her daughter staying at an orphanage.

However, what prompted Twyla's comment is Mary claiming people racially opposite of her smell strange and never wash their hair. Looking at Roberta, Twyla thinks Mary is right. Soon, however, Twyla looks beyond her and Roberta's physical differences, enjoying their friendship. As they age, however, their political views damage their harmony. The two women compete in sign wars during protests after Roberta tells her she should be bothered by the school district's plan to integrate students, something Twyla supports (Morrison 14-17).

"Recitatif" ends with the main characters well into their adulthood, a time in their lives when their identities are established, according to Erickson. Twyla's mindset reflects the desire to be better than Mary. Her husband is not rich like Roberta's, and her waitressing job earns only the minimum wage, but Twyla never involves herself in sex work. Her son Joseph receives the proper nurturance his mother lacked as a child. Twyla homeschools when schools temporarily shut down and she protests for children's rights so Joseph may not be separated from children opposite of him. Meanwhile, Roberta finds her identity in her mother's prejudice and the cruelty of the gar girls. The gar girls kicked Maggie once, and Roberta falsely accuses Twyla of being the culprit. Eventually, she confesses to Twyla that she wishes she had hurt Maggie herself. It is unclear if Roberta's motives for wishing harm on Maggie were racially motivated, as she remembers her as black, or due to her worry of ending up like Maggie. She tells Twyla, "She'd been brought up in an institution like my mother was and like I thought I would be too", indicating her fear (Morrison 19). Maggie's skin color remains as mysterious as the ethnicities of the other characters, a detail neither Twyla nor Roberta remembers.

The girls' faulty memory could be the effects of a lack of proper parental nurturance from their incompetent mothers, if not repressed as a coping mechanism induced by their experiences with the orphanage bullies. The socioeconomic statuses and adverse childhood experiences of parental figures and St. Bonny's in Twyla and Roberta's childhood not only hinder their ability to learn and focus in school and behave appropriately, but also shape their identities and social and

political viewpoints later throughout adulthood. Despite their differences not interfering with their friendship as children, the racial tensions between the girls' mothers follow them into their adulthood, making them argue over classroom diversity and Maggie's race. Roberta follows in the rest of her mother's footsteps; however, Twyla follows a primarily new and healthy path instead. The women these young girls grow into highlight the lasting influence of caregivers and life circumstances present throughout early development.

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Feminist/Queer Theory

race and Feminism in “Recitatif”

RYN KOWALLIS

“Recitatif” by Toni Morrison is a wonderful work that challenges how perceptions can change our reactions to people and situations. It takes place in the 1950s and follows two women as their lives cross paths every so often. We get to see glimpses into their lives and their struggles. The only constant is their confusion and ours. We never get a clear picture of either character’s race; readers are left to draw their own conclusions that could change throughout the reading. Each of these women follows their own paths through life, doing what they think brings them joy, and doing what is expected of them as well. Both of these women become trapped in their lives, knowing that they could be more.

When we are first introduced to the characters Roberta and Twyla, we are told that Twyla felt uncomfortable and that her mother would not want her sleeping in a room with someone from another race. From this point on we know that they come from different backgrounds and have different expectations placed on them. No matter the reader, their races will always be a topic of discussion: “However, not all critics argue that race is unknowable in ‘Récitatif’” (Morris). Depending on who they decide is white or Black can change the view of the entire story. But their race is not the only defining characteristic; these two characters are both women growing up in the 1950s-70s. They

grow up in a time that has many controversial moments for women and women's rights.

In this era women were told to be subservient to men, to strive to be the best wife they could be. They were told that it is better to be quiet and helpful than to be loud and exciting. Nothing they said was taken too seriously; rape allegations and other serious issues were swept under the rug, considered nonissues compared to the problems of business and men. In "Recitatif" we see instances of this misogyny throughout the story. One line in particular was glossed over, as narrator Twyla tells the reader that the older girls were just "poor little girls who fought their uncles off but looked tough to us" (Morrison 2). Even at the early age of around eight, she knew the struggles of those older girls. Struggles that no one should be subjected to, but that were swept under the rug.

As the girls grow up, meeting over time, we get to see how they each tackled the world. Twyla followed the path that was laid out for her. She worked as a waitress, one of the only guaranteed jobs for a woman. She worked odd times at inconvenient distances, for little pay. Roberta shows up with her exciting outfit and stylish big hair, she was everything fun in the world. Yet again these two characters show the reader the two sides to womanhood. On one side of the coin is the overworked, tired, and out of the loop woman. The woman who is trying to do everything as the world tells her to. Twyla saw what the world did to her dancing mother and wanted to play by the rules. But Roberta saw her mother, sick and overweight, and wanted instead to take her life into her own hands.

Their lives progressed like this, Twyla following the set path for a woman at the time. She married a man who liked her cooking and gave him a son. Roberta also married, but she married a widower with children of his own. They both took two different paths to get there, but they both arrived at marriage and children. That path seemed set in stone for them: It was the natural progression. Birth, childhood, marriage, mothering. There may be some gaps, but each of those steps seemed guaranteed for Twyla and Roberta.

There is more to being a woman than getting married and having children; there is something more important that was

in the background of this short story: feminism. *Feminism* is defined as the advocacy for women's right to be a man's equal. Feminism means so much more and encompasses so many more layers than that. That definition assumes that all women were already equal. But that was and is not the case. Jean Wyatt tells us that in order for feminism to help everyone, everyone needs to stand on the same ground in the fight. Before women can be equal to men, they first need to be equal amongst themselves. Until racial boundaries can be erased, gender gaps will always exist. But these boundaries are also important. We do not want to lose our individuality and unique cultures, but understanding each other and learning to accept those differences it's what is truly important. After all, "if one does not identify with the cultural other to some degree, does not make the conceptual leap to stand in her shoes, how can one be in a position to hear her point of view, to perceive things from her perspective?" (Wyatt) "Recitatif" helps us to understand that concept, and to answer that question, better. By leaving the race of each girl a mystery for us to fill in we can view each of their stories through many lenses.

A reading of the story where Twyla is Black will lead to an understanding of being beaten down and stuck in place. Twyla herself seems accepting of the fact that that is her place in life. She is just grateful that she doesn't dance like her mother, she has been pushed down and struggled her whole life. Never truly knowing how to be happy if someone else was not prompting her. To the extent, we can see, through her eyes, that a white Roberta got to be free to explore in her twenties. She could spend time with men and travel to see popular musicians, marry into riches and use her voice to fight for her and her family's rights. Although, if this were flipped, the reader could see a white Twyla living the white picket fence life. She gets the family she wanted and has no worries. She knows that the government is making the best choices they can on where her boy needs to go to school. Roberta as Black shows that there were no expectations for her. She didn't get a job, maybe because no one would hire her. Yes, she married up into a rich section of town, but she fought for her place. She changed herself completely in order to fit her new status. Her big curly

hair was smoothed down to mimic white hair. She had to fight for her kids' right to attend a close-by school.

These women, in either reading, are showing us each side of the feminist struggle. They are both struggling to break free from the expectations that women are placed into, becoming a person who knows their value, and fighting with others to get recognized for that work. In "Recitatif" we see each of these characters with male friends, spouses, and family. Each of these situations shapes their perceptions of what they are. Twyla, in getting the family that she grew up looking for, finds what seems like the perfect place for her. She is able to cook the foods that she never got, be the mother she wanted, and make sure that her children have the father she never saw. But those are all things to do for others, and in her story, they are specifically done for men. She cooks food that her husband, son, and father-in-law like. In one instance she is buying groceries and instead of buying ice cream because she wanted it or thought it would be a fun treat, she buys it because her "father-in-law ate them with the same gusto little Joseph did" (Morrison). In contrast, Roberta, despite following the same path to marriage and children, is full of passion and takes charge of her own life.

These two women, living their different lives, are both fighting to be heard and seen. They started as eight-year-old girls, both hoping to go back home to their mothers. Their mothers tried their best, despite their difficult circumstances. Both know that their mothers have issues but love them anyway. Their mothers are their ties into "their cultural and ethnic identities" (Androne). They grow into their early twenties, making their own place in the world, earning their place and exploring who they are. They become mothers, either by giving birth or by marrying a man with children. They fight for what they believe in, each on their own side. But in the end, what they need is someone to listen to them. Their friendship, the friendship of two women who lived tough lives, is key to this short story. They find power to move forward; they drive each other to be more than they were. That is what feminism does: It helps women to rise to their potential. Twyla is able to break out of her cycle of living for her husband; she is able to do something that she wanted to for no other reason.

In “Recitatif” Morrison shows us that women, regardless of race, have struggles. But that they can rise beyond them. They can challenge each other to fight back against the roles assigned to them. That women are not defined by the birth, childhood, marriage, kids path. While that is an admirable path, Morrison reminds all women to make sure to fight for our own wants and needs. If that means, like Roberta and Twyla, we must protest injustice that affects us, so be it. If that means going to concerts or waitressing, so be it. Whatever our path, we must choose it and push ourselves and other women to become the people we want to be.

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[PART IX]

"Critique de la Vie Quotidienne" by Donald Barthelme

You can read "Critique de la Vie Quotidienne" by Donald Barthelme here – <http://jessamyn.com/barth/critique.html>



Donald Barthelme was born in 1931 in Philadelphia. He was a renowned professor and founding member of the Creative Writing program at the University of Houston. In his time, he wrote over 100 short stories and multiple award-winning novels. He was known for his prolific postmodern style that challenged traditional plot structure and storytelling.

"Donald Barthelme" University of Houston Special

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[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Donald_Barthelme#/media/
File:Donald_Barthelme_\(author\).jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Donald_Barthelme#/media/File:Donald_Barthelme_(author).jpg)

About the Authors

AUSTIN HOLTON

Austin Holton is a current student at the College of Western Idaho studying English with a focus on literary analysis. While mainly focused on literary analysis, Austin also enjoys creative writing. In his free time, he writes short stories and poetry. Outside of reading and writing, Austin enjoys camping, fishing, hiking, and jiu-jitsu.

Brooke Brown

Brooke Brown is currently a student at the College of Western Idaho, studying English with a focus on creative writing. She is writing a thriller novel she plans to publish next year. Other than writing, she also enjoys reading, video gaming, and researching genealogy in her free time.

DARIN NEURBERGER

Darin Neuberger is a creative writer with an off-and-on infatuation with poker. When not watching *South Park*, *Mike Tyson Mysteries*, and *Aqua Teen Hunger Force*, he enjoys listening to Miles Davis, MF DOOM, Run the Jewels, and Death Grips. Some books he cannot get away from are Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*, Junji Ito's *Uzumaki*, and Charles Baudelaire's *The Flowers of Evil*.

ERIN NELSON

Erin Nelson is currently a student at the College of Western Idaho where she studies English, she plans to continue her education and pursue an MFA at Eastern Oregon University. Her analysis often focuses on the human condition, generational trauma, and mental health. Erin is inspired by transcendentalism, postmodernists, and the Byronic hero. Outside of academics, she loves to garden, paint, and hike.

Critical Introduction

Critiquing Everyday Life: A Deep Dive Into Barthelme's Masterpiece

While reading and analyzing literature, there are thousands of avenues one could take to better understand its importance. To better analyze Donald Barthelme's work, three different authors took three different approaches to the story "Critique de la vie Quotidienne." The work was examined through a subjective personal response, a deconstructive lens, and a psychological lens. Using these different stances, all three authors bring a unique perspective to the story, each with their own importance in understanding this powerful piece of literature.

Reader Response – Austin Holton

In his essay, Austin Holton uses a subjective reader response to compare personal life experiences with the main characters in "Critique de la Vie Quotidienne." In this essay, he compares the characteristics of the family in the story to those of his family and himself, using examples from the text as well as stories from his life. Barthelme's story sets a cautionary example of the disintegration of a family. The memories the story brought back serve as a reminder to put forth an effort to provide a better environment for his own family.

Deconstruction – Erin Nelson

In her essay, Erin Nelson deconstructs the protagonist of

“Critique de la Vie Quotidienne” and uncovers how he is both an abuser and a victim. While it is impossible to fully ignore the superficial cruelty, her essay finds the ways a reader might be sympathetic to the plights of the speaker. By recognizing patterns in Barthelme’s male protagonists, the essay encourages readers to look past the violence and alcohol to see how self-repressive behaviors and coping mechanisms function within the story. She argues that pain and barbarity can co-exist, creating an ethical dilemma in understanding the man beneath the monster.

New Historical – Brooke Brown

In her essay, Brooke Brown analyzes Donald Barthelme’s “Critique de la Vie Quotidienne” through a New Historical Criticism lens to explore the context in which this short story was written. The story is examined with regard to the historical setting of the early 1970s in which it was written. Personal obstacles faced by Barthelme throughout his lifetime, as well as the changing views toward marriage and divorce in the era, are discussed in terms of how they influenced the story. This essay demonstrates how Barthelme employs the domestic tensions of the time to directly address the patriarchal and misogynistic beliefs that persisted during the period through the perspective of a privileged male protagonist who embodies period-typical male ignorance.

Psychological – Darin Neuberger

Darin Neuberger uses the psychological lens to explore the characters in “Critique de la Vie Quotidienne,” as well as the relationships between them. Using Nancy Chodorow’s psychological theories he reveals the character’s pasts, futures, and present motivations. Additionally, he evaluates Barthelme’s critique of his own father and the significance of the child’s lack of an Oedipus complex. Chodorow’s theory allows him to expose Barthelme’s unconscious reasons and anxieties for writing about the family in the story.

When using different viewpoints and lenses to understand literature, each reader can take away conflicting meanings from

others. All three authors came to different conclusions about the work while exploring “Critique de la Vie Quotidienne.” Darin provided an in-depth psychological response to help the reader understand the behaviors presented in the story by the main characters. Erin deconstructed Barthelme’s work to gain a more sympathetic view of the main character. Austin provided a subjective response which showed how he related to the work in a very personal way. Though each piece concludes with different ideas, it is evident the common thread of how impactful this story is runs through this critical edition. The remarkable thing about literature is that its complexities mirror that of life, and using a critical lens to understand it, can help to understand life itself.

Annotated Bibliography

Belkaoui, Ahmed, and Janice M. Belkaoui. "A Comparative Analysis of the Roles Portrayed by Women in Print Advertisements: 1958, 1970, 1972." *Journal of Marketing Research*, vol.13, no. 2, 1976, pp. 168–72. JSTOR, doi.org/10.2307/3150853. Accessed 19 Apr. 2023

Ahmed and Janice Belkaoui's research article analyzes the portrayal of women in print advertisements in the years 1958, 1970, and 1972. The study compares ads from 1958 with those from 1970 and 1972. Women in the 1958 advertisements were portrayed as the following stereotypes: low-income workers, non-working in a decorative role, and having limited purchasing power. Results found that there was an increase in women being portrayed more independently in the 1972 advertisements compared to those from 1970 and 1958. While there was an increase in the representation of women in the workplace in the 1972 ads, there were regressive stereotypes still present in the advertisements from 1958, such as women only being depicted purchasing decorative or beauty products. The study reveals that certain expectations and standards present in 1958 continue to persist as stereotypes in the later decade's advertisements. The findings also show that the advertisements fail to portray women realistically in a wide range of roles. Overall, this article brings attention to the way women were portrayed in advertisements

during the time in which Donald Barthelme's story was written. This research gives an insight into the types of advertisements the character "Wanda" would have been consuming in magazines like "Elle."

Borstelmann, Thomas. *The 1970s: A New Global History from Civil Rights to Economic Inequality*. Princeton University Press, 2012. ProQuest Ebook Central, ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/cwidaho/detail.action?docID=768534. Accessed 25 Apr. 2023.

Thomas Borstelmann's book provides an analysis of the 1970s in America and its lasting impact on society. The book examines the rise of social inclusion alongside the pledges to the free market and government skepticism that took place in the 1970s. Further, Borstelmann investigates how the 1970s shaped current America. The political and social atmosphere of the period in history is explored, emphasizing the simultaneous increase in social recognition because of the civil rights movement. Hence, the trust in the government deteriorated as a result of various political and economic problems at the time. The author frames the turbulent political climate within a global context, to showcase how the 1970s was a decade that imposed irreversible changes on American society and to the wider globe that continues today. This source provides a history of the period in which *Critique* was written and will thus be helpful as a source to use for analysis. Overall, Borstelmann's book discusses the political and social environment of the decade in which the story was written, which gives historical insight into the events that shaped the viewpoints of that time.

Chodorow, Nancy (1997). "The Psychodynamics of the Family". In Nicholson, Pamela (ed.). *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory*. Psychology Press. pp. 181–197. ISBN 978-0-415-91761-2.

The Second Wave is a reputed journal with an emphasis on publishing essays on feminist theory. The biggest flaw in psychologist Nancy Chodorow's *The Psychodynamics of the Family* is its age, being released in 1997. Her psychological analysis, however, contains

enough important and valid conclusions that keep it relevant today. Chodorow argues that gender and sexuality play the largest roles in determining the dynamics of family relationships. She claims that all children are born bisexual, and that women are more emotionally closer to their caregiver than boys. Heterosexual men repress their emotions and feel they can only show them to their mother. On the other hand, a daughter will ignore her father's flaws as long as she feels loved. This same dependence of the opposite carries mildly into marriage, Chodorow argues, that the male dominance in heterosexual couples leads women to be more reactive. Though some of her claims do feel assertive, her credibility as a psychologist and provided supporting evidence from experts including, but not limited to, Michael Balint, Jessie Bernard, and Sigmund Freud. Through dissection and magnification, Chodorow is able to expose many roots and causes of everyday human behavior. Her expertise can be valuable as supporting evidence, but her psychological theory can be a great asset as well.

Domini, John. "Donald Barthelme." *Southwest Review*, vol. 75, no. 1, Jan. 1990, p. 95. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/cwi.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=f5h&AN=9602291956&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

John Domini is a literary critic and author who studied postmodern writers and published this essay in the *Southwest Review*, a literary journal produced on the campus of Southern Methodist University. This essay serves as an insight into how to read Barthelme. It compares different pieces of his works to uncover how "Chameleonic" his writing style and allusions truly are, arguing that his works are more art than reportage. The author explains the importance of Barthelme's modernist approaches and other literary conventions he applies. While this article does not mention "Critique de la Vie Quotidienne", it does comment on several other stories that appear in the same publication. It serves as

contextual information about how to read Barthelme and provides some biographical information about his life. The author cites interviews with Barthelme and supports his arguments with that of other Barthelme critics.

Clark, D. (Ed.). (1991). *Marriage, Domestic Life and Social Change: Writings for Jacqueline Burgoyne, 1944-88* (1st ed.). Routledge. doi.org/10.4324/9780203169292. Accessed 26 Apr. 2023.

The book is an homage to the life and research of Jacqueline Burgoyne, a key figure in British family studies. One of her unpublished works on couple relationships is included in the book. The other contributions are by Jacqueline Burgoyne's friends and colleagues, all of whom are recognized in the discipline of family studies. The topics covered span from demographic developments in marriage and the family over the previous four decades, the critical themes in family research in the 1980s, to examinations of the intimacies of marriage. A section written by contributors Martin P.M Richards, and B. Jane Elliot examines sex and marriage in the 1960s and 1970s. This section of the book provides historical context for the domestic life depicted in *Critique de la Vie Quotidienne*. The chapter thoroughly examines the domestic life of marriage in the 60s and 70s, focusing on the viewpoints around partnership and intimacy. Historical examples are provided within the text, including surveys, magazines, and letters that detail the common feelings and behaviors towards marriage at the time, providing perspective from both men and women who were married during the 60s and 70s. Overall, this book provides an additional frame of reference for the social and historical viewpoints of marriage life in the time period that *Critique* was written.

Kušnír, Jaroslav. "Contesting the Real in American Fiction: Donald Barthelme, 'The Angry Young Man' (1992)." *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies (HJEAS)*, vol. 16, no. 1/2, 2010, pp. 59–71, www.jstor.org/stable/43921753. Accessed 2 May 2022.

The Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies is a peer-reviewed, international journal stationed at the University of Debrecen. Jaroslav Kušnír is a professor with a specialization in American and European literature. In *Contesting the Real in American Fiction: Donald Barthelme*, “The Angry Young Man,” Kušnír focuses on Barthelme’s use of realism. He begins by citing literary theorists Benjamin Hrushovski, Lubomír Doležel, and professor Ruthy Ronen. Kušnír uses Barthelme’s short story *The Angry Young Man* as his main exhibit, pointing out all of the story’s nuances, postmodern themes, narrative techniques, and contradictions, concluding that Barthelme’s fictional world is one representative of reality. While Kušnír’s interest in Barthelme’s work may seem like a limitation, a less passionate researcher never would have gone through this immense length and detail. Kušnír’s long explanations and insights would work great as background information.

Lopate, Phillip. “The Dead Father: A Remembrance of Donald Barthelme.” *The Threepenny Review*, no. 46, 1991, pp. 6–11, www.jstor.org/stable/4383988. Accessed 30 Apr. 2022.

Released a mere two years after Barthelme’s death, essayist Phillip Lopate’s piece covers the majority of Barthelme’s career. While he does examine Barthelme’s work, citing parts of “Conversations With Goethe,” *The Dead Father*, “Chablis,” and “Critique de la Vie Quotidienne,” Lopate never lets the writing overshadow Barthelme’s personal life. For every analyzed bit of text, Lopate gives two details about Barthelme; whether that be Barthelme upsetting the women in his writing class, or labeling his own book *Paradise* as “pretty weak.” Detailing his personal relationship with Barthelme, Lopate describes Barthelme’s humor, emotional conversations after dinner parties, alcoholism, and how bored the man was with everyone around him. Lopate uses minute detail after minute detail to show appreciation and love for his friend. However, there will always be the limitation of Lopate’s inability to fully get inside

Barthelme's head, and fully understand the psyche of another man. Lopate's personal connection with Barthelme also may be a source of great bias. Though his unique connections and enlightening experiences are valuable beyond doubt when viewing Barthelme from a psychological lens.

McCaffery, Larry. "Donald Barthelme and the Metafictional Muse." *SubStance*, vol. 9, no. 2, 1980, pp. 75–88, doi.org/10.2307/3683881. Accessed 30 April 2022.

Larry McCaffery is a literary critic, author and English professor. His essay "Donald Barthelme and the Metafiction Muse" was published by The Johns Hopkins University Press in 1980. This essay unpacks many of Barthelme's works by looking at how he creates characters and complex, realistic perspectives on life. He reviews the postmodern elements with particular attention to the metafiction strategies used by Barthelme. The author discusses "Critique de la Vie Quotidienne" starting on page 78 of this article. It considers how Barthelme's work is self-reflexive and where it can be seen in his body of work. He argues that by manipulating language Barthelme changes traditional storytelling and creates dialogue about contemporary society.

McCaffery, Larry. "Meaning and Non-Meaning in Barthelme's Fictions." *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, vol. 13, no. 1, 1979, pp. 69–79, doi.org/10.2307/3332090. Accessed 1 May 2022.

This article breaks down Barthelme's way of storytelling and character building to tell his view of the world. It shows how he is able to personify himself into the characters that he creates. Not only are the characters within most of his stories, flawed and disintegrating, he is as well. McCaffery points out how Barthelme seems to personify his own imperfections into the characters in which he writes. The article claims that the reader is the final level of the process piecing together the connections between the two as well as their own lives. With the reader being the final level of the process, and leaving it open to interpretation for the reader, it helps to provide a strong subjective reading response.

Medvecky, Craig. "Reconstructing Masculinity: Donald Barthelme's 'Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts.'" *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 48, no. 4, Winter 2007, pp. 554–79. EBSCOhost, search-ebSCOhost.com.cwi.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lfh&AN=30000084&site=lrc-live

Craig Medvecky is the Associate director of the Loyola writing center and in his essay "Reconstructing Masculinity: Donald Barthelme's 'Unspeakable Practices'" Medvecky describes the archetypal male within Barthelme's "Sixty Stories" that he calls the Barthelmean Man. He describes these characters as ones full of fragility, self-loathing, and victimizations. Medvecky uses method sources to present Freudian logic to some of Barthelme's stories to examine how manhood is represented in Barthelme's works and points out where the oedipal tendencies appear in Barthelme's works.

Pinsker, Joe. "How Successful Are the Marriages of People with Divorced Parents?" *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 30 May 2019, www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2019/05/divorced-parents-marriage/590425/.

This article examines the success rate of marriages when both of the participants are, themselves, children of divorce. The author of this article does this by examining data and comparing to those of marriages where the participants were from families who were still married. The purpose of this article was to emphasize that children of divorce have a more difficult time maintaining a healthy relationship. This is due to the fact that they developed unhealthy relationship management by viewing their parents as examples. Rather than solving marital problems they instead choose to run away and dissolve the marriage. This article is relevant to the Barthelme's story due to the fact that the characters exhibit behaviors similar to those in the article, and didn't attempt to solve their problems, rather, they just went their separate ways.

"Reader Response versus New Criticism: Effects on Orientations to Literary Reading." *TESL Reporter*, vol. 41, no. 2, Oct. 2008, pp. 14–26. EBSCOhost, search-ebSCOhost.com.cwi.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lfh&AN=30000084&site=lrc-live

com.cwi.idm.oclc.org/
login.aspx?direct=true&db=ehh&AN=41521790&site=ehost-
live&scope=site.

This article examines the benefits of reader response criticism towards literary reading. It cites that different readers react differently depending on their own personal insight. They also respond more positively vs traditional institutional presentations. Reader responses allow for more personal connectedness with the story. Research has shown that students who learn the reader response approach, are more often willing to enter the literary world. They leave with a greater attitude and understanding of the piece of work they just read. The article states that those who are given inherited interpretations are more likely to lose interest and motivation.

Reader Response

Growing Up: A Personal Response to

"Critique de la Vie Quotidienne"

Austin Holton

As a person raised by an alcoholic father, and a mother trying to make sense of and recover from tragedy, "Critique de la Vie Quotidienne" rang a little too close to home. In what almost feels accusatory yet cautionary language, Barthelme tells of a man, his wife and child, and their predictable disintegration. Larry McCaffery wrote "This first level of many Barthelme stories, then, depicts a sort of personal struggle with disintegration. On the second level, however, the reader is aware that Barthelme himself is engaged a struggle with disintegration". (McCaffery) He tells tales not too unsimilar to my own. As a man on the precipice of starting my own, the family in Donald Barthelme's "Critique de la Vie Quotidienne" are the eerily similar characterizations of who we were as a family and what I never want mine to become.

The child in "Critique de la Vie Quotidienne", who was depicted as overfed, slightly spoiled nuisance, was not too far of how I view my childhood self. Each example provided in the story I can match with multiple memories as an adolescent. The child in Barthelme's short story asking for a horse and "a film of tears is squeezed out and presented to you, over its eyes, and with liberal amounts of anathematization" (Barthelme) when he

didn't get the intended response, is a perfect example of his ungratefulness. Instantly my mind was flooded with shudder, inducing memories of my own similar behaviors. One specific behavior I recall was a time where my dad had called during an out-of-town work trip. He had said that they were headed back home and that he had a surprise for my brother and I. The worksite was a day away, so I had plenty of time to wonder and build anticipation on just what this surprise could be. I was a coil compressed, ready to be released. As his truck pulled up the lane I was already waiting by the workshop where he would stop first. I don't remember greeting him at all. I do remember demanding to know where this surprise was. We were made to close our eyes while he unloaded it. "It" being a chair, shaped like an enormous human hand, where one would sit in the palm. The reveal did not go as either of us had expected. Anticipation and excitement turned to disappoint and tears. Loud, wailing tears. The chair still sits out front of that shop, bringing an acidic feeling of guilt and embarrassment every time it catches my eye. I was not a perfect child, nor do I think anyone has ever been, but the child in Barthelme's story, with him being ungrateful for what he has, brought back those memories of behaviors I used to harbor.

The mother in the story was also not unsimilar my own. While she never pulled a gun on my father, there was still a good amount of yelling, door slamming, or times where she would engross herself in work to avoid being home. I believe a great deal of this behavior stemmed from the grief and anger from losing her first son. When I was only a year old, my older brother was killed in an all-terrain vehicle accident. I was too young be aware of this event and fully comprehend how it had changed everybody involved, my mother especially. She has always been an emotional person. Always very caring and loving but when she felt as if she was at risk of being hurt, she would lash out. Preferring to strike first led to the escalation of minor arguments into loud drawn-out occasions. The mother in the story really resembled this behavior when she smashed the dinner to the floor in response to an off-color comment made by the husband.

The father character in "Critique de la Vie Quotidienne" was

the one that hit home the most for a multitude of reasons. The first, being that my father is an alcoholic, and growing up we have seen many things that resembled behaviors in this story. One of the things that stuck out the most was the change in demeanor that drinking caused. In the story, the father character stated, "At night I drank and my hostility came roaring out of its cave like a jet-assisted banshee. I'd glare at her so hotly she'd often miss a triple jump". The demeanor change was the most notable thing about my father's drinking. Normally he was a goofy, caring, and sensitive person. While drinking however, he was miserable and had a sharp tongue, but the most noticeable characteristic was this seemingly permanent sneer that crept over his face as if everything had a twisted, meanspirited humor behind it.

The father in "Critique de la Vie Quotidienne" seemed to drink to quell the annoyance brought on by his child. One event during my childhood matches this behavior all too well. Driving back from a weekend at our grandparents' cabin, my brother and I were sitting in the backseat. My dad alone in the front. Playful fighting between the two of us turned real. Crying back and forth at each other for miles. Abruptly, my father swerved into a gas station almost missing the corner, as if he had been resisting the urge but broke at the last moment. He came out with two brown paper bags, and we were quiet the rest of the trip.

The poor relationship (to put it lightly) between both the man and wife, and the man and child, stemmed from his bitter attitude towards family. "Our evenings lacked promise. The world in the evening seems fraught with the absence of promise, if you are a married man. There is nothing to do but go home and drink your nine drinks and forget about it" he said. I, myself, have been with my wife for ten years and we have plans of starting a family of our own very soon. The thought of feeling this way about my new family hurts to even fathom.

In an article in "The Atlantic", Nicholas Wolfinger, who is a sociologist at the University of Utah, was cited as saying:

"... couples in which both partners are children of divorce are more likely to get divorced ... If your parents stay together, they fight and then you realize these things aren't fatal to a marriage.

If you're from a divorced family, you don't learn that message, and after fights it seems like things are untenable. And so you bounce." (Pinsker)

My wife and I have had our share of fights. Unlike the characters in the story who never tried to work on their relationship, we take every fight as a learning experience. We do this so next time we can handle it in a more effective way. I have changed my personal behavior as well regarding alcohol. Seeing the effects of alcohol on relationships firsthand, I no longer drink the way I used to when I was younger. Had the father in Barthelme's story done the same, perhaps it would've turned out differently.

Donald Barthelme's story, "Critique de la Vie Quotidienne", was a dark reflection of an average family that rang a little too true and reminded me of past disintegrations within my family growing up as well as a reminder, or a blueprint of the battle with disintegration that I face with my new family. While I don't believe that this was Barthelme's main intention while penning this story, I do think that readers with similar experiences can take solace in knowing that they are not alone. I just hope that they reflect back and strive to take steps to create a brighter future. This response was not intended to be a scathing review of my parents and childhood. I have countless joyful memories growing up with both my parents as well. No family is perfect, but all require some work and effort.

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Deconstruction

Criticizing Everyday Life: The Man Beneath the Monster

Erin Nelson

Donald Barthelme's short story "Critique de la vie Quotidienne" follows a man in his gripes with everyday life, full of disdain for his wife and child, he drinks to numb the pains of failure and he hides anger behind eloquence. It is quintessentially the open letter of an abusive father and husband, and the reader is left to guess at the author's intention for penning the dramatic and unfavorable narrator. Author Craig Medvecky would say that the speaker of "Critique de la vie Quotidienne" fits into his description of a Barthelmean Man being, "Unable to act and on the verge of self-destruction, these men reveal aspects of a male consciousness that is above all in conflict with itself" (Medvecky 554). The narrator of the story is an archetype of this fragile on-the-edge man, who displays a cold and cruel attitude throughout the story. It could be suggested that the speaker of "Critique" hides his vulnerability underneath this cruel and unbecoming demeanor, becoming both the monster of the story and the victim. By deconstructing the monster that is on the surface of the story, the ethical conundrum that is Barthelme's narrator is pulled into focus, and the binaries of alienation and connection, composure and vulnerability, strength and weakness play together to uncover the cruelest realities of life.

The nameless man that narrates "Critique de la Vie

Quotidienne” hides behind alcohol. In a way to disassociate from his reality, the man feels that “The world in the evening seems fraught with the absence of promise, if you are a married man. There is nothing to do but go home and drink your nine drinks and forget about it” (Barthelme). His following statements suggest he feels trapped, specifying his unhappiness with his wife, and feeling without the promise of the freedom he imagines for “the genus horse”. The alcohol, which also feeds into the rage the speaker expresses later in the story, is a prominent action throughout the scenes. Ironically, while sipping away at his “modest nine” drinks a night, the speaker criticizes the world around him, but never once does he give pause to this destructive habit. He even shows his dependency on alcohol at the end of the story by alluding to how the whiskey won’t leave him, as his wife and child have, “And I, I have my J&B. The J&B company keeps manufacturing it, case after case, year in and year out, and there is, I am told, no immediate danger of a dearth” (Barthelme). This emphasizes the comfort he finds in the bottom of the bottle. The escapism he finds is critical to understanding his perceived victimhood. Repeatedly he demonstrates how dissatisfied he is with life, and yet clings to his hopelessness and coping mechanisms.

The narrator of the story presents two opposing representations of self. There is how he wishes to portray himself, and how he is actually perceived. In the opening lines of the story, he sets the tone for how he wishes to be seen, “I read the Journal of Sensory Deprivation” (Barthelme). Then he criticizes his wife’s choice of reading, *Elle Magazine*. By comparing their reading material, he is exposing his ego and high self-regard whilst simultaneously undermining his wife’s ability to think for herself. This becomes a pattern for the narrator throughout the story. His duality in language – painting himself as a more respectable sort of person, then showcasing how he is not – is more apparent in the argument with his wife, “you look, as I say to your wife, as the cocktail hour fades... and inquire in the calmest tones available what is for supper and would she like to take a flying fuck at the moon for visiting this outrageous child upon you” (Barthelme). The narrator uses language that is eloquent and sophisticated, which

nearly distracts the reader from his fury at her for inflicting a terrible child on him. What is underneath this criticism is the narrator's intensely felt hatred for himself. Discerning that criticizing what is around him is a criticism of his own life, and his inability to turn inward to resolve it leads to his outburst of brutish behaviors.

Barthelme writes his narrator in such a way that he is in a constant state of contradiction. The narrator conveys his unhappiness with his life multiple times throughout the story, he even goes as far as to condemn the family lifestyle directly to his wife. One intriguing instance of his duality comes from his behaviors as a father. In reply to his child's request for a horse he disguises his desire to escape his responsibilities, "the genus horse prefers the great open voids, where it can roam, and graze and copulate with other attractive horses... and that horse, if obtained, would not be happy here, in the child's apartment, and does he, the child, want an unhappy horse, mopping and brooding" (Barthelme). The narrator's metaphor for himself is readily apparent, however, this is complicated later in the story when he tells of a memory where he shows a desire for connection with his son. He fixes the child's bicycle and then proclaims, "That was a good, a fatherly thing to do," he goes on to say that they were "loving and kind that night" and he and his child "beamed at each other contesting as to who could maintain the beam the longest" (Barthelme). This contributes to the idea that there is softness under the coarse exterior that the narrator presents. He houses a desire to be seen and recognized as a good father but struggles to build those connections. He is connected in many ways to his family, but still feels alienated and troubled by his inner thoughts and failures.

The double language used by the narrator highlights where he consistently hides the more vulnerable moments in favor of harshness and depressive thoughts. Literary critic Larry McCaffery describes this aspect of the behavior in Barthelme's characters, "Simply stated, their fundamental problem is twofold: on the one hand they are bored with their humdrum lives and humdrum relationships with others and are therefore constantly seeking means of overcoming their rigidly patterned but ultimately inconsequential lives; on the other hand,

Barthelme's characters fear any loss of security and are unable to fully open themselves to experience" (McCaffery 79). What the reader sees unfold throughout "*Critique de la vie Quotidienne*" is the internal strife of the narrator. He is unhappy and self-perpetuates his misery through drinking, patterns of abusive criticism towards his family, and a desire to be perceived as a strong-willed man. The narrator, even to the end of the story, does not expose his true vulnerabilities to his wife.

Unable to achieve the great life he wishes for himself he lashes out and loses his marriage and child to divorce. The pressures of his own expectations have brought the narrator to a place of misery and while his actions in the story are brutish, the repressed emotions and underlying pain of the narrator do generate a small vote of sympathy from the reader. Barthelme's intentions for this story are to expose the realities of life while playing with the fictitious situations, and consequently, the fears that readers might connect to. So, when the reader asks, is the narrator of "*Critique de la vie Quotidienne*" a monster or a victim, the answer is both. The reality is that those hidden vulnerabilities, depression, and paradoxical self-images create the perfect storm for a man who can't control his emotions. Instead, he drinks and criticizes everyday life, uninspired to make the changes to his perspective and life to achieve what he seeks. The narrator points his fingers at everything else within the story, and never once stops to recognize his power to change it.

In examining the world we live in today and where Barthelme's narrator fits into it, it is important to see that behind every monster, there is a person in pain. There could be endless guesses as to why the narrator struggles so much with his self-image, but the truth of the matter is that it does not matter why. Behind the mask of alcohol, there is a person struggling to be a good father. Behind violence there is shame. While it does not excuse their behavior, it does shine a light on the healing that deserves attention. Collectively, offering support and kindness to those who deserve it the least might help to break down the walls they build for themselves and

move society in a direction with more kindness and love for one another.

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New Historical Criticism

A New Historical Perspective of Critique de la Vie Quotidienne

Brooke Brown

The short story “Critique de la Vie Quotidienne” by Donald Barthelme was originally published in *The New Yorker* in 1971. Within this story, the narrator, who relies on nine glasses of alcohol a day, reminisces on a series of family conflicts that display the nature of his problems with his wife, Wanda, and their nameless child. Written in the early '70s, the theme of turbulent domestic life was a relevant motif, both because of the personal challenges Barthelme faced in his lifetime and, on a larger scale, reflecting the experiences of many couples living in the era due to changing attitudes toward marriage and divorce. During this time, America was experiencing drastic social and political changes that brought forth equal amounts of tension and progress. “Critique de la Vie Quotidienne” succeeds in capturing the domestic tensions of the time through the perspective of a privileged male protagonist who encapsulates period typical male ignorance, which directly addresses the patriarchal and misogynistic values that persisted within the rapidly changing period.

The story opens with the speaker reminiscing in the past tense about the type of literature his former wife, Wanda, read compared to what he read. While he would read an academic journal about sensory deprivation, she would read *Elle*, a

fashion magazine marketed for women. The male narrator criticizes the material of the magazine, even though Wanda's interest in the magazine is made apparent as the narrator recalls her following diet instructions from the magazine to achieve the "schoolgirl look" by following the magazine enforced diet throughout her entire pregnancy (Barthelme 1). This distinction between the kinds of media they consume provides insight into the difference between how men and women were being marketed to and how they were represented in the early 1970s. American Marketing Association's research found that there was an increase in women being portrayed more independently in the selected 1970 and 1972 advertisements when compared to those from 1958 adverts (Belkaoui and Belkaoui 172). However, multiple stereotypes of women were reinforced and maintained in 1970s advertising as having little purchasing power and could be seen playing objectified, decorative roles (171). Wanda would have been exposed to advertisements that pushed forward negative stereotypes of women as dependent and as extensions of men while reading publications such as *Elle*. The narrator's acknowledgment of the difference between what they read points out the gender expectations that were meant to be upheld through targeted advertising.

The narrator is apathetic towards his life, most notably towards his own child. The child is objectified throughout the entire story, never being addressed by their name and at points being referred to as "it". This choice of description from the speaker shows the disconnect that the father has from what he describes as "married life". Cristina Ionica coined the characterization of the father in "Critique" as a "Latter Day Father," which describes a father who reinforces a type of violence to reinstate their patriarchal values; however, their failed attempts to stay in control of themselves cause them to fall into a depressed and detached state (Ionica 65). As a latter-day father, the narrator is simultaneously guilty of abuse while dissociating himself from his own actions. He acknowledges when he inflicts violence on his child but refuses to recall it because of the shame (Barthelme 6). The main character's vindictive tone in retelling such incidents eliminates his claims

of credibility or innocence, despite his belief that nothing is ever his fault.

Barthelme's depiction of the father here speaks to the reality of the expectations that men were held to as domestic partners at the time. It is true that in the 1970s, there was a rapid social change that caused a shift in the way men were expected to behave as fathers and husbands. The 1960s were when second-wave feminism began, which was a movement that brought forth the Civil Rights Act and began to challenge the expectations of marriage and, more importantly, what was expected of the man within the domestic unit as a father (Borstelmann 76). There was still much work to be done, and men continued to push back strongly in the early 1970s because they felt threatened by the new demands that were being placed on them. The implementation of a regressive, unchanging father in place of a narrator appears to be a deliberate choice on Barthelme's side. Barthelme is no stranger to incorporating anti-masculinist themes into his writings, which he frequently achieves by creating male characters who are so obsessed with their own masculinity that they become symbols of their own destruction (Ionica 62). He conveys patriarchal structures as abhorrent and wasteful practices, which was a contentious stance to take at the time he wrote.

Marriage is an important theme in this story. The narrator speaks about his marriage to Wanda in the past tense, introducing her as his "ex-wife". Their relationship has an obvious strain due to the man's boredom with domestic life and his drinking problems, which neither of them directly addresses. In relation to Barthelme's own experiences, he has been married and divorced multiple times throughout his life, only settling down after his fourth wife. Having had many marriages, Barthelme was able to draw from his own experience of strained and failed marriages. By the time "Critique" was published, he had already divorced and remarried multiple times. His relationship with his wife, Brigit, at the time, was described as "damaged beyond repair" (Daughtery 524). In the early 1970s, the viewpoint on divorce began to change drastically. It became more common for couples to get divorced compared to previous decades. Demographics showed that

divorce rates increased over time, particularly between 1960 and 1980 (Clark 70). This is reflected in the story, where the narrator and Wanda share drinks after their divorce. The spite between them is hardly resolved, though, as the male speaker never apologizes for the abuse and often jumps to justify his actions that he put her and their child through. However, they both benefit from the separation in the end: Wanda is free from her husband and able to “study Marxist sociology,” and the protagonist escapes from the clutches of domestic life. The depiction of a divorced couple in the story represents the rising divorce rates in the 1970s as well as Barthelme’s own experiences with failed marriages.

Another glaring aspect of this work is the speaker’s need for alcohol to get through the day. Even while the father holds his child in his lap, he keeps his nine glasses of alcohol close in the other hand, depending on it to keep him sane (Barthelme 3). This detail is not seen as a problem but rather a simple necessity for him to function as a father and husband. The protagonist of the narrative frequently states that the abuse goes both ways, yet his internal dialogue reads like an alcoholic rant. The narrator’s dependency on alcohol is also reflective of Barthelme’s own life. His issues with alcohol had manifested years before he began to write short stories, according to his ex-wife Helen (Daughtery 285). She recounted that he became reliant on alcohol to get through his projects, similar to how the speaker in the story leans on his nine glasses a day. In general, the viewpoint around alcohol consumption was lax, and the laws of the time reflected that. Previous restrictions on alcohol sales had been loosened, making it easier than ever in America to purchase liquor (Borstelmann 297). The seriousness of the matter is not completely overlooked, as during a post-divorce conversation in which the couple drinks together and exchange their wishes for health, Wanda attempts to shoot him, but the bullet instead hits the bottle of scotch, which was the source of their marriage’s failure. The harm of alcoholism is acknowledged through the characters’ actions; however, none of them speak of it outright. The attitude around drinking in “Critique” reflects Barthelme’s own struggles with alcoholism as well as the relaxed regulations

of the time that often minimized the seriousness of alcohol consumption.

In “Critique de la Vie Quotidienne” the depiction of men’s roles as fathers and husbands brings attention to the patriarchal standards of the time. As a postmodernist writer, Barthelme uses the absurd inner dialogue of the male protagonist to convey the attitudes and opinions many men in the 1970’s would have and does not shy away from portraying them as ridiculous while trying to perform acts of toxic masculinity. Donald Barthelme depicts violent men as aware and willing agents of an oppressive patriarchal system, as people who recognize the motivations and ramifications of their actions and gain pleasure from their violent acts, rather than as innocent embodiments of a natural aggressive instinct. His method of writing makes it difficult to ignore the problems within the speaker’s frame of thinking, which succeeds in calling out the many issues of the period. This short story captures the social and political climate that it was written in and confronts the issues within it using a touch of irony and absurdity.

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Psychological

Barthelme: Unconscious Revelations

Darin NeuBerger

Much of Barthelme's work criticizes the flaws of society and art in the times each piece was written. Through a satiric lens postmodern-realism approach he is able to show people's flaws, egos, and desires in their rawest forms. In regard to Barthelme's short story "The Angry Young Man," Jaroslav Kušnir says "Barthelme [is able to show] the inadequacy of art for the masses and the idea of a working class and vernacular poetics in the postmodern period." Likewise, "Critique de la Vie Quotidienne" exposes economic disparities and shows how the narrator's "destitute" causes him to no longer care. However, there is much evidence to suggest that Barthelme's intense analysis of human interaction is a result of his inner intellectualization. He prefers to analyze and interprets his childhood, rather than react in an emotional manner to it. As a result, through the characters in "Critique de la Vie Quotidienne," Barthelme has exposed his subconscious feelings and desires relating to his own childhood. When Nancy Chodorow's psychological theory of childhood gender norms is applied to Barthelme's short story, many inferences can be made about the characters' pasts, futures, and present motivations. This leads the reader to a better understanding of how Barthelme is shaped by his own childhood.

Nancy Chodorow argues that all elements of family roles and

relations can be traced back to each individual's gender-assigned role. She states that, "In theory, a boy resolves his Oedipus complex by repressing his attachment to his mother. He is therefore ready in adulthood to find a primary relationship with someone *like* his mother." Thus, the heterosexual male's romantic relationships will continue to be influenced by the unconscious desires and fears the man had with his mother. This contentious relationship with his mother is then to be continued with his spouse or partner.

Additionally, Chodorow proposes that "Men defend themselves against the threat posed by love but needs for love do not disappear through repression." This can lead to isolation and confusion. Opposingly, it is girls who "retains her preoedipal tie to her mother...and builds oedipal attachments to both her mother and her father upon it...Women try to fulfill their need to be loved, try to complete the relational triangle, and try to reexperience the sense of dual unity they had with their mother." Of course, variance from Chodorow's theory is not impossible, especially when considering children with only one caretaker and non-heterosexual individuals. However, the couple in "Critique de la Vie Quotidienne" obeys Chodorow's theory, revealing not just Barthelme's unconscious desires, but showing the characters, themselves, to follow Chodorow's philosophy.

The narrator is perhaps the most important of these characters when trying to understand Barthelme. It is worth noting that the narrator is not explicitly Barthelme. However, it is highly plausible that the author may still have unintentionally written about some similar experiences or relationships. Phillip Lopate goes as far as to claim that the photograph of Barthelme in his obituary "wore the same expression he wrote about in his story, 'Critique de la Vie Quotidienne.'" Lopate's analysis suggests that Barthelme has projected himself into the unnamed narrator's head. However, the characters may all represent a different aspect of Barthelme's psyche. It is inaccurate to simply state that the narrator is Barthelme. The narrator is purely in denial. For instance, after fixing the child's bicycle he says how "that brought [him] congratulations, around the fireside," and that it "was a good, a fatherly thing to do."

Barthelme would not have written this satiric scene if he was in denial, because satire is meant to criticize and those in denial think there is nothing to be criticized.

It is also worth noting that Barthelme was often critical of his own father, even writing a novel ironically titled *The Dead Father*. It seems more reasonable for Barthelme to have used sublimation to reverse the roles of his childhood. By immersing himself in his father's shoes he gains the power he never had, while simultaneously the child in the story is able to escape in the loving arms of the mother. Opposingly, Barthelme may have written "Critique de la Vie Quotidienne" from the perspective of an objectively careless father as a means to satirize his own father's faults, weaknesses, and misguided lifestyle.

The narrator prioritizes putting himself in the center; Whether that be through nine bottles of alcohol, telling the child to sleep by his feet, or talking with the Ambassador. The narrator's focus is on the "competitive." He achieves a sense of happiness when he pushes back against or outdoes Wanda and the child. He lives by the id, never approaches the ego, and the seven-year deal he makes with Wanda reveals his misguided superego. Chodorow says "For boys, superego formation and identification with their father, rewarded by the superiority of masculinity, maintain the taboo on incest with their mother, while heterosexual orientation continues from their earliest love relation from her." However, Chodorow also believes that individuals have the ability to change and grow. But the narrator instead chooses to deny that he had wronged Wanda and pushes her away, the same way Chodorow's theory asserts that males repress their feelings toward their mothers. Through isolation, he even is able to find joy in his mundane life, but nevertheless a joy he cannot share with others.

Chodorow's theory can be applied to Wanda and her son as well, which can be seen in the child's limited attraction to either parent or, the mother, Wanda's disdain for her husband, which are amplified by the narrator's inability to see his own faults. Chodorow says, "Male dominance in heterosexual couples and marriage solves the problem of women's lack of heterosexual commitment and lack of satisfaction by making women more

reactive in the sexual bonding process.” This lack of control in Wanda’s situation is what leads her to aim the gun at the narrator. Given Chodorow’s theory that family relationships repeat themselves, the wife in the story probably had a father similar to the narrator and the narrator a mother alike his wife.

Chodorow’s theory would suggest the child will likely grow up to marry someone similar to the parent of the opposite sex. Chodorow says this society run by males “propels men into the nonfamilial competitive work world place,” while “women’s mothering also reproduces the family as it is constituted in male-dominant society.” She claims this is why women are unable to become the dominant ones in heterosexual relationships, which actually is very reminiscent of Wanda and how risky it was for her to escape with the child. However, the child’s gender was never specified. As Chodorow says boys imitate their fathers and girls imitate their mothers, the child desires both seemingly equally. It “crept into bed” between the both of them, obeys them both without preference, and mostly keeps to itself. It only goes to its parents when needing comfort or wanting something it cannot get:

And so, newly cheered and warmed by this false insight, you reach out with your free hand (the one that is not clutching the nine drinks) and pat the hair of the child, and the child looks up into your face, gauging your mood as it were, and says, “Can I have a horse?”

Significantly, this suggests that the child never developed an Oedipus complex for the parent of the opposite sex. Chodorow’s theory says that a child without a need to mimic either parent will not grow to be like either one. Alike, a child without an unconscious attraction to one of its parents will not grow to have a spouse or lover reminiscent of that parent. In a sense, through adulthood, the child is destined to escape and never return to this family which has neglected and left it empty.

Barthelme perhaps exposes his repressed childhood anxieties in “Critique de la Vie Quotidienne.” It is irrelevant whether Barthelme intended to criticize his own father with this piece. Chodorow’s psychological theory says that the narrator is a part of Barthelme’s inner psyche, of which he cannot let go. The

child's lack of gender and draw to either parent infers its escape from the arguably cruel parents, which may reveal Barthelme's unconscious desire to escape his past, if not a need to use denial to rewrite his own childhood. While Barthelme's intentions for writing the piece can never be rightfully identified, his psyche is left smeared across the text and left for the reader's interpretation. And without saying it explicitly, Barthelme acknowledges that the pain of the child is shared between the two.

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[PART X]

"Paper Menagerie" by Ken Liu

You can read “The Paper Menagerie” by Ken Liu here – <https://gizmodo.com/read-ken-lius-amazing-story-that-swept-the-hugo-nebula-5958919>



Ken Liu is an American author best known for his silkpunk fantasy series *The Dandelion Dynasty*, and his works have won Nebula, Hugo, and World Fantasy awards. Before becoming an author, he worked in the tech industry and then, later, in law. He has also translated many Chinese Science Fiction works into English.

Piggyqzy. “Ken Liu.” Wikimedia Commons, 9

Sept. 2021, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=109846664>. Accessed 14 Dec. 2022.

[Kenliu.name](#)

About the Authors

Aneesa Loughmiller – Annotated Bibliography Editor

Aneesa Loughmiller is a student at the College of Western Idaho, studying English Literature. She is passionate about community building and environmentalism and hopes to use her degree to bring people together. Aneesa lives in southern Idaho and has two fluffy, fluffy dogs.

Ambrosia Shomaker – Editor

Ambrosia is a tired English major who just wants to take a nap with their cat. Ambrosia likes to eat Uncrustables because they require no labor to make. They are ready to get their associate degree and head out into the big bright world of copy-editing, so they can pursue their dream of moving to a nice, warm chunk of land somewhere in Europe, where they will have fruit trees, goats, dogs, a cat, and maybe a koi pond. Once a week they buy a taro smoothie with coconut jellies in it, and it's one of the most delicious drinks they've ever had. In their free time, they like to play video games, research obscure things such as the most famous alligators throughout history and read fantasy novels. They hope to one day publish a poetry collection.

Evan Samuelson – Publisher

Evan Samuelson is a creative writing major at the College of Western Idaho. Evan was born and raised in Idaho and will

graduate in 2023. He is pursuing a career in writing for the screen.

Kylie Lingo – Project Manager

Kylie Lingo is currently a student at the College of Western Idaho, and a Hugo Award winner via her contributions to Archive of Our Own. Kylie is studying creative writing with the intent on going on to work as a narrative designer in the video game industry. Her interests include reading *The Art of War*, which she does once a day, reading and writing poetry, and consuming fiction in all its forms.

Maria Zavala – Copy Editor

Maria Zavala is a student at the College of Western Idaho and a staff member of the enrollment and student services department. Maria has also been a Presidential Ambassador for CWI for the past year and a half serving CWI with community events and building relationships with outside partners. Maria will be graduating in the fall of 2022 with her liberal arts degree and having been a member of the Presidents scholar list for her duration at CWI.

Rafael Jacobo – Publisher

Rafael Jacobo is a student at the College of Western Idaho who has been given the opportunity to advance his education. Raised in Marsing, Idaho, he has developed a connection to the agricultural environment that surrounds him. After graduating with a Liberal Arts degree, he hopes to transfer to Boise State University to undergo their electrician programs. Rafael focuses on school, so he can travel the world to taste the wonderful food out there.

Critical Introduction

Unfolding the Paper Menagerie

Unfolding the Paper Menagerie is an industrious examination of Ken Liu's short story, *Paper Menagerie*, through various critical analysis lenses. Kylie Lingo examines the structure of the piece in *Capricious Envy of the Monomythic Boy*. Maria Zavala's *One Heart and Two Identities*, the struggles of understanding one's identity while coming from a background of clashing cultures is the focus. *Paper Menagerie* is an award-winning short story, and hopefully through these careful analyses, anyone can see why. Evan Samuelson takes a look at the unintentionally told story of Jack's potential psychosis in *Delusion in the Paper Menagerie*. Aneesa Loughmiller, in *The Magic of the Paper Menagerie*, compares and contrasts how the idea of magic is presented in other media, opposed to the casual approach *Paper Menagerie* takes. With *Subversion of the "Evil Matriarch" in Ken Liu's Paper Menagerie*, Ambrosia Shomaker examines the depiction of Jack's mother in contrast to other wicked mothers present in fiction.

Capricious Envy of the Monomythic Boy- Kylie Lingo, New Criticism

In this essay, Kylie Lingo delves into method of the monomyth to better articulate the main principles of Ken Liu's *The Paper Menagerie*. By recognizing this basic structure of Liu's work, Lingo is able to better articulate the themes within *The Paper*

Menagerie for a better understanding of both envy as well as the monomyth in modern storytelling.

One Heart and Two Identities- Maria Zavala, Reader Response

Maria Zavala examines the perspective of the first-generation immigrant in Ken Liu's *Paper Menagerie*, relating to her own experiences in trying to compromise between cultures struggling for control in one's life, and staking out their own identity.

Delusion in the Paper Menagerie- Evan Samuelson, Deconstruction

The Paper Menagerie is a postmodern short story that defies traditional patterns of meaning. In Samuelson's essay, the significance of the paper creatures is uncovered by an examination of their possible interpretations and how their meanings fail to create a cohesive narrative. "Delusion in 'The Paper Menagerie'" reveals what Jack's journey means in the context of his mental health and emotional well-being.

The Magic of the Paper Menagerie- Aneesa Loughmiller, New Historical

Analyzing the short story *Paper Menagerie* through a New Historical Lens, Loughmiller compares the discrimination Jack's mother experiences with discrimination that happens to Asian Americans currently. This is compared with the ending of the story when Jack learns to empathize with his mother's experience and sheds his negative beliefs about her. Likewise, stories of immigrants are being told more in 2022 as a way to counteract prejudices.

The Loss of Identity- Rafael Jacobo, Psychological

In "The Loss of Identity", Rafael Jacobo provides a compelling analysis of Ken Liu's short story "Paper Menagerie" through the lens of Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development. Using this lens, Jacobo argues that the story offers a rich

illustration of the complex interplay between individual identity and social changes across the eight stages of development by Erikson. By drawing on the Character Jack, the protagonist of the story, Jacobo highlights key factors that contribute to Jack's neglect of his Chinese heritage from Infancy to adulthood. The essay demonstrates the importance of understanding what factors influence the sense of individuality over time.

Subversion of the "Evil Matriarch" in Ken Liu's *Paper Menagerie*-
Ambrosia Shomaker, Feminist

In this essay, Ambrosia Shomaker takes a look at the trope of the "Evil Matriarch" in fiction, and how Ken Liu's *Paper Menagerie* subverts this trope by making the evil mother of the story a kind woman whose only evil is being different, while her 'heroic' son is the one who torments his mother. *Editor's Note: This essay was selected as a winner for the [2023 CWT President's Writing Award](#) for Critical Analysis.*

Without further ado, it is time for the unfolding to begin.

Annotated Bibliography

Besser, Gretchen Rous. *The French Review*, vol. 82, no. 1, 2008, pp. 202–03. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/25481529. Accessed 16 Dec. 2022.

In Besser's review of *Kathy*, she does a brief analysis of the novel written by Patrice Juiff. The story is about a young woman named Kathy who leaves her loving foster family to seek out her blood family, only to discover said family is cruel, and essentially become their indentured servant. Besser discusses the authors background in television, and how his novel leans more towards extremist caricatures than realistic characters, as an allegory for the various psychological reasons a person may choose to stay in an abusive situation, as Kathy does. Besser compares the piece to a fairy tale for its ridiculous leanings towards an abstract idea of abuse squallor, but compliments the author for his use of descriptive language and prose, which keep the reader hooked on the story itself. This piece is useful for gaining insight into *Kathy* on its own, but also for isolating its main themes, and how this story can be connected to other stories, or even real life scenarios that have the same ideas behind them. It is a quick read, and offers a good jumping off point to spark ideas for the themes of one's own writing.

Carr, Stephen Leo, and Peggy A. Knapp. "Seeing through

Macbeth." *PMLA*, vol. 96, no. 5, 1981, pp. 837–47. *JSTOR*, doi.org/10.2307/462127. Accessed 16 Dec. 2022.

Seeing Through Macbeth by Stephen Leo Carr and Peggy A. Knapp is an eleven page literary analysis of Macbeth, which is used as the framework to examine how Shakespeare's works are as universal as they are, and how said universalness shifts through the ages and different cultural examinations. It begins by looking at how other pieces have achieved such far reach, such as Christian works, and then focuses in on Shakespeare, then further in on Macbeth. The section I used for my essay focused on Freudian Psychology, and how Lady Macbeth is both Macbeth's wife, but also symbolically his mother for pulling him into the world of crime and intrigue that is afoot in his court. This piece provides ample insight to the story and its characters through psychological and historical examination, providing great supporting evidence, and serving well as a way to cross-check ideas and insure they make sense. Stephen Leo Carr works as the director of the Literature Program at the University of Pittsburgh, and Peggy A. Knapp works at Carnegie Mellon University as a professor emeritus of English.

Franklin, MJ. "MashReads Podcast." 'The Paper Menagerie' is a heartbreaking story of family and immigration, told in just a few pages. 2018. Podcast.

"The story is a powerful allegory about the experience that so many children of immigrants have. But in addition to describing an allegory of how we relate to our heritage, the story is also a heartbreaking look at the ways children relate or distance themselves from their parents as they grow up."

Hang, YU. "An Analysis of the Reconstruction of Chinese American Identity in The Paper Menagerie." *Journal of Literature and Art Studies*, vol. 10, no. 9, Sept. 2020, p. 6.

This article, written by a student at Jinan University in China, explores the "identity dilemma" (1) in "The Paper Menagerie" by Ken Liu: the dilemma of conflicting cultures and desires experienced primarily by second-

generation immigrants. This article by YU Hang explores how cultures are perceived by their participants when they are in a setting where that culture is considered dominant or a minority. Because second-generation immigrants are the primary subject of the article, Jack is the focus and his experience is used as a parallel to what many Chinese-Americans experience everyday. This article explains the push and pull of identity in “The Paper Menagerie” succinctly and effectively. It is an invaluable resource for projects concerned with Chinese American identity, “The Paper Menagerie,” or the authorship of Ken Liu.

Jabeen, Tahira, et al. “Magical Realism in Ken Liu’s Short Stories.” *The Dialogue*, vol. 17, no. 4, Nov. 2022, p. 16, journals.qurtuba.edu.pk/ojs/index.php/thedialogue/article/view/634/243.

This essay by students at The University of Azad Jammu & Kashmir analyzes the elements of magical realism and their significance in three short stories by Ken Liu, including “The Paper Menagerie.” The essay explores how magical realism became established in the “post-colonial world for depicting colonialism” (1) and how the genre brings an elevated emotional intensity to what could otherwise be purely historical information. This article is a compelling interpretation of Liu’s work as post-colonial literature and will be useful for anyone researching Liu, magical realism, colonialism, or post-colonialism.

Lee, David C., and Stephen M. Quintana. “Benefits of Cultural Exposure and Development of Korean Perspective-Taking Ability for Transracially Adopted Korean Children.” *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, vol. 11, no. 2, May 2005, pp. 130–43. *EBSCO host*, doi-org.cwi.idm.oclc.org/10.1037/1099-9809.11.2. Accessed 26 Apr. 2023.

David C. Lee and Stephen M. Quintana in the article “Benefits of Cultural Exposure and Development of Korean Perspective-Taking Ability for Transracially Adopted Korean Children” discusses the research done on transracial adoption. The authors examine the

placement of Korean children with parents of another racial or ethnic group. Through this research, Lee presents studies that deal with the psychological well-being and cultural identity of these adopted children. The studies show how well these transracially adopted children adjust to their adoption by other races and ethnic groups. Additionally, they show how these children have had a more challenging time developing this biracial identification. Furthermore, Lee includes the negative racial experiences that may have influenced the children's development in understanding their own origin of culture. Finally, Lee compares transracially adopted Korean children to Korean children adopted by Korean families and discovered that both children would adapt to their culture when they had a greater exposure to it.

Lee, Erika. "The Chinese Exclusion Example: Race, Immigration, and American Gatekeeping, 1882-1924." *Journal of American Ethnic History*, vol. 21, no. 3, 2002, pp. 36-62. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/27502847. Accessed 27 Apr. 2023.

The journal article written by Erika Lee called "The Chinese Exclusion Example: Race, Immigration, and American Gatekeeping, 1882-1924", examines the history of immigration law and policies in the United States with the introduction of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. Lee discusses the experiences of Chinese and other immigrant groups as they struggle to assimilate into American society. The act was specifically targeted at Chinese immigrants, but later affected many races and nationalities due to the restricted immigration imposed by the law. Furthermore, Lee's article introduces how this act allowed the creation of prohibiting other races from entering the United States. This would create the current legal system in America, requiring immigrants to obtain a "green card" to obtain certification of residence.

Liu, Ken. "The Paper Menagerie." *THE MAGAZINE OF FANTASY & SCIENCE FICTION*, 2011, pp. 64-76.

Author Ken Liu's short story *The Paper Menagerie*, originally debuting in issue #694 of *The Magazine of*

Fantasy & Science Fiction, tells the story of Jack, a half-Chinese boy as he grows up in Connecticut. Rooted in the traditions of his mother's Chinese heritage, Jack slowly begins to resent this facet of his life, while his mother works on trying to reconnect with animated origami animals.

Mackowiak, Maria Luísa. Uma Leitura Tradutória do Conto "The Paper Menagerie", de Ken Liu, para o Português Brasileiro [A Translating Reading of the Short Story "The Paper Menagerie", by Ken Liu, in Brazilian Portuguese]. 2022. Dissertação (Mestrado em Letras) – Universidade Tecnológica Federal do Paraná, Pato Branco, 2022.

This article written by Maria Luísa Mackowiak is both a New Criticism viewpoint of Ken Liu's *The Paper Menagerie*, while also a step by step process of what it has taken to translate Liu's story from English to Portugal Portuguese to Brazilian Portuguese. In the process of translation, this has opened a different perspective for how to read the text without the assumptions offered by familiarity with the English language.

McConnell, Theodore A. "The Course to Adulthood." *Journal of Religion and Health*, vol. 5, no. 3, 1966, pp. 239–51. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/27504803. Accessed 27 Apr.2023.

In "The Course to Adulthood", Theodore A. McConnell discusses the stages of the Psychological Development theory by Erik Erikson. McConnell explores the eight stages and how they develop a person's personality. These eight stages that emerge from infancy to elderly age consist of: trust versus mistrust, autonomy versus shame and doubt, initiative versus guilt, industry versus inferiority, identity versus role confusion, intimacy versus isolation, generativity versus stagnation, and ego integrity versus despair. In each stage, there is a recognizable conflict that is encountered between one's psychological needs and that of the surrounding social environment. In solving each of these connected conflicts, an individual is rewarded with basic human virtues and is better prepared for challenges later in life. On the other hand, failure to recognize and solve these

conflicts have led to difficulties in navigating the future for an individual. This can also have an impact on one's sense of self and personality.

Meredith, Anne. "China's Qingming Festival, Explained." CLI, 1 Apr. 2022, studycli.org/chinese-holidays/qingming-festival/.

Anne Meredith's article offers insight to a holiday mentioned in Ken Liu's *The Paper Menagerie*. Using the traditions of the Qingming holiday, it can provide insight into the culture and traditions of both the protagonist, Jack, and his mother in Liu's short story.

Parry, Jonathan. *Man*, vol. 16, no. 2, 1981, pp. 317–18. *JSTOR*, doi.org/10.2307/2801421. Accessed 16 Dec. 2022.

Jonathan Parry looks at *Women, Androgynes and Other Mythical Beasts*. by Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, which is an examination of Hindu mythology and the various hierarchies within it. He shortens it down to its key elements in his review, which is how O'Flaherty views the women within Hindu mythology to be demonised for doing the same things the men do, but get praised for. An example of this idea is "while 'the breast that feeds itself' is symbolic of the evil mother, the phallus that retains its own seed is symbolic of the perfect man conserving his life-blood." He gets straight to the heart of O'Flaherty's work with the line "The central theme of the book is introduced by a discussion of sexual fluids." He criticizes her for not looking at the mythology from a Hindu perspective, but from her culture as a white woman, and for imposing the structure of Hindu mythology on to modern day Hindu family structures. Jonathan Parry is a philosopher based in The London School of Economics and Political Science, specifically in the Department of Philosophy, Logic, and Scientific Method.

Prendergast, Finola. "'The Paper Menagerie Theme Wheel'" Symbolism Thesis. 2022. Web Document.

By boxing up his paper animals, Jack is figuratively "boxing up" his Chinese heritage to assimilate into American culture.

Sample, Ian. "US Scientists Boycott NASA Conference over

China Ban.” *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 5 Oct. 2013, www.theguardian.com/science/2013/oct/05/us-scientists-boycott-nasa-china-ban.

“Nasa is facing an extraordinary backlash from US researchers after it emerged that the space agency has banned Chinese scientists, including those working at US institutions, from a conference on grounds of national security.”

Song, Han. “Chinese Science Fiction: A Response to Modernization.” *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 40, no. 1, 2013, pp. 15–21. JSTOR, doi.org/10.5621/sciefictstud.40.1.0015. Accessed 4 Dec. 2022.

Han Song’s “Chinese Science Fiction: A Response to Modernization” provides a detailed list of influential science fiction authors in China. Song himself is a Chinese science fiction author and journalist. His article provides a brief history of the genre from its first appearance in China in the 19th century to its unique position in the country today, where it is gaining international popularity as entertainment while attracting the threat of censorship from the government. At the heart of Song’s article is the paradox of the Chinese science fiction writer: an artist dreaming up scenes of technology and the future in the midst of a culture that values traditionalism. He jumps back and forth in the chronology of Chinese sf to include the contributions of different demographics and perspectives (ranging from a section on female writers to a section on “alien affairs” (18). Song’s article is valuable for research on science fiction, Chinese literary culture, and modernization.

THE PAPER MENAGERIE Live Interview with Ken Liu. YouTube, YouTube, 11 Sept. 2022, www.youtube.com/watch?v=A158RmOPlkw&list=PLQY1XEgJNk9VITUX2-NH6hGTiZUoKwIqj&index=2&t=261s. Accessed 14 Dec. 2022.

Ken Liu is interviewed by two members of the Subtle Asian Book Club. They discuss his short story anthology *The Paper Menagerie, And Other Stories*. “I tend to not think about genres specifically. What tends to drive me to

write a story is usually a metaphor that we speak about”
[04:00-) 04:12]

Winslow, Kristie. “Subject Guides: The Monomyth (The Hero’s Journey): The Hero’s Journey.” The Hero’s Journey – The Monomyth (The Hero’s Journey) – Subject Guides At, Grand Valley State University, 23 Aug. 2022. libguides.gvsu.edu/c.php?g=948085&p=6857311.

Kristie Winslow’s work in breaking down the concept of the Hero’s Journey from Joseph Campbell’s *The Hero of a Thousand Faces*, acts as a backbone in understanding the inherent structure of Ken Liu’s *The Paper Menagerie*, allowing the piece to be compared to the “world’s oldest story” for the ease of understanding.

“Yearbook of Immigration Statistics 2011.” Yearbook 2011 | Homeland Security, www.dhs.gov/immigration-statistics/yearbook/2011.

A publication published by Homeland Security with statistics for who moved to the United States in 2011, broken down by county of origin and type of visa requested.

New Criticism

Capricious Envy of the Monomythic Boy

Kylie Lingo

Following the timeless story of the Monomyth, the main character of Ken Liu's "The Paper Menagerie," Jack, is one rife with flaws just as other protagonists who undergo a hero's journey. Jack's story is rooted in the concept of always reaching for something that can never be attained, and the life he will never have, all due to his flaw of envy. Throughout Jack's story in "The Paper Menagerie," he unwittingly calls attention to the story's true meaning; finding solace in the current state of being, rather than trying to go where the grass is greener. This observation changes the moral of "The Paper Menagerie" into a story of how envy is one that ultimately robs the envious of the important things in their life.

The point of view in "The Paper Menagerie" is best classified as first-person limited with a voice that signifies the past tense. The speaker of the story is Jack, his experiences, and his knowledge of the situations at hand, while he narrates the events in his life relating to his mother and what she has done for him growing up. This is all done with a tone of reminiscing, of feeling the guilt of neglect, all for the ways in which Jack treated his mother as he started growing older. "The Paper Menagerie" is one that best falls into the structure of the Monomyth, also known as The Hero's Journey. According to Kristie Winslow of Grand Valley State University, the Monomyth is a twelve-point

storytelling framework that is incredibly flexible (Winslow). Winslow continues to say:

[The Monomyth] has three main parts– the separation, where the hero sets out on his journey, seeking (possibly reluctantly) adventure. Secondly, the initiation, where the majority of the journey happens– the hero arrives. Finally, is the return. The hero has finished whatever they set out to do and has obtained the object (treasure, love, or knowledge). Now he must return home. These are the basic elements of every Hero's journey (Winslow, *An Introduction*).

The above passage is an explanation of the entire Monomyth while each of the twelve steps are present within "The Paper Menagerie," it is still relevant for the narrative itself. Jack's story starts with living at home and being comforted by his mother's origami tiger, named Laohu. Jack then continues to say, "I didn't know this at the time, but Mom's kind was special. She breathed into them so that they shared her breath, and thus moved with her life. This was her magic" (Liu, 1). Regarding the Monomyth, this establishes an ordinary world, yet when regarding the voice of Jack, it implies that the narrator is a much older Jack than the little boy in the scene. The end of the separation in the understanding of the Hero's Journey is much later, after Jack has a few altercations with a classmate named Mark. This results in an argument between Jack and his parents, where he demands that his mother only speak English and to cook American foods (Liu). It is after this point that Jack delves into a new world in the attempt to feed his envy to be just American. All so he can pursue the "American Dream" while leaving everything in his life that is Chinese by the wayside.

The initiation stage of the Hero's Journey is rife with lessons that Jack eventually learns to regret. After pushing away his mom in her entirety just to be like the other kids, he starts pursuing anything that is not related to his heritage. According to Maria Luisa Mackowiak of the Institutional Repository of the Federal Technological University of Paraná, the story of "The Paper Menagerie" is just as much about the sharing of culture as it is about Jack or his mother (Mackowiak). She goes on to say, "The relationship between mother and child highlights the themes related to English and Mandarin Chinese, as well as the

transmission of Chinese culture from generation to another, interrupted by family and identity conflicts (Mackowiak, 34).” With this understanding, Jack’s new world, as defined by the Monomyth, is one where he rejects Chinese culture, not just his mother. All due to his envy for the American life that the bullies at school made him want so badly.

After a short time of pushing away his Chinese heritage, Jack comes to his Supreme Ordeal, the death of his mother. “For years she had refused to go to the doctor for the pain inside her that she said was no big deal (Liu, 7).” While it is learned later that Jack’s mother simply thought this pain in her was something she was feeling because her son was rejecting all affection she tried to offer, it became an unintentional turning point for Jack. After returning home, he obtains a box containing his paper menagerie that he had stuffed away in the attic when he had to move to a smaller house. This marks the reward section of the Hero’s Journey. “After surviving, our hero takes possession of the object, typically a treasure, weapon, knowledge, token, or reconciliation (Winslow, *The Steps of the Hero’s Journey*).” This is the last step of the Initiation phase of the Monomyth.

With the end of Jack’s initiation, he begins to make his return, the final stage of the Hero’s Journey. The final three steps of the Monomyth are: The Road Back, Resurrection, and the Return with the Elixir (Winslow). The road back, which marks the pivoting point between the Hero’s Initiation and the Hero’s Return, is signified with Jack being met with Laohu. After Susan, Jack’s girlfriend, took the cache of origami animals and placed them around their apartment, Laohu finds Jack and growls at him, and starts getting petted by Jack (Liu, 10). This reunion takes place on the Chinese holiday known as Qingming, the Chinese day of remembrance for the dead (Meredith). Traditionally, Qingming is celebrated fifteen days after the Spring Equinox, which according to Anne Meredith, is usually between April 3rd and April 5th. The exact date is determined with the lunar calendar, rather than the traditional Gregorian calendar (Meredith). Being a holiday about death, in “The Paper Menagerie” the holiday of Qingming is noted by Jack’s mother as a day where the spirits return for one day to spend time

with their families. With this, the magic which Jack's mother had blown into the origami animals returns for the day, allowing the animals to bring Jack back into his old, ordinary world with what he has learned.

After Laohu greets Jack again, he unfurls, and exposes a letter written to Jack in Chinese characters. This marks Jack's resurrection into becoming the original child he was. He rushes to a common location for Chinese tourists and asks anybody if they can translate the letter from his mother (Liu, 10). The letter tells the mother's tale, from how she became an orphan, to how she ended up becoming a mail-order-bride. She explains that she saw her family in Jack's features and that seeing him was the happiest moment of her life. She speaks about how she looked forward to teaching her language to Jack. Then she changes her tone to write about how she was losing everything when Jack stopped talking to her (Liu, 11-13). Jack then returns home, with a newfound respect for his mother, too guilty about how he had treated his mother to even look at the woman who helped him translate in the face. He finally realized what his selfish behavior had cost him, when he could have enjoyed the time, he had left with his mother instead.

"The Paper Menagerie" is a story that illustrates how envy is something that can destroy families. Due to his outsider status, and the ways in which individuals such as Mark and the two neighbor women spoke to him, Jack slowly began to resent his mother and the lessons she could offer. Jack's internal struggles as he makes his way through his hero's journey gradually shows the degradation of his family's life, due to his actions in wanting to be like all the other children whom he was around. Yet, only after his mother's fateful passing, and only when he was truly alone, did he even realize what he had fully thrown away, all due to his capricious envy.

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Mackowiak, Maria Luísa. Uma Leitura Tradutória do Conto "The Paper Menagerie", de Ken Liu, para o Português Brasileiro [A Translating Reading of the Short Story "The Paper

Menagerie”, by Ken Liu, in Brazilian Portuguese]. 2022. Dissertação (Mestrado em Letras) – Universidade Tecnológica Federal do Paraná, Pato Branco, 2022.

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Reader Response

One Heart and Two Identities

Maria Zavala

The short story “Paper Menagerie” is a heart-wrenching yet eye-opening insight into the lives of children who are born in one place but must grow up in two different cultures. This story not only makes us revisit our childhood and reminisce on how we grew up in our homes, but it also shines a light on the struggles of growing up and facing the pressure from others to adhere to the social critique of “you’re in America now act American.” Ken Liu’s amazing story illuminates the struggles that many individuals go through with having to struggle to be American enough for the Americans and still be proud of our different cultural backgrounds. Growing up with one heart and two identities many endure racism, resentment, identity conflict, and most importantly self-discovery of love.

The mother in Paper Menagerie keeps her son from crying by creating animals from gift wrap paper which this art is called origami. These animals were very special for they would come to life with the mother’s breath and keep her son content. The animals would move around and play, and they moved with the life of the mother. The mother would make all the animals he wanted, and just like Jack who spent his days playing with his animals, I spent my days learning how to make flowers out of Kleenex. These items were crafted with such love and rich history. The paper animals all throughout this story are a tie for

Jack and his Chinese heritage and ancestors. The animals are symbolic of his Chinese heritage. Much like how Jack doesn't notice the differences yet of having two parents from separate races I also didn't realize the differences pertaining to a different culture until I started to meet other people in the community.

Growing up in a home with a parent of a different race we tend to not make a distinction of differences before school starts or until others notice and point it out. For Jack, it begins when they move to the suburbs, and have guests over. "The neighborhood ladies begin to speak about how "mixing never seems right" and that Jack looks like "a little monster with slanty eyes and white face." (Liu) They wonder why Jack's father chose to marry outside of American culture. Reading this from the story my heart broke for Jack, and it broke for my former child as well because just like Jack I began to experience bullying and racial slurs from peers because of what we look like. I felt Jack's confusion and conflict when he was being called a chink and parallel that experience to when I would be told this is America speak English. Despite the bullying eventually, we make friends and for Jack he has Mark. Jack wasn't fond of Mark's toys, so Jack showed him the origami animals. This is when Mark began to call the figures trash thus planting a seed of insecurity. During the time that Jack is showing Mark the tiger, Mark's toys are knocked over. Mark angrily tells Jack, "It probably cost more than your dad paid for your mom...here's your stupid cheap Chinese garbage..." Being treated that way at that developing age creates bitterness in oneself and towards others. On one side the wanting to belong is so strong and the resentment that grows towards your roots creates so much turmoil within living two identities.

Growing up and becoming more aware of the differences between myself and others I grew to develop resentment and bitterness towards myself and my family for being different. While I was battling my parents for them to try to learn fluent English Jack was battling his mother to speak English. Despite Jack's parents' very hard efforts, she continued to speak choppy English and whenever she tries to speak to Jack, he ignores her. "We are not other families." I looked at him. Other families don't have moms who don't belong." (Liu) Jack is ashamed of

his mother because his mother is a mail-order bride that his father paid to get sent to the U.S. The problem with growing up in essentially two different worlds is the lack of a sense of belonging all the while I see myself reflected in Jack and I understand why he is trying so hard to be more American while the mother's heart breaks by the way her son is treating her. I can only imagine it was the same way I broke my parents' hearts trying to change them so I could fit in.

Many first-generation immigrants struggle with trying to fit in and even I began to struggle with my own identity just like Jack. "The discrimination against Chinese in American society was internalized into Jack's self-discrimination. He was eager to abandon all the Chinese things in his life. He blamed all the discrimination he had suffered on his mother who was Chinese. He did not question whether the racism against Chinese was correct or not, but was trapped in the feelings of self-hatred, and could not find his own identity accurately." (Hang) Jack is ashamed of his Chinese heritage so much that it creates self-hatred, and he refuses to speak Chinese, eat Chinese food, and even refuses to speak to his mother. Jack is ashamed of these things because these are the things that cause him to be an outcast and cause many others to be outcasts as well. Jack stops playing with his animals and packs them away in a box. "By boxing up his paper animals, Jack is figuratively "boxing up" his Chinese heritage to assimilate into American culture." (Prendergast) Jack blames all his discrimination on his Chinese mother and is trapped not being able to distinguish his own identity.

Years have passed by and on her deathbed, his mother asks Jack to keep the box of the Paper Menagerie and to look at them every Qingming. Qingming can be the equivalent of my culture's Day of the Dead where I celebrate my deceased ancestors. When Jack was young, he would help his mother write letters and I would help my mother to make Kleenex flowers for my family's altar. After Jack's mother passed Jack took out the origami animals and discovered that there is writing on Laohu his tiger. It is a letter from his mother telling of her suffering and her life story, the love she has for Jack, and the great sadness that she had to endure when becoming

ignored by him. In the village where she grew up origami is very famous; she is very poor and became an orphan at ten then is trafficked to Hong Kong to be a servant. She suffered abuse for many years before she is picked by Jack's father to be his future bride. Jack's father is a good man but there is the language barrier and living in a completely new country with no one she knew or looked like her. She is alone. All the while that Jack is hearing this letter being translated to him, he starts to become ashamed of himself much like myself when reading this passage, I felt my stomach sink to my knees because I could only think of my parents who gave up their entire family and everything they knew to pursue a better life for me.

Jack's birth gives her life new meaning because she sees her family in him and her homeland. Teaching him about origami gives her a sense of belonging until Jack refuses to speak with her which fills her with great sadness until her death. "Son, I know that you do not like your Chinese eyes, which are my eyes. I know that you do not like your Chinese hair, which is my hair. But can you understand how much joy your very existence brought to me? And can you understand how it felt when you stopped talking to me and won't let me talk to you in Chinese? I felt I was losing everything all over again. Why won't you talk to me, son?" (Liu) All the shame and guilt that Jack is feeling at this moment is the exact shame and guilt I felt about myself because this story hits home with those who have one heart but two identities. The shame of never being able to sympathize with his mother and the guilt of never listening to her story due to selfish reasoning.

As children of mixed marriages or different races, Jack and I couldn't comprehend the life-changing struggles of parents and the self-sacrifice that happened. It is only after the fact of growing up and self-discovery that Jack and I can finally listen and understand. Jack can sympathize with his mother's suffering that she had to endure. "The story is a powerful allegory about the experience that so many children of immigrants have. But in addition to describing an allegory of how we relate to our heritage, the story is also a heartbreaking look at the ways children relate or distance themselves from their parents as they grow up." (Franklin) Through the letter,

Jack's mother can tell Jack her story and Jack is able to put aside the misunderstandings he has of his mother. Jack is no longer ashamed of his mother or of his Chinese heritage.

"The letter inside Laohu reconciles Jack to his mother and his Chinese heritage: he writes the Chinese character for ai, meaning love, all over the letter, refolds the letter into the shape of a tiger, and tenderly carries it home with him. Thus, Jack's love for, rejection of, and reunification with his paper animals mirrors his love for, rejection of, and reunification with his Chinese heritage." (Prendergast) In the end, it is the self-discovery of love that brings Jack back to his mother and to his roots. Jack by writing over and over the Chinese character for ai he is asking his mother for forgiveness for all the years he neglected her, and it shows his acceptance of his Chinese culture and settles his identity crisis. Ken Liu's amazing story illuminates the struggles that many individuals go through with having to struggle to be American enough for the Americans and still be proud of different cultural backgrounds. Growing up with one heart and two identities many endure racism, resentment, identity conflict, and most importantly self-discovery of love.

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Deconstruction

Delusion in “The Paper Menagerie”

Evan Samuelson

In Ken Liu’s “The Paper Menagerie,” metaphors shift meanings as easily as paper folds. The reader’s perspective on Laohu the paper tiger is directly related to how Jack feels about him. First, he seems to be a figment of childish imagination, then a personification of motherly love, and ultimately a personal communication from mother to son when Jack discovers the letter written on Laohu. Laohu’s significance evolves whenever Jack has a revelation (or crisis) of identity. For most of the story, Jack is torn between two binary identities: the Chinese identity he grew up with and the American identity he seeks to conform to. His feelings about his identity are manifested in his paper menagerie: as long as he accepts his mother’s culture, they are living, breathing creatures; when he rejects it, they become lifeless. He is unable to accept the fact he is Chinese-American, and his inability to make sense of his identity results in him resorting to self-imposed delusion: he imagines the sentient origami he saw as a child come back to life to soothe his remorse over mistreating his mother. In “The Paper Menagerie,” the living origami creatures are presented as the personification of motherly love but instead act as mile markers for Jack’s deteriorating sanity.

In the beginning of the story, Jack loves his animals and plays with them without any caveats. He was comfortable with his

identity because he had not yet doubted its validity in his larger culture. After his American friend calls them “trash” (Liu 4), he internalizes the epithet and shuts them away in a shoebox, only for them to break out of it and return to their old places in his room. When the paper menagerie returns to their old places, it is a metaphor for how his identity cannot be denied and will continue to manifest itself despite his doubts. Fed up with their refusal to conform to his will, Jack closes them in a box and leaves it in the attic where they will not bother him. He is able to forget about them and effectively compartmentalize his Chinese identity.

The action of shutting away his paper toys is the beginning of his deteriorating mental health. He begins to resent his mother not because of any action she took, but because she represents the identity he cannot come to terms with. Only after his mother’s death did he look at them again, and they did not come alive until Qingming as she had told him. Finally, after he reads the letter inside Laohu, he cradles Laohu in his arm on the walk home, which seems to signal a change in his attitude and even suggests a type of love akin to motherly affection. It seems that, in the end, the magic imbued into them by his mother won over reality. Or is there more than meets the eye? Is it any coincidence that Jack discovers Laohu alive again on the first Qingming after her death, a time when he would already be grappling with grief?

In order “to settle the doubts of the readers, Ken Liu also describes his narrator’s hesitation to accept the animation of the paper craft” (Jabeen et al. 7). He says to himself, “...perhaps I had only imagined that these paper constructions were once alive. The memory of children could not be trusted” (Liu 9). This is the only instance in the story where he considers the nature of his playthings, and he tells himself that it was only an overactive imagination. As Jack further represses his identity (the climax of which occurs at the death of his mother, which he was not even present for), the more powerful it becomes. When he shut his toys away in the shoebox, they continued to manifest themselves without his sanction. The way in which the origami springs to life from one breath of air from his mother

is similar to how Jack's self-hatred began with a few words of discrimination spoken to him.

Jack is a second-generation immigrant with a Chinese mother and an American father. As he grows up, he begins to resent his mother and his Chinese identity in a way that mimics how American culture at large perceives him. When he was ten years old, he overhears visitors in his home discriminating against Chinese-Americans, saying "Something about the mixing never seems right. The child looks unfinished. Slanty eyes, white face. A little monster" (Liu 4). His neighbors' racial discrimination and his mother's inability to confront them left him feeling powerless and other, and after an incident where his living origami was criticized by his American friend, he began to distance himself from his mother's culture. If his refusal to engage with Chinese culture is "a manifestation of his self-hatred after suffering racial discrimination" (Hang 4), his paper menagerie is a manifestation of the pain of that self-hatred. Aware that he is denying his own identity, Jack does not respond by taking action and fixing the problem within himself but regresses back to a childish mental state to cope.

In the context of the story, this origami can be interpreted as a metaphor for love, magical flairs, an indication of an unreliable narrator, or a commentary on the romanticization of memory experienced by many when trying to recall childhood. Jack himself dismisses the movement of the creatures as imagination, and yet he literally embraces the moving Laohu at the end of the story. The reality of the situation is not made explicit to the reader, and thus the binaries at the work become the reader's guide to figuring out the story. While it seems to be Liu's intention to make a statement about the life-giving power of unconditional love, instead, he creates a harrowing situation in which an emotionally-wounded, insecure man is left with nothing but delusions of the life he once had. The creatures are not creatures at all; they are paper, and Jack is just a broken young man. Han Song's statement about the conflict between Chinese and Western ideas from his 2013 article, "Chinese Science Fiction: A Response to Modernization," applies directly to Jack's identity crisis: "...we turn ourselves into monsters, and

that is the only way we can get along with Western notions of progress" (Song 20).

Jack is at once aware of the absurdity of his situation and completely immersed in it. When he finally understands why his mother did what she did, he realizes that he is the living embodiment of what she had called the "saddest feeling": "...for a child to finally grow the desire to take care of his parents, only to realize that they were long gone" (Liu 13).

In the end, Jack's final delusion is thinking that he can communicate with his mother. He writes the Chinese symbol for love repeatedly inside the letter written on Laohu, an example of performative guilt and shame. Because someone else had to translate the letter for him, he was hit with guilt three-fold: he had acted cruelly toward his mother, he could not even understand her appeal to him because he lost her language, and he was absent for her death. He seems to understand his mother's motivations and hopes for him, but instead of beginning the journey back to accepting his identity and following her tradition of love, he desperately tries to communicate with her to make up for all his lost time. It is unclear whether he does this for the benefit of the spectator or for himself.

In "The Paper Menagerie," the undoing of human beings and paper alike is the inability to communicate. No one can get across exactly what they mean— barriers of language and emotion separate them. When Jack finally understands his mother, it is too much for him, and his knowledge of his own powerlessness sends him spiraling into desperation. There is no chance for him to set things right with his mother. There is no chance for him to be young again, or to set things right for himself. He is left trying to fulfill his emotional needs with fantasy, with Laohu, the last remnant of a love he could never understand but only experience. Even the story's genre of "speculative fiction" takes on a darkly ironic tone as the delusion of Jack becomes the center of the story: all that is left for him now is to speculate about what could have been, comforted by Laohu, a creature that was never a creature at all and will forever be paper.

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New Historical

Prejudice Versus Empathy

Aneesa loughmiller

In “The Paper Menagerie” by Ken Liu, Jack’s mother faces racial prejudice as a Chinese immigrant in America. Not only from the family’s neighbors in the new house they move into across town, but also from Jack. This experience isn’t unique, unfortunately, and can be seen as a reflection of how immigrants have historically been treated in the United States. However, when Jack reads her letter after her death, his opinions change, and he regrets how he treated his mother while she was still alive. When this story was published in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* in 2011, almost 1.1 million immigrants were entering America every year (Yearbook of Immigration Statistics 2011). The growing number of immigrants led to conflicting attitudes toward immigration. On the one hand, prejudice continued, but on the other was a public desire to learn more about the people moving to the US. “The Paper Menagerie” reflects the tension of its time— both the desire to empathize with the stories of immigrants and the prejudice that Asian American immigrants faced.

Jack’s negative attitude towards his mother’s ethnicity was likely the most hurtful, but it is only one of many instances where she is considered an outsider. The first notable time in the text comes when Jack and his family move into a new home, and the neighbors come over to welcome them.

"The neighbors conversed in the living room, not trying to be particularly quiet.

'He seems like a normal enough man. Why did he do that?'

'Something about the mixing never seems right. The child looks unfinished. Slanty eyes, white face. A little monster" (Liu Paper Menagerie).

The neighbors speak within hearing distance of both Jack and Jack's mother because they know she doesn't speak English. Jack does, and they eventually become embarrassed when they find that out, but it doesn't change their opinions. Many people would refrain from saying mean things in front of the person being referred to, even if the other person spoke another language. These two women didn't consider Jack's mother to be worthy of that level of respect, though.

The most blatant example of Jack's mother experiencing intolerance came at the hands of Jack and his father, though. After his schoolmate, Mark, tore up Laohu.

"I brushed her hand away. 'I'm fine. Speak English!' I was shouting.

'Speak English to him,' Dad said to Mom. 'You knew this was going to happen some day. What did you expect?' (Liu Paper Menagerie)

Jack's mom had learned some English, but in her own home – with her family- she spoke Mandarin. Jack decided that he wanted to be like other families because "Other families don't have moms who don't belong" (Liu Paper Menagerie). It seems that in Jack's attempts to escape bullying, he alienated his mom, considering her Chinese heritage as 'less than.' But it wasn't just Jack here. His dad seemed to have been expecting something like this to happen eventually, as seen by the way he belittles her for not planning for a day when her son would reject her culture and language. It's not stated, but this interaction does imply that Jack's dad also sees his wife's Chinese heritage as something to be embarrassed about. That is why he was unsurprised by Jack's request for American food instead of Chinese, and to speak English at home. To Jack's dad, it was **something**

he decided was acceptable for himself, but also something that Jack would likely grow out of enjoying.

This sort of prejudice was unfortunately common in the early 2010s. An example comes from 2013 when a law was enacted that barred Chinese nationals from entering NASA facilities to prevent espionage (Sample “US scientists boycott NASA conference over China ban”). There doesn’t seem to be evidence that there was a risk of espionage, only the fear of it happening.

It’s unfortunate that Jack never learns to connect with his mother while she’s alive, because, as her letter says, “I had lost my entire family, all of Sigulu, everything I ever knew and loved. But there you were, and your face was proof that they were real. I hadn’t made them up” (Liu Paper Menagerie). Her new life in the US with her new husband was better than being a servant as she had been in China, but she was lonely. Especially because she didn’t speak English yet. When Jack was born, she no longer felt alone. Not only that, she felt like she had her family back.

By reading her letter, though, Jack sheds his compulsion to think of his mother as ‘less than’ because of her Chinese heritage. As Yu Hang says in “An Analysis of the Reconstruction of Chinese American Identity in *The Paper Menagerie*,” “Listening and understanding is one of the most common ways of identity reconstruction” (Yu page 793). Jack’s hatred of his own Chinese identity led to his ill-treatment of his mother, but by listening to her story, he was able to humanize his mother’s experiences. No longer does he think poorly of her because of her heritage, and he commits to embracing his own Chinese heritage.

The moral of the “Paper Menagerie” is that listening and

empathizing with people who are marginalized, like Asian American immigrants have historically been, leads to connection. Being able to connect and see people with different life experiences as equals is vital to ending the prejudice that immigrants face. Ken Liu, in an interview with Subtle Asian Book Club in 2022, said his goal in writing this story was to write “an empathetic story that makes sense; a story that is comprehensive; that reflects the totality of the human experience and the complexity of Asia’s recent history” [THE PAPER MENAGERIE live interview with Ken Liu 27:18-27:35]. This likely stems from the over-arching experience of discrimination against Asian immigrants, and this desire for their stories has only grown in recent years. New projects have started, like The Immigrant Story, founded in 2017, whose mission is, “To document, narrate and curate stories about immigrants in order to promote empathy and advance an inclusive community” (theimmigrantstory.org). This sentiment to promote empathy for immigrants seems to be more and more prevalent.

Even though more immigrant stories are being told, prejudice is still a problem faced, especially by Asian Americans. Since 2020, and the Covid-19 pandemic, Asian American

hate crimes have been on the rise. It seems strange that there is also more and more interest in the personal stories of Asian immigrants, like Jack's mother. Like in the story, however, when Jack's prejudice against his mother's Chinese heritage is broken by hearing her experiences, prejudice can be overcome with empathy. It follows then that in a time when there is more and more prejudice against Asian Americans, there would also be a rise in interest of their stories. Perhaps, like Jack's prejudice being softened through empathy, this same transformation can happen in the United States as more immigrant stories are told.

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Psychological

The Loss of Identity

Rafael Jacobo

In Ken Liu's short story, "Paper Menagerie," is a poignant short story that explores the theme of identity, culture, and self-acceptance through the eyes of Jack. Jack is a son of a Chinese Mother and a white father. Jack struggles to reconcile his mix heritages and feels like an outsider due to his mother's Chinese background. Throughout his journey from childhood to adulthood, Jack grapples with the psychological repression of his Chinese background, as he navigates the complexities of identity and belonging. Erik Erikson's theory suggests that individuals will go through a series of eight stages of psychological development throughout their lives, which each stage having a unique problem that must be resolved (McConnell page 240). These stages build on each other, with success or failure, with each stage influencing the individuals overall developmental growth. Therefore, "Paper Menagerie" explores the challenges of identity and belonging that arise from cultural differences and uses Eric Erikson's Psychological development theory to highlight the impact of an individual's overall development.

The first two steps in Erikson's theory, trust versus mistrust and autonomy versus doubt, are particularly relevant to Jack's infant to young child stages of growing. For Jack, he is entirely dependent on his parents for his early needs, and depending

on how they may respond to him will shape his sense of trust and mistrust. Through Jack's mother, he can create this "oral trust" (McConnell 241) where she can become the main source of sharing her Chinese background and creating trust with a young Jack. When she folds paper animals for Jack, he feels a sense of joy, but neighborhood child ridicules him for these origami figures. The statement, "That doesn't look like a tiger at all. Your mom makes toys for you from trash?" (Liu 2012) would be the start of Jack's rejection of his Chinese heritage, and he begins to feel shame and doubt of his cultural identity. According to Erikson, shame is when an individual "...would like to force the world not to look at him, not notice his exposure. He would like to destroy the eyes of the world. Instead, he must wish for his own invisibility (McConnell 243). This idea of mistrust and doubt is built upon as Jack's father struggles to understand and appreciate Jack's Chinese background. As Jack begins to assert his independence in understanding his culture, his father's dismissiveness towards his Chinese heritages contributes to his feelings of shame and doubt.

However, one thing that contributes to Jack's doubt and mistrust of his Chinese culture would be the Repeal of the Chinese exclusion Act of 1882. This act was passed by the United States and prohibited Chinese laborers from immigrating to the United States and remain in effect for 40 years until 1940, when it was repealed (Lee page 36, 55) This law implemented in the United States would affect many immigrants arriving legally and illegally. This Act would officially end lead to immigrants being issued "green cards" (Lee 55) to obtain residence in the United States. This law lingering effects would have many Chinese people, and other Immigrants to express their heritage, so this would explain Jack's resistance to explore his Chinese background. Yet the society that he lives in discriminates against Chinese immigrants. This would explain why the two neighbors exclaimed, "Something about the mixing never seems right. The child looks unfinished. Slanty eyes, white face. Little monster" (Liu). Undoubtedly, this interaction would also add to Jack's doubts and mistrust of this mother's culture.

Secondly the next two stages Erikson's theory take place, initiative versus guilt and Industry versus inferiority. In the

initiative versus guilt stage, the child takes time to explore their interests and develop a sense of responsibility to learn and follow rules (McConnell 242). Jack displays this stage by distancing himself from his mother and accepting his father's American culture (Liu). Jack's curiosity to explore his Chinese background was ignored by his father, who made no effort to encourage him to connect with his mother. Instead, Jack mentions that "Mom learned to cook American style. I played video games and studied French" (Liu). Moreover, this rejection causes Jack to feel guilty about his desire embrace his Chinese identity. Additionally, Jack expresses how he feels inferior to others at his school. He mentions that the students in his class call him "chink face" (Liu), and how that makes him struggle to fit in. These interactions have a significant impact on his self-confidence and is ability to establish his identity in the later stages of development.

Thirdly Erikson, the identity versus role confusion and intimacy versus isolation stages have the greatest impact on an individual's development (McConnell 243-244). During these stages, individuals are no longer children and begin their journey to young adulthood. For Jack, these stages are particularly challenging as he continues to grapple with his dual identity as a Chinese American. As he enters high school, he pushes his mother aside and separates himself farther from his Chinese heritage. His development under these conditions makes a session where he develops his role in the world and leads to confusion and a sense of isolation. Hence why he conveys "...it was hard for me to believe that she gave birth to me. We had nothing in common. She might as we be from the moon. I should hurry on to my room, where I could continue my all-American pursuit of happiness" (Liu). Just as important, the intimacy versus isolation stage is where individuals are faced with the tasks of forming deep meaning connections with others (McConnell 244). For Jack, it's his last opportunity to make a meaning full connection to his mother as she lies on her dead bed. In this confrontation, Jack is forced to confront the realities of her mortality and grapple with way he managed their relationship. Only until his mother passes away, does he

comes to realize the significance of the paper figures and his mother's heritage.

Furthermore, research by David Lee and Stephen Quintana suggests that transracial children adopt the cultural practices and values that benefit them the most in their environment (Lee and Quintana 132). Forming an individual's identity becomes more complex as teenagers view their racial identity through social dimensions. The racism and discrimination these children experience mold their perception onto themselves (Lee and Quintana 132). Through Lee and Quintana's research, they found that twenty percent of white families who adopted transracial children often had negative racial experiences and wished they had a different racial status. Among these adopted children, only a select few would investigate their racial origins and express their culture to others. On the other hand, if racially diverse parents adopted the children, they would have an easier time exploring their cultural background (Lee and Quintana 137). These slight changes in parents would open the doors for deepening relationships and guide many of these children towards their selective role in life.

Then again, when exploring Erikson's final two stages, generativity versus stagnation and ego integrity versus despair, individuals are finding the reason to complete intimacy with a partner and focusing on finding a sense of purpose. The generativity versus stagnation stage for Jack occurs when he finally moved in with this wife, as he reconciles the times his mother would share her ability to bring life to her origami. The use of "I saw, in my mind, mom's hands, as they folded and refolded tin foil to make a chart for me while Lihou and I watched" (Liu) allows Jack to recall the delicate moments that shaped him to the way is. During this point, Jack's maturity stagnates due to the overwhelming feelings, and his generative fails to develop. Thus, his wife Susan aids in the transition from a teenager's mind to adulthood. Her actions, putting Jack's mothers' origami around their apartment, aided in Jack achieving adulthood because it allowed him to understand the significance of studying his culture. His ego gets broken when he unfolds the origami and finds out there is a letter from his late mother, which he cannot read (Liu). Rather than avoid his

mother, he tries to embrace her culture by having someone translate the Mandarin that he could not read. As a result, the final letter completes his development because he understands that "... one's life is one's responsibility alone" (McConnell 245) and understands that his mother was offering her love even when he did not want it. This is why Jack asked the translator to find the word "ai," which means love, though out his mother's letter, so he can continue to reflect on his life's choices. This is why he "...refolded the paper back into Laohu" and, "... cradled him in the crook of my arm, and as her purred, we began the walk home" (Liu). Jack's struggle with ego integrity reflects on the broader social issues he experienced though his lifetime. His development is a reflection of trials and tribulations that he faced while navigating these stages.

In conclusion, Ken Liu's short story "Paper menagerie" provides a power exploration of identity and belonging though the psychological lens of Erik Erikson's theory of Psychological Development. Traces of this theory are found in the protagonist's journey from his childhood and into his late adulthood. This short story highlights the complex events that humans face when dealing with their individual identity and societal forces. Untimely, "Paper Menagerie" serves as a reminder on how individuals' identities are molded, and how their cultural and social forces affect their purpose and meaning in life.

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Feminist/Queer Theory

Subversion of the 'Evil Matriarch' in Ken Liu's Paper Menagerie

Ambrosia Shomaker

Cinderella's stepmother, the Evil Queen from Snow White, Mother Gothel from Rapunzel, Other Mother from Coraline, Lucille Bluth from Arrested Development, all characters deserving of the 'Evil Matriarch' title. One could even claim that Hera, queen of the Greek Pantheon, would fall under this trope for the way she treats her step-children. The idea of a cruel mother, undesired either by her children, her whole family, or even the whole world, is hardly something new. The evil matriarch is a relatively common trope in both modern and older writings, but for those who have lived under a rock and never read a story in their lives, here's a brief breakdown of the trope.

The mother is often an influential person to the main character of the story, and while most heroes are raised by their virtuous mothers, there were others that were born trying to escape the wicked hand of a mom. She often isn't in line with the political and religious leanings of the time, such as with Cinderella's step mother (in the original story, Cinderella is told by her mother to remain true to her faith, and all will work out), and is controlling of her childrens' lives. She destroys the self-esteem of her children to make herself look better, and often doesn't approve of her childrens' choices (as seen with Lucille Bluth

and Mother Gothel). The mother may even be outright abusive or murderous, in the case of the Evil Queen and Other Mother. The trope has even saturated modern culture and real life, with multiple people having tales of their 'evil' mother-in-laws.

Ken Liu's short story, *The Paper Menagerie*, published in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* in 2011, supplies its own evil matriarch figure in the form of Jack's Mother- although, there's something quite different about her in comparison to her trope counterparts. The thing is, she's actually a nice lady. She's only evil in the eyes of her son, Jack, for how her being Chinese has driven a cultural wedge between him and his peers, leading to him being discriminated against. Ken Liu subverts the 'Evil Matriarch' trope through the tale of Jack and his mother.

Jack's mom is a loving woman, and the story begins with one of Jack's first memories, which involves his father leaving him to cry because they couldn't find a way to get him to stop crying, but his mom staying, and continuing to try helping. She folds him an origami tiger made of Christmas wrapping paper that comes to life, stopping his tears, and at that time he says "This was her magic" (Liu). She wasn't always a villainous figure in Jack's life- that would only come once others started to discriminate against him.

He is his mother's son- he, too, can blow life into these animals, and so he plays endlessly with these paper toys until one of his neighborhood friends, a boy named Mark, calls his toys trash. Jack is embarrassed, and upset by Mark's destruction of Laohu, Jack's tiger, until eventually, after two weeks of bullying at Mark's hands, Jack begins to reject his mother and her culture. He demands that she speak English, and she responds with "If I say 'love,' I feel here.' She pointed to her lips. 'If I say 'ai,' I feel here.' She put her hand over her heart" (Liu). He still makes her speak English, asks for 'real toys,' and puts the paper menagerie away in the attic of the house, so they cannot come out to find him.

This is where the subversion of the trope truly begins, because generally, while the mother is evil, the child is innocent in contrast. In Gretchen Rous Besser's review of *Kathy* by Patrice Juiff, a novel telling the story of a young woman named Kathy

who, after being raised by a kind foster family, seeks out her blood family only to find them cruel and horrendous, she does a brief examination of this comparison. At the beginning of the review, Besser calls the story a “topsy-turvy fairy tale” (Besser, page 1), and details the monstrousness of Kathy’s blood family, including an evil mother. Besser states that “By contrast, Kathy appears saintly, the epitome of goodness” (Besser, page 2). However, in the Paper Menagerie, Jack begins to appear, well, cruel.

He refuses to talk to his mother unless she speaks in English, but even when she does, “her accent and broken sentences embarrassed [him]” (Liu). It eventually came to the point that they didn’t speak to each other at all. She abandoned aspects of her culture that have made up her whole life in an attempt to make her son feel better, such as trying to give her son hugs the way she saw American mothers do on T.V., but he thought it was “ridiculous” and “uncertain.” She starts to cook American food instead of Chinese food, and gets better at English. In a desperate final attempt at connection between her son and her culture, she gifts him with more origami animals that Jack always squeezes the life out of, until eventually, she stopped trying. Jack comes to view his mother as alien, rejecting her to the point that while standing at what would be her deathbed, he is thinking about what he should do to get recruited for a job when he goes back to his college campus. All his mother asks is for him to pull out his box of origami animals, and remember her sometimes, which he tries to skirt around doing with excuses of being busy, and not knowing when Qingming is. She tells him that she loves him in Chinese, speaking with her heart instead of her lips, and Jack tells her to stop talking. She dies while he is on his flight back to school.

Despite all that his mother has done for him, Jack still rejects her, and blames her for the things that make him different, the things that people use to make fun of him and reject him. This blame is not dissimilar to the blame Macbeth places on his wife in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, according to Stephen Leo Carr and Peggy A. Knapp in their analysis of the play, *Seeing Through Macbeth*. When discussing how Macbeth is repulsed by the “oedipal” crime he has committed in killing and usurping the

former king, he blames his wife for spurring on his actions. "Lady Macbeth has invited this identification with the terrible mother by "teaching" Macbeth his duties, putting herself in charge of his initiation into adulthood, linking his obedience to her with her continued love for him, and making him depend on her for the actual plan of the crime" (Carr, page 9). It is through these comparisons that yet another subversion of the "Evil Matriarch" is made apparent.

Because it is not Jack's mother that made him who he is- rather, it was him who forced his mother to change for his own desires. Jack's mother never tried to make Jack something he wasn't, only try to get him to understand her, which he doesn't do until it is too late. The mother, who is "evil" to Jack, is the one being controlled in this scenario, opposed to being the one who is controlling. She isn't set in her ways, but because she is something other than American, she is designated as the cruel mom stepping on her son's destiny. She did not fit in with the culture, such as many other evil mothers, so she has become villainized, despite not being particularly horrid, or even simply misguided. She was just a mother who loved her son. The final subversion of the story takes place in its ending- particularly, the tragedy that is the ending. A typical ending for the "Evil Matriarch" is for her to be defeated, for justice to be served and for the hero to live a happy life, never having to fear the wrath of the mother again. It happens in *Snow White*, *Cinderella*, *Rapunzel*, *Coraline*, *Macbeth*, *Kathy*, practically any story one can think of that has a wicked mother figure. The inverse of this is true for *Paper Menagerie*.

In the end, when Jack finally learns of his mother's life story, he feels ashamed for his actions towards her throughout the course of her life. He is guilty that he can't read the last note his mother left for him, and he, the 'hero' of the story, is punished by his rejection of his mother. In Jonathan Parry's review of *Women, Androgynes and Other Mythical Beasts*. by Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, which is an examination of Hindu mythology and the various hierarchies within it, he explains how "The central theme of the book is introduced by a discussion of sexual fluids" (Parry, page 2). I feel the need here to put a disclaimer that I am not suggesting incest between Jack

and his mother, but because of Freudian psychology and its influence in the literary world, any examination of relationship between mother and son is almost automatically assumed incestuous, so finding works that don't at least reference this idea is near impossible.

Anyways, the sexual fluids in question and their symbolism are in regards to milk and semen, and the inequality present in the relationship between the two, or, more accurately, the inequality of the presentation between mother and father.

Parry puts forth the summation that "while 'the breast that feeds itself' is symbolic of the evil mother, the phallus that retains its own seed is symbolic of the perfect man conserving his life-blood" (Parry, page 2). Paper Menagerie subverts this idea through Jack, who preserved himself by rejecting his mother, being presented as the one in the story who caused discord between him and his mother. Meanwhile, when Jack's mother tries to sustain herself and her relationship with her son by adapting to Jack's wants, she comes across as a loving mother, the one who is on the 'right' side of things, despite being Jack's "Evil Matriarch" figure for most of the story, reshaping the common narrative of said "Evil Matriarch."

In Ken Liu's Paper Menagerie, nearly every aspect of the "Evil Matriarch" is subverted, from the mother being evil herself, to the actions of the 'heroic' child, while still maintaining the key to a story about an wicked mother- that she is different. The difference of Jack's mother to other women and people as a whole villainizes her in Jack's eyes, despite her best attempts to fit in for her son's sake. Jack's mother is not cruel, and does not try to dictate his life for him, she is simply 'other.' For most, that's all it takes to become evil.

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[PART XI]

"The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" by Ursula K. LeGuin

You can read "The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas," by Ursula K Le Guin here: <https://shsdavisapes.pbworks.com/f/Omelas.pdf>

Ursula K. LeGuinn was born in 1929, in Berkley, California. Through her education at Columbia University she earned a Master of Arts. Her work as a writer in the mid-late 20th century has garnered much praise. She was known for her numerous works in science fiction and fantasy, which won her hugo awards for novels and short stories throughout the 1970's.

"Category: Ursula K Le Guin," provided by public domain via Wiki media commons



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Category:Ursula_K._Le_Guin](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Ursula_K._Le_Guin)

About the Authors

David Maryanski II

English Creative Writing Emphasis. I think my favorite tree is birch. I would have to choose crawling twice as fast, I would hate having to be strong and having my fingers in my ears!

Kelsey Jennings

Art history BA and French minor. Favorite tree is a banyan. Twice as strong because the idea of running twice as fast but crawling is terrifying haha. Reminds me of the girl in the ring.

Logan Hart

Logan is an English major and is thinking of pursuing law school once he has his bachelor's degree. He loves soccer and does his best to stay physically active, but his favorite thing to do is relax and watch a good movie or read a good book.

Sydney Bergeson

Creative writing major. My favorite kind of tree is cherry. I would rather crawl twice as fast as I can run, so I can strike fear into the hearts of my enemies. Can you imagine seeing someone crawl-sprinting towards you? Terrifying.

Tessa Winegar

Currently a liberal arts major but going into linguistics. My favorite tree is an evergreen, and I would rather be able to crawl twice as fast as I can run as I don't think I'd be able to do much with my fingers stuck in my ears.

Tristan Aja

English – Creative Writing Emphasis AA. My favorite tree right now is the Western White Pine. I'd like to crawl twice as fast as I can run because it would look peculiar and help me travel.

Critical Introduction

“The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas” is a disturbing yet masterfully written piece of philosophical fiction by Ursula K. Le Guin. Published in 1973, the piece depicts an unrivaled utopia of joyful and carefree individuals, with one glaring exception: the young child locked in a cellar, forced to live in its own filth. According to the narrator, the city’s enduring perfection depends solely on this child’s misery. As such, the story depicts a vividly utilitarian moral issue—is the anguish and torture of a single child acceptable in return for the unending happiness of an entire society, or not? The very nature of the story leaves it up to the reader. *The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas* was nominated for the Locus Award for Best Short Fiction in 1974 and won the Hugo Award for Best Short Story in 1974.

READER RESPONSE

Kelsey Jennings’s reader response criticism essay discusses how she believes that the ones that walk away are more complicit in the neglect of the child than those that stay. Le Guin’s narrative, use of description, and the integration of audience participation are examined. By forcing her readers to create their own narrative, Jennings asserts that Le Guin puts them in a position to make their own moral decision about the treatment of the child and whether they would choose to leave or stay. The metaphor of the “sacrificial lamb” and its application to the short story are also discussed.

DECONSTRUCTION

The deconstruction essay examines how language and culture are constructs that form arbitrary customs and preferences in “The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas.” By discussing how Ursula K. LeGuin both uses and breaks from conventions, Tristan Aja explores how conventions of story, culture, and language apply to the text and undermine its overall unity. While examining the idea of total happiness in the story, Aja questions the basis that some could ever turn down the opportunity to live in happiness.

NEW HISTORICAL

In this publication, David Maryanski’s historical analysis essay sets “The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas” against the backdrop of the Vietnam war. He focuses on how the two warring ideologies of the era—Capitalism and Communism—might have played a part in the story. He then examines how America and the Soviets used Vietnam as their “means to an end,” just as Omelas used the child in their basement to preserve their way of life. The story also expresses that utopia will never be the end of all suffering. To gain utopia will equal a constant struggle in suffering, even when society perceives that utopia has been singularly achieved.

PSYCHOLOGICAL

The psychological criticism essay discusses “The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas” as an allegory for Carl Jung’s theory of the human psyche and evaluates the city of Omelas as a unified entity. Tessa Winegar examines Jung’s theories of the ego, the persona, and the shadow, as well as his theory of individuation. She asserts the ego as Omelas in its entirety, the persona as Omelas’ public face (the happiness of the city and the suffering of the child), and the shadow as those who walk away. This analysis uncovers a deeper problem within the society—that even in leaving the city, both those who stay and those who leave are continually complicit in the torture of the child in the cellar.

FEMINIST

Logan Hart's feminist theory essay argues that Ursula K. Le Guin's story sets out to demonstrate how patriarchal norms pollute readers' worldviews. This literary analysis explains how the usage of a characterized narrator set in the world to recount their viewing of the utopia of Omelas to a crowd of doubting listeners is meant as a clear representation of Le Guin and the readers. Detailing Le Guin's own history with feminism and how deliberate her writing is, the essay makes the case that the messages seen in the story are not accidental. Le Guin describes a utopian society built upon a patriarchal foundation, and that the only way for readers to accept the perfect world is to know there is a cost that must be paid for the splendor. Despite wanting a world built on a foundation of feminine values, compassion, and liberation from violence, our understanding of the world is so corrupted by what has come before that we struggle to accept what could be.

Our individual analyses of such a clearly controversial and emotional story revealed many different perspectives on Ursula K. Le Guin's "The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas." We had the opportunity to fully engage and grapple with this short story in order to uncover the meanings that can only be found through deep analysis. Much of literature is the same. We hope that through this publication, we can inspire both ourselves and others to keep looking beyond the superficial to find true meaning, whatever that may be.

Annotated Bibliography

Adams, Rebecca. "Narrative Voice and Unimaginability of the Utopian 'Feminine' in Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* and 'The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas.'" *Utopian Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1/2, June 1991, p. 35. *EBSCOhost*, <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.cwi.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=4113050&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

Rebecca Adams discusses the mythology of utopia and how language can change the narrative. She examines two stories by Ursula K. Le Guin, 'The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas' and 'The Left Hand of Darkness'. Adams focus is through a feminist lens, using Freudian theory to explain how utopian ideals are inherently masculine.

Archie, Lee, and John G. Archie. "Chapter 23. 'Happiness Is the Greatest Good' by Jeremy Bentham." *Reading for Philosophical Inquiry: A Brief Introduction to Philosophical Thinking*, edited by John G Archie, 21st ed., GNU Free Documentation License, pp. 251–265.

This source is from my philosophy textbook, which is an open source publication and does not yet exist in print. The textbook goes over various philosophical essays regarding various philosophers and their ideals, and provides a great starting point for any student in philosophy. Given that "Those Who Walk Away From Omelas" is a critique of utilitarianism, I thought the

chapter on utilitarianism would be particularly useful here. The work goes over Jeremy Bentham, an 18th century philosopher's essay on utilitarianism, and how he thought utility should be the guiding principle for law making. He believed in the best for the most people. As long as the amount of happiness generated is greater than any non-happiness, the action is moral, and should be pursued. Bentham is not a fan of asceticism, or the practice of extreme self-denial. He believes that pursuing that path will lead to misery, and so does not fit with the ideals of utility. Bentham sees the world in terms of pleasure and pain. In order to maximize pleasure, and minimize pain, actions must be taken to account for the pleasure for the most amount of people, which is what happens in Omelas. One person suffers greatly, but the rest of the community thrives, therefore maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain.

BBC – Religions – Christianity: *Why did Jesus die?* (n.d.-b).
https://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/beliefs/whydidjesusdie_1.shtml

A brief overview discussing why Jesus died for us, what atonement is, and the metaphor, “sacrificial lamb”.

Collins, Jerre. “Leaving Omelas: Questions of Faith and Understanding.” *Studies in Short Fiction*, vol. 27, no. 4, Fall 1990, p. 525. EBSCOhost, <https://search-ebscohost-com.cwi.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=9705100586&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

In this essay Collins argues that *The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas* critiques the moral state of the US. Collins focuses on a religious tone with this, giving examples of a suffering-servant theodicy, theodicy meaning an idea that justifies evil despite the claim of the existence of a good God. Collins argues that Le Guin is trying to critique or even attack that notion of theodicy. This results in a critique of American moral state as Collins sees it, a country that Le Guin finds morally skewed because of its justification for a good, moral God. This essay seems to be a New Critical lens with pieces of historical criticism as it is pressing the social and political

standings of the US at the time. Those searching a sociological, religious, or even philosophical outlook might look to this essay.

Cross, Katherine. "Naming a Star: Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* and the Reimagining of Utopianism." *American Journal of Economics & Sociology*, vol. 77, no. 5, Nov. 2018, pp. 1329–52. EBSCOhost, <https://doi-org.cwi.idm.oclc.org/10.1111/ajes.12250>.

Cross focuses her paper on Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* and her ideology regarding utopia. Cross takes regard to Le Guin's views of how power is used in governing and society, noting how there is oftentimes informal power rather than formal. This brings to Cross and Le Guin excellent evidence that utopia will always have some form of power, whether it is this informal or formal power. Cross examines this position by analysis thoroughly each aspect of *The Dispossessed* in sex, hierarchy, and the plot of the story. While this essay focuses much on *The Dispossessed* and its implications as a story it also refer often to Le Guin's own personal views of utopia. The lens Cross takes appears to be on the side of New Criticism, with very specific examples of how the text brings you to a certain conclusion, but the inclusion of Le Guin's own personal sociological views it could be labeled as a political lens, so those wishing to analysis from those lenses may find this paper highly useful.

Ellis, John M. "What Does Deconstruction Contribute to Theory of Criticism?" *New Literary History*, vol. 19, no. 2, 1988, pp. 259–79. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/469336>. Accessed 10 Dec. 2022.

This article considers the attempts to define and limit what deconstruction is. It is proposed to be an ever-changing discourse that continually undermines the text it analyzes, often challenging every image and idea put forward by a text, while retaining the original image to focus on how it's undermined by the text itself. Even the analyst's view of a text needs to be deconstructed, as traditional interpretations and theoretical lenses all

assume single, authoritative ways to read texts. This article makes an important distinction, however, between attacking theory in general and focusing on the specific issues in the unity of a text, or unity of a specific interpretation. With this analysis of deconstructive theory, emphasis is placed on the judgement of meaning rather than the clear subversion of meanings.

Firenze, Paul. “[T]hey, Like the Child, Are Not Free’: An Ethical Defense of the Ones Who Remain in Omelas.” *Response*, Nov. 2017, <https://responsejournal.net/issue/2017-11/article/%E2%80%98they-child-are-not-free%E2%80%99-ethical-defense-ones-who-remain-omelas#content>. Accessed 13 Dec. 2022.

Paul Firenze discusses Ursula K. Le Guin's short story, 'The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas' and the dueling decisions between staying in Omelas and walking away. Firenze argues that those that walk away are less moral than those that stay because the ones that stay allow a possibility for change. Paul Firenze is an Assistant Professor of Humanities and Social Sciences at Wentworth Institute of Technology in Boston. His focus is on ethics, philosophy, and religion.

Kallis, Giorgos, and Hug March. “Imaginarities of Hope: The Utopianism of Degrowth.” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, vol. 105, no. 2, Mar. 2015, pp. 360–68. *EBSCOhost*, <https://doi-org.cwi.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/00045608.2014.973803>.

March and Kallis both examine the nature of degrowth, a differing view from that of capitalist growth. They theorize that Ursula Le Guin's story *The Dispossessed* and her own personal views on utopia further the ideas of degrowth. They also bring in different voices of sociologists and economists to back their analysis. Their arguments lead to a conclusion from Le Guin's writing that utopia is not a matter of finally reaching an end of perfection, but one that is vastly improved from past generations, despite conflict and some suffering. They support those arguments with *The Dispossessed* but also social philosophers like Serge Latouche, David Harvey,

Frederick Jameson, and many others. Their overall approach involves a sociological and environmental lens, with focuses on government structure involved in creating utopia through gradual changes rather than abrupt, violent change. Logically then a reader may use this text for sociological analysis or even environmental analysis. It also hints at some Marxist theory, which can also be an option.

Keller Hirsch, Alexander. "Walking off the Edge of the World: Sacrifice, Chance, and Dazzling Dissolution in the Book of Job and Ursula K. Le Guin's "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas"." *MDPI*, 9 Aug. 2016, <http://www.mdpi.com/2076-0787/5/3/67>. Accessed 13 Dec. 2022.

Alexander Keller Hirsch compares Ursula K. Le Guin's 'The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas' and the book of Job, which is a part of the Hebrew Bible. Unlike Firenze, Keller Hirsch instead argues that neither decision is moral and that morality is objective. Keller Hirsch provides justification for both the decision to stay and the decision to leave, arguing that perhaps the decision to leave is more self-sacrificial than the decision to stay. Alexander Keller Hirsch is an Associate Professor of Political Science; Director, Honors Program at the University of Alaska Fairbanks.

Khanna, Lee Cullen. "Beyond Omelas: Utopia and Gender." *Utopian Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1/2, 1991, p. p48, web-p-ebshost.com.cwi.idm.oclc.org/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=0a48781c-d92a-41f6-a1dd-7b46d7267c83%40redis&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWWhvc3QtbGl2ZSZyZ29wZT1zaXRl#AN=4113051&db=a9h. Accessed 22 Apr. 2023.

Lee Cullen Khanna walks us through three of Ursula K. Le Guin's stories and how they depict different interpretations of utopia and the role of gender therein. This study explores how the utopia depicted in "The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas" is built upon "binary oppositions" and explains how, looking through a feminist lens, the Utopian world still retains a more patriarchal slant. By exploring two of Le Guin's other works, *She Unnames Them* and *Sur*, Khanna highlights the

importance of gender in “Omelas” and Le Guin’s very deliberate identification of some characters, and the assumed gender of the narrator. This article helps the reader gain a better understanding of how Le Guin views gender roles and how through her stories she demonstrates the dangers and issues of many of them.

Knapp, Shoshana. “The Morality of Creation: Dostoevsky and William James in Le Guin’s ‘Omelas.’” *The Journal of Narrative Technique*, vol. 15, no. 1, 1985, pp. 75–81. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30225113>. Accessed 10 Dec. 2022.

In her article, “The Morality of Creation: Dostoevsky and William James in Le Guin’s ‘Omelas,’” Shoshana Knapp evaluates Ursula K Le Guin’s short story, *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas*, in comparison with the ideas that inspired it: a passage written by William James about a fictional place where a society’s happiness and prosperity depends on the suffering of a lost soul, and Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky, who also used this idea. However, she focuses more so on James’ passage than Dostoevsky. In her argument, Knapp offers that, unlike William James’ perception of this situation of moral instinct (that the “nobler thing tastes better”), Le Guin’s idea of Omelas objects to this idea, otherwise the city would be empty. Knapp argues that in doing so, Le Guin has created a much more political parable than it appears to the eye. This article is useful for those studying Ursula K Le Guin’s story, *The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas*, as it provides useful information on the basis for the story and some of the theory and psychology behind this society and how it relates to the real world. Shoshana Knapp is an associate professor in the Department of English at Virginia Tech with a focus on nineteenth century fiction from America, Britain, France, and Russia. She has a PhD from Stanford and a BA from Barnard College.

Knapp, Steven, and Walter Benn Michaels. “Against Theory 2: Hermeneutics and Deconstruction.” *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 14, no. 1, 1987, pp. 49–68. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1343571>. Accessed 10 Dec. 2022.

This analysis of deconstructive theory argues that we must assume meaning in the text outside from what the author meant to say. The ideas of hermeneutics and deconstruction are intertwined by meaning outside authors intent, but the main difference between these is that the former allows author intention to mean something, while the latter maintains that language is impossible for the author to totally control, implying that totally accurate interpretations are also impossible. This article argues against the “intentional fallacy,” claiming that authorial intent is removed from a work once it exists in the world. Mainly, this article draws from the idea that literary conventions cannot give meaning alone, and that these conventions can only act as evidence for underlying meaning.

Krapp, Kristine M. *Psychologists and Their Theories*. Gale, 2004,

[http://t5303.oceanikpsi.org/downloads/](http://t5303.oceanikpsi.org/downloads/psychologists_and_their_the.pdf)

[psychologists_and_their_the.pdf](http://t5303.oceanikpsi.org/downloads/psychologists_and_their_the.pdf). Accessed 5 December 2022.

Krapp's book provides information on many different psychologists and their asserted theories, while still maintaining a high level of depth in each psychologist's individual section. Some of the psychologists covered are Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, Carl Rogers, and Ivan Pavlov, among many others. Information provided includes details such as the psychologist's background, principle publications, development of psychological theories, and many subtopics of that which is personally relevant to the specific psychologist. A reader could easily use this text as background information in any pursuits that deal with psychology, especially if the reader is not already well-acquainted with these psychologists. It clearly and concisely explains relevant concepts and has a broad range of information covering almost six hundred pages.

Langbauer, Laurie. “Ethics and Theory: Suffering Children in Dickens, Dostoevsky, and Le Guin.” *ELH*, vol. 75, no. 1, 2008, pp. 89–108. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30029586>. Accessed 10 Dec. 2022.

This work discusses how the writers Charles Dickens,

Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Ursula K. Le Guin use the suffering of children to denounce it. They display it in their work as a way of showing how immoral it is. The author explores how the texts hold up children as the ultimate symbol of innocence, and so any harm to a child is a crime of the greatest nature. When these authors write about children, however, they are actually writing about themselves. The author argues for these works to be self-reflections of the writers themselves, as they see themselves in these children. The work details the traumatic experiences of each of the writer's lives and how those experiences influenced their world, including quotes from the authors. Le Guin describes her father's relationship with an Indian man he got out of jail and subsequently gained custody of, and how that relationship impacted the family, even years after his passing. The author also talks about how Le Guin was influenced by Dostoevsky in writing *Omelas*, although she admits it must have been subconscious as she did not realize it at first. In *Omelas*, children are used to drive home her critique of utilitarianism, because of their innocence.

Lawall, Sarah. "New Criticism & Contemporary Theory." *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920*, vol. 39, no. 1, Jan. 1996, pp. 98–102. *EBSCOhost*, <https://search-ebscohost-com.cwi.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=15968721&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

This source reviews a series of publications about New criticism, *The New Criticism and Contemporary Literary Theory: Connections and Continuities* by William J Spurlin and Micheal Fisher. The publication expands upon the history of the literary theory as well as the reception of it. New criticism gained a lot of ground when it was introduced, but was ultimately decried by opponents of it, saying that it ignores important influences on the text, like historical and biographical factors. Opponents also claim while it claims to be impartial, it falls prey to dogmatic ideals. As

controversial as it is, it has sparked new conversations about what criticism should be and what aspects of it are important. The article talks about how New criticism opened the door for more modes of criticism, such as deconstruction. By relying on the text and searching for ironies or ambiguities, it put more focus on the text than the author. Prior to this, there was a large amount of historical criticism dominating the conversation. New criticism is similar to reader response criticism, in that both forms of literary criticism focus on close readings, where the words of a text are closely analyzed for deeper meaning. In other words, reading between the lines.

Le Guin, Ursula K. "The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas." <http://shsdavisapes.pbworks.com/f/Omelas.pdf>

Lindow, Sandra J. "Le Guin's Post-Feminist Carrier Bag Make-Over." *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 37, no. 3, Nov. 2010, pp. p485-490, web.s.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail/detail?vid=2&sid=e07efc2b-977a-43f7-9e27-f3c599a90ef7%40redis&bdata=jnNpdGU9ZWWhvc3QtbGl2ZSZzY29wZTlzaXRl#AN=55190571&db=f5h. Accessed 24 Apr. 2023.

Sandra J. Lindow discusses Amy M. Clarke's book *Ursula K. Le Guin's Journey to Post-Feminism*, providing some insight into how Le Guin's writing portrayed feminist ideals and evolved throughout her writing. Lindow discusses the end of Second Wave Feminism and women to come after subscribing to the name of Third Wave Feminism, or Post-Feminsim. In this discussion, Le Guin's writing and her own feminist views are examined, giving the reader a better understanding of Le Guin's world view. This provides a better understanding of where Le Guin's values were during the writing of "The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas", as the reader can better understand where in her feminist journey Le Guin was at. All of her works have substantial feminist subtexts and influences, but they have evolved overtime, so better understanding her intentionality at the time of writing "Omelas" allows a reader to appreciate the work more.

Rashley, Lisa Hammond. "Revisioning Gender: Inventing

Women in Ursula K. Le Guin's Nonfiction." *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2007, pp. p22-47, <https://doi.org/10.1353/bio.2007.0029>. Accessed 24 Apr. 2023.

Lisa Hammond Rashley examines the importance of Ursula K. Le Guin and her writing in how they view and play with gender and common gender roles. Le Guin's views of gender have resulted in much critical acclaim as well as criticism. Rashley discusses how the deliberate nature of Le Guin's writing, something seen in "The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas", makes her discussions of gender so impactful. Le Guin very intentionally identifies, or ignores, the gender of her characters, allowing them to break free from typical societal norms, exploring ideas definitely not seen during the time period that she wrote. The context this article provides on how Le Guin wrote gender and how some critics responded to that gives readers a more nuanced, educated approach to "Omelas", allowing one to better understand why Le Guin chose to gender some characters, and leave others vague.

Spector, Ronald H.. "Vietnam War". *Encyclopedia Britannica*,
Invalid Date,
[https://www.britannica.com/event/
Vietnam-War](https://www.britannica.com/event/Vietnam-War). Accessed 10 December
2022.

Spector focuses his article on the major occurrences and events of the Vietnam War. He begins with the fall of French rule in Vietnam all the way to the fall of South Vietnam. This is for anyone wishing to know general facts about this point in history, with many off-shooting articles that go further in depth about specific events or world players during this war. Anyone who needs or wants to learn more and find facts about the Vietnam War could use this article.

Stein, Murray. Jung's Map of the Soul. Open Court, 1988,
[https://www.planete-coree.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/
Jungs-Map-of-the-Soul-An-introduction-by-Murray-Stein.pdf](https://www.planete-coree.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Jungs-Map-of-the-Soul-An-introduction-by-Murray-Stein.pdf).
Accessed 5 December 2022.

In his book, *Jung's Map of the Soul*, Murray Stein provides the complete scope of Carl Jung's thought and theories. While Carl Jung is a foundational and well-known psychologist, he is also known for his apparent challenges in formulating his own ideas clearly. Murray Stein provides a clear and easily-understandable approach to many of Carl Jung's most prevalent theories. These include his perception of the ego and the unconscious, psychic energy, the psyche, and the popular theory of the shadow, the persona, the anima, and the self, among many other concepts. This is a useful text in understanding the complex nature of Jung's theories and offers a broad range of topics within his collection of ideas. Chapters are broken down into clear, specific sections that allow for the easy location of relevant subject matter. Murray Stein is a Jungian psychoanalyst, author, and lecturer. His literary works focus almost exclusively on Carl Jung and range over many of his theories, showing his credibility on the subject. He is a graduate of Yale, the University of Chicago, and the C.G. Jung Institute of Zurich, and is a notable member of many analytical psychology associations.

Tompkins, Jane. "A Short Course in Post-Structuralism." *College English*, vol. 50, no. 7, 1988, pp. 733–47. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/377671>. Accessed 10 Dec. 2022.

The article by Jane Tompkins serves as an analysis of deconstructionist, or post structuralist, theory as a theory that points out the arbitrary and inseparable connection between reads, readers, and readings. Drawing from the lectures of Ferdinand de Saussure and Jacques Derrida, this analysis focuses on the tradition of language as an arbitrary system used for unique identification, and the idea that context gives identity value but that this value is only subjective or communal. This theme is expanded upon with Saussure's idea that meaning depends on systems, and that words apart from systems lose their meaning. Derrida's work expands on the idea of undoing the arbitrary rules that allow language to be understood.

His use of language shows the difference, disagreement, and deferment of language across cultures, and Saussure's notion of the evolution of language are synthesized to provide even more insight into how deconstruction is a theory that undoes the idea that theory can unravel texts because of each person's unavoidable cultural influences.

New Criticism

The Beauty of Blood Diamonds

By Sydney Bergeson

“The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” is a story about a city where people are truly happy and joyous, and peace reigns. This happiness, however, hinges upon the misery of the child, and it’s citizens have vastly different reactions to it. They believe it will not be as horrible as they have been told. They understand it is for the good of the community, and some of them even understand why, and some still do not, and refuse to accept it. There is no guilt in Omelas, because the guilt leaves with the ones who walk away. The opposing reactions to a beautiful and happy community that can only exist at the expense of an innocent child, show the tension between the people who choose to stay or leave, and how ultimately neither option solves the problem of helping the child.

When the citizens of Omelas first see the child, it is nothing like what they expect. They learn about the child at a young age, and see its condition somewhere in adolescence. They have been told it is ugly, they have been told it is horrible, but they don’t understand until they actually see the child. They expect to be able to handle it. When they see the child, “They feel disgust, which they had thought themselves superior to” (Le Guin, 4). This pains the citizens, and they wonder about what to do to help the child and how to fix it, even “brood[ing] over it for weeks or years” (Le Guin, 4). This is in opposition to the older,

more experienced Omelians, who have come to the conclusions that it's for the best. The child's situation could vastly improve, but it could never experience true joy, and doing so would doom the city. They expect it to not be that bad, but seeing misery of this scale is surprising to them. Some of them do not even understand why the child is there.

The child is a symbol, specifically of a scapegoat. The earliest record of a scapegoat comes from the Bible. Historically, a goat was 'given' all the sins of the community and sent out into the desert to be received by a demon. It was believed that by doing so the community would rid themselves of the sin, and make it better for everyone (except the goat) (De Verteuil). The child, an innocent, has committed no crime, yet still must bear the cross for the good of the community. The scapegoat is also expelled from the community, much like the child being locked in what amounts to a broom closet.

The goal of this community, of this town, is to maximize happiness for the most people. This is a political philosophy known as utilitarianism, where the guiding principle is happiness. Jeremy Bentham, founder of modern utilitarianism said that the purpose is to "augment the happiness of the community...greater than any [tendency] it has to diminish it" (Archie and Archie). The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few, and any action that maximizes happiness is considered good and moral. It follows, then, that Omelas would consider the child to be a just sacrifice, as there are scores of children who are happy, and whose needs are being met. Utilitarianism also deals with the complexity of happiness, and whether it is fleeting or lasting. Factors such as intensity, duration, certainty, propinquity or proximity to home, fecundity or ability to be reproduced, the purity and extent of happiness are taken into account. Omelas accomplishes these goals. The speaker proclaims of a community with "mature, intelligent, passionate adults whose lives were not wretched" (Le Guin, 2). These are not naive people, blind to the horrors of the world around them, but are lively and complex people. An entire community is thriving, simply for the sacrifice of one child. In straight number terms, which is one of the principles

of utilitarianism, Omelas has accomplished this goal. In opposition to the happy people of Omelas, however, is the child.

The child is the price that Omelas must pay in order to exist. In order to have adults that are happy and joyous, and beautiful children with sticky faces (Le Guin, 2-3), the child must wallow in misery. Does the happiness of a community justify the pain of one person? Do generations of peace and resources abound justify it?

The ones who stay seem to think so.

In Omelas, not everyone is content to accept the torture of the child. Le Guin offers a second option, the ones who walk away from Omelas. They walk straight out of Omelas, to an unknown place (Le Guin, 5). It seems as though it does not matter where they go, as long as they are no longer in Omelas, and no longer participate in what they see as a blood diamond. Beautiful, glittering brilliance, at a terrible, terrible cost. They simply must leave. The narrator mentions that "One thing I know there is none of Omelas is guilt" (Le Guin, 2). There is no guilt because the townspeople accept the child, and understand it is the reason for their happiness. It is not "vapid, irresponsible happiness", and it "is because of the child that they are so gentle with children" (Le Guin, 4). The townspeople are not willfully ignorant, or seek to forget, but recognize the child and ensure the sacrifice will not be in vain. This is why there is no guilt in the town, and the other reason is the ones who do feel guilty, leave. They walk away, and refuse to participate in the system.

The irony, however, is that in leaving the city they do nothing to help the child. In an effort to stop the cycle, they only absolve themselves of guilt. The ones who walk away resolve not to benefit off of misery, and they accomplish that goal, but it changes nothing for the child. Doing so would even destroy the happiness of the entire community (Le Guin, 4). The citizens only see the child because it is a custom of their society, and it's "clear that those who come to look at the tormented child do so for their own purposes, and never in response to its needs or wants, which simply don't exist for them" (Langbauer). Leaving seems to be an ultimately futile action, as the child's situation never changes. This is the unifying idea of the story, that resolving yourself of guilt does not resolve the guilty action.

The one thing leaving does do, however, is signal to others that something isn't right. These people grew up in the same community, and walked away with vastly different reactions. Perhaps like the older men and women who walk away, it can encourage others to leave, to seek out new ways to live.

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Reader Response

The Ones Who Choose to Stay

Kelsey Jennings

The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas, by Ursula K. Le Guin, tells the story of a fictional seaside city called Omelas. The short story takes place during Omelas “Festival of Summer”, full of horse races, music, smiling children and mothers with their babes. However, the seemingly happy Omelians have a dark local understanding. Their happiness depends on the neglect of one child, locked in a room under the floorboards of a local building. The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas asks its readers to look inward at their own morals and ask themselves, is it better to live with that sacrifice or to walk away?

Le Guin starts her short story with an idyllic description of the utopic society that is Omelas. The way in which Le Guin describes Omelas in the first paragraph is full of rich detail; “their manes were braided with streams of silver, gold, and green. They flared their nostrils and pranced and boasted to one another; they were vastly excited, the horse being the only animal who has adopted our ceremonies as his own.” (Le Guin). Le Guin almost gives the reader a sales pitch on how happy the Omelians are, like she’s trying to convince us of their happiness rather than it being a true, undeniable happiness. That’s not to say she isn’t at all descriptive. She’s quite the opposite and without giving exact details, allows the reader to interpret and create their version of a utopia. Le Guin doesn’t invite, but

makes her reader be an integral part of the story telling. "In "The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas" Le Guin invites the reader to co-create a utopian city and take responsibility for it, then also creates, at the insistence of her imagined reader, a graphically scapegoated victim—"(Adams). That is perhaps the trickery used on the reader. We create our own world, a happy one, one that we'd consider ideal, and then have to acknowledge the neglected child, just as the citizen of Omelas do. We're forced to ask ourselves if we'd stay in the utopia or wonder outside of it into the unknown.

Just as the reader has created their own utopia, Le Guin asks the question "Do you believe? Do you accept the festival, the city, the joy? No?" (Le Guin). This for me was a tonal shift in the story. I knew that whatever came after those questions would change the way I viewed Omelas. Le Guin asks these question as though it would be inconceivable to have a true utopia. This is when she introduces the neglected child and confirms the inconceivability of a true utopia; it comes with a sacrifice. Even this happy, loving, guilt free community, is flawed. When the child is introduced and it's conditions described, my initial reaction was disgust, anger, just like the Omelians. It's an almost jarring realization; all of our communities, cultures, and societies come with unimaginable sacrifices that we make every day. ""The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" appears to simply problematize the concept of utopia by

foregrounding the scapegoat which we, the readers, require to be the foundation stone of culture.” (Adams).

The citizens of Omelas, though not simple, find happiness in simplicity. They don’t have churches, government, or armies because “The joy built upon successful slaughter is not the right kind of joy; it will not do; it is fearful and it is trivial.” (Le Guin). I think this line is important because it should be noted that there isn’t any enjoyment or fulfillment gained by the neglect of this child. I would argue that the citizens are horrified of the treatment and nature of the child. They “peer in at it with frightened, disgusted eyes.” (Le Guin). Even for the person that “kicks the child to make it stand” (Le Guin), I believe this to be difficult for them. There isn’t joy in this act, it’s just an understanding, a job. It’s horrific, but they understand that the neglect of this child is what makes their city what it is and the happiness of all other citizens depends on this kind of deplorable treatment.

The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas plays on the metaphor, “the sacrificial lamb”. There are many examples of the sacrificial lamb in mythology, theology, art, cinema, and politics, but I think the clearest example is that of Jesus. Jesus sacrifices

himself and pays for our sins. “The death and resurrection of this one man is at the very heart of the Christian faith. For Christians it is through Jesus’s death that people’s broken relationship with God is restored. This is known as the Atonement.” (BBC – Religions – Christianity: Why Did Jesus Die?, n.d.-a). So, is the greater good more important than an individual life? Paul Firenze suggests that the ones who stay, the ones who know of the boy and live with it every day may be morally superior to the ones that walk away. “These terms are difficult at first for everyone in Omelas, but most come to accept them through a combination of rationalization (the child could never *really* know happiness now) but also, I will argue, through a realization that the child’s suffering is actually a call to live a moral life, not simply for oneself, but for others. And I think ultimately this is the source of their moral strength, and therefore the source of their genuine happiness. But of course, not everyone accepts these terms, and not everyone stays. Some find the terms unacceptable, and they walk away from the city into the dark unknown beyond the Eighteen Peaks.” (Firenze).

Why do those that walk away do so? They don’t feel guilt, correct? It seems

like a self-serving act. Just because they leave doesn't mean the escape the knowledge of the child's existence. "But, upon closer reading, we discover that this cannot be the case since, as Le Guin herself writes, the collective happiness determined by the child's sacrifice is in part defined by a state of absolute guiltlessness: "One thing I know there is none of in Omelas is guilt." Thus, the question remains: From where does the impulse to depart come from, for those who walk away, if not from a desire to feel free from culpability?" (Keller Hirsch). I would argue that the ones that walk away are just as response for the child's torment as the ones who stay.

Firenze also suggests that not only are the ones that walk complicit in the child's treatment, but they walk away, eliminating even the possibility of potential change they could make. "Ultimately, my critique of the ones who walk away is that while they hold Omelas to be a place of unacceptable evil precisely because of the child's situation, they have no plan for how to ameliorate the child's suffering. This amelioration could only come, if it is ever to come, from within Omelas itself. Those who remain are at least in a position to eventually realize, and to make others realize, that the moral

duty which ties them all to these admittedly grotesque “terms” is of their own making (and it is made by all of them, together).” (Firenze). I have to agree with Firenze and why I said them walking away is self-serving. Those that stay know the horror of the child’s torment but by staying, could make potential change and not allow another child to be the sacrificial lamb.

Do the ones that walk away make their own kind of sacrifice? Yes, I believe so. They walk into an unknown, imperfect world. But that’s where the irony lies. “Perhaps they might try to reconstruct a society based on all the good things in Omelas, only without the one obviously bad thing—the suffering child. Call it New Omelas. But in creating New Omelas they have not done away with the very thing they most reject—the child’s suffering. They have merely left it behind in the hopes of not contributing *directly* to its suffering. But it is unclear how this walking away absolves them of responsibility any more than those who remain.” (Firenze). Are they wandering into the world and forming a new Omelas? Or are they joining a new community? Yes, the treatment of the child is wrong, but there will be bad things and bad people in all other

societies. Is there a society in which they can fit in or are they destined for isolation?

Though it's an unimaginable decision, it's not an uncommon one. We face the ideas of third world countries, starving children, trafficking, corruption, and countless other horrors every day. And yet we live with it. Le Guin perhaps amplifies the guilt we may feel for a child in that situation, but in the grand scheme of things, horrible treatments of people happen all the time. The only way to fix those horrors is to stay and create change.

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Deconstruction

The Paradox of Paradise

Tristan Aja

After the somber conclusion of Ursula K LeGuin's abstract short story, "The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas," there are many questions and paradoxes that float about the impossible city of Omelas and its people. Contradictions, surrounding everything including the city's culture and celebrations, the speaker's suggestions and their use of language, play an important role in how the text is read. Its intention to portray happiness and humanity are continually undermined in a way that shows the moral paradox facing the citizens of Omelas, as well as the paradox of language as an ultimately futile way to truly communicate ideas. It's admitted that the speaker themselves cannot hope to encapsulate the happy city, the complex idea they wish to portray. But this doesn't stop them from trying, and in trying we see how certain customs and tools are arbitrarily preferred as the speaker tries to depict a happy world.

While the storyteller might first appear unsure of themself, or the idea they want to get across, a focus on the ways in which language and its conventions are limited, arbitrary, yet agreed upon constructs may help us get at the reason behind the abstract passages, contradictions, and frequent addressing of the reader. The text makes direct assumptions about what would, or wouldn't work in a city like Omelas, and includes

many subtle discrepancies that play into the ultimate failure of language to get at the essence of an idea. It is because of these conditions of convention and language, and the subjectivity of happiness, that the text ends up clashing with itself repeatedly on the idea of what Omelas is like, which arbitrary aspects are favored, and how language is used in an attempt to describe a happy community.

The most evident contradictions in the text come when the speaker asks us to do some of the imagining directly, even going back on details and aspects of the world described. It's quite uncommon in storytelling for the author to write, for instance, "Perhaps it would be best if you imagined [Omelas] as your own fancy bids" (LeGuin 2). And by breaking this narrative convention so often the story ends up reinforcing a loose narrative, that chooses mainly to focus on exposition, and whether we believe the author or not, rather than character or plot. Furthermore, it's considered that convention "gives the text an identity such that it can acquire meanings that are independent of the author's intentions" (Knapp and Michaels 67). But, partially owing to the fact that narrative conventions are *done away with*, this text is able to make the author's intent much clearer, as they encourage the reader's own imagining of a happy city on the coast in a way that communicates a deeper, more personal understanding of the utopian ideal in which people are still human. Yet conventions must exist, and here they are used in a way that shows the preferred society of the speaker with a new set of contradictions to unravel.

The speaker undermines their own attempt to describe utopia many times within the depictions of the festival celebrations, recreational activities, and the imagined culture of the city. Within the suggestions about the exclusion of temples and clergy, but the *inclusion* of beer, religion, and horse races, we find that the speaker's version of a happy community is inspired by self-interests rather than logic. But is this so wrong? In the sense that the text, and even its reader, are not free-thinking, but "culturally constituted by interpretive frameworks or interpretive strategies that our culture makes available to us" (Tompkins 734), the reason for the convention breaking exposition and encouraged open interpretation become a little

clearer. Through our own abstraction, and the speaker's comments, we see how Omelas is itself a construct of cultural frameworks. What's more is that the idea of cultural frameworks works to highlight the subjective details of the society proposed by the speaker, along with the ideas we produce when we're given the license to imagine our own parts of this society. This idea of unavoidable cultural influence on our thoughts goes along with the arbitrary suggestions about things like beer and clergy in a way that proves the impossibility of the city of Omelas, because each of us has our own, specific idea about what would make up a happy society. These arbitrary preferences are made up of cultural traditions, as language is made of arbitrary conventions and traditions. Both continue to affect how the city of Omelas, the idea of happiness, is presented, and it even affects many fundamental beliefs in Omelas.

Despite the contradictions and freely imagined details surrounding the city, the vital, non-negotiable aspect is, of course, the child underneath the city. While much more could be said about the festival and customs, it is this child that gives the people of Omelas their noted complexity amidst their otherwise easy life. But what is their decision? To stay, and continue to benefit from suffering, or leave, and allow suffering to give benefits. It would be easy to praise those who walk away, seeing the other citizen who rationalizes suffering as the villain, and these seem to be the only two options presented to the reader. But to merely shine a light onto this and other binaries might risk circumventing the need to think of greater questions (Ellis 277). These are supposed to be intelligent people (LeGuin 2) with access to *anything* the reader imagines will make them perfectly happy, so could anybody really walk away knowing their sacrifice helps no one?

First, let's look at those who stay. We've talked about cultural frameworks helping to build our interpretations (Tompkins 734), and this does seem to apply to how religion is viewed in the speaker's version of Omelas, but there are other ways to apply this idea to the text. For instance, we see the reasoning of those who *stay* in Omelas, despite the suffering child, positively reinforced by the speaker's own framing of the idea that "Some

of them understand why, and some do not" (LeGuin 4). Those who do not understand the "why" are not framed to know "why not," and the reasoning of those who stay, the dominant view, is the focal point of the argument. We see the rationalization of the young, who feel a moral pain for the first time. But with time to remember the luxury of their position, it's said that "Their tears at the bitter injustice dry when they begin to perceive the terrible justice of reality, and to accept it" (LeGuin 4). It is interesting to note that with time they come to see this *injustice* as *terrible justice*, which brings to mind the idea of utter fairness. But perhaps these people of Omelas have their own idea of justice, made up of the experiences and traditions in their community. Such ingrained ideas about justice, right and wrong, are difficult, though not impossible to see past; and the ones who supposedly leave could not do so without a rejection of their culture. But this stoic image of one who leaves may itself be nothing more than a cultural framework.

The idea of a single person going against society, taking on some unnecessary burden, might intend to inspire confidence. But the text, maintaining its unconventional tone, while adding praise to the people overall, could support this idea that nobody walks away by asking, after the child is revealed, with very specific diction, "are [the people] not *more credible*? But there is one more thing to tell, and this is quite *incredible*" (LeGuin 5; emphasis added). It is incredible to think about this selfless sacrifice, but the idea that someone leaves may be less credible. Suffering outside Omelas will not end the suffering within, and an intelligent, complex person in Omelas has no reason to change course other than the speaker's suggestion: that immeasurable happiness is outweighed by some negative emotion, spurred by the child in the basement. With infinite pleasures, what could it be that drives some people away? Do they possess shame? In my Omelas, there were—as the author suggests there may be—nudists in the procession (LeGuin 2), and from this there seems to be no shame. Guilt is another reason to leave, but there is no guilt (LeGuin 2), that would imply regret and sadness in Omelas. With this there seems to be something more credible about Omelas because of those who chose to stay and benefit, as leaving changes nothing. But

maybe, as it sounds so nice, the idea of some other person suffering has enough power to drive the comfortable mad.

The image of a lone figure walking away in protest is noble, but reinforcing this convention of stoic self-sacrifice doesn't appear to fit in, unequally contrasted with the highly personalized and infinite pleasures of Omelas. The speaker's attempt to show us the people of Omelas, and the idea of happiness, is developed further than conventions might normally allow with many abstract, convention breaking passages that allow for a flexible understanding of happiness that is fueled by each reader's own ideas. In fact, every aspect of the city, from rules to traditions, could be nothing more than the result of a cultural framework, which is equally true for my vision of Omelas compared to what yours may have been. But, whether these ideas of a happy community are all cultural constructs or not, the contradictions and breaks of convention within the text reveal that happiness is truly a subjective idea, and that language has inherent flaws that keep ideas from ever being perfectly expressed.

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New Historical

Vietnam in the Basement

David Maryanski II

Ursula K. Le Guin's story *The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas* reflects a common image of utopian society during the 1970s, with humanity and nature closely intertwined, a lack of oppressive governing, and ambiguous or absent social roles. The story is set in a city of perfection where humanity seem to have perfect harmony with each other and nature. However, there is great struggle and conflict with the last half of the story, showing the reader that all of Omelas' perfect utopia was only made possible by the suffering of one person, namely the Child in the basement. *The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas* views the Child and the society of Omelas as an allegory for the communist and capitalist ideological struggle that occurred in the 1950s to 1970s known as the Vietnam war.

The period of history Le Guin knew revolved around World War II and what we know as the Cold War, primarily between the US and the Soviet Union. We could state that the Cold War was a battle of ideology regarding communist and capitalist views rather than solely a conflict of land and power. Although there was never a full-scale battle between Soviet and US troops the war in Vietnam brought these two countries' philosophies together, manifesting the Cold War into a physical battle with North Vietnam and South Vietnam, each with an assorted group

of allies and supporters. North Vietnam was heavily influenced by the Soviets and other communist states, such as China, while South Vietnam was supported by the US for most of the war because of their desire to be rid of Communist rule (Spector).

How does this all play into Omelas and Le Guin's view of Utopia? In the battle between communism and capitalism both ideologies seemed to be warring over who would reign supreme and bring about peace for all their people. Both sides of the war in the 1950s to 70s believed their system would be the most beneficial to a struggling country, both promising many freedoms, equalities, and equities. Le Guin may have seen this and responded with disapproval towards the methodology. These points in history also ring true with the shocking revelation of the story.

The child in the basement is a striking image of Vietnam at war and as Jerre Collins puts it, "familiar to us from photo-journalism of war, displacement, and famine" (Collins 526) reflecting the very idea core to the Vietnam war—suffering for the advancement of political ideology. This image has further weight when we examine the reasons the US and the Soviet Union began their support for either South and North Vietnam. What both sides wanted from the war is nicely summarized by Ronald Spector at Britannica. The Soviets' strategy was to "[help] communist-led insurgencies...subvert and overthrow the shaky new governments of emerging nations" (Spector). On the contrary the US saw it as "an opportunity to test the United States' ability to conduct a 'counterinsurgency' against communist subversion and guerrilla warfare" (Spector). This seems like a training run for the US as they look to be taking part in the war solely for the chance to prove to the Soviets that they have strength to overthrow Communist rule. Further evidence is seen from Spector, who writes:

Kennedy accepted without serious question the so-called domino theory, which held that the fates of all Southeast Asian countries were closely linked and that a communist success in one must necessarily lead to the fatal weakening of the others. A successful effort in Vietnam—in Kennedy's words, "the cornerstone of the free world in Southeast Asia"—would provide to both

allies and adversaries evidence of U.S. determination to meet the challenge of communist expansion in the Third World.

One may wonder then if Le Guin, an American author viewing these world-shaking events, was solely criticizing American political choices to enter a war with Vietnam by using her images of Omelasian citizens purposefully using a helpless child for the upkeep of their utopia. However, looking at *The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas* itself shows readers that Le Guin might have meant this for anyone who saw their form of society as the sole means to reach utopia. She writes:

they could perfectly well have central heating, subway trains, washing machines, and all kinds of marvelous devices not yet invented here, floating light-sources, fuelless power, a cure for the common cold. Or they could have none of that: it doesn't matter. As you like it.
(Le Guin 2)

From that text the allegory of Omelas does not seem to be solely targeted towards the American political decisions of the time. She is saying anyone can put whatever they like in their utopia. To Le Guin this story is directed towards all, even the Soviets supporting Northern Vietnam. Both capitalists and communists were using Vietnam as a means to an end and that is the point Le Guin seems to be touching on.

Another aspect that points to *The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas* being meant for all societies, not just American, can be gleaned from the idea of what capitalism is compared with other philosophies. In their essay *Imaginaries of Hope: The Utopianism of Degrowth* both Kallis and March analyze another of Le Guin's books, *The Dispossessed*, touching on an idea born in the 1970s from radical environmentalism called Degrowth. This philosophy speaks to the opposing view in capitalism, which desires continual growth of material, wealth, and profit. It says that society should have limits without scarcity, economic growth without profit or loss for a single individual, and that endless growth is a capitalist dream. Serge Latouche, a French economist who touches on many ideas of Degrowth is one of their main sources. According to both Kallis and March "Latouche envisions autonomous communities with restricted

trade, organized in confederations of autonomous municipalities and bioregions” (Kallis and March 361). Omelas does share the idea of having enough without too little as Degrowth does. The idea of exponential growth does not exist there, neither do “the stock exchange, the advertisement, the secret police, and the bomb” It also noted that their laws are most likely “singularly few” (Le Guin 1) furthering the idea that Omelas does not adhere to any form of government.

Omelas is not system-less however, which seems to be what Le Guin is hinting at. Katherine Cross points out Le Guin’s ideas of informal systems in her paper *Naming a Star: Ursula Le Guin’s The Dispossessed and the Reimagining of Utopianism* which also focuses on Le Guin’s story *The Dispossessed*. Cross writes that “The ‘means’ [or the way we get to utopia] Le Guin details are those by which a society—any society, no matter how utopian or hierarchically flat—operates through power and, at the very least, informal systems” (Cross 1333). This speaks to Le Guin’s ideas of utopia. To her it seems there will always be struggle and conflict. It seems to be that Le Guin believed no one would ever be able to escape the draw to power in their societies, especially in constructed systems. For the child in the basement then, they will always be trapped and abused for society’s sake. In the case of the Vietnam war, perhaps Le Guin saw this as an inevitable reaction to achieving certain societal goals. It seems, to her, other countries will always use those weaker than them to achieve a certain peace for the citizens they most value.

From the revelation of the child in the basement, we move on towards the resolution of the story—those who walk away from Omelas—another group who seem to be unvalued in Omelas. Looking at the final movement of the story through a historical lens readers may first see the people who walk away as social reformers and movers. During the Vietnam war this was encompassed in the anti-war movements and the hippie movement of the early 1960s into the early 1970s. But these much more resemble the children who see why their society is the way it is for the first time. Le Guin writes “No matter how well the matter has been explained to them, these young spectators are always shocked and sickened at the sight” (Le Guin 4) but they eventually forget or accept the abuse and

terrible conditions the child lives in, all because they live in a society free from any societal suffering besides the child. The same seems to be about movements such as these. As long as the world of these movements was appeased, pieces could still be moving to achieve “utopia” for its citizens behind the scenes.

Alternatively, those who walk away are neither of those groups. They may represent another group: people who have given up on society changing. These people and Le Guin differ in how they see it, as the ones who walk away have a dismal view of it. Giorgos and Kallis quote Le Guin saying, “Utopia is not an end-state of stability and perfection but a state of struggle and conflict” (qtd in Kallis and March 364) They see the struggle and conflict, viewing it as a hopeless, lost cause or they wish to go to a place “less imaginable to most of us than the city of happiness” (Le Guin 5) namely death.

However, Le Guin seemed to be in the middle of these groups. Her idea of utopia encompassed the feeling of perpetual conflict and struggle for power, where there will most likely be a child in the basement everywhere, but she believed as does Latouche “that true revolution means institutional and cultural change, which can only come through reforms, not violent takeovers of power that would drift into bloodshed” (Kallis and March 364). In response to the Vietnam war Le Guin seems to be urging the countries who used Vietnam as their scapegoat to walk away, find another path, away from using countries and people who are in precarious situations for their own political agendas. She seems to be urging them towards a utopia where suffering is non-existent even in the basement.

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Psychological

A City Without Heroes

Tessa Winegar

In Ursula K. Le Guin's short story, *The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas*, it is clear that some form of psychological repression or desensitization must be taking place for the citizens of Omelas to live so happily with their awareness of the tortured child in a cellar deep below the city. The purely utilitarian treatment of this child pulls into question the lengths a society might actually go to, and why, in order to secure happiness and well-being for the majority. As such, this piece is a story well-suited for a psychological critique. It is known that the writings of the Swiss psychoanalyst Carl Jung had a strong impact on Ursula Le Guin's work. Therefore, the fictional society of Omelas can be viewed as an allegory for Carl Jung's theory of the human psyche (specifically the ego, the persona, and the shadow) and his theory of individuation. Through this lens, a psychological evaluation of the people of Omelas serves to uncover perhaps the deepest problem within the society.

According to Jung, the ego is "how one sees oneself, along with the conscious and unconscious feelings that accompany that view" (qtd in Krapp 208). So, in a Jungian analysis of the city of Omelas, it would appear that the ego is comparable to the city of Omelas itself. Just as the ego encompasses the conscious and the unconscious, the city of Omelas encompasses all its inhabitants, all the joy and happiness experienced, and of

course, the indomitable suffering of the child. As Jung posits, “some contents [of the psyche] are reflected by the ego and held in consciousness, where they can be further examined and manipulated, while other psychic contents lie outside of consciousness either temporarily and permanently” (Stein 25). The content held in consciousness (or awareness) in Omelas is simply the perfection of the city, the joys of everyday life. That which lies outside consciousness, permanently, is the child in the cellar. Its suffering must be constantly ignored for the citizens of Omelas to live the way that they do.

As such, if the ego represents the city itself, then the persona is the public face of Omelas. Omelas’ persona appears to be the “boundless and generous contentment” that every inhabitant experiences (Le Guin 2). The festivals, the music, the dancing. But, in Jungian theory, the persona is also “the set of traits and characteristics in conformity with social expectations that the individual shows to others” (Krapp 208-209). These social expectations arise from sources such as “acculturation, education, and adaptation to our physical and social environments” (Stein 101). So, in Omelas, in which every inhabitant is introduced to the harsh reality of the child’s endless torment early on, the social expectation is to “perceive the terrible justice of reality” (Le Guin 4) and to move on. Each citizen is expected to accept that the suffering of the child is justified because it provides the rest of them with unending happiness. To their credit, the citizens of Omelas do not accept this “terrible justice” in stride. They “go home in tears,” or “brood over it for weeks and years” (Le Guin 4). But still, they come to accept it. They rationalize it, and they become desensitized to the child’s cries of “Please let me out. I will be good!” (Le Guin 3). As Shosanna Knapp explains, “In Omelas...the nobler thing [leaving Omelas] does not taste better; if it did, Omelas would be a ghost town” (Knapp 76). So, while the public face of the city is the laughter and the joy, it is also the injured, naked child in the dark that every person is aware of.

In addition, the shadow is another integral piece of Jung’s theory of the human psyche. Stein explains that, “in adapting to and coping with the world, the ego, quite unwittingly, employs the shadow to carry out unsavory operations that it could not

perform without falling into a moral conflict" (Stein 99). In viewing the society of Omelas as one unified entity, it could be logically concluded upon first assessment that the child in the cellar is the shadow of Omelas. Certainly, its imprisonment seems to be an "unsavory operation." However, the child's situation is public knowledge, and as explained before, even part of the city's persona. So, what is the shadow of Omelas? In Jungian theory, the shadow contains the unconscious aspects of the psyche that have been repressed—containing features of the psyche's nature that are "contrary to the customs and moral conventions of society" (Stein 99). If those who stay in Omelas are obeying the social customs, then those who leave are not. Therefore, it can be concluded that the shadow of Omelas is those who walk away from the city. The shadow is what the persona will not allow. If the persona (Omelas) expects all to accept the suffering of the child, then the shadow (those who walk away) does the opposite.

Finally, Jung regarded his process of individuation as the core of his psychology. He used the term 'individuation' to reference psychological development, or "becoming a unified but also unique personality" (Stein 155). In comparison to those who stay in Omelas, the ones who walk away can be considered unique. Very few walked away. Similarly, Jung did not regard the process of individuation as being possible for all people. One of the important factors of individuation is that it requires one "to sacrifice some of the worldly gains that have been achieved," and that it has a "definite quality of detachment and isolation from other people" (Krapp 213). Those who leave Omelas give up their home, their relationships, their wealth—everything they have—as a form of dissent to the treatment of the child in the cellar. They walk to a place "even less imaginable to most of us than the city of happiness" (Le Guin 5). And thus, they could be considered to have achieved some form of individuation, or at least been on the path to it.

And here arises perhaps the greatest problem for Omelas, as revealed by Jung's theory of the psyche. Those who leave at first appear to be the heroes of the story, the ones who deny the atrocious treatment of an innocent youth. But are they really? They leave, but for what reason? Could it not be their own

feelings of guilt? As Le Guin states, “One thing I know there is none of in Omelas is guilt” (Le Guin 2). Surely this is because all those who experience guilt are those who walk away. Each moment of laughter and goodness in the city seems a slap in the face to those who recognize its cost. But this walking away achieves no true purpose, not in any significant way. Not for the child, nor for the city. It may be nobler, it may be better than staying, but it is still a form of self-preservation, of ignorance. It is a “protective and self-serving” activity (Stein 99). As stated by Shosanna Knapp, “the use of the subconscious...does not absolve one from accountability” (Knapp 79). The child still goes on in anguish and agony, and the city of Omelas still thrives at a wretched cost. Is this not the true problem? That even though some may walk away from Omelas, even though they have found a way to dissent, the poor child still suffers. The knowing abuse of this innocent child fuels the joys of the city, and that fact alone makes the entire city wretched.

As Stein states, “Persona and shadow are usually more or less exact opposites of one another, and yet they are as close as twins” (Stein 101). In Omelas, those who stay and those who leave seem to be in direct ideological opposition. However, both parties are still indifferent to the suffering of the child. No one in either party moves to alleviate its pain. And thus, they are as close as twins, both complicit in this atrocity.

Ursula Le Guin’s fictional city of Omelas provides the reader with a tragic and thought-provoking narrative that can be viewed in many different ways. And even within psychological criticism, many theories could have been applied to the city and its people. However, in applying Carl Jung’s theory of the human psyche and his theory of individuation, the reader can come to better understand the inhabitants of Omelas. The persona: the public face of the city; the shadow: those who choose to leave. But what is perhaps most impactful are the implications of what leaving Omelas truly means. Are those who walk away morally superior to those who stay? Does the indifference of all level the moral ‘playing field?’ Or, does it even matter? Regardless of the good intentions of the citizens of Omelas—who state that their happiness is not “irresponsible” and that they recognize the cost of their perfect society—when

the child suffers in continual torment, does it really matter who is more morally developed, or who stayed or left? What can truly matter in comparison to such an injustice?

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Feminist/Queer Theory

Trying to Understand Utopia

Logan Hart

In Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas* readers are introduced to a utopian city called Omelas. The narrator regales the audience with definitions of its beauty and splendor, but recognizing the listeners' inability to believe in this perfect happiness without suffering, talks of a young child who suffers so that everyone else may live in peace. The utopia of Omelas, while constructed to defy the norms and expectations of a patriarchal society, is still built upon patriarchal ideas and understandings. Le Guin shows that even in a utopia, patriarchal conditioning still shapes our understanding of an ideal society.

The deliberate choice to have the narrator act as a character emphasizes this claim. The use of a characterized narrator doesn't serve a purpose if Omelas is merely a perfect city. A utopia that Le Guin unassumingly wanted to tell the reader about, causing them to speculate what a peaceful society must look like. Yet, the narrator speaks as if they are trying to convince the readers of Omelas's existence and splendor. After going into copious amounts of detail explaining what makes Omelas so spectacular, the narrator checks in with the audience "Do you believe? Do you accept the festival, the city, the Joy? No? Then let me describe one more thing" (Le Guin 3). The listeners', and by extension, reader's understanding of society

is so fundamentally built upon their own understanding of the world, one more violent and masculine than this one, that we cannot accept it.

Utopia, by nature of being a society far removed and far above our own, must inherently be at odds with our own understanding of cultural norms. Rebecca Adams touches upon this in her article *Narrative Voice and Unimaginability of the Utopian 'Feminine' in Le Guin's The Left Hand of Darkness and 'The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas'* where she says "any truly utopian vision will of necessity be "feminist," insofar as it must be non-sacrificial and non-violent" (Adams 3). Simply by being a supposed utopia, Omelas casts aside typical patriarchal culture; there is no organized religion, no great leaders, sexuality is more open and less controlled. Omelas is a more feminine society simply by being so far removed from real world society. Le Guin even provides readers specific examples of typical gendered norms being ignored such as the women racing horses and the "tall young men (who) wear her flowers in their shining hair" (Le Guin 3).

The listeners are unable to accept this, and so the narrator describes the child beneath the city. A young child, which Le Guin deliberately leaves ungendered, is locked in a small room in a basement. The narrator described the horrible torment and suffering of the child, and the complicit nature of the city's inhabitants. They are all aware of the child's suffering, but, the narrator says, "they all understand that their happiness, the beauty of their city, the tenderness of their friendships, the health of their children, the wisdom of their scholars, the skill of their makers, even the abundance of their harvest and the kindly weathers of their skies, depend wholly on this child's abominable misery" (Le Guin 4). What Adams describes as "The archetype of the scapegoat, mythically representing—and critiquing—the process of the violent foundation of culture which Rene Girard terms the "victimage mechanism" (Adams 2).

It is implied that now the reader can understand how this society operates. Now Omelas is no longer perceived as perfect; in contrast, the cruelty the reader has seen in their own society, a more patriarchal foundation, the joyous nature of Omelas

is made more digestible. Le Guin expertly weaves this more feminine, free culture that has no government, no organized religion, and which enjoys all that life has to offer, and then offsets it by showing how this culture was established. There are even more subtle instances of this woven into the narrative as well. Lee Cullen Khanna points out in her article *Beyond Omelas: Utopia and Gender* how intentional Le Guin is when giving the characters in Omelas a specific gender. The most striking instance of this is the line drawn between the young artist and the suffering child. Khanna writes “Tile prototype of the artist is, notably, a “he,” while the victimized child is, perhaps significantly, not gender specific” (Khanna 4). While both men and women make merry at the child’s expense, it is notable that the child’s mirror is a man.

The narrator has now shown that both the reader, and to an extent Le Guin, struggle to believe in a perfect society, one free from the reign and tyranny of old and cruel patriarchal structures. The use of a scapegoat to “benefit the majority” is nothing new in the society that we and Le Guin lived in. Women, people of color, children, the poor, any marginalized group are victimized and used as scapegoats in this world. Given lower paying jobs, expected to bend to the will of those around them, forced to meet societal expectations lest they become outcast. The success of the upper class, which for centuries has been composed of men, typically white, has been built upon the backs and bent heads of everyone else. It is revealing that the narrator believes the only way for the reader to understand Omelas is by telling us of the suffering child.

The conclusion of this story emphasizes the patriarchal nature of Omelas even further. The narrator, after speaking of the child, details the reactions of the citizens. As expected, none of the citizens, or at least those the narrator speaks of, are comfortable with the child’s suffering, but what are they to do? For one reason or another, the citizens firmly believe, even know, that should the child receive any happiness whatsoever, the narrator informs the listeners that, “there may not even be a kind word spoken to the child” (Le Guin 4). This in and of itself is reminiscent of patriarchal society. Instilling the notion that the suffering of others is standard, to be expected, so that

the upper classes may be happy. Sexist ideologies are taught young and reinforced throughout adulthood to maintain the status quo in societies all around the world.

The narrator continues, describing how many citizens rationalize the treatment of the child, explaining away their suffering with false beliefs, even notions that it's better for the child to stay suffering, as it wouldn't know what to do with freedom. However, there are others, boys, girls, even adults, who cannot explain away the child's misery. "These people go out into the street, and walk down the street alone. They keep walking, and walk straight out of the city of Omelas, through the beautiful gates. They keep walking across the farmlands of Omelas. Each one goes alone, youth or girl, man or woman" (Le Guin 5). The narrator says that where these people go is even more incomprehensible than Omelas.

This final scene epitomizes the message and the reader's understanding of the city. Now we know that the joy and happiness comes at a cost, a steep one, and naturally some can't live with that burden. The city of Omelas accepts that people will leave if they are too consumed by the guilt of those who suffer, but the narrator doesn't mention anywhere any attempts at saving the child. The notion that rescuing the child results in the loss of Omelas's joy is so ingrained in the people, so established as fact, that none do so. In the past, when society was far more dominated by masculine leadership than it is today, we saw this same kind of indoctrination. It was expected of women and minorities to behave certain ways, accept certain things as truth. Their place as lessers, as accessories, as slaves. The patriarchy was obsessed with ensuring the idea of breaking free from those norms didn't even cross the mind, and that any act of rebellion did not affect society on a grand scale.

This piece succinctly demonstrates that people such as the audience and the narrator cannot conceive of a society that is not plagued by patriarchal ideals. That to even begin to understand a culture of joy and happiness, we expect a dark mirror of that joy. Le Guin speaks even further to the corrupting nature of our society, that even when we understand and recognize the misery, we are more likely to turn from it than to do anything about it. In some ways, readers can view this

piece as a warning. Le Guin wants the readers to be aware of their happiness and joy, know that it rests upon the suffering of others because of how our society has been built, and perhaps encourages us not to be like “the ones who walk away from Omelas” (Le Guin 5).

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[PART XII]

"There Will Come Soft Rains" by Ray Bradbury

You can read Ray Bradbury's "There will come Soft Rains" by following this link: https://www.btbores.org/Downloads/7_There%20Will%20Come%20Soft%20Rains%20by%20Ray%20Bradbury.pdf



"Ray Bradbury", by Alan Light,
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/alan-light/332925230/>

An American screenwriter and author who dabbled in many different genres including, horror fantasy, science fiction, realistic fiction, and mystery. Born in Waukegan, Illinois, in the year 1920 ever since a young age was an avid and talented writer and reader. Bradbury's works have been awarded 45 wins and nominations including the Science Fiction Hall of Fame in 1999. 10 of his 45 total wins were considered special and major awards. Including one his most

popular works, "There Will Come Soft Rains".

About the Authors

Maci Brent: Project manager

Maci is majoring in Education. She has always had a nurturing side, connecting her with her education career path. However, in her free time, she has a wild side, leading her to snowboard, go to music festivals, and play disc golf.

Candace Brown: Annotated Bibliography Editor

Candace is majoring in English with a Literature emphasis. Though literature has become very special to her, her heart belongs to the sciences. She plans to become a Speech Language Pathologist.

Eldon Moler: editor

Eldon is majoring in English with a Literature emphasis. He has always found literature as the best form of self expression. There's a certain beauty on the page that cannot be matched by anything else!

Celestia Phillips: publisher

Celestia is majoring in English with a Creative Writing emphasis. She plays 5 instruments and is preparing to audition to Juilliard on the piano just to see if she can get in.

Karley McCarthy: Publisher

Karley is majoring in Education with plans of becoming a high school English teacher. If she's not working or reading, she's usually spending time with her two cats and husband.

Critical Introduction

Nothing Remains but Soft Rains: A Critical Edition of Ray Bradbury's 'There Will Come Soft Rains'

Some short stories resonate with the world more than others, tending to be scarier and apocalyptic. There are many elements in Ray Bradbury's short story, "There Will Come Soft Rains," that make it well-known. However, there are very strong arguments both for and against this story and its contents. Whether it's the less realistic plot or the harsh reality that the story presents, there is something for everyone to glean from it. And through lenses consisting of New Historical, Critical Deconstruction, Reader Response, and New Criticism, the short story can be interpreted and interacted with in a multitude of ways.

Candace Brown explores "There Will Come Soft Rains" through a critical deconstruction lens with the purpose of identifying and exploring contradiction within the text and using that to prove that the text as a whole is absurd. Analysis of the author's use of technology in the story and the convenient malfunctions of the technology, Brown argues, reveal numerous inconsistencies that distract from the intended message and harm the validity of the short story. The high-tech house in the short story has a peculiar security system that, despite its artificially intelligent nature, is subjective toward threats and non-threats. This, along with other specific examples from the text and relevant information from related articles, work

together to exploit the short story and its flaws, bringing the weaknesses in Bradbury's work to light.

Eldon Moler delves into "There Will Come Soft Rains" through a reader response lens. His essay, "'There Will Come Soft Rains': How Does It Make You Feel?" explores the emotional responses one might have while reading the short story. It uses sources to explore the deeper messages being conveyed, as well as Bradbury's techniques in his writing that make these responses so prevalent. He supports the notion that the short, apocalyptic story is meant to create awareness, even a edginess, in readers. By using darker images such as the shadows burned onto the side of the house forever, Bradbury is able to establish and instill feelings of fear and anxiety, something Moler argues is crucial when digesting this short story.

Celestia Phillips utilizes a new historical lens to analyze Ray Bradbury's short story, "There Will Come Soft Rains," showing how the story becomes a significant step towards understanding the fear and uncertainty that plagued Americans during the Cold War. The devastation and loneliness that rested in the single house was representative of all that the people were afraid of in the future and their posterity. Phillips also argues that the lack of empathy towards those the house was intended to serve gave many people the knowledge that they needed to understand how the technology they had created, while useful, was also destructive.

Maci Brent's essay uses a new criticism lens to analyze "There Will Come Soft Rains." Brent discusses the use of irony, tension, and ambiguity within the short story and how they are connected to a unifying idea. Brent's essay includes imagery and metaphors from within the text, explaining the human aspects of the house and even the fire. It also provides examples from outside sources which elaborate on why certain literary devices might have been used, and what their possible underlying message may be. This all supports the notion that Ray Bradbury successfully uses the house as a unifying device for ambiguity, tension, irony, and to convey a message to readers. As one may notice, readers and audiences alike will have unique takeaways from the short story. Ray Bradbury's short, apocalyptic story, "There Will Come Soft Rains," is rife

with minute details, a thickened plot, and bold/enriching messages.

Karley McCarthy explores Bradbury's "There Will Come Soft Rains" through a feminist lens. Her essay discusses "Soft Rains" as a period piece, focusing on how Bradbury's experience as a writer post-World War II may have influenced his story's narrative and worldview around gender roles. One important aspect of this is the house's personification. While the house seems to have autonomy and intelligence, in many ways it replicates the daily tasks of the traditional 1940's housewife. The house does this to its own detriment despite the catastrophe around it. Throughout the analysis, Karley focuses on how Bradbury's work parallels with the experience of many women at the time and how their experience post-war may have affected gender stereotypes and expectations.

Annotated Bibliography

Adams, Mark. "Atomic Bomb: August 6, 1945." *Truman Library*, National Archives and Records Administration, <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/education/lesson-plans/atomic-bomb-august-6-1945>. 9 December 2022

This website was created as a lesson plan for high school students, providing short summaries of some of the events that helped end WWII. It also provides quotes from presidents and political leaders during the time to emphasize key details that helped Americans during the Cold War.

"A Summary and Analysis of Ray Bradbury's 'There Will Come Soft Rains.'" *Interesting Literature*, 12 Feb. 2022.

This source, an article summarizing and analyzing Ray Bradbury's "There Will Come Soft Rains," offers a really nice selection of facts, analysis points, and general information about the short fictional story. It offers a general, yet somewhat specific plot summary, as well as some basic history about the Cold War and nuclear warfare in the 1950's. Understanding this history is crucial to being able to really connect with this short story. The entire premise revolves around a house that seemingly "lives on" after the inhabitants of it all die because of a nuclear explosion.

Boyer, Paul. "American Intellectuals and Nuclear Weapons." *Revue Française d'études Américaines*, no. 29, 1986, pp. 291–307.

JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20873421>. Accessed 28 Nov. 2022.

“American Intellectuals and Nuclear Weapons” describes the different stances that leaders, or rather intellectuals, in the World War II era and their stances and morals regarding the use of nuclear weaponry. For example, discussions on the moral costs of victory, perceived justifications on the use of nuclear weaponry, and the politics involved in the decision making. However, this article does not solely focus on the discussion on nuclear warfare in the early 1900’s but also how the use of nuclear weapons affected the works of science fiction poets and authors, and how they made their opinions known to the world. “There Will come Soft Rains” is centered on the theme of nuclear warfare, specifically the aftermath, making this article a valuable resource and reference to many different points of view on the short story.

C.N., Aswathy. “Nature versus Culture: Mapping Imperialistic Alternatives in the Martian Chronicles and Avatar.” *Language in India*, vol. 18, no. 2, Feb. 2018, pp. p33-43, web.s.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=fa888d87-788f-46fb-8bb2-dfe3de6637b1%40redis&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWZWhvc3QtbGl2ZSZzY29wZTlzaXRl#db=ufh&AN=137936889. Accessed 1 May 2023.

Aswathy C.N. takes a look at Ray Bradbury’s work and his fears of the future in her article “*Nature versus Culture: Mapping Imperialistic Alternatives in the Martian Chronicles and Avatar*”. Ray Bradbury’s short story “*There Will Come Soft Rains*” is only a part of *The Martian Chronicles* collection, the whole of which, as discussed by C.N. explores Bradbury’s fears and predictions of the future. C.N. summarizes the chronicles and details how they paint a picture of a future made destitute by humanities never ending pursuit of advancement. This is most obvious in “*There Will Come Soft Rains*” where Bradbury’s fears are most clearly projected in the subject matter. Reading of a home devoid of life that still carries out the tasks assigned to it by the humans now long

dead, readers are given a glimpse into the future that Bradbury worries is to come. The emptiness creates a clear sense of isolation that comes at the cost of the destructive colonialism and ambition that C.N. talks of in their article.

Dominianni, Robert. "Ray Bradbury's 2026: A Year with Current Value." *The English Journal*, vol. 73, no. 7, 1984, pp. 49–51. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/817806>.

This journal focuses on the technological advancements in connection to science fiction writing. Dominianni directly discusses how the work of Ray Bradbury's work is pertinent to real-world problems, rather than fiction. He goes on to argue that the short story "August 2026: There Will Come Soft Rains" is important for students because it allows the appreciation of dramatized writing. Dominianni noted that students may feel indifferent towards this story, making assumptions that Bradbury had a negative view of technology. This journal points out the importance of understanding technology in relation to human aspects of life, not just technology itself. Metaphors are prevalent throughout the story, arguing how different aspects took on the roles of human aspects of life. This journal can be useful to use as a reader, because it leads to deeper meaning of the text and its connection to real world problems and potential outcomes. It is informative, providing author information and historical context.

Forrester, Kent. "The Dangers of Being Earnest: Ray Bradbury and The Martian Chronicles." *The Journal of General Education*, vol. 28, no. 1, 1976, pp. 50–54. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27796552>. Accessed 8 Dec. 2022.

Ray Bradbury is a popular author who has drawn a lot of attention to his work because of his genre and unique writings, sparking discussions that cause scholars and critics to review his work, reference him, and take opportunities to contrast his work with others. This article compares Bradbury with some other authors and even voices the opinions that other scholars have on him and his work. The voices that are highlighted show

different views on authors like Ray Bradbury and Hal Clement. Some speak highly of these authors and others express a different point of view. The versatility of this article is valuable because of the wide variety of opinions that are accumulated into one comprehensive piece, showing all readers all sides of an argument.

Galeyev, Bulat. "Open Letter to Ray Bradbury." *Leonardo*, vol. 34, no. 1, 2001, pp. p25-26, <https://doi.org/10.1162/002409401300052451>. Accessed 1 May 2023.

Bulat Galeyev's "Open Letter to Ray Bradbury" offers interesting insight on the impact that Ray Bradbury had as an author, and even more interesting, some of the biases that he himself is victim of. In this article, Galeyev, a Russian citizen, writes about how Bradbury's works managed to transcend the cultural divide, and touched upon so many of the thoughts and concerns of a Russian citizen such as himself. It provides interesting insight going into reading Bradbury's work, knowing that people the world over can see the messages and relate to the fears Bradbury expressed. Beyond that, Galeyev notes that Bradbury in his writing seemed to fail to acknowledge Earth as anything beyond America in his futures. This itself is a very interesting thing to note, as Bradbury's story "There Will Come Soft Rains" explores a future where humans are gone and forgotten, leaving only machines behind. Knowing that Bradbury himself can forget people outside of his own worldview brings a unique lens to read his work and shines a light on the fact that even one such as he can forget the individuality of people.

Harlow, Morgan. "Martian Legacy: Ray Bradbury's The Martian Chronicles." *War, Literature & the Arts: An International Journal of Humanities*, vol. 11, no. 1/2, pp. 311-314. *EBSCOhost*, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=19134428&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

Morgan Harlow's commentary "Martian Legacy: Ray Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles*" covers Bradbury's science fiction fix-up novel that "There Will Come Soft

Rains” was published under during the 1950s. Harlow’s article does not summarize the entirety of *The Martian Chronicles*, but it does an adequate job of filling in contextual gaps for readers that are only knowledgeable of “There Will Come Soft Rains”. Harlow’s commentary covers much of the extraterrestrial side to *The Martian Chronicles*, but does break down the importance of Bradbury’s science fiction as a whole in a concise and informative short commentary focusing on a historical context. Harlow mentions moments throughout history such as nuclear war, human greed, and colonization and explains how these events acted as backdrops and parallels in shaping Bradbury’s anthology. At the end of the commentary, Harlow also mentions the Vietnam War, where Harlow believes Bradbury’s cautionary tale has been prophetic. Instead of focusing solely on the future and the stars, Harlow points out that *The Martian Chronicles* begs readers to look at themselves and work towards the future they wish to prevent.

“Hiroshima and Nagasaki Bombings.” *The International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons*, https://www.icanw.org/hiroshima_and_nagasaki_bombings. Accessed 9 December 2022

“Hiroshima and Nagasaki Bombings” gives insights into both the long and short-term effects of these nuclear bombings. It also shows how the Japanese people dealt with the problem and how Americans became intimidated by the destruction they had caused. It provides context for how the Japanese people are stronger due to the hardships they faced.

Mambrol, Nasrullah. “Analysis of Ray Bradbury’s There Will Come Soft Rains.” *Literary Theory and Criticism* (2022). 28 November 2022. <<https://literariness.org/2022/01/17/analysis-of-ray-bradburys-there-will-come-soft-rains/>>.

This article is a short and brief summary and explanation of the short story “There Will Come Soft Rains” by Ray Bradbury. The article begins by providing simple context of the time that the short story was written by talking about the genre and original

inspiration the author used like the type of home the house in the story was modeled after. The article also expounds on the true significance of what some of the images in the story represent or entail, such as how the silhouettes of a family implies what happened prior to the scene. Because of the more analytical approach of this article, it proves to be a valuable resource for the further analysis and interpretation of Ray Bradbury's short story.

May, Elaine Tyler. "War and Peace: Fanning the Home Fires." *Homeward Bound : American Families in the Cold War Era*. 20th ed., Basic Books, 2008, pp. 58-88.

The third chapter "War and Peace: Fanning the Home Fires" of Elaine Tyler May's book *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* recounts the history of household dynamics in the aftermath of World War II through a feminist lens. May gives readers ample sources, statistics, and pop culture references to help form a vision of what 1950's America would have been like for the average family and woman. While May doesn't directly comment on Bradbury's work, the information distilled about birth-booms, increased patriotism, and fears of nuclear Armageddon all act as a historical backdrop to Bradbury's "Soft Rains". Focusing on women, the third chapter of May's *Homeward Bound* showcases the way an image of domesticity triumphed over the independent Wonder Woman of World War II. May's work is an excellent backdrop for a feminist analysis of Bradbury's "There Will Come Soft Rains".

McLaughlin, Pat. "A Literary Analysis of There Will Come Soft Rains by Ray Bradbury." *Elon University Digication EPortfolio*, Digication, 2013, https://elon.digication.com/a_literary_analysis_of_there_will_come_soft_rains/A_Literary_Analysis_of_There_Will_Come_Soft_Rains.

This journal is an analysis written by a college student and addresses the nature of Bradbury's work and its connection to real world problems. Specifically, this journal discusses how Bradbury used descriptive literary techniques to tell the story of how technology overtakes

humanity, but that nothing can win against nature. McLaughlin provides lots of author information, relating the story ideas to his other works. He displays the connection between the house, and our fate as a species. Many images are also discussed to relate to this idea, such as the charred side of the house and the silhouettes of the family. The use of imagery, descriptive language, and themes helps guide the reader to understand why Bradbury wrote the story in the way he did. This can be very useful to understand different wording within the story and linking it to an overall theme and motive of the work.

Oakes, Guy. "The Cold War Conception of Nuclear Reality: Mobilizing the American Imagination for Nuclear War in the 1950's." *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* (1993): 339-363.

This article talks about the nuclear threat looming over Americans in the 1950's. The author, Guy Oakes, begins the article by outlining the actions the government planned to take if the threat grew too large, including what kind of persona the country wanted to uphold, even while in the midst of a nuclear war. He also shows how some of the views of the people differed from the government's, including what the priorities should be. Following the historical details, Oakes shows some of the different events and procedures the country took to maintain the safety of its citizens.

Patai, Daphne. "Ray Bradbury and the Assault on Free Thought." *Society*, vol. 50, no. 1, Feb. 2013, p. p41, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12115-012-9617-x>. Accessed 1 May 2023.

Daphne Patai discusses at length in her article "*Ray Bradbury and the Assault on Free Thought*" Ray Bradbury's novel *Fahrenheit 451* and with that some of his political views, specifically a strong belief in free speech. Bradbury very openly supported freedom of speech and freedom of expression, something seen quite heavily in his writing. This article discusses the importance of that belief, and how Bradbury's advocacy for it was something to be proud of and to encourage, especially

in a world that constantly tries to quell and silence those who speak up. By defending freedom of expression, Bradbury fights for the existence of the individual, the ego. Understanding the importance that Bradbury placed on the individual, the human being as someone that should express themselves and fight for their existence, offers an almost bleak frame of reference for the distinct lack of ego in his story “*There Will Come Soft Rains*”.

“Ray Bradbury’s “August 2026” Short Story Analysis.” *IvyPanda*, 16 Dec. 2021, <https://ivy panda.com/essays/ray-bradburys-august-2026-short-story-analysis/>.

This article was written by the authors of the IvyPanda website and includes a short analysis of “August 2026: There Will Come Soft Rains”. This analysis addresses the movement all throughout the house, displaying that the house for waiting for its human occupants. This analysis also points out the liveliness of the house, with examples of the energy and movement it holds. It is addressed that this short story has two completely different worlds: the previous one with the dog and family and the world that exists afterwards. The conclusion of the analysis points to the idea that this story is not purely pessimistic, due to the house remaining the same no matter if it had inhabitants or not. This analysis can be useful to a reader because it showcases the idea of two different worlds, the house living in the future world that didn’t inhabit humans while the routine and atmosphere stayed the same.

Seed, David. “Out of the Science Fiction Ghetto.” *Ray Bradbury (Modern Masters of Science Fiction)*. University of Illinois, 2015, pp. 1-45.

David Seed’s biography *Ray Bradbury (Modern Masters of Science Fiction)* covers Bradbury’s lifelong writing career. While the entire book offers insight to the different eras of Bradbury’s work, the first chapter “Out of the Science Fiction Ghetto” is particularly useful as a long and detailed summary of Bradbury’s work and life. This

chapter of Seed's biography goes all the way back to the start of Bradbury's career and his interest in the Los Angeles Science Fiction Fantasy Society in the 30s and then explores the author's early struggles, his notable colleagues, and innovation against what he perceived as constraining stereotypes littering the early days of the science fiction genre. Readers of "There Will Come Soft Rains" can use Seed's biography as a resource to better understand Bradbury's greater feelings towards his work in the sci-fi genre as well as gain context for how his work in *The Martian Chronicles* was as impactful as it was to science fiction.

Sleman, Sokar Musleh, and Ismail Muhammad Fahmi. "The Destiny of Humanity in the Future Cities of Ray Bradbury." *Zanco Journal of Humanity Sciences* 24.1 (2020): 278-288.

This article addresses many short stories by Ray Bradbury. The authors focus on how his work still plays a role today, even though it has been many years since they were written. Through detailed research and assertions, they explain themes in Bradbury's work, including things that do not line up with what Bradbury claimed to believe. They showed how his work brought peace to readers, although that was not Bradbury's intention with the things that he wrote. They also wrote a short summary of Bradbury's life that shed light on the reasoning behind the stories he wrote.

Sustana, Catherine. "Analysis of 'There Will Come Soft Rains' by Ray Bradbury." *ThoughtCo*, 8 Aug. 2019.

This article is highly informative and covers many different aspects relating to "There Will Come Soft Rains." It covers many different perspectives and comparisons that offer a good selection of information. Author Catherine Sustana explains the comparisons and the contrasts with Sara Teasdale's poem and goes into extensive detail about the history of both authors, as well as the history and impact of the short story. It's a very well-written article, and the details that Sustana goes into are very thorough.

Teasdale, Sara. "There Will Come Soft Rains." *Poets*, Beacon

Rains, 2003, <https://poets.org/poem/there-will-come-soft-rains?mbd=1>

This website contains Sara Teasdale's poem, "There Will Come Soft Rains."

"There Will Come Soft Rains by Sara Teasdale." *Poem Analysis*, An Elite Cafemedia Publisher, 2022, <https://poemanalysis.com/sarah-teasdale/there-will-come-soft-rains/>

This article analyzes Sara Teasdale's poem "There Will Come Soft Rains." Her poem is split into two sections. The first half outlines a scene of peace in nature. The second half addresses the fact that the natural order of the world would not notice if humans were at war; the seasons would still change. Following this, the article shows how themes and symbols hidden throughout the poem solidify the picture of independence that nature has regardless of human actions. This analysis gives greater clarity to Ray Bradbury's short story because his technologically advanced house continued to function even though the human race had wiped each other out.

"There Will Come Soft Rains." *Encyclopedia.com*, An Elite Cafemedia Publisher, 2019, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/education/news-wires-white-papers-and-books/there-will-come-soft-rains#F>

This article analyzes Ray Bradbury's "There Will Come Soft Rains" using many different critical lenses to provide a deeper understanding of the story. It begins by summarizing the short story, then moves to details about Bradbury's life, the story's characters and themes, writing techniques and styles that play a role, historical context, critical overview, and a short criticism of the story. The depth of the article results in readers thinking for themselves and applying parts of Bradbury's story into their own lives, even though many of the threats of the late 1940's and early 1950's have dissipated significantly.

"There Will Come Soft Rains Summary and Analysis: LitPriest." *Lit Priest*.

This source covers a character analysis for every character in the short story. Understanding characters in

stories, as well as their purpose and what they represent, is very important when trying to understand a story. This source does seem credible, but there isn't a lot of information on the author or when it was published, so that kind of worries me a bit. All in all, this article covers a lot of good information!

New Criticism

A Look into the Lonely House: New Criticism Analysis

Maci Brent

Technology and its connection to destruction is a theme that seems all too reoccurring in the modern world; a great example of this is Ray Bradbury's "There Will Come Soft Rains". Television, books, and conspiracy theories have all shown the ideal of technological advancements going too far and becoming more dangerous than helpful. Some background is given before the short story begins, providing information to the reader that it was written during the Cold War. During the Cold War, the development of nuclear weapons was an increased focus, leading to a widespread fear of mass destruction. In "There Will Come Soft Rains", Ray Bradbury uses the lone standing house as a unifying device for irony, tension, and ambiguity.

Even though this short story was written in the 1950's, the complexities within it are still very relevant today. Technology hits record breaking advancements every year, as new gadgets and devices are introduced to the world. "There Will Come Soft Rains" is set in the future year 2026, giving a wider perspective to today's readers, as that is only a few years away from our time right now. The features possessed by the house in the story are comparative to smart home features that citizens have access to all over the world currently. The speaker of "There Will Come Soft Rains" uses ambiguity throughout the entirety

of the story, starting in the beginning. There is no immediate giveaway that the plot will be out of the normal, as the house begins to ring the morning alarms and start cooking breakfast. After some quick announcements, it becomes clear that the only movement is coming from the house itself and not from anyone inside. There is clear ambiguity within the beginning of the story, as the family may have left early that morning, or gone out of town. However, the house was sticking to the normal daily routine as if nothing was amiss.

After more announcements, the robot mice began to clean the house just as they normally would. Something out of the normal routine is that these robot mice are now only cleaning up after the house, instead of the residents of the house. Still, the routine continued. The house seems to display anthropomorphism, in instances such as “the house stood alone in a city of rubble and ashes” and “until this day, how well the house had kept its peace” (Bradbury). The speaker uses this anthropomorphism as ambiguity, giving the readers a new viewpoint on an endless and pointless routine, showing emotion behind the uncontrolled continuation. Without proper emotional ties, readers today may perceive this text as a negative attitude towards technology itself, instead of an opportunity to see the possible negative outcomes. The ambiguity of the story also allows the reader to wonder how this was the only house standing, whether it was due to the technology or something as simple as the location.

As the house continues to protect itself through the looped routine, a dog arrives to the door of the home and “the front door recognized the dog voice and opened” (Bradbury). The reader can interpret this many ways, such as the dog was the previous house owners’ pet, and it came back looking for them. Or maybe it was nothing but a stray dog who had come in for comfort on several occasions after the nuclear weapon strikes. No matter if there were random encounters, or zero movement, the house continued. As the house begins to burn towards the end of the story, the house can be interpreted as displaying anthropomorphism once again, as it yelled “fire” and the voices began to die. However, it can also be interpreted as a standard fire drill, slowly using power as the house begins to be destroyed.

The speaker never makes it clear to the readers if the house is strictly mechanical, or carries more artificial intelligence qualities, adding to the ambiguity of the plot.

Throughout the looped routine, the speakers display images of the charred west side of the house, where silhouettes can be seen of a woman, man, and two children. These silhouettes show the people in action of doing something, almost frozen in time. The speaker may have felt it important to state which side of the house, because the “usage of west is sometimes notable when performing literary analysis as it can symbolize the death of things, as it is where the sun goes to die daily. The use of west could also be alluding to which direction the bombs came from” (McLaughlin). Tension is clear within this imagery, because it begins to display the instant destruction that occurred, as nobody was prepared. The house itself displays tension as “it quivered at each sound” (Bradbury) and “the house tried to save itself” (Bradbury). This once again allows the idea that the house had feelings or a mind of its own, holding fear of the inevitable.

The speaker uses tension from the very beginning, first providing small snippets of the emptiness and pointless cycle. Displaying the felt tension of the house, as it protects itself from any outside life, but staying alive inside. Growing tension arises as the speaker provides more information of the current tragedy and the state of the surroundings. After a full day’s routine, the house begins to panic at the sight of fire. Fighting once again to protect itself, there is a clear strain between the capability of the house and the dooming fire that is quickly beginning to take over. The irony at the end of the story is most prominent, as the house finishes another normal day, only to end up just as the rest of the world.

There is significant irony throughout the short story, connecting the theme of the story to all other aspects. Not only is it ironic that the house itself, being created by humans, outlasted the human creators, but it also displayed clear characteristics of its makers. Showcasing human emotions of fear and distress. Even the robot mice getting annoyed at having to clean up after the dog and the fire “has human traits, though in a malicious sense. It crackles up the stairs, feeding upon oil paintings as if it knew their worth” (Dominianni). The speaker

is showing irony through these aspects because the dog, house, and fire could showcase human attributes, all while humans are no longer alive. The house ironically takes on all human attributes within the story, from cooking the food, cleaning, reminding of bills, and even reading a poem at the end of the night. Humans created something so capable of life, that it was able to continue surviving without them.

However, the irony continues to get more prominent as the house begins to burn down. It somehow was able to survive the nuclear bombs, being the only house left standing. Yet one small tree was able to create a massive problem, though not long ago it seemed to have everything under control. The house went into panic mode, screaming, flashing lights, and pumping water from the ceiling. Only so much was able to be done before the system began to shut down and the water ran out. It is especially ironic in this scene, due to the nature of the house not having enough water. The water supply being used to put out the fire, “filled the baths and washed the dishes for many quiet days” (Bradbury) and was quickly gone. If the house was not programmed to automatically make food, clean dishes, and fill bathtubs, it would have likely been able to put out the fire.

To the nature of the house’s ultimate destruction, the true irony of the story is that the technology ends up being the destroyer of the house. To make everyday life easier, nothing beneficial happened in the end. The nature of humankind was so focused on making things bigger and better, that they never stopped to realize the damage that may be caused from such disconnection of what makes us human. The speaker uses tension to lead you from a boring routine into a bad ending, allowing ambiguity for the readers to widely interpret different aspects, and displaying the irony of carelessness in design. The lone standing house in “There Will Come Soft Rains” is a unifying device for the ambiguity, tension, and irony within the plot.

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Reader Response

There Will Come Soft Rains: How Does it Make You Feel?

Eldon Moler

In the time of nuclear war, pin-up styles, and Elvis Presley, the 1950s were a time of extreme change both societal and technological. Author Ray Bradbury took advantage of the changing times and wrote a short story which captures a little bit of the time period. In 1950, he wrote the famous and widely read fictional short story, *There Will Come Soft Rains*. This story focuses on a family who was annihilated by the nuclear explosion, leaving their smart home to “live on.” That is, it keeps functioning in its daily routine as if nothing is out of the ordinary. How does this make readers feel? What can it teach audiences? Throughout this essay I will attempt to argue that this short story focuses on invoking feelings of fear, a willingness to change, and a concern for the future state of our world.

To understand the emotions behind this story, readers must first understand the overall basis of it. The story begins with the introduction of a new day via a voice on the ceiling speakers in a smart home. The story will ultimately revolve around this smart home. There appears to be no human activity and the home is described as being filled with vegetation that has taken over. It’s a very apocalyptic feeling. A nuclear explosion wiped out all mankind, yet the house remains. At the end of the story, the house is overcome with flames after a gust of wind creates a fire

within the home. There are a lot of symbols in this story, and readers can glean many different messages from it, some might even say warnings.

There is a simple irony in this story, one that can be interpreted possibly as a crude awakening that should not be overlooked by audiences. The author (unknown) of an article titled, “A Summary and Analysis of Ray Bradbury’s ‘There Will Come Soft Rains,’” offers more insight for this perspective saying, “First, the technology in the story, all of the robotic mice and mechanical labour-saving devices, are part and parcel will the technological and scientific ‘progress’ which led to the development of the atomic bomb” (paragraph 9). The very technology that was created to help humans out—the smart home, for example—would end up doing much more harm than good. This is a mirroring image of our modern society and the technological advances that have taken place in the last five to ten years. This should be alarming and awakening to readers, as it was most likely meant to be a warning or at least an attempt to warn audiences.

Something that is very prevalent in Bradbury’s short story is his ability to show rather than tell. There is a quote by William Carlos Williams, an esteemed poet/writer, that says, “No ideas but in things.” Essentially, this means that one should focus on showing what is happening in a story, not simply state it. A prime example of this in *There Will Come Soft Rains* is addressed in an article written by Catherine Sustana, entitled “Analysis of ‘There Will Come Soft Rains’ by Ray Bradbury.” She says, “Instead of describing the moment of the explosion, he shows us a wall charred black except where the paint remains intact in the shape of a woman picking flowers, a man mowing the lawn, and two children tossing a ball” (12). This adds to the ability Bradbury has to entice readers and give them a major sense of dread. While reading this, I felt anxious because of the idea of a family being wiped out and their shadows being the only thing left to remember them by. But it’s not a metaphoric shadow of the family, they’re literally imprinted on the wall of the house and are a permanent reminder of what was once a beautiful moment.

Another somewhat scary element to this story is its

timelessness. No matter when this story was written or how many times its read by any given audience, it's always going to be a constant reminder of the very real, very possible outcome of humanity. The irony of it all is that something which was created by humans could very well be the reason we become extinct. This possibility is basically what Bradbury's short story is based on. Addressed in the same article, Sustana says, "The story is not meant to be a specific prediction about the future, but rather to show a possibility that, at any time, could lie just around the corner" (21). I would argue otherwise, because in its very nature it's a prediction of the future. I think Bradbury saw patterns in society and the cultural images of his time and formed predictions about the future. But I do partially agree with Sustana when she says, "but rather to show a possibility that, at any time, could lie just around the corner." We are living in a time almost identical to the one that this story was written in. I think the only difference is society's filter has changed drastically.

Possibly the strongest point this story is trying to make is humanity's ability to both create and destroy. There are so many points in this story where readers can see a stark comparing image of humanity and our ability to create amazing things. The house serves as a prime example of this. The humans in the story created a smart home which can do amazing things, but in the end, the house was destroyed drastically. In an article titled "Analysis of Ray Bradbury's *There Will Come Soft Rains*," author Nasrullah Mambrol states, "The house is depicted in this way because it represents both humanity and humanity's failure to save itself" (4). This example—the primary subject of the story—can be a wake-up call of sorts. It can be a call to action for any audience who may read it. Our society is complex, and this story does a very good job at bringing those complexities to light.

The relationship between humans and the technology we create is complex too. It's amazing how we can turn something so helpful and innovative into something so destructive and unhelpful. The house in the short story was helpful in many ways, but it also brought out a key difference between AI products and the human species: judgement. The house

remained on schedule and completed its daily tasks, but in the end, it didn't feel. It didn't judge. It didn't register with what was happening. The house has person-like traits, but it lacks the judgement needed to comprehend that the world has stopped. There are no more inhabitants in the house, the world outside the house, or the planet at all. The house continues with its day, saying things like "Eight-one, tick-tock, eight-one o'clock, off to school, off to work, run, run, eight-one!" It also completes actions like "the garage chimed and lifted its door to reveal the waiting car" (6). This, too, is a good example of Bradbury's ability to show something as opposed to state. The house is "living" the rest of its life until, consequently, it is destroyed because of its own actions. This is a uniquely human trait, and it gives the house yet another element of personification.

Throughout Ray Bradbury's fictional short story, *There Will Come Soft Rains*, he is able to invoke feelings of fear, anxiety, and worriedness in audiences. He does an amazing job at showing a scene, or painting a picture for readers, rather than stating it. He uses dark images such as the burnt-to-the-wall shadows of a once-living family, as well as the creepy notion that the house has no idea what has happened and continues with its chores and daily duties to instill the idea that humans are great at self-destruction. This running theme throughout the short story makes sure to engrain itself in readers' minds and ensures that they will hopefully take something away from the reading. There are many examples in the story that support this theme and give it a very dark feeling. Science fiction has been a popular genre for many decades, but I would argue that not many stories are able to instill in readers the kind of rational fear and very probable future that this story does. And I think that's what makes it such a scary one. It's a very possible reality and could very well be much nearer than we know or think. Humans are great at creating, but it's those creations and our lack of awareness that lead to events that took place in *There Will Come Soft Rains*.

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Deconstruction

Not Really High Tech

Candace Brown

“There Will Come Soft Rains” is a science fiction short story about a technologically advanced house that remains after a large nuclear disaster, its significant vacancy, and another disaster that finally destroys the house. It was written in 1950 during the Cold War, a time of military and political tension to encourage readers of the intense harm of nuclear weapons. However, try as the story may, the argument is weakly supported and evidenced making the intentions fall flat. In the short story “There Will Come Soft Rains” by Ray Bradbury, there are many inconsistencies with the house’s technology, the surroundings of the house, the wildlife on the house’s property, and the lack of logic concerning each of these situations diminish the story’s intended validity and argument.

The first major inconsistency of the house told of in the short story involves the technological security defenses the house has in place. Early on, the house is described as carefully inquiring the wildlife (i.e. wandering cats and foxes), “Who goes there? What’s the password?” to decide if it should allow entry into its premises and due to the obvious lack of response, the house, “had shut up its windows and drawn shades in an old-maidenly preoccupation with self-protection which bordered on a mechanical paranoia” (Bradbury). The description even extends to, “If a sparrow brushed a window, the shade snapped up...

not even a bird must touch the house" (Bradbury). These descriptions articulately describe the house's security responses to situations such as possible intruders through the front door and windows and demonstrate how the house cannot differentiate a threat from a non-threat. In an analytical article on the short story "There Will Come Soft Rains" further insight is provided on the house's intended character, "The house is modeled after concept homes that showed society's expectations of technological advancement" (Mambrol). These descriptions of the house make it seem as though nothing could overcome the safeguards set in place. It makes readers understand that because of the intense protocols over the smallest of dangers the house still stands strong amidst a world of destruction and lifelessness. However, easily and without warning, "a falling tree brough crashed through the kitchen window" (Bradbury). The descriptions of the house during the story's build-up and the event of a tree crashing through a kitchen window imply to the audience two completely different messages.

The first proving itself an explanation as to why out of all the surrounding houses the one being highlighted survived, and the latter showing just how fragile and ready-to-fall-apart the house really was after the event of destruction. This event forced readers to believe that this high technology house can recognize and stand against the smallest of threats but can do nothing to warn or protect from a falling branch. Are readers expected to believe that this house is strong and self-sustaining and protecting or that it is simply held together with figurative popsicle sticks waiting to literally be set ablaze by the right chain of events? This major contradiction distracts from Bradbury's argument and warning against nuclear warfare. It also prompts readers to read the rest of the short story with the perception that it is an unrealistic story and has invalid themes and messages. Because the event of the tree branch falling through the window plays a pivotal role in the sequence of the short story, this major contradiction cannot be ignored, thus confusing all attentive readers and losing validity and strength in the story.

The second major inconsistency with the home's technology

is the mystery behind the man with the lawnmower. On the outside of the house there is a group of silhouettes that depict a family taking part in normal and perhaps stereotypical suburban household activities. Two children, a young boy and girl passing a ball to each other, a woman (presumably the mother) stooping down to pick some flowers, and a man mowing the lawn (Bradbury). This description is intended to invoke a feeling of sadness or regret because these silhouettes show a seemingly perfect family whose life and existence abruptly ended because of a tragic decision that caused complete destruction of life, the decision to drop a nuclear bomb. However, upon further thought on the activities of the family, a discrepancy can be found. For a house that was depicted as being state-of-the-art and the head of household technology, have the people in the story not found an alternative way to maintain a lawn? The house had the technology and efficiency to clean up and remove without a trace of a dog that as described to have, “frothed at the mouth...spun in a frenzy, and died” on the parlor floor and was cleaned up by electronic mice in fifteen minutes (Bradbury). Even with this amazing cleaning and maintaining technology, the man was still having to mow the lawn, and to not stray from the stereotypical suburban family life, the lawn mower was perhaps even a push mower something seemingly more primitive. This realization can again distract readers from the intended feelings of the images, leaving readers wondering why the man is mowing the lawn.

Again, these distractions take away from the validity and feeling of the short story. Another distracting aspect of the man mowing his lawn is not only Bradbury's convenient use of advanced technology in the story but also the lack thereof. Even the very action of the man mowing his lawn seems confusing. In an article, Robert Dominianni describes a hypothetical situation to a mature group of individuals, he wrote, “...suppose we were to receive news that an atomic bomb will land within five or ten minutes—one that cannot be destroyed in mid-air and which would be too potent to escape from in the given time. Write your instantaneous reaction would be to such news. What would you do in these final minutes of life?” (Dominianni).

Dominianni reports their varying responses, some turn to manifestations of religious beliefs and religious actions, intense expressions of emotional distress or meltdowns, spend time with their loved ones, and “others plan to calmly indulge in favorite delights”. Each of these are natural reactions to such an unnatural situation, however none of these top reactions hinted that doing yardwork or participating in an activity that would never enjoy a satisfying ending or a completion of a project. Therefore, it is absurd to have the man mowing his lawn. Personally, this detail was extremely confusing as to what message was trying to be conveyed.

The fact that the family was outdoors implies that despite all of the technological advancements and improvements made to the house, they had no faith in the house’s true ability to protect them from real dangers. Rather than staying inside to protect themselves in their own home trusting in the roof and walls for shelter, they went outdoors to meet an end directly with no chance of survival. It is understandable to include an example of an innocent family meeting a bitter end to support the argument against nuclear warfare; however, there are too many illogical scenarios surrounding the silhouetted family and their actions that rather than supporting the argument, it diminishes the validity and strength of the purpose of the short story. Though these pieces of evidence are more than enough to completely invalidate the entire premise of the short story “There Will Come Soft Rains”, there is one more piece of evidence that harms the argument Bradbury is trying to make and that lies within the kitchen of this vacant home.

After an extended period of vacancy, the house is still able to produce copious amounts of food for the deceased homeowners without logical replenishment. In an article written in regard to the American Intellectuals on nuclear weaponry, Paul Boyer references the short story “There Will Come Soft Rains” and how the house functions regardless of its vacancy. He writes, “In Ray Bradbury’s famous ‘There Will Come Soft Rains’, an automated house continues to prepare meals, draw baths, mix drinks, clean floors, and recite poetry for occupants long since vaporized in a nuclear flash” (Boyer). Though there is no specific time frame provided in the short

story the dog that was mentioned previously brings time frame implications. The dog once belonged to the home and was recognized upon its return because the house permitted entry to the dog. However, the dog's physical state was far less than healthy, described as, "...once huge and fleshy, but now gone to bone and covered with sores" (Bradbury). For the dog to go from a strong and healthy pet to an animal that more closely resembles a lurking shadow is not an overnight process but something that could take weeks, even months.

Given this information, it can also be inferred that the house has remained empty for that amount of time; despite this, the house still prepares everything with a seemingly endless supply. Even at the end of the short story when the house begins to malfunction and become engulfed in flames the kitchen prepares as written, "ten dozen eggs, six loaves of toast, [and] twenty dozen bacon strips" (Bradbury). Are the readers supposed to assume that this lone-standing house has a year supply of food preserved and stored perfectly within its walls? Though it is an amusing detail of the way that the house begins to malfunction, this event is illogical and decreases the believability and validity of the story once again.

It is without a doubt that Ray Bradbury is as Kent Forrester says, "[with an] imagination [that] is inventive and vivid... creat[ing] the outlandish", most especially with the short story "There Will Come Soft Rains". But there are several extreme inconsistencies within the story with the house's technology and the house's surroundings (specifically the silhouettes) that unfortunately caused an erosion of the validity and support of the purpose of the short story. Because the house's security system and the flaws within it have illogical components the readers can be, and are, easily distracted thus making this short story seem absurd. As readers continue to approach Bradbury's short story "There Will Come Soft Rains" it is important for them to recognize and understand that there are major inconsistencies that greatly weaken the intended message and argument so they might better understand what mistakes to avoid in their writings and further analyses of other literary works. Recognizing and expounding on these discrepancies trains readers to approach more works critically.

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New Historical

Fears in the Cold War

Celestia Phillips

Nothing is as unsettling as going to bed one night, not knowing if you'll wake up the next morning. For many years, threats of a nuclear war between the United States and the Soviet Union instilled this agitated feeling in citizens of both countries. How long until the first nuclear bomb landed? Would anyone survive the war, or was the world doomed? Hysteria and fear increased as things became more escalated. In 1950, author Ray Bradbury wrote a short story, "August 2026: There Will Come Soft Rains," outlining the future of the world with destruction on every side. Using a New Historical lens, it becomes possible to fully comprehend the feelings many people experienced during this uncertain time.

"There Will Come Soft Rains" is a story about a technologically advanced house that survives the nuclear war after humanity has destroyed itself. The house, such as waking up the owner with the date, August 4, 2026, making breakfast, and cleaning up messes made by the family dog, even though no people are inhabiting the house. That afternoon, the house chooses a poem to read to the owner, "There Will Come Soft Rains" by Sara Teasdale, about how nature does not change despite the wars going on around it. At ten o'clock that night, a gust of wind blew a tree branch through the kitchen window, resulting in a fire that destroyed most of the house, which

couldn't protect itself from the flames. Nothing remained but one wall, repeating, "Today is August 5, 2026."

Within months of World War II ending, the United States was beginning its preparations for a third war (Oakes 339). Although many people dreaded the next war, a hope for success rested in the nuclear bombs only America knew how to make. This confidence quickly dissipated in the fall of 1949 when United States scientists recorded underground nuclear activities in the Soviet Union (History.com Editors). With possibly the greatest enemy the United States has ever seen suddenly on equal ground, stakes raised and the country altered its plans to include missile strikes from the Soviet Union in another world war. Politics consisted of little besides responses to nuclear threats. On December 8, 1953, President Eisenhower said, "Even a vast superiority in numbers of weapons, and a consequent capability of devastating material retaliation, is no preventive, of itself, against the fearful material damage and toll of human lives that would be inflicted by surprise aggression" (Adams).

Bradbury paints a picture nearly identical to Eisenhower's. "There Will Come Soft Rains" was written under his certainty that a nuclear war would consume humanity. The destruction is not apparent until the end of the story, but the house's emptiness is significant starting in the beginning. Bradbury uses details in the house's mind, the morning alarms going off "as if it were afraid that nobody would" get up. He also uses words like "empty" and descriptions like "no doors slammed." Later, the house mentions that it was raining outside, further emphasizing the dreariness of the world (Bradbury 1). This desolation displays the world everyone feared. The destruction and lack of hope that were silently creeping up on the people in America were changing the habits that people were making and the dreams they harbored after finishing another devastating war. In the end, nothing would be left but broken buildings and empty dreams.

With the Soviet Union growing in power, many people were filled with questions. Who would make the first move? Was there a way to protect the people in either country? The United States government made plans to win a nuclear war, seeing no option to promise peace short of the destruction of one

of the countries. Slowly, it all came down to image. "If the price of freedom proved to be nuclear war, even this price was not too high.... The preferred conception of nuclear reality would demonstrate that Americans were capable of confronting a nuclear emergency through their own efforts" (Oakes 340). The country that had helped win both World Wars would certainly win a war more dangerous than those preceding it. Though they had little knowledge of how to fight this war, they were prepared to prove that America could stand, despite nuclear threats.

The technology that the world had created left nothing to be gained. At noon, the family dog came into the house, "covered with sores." It tracked mud into the house and the "copper scrap rats" angrily cleaned up after it (Bradbury 2), showing that the house was not as happy to serve as it had been intended to be. When the dog died, the house "delicately sens[ed] decay *at last*" (2, emphasis added), further indicating that it was happy to be rid of the job it had been left with, despite the emptiness. The house had not found company in the dog, nor had the dog found solace in the house. The house was quick to deal with the dog in an emotionless display, marking the death and disposal with time stamps rather than feelings. The house was reluctant to perform any tasks outside of what it had been programmed to do. Perhaps it was content to have the house rid of people, where it could work on its tasks without interruptions.

Although the United States citizens did not truly understand how the government planned to respond to a nuclear threat from the Soviet Union, they understood enough from the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki to have a somewhat clear idea of what some of the aftereffects would be. Even though the United States had helped win World War II, the people had not forgotten what had happened in Japan. "With this fear of the unknown and tension rising between the U.S. and U.S.S.R., people became stressed and didn't know if they would be alive much longer" (Hiroshima and Nagasaki Bombings"). Many survivors of the bombings were developing fatal diseases. With deaths still occurring from the bombings five or six years later, what hope was left for the world? There was no way to change the events that the United States had caused in Japan. The

aftereffects would last through generations, increasing the likelihood of cancer in both those who had been exposed to the radiation and their children.

Bradbury's disappointment in society is apparent in the destruction of the house at the end of the story. Technology, while created to serve, was destroyed. It wasn't meant to last. The fire and the house each contained human characteristics, fighting a war with each other in an effort to keep or destroy what remained of the house. The house "gave ground" (Bradbury 3) and the fire "backed off" (4). In some ways, "The house represents technology and the fire stands for the natural force. The victory over the house shows the supremacy of nature over technology" (Musleh and Fahmi 281). Even the ceiling sprinklers, designed and intended to preserve the building and its occupants, could not stop the fire from ravaging the building.

On August 6, 1945, a nuclear bomb was dropped over Hiroshima, resulting in about 140,000 deaths. Three days later, another bomb was dropped over Nagasaki, killing 74,000 people. Many Japanese citizens who traveled to the cities to provide aid later died from exposure to the radiation ("Hiroshima and Nagasaki Bombings"). The destruction from these two major events changed the way people around the world thought. News of the devastation placed fear in everyone. The inability for neighbors to help without risking their own lives increased suffering in people distanced from the events.

Bradbury claimed that he did not believe in optimism, choosing to focus more on "optimal behaviors." However, his story left a small feeling of hope to many who read it. Though the story occurs in an empty place devoid of human activity, "soft rains will come and wash out all the ugliness and, eventually, a new dawn will rise up" (Musleh and Fahmi 281). The fear that silenced the entire world began with a bomb on August 6 and was remembered on the anniversary of the day for many years. Whether Bradbury intended to or not, the destruction of the house finished on August 5, 2026, one day before the anniversary of the bombings. Never again would the world remember the sad event that took place in 1945. The chaos that was caused by the house and the silence that was

about to ensue became a fulfillment of the prophecy written by Sara Teasdale thirty years before Bradbury wrote his story. “Spring herself, when she woke at dawn / Would scarcely know that we were gone” (Teasdale).

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Psychological

Feminist/Queer Theory

Burning Stereotypes in Ray Bradbury's "There Will Come Soft Rains"

Karley McCarthy

Ray Bradbury's short story "There Will Come Soft Rains" takes place in the fallout of a nuclear war. The author chooses to tell the story through a technologically advanced house and its animatronic inhabitants instead of a traditional protagonist. The house goes about its day-to-day as if no war had struck. It functions as though its deceased family is still residing in its walls, taking care of the maintenance, happiness, and safety of itself and the long dead family. On the surface, Bradbury's story seems like a clear-cut warning about technology and humanity's permissiveness. Given that the short story was written in the 1940s, it's easy to analyze the themes present and how they related to women of the time. Bradbury's apt precautionary tale can be used as a metaphor for women's expectations and role in society after World War II and how some women may have dealt with the fallout of their husbands coming back home with psychological trauma.

To experience "There Will Come Soft Rains" from a feminist perspective, readers must be aware of the societal norms that would have shaped Bradbury's writing. "Soft Rains" takes place in the year 2026. Yet the house and norms found throughout were, "modeled after concept homes that showed society's expectations of technological advancement" (Mambrol). This

can be seen in the stereotypical nuclear family that once inhabited the house as well as their cliché white home and the hobbies present. According to writer Elaine Tyler May's book *Homeward Bound*, America's view of women's role in society undertook a massive pendulum swing during the World War II era as the country transitioned through pre-war to post-war life. For example, in a matter of decades support for women joining the workforce shifted from 80% in opposition to only 13% (May 59). Despite this shift, the men coming back from the war still expected women to position themselves as the happy housewife they had left behind, not the newfound career woman archetype. Prominent figures of the 40s, such as actress Joan Crawford, portrayed a caricature of womanhood that is subservient to patriarchal gender roles, attempting to abandon the modern idea of a self-sufficient working-class woman (May 62-63). Keeping this in mind, how can this image of the 1940s woman be seen in Bradbury's work?

Throughout Bradbury's life he worked towards dismantling clichés in his own writing. A biography titled simply "Ray Bradbury" mentions that even in his earlier work, he was always attempting to "escape the constrictions of stereotypes" found in early science fiction (Seed 13). An example of him breaking constrictions could be his use of a nonhuman protagonist. Instead, Bradbury relies on the personification of the house and its robotic counterparts. Bradbury describes the house as having "electric eyes" and emotions such as a, "preoccupation with self-protection which bordered on a mechanical paranoia," something that would make the house quiver at the sounds of the outside world (2-3). While these descriptions are interesting, Bradbury's use of personification here is a thought-provoking choice when one breaks down what exactly the house is meant to personify.

One analysis of this story notes that the house's personification, "replaces the most human aspects of life," for its inhabitants (Mambrol). Throughout the story, the house acts as a caretaker, records a schedule, cooks, cleans, and even attempts to extinguish an all-consuming fire. While firefighting is not a traditionally feminine career or expectation from the 1940s (more on that later), most of the house's daily tasks are replacing

jobs that were traditionally held by a household's matriarch. Expanding further on this dichotomy of male/woman tasks, a chore mentioned in the story that is 'traditionally' accepted as a masculine household duty—mowing the lawn—is still assigned as a male task. This is feels intentional to the house's design as Bradbury is, "a social critic, and his work is pertinent to *real* problems on earth" (Dominianni 49). Bradbury's story is not meant to commentate on just an apocalypse, but society at large. Bradbury describes the west face of the house as, "black, save for five places" (Bradbury 1-2). These "five places" are the silhouettes of the family who had been incinerated by a nuclear bomb. The family's two children are included playing with a ball, but the mother and father's descriptions are most important. The mother is seen in a passive role, picking flowers, while the father mows the lawn. The subtext here is that the man is not replaceable in his mundane and tedious task. Only the woman is replaced. While this is a small flash into the owners' lives, what "human aspect" or autonomy of the father's life has been replaced by the house's actions if the house is mainly personifying only the traditional 1940s female-held positions? The message here is that a man's position in society is irreplaceable while a woman's is one of mere support.

While this dynamic of husband vs subordinate is harmful, wives supporting their partners is nothing new. *Homeward Bound* explains that life after World War II for many women meant a return to their previous position as a housewife while many men came home irreparably damaged by years of warfare. PTSD, known then as shellshock, affected countless men returning from the war. Women were often expected to mend the psychological damage as part of their domestic responsibilities, even if they were unprepared for the realities of the severe trauma their husbands had faced (May 64-65). The psychological effects of the war came crashing into women's lives the same way that the tree fell into the autonomous house in "Soft Rains". As mentioned earlier, firefighting is not a task someone from the 40s would expect of women, but the house's combustion and its scramble to save itself can be seen as a metaphor for women attempting to reverse the cold reality that the war had left them with. The picturesque family they

had dreamed of would forever be scarred by the casualties that took place overseas. While Bradbury may not have meant for women to be invoked specifically from this precautionary tale, it's obvious that him wanting his science fiction to act as, "a cumulative early warning system against unforeseen consequences," would have impacted women of the time as much as men (Seed 22). The unforeseen consequences here is the trauma the war inflicted on families.

While men were fighting on the front lines, women back home and in noncombat positions would still feel the war's ripples. In "Soft Rains" the nuclear tragedy had left, "a radioactive glow which could be seen for miles" (Bradbury 1). Despite the destruction, the house continues its routine as though nothing had happened. This can be seen as a metaphor for how women responded to the trauma their husbands brought back from the war. Women were urged to, "preserve for him the essence of the girl he fell in love with, the girl he longs to come back to. . . The least we can do as women is to try to live up to some of those expectations" (May 64). Following this, many could have put their desires and personal growth to the side to act as a secondary character in their husband's lives.

The final line can be read as the culmination of similarities between post-war women and Bradbury's house. The violence and destruction that fell upon the house in its final moments leaves little standing. What's remarkable is how the house still attempts to continue despite its destruction. The final lines of the short story exemplify this: "Within the wall, a last voice said, over and over again and again, even as the sun rose to shine upon the heaped rubble and steam: 'Today is August 5, 2026, today is August 5, 2026, today is...'" (Bradbury 5). The house is acting just like the women from the 40s, clinging to their past in an attempt to preserve something that had already been lost, society's innocence. One analysis points out that, "The house is depicted in this way because it represents both humanity and humanity's failure to save itself" (Mambrol). While it might be wrong to say that women were unable to save themselves in this situation, this quote does touch on an idea present in the feminist metaphor for "Soft Rains". The preservation of "the essence of the girl he fell in love with, the girl he longs to

come back to” was a failure (May 64). The same way that the house cannot preserve itself from destruction, women cannot preserve an image of themselves that had already dissolved. As mentioned earlier, women had already entered the workforce, a huge step towards removing sexist stereotypes around women’s worth. After garnering work-based independence, it seems impossible that the idea of women solely as men’s support would not immolate.

While Bradbury’s “Soft Rains” can be viewed as an apt precautionary tale with real modern world issues at hand, in many ways it is a period piece. As a writer in the 1940s, it’s hard to imagine that Bradbury’s story would not have been influenced by the framework of a nuclear family and the stereotypical expectations of this time. Bradbury’s use of personification opens dialogue about gender roles in the 1940s and how war had complicated patriarchal expectations. Despite his attempt to bypass science fiction stereotypes, his story is full of metaphor for gender stereotypes. Using a feminist lens to analyze the story allows it to be read as a metaphor for war and its effects on married women. The standard analysis appears to say that, “machine no longer served humanity in “There Will Come Soft Rains”; there humanity is subservient to machinery” (Dominianni 49). From a feminist perspective, instead of machine, the house represents patriarchy and gender norms. While men suffered greatly during World War II, women often put their wants and futures on hold to support their husbands. This is a selfless act that shows the resilience of women despite their society’s wish to downplay their potential and turn them into mere support.

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[PART XIII]

"Speech Sounds" by Octavia Butler

About the Authors

author bios

Jacob A. Powers

Jacob is a fantasy/sci-fi writer and self-identified otaku from Eagle, Idaho. Jacob attended the College of Western Idaho and Boise State University on a quest for the elusive Technical Writing degree. When not slinging paint at his part-time job or contemplating the existential dread of the universe at large, he spends his free time attempting to finish the novel he has been working on since the age of eleven. His works tend to deal with the fantastical, epic, insidious, and cosmic. Dealing with Gods, crafting secret cabals, weaving witty characters, and masterminding technology that just barely stays within the realm of sense are just a few of the things Jacob has to deal with daily. Jacob has multiple fanfictions and original works of significant renown – one of which ranked third most popular on its website of publication for a time (Reluctant Reader on Wattpad)– and has been creating audiobooks and audio dramas for over six years. He has a sarcastic wit, and he hates talking about himself.

Ali Murphy

Ali is a Creative Writing major finishing her fifth semester while maintaining a 4.0 GPA at the College of Western Idaho. She has lived in Boise, Idaho for five years with her life partner and two

children. Murphy has had a great love for literature throughout her life, being raised by two avid readers who instilled in her an appreciation for broad, artistic, and literary worlds. Murphy has worked as a musician for twenty years, yet it wasn't until recently she found a love for writing. She quickly discovered this new creative outlet during her first semester while writing her first college essay ever, "The Lucky One". This essay would take third place in CWT's President's Awards, creating a new sense of confidence and purpose in Murphy's academic career. The next year Murphy would become determined to enter the contest again where her next nonfiction essay, "Dad, God, and Joe Hill" would win first place. Murphy hopes to continue to discover opportunities in literary communities by further her education in English, Creative Writing, and Literature.

Rachel Roberts

Rachel is a part-time student and aspiring writer. She is studying to become a librarian so she can share her love of reading. When she is not reading, writing, or studying she is playing with her dog Copper.

Jessica Mejia

Jessica attends the College of Western Idaho. She currently holds her associate degree in Secondary Education and hopes to receive her Bachelor's in English Teaching within the next couple of years. She hopes to be able to teach English as a Second Language to newcomers. Education has always been her passion and goal for her future. Not only is she passionate about education but she is also passionate about writing. She has written many poems and hopes to publish a chapbook soon.

When not in school or working, she enjoys spending time with her family. Her hobbies include reading, photography, and hiking.

Madyson Crea

Madyson is finishing up her liberal arts associate degree and will be graduating this spring. She plans to pursue a bachelor's in

health sciences at Boise State University and then complete law school.

Emily Rubio

Emily is an English major and is planning on pursuing communication or mass media at Boise State University. She loves reading a good book with her cat on her lap.



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Critical Introduction

Summary: Ali Murphy's Breaking Barriers: Octavia E. Butler's "Speech Sounds"

Ali Murphy uses a New Historical critical lens to provide insight into Butler's inspiration behind the speculative, science fiction story "Speech Sounds". Murphy argues that Butler crafted themes to create discourse about a society that felt unwelcoming to the author as an oppressed African American-female author. "Breaking Barriers" also reviews a literary analysis of a collection of Butler's works, including interviews with the late author. Focusing on the presence of racism in the science fiction genre, Murphy argues the importance and relevancy of Butler's visionary talent in a society that is still riddled with racism. Murphy analyzes the science fiction genre itself, as being a genre wrought with racist undertones in its content and authorship. This is privileged by Murphy's review of Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine and evidence from Butler's own mentor, author Samuel R. Delany and his 1998 article "Racism and Science Fiction". Murphy argues that Butler's isolation in life is reflected through Rye, and though the story does not mention race, privileges the fact this story is still about Butler's identity and the feeling of otherness that Butler felt because of her identity. *Editor's Note: This essay was selected as a winner for the [2023 CWT President's Writing Award](#) for Critical Analysis.*

Summary: Rachel Roberts's "Speech Sounds" Analysis

Rachel Roberts's analysis of "Speech Sounds" explores deeper meanings underneath the surface themes of Octavia Butler's gripping dystopian novel. Roberts uses a Deconstructive critical lens to reveal a subaltern meaning of Butler's story about a world without communication. Roberts argues the binary opposition within Butler's text and the arbitrary nature of telling a story about communication through the written word. Roberts implores the reader to consider Butler's own speculation about the real world devolving, becoming a society that uses violence before communication. This is done to create a level of relevancy that applies to modern society, further illuminating the speculative nature of Butler's award-winning science fiction story. This is done by exhibiting evidence comparing the use of sign language and male-to-female communication in the story, to peer-reviewed scholarly articles.

Summary: Jessica Mejia's "Fear Evokes Change"

"Fear Evokes Change" by Jessica Mejia is a New Criticism response to Octavia Butler's "Speech Sounds". Mejia dissects the emotion and journey of Butler's protagonist Rye. Mejia articulates the importance of violence and fear that is present in the story, exhibiting evidence from scholarly articles that focus on elements of Butler's well-crafted literary voice. Mejia illuminates that Rye felt very alone, and re-experienced emotions that she had not felt in a long time. This is done to privilege Mejia's thesis that violence and fear are prominent themes in this story, that encourage Rye to make new choices when she begins to feel safe. Mejia creates the idea that these two emotions are somewhat of a vicious cycle for Rye and influence the movement of Butler's plot.

Summary: J.A. Prowers's "Apathy and Hope: A Duality"

"Apathy and Hope" by J.A. Powers utilizes a Reader Response critical lens to illuminate the tough subjects that shape Octavia Butler's riveting "Speech Sounds". Powers doesn't theorize a response from a specific, broad audience; instead, creates an

intimate and thoughtful response to his own personal interpretation of Butler's 1983 science fiction story. This is done by relating to the ostracization of Butler's protagonist, Rye, and the overall hopelessness of the environment that Rye is stuck in. Powers thus creates a feeling of empathy in his analysis, sequentially creating a sense of currency and relevancy regarding the overall impact of Butler's speculative, fiction. Powers uses scholarly articles that highlight the effects of these emotions that Butler brought to the forefront of her work; and contrasts this science fiction story to the storyline of the popular *Dark Souls* game, which potentially creates a broader audience for this story that continued to cement Butler's title as one of the first, Black women science fiction authors. By focusing on the otherness of the story, Powers creates an opportunity for larger audiences not to feel as isolated as Rye, or Butler did, throughout their own life stories.

Summary: Madyson Crea's "THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EXECUTIVE FUNCTION AND EGO DEPLETION IN "SPEECH SOUNDS" BY OCTAVIA E. BUTLER"

Madyson Crea analyzes Octavia Butler's short story "Speech Sounds" through a psychoanalytical lens. Initially published in 1983 in a science fiction magazine, the story is narrated by a woman seeking human connection in a dystopian world. "Speech Sounds" has historically been criticized through a feminist lens. However, there are intriguing implications when considering a psychological perspective. Madyson's essay focuses on the decision-making process and psychological condition of Butler's main character Rye. Rye is struggling to survive in a society where humanity is inevitably experiencing ego depletion: a lack of resources that are normally available. The depletion is elicited by an illness that has rendered humanity incapable of effective communication. The essay explores the severe ego depletion experienced by Rye and the impact on her decision-making capacity by utilizing the findings of several cognitive studies. Butler's work exhibits the implications of decision fatigue on humans' decision-making through Rye's navigation of a hostile world.

Summary: Emily Rubio's "OCTAVIA BUTLERS, "SPEECH SOUNDS," IS AN OVERLOOKED FEMINIST ICON"

Emily Rubio examines "Speech Sounds" by Octavia Butler and its numerous hidden feminist undertones. The story was written at a time when women were heavily discriminated against and only considered capable of being their husband's maid and property. Butler's choice of a black woman as the protagonist in an apocalyptic setting challenges the prejudices of writers who engage in sexist practices. For example, the illness featured in the story serves as a metaphor for how women's voices are silenced in society. By giving power to a black woman, Butler proves that language is crucial, and women are equally deserving of having their voices heard. Her decision was revolutionary in the genre and challenged the sexist norms that relegated women to secondary roles. Women can take center stage, and it is imperative to represent them accurately, making "Speech Sounds" an unsung feminist icon.



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Annotated Bibliography

Baker, Kerrian. "‘Speech Sounds’: How Octavia Butler Found Her Voice and Shook Up Science Fiction." *Nu Harvest Journal*, 1 Dec. 2020, nuharvestjournal.org/harvest2020/2020/11/25/nbspspeech-sounds-how-octavia-butler-found-her-voice-and-shook-up-science-fiction.

Kerrian Baker goes over the historical information about Octavia Butler as she wrote "Speech Sounds," and includes some different criticisms as well. She goes into how groundbreaking the short story was in its time, and how it helped to transform the genre of science fiction forever with the inclusion of minorities. By using a black female protagonist and both adhering to and subverting the genre expectations, she calls out the entirety of the literary community for their very prejudiced practices.

Readers can use this as a straightforward literary analysis.

Baumeister, Roy F., and Kathleen D. Vohs. "Self-Regulation, ego depletion, and motivation." *Social and personality psychology compass* 1.1 (2007): 115-128.

This article examined and synthesized several findings about self-regulation and ego depletion. It was initially published in the Journal of Social and Personality Psychology Compass. Roy Baumeister is a Psychology Professor and head of the social psychology graduate program at Florida State University. He earned a PhD in social psychology from Princeton University. Kathleen Vohs, his coauthor, is an assistant professor at the

University of Minnesota and received her PhD in Psychological and Brain Sciences from Dartmouth College. The article outlines the human tendency of decreased self-regulation after having denied the self something. It goes on to explain that multiple studies have proven that self-regulation is similar to muscle. The more it is used, the less it is able to function to its full ability. This is exhibited in “Speech Sounds” when Rye shows little inhibition for intimacy with Obsidian. Notably this lack of reservation occurs after having restrained herself from acting rashly out of jealousy for his ability to read.

Bellot, Gabrielle. “Positive Obsession; Octavia E. Butler’s Visionary Science Fiction.” Book Forum (2021).

“Positive Obsession” by Gabrielle Bellot is an article from Book Forum magazine, which features articles that focus on socially pertinent books. Bellot explores the novel Butler: *Kindred*, *Fledgling*, *Collected Stories* and recounts how Butler’s path to becoming a writer was an isolated one, where she was hindered by limitations created by the intersection of her race and gender. Bellot exhibits how Butler’s life shaped her career, and how racism and sexism played a role in establishing her voice as a writer. This is done by recounting actual events in Butler’s own life, and how she encountered oppression at many points of her career, as a large, dyslexic, African American woman ostracized from many communities in her life. Bellot examines how this influenced Butler’s love for writing, and Bellot’s respect for the author is evident. It is an article written in great reverence for Butler and how she overcame these social limitations, highlighting the importance of Butler’s artistic voice.

Bellot’s “Positive Obsession” is a straightforward literary analysis of Butler: *Kindred*, *Fledgling*, *Collected stories*, aptly highlighting information about Butler’s life and career. It provides a biography of Butler’s life and her great love for writing. Bellot encourages the reader to understand Butler’s perspective on her career, providing ample evidence of Butler’s own feelings on her life’s

achievements. This offers the reader an intimate understanding of Butler, providing reasons for Butler's historical importance and why the author remains culturally relevant today.

Butler, Octavia. "Speech Sounds." *Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*. vol # 73, 1983

Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine (hereafter ASMF) was founded in 1977, named after and published under the editorial direction of Isaac Asimov, who is considered one of the founding fathers of the science fiction genre. ASMF published hundreds of science fiction stories before Volume #73 in December 1983 which featured Octavia Butler's "Speech Sounds". "Speech Sounds" is a gripping, speculative science fiction narrative, which Butler indicates in the 'Afterword' of this story was done to reflect her own fears of a society that did not value communication and language.

"Speech Sounds" was ASMF's first published story written by an African American woman, and would go on to receive critical acclaim, subverting Asimov's own oppressive mindsets about the capacity of African American, and female science fiction authors. The following year, 1984, Butler would be the first African American woman to receive a Hugo Award for "Speech Sounds", it would eventually be collected in two anthologies, *Bloodchild* and *Other Stories* and *Wastelands: Stories of the Apocalypse*. This story does not explicitly tackle the topic of race, yet still reflects Butler's feeling of otherness. It is a speculative science fiction story that doesn't rely on typical science fiction tropes and has evolved into the speculative fiction genre in a post-COVID American society. It is a story about a virus that impacted the whole world, regardless of one's own identity. A world that Butler projected herself into through the protagonist Rye.

Ceide, Mirnova E., et al. "Mediation Analyses of the Role of Apathy on Motoric Cognitive Outcomes." *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, vol. 19, no. 12, 2022, p. 7376., <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19127376>.

Written by Mirnova E. Ceide et al., “Mediation Analysis of the Role of Apathy on Motoric Cognitive Outcomes” was published in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* on June 16th, 2022. The paper is a research journal done to show the outcomes of studies that showed the correlation between apathy and poor cognitive function in older adults –adults over the age of 65, as that is the group with the greatest risk factor. The evidence presented shows a higher risk of dementia for adults with apathetic behaviors and that have preexisting conditions such as Parkinson’s, MCI, or have suffered a stroke. Testing was done on those that enrolled in the Central Control of Mobility in Aging Study. 347 adults without dementia – which was determined via consented testing – enrolled in the program and had to pass a series of cognitive tests; once those tests were completed, the participants would then be carefully studied and periodically checked on at yearly intervals. It is to be noted that there is no concrete way to determine the standard for apathy, and it is still classified as a subcategory under the diagnosis of depression. Apathy is a type of mild behavioral impairment.

Curtis, Claire P. “Theorizing Fear: Octavia Butler and the Realist Utopia.” *Utopian Studies*, vol. 19, no. 3, 2008, pp. 411–31. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20719919>. Accessed 6 Dec. 2022.

This article was published by Penn State University Press as part of their *Utopian Studies* collection where they published an Octavia Butler special issue of the year 2008. Claire Curtis is a professor of political science at the College of Charleston located in South Carolina. She holds a MA and Ph.D. from John Hopkins University. In her article “Theorizing Fear: Octavia Butler and the Realist Utopia”, Curtis looks at different stories written by Octavia Butler and analyzes the recurring theme that all stories have in common and the main drive that Butler is trying to convey to the readers. The first theme is the creation of a utopia by Butler. In a lot of her stories,

Butler creates a new world for her characters. The second is the theme of fear. In *Speech Sounds* Butler evokes both fear of violence and fear for the main character's safety. Lastly the recurring theme of how humans come to terms with such fear. Curtis examines how these themes can play out for females, minorities, and people of different social classes and how fear leads humans to activate their fight-or-flight response. Particularly, how in *Speech Sounds*, the main character acts because of her fear of living in a post-pandemic world.

Delaney, Samuel R. "Racism and Science Fiction." *Dark Matter* and *The New York Review of Science Fiction* 120 (1998). <<https://www.nyrsf.com/racism-and-science-fiction-.html>>.

Samuel R. Delany was Octavia Butler's teacher at the Clarion Science Fiction workshop in 1971, and the only other African American author published before Butler in *Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*. His 1998 article "Racism and Science Fiction" reflects his own experience as a black man in the science fiction field. He also fondly reflects on his relationship with Butler, from the beginning of her career. Delany and Butler are known as two of the first black science fiction authors and pioneers of the Afro-Futurism subgenre of science fiction, which Delany concisely argues against. This is done by providing ample evidence of the many black authors that preceded his well-received 1966 novel *Babel-17*. He discusses how many of these authors were influential to his own voice as an author, and his belief that 'black-narratives' went unacknowledged because of how they were received by white audiences. Delany compares these authors and their stories to popular, white authors. Through this comparison of narratives, and by recounting his personal experience, Delany provides ample accounts of the presence of racism at multiple layers of the science genre field: science fiction themes/tropes, the publishing world, and amongst Delany and Butler's own literary contemporaries in the field.

"Racism and Science Fiction" was published by *The New York Social Review* and featured in the book *Dark*

Matter, an illuminating book about the unseen presence of black writers that went unacknowledged in a dominantly white genre. By providing a personal narrative in this article, Delany provides an autobiographical account of his career, which provides a unique historical insight into his unique experience in this genre. As a friend and mentor of Butler, Delany's own words provide a unique insight into the obstacles that Butler was also facing at the time.

Dimmock, Mark, and Andrew Fisher. "Conscience." *Ethics for A-Level*, 1st ed., Open Book Publishers, 2017, pp. 157-167. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1wc7r6j.13>. Accessed 7 May 2023.

This source provides a foundation for understanding Freud's theory of the ego and the id. It is a first-edition ethics textbook that was published in 2017. The author, Mark Dimmock, holds a PhD in Philosophy from the University of Nottingham and teaches philosophy and theory of knowledge. Coauthor, Andrew Fisher, is an Associate Professor and teaches philosophy at the University of Nottingham. Chapter 9 on conscience was utilized to gain a foundational understanding of Freud's psychoanalytical theory. The id and the ego's contribution to decision-making were applied when considering how Rye, the main character, evaluated her options and reacted in "Speech Sounds".

Green, Sarah L., et al. "Apathy and Depression as Predictors of Activities of Daily Living Following Stroke and Traumatic Brain Injuries in Adults: A Meta-Analysis." *Neuropsychology Review*, vol. 32, no. 1, 2021, pp. 51-69., <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11065-021-09501-8>.

"Apathy and Depression as Predictors of Activities of Daily Living Following Stroke and Traumatic Brain Injuries in Adults: A Meta-Analysis." Was published on March 23rd, 2021, in *Neuropsychology Review* volume 32 by Sarah L. Green et al. "Apathy and Depression" is an academic journal article discussing the commonalities and connections between depression and brain injuries. Depression is defined as a mood disorder that specifically

notes hopelessness, sadness, and worthlessness as symptoms. Apathy is defined as the lack of motivation and or making/maintaining goals. The journal discusses the potential rehabilitation paths that survivors of brain injuries could have and the effects that depression and apathy can have on them. The connection between brain injuries and apathy is because ABI generally affects the frontal lobe and limbic systems, the same places that regulate motivation, leading to a 61% increase in apathetic behavior following traumatic brain injuries. This study notes that depression and apathy are often shown to overlap, and apathy is often cited as a symptom of depression instead of its own entity. It is stated that it would be prudent to distinguish apathy and depression as different illnesses to create different and more effective treatment strategies. This journal took data from 20 different studies, with 14 of them finding similar correlations between apathy and brain injury.

Gutzmer, Kyle, et al. "Come on Baby. You Know I Love You": African American Women's Experiences of Communication with Male Partners and Disclosure in the Context of Unwanted Sex." *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, vol. 45, no. 4, 2016, pp. 807–819., <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-015-0688-9>.

In this study researchers from different Californian Universities sought out African American women from the San Diego area to interview about any experiences with sexual coercion in intimate relationships with a male partner. Of the 28 possible participants, aged 18-44, only 19 were able to complete a full interview. These interviews were performed with trained professionals who were female and from a minority. The interviews were flexible in nature allowing the participants to ask questions and elaborate freely. Approximately 90% of the participants had been threatened to engage in unwanted sexual activities and 57.8% had been physically forced.

These interviews focused on the communication that occurred before and after these unwanted sexual experiences. Before these experiences the male partners engaged in different verbal and nonverbal behaviors

such as bullying, accusations of infidelity, unwanted sexual touches, pressuring, and other strategies to coerce sex. The participants would attempt to refuse, but they either gave in or were physically forced into these situations. After these experiences, the male partners would avoid discussion, and downplay the incident when it was brought up. Some of the participants might disclose the event to trusted friends or family, but few would seek out help from a trained professional.\

Halali, Eliran, et al. "Between Self-Interest and Reciprocity: The Social Bright Side of Self-Control Failure." *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, vol. 143, no. 2, Apr. 2014, pp. 745–54. EBSCOhost, <https://doi-org.cwi.idm.oclc.org/10.1037/a0033824>.

This study examines the human tendency to reciprocate. It asks if reciprocity is something automatic or a conscious act that requires thought. It was published in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology* in 2014. The author, Eliran Halali, holds an M.A. and Ph.D. in psychology. By conducting three studies, the article analyzes factors contributing to the human tendency to reciprocate kindness or, alternatively malice, including the fairness of a proposal affecting the subject's response, likelihood to accept an offer, and arousal. This is significant to Octavia Butler's "Speech Sounds" in multiple situations presented. The first is the main character's interaction with Obsidian after the bus incident. She felt the position she was put in was unfair as he had already drawn attention to her. Alternatively, not getting in his car was less appealing. However, once Obsidian had opened up to her, she was more willing to engage with him. He made the offer more attractive, and in turn, she was willing to reciprocate his affection. The second implication is when she decides to bring the orphans home with her. She initially does not think twice about leaving them but realizes that having a human connection will benefit her and changes her decision.

Henslin, James M. "Gender and Age." *Essentials of Sociology: A Down-to-Earth Approach*. 10th ed., Pearson, 2013, pp. 274-298.

James Henslin walks us through the rise of feminism. He goes over how throughout the years, women have become a minority, even though they make up half of the population. He brings to light all the violence that was going on towards women, and how that led to women standing up for themselves. Henslin goes over what feminism is and how the different waves of feminist approaches paved the way for how it is today. Readers can use this as a theory piece that can help clarify what feminism is and what has led up to it.

Kenan, Randall. "An Interview With Octavia E. Butler." *Callaloo*, vol. 14, no. 2, 1991, pp. 495–504. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2931654>. Accessed 6 Dec. 2022.

Randall Kenan was an award-winning American author that specialized in magical realism. This interview between the two African-American fiction authors took place over the phone in November 1990 and was published by John Hopkins University Press, first featured in *Callaloo* in the Spring of 1991. *Callaloo*, A Journal of African Diaspora Arts and Letters was founded in 1976 and is still publishing, maintaining a focus on original works by and about Black artists worldwide.

Kenan prefaces this interview with a summary of Butler's work and accomplishments. It is clear that he has great respect for Butler's trailblazing career, stressing her ability to lift her work 'beyond genre'. The topic of genre starts Kenan's interview, creating a very poignant insight into Butler's feelings about labels in the literature industry, and feelings about her own work. She casually weaves in anecdotes and memories of her own childhood. This interview is one of the many historical artifacts that exist where interested audiences can hear Butler in her own words. However, "An Interview With Octavia E. Butler" has a particular sense of intimacy that truly makes this interview stand apart. The casualness in Butler's voice creates a unique and captivating tone throughout the interview, it is a unique opportunity to hear Butler voice off the page.

Kuk, Anna, and Monika Guszowska. "Changes and Predictors

of the Sense of Meaning in Life in Polish University Students Participating in Psychological Workshops Communication–Forgiveness–Love.” *Journal of Religion and Health*, vol. 58, no. 4, 2018, pp. 1095–1106., <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-018-0631-1>.

In this study, 33 students from the Józef Piłsudski University of Physical Education in Warsaw volunteered to take part in a workshop called “Communication–Forgiveness–Love” in an attempt to learn more about these subjects than their academic courses taught. This workshop seeks to strengthen each student’s sense of identity and purpose in life while lowering the occurrence of mental illnesses such as depression and anxiety by improving emotional control and communication behaviors in these students. The results were evaluated with a pretest before the workshop and a posttest after the workshop evaluating the participants’ values and ideas on ‘the meaning of their life.

The Communication portion of the workshop focused on teaching the students active listening skills, overcoming communication barriers, reading non-verbal cues, and distinguishing different emotional states in people. The forgiveness and love portions of the workshop focused on conflict resolution, empathy, and the different forms of love. After the conclusion of the workshops, a posttest was taken by the participants. These posttests revealed that the students had increased levels of confidence and feelings of control over their own lives while their feelings of boredom, apathy, and lack of purpose decreased. The students had a better sense of purpose and identity after taking this workshop. The students with the most increased positive feelings were those with worse mental health and lower social competency, showing that these students should be sought out for this kind of workshop. As this was a one-group study there is no control group to compare results against.

Miyazaki, Hidetaka. “Dark Souls.” FromSoftware Inc., 2011.

Dark Souls is a Japanese Roleplaying Game created by

FromSoftware Inc and directed by Hidetaka Miyazaki. The game is set in a dark fantasy world set after the fall of a golden age when an age of darkness encroaches upon the world. The player is thrust into the world as a cursed undead without explaining why they are there or what the current story is and must piece it together themselves. The game itself deals with themes of apathy, depression, and hope as the player quests through a game where failure is permanently punished – each time the player dies they lose a large amount of progress and all of their currency – and each and every foe the player faces was once on the same quest as them but gave up on succumbed to despair. The player is not told about the purpose of their quest and is left in a state of utter confusion for most of the game as to why they are going anywhere or doing anything. It is the player's choice whether or not to let the Age of Darkness be born or to give their life to continue the Age of Fire, either letting the current world fade away and a new one be created or perpetuating the status quo for an unspecified amount of time.

Otterson, Sarah. "Diversity, Change, Violence: Octavia Butler's Pedagogical Philosophy." *Utopian Studies*, vol. 19, no. 3, 2008, pp. 433–56. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20719920>. Accessed 6 Dec. 2022.

This article was published by Penn State University Press for their *Utopian Studies* Volume dedicated to Octavia Butler in 2008. "Diversity, Change, Violence: Octavia Butler's Pedagogical Philosophy" was written by Sara Otterson. Otterson holds her degree in Law from William and Mary School of Law. She currently works for the Center for Reproductive Rights. In this article, Sarah Otterson examines the theme of violence in Octavia Butler's stories. She analyzes how the violence and suffering in her novels reveal our own inherent violence as humans. In *Speech Sounds*, particularly it reveals how much violence can affect how humans act upon it. Otterson also examines how Butler interprets violence as necessary for the way we live such as living

under oppression, especially for minority communities. She also analyzes how the pain from violence can bring new life. She uses examples from Butler's stories such as *Xenogenesis*, *Amnesty*, *Blood Child*, and *Speech Sounds*. She also shares how all these short stories share violence becoming something new, something to look forward to in a post-apocalyptic world such as the one that Octavia Butler creates in each of her stories. Accepting change and diversity prevents communities from falling apart and can even help them be reborn.

Smith, Christina Jean. "What Disappears and What Remains: Representations of Social Fluidity in the Post-Apocalypse." *NC State Repository*, North Carolina State University, 2007, repository.lib.ncsu.edu/bitstream/handle/1840.16/2918/etd.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

Christina Smith goes over three stories in her article, of which are Walter Miller's *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, and Olivia Butlers "Speech Sounds." She aims to examine the ways authors have envisioned the apocalypse, specifically on the concepts of social fluidity and change. Focusing on the "Speech Sounds" section, she starts with a summary, and shows how Butler thinks that language is the most essential binding element of any complex society. As without language, we revert to the primitive animalistic ways of our cousins, the chimps. Readers can use this as a literary analysis leaning towards how important language and communication are.

Sturgis, Amy H. "The Parables of Octavia Butler." Reason.com, 1 June 2006, <https://reason.com/2006/06/01/the-parables-of-octavia-butler-2/>.

This article was written a few months after Octavia Butler's unexpected death and works as a retrospective of Butler's literary body of works and a quick examination of the woman behind them. Butler was born to a poor family and struggled growing up with dyslexia and being marginalized as both a black woman and a lesbian. However, Butler managed to overcome her obstacles to become one of the most respected science fiction writers

of all time, winning several awards, and so far being the only science fiction writer to win the MacArthur Foundation genius grant.

In the article Amy Sturgis, the writer, examines some of the different novels that Butler wrote, connecting each story with the themes that Butler examined throughout her work. Throughout all of her works, there are themes of coercion, abuse of power, questions about one's responsibility to their community, and the ideas of kindness and empathy are explored, even when these subjects may make the reader uncomfortable. Sturgis notes that the villains in these stories are institutions that use coercion to control others, while the protagonists are individuals fighting to find justice for those around them. Sturgis ends the article by explaining that Butler's work is well-known and well-regarded for forcing readers to reconsider those who are alienated.

Theory aka McCauley, Nikki. "The Hyphenated American: An American idiom for the ages." *Lesbian News* 35.7 (2010): 11.

"The Hyphenated American" is a 2010 article that focuses on the life and accomplishments of Octavia Butler. It was featured in *Lesbian News* a magazine that highlights stories relevant to lesbian communities. The author, Theory, illuminates the importance of Butler's visionary science fiction, and the importance of Butler's identity throughout her career. Theory lists the many great accomplishments that Butler received throughout her life, and the uniqueness and impressiveness of doing this during a period of civil discord, qualifying Butler's historical importance in American literature.

This short article was written to in an issue by *Lesbian News* celebrating African American history month. Theory openly discusses the presence of racism in America, using subverting language that may upset certain audiences. However, this article provides historical context pertinent to the importance of Butler's life and work. This article doesn't fully submerge the reader in Butler's life, instead focusing on a brief reflection of Butler's many achievements. Theory

discusses the ‘hyphenated American’ which is the intersection of Butler’s identity as an African American – woman, and how being a hyphenated American only further cements the importance that Butler has. Short but poignant, this article accurately argues that Butler was a trailblazer for other marginalized voices.



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New Criticism

Fear Evokes Change

Fear Evokes Change

by jessica Mejia

Octavia Butler's short story "Speech Sounds," tells a story about a woman by the name of Rye. Rye is living in a community that has been affected by an illness that affects your ability to speak. Because of that change in the community, it has filled the community with violence. Rye is left alone, so she embarks on a journey to possibly find her only relatives left, her brother and his two children. As she tries to find her way to Pasadena, a fight breaks out on the bus that she was hoping would take her to where her brother lived. "People screamed or squawked in fear. Those nearby scrambled to get out of way", (Butler, Speech Sounds). Because of the fight, the bus had to be emptied. Once she gets off the bus she meets a man, whom she starts to call Obsidian. Obsidian stares at Rye and signals her to get in his car with him, but something stops Rye. Finally, she decides to ride with him to Pasadena but on their way there, they run into a woman being chased by a man whose goal is to kill her. Obsidian gets off the car to help the woman but also ends up getting killed by the man. Rye then kills the man and finds two children who can talk. Then, Rye takes the children and all three rides away together. In Octavia Butler's story "Speech Sounds", there is a unifying theme of fear caused by violence and wanting to be safe from that violence.

First, the main character Rye feels the need to go find her family. Butler states, “She had put off going until the loneliness and hopelessness drove her out,” (Butler, 1). Rye knew that her journey was going to be dangerous, so she waited until she felt like she had to go. In a community that was taken over by illness, violence grows because no one likes the idea of things changing so quickly. Because Rye was lonelier than ever, that loneliness made her fear for her safety because around her there was nothing but violence. In the article “Theorizing Fear: Octavia Butler and the Realist Utopia”, by Claire P. Curtis, she analyzes how humans come to terms with fear. Curtis states, “It is not fear of what is unknown, but fear of what is known: the capacity of humans purposefully to harm one another,” (Curtis). From the beginning, the main character realizes that she might not make it to Pasadena, due to the violence that could break out at any moment. She does not know anyone in the city, and nonetheless, she does not know their intentions. If a fight broke out because someone looked at someone for too long on the bus, how can the main character of this story know when they are safe? People try to pick a fight with anyone even if that person is not wanting to pick a fight. In a community where people’s physical abilities have been impacted by an illness that has left them impaired, it is easier for violence to arise between others because of misunderstandings. Rye’s fear comes from what is happening around her. Her loneliness makes her fear for her safety.

Secondly, Rye meets a man dressed in a Los Angeles Police Department uniform but instead of feeling safe, Rye was shocked to see someone dressed like this. The story states “Rye took another step back from him. There was no more LAPD, no more any large organization, governmental or private,” (Butler, 2). Instead of feeling safe around someone in a police uniform, she felt afraid because they no longer existed. In another section of her article, Curtis states “Political authority is often the source of insecurity, not the guarantor of peace,” (Curtis). In societies where authority isn’t present when authority arrives, it can cause more violence to rise because of the fear of change. How can someone be under the law after they have been without a law for so long just like in *Speech Sounds*?

The theme of fear of violence balances out with the theme of wanting to be safe from violence when Rye decides to go with this man that she later starts to call Obsidian. The story states, "He had removed his service revolver, holster, and all. He beckoned again, both hand empty... Maybe he was all right", (Butler, 5). Even though Rye was still unsure about going with this man she felt safer with him than being in her community. Her loneliness had made her also made her think that he was perhaps also lonely. The story then goes on to state, "If he was willing to go where she directed, perhaps he was safe", (Butler, 5). Rye is slowly starting to feel safe with Obsidian. In her article, Curtis states that "in a lot of Butler's stories, the female protagonists work through and with fear modeling a particularly feminist and a particularly compelling way of acting in relation to the unknown," (Curtis). Most people wouldn't go with just anyone, especially after an illness has wiped out most of the community. But in Rye's situation, she is acting this way in her interest. Perhaps the man would take her closer to where her brother is. It could be because of how long she has been lonely that she goes with Obsidian after only seeing him for a few moments. As we keep on reading, we start to see Rye's fear of violence change to a fear for her safety that causes her to journey to Pasadena with a stranger.

In a similar way, Rye develops feelings for Obsidian that she had not felt in a long time, she begins to feel safe. This makes her want to stay with him, no longer afraid of being alone, "She pointed back southwest-back toward home. Now she did not have to go to Pasadena," (Butler, 9). Rye had started to feel things other than fear, which lead her to think that she finally found what she was looking for. With obsidian, she would not be lonely anymore. In the article "Diversity, Change, Violence: Octavia Butler's Pedagogical Philosophy", Sarah Outterson, states "the process of encountering difference and allowing yourself to change in response to it (even to build more intimately connected communities) is a much more violating experience than we often sentimentalize it to be," (Outterson). Rye was experiencing things all over again that felt new to her. Because she was feeling all things emotions she starts to forget about the fear and asks Obsidian to go back home with her, even

though she had only known him for a few hours. Her fear of the violence around her starts to disappear because she has found that safety with Obsidian.

At the end of the story, Rye is left without Obsidian but with two toddlers. The story states “Two very small children came out of the house from which the man and woman had a run—a boy and a girl perhaps three years old. Holding hands, they crossed and street toward Rye,” (Butler, 10). Obsidian was shot by a man that Rye believes could have been these children’s father. These two children are now fearing the same thing that Rye was at the beginning of the story, violence, and fear for their safety. Not to mention they are also now lonely just as Rye was. In her article Outterson states “Butler also seems to intend the continuous violence, physical harm and suffering in the novels to reveal to us our inherent violence as humans,” (Outterson). The children’s father killed what could have been their mother. Violence and suffering are what led both Rye and the children to be alone. Rye takes these children into her care because she knows how it feels to be left in a world full of violence. Rye’s fear has expired and has turned into care for these children.

In conclusion, the short story *Speech Sounds* by Octavia Butler has a unifying point of fear of violence versus fear of someone else’s safety. The main character, Rye tries to find a way to reach her brother but knows that her journey will have violence. She starts here fearing the possible violence that could break out at any moment. She later meets Obsidian. She lets her guard down because he reintroduces her to some forgotten emotions. He helps turn her fear into finally feeling safe in this post-apocalyptic world. Together they start to experience emotions Rye had not felt in a while. The Obsidian, unfortunately, gets shot and dies. This leaves Rye where she started. Rye then takes into her care two toddlers, because she was once like they were fearful of the things around them. Rye’s fear has turned into caring for these children. Throughout the works of Octavia Butler, there are themes of violence and how violence affects our world. Violence causes fear but through that fear, it can also create change. Change for better things.

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Reader Response

Apathy and Hope: A Duality

Apathy and Hope: A Duality

by J. a. powers

Apathy is the most dangerous weapon against humankind because we cannot make accurate, impactful decisions if we do not care about the outcome. Speech Sounds by Octavia E. Butler describes a post-apocalyptic world ravaged by a plague that took full cognitive capability from most of the human race. Most of humanity forgot how to speak or write, instead communicating with pictures and hand gestures. This mass dulling of human function led to the collapse of civilization as people across the globe could not remember how to maintain society – even simple things like maintaining vehicles grew beyond human understanding. The living must rely on the goodwill of each other, and fear of others is commonplace; fear of others and what they might do. Rye, the story's main character, has already given up on hope for the future by the time the story begins. She wanders without a true goal in mind until she meets a man named Obsidian, who has taken it upon himself to keep the ideal of an acting police force alive all by himself. He gives Rye the hope that she so desperately needed, and she can see a small glimpse of a future. That future would not come to pass as Obsidian dies attempting to save another woman from a violent man but ends up dying himself. But after his death, Rye meets

two young children who are able to speak full sentences and do not seem to be feeling the effects of the plague.

“Speech Sounds” grapples with many tough subjects; othering, fear of the unknown, depression, and communication. However, the theme I resonated most with was not the ostracization of Rye that she so fears or the threat to survival, but rather the absolute hopelessness of the setting. The unnamed plague destroyed humanity’s cognitive function and left them in a daze, removing the ability to rationalize and communicate properly, leading to widespread despair – just as it would have in the real world. Many people died, and those who lived were trapped in a mental fog, too dazed to help themselves or each other properly. People often forget that the world is not a place that cares about humans in general or as individuals. As a writer, I can see Rye and Obsidian representing a duality of ideas – that being apathy and hope, respectively.

The actual definition of apathy and its commonly thought definition differ in small ways. “Apathy is a syndrome characterized by diminished motivation and purposeful behaviors.” (Green et al. 1). The generally agreed upon definition – in my experience – is that apathy is the feeling of not caring and letting the things happen around you without trying to stop them. These are symptoms of depression that can often be mistaken for apathetic behavior. An apathetic person will likely have enough self-preservation instinct to continue living, while someone depressed might not. A person with an apathetic mindset could still laugh and enjoy their time, but hopelessness will always be hanging over them. “She had told herself that the children growing up now were to be pitied. They would run through the downtown canyons with no real memory of what the buildings had been or even how they had come to be. Today’s children gathered books as well as wood to be burned as fuel. They ran through the streets chasing one another and hooting like chimpanzees. They had no future. They were now all they would ever be.” (Butler 8). Rye wishes not to bring children into this world because she has already accepted that there is no point to it, that they would be born into senseless suffering and violence. Rye also barely reacts after Obsidian is murdered; she knew it would happen and that it would have

been foolish to hope for anything more. Rye faced the horrid world she found herself in with a calm acceptance, knowing that the world she lived in was destined to fade away into nothingness.

Apathy itself is the illness. The illness is described as taking away something each person held dear – their writing, speech, other faculty, or some combination. This mirrors how apathy takes root in a person's mind; it hangs over their thoughts like a shroud. The infected lost their ability to reason effectively, "Behavioural symptoms include deficits in goal-directed behaviours, reduced productivity and social effort. Finally, affective symptoms include emotional indifference or flat affect." (Green et al. 2). This is shown clearly in the bus driver. He does not react at all when the fight breaks out or when people scream at him for aid, simply sitting in his seat. He only reacts when outside stimulus forces him to move – that being a gas grenade set off inside his vehicle – and he finally reacts angrily toward the man who set off the grenade.

The bleakness of this setting reminds me of another, one that carries similar themes, *Dark Souls*. *Dark Souls* takes place in a world that is slowly dying after a golden age, the Age of Fire. The human inhabitants of the world no longer know how to recreate the enormous structures and monoliths seen from the Age of Fire. Butler refers to buildings as canyons in *Speech Sounds*, implying that future children would not know the difference between something man-made and something natural – there would no longer be such a thing as man-made anything. All humans are cursed with the Darksign, a mark on their skin that keeps them trapped between life and death. They suffer in a perpetual existence without actually living. These Hollowed souls can sometimes speak and communicate but do not. Some will attack the player on sight, while others simply lean and lounge around with their heads bowed. Being Hollow means giving into despair and giving up on any hope; they gave up on attempting to save their world and accepted their cursed existence until the Age of Darkness. This is relevant because this way of thinking describes Rye perfectly. She is shown to still remember how to speak and can take care of herself just fine, but she had given up on taking care of others. She does not

interfere on the bus when people started hurting each other and only looked after her own skin. She believes that humanity is doomed and it is worthless to try and put society back together, even finding the idea of someone standing up for the ideals of law laughable.

If Rye is the embodiment of apathy in this setting, then Obsidian is the embodiment of hope. Unlike Rye, who does her best to keep her head down and stay out of sight, Obsidian drives into a dangerous situation and directly puts himself into conflict for the greater good. Obsidian does not use lethal force when confronting brawlers on the bus but instead breaks up the fight with non-lethal gas and only leaves once all of the anger and animosity of the group turns to him. This duality even extends into Rye and Obsidian's intimate moment. Rye shakes her head at the request for sex and notes to herself that she cannot have any more children and that it would be too risky to be intimate. Obsidian throws a metaphorical wrench into her way of thinking and offers up a condom, something that makes Rye burst out laughing. He not only provided a solution to the problem instead of outright dismissing it but managed to lift Rye's spirits as well. Just spending a small amount of time with Obsidian makes Rye remember some of her humanity and leaps with him to the aid of a woman in peril. While the woman sadly dies and Obsidian is with her, the story is left on a hopeful note as Rye finds two children with whom she can speak to. Rye is given back her hope.

As a writer, I can see Rye and Obsidian representing a duality of ideas – that being apathy and hope, respectively. The obvious themes of this story are depression, hopelessness, and othering, but I decided that it would be better to look at a theme the story shows that is often overlooked. Hope and hopelessness might be direct opposites of each other, but the relationship between apathy and hope is an interesting one as well. I decided to look at what apathy can do to a person – namely Rye. The way she thinks throughout the story is, “I guess I will do this.” Not really having a specific reason in mind for anything she does other than not to be lonely. She constantly reaffirms to herself that there is no reason to really care about anything because they will all be taken from her eventually, as everything had been

in the past. It is only a small glimmer of hope through the children and the actions of Obsidian that gives Rye the lesson she desperately needed, that it is okay to try and help the world grow once more. It is okay to care about the outcome.

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Deconstruction

Deconstructing "Speech Sounds"

Deconstructing "Speech Sounds"

By Rachel Roberts

Octavia Butler was a 20th-century writer who worked primarily in science fiction and speculative fiction. Her work is known to be both intriguing and challenging for readers from all backgrounds, tackling themes of race, religion, and humanity. Butler's short story "Speech Sounds" is an example of her speculative fiction, imagining a future in which the majority of humanity has lost the ability to communicate with each other with speech or reading/writing. While a surface reading of this story seems to indicate a message about the importance of communication, exploring how the world as we know it would fall apart without the ability to communicate, a deeper meaning can be uncovered when a deconstructive lens is applied to the story: communication is meaningless unless all parties are willing to listen.

The story starts with the main character, Rye, witnessing a fight while riding a bus. The fight, which Rye speculates started from a misunderstanding, becomes so bad that the bus driver must pull over and try to get the fighting pair off the bus. This sets a binary standard: verbal communication is good, and nonverbal communication is bad, or ineffective. As the two men are sizing each other up, Rye observes, "the fight would begin when someone's nerve broke or someone's hand slipped or

someone came to the end of his limited ability to communicate.” (Butler Page 1) However it is important to note that this fictional fight, set in a world that has lost verbal communication, is based upon a real fight that Butler observed in our world. As she explains, “One Saturday, as I sat on a crowded, smelly bus, [...] I noticed trouble brewing just across from me. One man had decided he didn’t like the way another man was looking at him.” (Butler 13) Even with our modern relative ease to communicate, fights like these occur every day, not because of the inability to communicate but because of a refusal to communicate. Perhaps what Butler is trying to say is not that an unexpected loss of communication would destroy society, but that people’s unwillingness to communicate in many situations is currently destroying society, and Butler is showing the reader the extreme of this issue.

It is important to point out that in “Speech Sounds,” the collapse of society is not entirely due to the sudden loss of verbal language. As it is explained in the story a mysterious illness caused language worldwide to be, “always lost or severely impaired. It was never regained. Often there was also paralysis, intellectual impairment, death.” (Butler 5) The intellectual impairment has, in most people, destroyed not only their capacity for language but their ability to use logic, reason, and emotional control. This gives a more comprehensive explanation as to why society has completely fallen apart- while the loss of language would be catastrophic, large organizations like governments and scientific communities may have been able to hold things together by finding new ways of communication, such as a less abstract and more tangible version of sign language, as is even shown in the story. A newer version of sign language or ‘hand gestures’ is used within the story, showing that this method could be effective. As explained, “Loss of verbal language had spawned a whole new set of obscene gestures.” (Butler 4) While this sign language is mostly used sparingly, used within the story only to ask for sex from Rye, it does prove that a widespread adoption of this method may have worked if an infrastructure was around to support it. There also could have been a method of creating an easy way to communicate with pictures, the same way that the bus driver

indicates desired trades with magazine pages. This indicates that Butler is less concerned with the loss of the language itself, but the exacerbation of non-communicative behaviors that people already employ, but are able to conceal with the use of centralized language.

The use of nonverbal communication throughout the story is very realistic- traditionally nonverbal language is used to accent verbal communication; as an article by the Marbella International University Centre explains, “we have more faith in non-verbal cues than what is actually said.” (MIUC Eva Berkovic). Suddenly the world the reader sees is forced to interact with what is technically an accessory to verbal communication, and for the most part it comes off as ineffective. The fight that begins the story starts due to an inability to pacify or apologize from either of the combatants, and as the bus driver roughly pulls over even more fights are started when people bump into each other. When the police officer, Obsidian, helps stop the fighting he is forced to use tear gas as he has no other safe way to break up the fight. Nonverbal communication is a much more delicate form of communication, requiring all parties involved to be paying close attention to different cues; this is also evidence that Butler is more concerned with people’s lack of willingness to communicate rather than a sudden inability to communicate. Rye mentions in the story, “she never went unarmed. And in this world where the only likely common language was body language, being armed was often enough.” (Butler Page 3) As is shown, when no one is willing to pay attention, force must be used which leads to chaos.

However the story does offer a view of how nonverbal communication could work with people who are described as ‘less-impaired’. Rye notes that, “Left-handed people tended to be less impaired, more reasonable and comprehending, less driven by frustration, confusion, and anger.” (Butler 2) It is interesting to note that there are existing studies that suggest that left-handed people are better with verbal communication than right-handed people. As explained in an article from Healthline, “The biggest takeaway was that, in left-handed people, the left and right sides of the brain work more

effectively with one another. This means that lefties may have inherently better verbal and language skills”(Gray Left-handed gene and verbal skills) . While this connection between left-handedness and an increased capacity for verbal communication is still unproven, it is interesting to keep in mind when analyzing the story.

Both Rye and Obsidian are left-handed which sets them apart from the others and sets up an immediate connection between the two. Their relationship develops quickly by necessity, going from meeting, to becoming intimate, to Rye asking Obsidian to live with her within a couple of hours. The speed with which the relationship progresses is understandable when considering the story’s setting, but it is interesting to view this relationship through another light.

“”Come on Baby. You Know I Love You”: African American Women’s Experiences of Communication with Male Partners and Disclosure in the Context of Unwanted Sex.” is a study conducted by researchers from the University of California that, as described, studies the experiences of African American women’s experiences communicating with their partners before and after experiencing unwanted sex. In the United States African American women experience a higher rate of rape both with strangers and with intimate partners than both white women and Hispanic women. While Rye never experiences rape in the story, it is interesting to examine the differences in communication between Rye and Obsidian and those who participated in the study.

The participant’s partners in “Come on Baby. You Know I Love You” would use a variety of methods to coerce and force sex from their partner, “The strategies men used ranged in severity, from the use of perceived sexual responsibilities (i.e., wifely duty) to verbal cues and more severe physical force.” (Gutzmer, Kyle, et al.). This is juxtaposed by Rye and Obsidian’s gentle requests for sex from one another- Obsidian asks first by rubbing her leg, Rye refuses due to fear of pregnancy, Obsidian produces a condom and they both laugh as they move to the backseat of his Ford. There is never a sense of force throughout this exchange- it is nothing less than consensual. The level of communication after this consensual sex is also very different

from the communication reported in the study. As the study explains, after the coerced/ nonconsensual sex, “Communication, or lack thereof, was central to the process of making sense of the unwanted sex. Many women reported that their partners both passively and actively avoided discussing the unwanted sex.” (Gutzmer, Kyle, et al.) This stands in stark contrast to the honest conversation that Rye and Obsidian have about living together- Rye asks him to come home with her and Obsidian makes it clear that he will not stop being an officer if he does. Despite the inability to verbally communicate the relationship in “Speech Sounds” is much healthier and much more consensual due to the willingness of both partners to work at their communication. When Obsidian dies soon after this conversation, it feels like a real loss both to Rye and to the reader, despite how little they really knew each other.

The story ends on a hopeful note though; after witnessing her lover’s death Rye is confronted by two small children who have the ability to talk. This immediately gives Rye hope for the future of mankind. As Rye explains, “What if children of three or fewer years were safe and able to learn language? What if all they needed were teachers? Teachers and protectors.” (Butler 12). This brings Butler’s message full circle- communication can only work when all parties are open to it; it also comes as a call to action- the reader must do what they can to lead by example and teach those who are young to be good listeners as well as good speakers. This is a call to action for all readers to become better communicators, so that the newer generations can have a chance to build a better world.

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New Historical

Breaking Barriers: Octavia E. Butler's "Speech Sounds"

Breaking Barriers: Octavia E. Butler's "Speech Sounds"

BY aLI MURPHY

Octavia Butler's "Speech Sounds" is set in a post-pandemic, Los Angeles dystopia. An undisclosed illness had left its survivors without the ability to speak, read, or write. The lonely protagonist, Rye, sits aboard a bus to visit her last remaining family members. A fight breaks out, forcing the bus to stop. A man intervenes in the fight, communicating through hand gestures with Rye. She eventually goes into his car, and they exchange these personal totems that symbolize their names. Rye calls him Obsidian, and the pair end up having sex. She begins to feel less lonely, and hopeful even, as they continue on their journey; then another act of violence disrupts Rye's path. A woman is being chased by a man with a knife and the heroic Obsidian intervenes yet again. The fight unfolds leaving the woman, man, and Obsidian dead. Two children start grieving the dead woman and begin yelling coherent words at Rye. The story ends on a note of hope, as Rye utters her full name and vows to protect the children.

Butler's "Speech Sounds" consists of themes of isolation, violence, and fear; this is done to create discourse about a devolving society. This story, wrought with social commentary, launched Butler's science fiction career; both in her text and as a person, Butler broke the barriers of an arguably racist literary

genre. Unlike many other science fiction (SF) stories, “Speech Sounds” creates a dystopia without the presence of science-bound tropes of robots or outer space, which makes for a more speculative, earth-bound narrative. Nonetheless, this story situated Octavia Butler into the sci-fi genre historically, but at the time Butler felt isolated in the sci-fi genre as a tall, black, dyslexic woman. In an article from Book Forum, Gabrielle Bellot writes, “If the world of science fiction seemed lonely for someone like Butler, real life seemed lonelier still. She was painfully shy, and as she grew older, she developed insecurities about her body that would linger.” (Bellot, 2021). Like Rye, Butler also felt lonely in a world that she believed was violent and unwelcoming. Bellot continues, “She was a large, Black woman in a society that demonized being large, Black, or a woman, and although she enjoyed being alone, her sense of rejection never left.” (Bellot, 2021). Even though she would earn many accolades in her life, Octavia Butler never felt truly accepted by the African American community or SF readership; even though she would be a seminal person in the Afro-Futurism subgenre of science fiction. This sense of isolation strengthened Butler’s love for literature and is a consistent theme in many of her stories. Unfortunately, she also felt rejected amongst the very authors that first published “Speech Sounds”.

Octavia Butler’s “Speech Sounds” was first published in Volume #73 of Asimov’s Science Fiction Magazine in December of 1983, the magazine hereafter referred to as ASFM. ASFM was founded in 1977, publishing an average of three short stories per issue under the direction of Isaac Asimov, a pioneer of the SF genre. Asimov and his contemporaries crafted their own ‘canon’ of acceptable tropes and devices commonplace in the genre, and like other respected literary canons, white male authors dominated the field. Of the over two-hundred short stories published before Butler’s “Speech Sounds” an overwhelming, yet unsurprising majority of the authors were caucasian men. Octavia Butler was the twenty-first female author published in ASFM, many of whom wrote under shortened, more masculine names or pseudonyms to hide their gender. Only two other authors published before Butler were not white-passing: Thai-

American author Somtow Sucharitkul, and African-American author Samuel R. Delaney, Butler's teacher at the Clarion SF Writers' Workshop in 1971 (Delaney, 1998). The first black woman published in ASMF, Octavia Butler's "Speech Sounds" would be critically well-received; in 1984, Butler would also be the first black woman to win a Hugo Award for her enthralling, dystopian story.

In *The New York Review of Science Fiction* Samuel R. Delany, authored an article called "Racism and Science Fiction" where Delany disagrees with his label from the SF readership that he was the first African-American SF author. Delany states, "Among the ranks of what is often referred to as proto-science fiction, there are a number of black writers" (Delany, 1998), and exhibits ample evidence of the presence of black voices published before his debut novel *Babel-17* in 1966. Delany also recounts a direct interaction with Isaac Asimov in which Asimov told him, "No one here will ever look at you, read a word you write, or consider you in any situation, no matter whether the roof is falling in or the money is pouring in, without saying to him- or herself 'Negro'." (Delany, 1998). Delany's article suggests that African-American authors were too subversive for the popular, white readership of magazines like ASMF. Under his tutelage, Butler was undoubtedly aware of this presence of racism in the SF genre and more equipped to navigate her career despite the apparent racism in the field.

The reception of "Speech Sounds" began Butler on a path where (like Delany) Butler would be labeled the "first" of her kind. Though (like Delany) they were titles that Butler never completely embraced. Instead, Butler felt very alone in a society that seemed desperate to label her. Book Forum's article quotes Butler about her experience in a creative writing class, "The presence of blacks, my teacher felt, changed the focus of the story" (Bellot, 2021). This provides some insight into why Butler does not discuss race in "Speech Sounds", as a means to break the barrier crafted by the white-male SF canon. Due to their popularity, and white palpability, Delany and Butler helped build the framework that would be later deemed Afro-Futurism; the representation of black history and culture

through the use of science fiction themes and tropes; a genre that focuses on black narratives told by black artists.

Afro-Futurism is a subgenre of science-fiction literature that subverts the presence of race in the science fiction genre; both the lack of diversity in the collective science fiction cannon and the devices and stereotypes that exist in many of these white narratives (i.e., the use of alien races as symbols of otherness or evil, making all Asians are martial arts masters, white saviors, etc.). Octavia E. Butler does not mention race or inequality once in “Speech Sounds”, in this narrative everyone is equally stripped of their language. There is no allegorical ethnocentrism hidden in Butler’s story or any white saviors, instead, “Speech Sounds” is a character-driven story centered around the protagonist, Rye. Butler only alludes to their race through the totems they exchange with each other: the deep black conjured by the name Obsidian, and the golden wheat symbolized by the name, Rye.

Typically, in New Historical Criticism it is uncouth to equate the author with the narrator or character. The focus should remain on who Butler was and determine how that influences the creation of this story. However, it is also important to understand the conception of this story, and Butler’s insight on the science-fiction genre as a whole, which is easily determined by the ample amount of access to the late author’s insight on these topics. Butler was inspired to write this gripping, dystopian novel after witnessing a bloody fight on a bus bound for Los Angeles. In the ‘Afterword’ of her short twelve-page story, Butler writes, “I sat where I was, more depressed than ever, hating the whole hopeless, stupid business and wondering whether the human species would ever grow up enough to learn to communicate without using fists of one kind or another.” (Butler, 13, 1983) Sequentially, Butler infuses herself into “Speech Sounds” by utilizing a third-person limited perspective; only revealing the perspective and emotions of the protagonist, Rye.

This dual perspective begins to exist: the point of view of the dystopian society within the story, and Butler’s perspectives and fear about a society that doesn’t value language. The plot of “Speech Sounds” centers on Rye’s choices, whose perspective

begins at the very point the idea of the story was conceptualized, right where Butler herself was sitting; through Rye, we see Butler's vision unfold: a story that asks if the 'human species' could ever evolve.

"The Hyphenated American" is a 2010 article from Lesbian News about the life and accomplishments of Butler. The article illuminates the uniqueness of Butler's rise to popularity, "She did it during a time of civil disturbance, she did it in a male-dominated genre, she did it as a Negro, A black and Hyphenated American." (Theory, 2010). Though "Speech Sounds" does not explicitly tackle race, at the root is a story that reflects Butler's feeling of Otherness; Rye is silenced, threatened, and alone. The lack of heavier racial topics helped her cross the threshold of the white SF author/ readership, yet she tells a story of fear and otherness situating her as a triple threat in the literary world, appealing to more audiences outside of the typical ASMF readership. Butler found larger audiences as a seminal figure in Afro-Futurism, an acclaimed science fiction author, and as a female author.

Octavia E. Butler's "Speech Sounds" is as socially pertinent today as it was in 1983. Butler feared "whether the human species would ever grow up enough to learn to communicate" (Butler, 1983) and now nearly forty years later, her speculative SF story has become hauntingly believable. Then, Butler became the first 'hyphenated' black-female author to be featured in ASMF. She was the first 'hyphenated' black-female author to win a Hugo Award, and eventually the only (hyphenated and non-hyphenated) SF author to win a MacArthur Genius Grant. Now, in a post-COVID American society, "Speech Sounds" echoes the paradigm of the modern, violent, and racist social discord that is at the forefront of social issues today. It mirrors a world where illness, isolation, and fear have become an episteme for people of all races, social, and economic classes. In an era where there are increasing instances of literature not 'aging well' to modern readerships, "Speech Sounds" has only become more impactful, important, and realistic, transcending the science fiction genre as a whole into a historically important work of speculative fiction.

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Psychological

The Relationship Between Executive Function and Ego Depletion in “Speech Sounds” by Octavia E. Butler

Madyson Crea

“Speech Sounds” by Octavia Butler depicts a world where the ability to communicate has been stripped from humanity. The short story was initially published in 1983 in a science fiction magazine. The main character, Valerie Rye, was once a history professor at UCLA. After the illness took away speech, Rye’s world descended into a dystopian state. As a result, she could only ensure her safety and fundamental needs. Octavia Butler’s “Speech Sounds” exhibits the psychological limits of logical thinking through her main character as she achieves and loses security at an alarming rate causing ego depletion, decision fatigue, and ultimately decreasing her faculty to self-regulate.

The main character, Rye, and her executive function are the concentration of this analysis; however, the author’s psychological state provides a basis for understanding the main character’s situation and reactions. Octavia Butler was experiencing many of the struggles her character faced in “Speech Sounds”. The afterword in Butler’s story gives insight into her motivation and psychological state while writing the story. Butler tells the reader that the story “was conceived in weariness, depression, and sorrow. I began the story feeling little hope or liking for the human species, but by the time I reached the end of it, my hope had come back.” (Butler, page 12). This

echoes Rye's emotional progression throughout the story. At first, she has little hope for humanity or the future. Rye thinks, "Today's children gathered books as well as wood to be burned as fuel. They ran through the streets chasing one another and hooting like chimpanzees. They had no future" (Butler, 8). As a teacher, this mentality is demoralizing for Rye. With no hope for children and no one to teach, she has no purpose, no goal. By the end of the story, Rye's outlook on humanity drastically changes. She regains hope resembling Butler's experience. This hope is acquired while observing two children with the ability to speak. It forces her to wonder, "What if all they needed were teachers? Teachers and protectors...She had been a teacher. A good one. She had been a protector, too, though only of herself." Rye experiences several ups and downs throughout the story most of them happening rapidly in comparison to her hope for humanity's future which takes the entire story to shift. These swift fluctuations in emotion result in impaired decision-making, demonstrating how regardless of the situation, violent, sexual, maternal, etc., humanity is predisposed to certain behaviors.

Rye's ego depletion is intensely linked to her executive function, and this phenomenon is demonstrated throughout the story. Executive function is "higher level cognitive processes of planning, decision making, problem solving, ... [and] inhibition of competing impulses" (VandenBos). For the purpose of this analysis, executive function also referred to as cognitive control, is simply the ability to self-regulate and consciously make choices. The foremost impact on Rye's executive function is ego depletion. Dr. Baumeister defines ego depletion as "a state in which the self does not have all the resources it has normally... Ego depletion renders the self temporarily less able and less willing to function normally or optimally" (Baumeister, 116). Rye and humankind in "Speech Sounds" are indefinitely suffering some level of ego depletion as they lack the essential resource of communication.

Self-preservation plays a crucial role in Rye's decision-making process, suggesting that she is fighting to maintain her safety. "Every day had brought her closer to the time when she would do what she had left home to avoid doing: putting her gun in

her mouth and pulling the trigger” (Butler, 8). The only reason she ventured out into the world was based on survival. Rye consciously decided to seek out her brother and nephews in search of love and belonging. She had met her fundamental needs at home and maintained her safety. However, her need for love and belonging was not met, which triggered thoughts of suicide. This decision can be explained by Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs Theory, which suggests that when “lower level [needs] are fulfilled, those on the next level will emerge and demand satisfaction” (Trivedi, 1). Rye had delayed her journey “until loneliness and hopelessness drove her out. (Butler, 1). She hesitated to leave as she knew she would be risking her safety. At her home, she had a base level of executive function until she lacked the will to live – an essential resource – which compelled her to risk her security from external threats and attempt to fulfill higher-level needs.

Once on the bus to Pasadena, Rye was alert and cognitive of the dangers she encountered. She was not suffering any ego depletion until a fight broke out between two passengers. Rye effectively removed herself from the bus but severely depleted her ego while fighting to maintain her safety. A stranger dispersed the fight with tear gas. When the unfamiliar person asked Rye to get in his vehicle, she consciously weighed her options. The main struggle was the lack of clarity and uncertainty about possible outcomes. She was either in danger from the bystanders who fled the bus or Obsidian, a stranger. Her decision to get into Obsidian’s vehicle was heavily influenced by “ambiguous, uncertain, inconsistent, or conflicting standards [which] make self-regulation difficult.” (Baumeister, 117) This situation did not exhibit a complete lack of cognitive control. However, Rye’s emotions, and perhaps unconscious desires, were heavily involved in her decision. She tried to convince herself he was safe, “Maybe he was just alone. She had been alone herself for three years.” (Butler, 5). Rye was trying to justify her poor decision by empathizing with Obsidian. After choosing to get in the vehicle, she suppressed her conscious thoughts because “If she had let herself think of the possible deadly consequences of getting into a stranger’s car, she would have changed her mind.” (Butler, 5). This entire

situation was emotionally and mentally draining. An accurate explanation of Rye's psychological state is that the "ego depletion induced prosocial, reciprocal behaviors in response to highly trusting prosocial behaviors shown by a stranger partner in a one-shot encounter" (Halai, 752). Her cognitive abilities were depleted when she was forced to make a difficult decision. Consequently, she reciprocated Obsidian's social behavior and agreed to go with him. Obsidian's willingness to interact with Rye and offer of companionship in conjunction with a stressful situation caused Rye to get in his car even though she would not have under different circumstances.

Once Rye and Obsidian are alone, she is reassured by his willingness to follow her instructions. She can decompress from the prior situation and regain composure. Unfortunately, this calm does not last. When Obsidian takes out a map and asks her where she wants to go, she realizes he can read.

This realization and, subsequently, her reaction are emotionally charged and almost incapacitating. "Abruptly, she hated him—deep, bitter hatred... he was literate and she was not. She never would be. She felt sick to her stomach with hatred, frustration, and jealousy. And only a few inches from her hand was a loaded gun" (Butler, 6). Rye's quick and passionate reaction is an example of "immediate experienced emotions [that] are viscerally driven". Rye felt the hatred rush over her without much time to comprehend her feelings. Her emotional reaction was "dominant under a shortage of cognitive control resources", she felt nothing except overwhelming rage (Halai, 752). Before acting, Rye is able to compose herself, "her rage crested and ebbed and she did nothing" (Butler, 6). This is an example of Rye using self-restraint instead of immediately acting on her violent thoughts. When she reflects on her intense reaction, she realizes that "she had experienced longing for the past, hatred of the present, growing hopelessness, purposelessness, but she had never experienced such a powerful urge to kill another person" (Butler, 7). This powerful impulse took considerable effort to prevent taking action. The origin of her restraint was cognitive control: "the ability to 'deliberately inhibit dominant, automatic, or prepotent responses' in order to maximize the long-term best interests of the individual" (Halali,

746). Rye knew that killing Obsidian because of jealousy was not in her best interest, nor was it acceptable. She cognitively regulated her emotions and deferred to executive function rather than acting violently. Regulating this urge caused significant depletion in her ability to self-control leading to the subsequent events.

Obsidian propositioned Rye for sex only shortly after she had felt resentment toward him and his ability to read. Although she was initially hesitant, once Obsidian had addressed her concerns regarding possible consequences, she was convinced and eager to feel a connection. Her inhibitions were dwindling. Not only because she had not experienced intimacy in several years but because “self-control relies on a limited resource that gets depleted when one tries to inhibit competing behaviors, urges, or desires... As a result, an initial act of self-control impairs subsequent acts of self-control” (Halali, 746). Rye’s restraint from violence towards Obsidian took a lot of effort, making her less able and willing to control the want to have sex. In the study Halai conducted, subjects “reciprocated more when cognitive control resources were limited.” (752). Suggesting that reciprocating Obsidian’s affection was based on Rye’s exhausted mental state and ego depletion in conjunction with her previous self-restraint decreasing her willingness to deprive herself of a separate desire.

After intimacy, Rye asks Obsidian to come home with her. At first, he is hesitant... but eventually, he agrees. This results in Rye disbanding her journey to her brother’s and deciding to return to her own home. Obsidian sees a woman in danger on the way and stops the car to help. Rye has little control over this situation but later reflects that she similarly would have stopped to help. In Obsidian’s efforts to aid, he is killed by the aggressor. The companionship Obsidian offered is yanked from Rye. “It was as though she had been snatched from comfort and security and given a sudden, inexplicable beating. Her head would not clear. She could not think.” (Butler, 12). Rye acknowledged that she could not process the situation clearly. The deprivation she felt made her sick. She had nothing left to give when the two children approached her. Dr. Halai explains that “negative emotions provoke immediate self-centered emotions that

dictate behavior” (Halai, 752). After seeing the two orphans, Rye reverted back to survival mode, which is inherently self-centered. “She did not need any more grief. She did not need a stranger’s children who would grow up to be hairless chimps” (Butler, 10). Rye had lost all hope for human connection and subsequently lost hope in humanity. The negative emotions she felt caused “a shortage of cognitive control resources [which] led to an increase in negative reciprocity; that is, people tended to punish unfair treatment more often when they were depleted” (Halai, 748). Rye experienced an unfair situation, the loss of Obsidian, and subsequently was going to punish the two toddlers who had no part in his death.

Rye then realized that she should bury Obsidian. At this moment, she took inventory of her thoughts and comprehended that she was going to leave two innocent toddlers to die. Instead, she decides “she would have to take the children home with her. She would not be able to live with any other decision” (Butler, 11). Rye is completely spent, but she regulates herself. Dr. Halai explains, “guilt prohibits immoral behavior by the expected guilt following an immoral behavior” (Halai, 752). The thought of living with herself, something she was already struggling with, was too much. Even though she had experienced a negative situation that led to selfish behaviors, the anticipated guilt of leaving the children overwhelmed her initial self-centered reaction. She put Obsidian, the children, and their mother in the vehicle and took them home. Baumeister presents an alternative reason for Rye’s decision. Rather than acting out of guilt, perhaps she acted out of the need for connection. Baumeister states, “the desire for social connection is one of the three most basic and powerful human motives. That motive is ultimately what comes into conflict with selfish impulses” (Baumeister, 120). Even though Rye’s initial reaction was to leave the children, she needed a human connection and, more importantly, a reason to live.

Octavia Butler’s “Speech Sounds” demonstrates that humanity fundamentally needs social connection and purpose beyond surviving. Rye’s executive function is inhibited by ego depletion throughout the story, making it challenging to function rationally and, at times, compassionately. Yet, all

decisions that contradict her executive function have a common motivator. She desired love and belonging when she left home to find her brother. She found a connection in Obsidian, and though it was promptly taken from her, ultimately finds purpose and her capacity for compassion in the two orphans. “Speech Sounds” reminds readers that, above all, humans desire to belong and connect. Sometimes the need for relationships contradicts logic. However, it is necessary to provide a sense of purpose and will to live beyond merely surviving.

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Feminist/Queer Theory

Octavia Butler's, "Speech Sounds," an Overlooked Feminist Icon

Emily Rubio

Octavia Butler's story, "Speech Sounds," contains numerous hidden feminist undertones and was written during a time when women were subject to heavy prejudice and violence. As violence against females has been persisting throughout human history. Such as foot bindings in Ancient China, which was a common practice that involved breaking a woman's foot and binding it to restrict her ability to run, serving as a status symbol. Additionally, honor killings, in which a relative kills a girl for engaging in pre-marital sex, exemplify the ongoing violence. Thus, "Speech Sounds" critique of other prejudiced writers and their sexist practices earns it a place as an overlooked feminist icon. As women, having endured such pain and suffering for such an extended period, have chosen to stand up against the violence and the prejudice.

Before we can delve into the feminist undertones, it is important to understand the historical context of the time period in which Butler authored her story. According to James Henslin, at the time of the United States' founding, women were considered nothing more than property to their husbands or fathers. Therefore, the first wave of feminism emerged in 1920 with suffragists fighting for equal rights in a male-dominated world. Despite them facing strong opposition, they ended up

succeeding in securing the right to vote for women. The second wave of feminism, which had begun in the 1960s, focuses on combating gender inequalities such as the gender pay gap and biased laws that subjugated women. This movement remains relevant today, with many different organizations leading the fight. Both the second and third waves of feminism continue fighting, with many different organizations leading. During the third wave, women critique the societal morals and values that promote masculine over feminine qualities: "Some feminists argue that competition, toughness, calloused emotions, and independence represent "male" qualities and need to be replaced with cooperation, connection, openness, and interdependence" (Henslin 287). This wave emerged in the 2000s and also addresses the plight of women in underprivileged countries who still endure practices such as honor killings and female genital mutilation, whereby men mutilate female genitalia to exert control over them.

Octavia Butler wrote "Speech Sounds" between the second wave and third wave of feminism. During this turbulent time, women were heavily confined to the domestic sphere, and any deviation from it was viewed as a betrayal to society. They were assigned to household duties such as cooking, cleaning, and child-rearing, bound to their husbands, and denied their basic human rights. Regrettably, they were perceived merely as appendages to their husbands, devoid of individuality, hopes, and dreams. Consequently, their publications often revolved around the mundanity of their lives. The repetitive nature of their daily experiences over the years could drive anyone to the brink, leading them to seek alternative outlets for their free time. Consequently, numerous short stories and poems emerged from this time period. Kerrian Baker asserts that due to the restrictions and severe consequences if caught participating in the maledominated world, women had to modify men's genres and publish their own work discreetly. They subtly altered the genres to evade detection by men, while still allowing other women to recognize their contributions.

Octavia Butler made a courageous choice by featuring a double minority as the main character in her work, rather than a white man. Simply featuring a black protagonist was enough

to draw criticism from many other writers. Baker points out that during that time period, white male writers had dominated the field, and they predominantly used white male protagonists to convey their messages. Their biases became very apparent as they relegated characters of any races other than white and women to side characters in supporting roles that reinforced stereotypes about minorities. Therefore, Butler's decision to have her protagonist be both a woman and a black character was revolutionary within the literary landscape at the time. Despite women constituting half of the world's population and encompassing diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, they are still regarded as a minority. As Henslin states, "Every society sorts men and women into separate groups and gives them different access to property, power, and prestige" (Henslin 279). Gender has historically served as a primary dividing line among people worldwide, consistently favoring men over women, as women (as a group) have never had decision making power over men (as a group). Men have always held more power than women. Traditional narratives often depicted men as the ones embarking on adventures while women were relegated to being slaves to their emotions. Butler subverted this narrative completely by placing minorities in the spotlight. In doing so, she effectively challenged other writers who confined female characters to the sidelines and support roles, perpetuating the notion that women were only capable of serving as their husbands' maids and property. Butler demonstrated the falseness of this narrative.

The premise of Butler's apocalypse story is that an illness swept through the human population, leaving everyone without the ability to communicate. As Butler writes, "The illness, if it was an illness, had cut even the living off from one another... Language was always lost or severely impaired" (Butler 5). However, this illness serves as a metaphor for women having their voices silenced in society. Women are born with the innate ability to speak and communicate with others. It is only as they grow older that they start to feel the pressures society has imposed upon them—the pressure to conform to traditional gender roles. These roles include staying in the kitchen, maintaining their husband's house, taking care of the children,

and leaving external matters to the men. Society begins exerting this pressure from an early age through mass media, such as books and TV shows. Anything that deviates from these roles is rejected by society. This pressure compels women to try and strive for unattainable beauty standards and prevents them from stepping out of line. Due to this pressure to conform to traditional roles, women's voices are deemed much less valuable than men's. Traditionally, women have been subservient to men, resulting in them having less power. The inability of women's voices to carry significance has caused them to become a marginalized minority group without the ability to communicate meaningfully. Now that both men and women are unable to communicate meaningfully, reduced to mere grunts and gestures that hold little meaning, it signifies an apocalypse.

Language holds significant importance as it enables communication and collaboration among our species. Unlike any other animal or species, *homo sapiens* possess exceptional capabilities for clear communication. Through this ability, we can sustain the society we have built, including cities, communities, and transportation systems. Christina Smith asserts that "language is the most essential binding element of any complex society" (Smith 45). Without effective communication among our species, these systems would be completely unsustainable, thus leading to the utter collapse of everything our species has achieved. Our society as we know it would cease to exist, giving way to a new world order. Humanity would regress to a primitive fighting state, resorting to the nonverbal communication of grunts and growls, deprived of the ability to clearly communicate with one another. As Butler writes, "Could she speak? She nodded and watched his milder envy come and go" (Butler 7). Considering the crucial role language plays in maintaining society, it is intriguing that in Butler's apocalyptic world, it is a woman who retains the ability to speak, rather than a man who society has elevated to a pedestal. The power of speech and communication holds significant sway in this apocalyptic world, with the remaining humans engaged in an unending struggle for power. Granting this power to a woman challenges society's preached ideology

that women are incapable or unworthy of wielding such authority, as Butler clearly demonstrates their capacity to do so.

“Speech Sounds” by Octavia Butler has many hidden feminist undertones. The story was written at a time when women were heavily discriminated against and only considered capable of being their husband’s maid and property. Butler’s choice of a black woman as the protagonist in an apocalyptic setting challenges the prejudices of writers who engage in sexist practices. For example, the illness featured in the story serves as a metaphor for how women’s voices are silenced in society. By giving the power to a black woman, Butler proves that language is crucial, and women are equally deserving of having their voices heard. Her decision was revolutionary in the genre and challenged the sexist norms that relegated women to secondary roles. Women can take center stage, and it is imperative to represent them accurately, making “Speech Sounds” an unsung feminist icon.

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Chat GPT assisted with grammar and syntax correction throughout this essay. <https://chat.openai.com/chat>