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CRITERION

A LITERARY JOURNAL

21

VOLUME 39

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CRĪTERION

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VOLUME 39

CRĪTERION

A L I T E R A R Y J O U R N A L

Dear Reader,

WELCOME TO THE FIRST FULLY ONLINE EDITION OF *CRĪTERION*. We are excited about this shift from paper to screen, and hope that the journal still inspires and moves you the same way as a physical copy. We also hope that the online format allows for greater accessibility that will ensure that *CRĪTERION* has a wider reach.

The ten essays in this year's edition were meticulously sorted and selected to showcase the academic talent and devotion of LMU's English students. After a difficult fully-virtual year, this edition's featured authors demonstrate resilience after a devastating year of pandemic, racial injustice, and social upheaval. These included works represent how students of LMU turned to the study of literature to comprehend, cope, and find meaning in the tragedies of a mentally-tolling year. We would like to thank everyone who submitted, including those whose essays were not selected this year. We hope that all readers of *CRĪTERION* will find these essays to be intriguing, unique, and an appropriate reflection of our wonderful university.

To produce this fully virtual edition of *CRĪTERION*, our usual preparation, selection, and editorial processes were also adapted into a virtual format. Despite the strangeness and the awkwardness of this transition, each person involved with this project committed precious time and energy and delivered exceptional work. It is only fitting to extend a tremendous thank you to all the authors, editors, and faculty advisors who contributed to the creation and curation of this collection. You all did such fantastic work by various deadlines while also attending online classes and handling other extracurricular and essential responsibilities. Truly, a fantastic effort, and we couldn't be prouder that this beautiful end product was what came out of it.

Thank you to all readers, as well, for taking the time to read through these essays. We hope you thoroughly enjoy them.

Christina Martinez
Alexandra Paradzick
Comer Wadzeck
CO-EDITORS-IN-CHIEF

Toxic Maternity in Gillian Flynn's *Sharp Objects*

ABIGAIL DAVIS

Most sows are repeatedly inseminated, brood after brood, till their bodies give way and they go to slaughter. But while they're still useful, they're made to nurse—strapped to their sides in a farrowing crate, legs apart, nipples exposed. Pigs are extremely smart, sociable creatures and this forced assembly-line intimacy makes the nursing sows want to die. Which, as soon as they dry up, they do.

—GILLIAN FLYNN, *SHARP OBJECTS*

THE PERVERSE IMAGE of forced maternity acts as the backdrop for Gillian Flynn's *Sharp Objects*, a story that puts the ideology of motherhood into question. The twenty-first century has presented a lot of ambivalence towards the topic of motherhood in America. Women have more ability to choose than ever before but continue to be bombarded with the

pressure to have kids and are simultaneously inundated with constant ridicule and judgment on what it means to be a “good” mother (Badinter 123). In a culture obsessed with motherhood, contemporary American fiction has presented the trope of toxic maternity. Toxic mothers are mothers who kill their children; raise children who kill themselves; or worse, raise children who kill others—mothers like Casey Anthony, Augusta Gein, and Medea (Seidel 3, Doyle 186, Rozmarin 321). The trope makes me wonder: are *all* women suited for the mom-job? Flynn's answer is no; she creates a town plagued with death and the mother is responsible. Critics claim Flynn undermines her sex with a negative depiction of women. I'd like to offer an opposing viewpoint: Flynn potentiates the toxic maternity trope to force readers to re-examine a collective bias about women's societal roles and suggests that a



ABIGAIL DAVIS is a M.A. candidate in the English graduate program at Loyola Marymount University. Her scholarship explores the ideology of motherhood as represented in contemporary American fiction. This essay was written for Dr. Dermot Ryan's Critical Methodology class. Abigail lives in Los Angeles with her husband and a lot of books. When she isn't reading literature, she's attempting to write it. Right now, she's working on a lyrical novel that explores similar topics of motherhood and cyclical trauma.

society that puts pressure on all women to have kids is one that breeds toxicity.

Though there is scarce scholarly discussion on toxic maternity as it relates to contemporary fiction, feminist scholars have identified and highlighted the conflicting messages surrounding motherhood and there has been broad cultural critique and scholarship on the “good” vs. “bad” mother. Despite efforts of feminist scholars “to deconstruct the notions that women naturally possess maternal instincts or the desire to sacrifice themselves for their families, many people remain sentimentally invested in these ideas” (Seidel xii). Therefore, the “good” mother is “the traditional feminine and self-sacrificing woman who devotes her life to her children”; whereas, the bad mother “put[s] [her] quest for agency in the world ahead of [her] solicitude for [her] children” (Seidel 85). “Bad” mothers are powerful businesswomen like Patty Hewes, in the television show *Damages*, who reflect “persistent cultural anxieties about the roles of career women in an intensely competitive society” (Seidel 85). “Bad” mothers can be seen as “disruptive and dangerous women who threaten the institutions of marriage, motherhood, and filial duty” (qtd. in Seidel 17). We can use their stories to “trace the shape of patriarchy; the key junctures in a woman’s life when male control and violence are deployed to domesticate her sexuality or her reproductive agency into something less fearsome, and the monstrosities that invariably show up at these junctures, justifying male violence by demonstrating what the patriarchy fears women may become” (Doyle xx). The following pages put a close reading of *Sharp Objects* in conversation with relevant scholarship. My

hope is to contribute to existing conversation around why the “bad” mother is so prevalent in stories Americans create and consume, and to further interpret what this trope says about cultural anxieties.

Toxic mothers are “bad” mothers. They stem from a culture with an ideological investment in motherhood that is toxic. Flynn showcases this in her work. She mimics stereotypical gender roles by strictly enforcing them in the female characters of *Wind Gap*, where seemingly rebellious girls are either tamed or killed off. The town “demands utmost femininity in the fairer sex” (13). Girls are presented as docile and doll-like, morphing into their mothers. Like the pigs, the women in *Wind Gap* are all destined to breed. The narrator, Camille, is not like the other girls in *Wind Gap*, and does not follow this expectation. She has escaped the small town and moved to Chicago, where she’s become a crime reporter, and she is only back on her boss’s orders to investigate the murders of two young girls. Camille is a cutter and a drunk, but what really sets Camille apart from her peers, whom she describes as an exact mirror of her mother’s group (minus twenty years), is that she’s the only one who is still single and childless (35-36).

Each generation of *Wind Gap* women follows the generation before it in its destiny for motherhood. For historian and philosopher Elisabeth Badinter, “the eternal appeal to the maternal instinct, and the behavior it presupposes, are in fact motherhood’s worst enemies” (6). Through Camille, the reader is able to recognize the toxic ideological investment in maternity, and the danger that

ensues from the assumption that all women have a maternal instinct. Camille's childhood friends do not accept her way of life. Their disapproval is made evident one evening as they discuss the topic of going back to work after childbirth. One woman breaks down in tears, admitting she decided to go back to work to find purpose, but regrets the decision. Another woman reminds her that she has purpose and shouldn't "let those feminists... make [her] feel guilty for having what they can't have" (131). Another decides that God and science are on the same side of the discussion, reminding the group, "the Bible says be fruitful and multiply... that's what women were made for" (134). Though the women call Camille out for being different and make a nod to her as a "feminist," she doesn't challenge or interact in this conversation. Instead, she suppresses her feelings. As a recovering cutter, she "wanted to slice *barren* into [her] skin. That's how [she'd] stay, [her] insides unused. Empty and pristine. [She] pictured [her] pelvis split open, to reveal a tidy hollow, like the nest of a vanished animal" (134-135). This violent internalization is evidence of how harmful it can be to live in a culture that doesn't accept women who do not have children. She doesn't have an outlet for her emotions, so she turns to thoughts of physically harming herself.

For Badinter, women without children, like Camille, whether infertile or by choice, are "all equally suspect" and disapproved of by the public. Women today have "far greater freedom to choose motherhood...which means their fate is no longer synonymous with motherhood," but even with "an increasing number of women [who] have chosen to opt out of motherhood,"

there are still women who don't realize they have the agency to choose (123-124). Therefore, there are women who become mothers for all the wrong reasons, merely because they were conditioned to do so. Camille's mother, Adora, is one of those women. Adora represents the type of mother who comes from a toxic ideological investment in maternity. Her actions are a consequence of this ideology.

Adora completely abides by the gendered role society prescribes. When Adora got pregnant at seventeen, practically a child herself, she quickly found a man to marry and started a family. She embodied everything a "good" mother should, and as a result, "the town loved [Adora, who] was like a cake topping: the most beautiful, sweet girl Wind Gap had ever raised" (75). She has "glowing pale skin, with long blonde hair and pale blue eyes," and she is always immaculately presented (24). This is not the image one would expect to represent toxic maternity, but Adora is the most toxic of all. Adora ultimately kills one daughter (Marian), raises one daughter who kills (Amma), and another daughter who tries to kill herself (Camille). Flynn suggests that the town raised her, and sets up a culture of dysfunction in Wind Gap, revealing that this toxicity is being bred on a societal level.

Flynn's creation of Adora as the ultimate "good" mother gone terribly "bad" prompts a reexamination of definitions of "good" and "bad." Are they really all that different? One might ask: what would drive a "good" mother to hurt, or worse, kill her child? According to ethicist Sarah LaChance Adams, this behavior doesn't necessarily constitute a "bad" mother. LaChance Adams blurs the lines between "good" and "bad"

mothers, arguing that good mothers share “in the feelings and impulses” of bad mothers (2). She calls this “maternal ambivalence” and asks society to acknowledge maternal ambivalence as a “mother’s simultaneous desires to nurture and violently reject their children,” calling it a source for maternal filicide. These negative feelings are common and “the result of valid conflicts that exist between mothers’ and children’s interests” (5).

LaChance Adams relates the public’s misunderstanding of maternal filicide to its romanticism of the mother’s relationship to her child. Carol Conger, who has analyzed long-term effects of child abuse, agrees, citing one cause of child abuse as the “rage and guilt at not being able to fulfill the romantic ideals of motherhood and childhood” (qtd. in Simons 75). In a conversation with Camille, Adora admits her ideals of motherhood have not been fulfilled:

I think I finally realize why I don’t love you...
You remind me of my mother...Cold and
distant and so, so smug. My mother never
loved me either, and if you girls won’t love
me, I won’t love you...When I had you inside
me, when I was a girl—so much younger
than you are now—I thought you’d save me. I
thought you’d love me. And then my mother
would love me. That was a joke. (148-149)

Adora claims her own mother didn’t love her, which suggests her romantic ideals of motherhood did not come from inside her home, but rather that she is a subject of a conditioned society. She has thought that by having a child of her own, she’d be able to mend the relationship she had with her mother, and

somehow feel fulfilled. That doesn’t happen, and the toxicity manifests and is rebirthed.

Adora’s inability to gain the positive experience of motherhood she thought was owed to her is probably what leads her to seek attention as a perpetrator of Munchausen Syndrome by Proxy. MSBP is a psychological disorder that is considered child abuse. The syndrome is defined as “a situation wherein a person induces illness in a child to get attention” (Morrell and Tilley 328). In our society, the pressures and politics of maternity in accidental pregnancies lead adolescent, unprepared mothers to not only have babies, but also to perform motherhood as a way of recapturing their adolescence. MSBP is a vehicle to illustrate this behavior. Adora’s parents literally died upon finding out about her accidental pregnancy. As a young child, Adora was under strict rules and, when she came home pregnant, her parents “grew angry twin tumors to match [Adora’s] expanding tummy and were dead within a year” (75). This exaggerated reaction exposes a paradox of pressure put on women to remain pure and childlike, yet also to strive for attention, with sex and fulfillment in motherhood. These are impossible expectations, and when they are not met, society places blame on both the child and the parents.

Without any support from her immediate family or the society at large, Adora is still expected to be a “good” mother. In her diary, we see how this pressure is toxic. She seems to be playing house rather than participating in motherhood:

Camille has never become a good patient—
being sick only makes her angry and spiteful.

She doesn't like me to touch her. I've never heard of such a thing...I hate her. Marian is such a doll when she's ill, she dotes on me terribly and wants me with her all the time. I love wiping away her tears (242).

In our culture, young girls are given dolls to play with. Dolls are props, as if caretaking is some sort of game. Dolls are passive and often stay in their dollhouses. Adora likes Marian because, like a doll, she is passive and lets Adora tend to her. She says she "hates" Camille, which is language a child would use if someone refused to go along with a game. Camille refuses to act passively. She is lively and fights back. Adora's actions show how the glorification of motherhood can lead directly to toxic maternity.

Throughout the book, the glorification of motherhood is consistently shown through the representation of dolls and dollhouses, which imitate a collective bias about women's societal roles. Just as the pigs of Wind Gap are held in crates, the women are represented as dolls in a dollhouse. The dollhouse and the crate can both be interpreted as cages. A cage has two purposes: "it serves to keep women confined... [but also] to protect the world from what is inside it. On some level, the cage exists to keep women from getting *out*" (Doyle xv). The doll in a dollhouse represents the expectation that girls are meant to be passive, grow up to be mothers, and stay in the private sphere. Adora showcases how this forced behavior is destructive.

Adora is "a girl's very best doll, the kind you don't play with" (24). Like a doll, Adora is always in her house. For sociologist Sharon Hays, "distrust of powerful women and distrust of the market-controlled workplace are supported by

continuing belief in the difference between the public and the private...the private [sphere] being the home where women supposedly maintain a safe haven and moral purity" (qtd. in Seidel 86). Adora operates almost exclusively in the private sphere, and she poisons her children there, suggesting that home is where the toxicity of her maternity thrives. Location directly relates to behavior for a perpetrator of MSBP, making Adora the perfect character to illuminate the private and public spheres. Camille recognizes how Adora's role changes, outside of the home:

Even I, in public, was a beloved child...she'd parade me into town, smiling and teasing me, tickling me as she spoke with people on the sidewalks. When we got home, she'd trail off to her room like an unfinished sentence, and I would sit outside with my face pressed against her door and replay the day in my head, searching for clues to what I'd done to displease her. (96-97)

Adora puts on a performance for the public. She does not leave her child's side, and appears devoted and selfless; however, at home, she discards her child as if she's no longer in the mood to play house.

Although Adora is primarily bound to the home, she does not lack power in the public sphere. She owns the pig farm and half the houses around it (50). The farm gruesomely exploits female pigs. The town is known for this farm, and everyone benefits from it. Adora "lets other people run it," but rakes in the profits. She employs the town members, most of whom wear earplugs to drown out the sound of the frantic squeals of dying pigs. This lets

the workers “spend their days in a soundless rage” (49). Adora’s ownership of the farm implies that toxicity is reinforced by its own subjects. This woman, who appears to be, by society’s definition, a “good” mother, poisons her children in private, and represents the exploitation of maternity in public. Everyone in town participates. The matter of covering one’s ears or looking away is up to the individual.

The greatest beneficiary of Adora’s toxicity is her youngest daughter, Amma, and she chooses to participate with eyes wide open. When she doesn’t think anyone is watching, Amma visits the pig farm alone. She is drawn to the mother pigs. In one scene, Camille says that Amma “walked straight past the slaughtering house, past the lines of pig holds, those wet pink snouts squirming between the air slats, and to a big metal barn of a building where the nursing happens.” Camille describes the practice of forced maternity as “repulsive.” She says that the sight of the pigs is “like watching a rape and saying nothing” (99). Amma, on the other hand, is in a trance. She “[sits] down cross-legged and gazed, fascinated. After five minutes she [is] still in the same position, now smiling and squirming” (100). It’s as if watching the abuse gives Amma joy.

Amma craves her mother’s attention and will do anything to get it. She plays with a dollhouse that’s the exact replica of Adora’s house, and she has learned how to mimic doll-like behavior to manipulate the public and private spheres. Amma is “a smart girl—she has done her acting out away from home. Near Adora she is compliant, sweet, needy—just what she’s had to be, to get [her] mother’s love” (101). In the home, Amma is like a baby doll, dressing for Adora because, according to Amma, “when [she

is] home, [she is Adora’s] little doll” (43). Amma is the most doll-like when Adora makes her sick. Camille witnesses this one day as she “[sits] naked on the floor in front of her huge dollhouse, a thumb in her mouth” (193). Amma admits she knows Adora gives her medicine to make her sick, and she realizes she has the agency to stop it, but she insists “[she doesn’t] mind. Sometimes [she doesn’t] take it—just pretend[s]. Then [they] are both happy” (194). The fact that Amma is able to recognize her mother’s abuse suggests that she can break the cycle, but she chooses not to. Amma’s decision to participate in her mother’s abuse may relinquish her social agency, but it seems to give her an internal feeling of agency. She knows that when she is sick, her mother is happy. Her decision to participate, therefore, gives her a sense of power. She has power over her mother’s happiness.

Outside the home, Amma adapts her doll-like behavior in sexual situations, admitting, “after [Adora] takes care of [her], [she] like[s] to have sex” (182). Camille warns Amma not to let boys do things to her, but, again, Amma looks at her actions as a form of agency. She says:

Sometimes if you let people do things to you, you’re really doing it to them...If someone wants to do fucked-up things to you, and you let them, you’re making them more fucked up. Then you have the control. As long as you don’t go crazy. (182)

This is clearly a coping mechanism. Self-harm brings Camille a sense of control and relief, and sex does the same for Amma.

Amma’s delusion of agency is not healthy. She can be looked at as an example of how

abuse is cyclical as she replicates the learned toxicity throughout the town. This is made most evident when she is revealed as the killer of the two girls Camille returned to town to investigate. Just like Adora treats Amma like a doll, Amma treats her conquests like dolls. When Ann Nash and Natalie Keen are alive, the little girls are not doll-like at all. They don't prescribe to feminine roles. They are wild and unruly. Amma kills them and leaves them looking like dolls. When Natalie is found dead, she sits propped up as if on display. Her eyes are "wide open," and, toothless, her lips are "caved in around her gums in a small circle. She looks "like a plastic doll, the kind with a built-in hole for bottle feedings" (28). Amma collects the teeth to create a porcelain floor for her dollhouse to match the one Adora has in her bathroom, binding Natalie to the private sphere forever and further reinforcing her place as a female in the home. The dollhouse is, therefore, literally made of death, proving that in confining these girls to a constructed gender role, the role itself becomes deadly.

This girl-on-girl crime becomes even more complex when considering all the power dynamics at play. There are various power struggles. Amma craves her mother's attention and has felt that Adora has given too much attention to the young girls. Ironically, Adora has only given those girls attention to get closer to Camille. Adora admits that they reminded her of Camille, "running around town wild. Like little pretty animals. [She] thought if [she] could be close with them, [she] would understand [Camille] better. If [she] could like them, maybe [she] could like [Camille]. But [she] couldn't" (148-149). Like a wild animal,

Adora can't control Camille. This causes her to dominate Amma. Amma can't control her mother, so she dominates the girls. Camille turns her oppression in and harms herself.

Feminist author Sady Doyle claims, "fantasies about violent women usually conceal realities about violent men" (xxii). Wind Gap is a town rooted in toxic masculinity. This is made apparent as the history of crime in the town is revealed. Richard, a detective from out-of-town, points this out to Camille. She rattles off a list of the crimes she can remember from childhood: a woman hurting a young girl; boys bullying a young girl into defiling herself on the playground while others watched; a teenager, gang raped at a party. What shocks the detective is Camille's nonchalance in the description of these matters. She doesn't seem to be moved by them. She describes how the girl on the playground was forced to apologize to the class. They were taught, "Young ladies must be in control of their bodies because boys are not" (109). When she tells the story about the teenager getting "passed around," she asks if that counts in Richard's criteria for violence. Both the violence and the response to the violence prove the conditioned nature of the women in Wind Gap. Richard is appalled and "surprised [the girl] wasn't made to apologize for letting them rape her." This comment sets Camille off. It seems personal for Camille to stick up for the agency of the women. She uses discourse to flip the situation around. She calls Richard sexist, saying, "I'm so sick of liberal lefty men practicing sexual discrimination under the guise of protecting women against sexual discrimination...sometimes drunk women aren't raped; they just make stupid choices—

and to say we deserve special treatment when we're drunk because we're women, to say we need to be *looked after*, I find offensive" (110).

Perhaps, as a grownup, Camille feels she needs to give some power to the girls because she related to them as a child. She describes an environment of toxic masculinity in a scene where she has wandered into her neighbor's hunting shed as a twelve-year-old:

Ribbons of moist, pink flesh dangled from strings, waiting to be dried for jerky. The dirt floor was rusted with blood. The walls were covered with photographs of naked women. Some of the girls were spreading themselves wide, others were being held down and penetrated. One woman was tied up, her eyes glazed, breasts stretched and veined like grapes, as a man took her from behind. (14-15)

Here, dead animals and violated women are side-by-side, as if they are one and the same. The fact that they are both hanging on the walls as objects to admire suggests that these men idolize terrorizing both animal and female. The woman who is tied up has "glazed" eyes, which is what Camille once recognized in Amma's expression while watching the nursing sows. The adjective implies an environment where women are sedated and suppressed. Camille's reaction to the hunting shed proves that she is more like Amma than she has thought: "at home that night, [she] slipped her finger under [her] panties and masturbated for the first time, panting and sick" (15). The only difference is that where Amma finds ways to exert her agency outwardly, Camille turns in. Her

masturbation is a form of agency. Although she knows it's "sick," it's her way of participating in an environment of toxic masculinity.

Although Camille is flawed, she's ultimately the only character with enough agency to stop history from repeating itself. Like LaChance Adams, humanities scholar Linda Seidel highlights the importance of recognizing bad habits and breaking patterns:

One might argue that the Snow White tale suggests that mothers and daughters will always compete with one another in patriarchal cultures. Similarly, the Medea play hints that children have long been at risk of becoming pawns in their parents' power struggles. But the fact that these patterns have been in place a long time does not make them inevitable. The recognition that women and children have rights has been accompanied by a somewhat reluctant admission that these rights sometimes conflict and must be socially negotiated. (xviii)

Camille identifies her rights, and socially negotiates her place in the world. She escapes Wind Gap, and she is the only character with a positive ending. She finds parent figures in her boss and his wife, nullifying the myth of lone success in the nuclear family, and she goes into recovery.

According to LaChance Adams, support and deliberative agency are the means necessary to avoid filicide (5). Camille takes the first step in deliberative agency. She acknowledges her self-destructive behavior, and her potential for external violence. During

her recovery process, Camille considers her role in everything. She wonders if she was “good at caring for Amma because of kindness? Or [if she liked] caring for Amma because [she has] Adora’s sickness?” and admits, “[she] waver[s] between the two, especially at night, when [her] skin begins to pulse” (252). Her brutally honest self-reflection forces readers to question whether Camille should ever be a mother. Through Camille, Flynn presents a valid point of view: maybe some women are not meant to be mothers. She clearly doesn’t see herself as suited for the job.

This is a valid concern for women in our society. For Badinter, “to admit that you are not cut out to be a mother...would brand you as a reckless monster” (15). In an effort to challenge this sentiment, Margaret Simons aims to provide a philosophical justification for the choice not to be a mother. Simons claims, “for feminism to be really pro-choice, a woman must be able to choose not to be a mother without losing her self-respect or identity as a woman” (2). Simons calls for the recognition of difficulties created by the social institution of mothering that would result in women choosing not to become mothers. For example, like Camille, “contemporary American mothers can pass on to their children the physical and emotional abuse they themselves suffered in childhood” (Simons 5).

Camille represents a phenomenon of childlessness that has become more widespread, showcasing the resistance to motherhood, and suggesting the need to redefine women’s identity. She recognizes toxic maternity and reinforces the ability to choose motherhood on an individual level. Seidel points out that this challenges an existing patriarchal fear

because when women have reproductive power, they “could end the world as we know it” (88). When women are able to “control reproduction, pursue studies, enter the job market, and aspire to financial independence, motherhood stops being a natural, self-evident fact, becoming a question instead” (Badinter 132). With the ability to choose, women are given an identity and path to self-fulfillment outside of motherhood. This is an advertently feminist message—one that threatens the patriarchy by presenting paths that alter from the nuclear family (Doyle xvii). For Doyle, “patriarchy is inherently unsustainable... and if women realized how fragile male control is, everything might change” (Doyle xvii).

Doyle explains that “at the heart of horror is a bad mother; the familiar and terrible vision of a woman corrupting the world, unleashing her own flaws upon it through her monstrous children” (188). Camille mirrors the typical societal reaction that “every killer is some mother’s fault” (Doyle 187). She says: “Amma enjoyed hurting... I blame my mother. A child weaned on poison considers harm a comfort” (251). However, we must not forget that Adora was weaned on poison too. The town failed her first. Through this recognition, a gruesome truth is revealed: our society romanticizes motherhood but does not provide healthy ways to support mothers. So, beyond merely asking if *all* women are suited for the mom-job, we must now ask: how can we redefine the mom-job? How can we make entry into and survival in motherhood possible?

Beyond individual deliberative agency, collective agency is needed to break the cycle of toxicity. Empowering one another is where opportunity for change can arise. Our society

must recognize that “love, even maternal love, does not conquer all... We must struggle against inequalities and fight for the liberation and care of every human being for our own sake as well as theirs...The fight for justice must be a collective human effort” (LaChance Adams 191). Instead of casting sole blame on the mother for the child’s actions, we might consider who else is responsible. It takes a village to raise a child, but “it also takes a village to allow one to be so severely abused. To merely blame the mother, to pass her off as pathological, is grossly insufficient. It is not enough to ask the question, ‘Why did she do it?’ We must also ask: how did we let this happen in our community?” (LaChance Adams 192-193).

Wind Gap is an illustration of how communities fail to support one another. Through Adora’s husband, Alan, we see how a lack of paternal support aids abuse. Alan is a wallflower. He could have stepped in to make a difference in his daughters’ lives but he didn’t. He watches Adora medicate Amma, and not only tolerates it, but excuses it. He dismisses the severity of the situation, saying things like, “Nothing to worry about,” and, “We Crellins run a bit delicate” (58). Even though he isn’t the one administering the abuse, lack of intervention makes him just as guilty. He also excuses Amma’s toxic behavior. He apologizes for Amma’s violent tantrums, claiming she’s just “going through one of those stages” (66). When Amma actually takes responsibility for her behavior, he dismisses her apology. He says, “There’s not a speck of evil in you, sweetheart” (67). With this, Amma continues in her toxic ways.

The community members also fail to properly intervene. Their toxic ideologies

prevent them from doing so. The only key witness to Natalie’s abduction claims she was taken by a woman who looked like “she’d never been outside before” (51). The story is dismissed because everyone in town, including the Chief of Police, is determined that the killer is a man. They are so blinded by gender norms that they can’t imagine a woman committing the crime. Since Ann wasn’t sexually molested, her father suggests the killer might be a “homo” (20). Natalie’s sensitive brother, John, cries too much, so the town soon places blame on him. As time goes on, Ann’s father admits that he thinks Ann must have gone with someone she knew and would be more likely to go with a woman, but he still thinks the killer is a man because he “can’t picture a woman doing all...that to a baby” (93). Even though the signs indicate the killer is a woman, the idea of a woman exerting power over another person is unbelievable.

As Camille researches the death of her sister Marian, we see how not much has changed over the years. Before Marian died, a female nurse tried to warn the doctors. She co-wrote a letter reporting the abuse, claiming, “I and several other nurses, who for political reasons choose not to sign their names to my statement, believe strongly the child, as well as her sister, should be removed from the home for further observation” (227). The nurse tells Camille that the doctors regarded it as “some childless, jealous nurse’s pettiness.” The nurse was told to take the week off because she was “one of those hysterical women” (229). The nurse claims it was a different time back then, but in reality, the town still has the same ideological issues. Perhaps Flynn is trying to bring to light how slow progress has been made in society.

In one sense, *Sharp Objects* is a feminist revenge fantasy, where perfect, primed mothers breed toxicity and bring demise to the town. More importantly, *Sharp Objects* makes the environment of toxic maternity recognizable and offers up a path to break its cycle. Most stories targeted at women “reinforce the values that women are supposed to have rather than foment rebellion against patriarchal oppression...these genres teach women to ‘live for love,’ whether romantic or maternal, even when—or, perhaps, especially when—it disappoints” (Berlant qtd. in Seidel 6). However, in *Sharp Objects*, Flynn exposes the roots of toxic maternity to challenge readers to consider the consequences of the social and sexual disenfranchisement of women.

Typically, women like Adora are demonized by society (Seidel 86). Flynn does not demonize Adora. Instead, she grants her a fan club and fights for her freedom. When Adora is found guilty of murder in the first degree, her lawyer quickly prepares an appeal, which is “‘enthusiastically chronicled by the group that runs [her]’ (Web site, freeadora.org)” (epilogue). Flynn’s liberation of the “bad” mother inspires a feminist transformation to take place. The “bad” mother is seen as problematic to society because she threatens the patriarchy, which “mandates one specific, supposedly “natural” family structure—a man using a woman to create and raise “his” children” (Doyle xvi). When the “bad” mother is liberated, the possibilities for women are endless. “Bad” mothers “can tell us more about motherhood...they are politically important” (Rozmarin 328). The psychological burden that mothers carry is driven by a political context. If

our society normalized equalitarian parenting and stopped assigning very specific roles to one person of one set gender without social support, there’s no reason we couldn’t liberate the “bad” mom indefinitely. «

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Gazing Away From Arthur: An In-Depth Analysis of Mulvey's Male Gaze Theory Applied to Arthurian Literature

SOFIA ACOSTA

FEMALE REPRESENTATIONS IN Old English Arthurian literature are riddled with stereotypical gender norms, weak character development, and contrasting personality traits. It is important to note that there are no records of Arthurian literature written by women until the nineteenth century. However, despite these common tropes, it is essential to recognize how these male-dominated works have been written to create these skewed depictions. The literature—influenced by its authors—gives insight into how women were viewed by their corresponding translations onto paper. Laura Mulvey's Male Gaze Theory, from her infamous essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," offers a psychosocial

approach to understanding these perspectives of the "male gaze," one that can be applied within the Arthurian narrative framework. By using Mulvey's theory as a critical approach to dissecting Arthurian literature, we can further understand how the author's "male gaze" influenced narratives written in relation to women's evolving roles in literature. This modern approach enables us to see how literature follows the attitudes of society and women's corresponding socio-political positions in society, maintaining a gendered culture that is still prominent today.

For a brief history, women's roles within Arthurian literature were confined to religious settings, children, marriage, and home life.



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While these depictions remain a prominent norm, the literature has expanded to include more accurate depictions of womanhood in a variety of settings within Arthur's story. Since the first reliable reference to Arthur around 830 A.D., women have slowly been able to move forward in society towards more elevated positions of power; literature took heed, following soon after. Women began appearing on western thrones, entering robust roles within society despite recorded backlash. Their reigns were translated within Arthurian literature—analogs of which are distinctly recognized in both "The Idylls of The King" and "The Faerie Queene." The 19th century marked the first wave of feminism as women pushed at the boundaries of their restrictive society, moving towards equality between the sexes, including equal representation and power distribution. The impact of a changing society—combined with the efforts of two waves of feminist movement—has been able to change the attitudes of modern writers.

As real-life precedents for expanding positions of women in power began in Western society, the corresponding Arthurian literature represented a passive "male gaze," depicting distant understandings of females through one-dimensional characters with extremist personality traits. Within the 16th century, Edmund Spenser's "The Faerie Queene" is dedicated to one of these women breaking political norms. The epic romance was inspired by Queen Elizabeth I, its title even an ode to her, acting as an allegory portrayed by the Faerie Queene—Queen Gloriana—within the story. The name itself was an accolade to her, meaning "glorious grace," showcasing Spenser's

willingness to appease her and his preexisting respect for her political position. The story begins by following the quest of a knight whose mission was ordered by the queen. The knight praises his monarch instead of disparaging her for sending him on a mission he knows to be deadly; he is grateful to showcase his knighthood and abilities for the queen in power, acknowledging his place: "To winne him worship, and her grace to have, / [w]hich of all earthly thinges he most did crave" ("Faerie Queene" 10). Spenser breaks out of the "male gaze" within this depiction by simply not questioning the monarch's ability, allotting her the same regard and respect as male monarchs. This reflected an ease in accepting women in power. Wynne-Davies—a writer who has published literary criticism extensively covering women's roles in Arthurian literature—highlights this phenomenon reflected by Spenser in almost a predisposition to accept female power. She further suggests that these pieces of literature provide evidence of these changing roles "through the tracing of gender identities through successive ages... simultaneously aware that these categories are not constant, rather, they are challenged or investigated in the literary works" (Wynne-Davies 3). Within this era, this new precedent provides an acknowledgement of female power, challenging traditional norms and marking a necessary change that had occurred within society (especially with the aggravated attitudes towards Queen Elizabeth I's religious standing).

However, Spenser does not set permanent character traits for the women depicted in his work, skipping over necessary character development that grants them their unique

individuality. Their identities are not actually fleshed out like their male counterparts. This weak character development for women lacks the relatability that would have made this work astoundingly socially advanced for its time. For example—Una, another main character also present within the opening scene—displays this issue. She fills the role of the pure, chaste woman who is both wise and dumb, quiet and outspoken, powerful and weak. Harry Berger, a prominent writer and critic of Spenser's essays, points heavily at these contradicting character traits as they fail to encompass the true "complex reality of woman," due to Spenser's attempts to "idealize women or the feminine viewpoint" (Berger 92). Berger cites his own work, *Revisionary Play: Studies in the Spenserian Dynamics*, to further this analysis, "appropriately inflected towards the dialect of male and female" (Berger 12). It acknowledges the differences Spenser failed to make in the equal representation of women. The "male gaze" forces women falsely into the perceived male position, instead of taking their own, with equitable standing, next to men. In his introduction, Berger continues this correlation by claiming that "since two lovers are neither able to melt into one nor likely to live happily ever after if they expect to melt into one, they must acknowledge differentness or separateness and accept their differences" (Berger 22). Through this perspective, the "male gaze" itself has changed its specifications of appeasement, but still remains an oppressive force that erases the individuality of *both* genders.

On various occasions, Una is seen breaking gendered norms, assuming the trope of the wise savior when her counterpart,

the knight, is in trouble. She is the first to acknowledge the danger they are in and is already seemingly familiar with the ominous location on their quest to defeat the monster, Errour. Una, despite waiting patiently to the side, apparently quietly watching the battle, only "...Cri[es] out, 'Now now Sir knight, shwe what ye bee, / Add faith vnto your force, and be not faint'" when the knight seems to yield to the battle, accepting momentary defeat ("The Faerie Queene" 11). There is an odd balance between her resigned nature and her essential involvement and coaching in the battle that spurs the knight to finally stab Errour, killing the monster. It almost flips the damsel-in-distress dynamic to the knight; however, in a literarily weak manner. This flipped dynamic is seen more prominently in Canto 1, as Una saves the knight's life once again in the end. This variability in Una's persona—sometimes weak, sometimes strong—showcases a multiplicity that is not fleshed out enough to actually portray a truly dynamic, nuanced human.

Una is also a representation of Spenser's gaze's ideal female, who resembles holy figures more than actual women, resulting in a loss of relatability and, in a way, humanity. The "male gaze" is most prominent in Spenser's representations of virtue and purity through Una and the Faerie Queene. He correlates women's worth with their good deeds and their ability to cater to a male voyeurism of their perfect, virtuous abilities, establishing "that which is for Ladies most befitting, / [t]o stint all strife, and foster friendly peace, / [w]as from those Dames so farre and so unfitting" ("The Faerie Queene" 193). This enables rigid gender stereotypes that fit the male gaze of women as

pacifiers, communicators, and peacemakers without allocating them the same accreditation and position in society as men who do the same within political contexts. It displays that women need to be pure of strife. Only within these depictions can they be portrayed as righteous. Berger claims that a “certain amount of discord is essential” and “[w]here there is no opposition there can be no true concord” (Berger 19). This showcases the need for more character development and more interactions between differently gendered characters that portray their unique personalities, not just passive gestures, for them to step out of the “male gaze.” Furthermore, Una hasn’t even been named until halfway through the opening Canto. The only establishing qualifiers written to represent her were the references to her purity, further accredited by her introductory scene riding in on a lamb—a reference both to her name and its definition of purity. This depiction does not represent a woman, but rather one seen through the lens of the “male gaze,” whether consciously or not.

The queen herself is another representation of a pure individual, seemingly untouched by any authentic human traits. The work lacks honest, personal portrayals of women despite the situations of power they are placed in. Their personalities seem to cater to the specific needs of the scene, instead of having an unwavering personality that characterizes them with real development and pathos. Una seems to come to no realization or real revelation within the story, her position as a main character more comparable to that of background, a scene-continuer lacking any unique abilities outside of momentary

conflict where she’s finally remembered and utilized. Although the depictions of both Una and the queen are not inherently negative, they lack the substance to portray a real woman. The ability for readers to even connect with the perspective of Spenser’s gaze falters. Perfection isn’t relatable. No one can connect with it but the “male gaze,” which itself doesn’t even provide the framework for relatability, but rather voyeurism. These women are associated with god-like virtues. These comparisons to holy figures strip them of their flawed humanity, placing them on a suffocating pedestal. This gaze positions the women as otherworldly, pristine beings through visually distant depictions, continuing as the idealized objects of men’s desires for their counterparts not to have flaws, stubborn personality traits, or other human “errors.” This framework limits depictions of real human qualities, essentially dehumanizing them. It results in unrealistic, unhealthy comparisons to real-life women who have the same capability of multiplicity in thought and personality that men do.

Through character portrayals, correlative analogies, and patriarchal norms, Arthurian works within the 19th century showcase how the “male gaze,” employed, perhaps unconsciously, by the male authors, restricts narratives of independent women in power as they rose within society. Within this, the “male gaze” seeks to position women as divine and innocent to appease their lustful correlations with sexual corruption. This furthers the already present imbalance of power between the male and female gender, built on patriarchal status quo. By viewing women strictly within positions of servitude and submission to

men, it limits powerful representations of women with characteristic traits associated with authority and leadership. *Idylls of The King*, by Alfred Lord Tennyson represents an attempt at this other depiction. The work was dedicated to Queen Victoria, who, upon her husband's death, became the sole ruler in 1861. Many Victorians were not fond of her reign, and Tennyson himself seems to undermine his own dedication to her by veering down the path of patriarchal norms represented in his writings, maintaining male-oriented leads throughout the piece and remaining vague and ambiguous when representing the same traits with corresponding female leads.

Tennyson's writing seems to have a characteristically critical "male gaze" upon his female characters, depicting most human women as solely vexing; their sexuality, a bold indicator to their personality and likeability within the literature. In contrast, the only positively portrayed women within his work represent those pure of heart, or rather, innocent and inexperienced. The representations of women reflect fierce maenadic thought processes, ones that give insight to Tennyson's, perhaps unknowing, disdain for women within positions of power, or at the very least, with equal socio-political standings, separate from pleasure. His writing seemingly attempts to dismiss gender differences, instead showing a distinct inability to equate genders without losing the characteristics that make each unique. Wynne-Davies claims that Tennyson's "... dialogism collapses in upon itself as perception and utterance are shown to be unstable and unreliable" (Wynne-Davies 9).

Within the larger work of *Idylls of the King*, the narrative poem titled "Merlin and Vivien" depicts Vivien as a classic representation of a character created through the critical and bitter "male gaze." She is conveyed as a conniving, malicious woman. Vivien's character was written as one with sexual prowess; she is seen using her distinctly feminine powers of seduction upon both Arthur and Merlin throughout the book. She endures insult after insult from the men because of her venereal tactics, becoming "the laughter of an afternoon, / [t]hat Vivien should attempt the blameless King" (Tennyson "Merlin and Vivian" 150). Unabashed support of the male characters is displayed, especially through "blameless" Arthur, while Vivien seems to continue her unrelenting, misplaced advances. Within this, Tennyson dismisses the usually violent patriarchal figures commonplace to older Arthurian literature by depicting this peaceful king. However, he also undermines the abilities of powerful women reclaiming the same sexual tendencies men are freely allowed to exploit. Despite these vehement flirtations placed by the author, Vivien's entire aura is reflected negatively. She is depicted utilizing her seductive abilities as a ploy to desecrate Arthur's marriage and win over Merlin, furthering the "male gaze's" perception of beauty as a political tactic for women instead of acknowledging actual intelligence or cunning.

Tennyson's voyeuristic perspective of women is so distant from reality that it limits the accuracy of his portrayals. He maintains patriarchal standards that undermine his attempt to portray the genders as equal, claiming, "[m]an dreams of fame while woman

wakes to love” (“Tennyson 159). These fallacies misrepresent both genders and push people into stereotypical confines of personality that aren’t truly indicative of reality. Vivien, however, is able to maintain a strong personality, albeit one-dimensional and lacking true motive. Her plan ultimately works, as she turns Merlin to stone, although this conclusion doesn’t leave a representation of a strong, powerful woman, but rather serves as a cautionary tale of a manipulative woman using beauty for politics, seen “as an enemy that has left / Death in living waters and withdrawn” (Tennyson 149). Vivien, upon her success, now wields the power to turn people to stone, yet her position of power is corrupted by the negative gaze placed on her. Her tactics, although sneaky, are not unusual within Arthurian tales and, if she were a man, they would have been praised for their efficiency. The story reflects anxieties about allowing women to gain access to something previously only known by men—in this case, that man is Merlin. It instills fear about trusting beautiful, powerful women; even Vivien tells Merlin that he should trust her “not at all or all in all,” forcing extremist ideals, at the hand of Tennyson’s pen (157). This sets a precedent of fear. It perpetuates the continuation of denying women access to equal educational and/or work opportunities because once they are in these positions of power, they no longer fit into the perceived “male gaze” narrative that confines them within it, ousting all nonconformists as villains.

Arthurian stories each have unique perspectives on the classic tale; their characters, plot lines, and diction all have hidden clues to the feelings and perceptions

of the authors within their times. Women have been able to combat these pervasive stereotypes over time, changing their own presentations in history and in how they are reflected correspondingly in contemporary Arthurian literature. Understanding how the “male gaze” affects older literature is essential to acknowledging the history of the disparity between social movements and the majority male writers creating these narratives, their works having become infamous in part due to their appendage. Marie Štefanidesová, in her work “Perception of Women of the Arthurian Legend in the Middle Ages and in the Twentieth Century,” also acknowledges the importance of analyzing past literature through a modern lens, as “...the work itself offers diverse ways of understanding the society, its history and development” (Štefanidesová 5). While identities are constantly changing, analyzing literature provides insight into implicit biases that remain, showing how narratives shift based on the time period, social conflict, and the authors themselves. This Arthurian history—albeit fictional—is based on real people and reflects the real attitudes of the authors. It displays anxieties held about women in power and the stereotypes put in place to restrict their abilities to advance in a restrictive society. Štefanidesová speaks on this portrayal, stating “not only that every author is influenced by the situation of his or her contemporary society and by their specific backgrounds and beliefs, but also that... [it’s] a way to express one’s opinion or anything else; it depends only on the way one chooses to see it” (40). While these works should not be held in caution solely due to their often misogynistic points and ill-conceived

gallantry, bias should be actively acknowledged, to hold accountable our consumption of their information. This is not a work of dismissal, but a call to action for more conversation, more discussion, and thoughtful conclusion. It is not the authors' fault that they are a product of a society different from ours. However, we must acknowledge that it is different first. For only when our own minds are left unchecked can we be blamed for our negligence, should it result in awry consequences. «

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The Infamous Albatross: A Romantic Symbol Surrounded by Literary Theories Turned Modern-Day, Metaphorical Idiom

VERONICA URUBIO

MODERNITY GARNERS influences of the past that work to mold the present out of ideas that have already been witnessed and built upon throughout history. The Romantic period saw poetry based in nature as a means of revitalizing the nostalgia for humanity's long-lost happiness of days spent without technological advancements used to master the materials of land, sea, and sky. However, innovators and inventors alike envied the masters (and their mastery) of the one domain man could never truly claim as their own: the avians. Infamous authors of the period—from John Keats to Percy Bysshe Shelley—found themselves enraptured by birds and their potential for expressing their

respective plights and yearnings in an ever-changing society.

Similarly, Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 18th Century "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" considered the bird precious, promoting the Romantic belief that nature was inherently good and thus not to be trifled with ("Rime of the Ancient Mariner" xxvii). Out of the many literary elements to come from this poem, and to be popularized by later cultures, the albatross raises the greatest speculation as to what Coleridge wanted to propose by using the motif; its symbolic power would later grow in fame, particularly in its evolution into a common idiom found in Europe. Contextualizing



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historical works, and following their seepage into modern-day media, brings these elements into conversation with their influences and origins. In examining how the Romantics viewed birds, I will elaborate on what this entails for Coleridge's albatross before bringing up what other critics have proposed regarding the motif. Following this, I will explain how idioms come to be and, specifically, what it means for Coleridge's albatross to have surpassed not only its initial genre, but medium altogether. Finally, I will discuss how modernity has come full-circle, in supplying song lyrics featuring and revolving around the idiom that originates from this lyrical ballad.

Motifs signify the importance of elements within a story, drawing the audience to speculate about the meaning of their placement and inclusion beyond superficiality. Thus, the choice to use birds as the embodiment of "goodness" is a clear indicator and inspiration drawn from the Romantic period. While Keats had already given up on experiencing happiness—and by extension, the happiness of humanity as he observed the nightingale flaunt its freedom, Shelley projected his desire to reclaim the happiness the skylark embodied, desiring to understand the secret component needed to redeem humanity. These portrayals of birds work to place an audience's recognition of the themes projected in correlation with Coleridge's albatross, as words that allude to its inherent goodness include the Mariner's description of its feathers—"glimmer[ing like] white Moonshine" ("Rime of the Ancient Mariner" 78), emphasizing its coloring to connote purity and otherworldliness, as the color white is often associated with these terms. Funnily

enough, it was his friend and fellow poet William Wordsworth who proposed, in a discussion with Coleridge (or so Wordsworth claims), "that the Mariner should be represented as having killed [the albatross]...and the protecting spirits of [the South Seas] should be made to avenge the crime," because he had coincidentally read a book "that recounted... frequently seeing albatrosses—huge sea-birds with wings twelve or thirteen feet in extent" ("Rime of the Ancient Mariner" xxxii). While the narrative portrays the albatross within its assigned categories, it also becomes its own entity, separate from the avians and even from Nature itself.

By separating the albatross from its avian collective, the theories of several literary critics resound to separate the bird from its form as a stand-in metaphor for something greater. Charles H. Rowell suggests a Biblical allusion to "the symbol of Christ" that falls into its own religious interpretation category, along with critics such as Robert Penn Warren, who theorized that the albatross "is symbolically... a Christian soul"; later elaborations expand to include "the doctrine of the Fall," from the story of Adam and Eve, with the albatross symbolic of the event itself—or "God"—according to readings from Howard Creed and J.W.R. respectively (qtd. in Rowell 134; qtd. in Ebbatson 172). Moreover, as one of the longest-standing theories of the story's symbolism, religious critic W. H. Auden also sorted the albatross in with another infamous bird symbol, "the Dove of the Holy Spirit," in relation to the story of Noah's Ark (qtd. in Ebbatson 172). Another acclaimed critic, George Whalley, suggests that the albatross "was more than a...mechanical device introduced as a motive of action in the plot" and represents

“Coleridge’s creative imagination” as a means of metaphorizing his addiction to opium as an “unconscious...personal allegory” (Whalley 393, 397). Another critic, J.R. Ebbatson, first suggests that the poem “has been viewed as a Christian epic... [and] Jungian archetype,” further noting the “myriad variet[y]” of ways in which the story and symbol can function (Ebbatson 171). He also proposes that Coleridge’s political history holds some merit in dissecting the story’s allegorical meaning, likening it to “maritime expansion...of the European powers in their... belated guilt...[in regard to the] phenomenon of colonialism,” with the albatross symbolizing “the indigenous peoples of the globe” (Ebbatson 176; qtd. in Shah and Khattak 6). In short, the albatross’ inherent symbolism holds “unlimited symbolic possibilities [that] testify not only to [its] richness...but the flexibility of its contextual variety,” when considering the theories of how it speaks within Biblical, personal, and historical contexts (Shah and Khattak 2); therefore, we can infer, due to the critical acclaim for the poem and the various literary interpretations of the albatross itself, that these are the reasons it becomes immortalized as an everyday idiom.

To this day, idioms are spoken frequently enough to garner a bridge between the albatross’s defined existence—a burden that is taken on psychologically and leaves a lasting impression—and its significant role within its origins. Widely recognized for its multiplicity, the albatross reference finds itself in works dating onward from its original publishing, in 1798, among Coleridge and Wordsworth’s first *Lyrical Ballads*, to as early as 1818, in Mary Wollstonecraft–Shelley’s infamous novel *Frankenstein*, to TV show *Riverdale*’s second

season finale. Coleridge’s depiction of the albatross adds symbolic weight to the impact it has in modern-day usage of the idiom. As defined in “A Handbook to Literature,” an idiom is “a use of words peculiar to a given language [or] an expression that cannot be translated literally,” which “arise[s] from a peculiarity that is syntactical or structural...or from the obscuring of a meaning in a metaphor” (245). Thus, the metaphoric nature of the idiom carries the potentiality of either staying true to or obscuring its origins over the passage of time, though knowing the history is not always necessary, according to Barno Bobojonova:

To know the history of an idiom can be useful and interesting, but it is not necessary... to use the idiom properly. For example, most... know that ‘No room to swing a cat’ means [that] ‘there is not much space’...However, few know that this is because two-hundred years ago, sailors [were] punished by being whipped with a ‘cat [o’] nine tails’...[and] a big space was cleared on the ship so that the person doing the whipping [had room]... we can understand that an idiom is a phrase whose meaning cannot be [understood] from [a] dictionary’s definitions of each word taken separately...it’s in the subtext.” (“Idioms and Their Importance” 57)

Idioms serve as vehicles that “are a type of figurative language... that have more literal meanings,” and can be used in fiction (and real life) to “sound more conversational... add[ing] emphasis to important points... or make [a] character seem more authentic” (Bobojonova 59). Studies that have revolved around idiom

comprehension and pedagogy—such as Raymond W. Gibbs Jr.’s rating study, which focused on a subset of idioms that were metaphorical in origin, testing for which felt most natural—take into consideration how *time* affects metaphors that result in idioms. One conclusion: “A closer look at idiomaticity... reveals that idioms do not exist as separate, semantic units within the lexicon, but... reflect coherent systems of metaphorical concepts” (“Metaphor in Idiom Comprehension” 142). In these idioms, meanings dictate some emotional connection, highlighting how metaphoric *thought* translates to the use of metaphoric *idioms*, and confirming the degree of emotional comprehension in study participants. Such studies validate the notion that the comprehension of idioms is not only accessible, but helpful in navigating how a given metaphor’s significance, within the context of a particular idiom, changes or stays the same in modernity. Television shows, movies, and even videogames sport references to the notorious albatross idiom, and it is later inserted into a medium distinct but not separate from poetry: song lyrics.

Well-received contemporary artists have written songs with the albatross metaphor in mind, such as Pink Floyd, Fleetwood Mac, Iron Maiden, Weezer, and Foals; some, like Weezer’s “Wind in Our Sail,” contain the lyrics “A boy and a girl... Albatrosses around their necks,” while others, such as the Foals’ song, are appropriately titled “Albatross,” which not only embeds the metaphor into the title, but the lyrics: “You got an albatross around your neck” (2016; 2015). Bastille—an English pop-rock band—fuses this idiom into the lyrics of their song “Weight of Living, Pt. I” (2013). In an interview for a series titled *Between the Lines*, lead singer Dan Smith

explains the meaning behind the lyrics, claiming: “the albatross is a symbol of what I take as like your problems you carry wrapped around your neck, and the song takes that quite literally” (MetroLyrics 2014). Within the first verse, the lyrics depict the latter part of the story, but with inquiry from the speaker, who is presumably asking this of whomever is taking on the Mariner’s mantle:

There’s an albatross around your neck
All the things you’ve said and the things
 you’ve done
Can you carry it with no regrets?
Can you stand the person you’ve become?
(Bastille 2013)

These lines correspond with the poem and the speaker refers to the person’s current predicament of having “the Albatross / About [their] neck...hung,” like the Mariner had (“Rime of the Ancient Mariner” 141–142). Furthermore, the Mariner’s unnecessarily cruel treatment of the bird, who not only resolved their foul moods, from being stuck in the ice, but whose presence also correlates with their freedom, led to the burden being carried in both the physical and emotional sense, as the speaker suggests: “The ice was all around!.../ At length did cross an Albatross.../ The ice did split.../ The helmsman steered us through!” (60, 63, 69–70). Thus, the lyrics align with the meaning presented in both its origin and the idiom; however, this does not stay the case.

To elaborate, the origin and idiom’s tracks depart in the later section of lyrics that take up the majority of the song’s three minute and twenty-seven second timeframe. During the

chorus, the albatross becomes a physical barrier, preventing the theoretical situation the speaker warns about, implying that freeing oneself from the physically taxing activity will revitalize the will to live or, at the very least, will result in some form of catharsis:

Your albatross
Let it go, let it go
Oh, your albatross
Shoot it down, shoot it down
When you just can't shake the heavy weight
Of living... (Bastille 2013)

Interestingly enough, the chorus *first* conflates the Mariner's later admiration for other creatures that symbolize nature, causing the albatross's corpse to slide off from him in his recognition of their beauty: "And I blessed [the water-snakes] unaware / The... moment I could pray / And from my neck... / The Albatross fell off and sank / ...into the sea" (287-291). This is then *followed* by the earlier Mariner's catalyst for the grotesquely disturbing visions he experiences in having "shot the albatross" on a whim (82). Though the song lyrics depict freeing oneself from the albatross as something that would lead to a positive outcome from a regrettable situation, Coleridge's poem says the opposite.

The Mariner's shooting of the albatross—blasphemous against nature's inherent goodness and innocence—is portrayed to be a cautionary tale in that you should not disrespect those that can do no evil; thus, the lyrics achieve a paradoxical message, as "letting the albatross go" and "shooting the albatross down" hold different connotative meanings and results. Literary critics Syed Zahid Ali Shah and Nasir

Jamal Khattak explain how "[their] reading of the poem sufficiently supports [the] conviction that... we indiscriminately kill our Albatrosses," affirming Coleridge's intended message of the Mariner's shooting of the albatross as "surrender[ing one's] soul to negative forces," while letting it go is not on the table (Shah and Khattak 7-8). To summarize, Bastille's use of the idiom in their song simultaneously obscures and operates under its origins, which offers yet another lens from which to consider the symbolism of the albatross in modern media. The translation of meaning from the albatross' origin, first to idiom, then to new medium, is reminiscent of the game "telephone," where the meaning shifts with each iteration.

Overall, the albatross's multiplicity showcases the extent of influence history holds over modernity through these multiple contexts, such as: its historical roots in the Romantic period; the theories Coleridge's critics pinned to its pinions, a number of which garnered the attention of those beyond 20th century circles; and as a European idiom that has continued to draw artists from outside of the literary world. Perhaps, if the Romantics could have predicted what the 21st Century would bring, they would celebrate the survival of the influence of their works; more likely, they would shudder to consider how meanings have changed and evolved over time (though I would like to think that their reaction to planes or hot air balloons would merit some spectacle). «

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Wolfsong: Music, Magic and Meaning in Angela Carter's “The Company of Wolves”

STEVE BUCCELLATO

... as I listened I heard as if from down
below in the valley the howling of many
wolves. The Count's eyes gleamed, and he
said: “Listen to them—the children of the
night. What music they make!”

—BRAM STOKER, *DRACULA*

THE CRY OF howling wolves is ever present in Angela Carter's reimagining of *Little Red Riding Hood*; a forewarning of impending danger to any unfortunate souls close enough to hear the creatures' “aria of fear made audible” (141). Indeed, the story's very first line places importance on the howling of wolves: “One beast and only one howls in the woods by night” (141). That emphasis persists throughout the text, and the author utilizes curious language

that challenges the reader repeatedly to associate the sound not with terror, but with music. Carter uses words to describe the wolfsong such as *serenade*, *canticle*, *carols*, *threnody*, *prothalamion*, *liebestod*, and the aforementioned *aria*. More than simply an array of synonyms, these words evoke very specific imagery connecting with the larger themes of the story: life, love, innocence, sexual maturation, metamorphosis, death, and rebirth—though not necessarily in that order, as we will see. These word choices are designed to subtly inform and manipulate readers emotionally, much in the way that films do with their musical scores, resulting in a provocative experience that casual readers may not fully understand, but nonetheless feel. >>

STEVE BUCCELLATO ('21) originally wrote this essay on Angela Carter's short story “The Company of Wolves” for Dr. Alex Neel's Genres: Fiction course. The examination of classic and modern fairytales with Dr. Neel has since inspired Steve to delve more deeply into the scholarly study of folklore and fairytales, and even to write a few modern reimaginings of his own.

Fear is the expected response when confronted with the howling of wolves. Whether this reaction is innate, or if it has been hammered into our collective unconscious by popular media (e.g., radio dramas and classic horror films), is up for debate. Yet, surprisingly, Carter's wolves evoke *pity* as much as they do fear. In the mini story-within-the-story about a witch who transforms a wedding party into wolves, the creatures come to visit her at night, "serenading her with their misery" (143). This misery (along with the theme of marriage) continues into the next sequence about newlyweds, in which the howling is described as having "some inherent sadness in it, as if the beasts would love to be less beastly if only they knew how and never cease to mourn their own condition" (143). Carter's pitiful creatures are stuck in a perpetual state of grief for something they have lost, or something that they can never obtain on their own; it is a release from misery that can only come from a loving savior:

There is a vast melancholy in the canticles of the wolves, melancholy infinite as the forest, endless as these long nights of winter and yet that ghastly sadness, that mourning for their own, irremediable appetites, can never move the heart for not one phrase in it hints at the possibility of redemption; grace could not come to the wolf from its own despair, only through some external mediator, so that, sometimes, the beast will look as if he half welcomes the knife that dispatches him. (143-144)

This passage foreshadows the action of the entire story that follows, and provides clues to

the Huntsman's dilemma, beginning with the author's choice of the word *canticles*.

Canticles are hymns, and the term is specifically used to reference the "Song of Solomon," or "The Song of Songs." This book of the Bible is told from the point of view of two lovers in the form of an unusually racy poem: a passionate love song detailing their sexual desire for one another. From a biblical perspective, this depiction of sex is supposed to symbolize a perfect love, of the kind that existed before the fall, when there was no sin. In the context of *The Company of Wolves*, there is a parallel between this impossible ideal, and the wolves' "irremediable appetites," noted in the passage above. The concept of an immaculate sexual being is personified in the flaxen-haired young protagonist of the main story (Red Riding Hood), whose virginity is excessively described as follows: "She is an unbroken egg; she is a sealed vessel; she has inside her a magic space the entrance to which is shut tight with a plug of membrane; she is a closed system" (146). Note the similar language present in the biblical verse: "A garden inclosed is my sister, my spouse; a spring shut up, a fountain sealed" (Song 4:12). In both cases, chastity is glorified, while at the same time placed within a lustful context. By her invocation of these canticles, Carter explicitly provides the reader with necessary details on how to redeem the werewolf: the savior will come in the paradoxical form of virginal seduction.

The next type of song used to characterize the wolfsong comes when the girl arrives at her grandmother's house to find the huntsman waiting for her. Trapped alone with the predator, she hears howling from outside:

“Who has come to sing us carols, she said” (150). Of course, *carols* are songs traditionally sung during Christmastime in celebration of the nativity, and indeed, this story takes place on Christmas Eve. The significance of this is twofold: from the Christian standpoint, Christmas marks the day of the birth of the savior. In fact, the figurative usage of the word “nativity,” as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary, includes the act of “creation, beginning, or origin of something.” This positions Carter’s protagonist as a Christ figure; as redeemer; a new position she will be reborn into on this auspicious night. From a pagan perspective, Christmas is connected to the winter solstice, the longest night of the year, and a turning point when the subsequent days will grow longer, bringing more light into the world. Carter’s savior will use her pure, virginal light to overcome the lupine children of the night, but first there must be a price paid. The pagan symbolism is similar to the Christian, but more elemental; it is a time of metamorphosis, and rebirth. But to be reborn, one must first die.

In anticipation of death, the next song on the wolves’ playlist comes in the form of a *threnody*: “She closed the window on the wolves’ threnody and took off her scarlet shawl, the colour of poppies, the colour of sacrifices, the colour of her menses, and, since her fear did her no good, she ceased to be afraid” (150). Thus begins the provocative scene when the girl (as she is called) casts her shawl—and the rest of her clothes—into the hearth to be consumed by flame. Symbolically she sheds her innocence, murdering her childhood, and is reborn out of the funeral pyre like the mythological phoenix—

the “magic bird” to which Carter alludes (151). Showing no fear, the newborn woman/savior (in her “birthday-suit”), boldly seduces the lycanthropic huntsman, “freely [giving] the kiss she owed him,” while “[e]very wolf in the world howled a prothalamion outside” (151).

A *prothalamion* is a wedding song. The consummation of this “savage wedding ceremony” is entirely orchestrated by the brazen heroine, who literally laughs in the werewolf’s face when he delivers his empty threat: “the better to eat you with” (151). There may be a consummation, but not a consumption: “she knew she was nobody’s meat” (151). Her seduction continues unfettered, and she ignores the rattling of her grandmother’s bones beneath the bed (the sound of generations of disapproving elders, rolling in their graves). She barely notices that the melody outside has shifted to resemble *Liebestod*—the climax and finale of Wagner’s tragic romance, *Tristan and Isolde*. In German, *liebestod* literally means “love death” (*liebe* = love, *tod* = death). Wagner’s opera ends with a consummation of Tristan and Isolde’s love at the moment of their deaths. Likewise, Carter’s coital confrontation conjoins the concepts of “la petite mort” and “la grande mort”—sex and death. The scene builds to a crescendo, and as they dance, powerful magic is unleashed, as Carter’s reference to Walpurgisnacht implies, for that is the night when witches congregate and fires are lit to drive away evil spirits. In the moment of climax, it is the “carnivore incarnate” who is submissive and afraid: “She will lay his fearful head on her lap . . .” (151).

The final paragraphs of Carter’s story are composed of brief, staccato sentences and discordant imagery:

The blizzard will die down.

The blizzard died down, leaving the mountains as randomly covered with snow as if a blind woman had thrown a sheet over them, the upper branches of the forest limed, creaking, swollen with the fall.

Snowlight, moonlight, a confusion of paw-prints.

All silent, all still.

Midnight; and the clock strikes, It is Christmas Day, the werewolves' birthday, the door of the solstice stands wide open; let them all sink through.

See! sweet and sound she sleeps in granny's bed, between the paws of the tender wolf. (151-152)

So, what happened? On the surface, these last lines are ambiguous. However, if we consider all we have looked at in the text, accompanied by the musical cues and clues, a clearer picture emerges. The role of the young woman should be obvious by now; she starts out possessing a unique combination of innocence and untamed wildness; she is unafraid of her budding sexuality, and welcomes her own transformation. The huntsman/wolf views her only as meat, but she turns out to be much more; she is his savior, the “external mediator” possessing the power to break his lycanthropic spell, and bring redemption. To understand how, we must recall earlier in the story, when the narrator recounts an old wives’ tale claiming that “[s] even years is a werewolf’s natural span but if you burn his human clothing you condemn him to wolfishness for the rest of his life” (145). This is exactly what occurs during the climax; she

tears off the huntsman’s clothing and tosses them into the fire, “in the fiery wake of her own discarded clothing” (151). Here again, Carter uses funerary imagery as the backdrop for their coupling, but whose funeral is it?

By the logic of the wives’ tale, it would appear that by burning his clothes, the spell has been broken, and the huntsman must live the rest of his life as a wolf. The “fiery wake” may therefore be referring to the death of the huntsman’s human form. References to Christmas Day being “the werewolves’ birthday” may also suggest the beginning of a new life for the wolf (and possibly all of the other howling wolves who seem to disappear in the end, leaving only paw prints behind): a happy ending. Yet, the referencing of Tristan and Isolde’s *liebestod* suggests otherwise. There is a heavier price for breaking the werewolf’s curse, a blood-sacrifice that is specified unequivocally: “Carnivore incarnate, only immaculate flesh appeases him” (151). Yes, the couple’s savage union has cured the monster and tamed the beast, but the peaceful body resting between his tender paws sleeps eternally; reborn in flames only to die again. «

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A Poet with a Paintbrush: Georgia O’Keeffe and *Blue and Green Music*

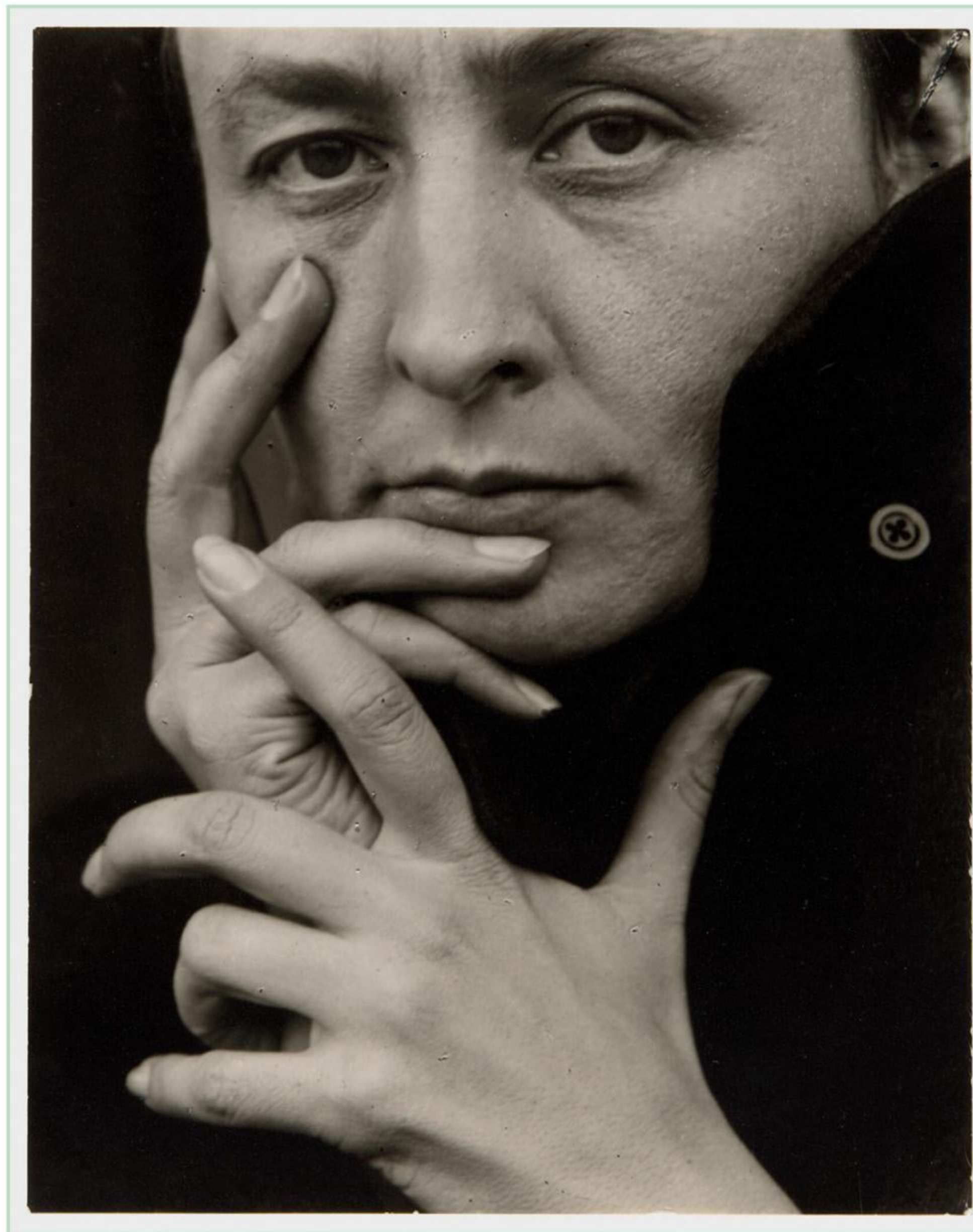
CHRISTINA MARTINEZ

IN THE EARLY 1920s, American artist Georgia O’Keeffe made several paintings based on the “idea that music could be translated into something for the eye” (The Art Institute of Chicago). This idea may be familiar to us ekphrastic poets, who see art and attempt to translate its beauty into our own medium so that we can describe our reaction to our chosen work. In O’Keeffe’s case, she endeavored to invent a corporeal form for music, translating this invention into the oils on her canvas. Just as we poets want to imitate art by applying words to a page, O’Keeffe strived to imitate music and its beauty; her paintbrush was her instrument. *Blue and Green Music* is one of these attempts, a study of music with the goal to unlock synesthesia. After close observation, I believe this work is both a poem and a symphony. The shapes, colors, and textures of O’Keeffe’s composition successfully create a synesthetic experience possible only through art.

Most people with working knowledge of O’Keeffe’s significance in the art world and her overall contribution to Americana can attest to her fame for her observations of flowers and natural landscapes. O’Keeffe’s greatest works capture photographic fantasies only possible through her meticulous eye towards all aspects of the natural world. Even with the abstractness in the expression of music, her skill molds it into familiar shapes of nature. O’Keeffe transformed melody into tangibility with strokes of oil paint, capturing music’s profound effect to grow new feelings and sensations for human beings. In *Blue and Green Music*, this growth is represented as floral flourishes. The way the shapes emerge suggests O’Keeffe’s belief that music blossoms from natural observations of life, whether from the earth where humans were made or the release of a trumpet’s roar. »

The twin colors of *Blue and Green Music* are synonymous with the title, and aid in symbolizing O’Keeffe’s idea. Blues and greens

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STIEGLITZ, ALFRED. *GEORGIA O'KEEFFE*, 1918.
ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO,
[HTTPS://WWW.ARTIC.EDU/ARTWORKS/66424/GEORGIA-O-KEEFFE](https://www.artic.edu/artworks/66424/georgia-o-keeffe)

VIEW *BLUE AND GREEN MUSIC*, 1919-21, BY GEORGIA O'KEEFFE AT:
[HTTPS://WWW.ARTIC.EDU/ARTWORKS/24306/BLUE-AND-GREEN-MUSIC](https://www.artic.edu/artworks/24306/blue-and-green-music)

of multiple shades compose the shape of the floral music, but they are nestled around an unnamed and centered prominence of white. The combinations of these colors convey a “vibrancy” of music and support the qualities of life observed in the painting so far. The composition reflects the familiar structure of a bloom. From the bottom corner, tinges of green simmer up through a bulb into a dark blue-and-green cone, holding wisps of white, like lily petals. This embellishes O’Keeffe’s portrayed music as emergent and rich, as if it is building up to its climax. This climax is white, traditionally a color signifying purity, perhaps

suggesting the aura of music, but it also serves a second function as a spectrum-producing prism that holds all colors in its light. This signifies that the blues and greens of the painting must unite to create the cohesiveness of music. Despite only including three base colors in this painting, O’Keeffe harnesses their full power to express music’s harmony with life and the natural world. O’Keeffe utilizes colors to convey emotion, science, and existing philosophies as a way to trace the path of musical development and worth.

The textures of *Blue and Green Music* cannot be overlooked, as they add dimension to

this colorful path and trace the footprints that music leaves upon the human experience. We can find this trailhead by peering just outside of the flower-cone, where O’Keeffe has stacked pale green squiggles like serrated coral. These lines crest like traditional diagrams of sound waves, but they are shadowed with depth. O’Keeffe agrees that music is simply sound, but a collection of many sources of it. Music must marry sounds together into a continuous unit, just as O’Keeffe has done here. These sound waves feed into the flower-cone like an amplifier, further emphasizing the shape and progress of music. The strokes of the blue cone are solid, harsh, and angled, much like paper or a book. The paint is thick, but flat, like sheet music or the structure of a song. However, O’Keeffe draws how the structure gives birth to the pure white of music by painting strokes like whiffs of smoke. They disperse, thin out, and fade into the painting’s central void like a song that is played to a concert crowd in an arena. This is a representation of the prevalence, infectiousness, and universality of music that derives its structure to become shapeless and nothing more than bliss and medicine for the soul. O’Keeffe must have carefully planned each stroke in *Blue and Green Music* to detail the timeless and synesthetic journey of music.

Blue and Green Music serves as a highlight of O’Keeffe’s body of work and solidifies her craft as beautiful, visionary, and astounding; emblematic as to why she is one of the United States’ most celebrated artists. Though it is right to commend O’Keeffe for her awe-inspiring re-creations of flowers and landscapes, we must appreciate the thoughtfulness and care in her early abstract works like *Blue and Green Music*.

Expressing meaning through abstract art is a challenge, yet O’Keeffe takes it on effortlessly, elevating music as if it were any still life painting. Even in this stillness, the movement, the noise, and the lifeblood of music are loud and effective. The complete result of these elements is a piece that allows an audience a new perspective on a familiar concept and grapples with new philosophies about it. These epiphanies bear O’Keeffe’s incredible gift to push a unique angle and express it in artistic form, just as if she were a poet. O’Keeffe’s craft and methods may elevate her own ideas into universal fact: it is true that music can be “translated into something for the eye.” «

“It Should Live in the Tongue”: An Analysis of the Music in *Archicembalo*

ANDREW GARCIA

POETRY IS an elusive song to master. Nevertheless, poetry cherishes and welcomes sound and voice, along with those who play with them. G.C. Waldrep, who formerly trained as a singer, believes that poetry should have an emphasis on vocal performance: “It should live in the tongue,” he says, in an interview, and that in his book, *Archicembalo*, “that’s all there was: sound quality” (“An Interview with GC Waldrep”). The idea that poetry should emphasize verbal expression informs the poems in *Archicembalo* and how they should be read—with an ear for sound. Waldrep’s poetic craft and skill reveals itself in the musicality of his poems: Waldrep uses a deliberate arrangement of punctuation, repetition, and suggestive imagery that all work to blend musical sound with the visual aspect of poetry, thus creating musical poems.

The use of consonance and its repetition of vocal sounds creates a sort of poetic melody in the opening poem, titled “Who Is Josquin Des Prez.” This poem demonstrates one of the ways in which Waldrep achieves a sense of music throughout his poetry: the relationship between punctuation and time. The prose poem starts off as such: “A little winter, a drop at winter, a descent and then a steeper dwindling in the depths of winter, a snowdrop. A small sketch. A snowdrop signals the end of one thing and the beginning of another, a wider imprecation. How do you do. How does one do. A snowdrop reminds” (Waldrep 1). The passage involves the repetition of consonant sounds that recur throughout the greater poem. The words “little,” “winter,” “dwindling,” “descent,” “snowdrop” reveal the consonants that repeat: “W,” “T,”



ANDREW GARCIA ('22) originally wrote this essay for Genres: Poetry with Professor Sarah Maclay. *Archicembalo*, the subject of the essay, was a difficult text that changed the way he reads and listens to the sounds of poetry.

“D,” and “S.” These sounds charge the poem with both patterned repetition and variation—the similar sounds recur but with change that makes the poem’s music more fluid than restricting. The phrase “A little winter, a drop at winter, a descent and then a steeper dwindling in the depths of winter, A snowdrop” reveals how, when spoken and expressed verbally, the use of consonance creates an effect akin to a melody in music, where sounds are arranged as a musical theme. Every sound is used in a way that does not seem overused, in a way that becomes a thematic arrangement for the poem; the relationship between these sounds, moreover, takes on a balancing effect. Tension, after all, is necessarily required to produce the “D” and “T” sounds; the tongue touches the roof of the mouth and air pushes the tongue forward, thereby creating those sounds depending on the force of the air. The “W” and “S” sounds, on the other hand, are softer by comparison because they require no comparable type of tension in order to verbalize them; this allows for unique types of shifts in the poem: Former Poet Laureate Robert Pinsky, in his book *The Sounds of Poetry*, for example, notes how “the shift away from a consonant sound may mark a moment when things might chime, but depart instead” (Pinsky 87). As such, Waldrep is able to walk the line between tension and softness, the moment between the “chime” and “depart[ing]”. The phrase “A snowdrop signals the end of one thing and beginning of another” captures the moment between the end of one thing and the beginning of something else, a moment between tension and resolution in the departing of the “S” sound for the dental “D” in “end.” Waldrep, in short, uses the arranged repetition of consonant

sounds in order to achieve a type of thematic musicality within his poem that dwells in the silence between tension and resolution.

The use of punctuation augments the impact of repetition by creating and varying the sense of speed, thereby contributing a deliberate pacing in the poems. The passage from “Who is Josquin Des Prez,” with all its periods and commas, takes on various moments of refrain from vocal expression, moments where the poem informs the reader to pause at the moment of a comma, or to finish the sentence altogether at the demarcation of a period. Waldrep himself, in an interview, regards his interest in punctuation, referring to it as “endlessly fascinating” in how it can “modulate the music of thought in a poem, and therefore the thought itself” (“The Mystery of Persistence”). As such, when the passage is read aloud it starts at a methodical pace—the voice is paced by the commas in the phrases: “A little winter, a drop at winter.” The voice then picks up, energized by the longer, unpaced “A descent and then a steeper dwindling in the depths of winter,” where it is slowed and made quiet by the poem’s first two periods: “...a snowdrop. A small sketch.” The periods in the poem take on the charged nature of silence and transition. Commas, on the other hand, are more playful moments reminding the voice to take a breath and slow down, an indicator of continuation; in this sense, the commas acknowledge the future of the voice, while periods recognize the ending of that voice in a sentence. The commas act as small moments of break while the periods leave room for the silence and ambiguity that mirrors the “end of one thing and the beginning of another.”

Punctuation within the poem, as well as the use of consonance, operate in tandem to create a unique blend of time and sound when the poem is read aloud; not only does Waldrep take into account the auditory aspect of poetry in terms of the sound which the voice expresses, but also the arrangement and speed of that sound in time. The passage takes on a musical character that plays with language as well as the pacing of the voice.

If music is the arrangement of sound in time, Waldrep creates a sort of visual music in the opening poem with the arrangement of imagery through time. Waldrep takes a particularly suggestive approach in regard to the use of imagery in the opening poem of the book, which works to direct, rather than distract, the voice from the more auditory aspects of the poem. Waldrep writes, for example: "... as with may I hold you, may I kiss your lips, may I move my hand between your cheek and neck, between your neck and the basin of your shoulder. May I purchase this felt hat. Yes thank you" (Waldrep 3). The images in this particular passage are tactile and bodily; they focus on aspects of the human body in a romantic sense by capturing the speaker's constant asking of permission to "hold" the subject, further progressing towards more intimate acts. He asks about being able to kiss the subject's lips, then about moving his hand "between your cheek and neck," then "between your neck and the basin of your shoulder." The succession of intimately progressive images operates as a buildup toward the intimacy expected from two lovers: sex. The final image of the sequence, however, reveals a far more suggestive and even subverting destination wherein the speaker

asks if he may "purchase this felt hat." Waldrep subverts the expectation of explicit intimacy with the image of a felt hat, thereby reverting to a far more suggestive approach toward imagery that does not take focus away from the musical appeal in the poem; the buildup of images adds to the sounds of the words. The escalation of the images mirrors the verbal escalation of the passage with the commas introducing a moment of transition; with every comma something changes: the "hold" turns into a "kiss," then into the caress between the "cheek and neck," and so on. The voice reads the line with a constant speed to increase the tension within the phrases. In other words, the arrangement of tactile imagery in their progression toward the tension of intimacy is a visual music for Waldrep. The imagery, as the voice reads aloud, carries an auditory as well as visual weight; in this sense, Waldrep combines the qualities of both sound and sight to create a unique musicality in his writing.

The mixing of both poetry and music is present throughout *Archicembalo*, but what particularly makes Waldrep's sense of craft unique is the way in which he prioritizes the sounds of words over their denotation. Waldrep notes in an interview how "In *Archicembalo* that was all there was: the sound quality. Some of those poems have deeper ideas and meanings, and some of them are just beautiful noises as the poem goes by" ("An Interview with GC Waldrep"). It should come as no surprise that the poetry organized in his book largely involves words chosen for their sound rather than for their literal meaning; this can be a frustrating experience when reading *Archicembalo* and searching for the significance

behind impossible images, but it ultimately creates a more deliberate sense of sound, as well as a distinct musical nature to the book. In “What is Radio,” for example, Waldrep writes: “... let us assume these hands as we assume once more the dark garb of the stereopticon, the aspergillum, one static motion because there is a third cell in the eye that witnesses to the light” (Waldrep 55). When the example is read while paying careful consideration to the literal meanings of the words, it seems inaccessible, but when it is read while considering the sounds, rather than the meaning of the words, the poem takes on a strangely musical appeal. The phrase “dark garb” reflects a verbal echo in the “-ar” sound and charges the poem with a dark tension—the tension comes from the hard sounding “dark.” The multisyllabic words “stereopticon” and “aspergillum,” moreover, indicate musical exoticness as most of the other words in the sentence are either monosyllabic or comparatively brief two-syllable words. The longer words, as a result, suggest a variation in the melody of the sentence: the usual, soft sounding words are interrupted by the sudden hardness of the “dark garb” and are shortly transitioned back into softer language through the duration of “stereopticon” and “aspergillum.” In this sense, those variations in the music of the poem create an auditory caesura that fades in and out of softness. It becomes clear that the profile of Waldrep’s poetry has a distinct ear for sound and focuses on the musical nature of words in their arrangement on the page, be it in a phrase, sentence, or paragraph.

When considering Waldrep’s use of repetition and how it appeals to the musical

nature of the poem, it is evident that the particular arrangement of consonant sounds within a sequence of words comes to heighten the musical impact, but so too does the use of assonance. Moving to a different poem of Waldrep’s, titled “What is a Hymn,” the repetition of consonant sounds remains as a poetic fingerprint, albeit with a variation that makes it unique in this poem, compared to the previous one: he also employs the use of repeated vowel sounds. One of the lines in “What is a Hymn” that particularly demonstrates Waldrep’s distinct arrangement with consonant sounds seems frustratingly ambiguous: “And so how round a vowel is it that forces static from the elms into a pale sky” (Waldrep 3). What is particularly striking about this sentence is how the repetition of sounds—be it of vowels or consonants—occurs between the ending and the start of two sequential words; the repetition acts almost like a door hinge that naturally aids the voice in transitioning from one word to the next. The words “how round a vowel” demonstrate the idea of assonance as a verbal door hinge: the ending of “how” echoes the same vowel sound in the beginning of the following word, “round.” By reading “how round a vowel,” the voice swings between the words in a natural, fluid way, thereby creating a smooth and steady sense of rhythm. The phrase “forces static” is the consonant equivalent, wherein the final syllable of the word “forces” mirrors the “S” sound that occurs in the first syllable of “static.” Yet again, this deliberate placement of consonance appears at the concluding lines of the poem: “What is red, a hymn is a red dress that keeps swinging” (Waldrep 3). In the final sentence of

“What is a Hymn,” the hinge effect embodies the words “red dress” as well as the last two words of the line “keeps swinging.” The phrase “keeps swinging” is itself reflective of the hinge effect in terms of imagery: the voice swings between the words as the dress is described as swinging. When considering the impact that the hinge effect has on Waldrep’s poetry, it is evident that it aids the voice in bringing a fluidity to the words, thereby creating a softness in the music of the poem.

It becomes clear that Waldrep has an affinity for combining his auditory, musical skill with the visual aspects of imagery, and so one of the moments wherein the combination of these elements comes together comes in the last poem of *Archicembalo*, titled “What is a Testimony.” The beginning of the poem begins with the description of a frozen lake: “Brocade of the frozen lake. Diaspora of shore ice, just waiting, wait: the boys with their skates will come, will come with their skates, will come skating. Putting on & taking off” (Waldrep 64). This poem in the opening paragraph demonstrates both an auditory and visual type of music as it plays with the aspect of sound and pacing, and also in the variation of images. The commas in the passage temper the speed of the voice until it comes across the commanding colon of “wait:”—which works in tandem with the word preceding it, acting as a visual and auditory stop sign in the line. “Wait:”—as if to inform the voice of the ice’s morbid intentions, as if to say *caution*, until the voice reads on about the “boys with their skates.” Use of assonance in the word pairs “Brocade” and “frozen,” and “Diaspora” and “shore” also contribute a haunting in the sound

quality of the poem; the words echo sounds which seem foreboding. The sibilant “S” sound throughout the passage also introduces a kind of quiet whisper as the voice encounters words like “shore,” “boys,” and “skates,” which is eventually overtaken by the dental “T” sounds in the sentence “Putting on & taking off.” The use of repetition in regard to sound contributes to the foreboding music of the poem as it is read aloud, which shifts and turns to a violent harshness, suggesting of a kind of mortality that is consistent with the image of the “Diaspora of shore ice, just waiting.” The sound and timing of the passage works in tandem with the image of the spread out, and thereby vulnerable, surface of the ice; the auditory and visual aspects of the poem create a tense, suggestive music. If music is the arrangement of sound through time, Waldrep creates a visual arrangement yet again in the final passage of the book. He captures, through music created by sound and imagery, the sentiment of tension, and the quiet arrangement of mortality that plays throughout the background in dangerous situations of which people can be unaware.

In *Archicembalo*, G.C. Waldrep reveals his skill in his arrangement of both sound and imagery. The two work together, complimenting one another, charging one another so as to evoke a kind of unifying bodily response when the poem is read aloud; the voice is paced, is tempered, is energized by the punctuation, sounds, and imagery within the poem. This is to say that the poems in *Archicembalo* not only “live in the tongue,” as Waldrep says, but the tongue also lives within the poems. As such, Waldrep creates a beautiful, frustratingly ambiguous, musical, intimate work that unifies

the body with the art, and so makes the voice its medium. Robert Pinsky, who also trained as a musician like Waldrep, said it best: “The reader’s breath and hearing embody the poet’s words. This makes the art physical, intimate, vocal, and individual” (Pinsky 8). *Archicembalo* is an invitation to enter, and the voice is welcome inside. «

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Education of Innocents: A Phenomenological Analysis of Donald Barthelme's "The School"

ALYSSA BOBICH

DONALD BARTHELME'S "The School" is an unsettling story that places excessive death uncomfortably close to a group of innocent children. Upon a first read, it may appear to be meaningless, nothing more than a case study of intentionally absurd writing. However, embedded within the elements of the story lies a deeper commentary about how education ultimately forces children out of their innocence and into adulthood. Using a phenomenological approach to critique inspired by Georges Poulet, I will explore how "The School" develops these themes using the associations implicit in the story.

Under phenomenology, the reader determines the meaning within a work by analyzing the associations of elements—the words, the structure, the literary devices—within the work itself. The author's intention

does not matter. In fact, under this theory, the story does not exist until it is read, taking shape as the reader gives meaning to the elements on the page. In his "Phenomenology of Reading," Georges Poulet offers a deeper explanation of the phenomenological approach. He describes how a book may start as an object within "material reality," but becomes something different, an "interior object," once it is read (Poulet 54-55). This is because a book, unlike other objects, requires interpretation to fully exist, and this interpretation can only take place within a reader's consciousness. The story requires someone not just to *see* the elements of the story on the page, but to allow the *ideas* with which those elements are associated to take over the reader's consciousness in order to fully exist. Poulet further comments on this phenomenon, observing that in this "strange



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displacement of myself by the work,” the reader has a “common consciousness” with the work, allowing the work to actively take over their consciousness while simultaneously witnessing the work unfold (59).

While Poulet acknowledges that every work “is impregnated with the mind” of its author, he points out that the work itself “is not the author” and has “its own inner meaning” apart from the author’s intentions or biography (58). Based on this theory of analysis, I argue Donald Barthelme’s short story “The School” utilizes biblical associations and dialogue to suggest that education, by showing children the brutal realities of life, inevitably leads to the loss of innocence. In “The School,” a first-person narrator, a teacher named Edgar, describes the increasingly disturbing deaths that occur in his class. At first, the deaths are less impactful—trees, a garden, small class pets—but then become increasingly significant, moving to the death of grandparents, parents, and even a few of the children themselves. Throughout the story, the children slowly become more concerned and distraught about the tragedies, culminating with them asking Edgar about death itself.

The story opens with children planting orange trees. These fruit trees designated for learning connect to the biblical Tree of Knowledge within the original, perfect garden, suggesting the knowledge brought by these trees relates to the knowledge that brings sin into the world. Adding to this connection, Edgar specifically mentions educating the children on “root systems,” further cementing that these trees bring a deeper, more fundamental lesson (Barthelme 367). As it turns out, all of the trees

have died, potentially due to “something wrong with the soil” (367). In this turn of events, we see a twofold connection. First, in connection to the previous biblical imagery, death came into the world once Adam and Eve ate from the Tree of Knowledge. In the same way, in pursuing this greater, deeper understanding, death has entered into the children’s lives, beginning to wipe away their previous innocence. Secondly, the problematic soil, as something intentionally put around the trees by the children and the teacher, indicates that something intentionally surrounding the children, something intended to be beneficial and help them grow—namely, education—is leading to their own death, a death of innocence.

Next, Edgar mentions the first deaths of class pets: the deaths of their snakes. Notably, the snakes also connect to the biblical story of the fall of man, representing temptation to leave a place of innocence and goodness to enter a place of knowledge, sin, and death. In the story, the snakes died because “none of [the children’s] parents would let them cross the picket line” to take care of the snakes (Barthelme 368). Symbolically, this suggests the parents are protecting their children from losing their innocence by keeping them away from temptation. Ironically, however, the true ugly nature of reality stands right in front of the children in the form of a strike. The best attempts to keep the children in their pure naiveté are foiled by the overwhelming and persistent presence of reality within the place of their education: people violently disagree, and beloved class pets die.

After the snakes, Edgar mentions a “herb garden” dying, “probably a case of overwatering”

(Barthelme 368). Gardens are planted with the intention of sustaining life. In the children's eagerness to care for the plants, however, they end up destroying both the life of the plants and, by extension, their own lives. For the first time, the teacher brings up the idea of "sabotage," suggesting that the children may no longer be as innocent as they once were (368). Having been educated on the darker side of reality, some are beginning to move towards more sinful natures, towards the ugly side of humanity. From here, the deaths of animals, and later, people, get more and more significant, hitting closer and closer to home, mirroring the children's growing loss of their innocence. The more the children learn, the more animals and people die.

Eventually, the children start to wonder if "maybe there was something wrong with the school" (Barthelme 369). The children are beginning to grasp the true badness of these deaths, moving past their naiveté into a new stage of knowledge. In contrast, Edgar dismisses the question, thinking "I've seen better and I've seen worse" (369), suggesting that, from his point of view as a teacher who has seen many schools, this scourge of death is somewhat normal within education. This highlights the disparity between the children and Edgar in terms of innocence: while the children are only just beginning their education, only just scratching the surface of what it means to live in a world full of problems, Edgar remains unfazed even when he acknowledges "we had an extraordinary number of parents passing away" (369).

The death of the parents marks a turning in the story. Though many lovable classroom pets had passed before, as well as

their "adopted" Korean orphan, these previous deaths do not hold the same immediacy as the death of the parents (Barthelme 368). By losing their parents, the children also lose their protectors, their role models, their family, and are set adrift into the world, alone and uncertain. This experience simultaneously takes away a barrier between the children and their ultimate maturity as well as forces the children to confront the ugly reality of life in a very intimate and severe way.

At this point, the children again begin to question Edgar. Their questions steadily increase in complexity of language, starting from a simple "where did they go?" in reference to the dead animals and people and building, up to "isn't death, considered as a fundamental datum, the means by which the taken-for-granted mundanity of the everyday may be transcended in the direction of—" (Barthelme 369-370). This increasingly complex and elevated language parallels the children's maturing in the face of the "real world" throughout the story: they grow out of their innocence, lose their naiveté, as day after day they learn more, are taught more, and witness another death. The experience of death, and their closeness to it, draws the children out of their innocence.

In response to facing reality, however, the children declare "We don't like it," reverting back to simple, childish language to reject their newfound reality (Barthelme 370). Though they have finally reached the place where they can see reality for all of its brokenness and chaos, they stubbornly and bluntly declare it unsatisfactory, as only children can. Here, we see the grip of innocence fighting to keep its hold on

the students even in the face of the knowledge they have gained. In contrast to the children's outrage and resistance to seeing reality fully for the first time, Edgar, having accepted this reality long ago, responds in calm agreement: "that's sound" (370). Again, this difference highlights the disparity between adults, who have lived without their innocence for much longer and have embraced reality for all of its ugliness, and children, who are only just beginning to see what terrors reality can hold and still cling to what they know—naiveté.

In one of the final scenes, the children beg Edgar to "make love with Helen," an action typically associated with a loss of purity and a movement into maturity (Barthelme 370). Though not doing the action themselves, even learning about it through witnessing it would complete the children's loss of innocence and secure their movement into adulthood. The children tell Edgar that "we've heard so much about it... but we've never seen it" (370). There is a metaphorical reason for this. "Making love" implies an intimacy, a vulnerability, only achieved when one understands the shame that accompanies nakedness. In their innocence and resultant inability to see the problems in the world, the children would not be able to understand sex in the same way; they would not understand that in "making love," you acknowledge and embrace all the morally complex parts of yourself—the ugly and the beautiful, the good and the evil—and allow someone else to witness you in that imperfect state.

This gap between innocence and sex also parallels to the biblical Garden of Eden. Before Adam and Eve had eaten from the Tree of

Knowledge, they were naked, but had no shame because of their innocence. However, after they had eaten—after they had gained knowledge, after they had understood sin and the world's ugliness—they were ashamed of their nakedness, realizing their imperfection. In the same way, these children are just coming to the end of their education. They are just beginning to fully see themselves and each other for the broken, sinful people they are, and yet now they demand to see what it means to make love—to see that vulnerability, that honesty, that rawness. To fully leave innocence behind, they must take this final step.

Interestingly, the children are begging for this final step as "an assertion of value," for "[they] are frightened" (Barthelme 370). In finally reaching the near-end of their education about the "real" world—the ugly and sinful world, outside of childhood innocence—the children realize they are terrified to enter it. They need proof that beyond all the ugliness and chaos, there is "value" within life, that life is still worth living despite the tragedy it contains. They want to see someone embrace the raw, ugly chaos of life, to embrace that shame and that vulnerability it brings, and to then conquer it—to prove it can be conquered—by witnessing it, embracing it, accepting it, both in themselves and in others. Notably, this request is entirely inappropriate for a school setting, and yet in a sense it represents the completion of the children's education. By finally seeing the world and themselves in all of its moral shades of light and dark, embracing that reality through an act of vulnerability cements the children's decision to continue living in spite of life's tragedies. Once they

leave innocence behind them, the children are prepared to face the world as it truly is.

Edgar finally agrees to a small display of affection; he and Helen “held each other” (Barthelme 370). As a result, the children “were excited” (370). The thing they needed—the proof that even despite the ugliness of life, there was still value within it—allowed them to return to a place of energy and hope; balance was restored in their world. Immediately afterwards, when “the new gerbil walked” into the classroom, “The children cheered wildly” (370). This quick move from dark, brooding, melancholy hopelessness, a moment when the children are “scared,” uncertain as to what life means in the face of death, to joy at the sight of a new creature, highlights the fact that the children’s education is complete. They have faced death and vulnerability and all of the darkness of reality but have learned to find value and hope even within this darkness. They now move back towards a joy and hope: a hope founded in the understanding, the proof, that value has been restored by the embrace of the broken parts of life. This “new gerbil” — this new life — is another chance to pursue living their own lives in the face of this new reality (370).

Schools are supposed to be places of education, of positive growth, turning students from naive children into understanding, intelligent adults capable of living in the “real” world. Yet here, at this school, it seems the children only learn about death. Ultimately, this suggests that to truly be prepared to live in the “real” world, students must first confront the tragic side of reality, both within and around themselves, and decide that life is indeed worth living. While they lose their childhood innocence

in the process, the positive ending suggests that even when the true nature of the world becomes clear, we still have reason to hope. Though life may be tragic, we have each other to hold as we make our way through it. «

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Sui Sin Far: Debunking the Yellow Peril

CHRISTELLE KUA-BALBUENA

AMERICA HAS A long history of discriminating against minority groups, especially those of Asian descent. By the late nineteenth century, the massive influx of Chinese laborers entering the United States, especially in the West, stirred up xenophobic and racist attitudes towards Chinese, known as the Yellow Peril, and fears related to American race, class, and gender relations. These grumblings eventually surged into a wave of anti-Chinese sentiment that swept across America and culminated in the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. This was the first immigration act that specifically excluded an entire ethnic group, effectively barring Chinese laborers from entering the U.S., with the exception of merchants, diplomats, teachers, students, and tourists (Guest 241). The act was later extended indefinitely in 1902 and would not be repealed until 1943 (Guest 243).

The passing of the Chinese Exclusion Act endorsed and fed into white Americans' fear

of the Yellow Peril, which embraced anti-Asian sentiment and portrayed Asians as an alien race and an economic threat, perpetual foreigners, incapable of assimilating into American culture, and an economic threat. In the midst of all this, author and journalist Edith Maude Eaton, known by her Chinese pen name as Sui Sin Far, published her short story in 1912 called "In the Land of the Free." In her story, Far combats these false perceptions through the humanizing portrayal of the Chinese merchant, Hom Hing, and his wife, Lae Choo, and in doing so, she challenges the prejudiced narrative being told about the Chinese and criticizes the U.S. government's unfair treatment and discriminatory system.

Being half Chinese herself, Sui Sin Far was no stranger to the racial prejudices white Americans had towards the Chinese--other children would call her and her siblings derogatory names such as "Chinky," "yellow-face," "pig-tail," and "rat-eater" (Far, "Leaves from the Mental



CHRISTELLE KUA-BALBUENA ('23) wrote this essay for her final in Dr. Robin Miskolze's Histories: American Realism class. The topic was inspired by what she learned in her Contemporary Issues in Asian Pacific American Communities class. She hopes that those who read her essay recognize that the rise in discrimination and violence against Asians and Asian Americans is not a recent phenomenon due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but that these stereotypes and racist ideologies have been persistent throughout America's history.

Portfolio”). In her reflection titled “Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian,” Far recalls a conversation she had with her white employer, Mr. K, whom she worked for as a stenographer. In response to a remark about how the cars had been “full of Chinamen,” Mr. K declared, “I cannot reconcile myself to the thought that the Chinese are humans like ourselves. They may have immortal souls, but their faces seem to be so utterly devoid of expression that I cannot help but doubt” (Far, “Leaves from the Mental Portfolio”). Mr. K’s response echoes the mainstream, but misguided views that many white Americans had of Chinese people at the time. White Americans viewed the Chinese as radically different from themselves, whether that be emotionally, culturally, or physically. It is no wonder then that Far chose to place Hom Hing and Lae Choo in such an emotional situation in order to reveal that Chinese people truly are “humans like ourselves” (“Land of the Free” 4). Far from being expressionless, the emotions Hom Hing and Lae Choo’s characters portray are relatable to any person facing their same circumstances. For example, when he sees his baby son for the first time, Hom Hing gazes upon him with “proud and joyous eyes,” and later on in the story, Lae Choo is so afflicted with grief over her baby boy being taken away from her that her husband fears she will “pass into the land of spirits” (Far, “Land of the Free” 4, 8). From Far’s description of Hom Hing and Lae Choo, readers can hardly claim that the Chinese couple is “utterly devoid of expression” (“Leaves from the Mental Portfolio”).

Another popular misconception white Americans had was that all Chinese women were prostitutes or carriers of disease, a belief that led to the passing of the 1875 Page

Law, which prohibited the entry of Chinese prostitutes (Guest 240). In order to gain entry, Chinese women had to prove that they were not prostitutes, and, as Kenneth Guest—a professor at Baruch College whose research focuses on China, New York City, immigration, religion, and transnationalism—notes in his article “Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882,” these “concomitant interrogations and examinations intimidated and discouraged many potential women immigrants, leading to a 68 percent decline in Chinese women arrivals between 1876 and 1882” (240). White Americans viewed Chinese women as polluters who would sully their pure Anglo-Saxon race, and if not, then at best they were sought after to satisfy American men’s sexual desires. By centering “In the Land of the Free” around a devoted Chinese mother’s quest to reunite with her son, Far completely challenges this damaging portrait white Americans have painted of Chinese women. She characterizes Lae Choo as the personification of motherhood, a novelty concept for its time. When Hom Hing asks if she has rested, Lae Choo is shocked by her husband’s question and replies, “You do not know—man—what it is to miss the feel of the little fingers and the little toes and the soft round limbs of your little one” (Far, “Land of the Free” 6). In this, Far establishes a connection between Lae Choo and all mothers, calling upon the intimacy between a mother and her child. She also deliberately portrays Lae Choo as a faithful wife. Through Hom Hing’s explanation to the American customs officers, readers learn how, after giving birth to her son, Lae Choo nursed her mother and father-in-law “for twenty moons,” and when it came to requests from her husband, she was “accustomed to obedience”

“Land of the Free” 5). She was committed and worked hard to provide for her family, “her activity [being] ceaseless” (“Land of the Free” 7). Although being Chinese, Lae Choo undoubtedly possessed qualities that were highly valued in white American women, once again portraying Chinese women in a radically different light than what was expected of them.

There was also a common belief among white laborers that Chinese “coolies” were an economic threat because they settled for lower wages and thus stole jobs that should have gone to more deserving white workers (Guest 240). As a result, Chinese workers were often subjected to racist and violent acts of discrimination, and as Erika Lee, a member of the departments of history and Asian American Studies at the University of Minnesota, describes in her article “The ‘Yellow Peril’ and Asian Exclusion in the Americas,” Chinese coolies were “portrayed either as an industrious labor force that would make slavery unnecessary or as an (other) inferior race that was vulnerable to cruel exploitation, just like African American slaves” (546). Through Hom Hing and Lae Choo’s struggles to reunite with their baby boy, Far exposes how the Chinese have been exploited and taken advantage of, despite white Americans labeling and condemning them as an economic threat. This is seen specifically through Hom Hing and Lae Choo’s interactions with the lawyer, who Far describes as “keen-faced,” which is indicative of the young man’s perceptive and calculating nature (“Land of the Free” 7). Far first sets up the scene by having Hom Hing explain the couples’ financial situation, how “nearly all [he has] is gone,” and later it is revealed that even Hom Hing’s friends “are not rich” (“Land of the Free”

8, 9). Despite this knowledge, the lawyer remains indifferent and demands that the couple pay five hundred for him to travel to Washington and get their son back. He downplays their concerns, saying, “It won’t harm the boy to stay where he is, and your wife may get over it all right,” knowing that as long as he plays the right cards, they will pay him because his assistance is invaluable to them (“Land of the Free” 8, 9). In the end, in an act of desperation to meet the lawyer’s demands, Lae Choo gives him her precious jewelry as payment. Although white workers claimed that Chinese laborers were an economic threat, the characters of “In the Land of the Free” revealed that many Chinese were actually worse off than they were made out to be, making them easy targets for exploitation.

Even though the United States claims that all men are created equal, the anti-Chinese sentiment of the nineteenth century made it very clear that certain races were less desirable than others. White Americans feared that the Chinese would take over and destroy “American” culture and values. However, in “In the Land of the Free,” the opposite occurs. Since Lae Choo’s son, who is referred to as the Little One, was kept at a missionary nursery for ten months, he was disconnected from his family and could not even recognize his own mother when they were finally reunited, instead “[shrinking] from her and [hiding] himself in the folds of the white woman’s skirt” (“Land of the Free” 11). Although a heartbreaking scene, this moment serves as Far’s critique of the U.S. government’s unfair treatment and racist legislation towards the Chinese. As Far implies through the Little One’s rejection of Lae Choo, it is America’s own racial prejudices and discriminatory laws that trample over other

peoples' culture and livelihood. In the story, Hom Hing assures Lae Choo that "there cannot be any law that would keep a child away from its mother," but unfortunately, that is exactly what happens ("Land of the Free" 6). However, the customs officer appears guilt-ridden for separating them, claiming that he "[doesn't] like this part of the business" ("Land of the Free" 9). Even the lawyer feels "something within him [arise] against accepting such payment for his services," and while he does take Lae Choo's jewels, Far describes that he does so "mechanically," as if he is just going through the motions ("Land of the Free" 9, 10). Through these telling moments, Far alludes to the system created by the U.S. government, which permits such atrocities to occur even without the interference of overtly racist people. Even the missionary nurse herself does not seem to understand the consequence of her words when she says, "children so soon forget," highlighting the fact that the system no longer needs racist individuals to run it when the laws themselves are discriminatory ("Land of the Free" 10). It did not matter that Hom Hing was a merchant who "[had] been in business in San Francisco for many years," or that he and Lae Choo were American citizens ("Land of the Free" 5). These laws discriminated against the Chinese solely based on their race.

Far's short story "In the Land of the Free" challenges the popular perceptions white Americans had of the Chinese in the nineteenth century. The mainstream narrative portrayed the Chinese as the Yellow Peril, people who were radically different and an economic threat, but through Far's representation of Hom Hing and Lae Choo, it is clear that this belief is highly misinformed. Sadly, these opinions were held

by the majority of Americans, leading to the creation of discriminatory laws such as the Chinese Exclusion Act. However, Far's story not only gave insight into the challenges members of the Chinese community faced due to these laws, but it also gave them a voice. While she does not openly critique the U.S. government, Far appeals to the readers' sense of empathy by humanizing her Chinese characters so that readers can understand how unfairly they have been treated by these American policies. Although "In the Land of the Free" addresses the misconceptions white Americans had of the Chinese in the past, many of these prejudiced views against Chinese and other Asian Americans are unfortunately resurfacing today due to the outbreak of the coronavirus, and it is important to remember that these differences should not divide us. «

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Black Characters: Humanizing Representation

MEGAN LORETO

HISTORICALLY, BLACK characters in literature, film, and art have been represented in offensive, harmful, and often dehumanizing ways. In a culture that touts the power of art and representation, the need to subvert the stereotypes and literary tropes mirrored from a society built on the foundations of white supremacy onto Black characters has never ebbed away. To understand the delicate balance of realism, characterization, and metaphor in writing and film, there is much to be learned from good contemporary examples. By examining the Black characters in *Dear White People* (2014), directed by Justin Simien, and *BlackKKKlansman* (2018), by Spike Lee, my intention is to identify some of the ways writers construct Black characters who subvert tropes and broader stereotypes.

I. WHY?

Why do we need Black characters to humanize those they represent? To begin by posing the

question of “why” might seem to undermine the purpose of a work seeking to investigate nuance and depth. It might seem like the answer to such a question is obvious. However, even in this basic question there is much to unpack. There are two primary reasons to justify the ways in which the question of “why” is important to pose at the beginning of this investigation into writing characters. First, that for many, “why” is posed in the face of questions more simple than that stated above. “Why do Black lives matter?” “Why do we still have to talk about race?” “Why are people rioting?” In a recent commercial, Google created a video around the concept of “why” and one of the searches displayed briefly read, “why black lives matter.” The irony, of what was probably intended to represent the most recent wave of Black Lives Matter activism in 2020, detracts attention from the absurdity that Americans still need to Google the answer to that question to begin with (Google). The second reason for posing this question is to allude to the



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complexity of the answer. Characters can fulfill a variety of purposes. They can seek to divert and entertain. They can be placed in a story to move a plot forward. They can be symbolic. The most successful characters are, in some ways, indistinguishable from the living. They are figures which not only mirror the humanity of the writer but some truth of living. They are able to evoke empathy. They are able to touch their readers or viewers, not just by extending the reach of their writer, but by some merit of their own, carried forward by an inherent power of art to touch humans. Why do we need Black characters to humanize those they represent? We need them because there is a lack of consideration for the humanity of Black people in the United States. We need them because there is a shortage of Black characters who do so. We need them because, historically, when Black characters were in stories they served the interests of white people, their narratives were crafted and controlled by white hegemony. We need them to illustrate that there is not one type of “Black person” and not one singular Black experience.

Often, the idea of “representation” is decontextualized. In many cases, the appearance of representation replaces diverse, empathetic depictions of Black humanity. And while there are constant conversations about representation in the workplace, in government, in schools, and in media, the conversations rarely address what the representations ought to be, outside of aesthetics. The appearance of diversity alone is not enough for what can be quantified as “good” representation. Especially in terms of media representation for the sake of the following arguments and

inquiries, “good” means complex, human, and subversive to stereotype. More than anything, “good” is that which is working to subvert white supremacy in its exponential forms.

Stories about Black Americans are often considered to be “Black” media, a subsection of mainstream—that is to say, white—media. One example of this phenomenon includes the TV series *Living Single*, which was outperformed by its white successor *Friends*, despite having nearly identical narratives (Judge). This also includes Black literature which includes a canon of writers separate from the accepted literary canon—predominantly composed of white writers. During the Academy Awards for the year 2015, the mostly white Academy failed to nominate a single Black actor or actress and snubbed *Straight Outta Compton* (2015) by failing to even nominate the film for best picture. While this is unsurprising to any with a critical eye who view the Academy as merely an extension of the film industry, which has failed to be inclusive (or even project a progressive image, until very recently), the Academy—when confronted—failed to see where they had erred. The Hollywood Reporter wrote, “While many agree that the Academy’s overwhelmingly white membership does play a role in the types of films and performances that get Oscar attention, some white members privately express resentment over accusations of racism in failing to nominate a single non-white actor or anoint *Straight Outta Compton* a best picture candidate” (Feinberg). This response privileges powerful white people—their art, their perspectives. Since 2015, the Oscars have become more diverse, but white art and white artists still seem to

reign supreme, even when appropriating stories about Black individuals or using Black characters as plot devices; i.e., *Green Book* (2018), written by three white screenwriters.

The truth is, many well-known or critically acclaimed stories about Black people—particularly in film or television—are stories either told by white people, appropriated by white people, or compressed by white people from a story with perceivable dimensions into something flat. Nuance is missing from the characters who face this manufactured Black existence on screen. This un-reality also upholds the misconception of a singular “Black” experience in America (and beyond, though that is larger than the scope of my arguments here); in reality, this is a myth manufactured by white people. Its purpose is to continue to maintain white hegemony and the dehumanization of those deemed as “other.” By depicting the experiences of Black individuals as a monoculture, white people can continue to envision whiteness as a singular, oppositional force. This allows them to avoid confronting their own lack of cohesive identity beyond hypocrisy, despotism, and their continued role in American society as the oppressor.

There is a need for subversion and the media offers an opportunity to combat white supremacy in a profound way. This job does not fall solely on the shoulders of Black creators and artists, nor is it a job that can be accomplished without a reckoning of white America from within. There is a need for all writers and artists to learn how to write characters with intersectional identities that garner empathy, lend to historical understanding, encapsulate nuance, and function with contemporary fluidity

for an ever-evolving world. The world will be better for it.

II. ARCHETYPES AND TROPES

For me, there is a difference between a trope and an archetype. A trope is a writer’s device that often plays into stereotypes and presumed expectations, refusing to embody any originality of thought. An archetype is a fundamental human motif that exists in universal myth. I don’t mind inhabiting an archetype if it has been given life and interiority.

—LUPITA NYONG’O

Before launching into a comparison of archetypes and tropes, it is necessary to define both terms in the context of the following analysis. Both archetypes and tropes are literary devices. The *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* defines an archetype as “A symbol, theme, setting, or character-type that recurs in different times and places in myth, literature, folklore, dreams, and rituals so frequently or prominently as to suggest (to certain speculative psychologists and critics) that it embodies some essential element of ‘universal’ human experience” (Baldick). To define what a trope is in a contemporary context is more difficult to authoritatively define. The word has changed over time. Classically, “trope” refers to “A figure of speech, especially one that uses words in senses beyond their literal meanings” (Trope); (i.e. allegory, metaphor, etc.), but in contemporary literary studies the word has taken on a more multifaceted meaning. When used in terms of character or a characteristic of a genre, the word “trope”

carries with it a negative connotation. On one hand, it can signify an element that is overused or cliché—for example, a situation that comes up repeatedly, such as one bed being available at a hotel when prospective lovers are forced to stay in a room together. It could be attributed to lazy writing. When it comes to characterization—what this work is more specifically concerned with—the presence of a “trope” refers to a repetitive character type that relies on cultural stereotypes to operate within a story. Tropes are commonly used by writers to avoid confronting the humanity of the type of people their character is supposed to represent, particularly if they represent the “other.” An example of this would be the funny, Black sidekick who undergoes no character development and seems to have no purpose within a narrative other than to support the main character’s more complex arc.

Tropes are rooted in a long history of stereotypes used to actively otherize Black individuals in America. “Stereotypes are based on simplification and generalization, or the denial of individuality; they can be either negative or positive. Though they may have no basis in reality, stereotypes are real in their social consequences, notably with regard to the allocation of roles” (Nederveen 11). Many of the stereotypes of Black people are recognizable to those whose formal and informal education occurred in an American context. Stereotypes of the tragic mulatto, the comic negro, and the mammy, originally identified by Sterling Brown, infiltrate our cultural understandings (Nederveen 152). They are not just accepted by white and non-black individuals, but they are also internalized by Black people who

must cope with combating these simplified and toxic notions of self. Stereotypes are a way of erasing humanity from people and minimizing the complexity of our narratives and understandings of the world.

Additionally, stereotypes are not just related to tropes. They are also related to the concept of archetypes. This threatens a different type of danger to collective renderings of Black and marginalized people on the fronts of literature, art, and myth. “Sometimes stereotypes are held to be true, and in fact a kind of primal image or archetype; in other words, not an expression of prejudice but rather a reflection of the inherent essential characteristics of the group in question. To equate stereotypes with archetypes is to remove them from history; to do so means that the social conventions, the clichés of the day, must be taken to be profound truths” (Nederveen 152). This is the larger threat that could grow out of a trope in a book, film, or television show. When white writers write about Black people their reliance on tropes—without it always being their intention to do so—creates a two-fold problem. First, it creates one-dimensional characters without any real or substantive humanity for audiences to sympathize with. Second, white writers rely on flawed cultural assumptions and stereotypes while simultaneously constructing and reinforcing even more thoroughly flawed notions of truth.

In order to combat this ongoing construction, many Black writers have created works of art and literature throughout history that operate to combat tropes and stereotypes. Demonstrating both a knowledge

of the trope and the deconstruction of it, Black writers are able to subvert the expectation—even if it is subconscious—of readers whose cultural knowledge stems only from repeatedly consuming the same iterations of Black characters. In his collection of short stories *The Ways of White Folks*, Langston Hughes puts the dichotomy of Black and white under a microscope. Each individual story challenges the reader to subsume their expectation of what Black and white characters are, or how they operate, in order to reveal the complexity of the narratives and characters. Even in the medium of the short story, one of the ongoing themes through this collection is to illustrate how a scene plays out when a Black person says, does, or otherwise operates in a way that the white character does not expect. This technique undermines tropes on a literary level and undermines stereotypes for the reader.

One example is in “Red-Headed Baby.” The story begins with dialogue from a white character who is discussing a girl who readers presume is a prostitute. He speaks about her in a derogatory way, commenting on her sexuality—“She acted like she was a virgin then... Sure ain’t a virgin now” (Hughes 125)—and her race: “this damn yellow gal” (Hughes 126). He insinuates that she is a slut, a liar, and something of a sexual last resort for him. The language the character uses to describe her brings to mind the trope of a “Jezebel,” or an overly sexualized example of the female tragic mulatto, mentioned above. By the end of the story it becomes clear that the young woman, Betsey, is not a seductress but an innocent and naive character—a universal archetype—who has been taken advantage of by Mister Clarence. When a red-headed baby

emerges, the true affection Betsey had for the man and his own affection for her confronts him directly. He cannot handle this subversion of his worldview and rather than confront the truth of Betsey’s humanity and his own, he chooses to pay her \$2 for drinks to perpetuate the idea that their relationship is and was a business transaction and leaves. This story is successful in every regard. It illustrates the trope, undermines it, forces the main character to confront his stereotypes, and—though he chooses to bury the truth—his exposure to the very humanity of Betsey cannot be undone. Hughes is able to accomplish storytelling that humanizes both characters in the span of only eight pages, making it an excellent example of how writers and artists can and should be able to avoid using tropes in writing.

III. *DEAR WHITE PEOPLE* (2014)

To further analyze the use of tropes used in media and how writers are able to subvert them, I will be using two films to examine how compelling characterization contributes to good representation. The first of these two examples is *Dear White People* (2014), which was written and directed by Justin Simien. It is his first film. Set at a fictional, predominantly white institution (PWI) meant to allude to Ivy League institutions, the film riffs off of multiple tropes to create a dynamic, multi-character drama. It centers on the fact that there is no singular Black experience, at college or otherwise. This film was released during the Obama Era, when post-racial dialogue came to a head. This film illustrates that under the pretense of diversity, the racism and white supremacy of institutions is allowed to flourish unchecked.

In an interview with NPR, Simien discussed his work and his intentions for the story. He said he wanted to show multiple characters struggling against the idea of a monolithic Black experience and illustrate the war between the identity you create and your true internal self. “I think the film attempts to admit that there is no quintessential blackness,” said Simien, “Each of my four characters are just attacking that same problem from a different point of view. Should I wear my hair that way, should I be militant, should I conform? I think they’re all kind of struggling with the deep fear that this is all in response to white people” (Meraji). His analysis of this larger question plays out in the character development of these four main characters: Samantha White, Lionel Higgins, Coco Connors, and Troy Fairbanks.

Samantha White is the main character of the story. The plot operates around her. At the beginning of the film, her radio show, “Dear White People,” introduces us to her. She comes across as opinionated and forthright, and when we see her again in the classroom it is clear that she likes to provoke reactions. The trope Simien is comparing her against is that of “the angry black woman.” “The ‘angry black woman’ trope has its roots in 19th Century America, when minstrel shows, which involved comic skits and variety acts, mocking African Americans became popular” (Prasad). Samantha argues with her professor and those around her, but though she is a contrarian, she is not truly angry. This becomes clear when the white male, TA, who criticizes her film, follows her back to her dorm where—to punctuate their back and forth debate—they have sex.

Throughout the film she struggles with the idea of militancy, sometimes leaning into more radical actions and sometimes coming across as reluctant. While some characters in the film urge her to become something of a figurehead for the Black students on campus, it seems like Samantha just wants to grow into her own identity as a young woman, daughter, and artist. Her character struggles with being bi-racial, sometimes feeling too Black and other times too white, and by the end of the film comes to embody the space in-between that she has been avoiding her whole life. Samantha becomes the archetype of an anti-hero in many ways. She does not always do the most noble or heroic action, in the end. She doesn’t sacrifice herself. Instead, in the face of her trope, she chooses to pursue not anger or rage, but her own joy, even when this means openly dating a white man.

Another of the main characters, Lionel Higgins, represents the intersectional experience of someone who is Black and queer. Lionel is clever—this is evident from the first—but for most of the film he follows what others ask of him in order to gain some sort of social acceptance. At the beginning of the film he vaguely represents one of the five dominant stereotypes identified by Sterling Brown: a “tom: they served their masters well” (Nederveen 152). However, it is clear that Lionel is not really keen on serving anyone but himself. He is more of an outcast than a follower. His appearance alone, with his natural hair and glasses, makes him stand out. During the film, Lionel tells the Black kids that he knows he doesn’t fit in with either the Black kids or the white kids. Part of this is a fixture

of his sexuality. “Black Queer men in higher education settings engage in a complex set of identity negotiations. Not only do they have to contend with the negative imagery and experiences of their heterosexual counterparts, but also issues regarding their sexual orientation within a sometimes homophobic Black community. Black Queer males then must work to create spaces and places within their school and broader Black communities, negotiating between their sexual and racial identities—with many of them choosing to prioritize their racial identity” (Sewell 34). In fact, in *Dear White People*, Simien does force Lionel to choose to prioritize his racial identity. At the blackface party, the crush he had been pining over throughout the film kisses him and clings to him. His behavior, while not outright racist, is filled with microaggressions that Lionel bears for the sake of getting to express his sexuality. Yet at the party, it becomes clear to Lionel that he needs to prioritize solidarity with his Black friends. Despite being forced to combat these multiple layers of marginalization, Lionel manages to break free from his passive state and becomes the main actor during the second half of the film. He is no longer passive, quiet, or allowing himself to be stepped on, but fighting full force.

Both Coco Connors and Troy Fairbanks are two equally as interesting, though less celebratory characters. Simien is determined to make them as dynamic and multifaceted as possible by giving both strong motives for everything they do, even if it is not what the audience wants them to do. Coco Connors is oppositional to Samantha White. She imposes white beauty standards on herself

by straightening her hair and wearing blue contacts. She is very conscious and intentional with the way she presents herself and she caters towards the white male gaze. Although these character traits might not be the making of a protagonist, Coco has very keen self-awareness. She does want fame and attention and she is sacrificing some parts of herself to achieve that end, but she is also aware of the complexity of Blackness and whiteness and navigating as she sees fit. At the end of the film, she has a few moments of dialogue where she talks about how, in a contemporary context, some aspects of perceived Blackness have become aspirational to white society without white society having any recognition or awareness of this. In this way, Coco reveals that by consciously crafting herself for an audience, she is actually gaming the system in her own way, rather than being an unwitting victim, as the audience might have imagined her to be earlier in the film.

Troy Fairbanks is a character complicated by intergenerational tension between himself and his father, Dean Walter Fairbanks of the campus administration. Dean Fairbanks envisions one path to success for his son, his own path, conforming to the rules of white respectability. It is clear that Troy would have other plans for himself if he could exert agency. He is not always happy to go along with what his father has mapped out for him, and their conversations are emotional. During several scenes, Troy locks himself in the bathroom away from his white girlfriend—who he is only dating at his father’s suggestion—to smoke weed. Troy seems to be far from his authentic self during his time on screen, perhaps

further from himself than his counterparts, and occasionally smoking is the only time we see him able to center himself. Troy is hypersexualized by men and women in this film. He has sex with Coco and something of a romantic attraction to her, but they can't be together publicly without revealing something of their inner selves they do not want the world to know. However, the viewers are in on the secret, so in the same way that Hughes offers humanity to his characters by letting the audience in on a secret, so does Simien.

Overall, *Dear White People* (2015) offers several portraits and relates many stories in the span of only a few hours. The interiority, as Lupita Nyong'o termed it, of these characters is utterly convincing. The viewer does not have to like any of the characters to feel that they are real, human, and complex. Not all of them experienced the same amount of growth over the course of the film, but all of them were given dignity. None were reduced or flattened, but, instead, were surprising and dimensional. From a less narrow perspective, the film also serves a greater purpose than counteracting tropes or responding to white preconceptions of singular Blackness. "Black college movies all contain a dual perspective: on one hand, the familiar campus themes of risk, zaniness, and detachment from the real world, and on the other hand, the deeply moving struggle of an entire minority community for justice, equality, respect, and brute survival" (Beck 144). Simien tells several stories that allude to and symbolize the many ongoing journeys of young Black collegiates: this is successful, good representation.

IV. *BLACKKKLANSMAN* (2018)

The second film I would like to examine is *BlackKKlansman* (2018), directed by Spike Lee and written by Spike Lee, Kevin Willmott, Charlie Wachtel, and David Rabinowitz. This film is based on the true story of Ron Stallworth's infiltration of the Ku Klux Klan during his time as a detective for the Colorado Springs Police Department, during the 1970s. On one level, this film not only tells the story of a true event, but it also operates as a contemporary response to the Trump Era. Unlike *Dear White People*, *BlackKKlansman* does not have to deconstruct "post-racial America." No, this film is set in the 1970s and released during a time where outright racism was impossible not to encounter. Overall, this element led to the creation of a piece of media that is far more direct in tone. It has more of a sense of urgency. That being said, its characters are truly part of the story, rather than being the story itself. Because the characters were not the main focus, Lee did fall short on some fronts despite creating a dynamic and multi-faceted Black lead.

Not all of the main characters in this film are Black, but Ron Stallworth and his love interest, Patrice, offer two interesting subjects to analyze in terms of the use of tropes and archetypes in cinema. Ron and Patrice's relationship throughout the film is a secondary storyline. They are clearly drawn to one another and they both want Black liberation, but that is where their similarities end. Ron Stallworth believes in a less radical, more diplomatic road to progress. He is the first Black cop in Colorado Springs; he bears the burden of integration, he bears the racist jokes from his coworkers, he begs for opportunity from those higher in command. Patrice is

far more radical. She believes in a grassroots approach to activism and abhors institutions. She does not buy into Ron's belief that you can change a power structure from within. Still, they are drawn together and bonded by—not just experiences of trauma at the hands of the KKK—but also by some experiences of joy.

As far as their roles in the story outside of their relationship with each other, Ron is the protagonist and Patrice is his love interest. In this regard, both characters could be considered archetypal. This is a story with clear heroes and villains and audiences are rooting for Ron throughout the film. However, in this film, there are tropes. It is not so unusual, or even subversive, for the media to portray cops as Black. In fact, the minority cop is—in fact—a contemporary trope. “Movies show us the camaraderie and job satisfaction black or female cops get from buying into institutions that previously barred them. But they don't tend to inquire deeply into the limits of the citizenship that come with being a police officer or the compromises minority officers must make for that citizenship. The result is a narrative that dramatically simplifies the complex relationships between police departments and the women, people of color and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people with whom the police have had historically fractious relationships” (Blue). However, Ron Stallworth is perceptive and intentional. He does everything in his power to change the police force internally, even when it jeopardizes his own success. Can there be such a thing as a good cop? Patrice, and probably many audience members, would say no. Lee leaves that question up to interpretation, but throughout the film, he

hints none-too-discreetly that the police force is simply an extension of white supremacy.

Patrice's character is where the film falls short in subverting tropes. She can easily be identified with the “strong black woman” trope. Carrying the emotional battles of Ron on her back throughout the film, Patrice is barely developed as an individual outside of her supporting role of the main character. She does serve as something of a stabilizing and moral force for Ron throughout the film. “The stereotype of the ‘strong black woman’ is more than just a cultural trope: Many black women in America report feeling pressured to act like superwomen, projecting themselves as strong, self-sacrificing, and free of emotion to cope with the stress of race- and gender-based discrimination in their daily lives” (Manke). Patrice's character is simply not as well developed as Ron and the story relies on the trope of her goodness and strength as a progressive Black woman to compel us to like her. I believe, if there had been a woman writing for this script, Patrice could have been a more dimensional character, someone more human. Though this trope does not necessarily promote something bad, it still fails to capture the humanity and burden of Black women. The script lacks intersectionality.

V. CONCLUSION

The way I think about it is I honestly believe stories belong to all of us. At the same time, the glory of publishing — who gets to tell the stories — does not belong to all of us. So how do you resolve these two things? You have to work with both.

—ANDREA CIPRIANI IN *VULTURE*

To buy into the arguments above, you have to believe that literature and art profoundly affect who we are as individuals and as a collective society. Over time, many people have said that a single flawed reputation of Black character on screen or in a novel is not critical to the progress of society. Many have even questioned why Black characters ought to be present at all. Are they necessary? They ask. Aren't we all human? The answer is, yes, we are all human. But the depiction of all of us in art does not reflect the fact that we are all human. Humanity and the gift of complexity are reserved for the select few who represent those who have the privilege to create and sell and achieve success to begin with; in the American hegemonic order that is straight, white, protestant men who have wealth. Over time, a small cohort of Black, Indigenous people of color (BIPOC) and women have created art that rebels against this hierarchy, but this group is working to undo centuries of active dehumanization through representation. It is not a process that will occur overnight, and in the meantime, white artists and creators need to take part in creating BIPOC characters with nuance, complexity, and humanity in their media.

In order to create content that deals with Black humanity, there is a need for white writers to explore and understand Black humanity. This means reading Black writers, their history, philosophy, criticism, reviews, memoirs, and cookbooks. This means watching "Black" media or, in other words, film and television written, directed, and acted by Black people. Without this basis of understanding of Black humanity, writers will have no basis for creating compelling

characters who are apt representations of the flawed and complex experiences of those who have dealt with oppression and marginalization unexperienced by white Americans. There is also a different canon of art to be found in the work of Black creators that can illustrate how to subvert tropes and stereotypes, how to escape the confines of constructed dehumanization. These works are valuable resources, and in some ways aspirational. They seem to say: someday the world could be like this, we could see each other like this, we could love each other like this. «

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A Letter to the English Faculty of John Cabot University

LEOPOLDINE RIGAUD

AS AN ADVOCATE of diverse curriculums, it has come to my attention that your syllabus provides a three-week-long section on Shakespeare's *The Tempest*; yet my grandfather's, Aimé Césaire's, 1969 *A Tempest* lacks any proper mention. Considering the socio-political climate that the young adult generation is living in, I believe it is of the highest imperative you introduce them to one of the most prominent plays written by the creator of the Négritude movement. Not only would this work allow students to discover a particularly exceptional anti-colonial perspective on Shakespeare's play, but it would also provide these students with an opportunity to enjoy a more modern writing style to relieve them from Shakespeare's Elizabethan writing. Not to say that Shakespeare's writing should be ignored, but rather that students be more versed in a comparative understanding of the work. *A Tempest* is a confrontational piece about colonialism but also an ode to the Martiniquaise culture. In addition, it stands

as a powerfully optimistic gaze aimed at its Martinique's independence. With this letter, I intend to demonstrate that any Shakespearian class that seeks to teach *The Tempest* should imperatively parallel its analysis with that of Césaire's *A Tempest*.

A Tempest introduces students to a new way of reading Shakespeare and allows a discussion surrounding the changes made by Césaire regarding the play's narrative and their implications. The author's focus on the circumstances surrounding colonized lands—Martinique as the example in particular—is embodied by his depiction of the relationship between Caliban and his master Prospero. In contrast to Shakespeare's original work, Césaire's insistence on the idea of race and equality is front and center in his version of the play. The critic Laurence Porter drives this point home when he eloquently states that "Shakespeare's essentialist views, not necessarily racist themselves, can readily be



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used by racists concerned with preserving the status quo. In *The Tempest* Caliban's revolt is only a secondary disturbance of the social nexus, destined to be set right, as are all such disturbances in Shakespeare's play" (Porter 363). In comparison, Césaire uses Caliban as the leading role and makes his revolt the focus of the work. Césaire demonstrates this by the fact that Caliban has the final word of the play—a call of hope: "Freedom hi-day! Freedom hi-day!"—in an attempt to reclaim the freedoms lost to colonialism.

Furthermore, Césaire's ending, as opposed to Shakespeare's version, does not provide the audience with a sense of closure. Instead, Caliban's newly found freedoms at the end allude to the ambiguous fact that what will follow the end of the play is unknown; it could lead to a more powerful revolt on one hand or be completely squashed on the other. Either way, an ending like this embodies the risk of the harm and unknown that comes with taking a chance at one's own freedom, which gives students a chance to question whether Caliban's work was all worth it in the end or not, if they put themselves in Caliban's shoes. This underlying sense of activism and change is clear in the title itself—*A Tempest*—one among many. The implication is subtle, but the title can also remind students that the notion of seeking freedom in some form is not unique to just one place, a theme which falls in line with the overall theme of Césaire's work. When questioned about writing his play, Césaire claimed, "*La Tempête*, certes, mais ce qui serait intéressant, celle qui m'intéresse, serait une tempête particulière: la tempête de la Martinique, ce qui se passe dans mon pays" ("*A Tempest*, sure, but what would

be interesting, the one that interests me, is a particular tempest: the tempest of Martinique, what happens in my country") (Césaire Constant). The play, although it is deeply rooted in the specific context of Martinique, could ultimately be transposed within the context of many other colonized lands. The play's specificity would allow students to learn about a land and situation they most probably have never heard of, while still being able to analyze colonialism in its entirety. This feature is something that Shakespeare's original work just does not offer.

After all of that, you may still wonder why teaching students about Martinique would benefit enough to merit a change in curriculum. The reality is that the books most often assigned to discuss colonialism are Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* or Kipling's *The Man Who Will be King*. It comes as no surprise that these books were written by men who came from the country of the colonizers. English literature classes must offer more readings from the other side of this issue. *A Tempest* presents the opportunity to put the voice of a colonized man in dialogue on the same level with that of one of the most renowned authors of all time: Shakespeare. *A Tempest* takes away perceived notions of superiority and inferiority, in this sense. In addition, teaching Césaire introduces students to a figure with a singularly fascinating life and alluring destiny. Aimé Césaire is the example of a man who traveled to France to attend elite institutions that were mostly populated by a white student population at the time, while still managing to excel with tremendous distinction. Specifically, from Lycée Louis le Grand to the École Normale Supérieure, my grandfather challenged the

status quo of prestigious institutions by creating his journal “L’Étudiant Noir,” putting a focus on black identity and bringing his relative experience to a broader audience. This is the same man whose *La Tragédie du Roi Christophe* now stands next to Molière’s comedies in the repertoire of the Comédie Française. Such authors can be sources of inspiration for many aspiring writers. Césaire takes it a step further; he demonstrates a path to future black students where they can use their voices in the service of literature. *A Tempest* proves that black voices are as—if not more—powerful in denouncing societal issues. Overall, introducing the tempest offers incredibly diverse dimensions to an already incredibly famous work which can only benefit its scholars.

The opening mention of the original version of *A Tempest* claims that it is “Adaptee pour un theatre negre.” Miller’s translation of the play edited it as “Adaptation for black theatre.” However, *black*, in French, is *noir*, and *negre* is the equivalent to “negro” in the United States vernacular. There is a specific reason as to why Césaire chose the word “negre” instead of “noir.” It is interesting that the translator decided to translate “negre” to simply “black” when Césaire was clear with his choice of words and his intentions. His appropriation of the derogatory term that was used during times of black oppression may be a point of conflict among some students and clearly controversial among others. Controversy generally forces discussion and debate and, although at times debate only serves to polarize pre-existing biases and positions, a great chance also arises that the work would force students to challenge their own ideas and confront other

movements regarding anti-racist themes. The taboo surrounding the term “negro” was a key piece of Césaire’s ideology and he sought to challenge that status quo by showing that he was unaffected by the derogatory nature of the word. When asked whether he was a surrealist, my grandfather replied, “Je me considère surtout comme un Martiniquais et comme un Nègre” (“I especially consider myself to be a Martiniquais and a Negro”) (Constant Césaire 12). Césaire’s nonchalant willingness to use a term that has been taboo may result in a sense of discomfort for many students. Yet would it be fair to disregard a play written by a black author who himself chose to use a term he openly embraces—only to focus on Shakespeare? The cultural difference that arises in the text has been discussed by its translator. In his opening note, Miller claims that “The translation of Aimé Césaire’s *Une Tempête* presented more challenges than usually arise in the transfer of a play from one language into another (differences in cultural background, tone, milieu and so on).” This goes to show that the vernacular used by Césaire is unique in many ways and presents a chance for any student to discover it. Such a singular play begs to be read and analyzed, regardless of its controversial language, because controversy generates discussion, retention, and consideration of opposing views in a healthy environment. This would help the class ponder the meanings and uses of words, the use of language, and how language can shape the identity of minorities, depending on who uses it.

A Tempest was not immune to criticism from other anti-colonialists or figures of Negritude. In a comparison between Senghor and Césaire’s approach to the movement, Maryse

Conde questions “whether the creation of a black aesthetic did not in fact imply the assumption of a cultural paradigm, which is itself a function of the colonial relationship—that of the Negro, a concept created by the West, such that the process of liberation was hindered rather than accelerated by the model chosen” (Conde 413). Others have argued against these claims and believe that *A Tempest*, by virtue of using the core of a Shakespearian play, is a direct critique of European literature, as “Césaire’s text evades recuperation by an immobilizing of European cultural paradigm” (West 2). The controversy surrounding Césaire’s movement and his work is extremely relevant in this generation of social justice, focused on social inequity, among many other views. In a time which seems to lack nuance, it is important to force students to reflect and debate. *A Tempest* also shows students that social inequity is nothing new.

This aspect of Césaire’s identity is crucial in the reading of his works and his adaptation of Shakespeare’s play, in particular. In an interview, Césaire expressed his passion for writing drama: “par le théâtre, l’homme se projette et se voit. Se voir pour se comprendre et s’appréhender” (“through theatre, the man projects and sees himself. It is seen to understand and grasp oneself”) (Césaire). *A Tempest* is Césaire’s resulting attempt to portray the situation of the people in Martinique and their relationship to their French colonizer. He introduces the colonizer to an entirely new complex way of seeing the world and the issue of race.

If Césaire is not discussed when reading *The Tempest*, then the question that logically follows: when would he be discussed? It seems that few literature courses offer an anti- or

postcolonial focus. Yes, some may argue that African American Literature is a common subject and course offering in American universities, which introduces students to black authors. But in reality, these courses generally focus on *American* black authors and these works are realistically tied to the legacies surrounding slavery in the United States. In other words, even these courses would benefit from surveying other black communities under different cultural oppressive circumstances while reading *A Tempest*. La Négritude is the belief that black people from the Caribbean, Africa or America can feel connected to one another due to their shared roots: “Quand nous disons négritude nous insistons tout particulièrement sur la notion d’identité” (“When we say négritude we insist particularly on the notion of identity”) (00:29:30). I will argue that if we follow Césaire’s theory of the négritude, there should be more non-American black authors in the reading lists of classes—yours included—to offer a more balanced and holistic approach on the subject.

Through his works, Césaire fought to create a culture by and for Martiniquais detached from the broadness of French literature. My grandfather did not discredit French literature, but wished to create something new alongside it. This is an important distinction, because although he was unhappy with how colonialism treated his community, he still recognized the beauty in the colonizer’s art. Some individuals call for outright rejections of the colonizer’s work in different contexts, but Césaire did not agree with such a hostile view, as it is possible to appreciate the beauty in both. This, in my opinion, is more conducive to repairing these strained social relationships. It cannot be emphasized enough

that Césaire’s works stood apart with distinction from the literary repertoire of the mainland. In an interview he claimed that his works aim to “Essayer de fonder une nouvelle culture—que disje, une contre-culture qui sera la vraie culture Martiniquaise” (“Try to build a new culture—in fact, a counter-culture that would be the real Martiniquais culture”) (Césaire 00:23:05). This play shows the possibility of rethinking the literary realm and the need for various minorities to share their views. The choice of the play’s title itself proves Césaire’s wish to shed light on a people and a land that was a mystery for many when he says, “Il m’a semblé que ce titre pourrait être le symbole de cette interrogation que l’on peut se poser sur mon pays” (“It seemed to me that this title could be the symbol of the interrogations some may have about my country”) (Constant Césaire 11). It would then be a disservice to your students to withhold this play from their academic enrichment and pursuits. Especially in a time where minority struggles and voices are uniting in their broad and shared sense of community, as well as being increasingly heard on a global scale.

A Tempest is a fascinating way for students to grasp a classic play in a more understandable, modern setting. Indeed, more than an adaptation, Césaire’s play is a recontextualization of the original work. “*Une tempête* stands out as a translation through time (the era of black civil rights and African liberation movements), and space (creatively refashioning Shakespearean references into a francophone Caribbean location)” (Crispin 137). It is important to note that the era of black civil rights is far from over and still extremely relevant today, with new movements advocating for civil rights and justice.

Witnessing a play that denounces Shakespeare’s play’s naivete in this regard would be a source of satisfaction for many in university classes, and even empowerment for others. In her “Guide to teaching *A Tempest* for Postcolonial educators,” Sarah Rich describes the difficulties that can arise when teaching Shakespeare when she explains that “The tradition of studying Shakespeare through many generations presents a struggle between the past culture and the present morality standards” (Rich 1). Through my grandfather’s play, university students will recognize modern references of which they are well aware. This can be seen when Caliban claims, “I’m telling you that from now on I won’t answer to the name Caliban” “because Caliban isn’t my name. It’s as simple as that [...] It’s the name given by your hatred, and every time it’s spoken it’s an insult [...] Call me X [...]” (Césaire 20). Here, the allusion to Malcolm X allows students to grasp the fact that this play remains somewhat current since it refers to a famous figure that impacted the reach of black voices. This Caliban is not the one they met through Shakespeare; he is now an embodiment of the fight against racism and racial injustice. “Do I lie? Isn’t it true that you threw me out of your house and made me live in a filthy cave. The ghetto!” (Césaire 13). The use of the word ghetto also contextualizes the play in a modern, American context. “My text [...] was greatly influenced by the preoccupations I had at that particular time. As I was thinking very much about a play concerning the United States, inevitably, the points of reference became American. [...] There is the violent and the non-violent attitude. There are Martin Luther King and Malcolm X and the Black Panthers” (Smith & Robert 394). This proves that although *A*

Tempest was deeply attached to Martinique, the American references would enhance the students' ability to connect to the play's message.

In a continuous effort to demystify the original structure of the play, the Master of Ceremony plays a crucial role; he takes control over the play and limits the power held by Prospero: "No longer is it he who is the chief master of illusion; no longer does the colonial usurper exercise an almost unquestioned authority close to that of the playwright himself" (Porter 365). This emphasizes the fact that *A Tempest* provides a constant effort to contradict and challenge the original work. Our generation is responsive to these issues. Assigning *A Tempest* would spark the enthusiasm of many students, and perhaps a newly found interest for the négritude movement, which has unfortunately been forgotten by many.

Countless English classes provide a wide array of angles to tackle Shakespeare's works. I am aware that looking at classical works through a modernized lens can sometimes lead to unfair and often low-effort arguments. Such arguments attack implied standards of the work's time when compared to today's, which ultimately lead to skewed analyses. However, the reading of *A Tempest* in a dialogue with *The Tempest* can only reinforce students' understanding of *The Tempest* itself while simultaneously offering them a more diverse perspective on race and society. It is through Césaire's unique rewrite that students may find a voice that comforts their own ideas during their analysis of the works of a white European canonical author. Teaching *A Tempest* is not only a political act by nature, but it is also the recognition and homage to one of the few black authors immortalized alongside

Victor Hugo and Emile Zola in the Pantheon of Rome. I hope that my letter will allow you to realize that you have the power to enrich the minds of your students in an increasingly special way. These same students would probably thank you for finally opposing Shakespeare's dramatization of colonialism to that of a man who made it his lifelong fight. «

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