The Ashen Egg

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The Ashen Egg

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Note on Journal's Title:

The phoenix has long been recognized as a symbol of rejuvenation. After arsonists attempted to destroy Cherry Hall by fire in 2006, the English Department adopted the phoenix as its informal mascot in recognition of its enduring spirit. *The Ashen Egg* carries that symbolic connection a step farther. As the intermediary state between one incarnation of the phoenix and its next, the ash-enshrouded egg of the phoenix is a manifestation of the continuity between generations. The intellectual work of our students, as exemplified by the material in each volume, stands as a legacy fostered by one generation of scholars among the next.

Call For Papers: *The Ashen Egg* Vol. 15 (2027)

Submission guidelines: *The Ashen Egg* is an annual journal publishing essays on literature, rhetoric, linguistics, film, and popular culture. Any current Western Kentucky University undergraduate student may submit work for consideration. Submissions must be endorsed by an English Department faculty member who confirms the submission as a piece produced for one of the faculty member's courses and approves it as worthy for publication. Manuscripts may range from 750 to 3000 words, though exceptions may be made for submissions of stellar quality. Literature, film, and pop culture essays must follow the Modern Language Association style guidelines as defined in the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* (latest edition); essays on linguistics or professional writing topics may use APA (latest edition). Submissions must be received no later than December 15 and must be accompanied by the cover sheet with endorsement to be considered.

Contents
Vol. 14 (2026)

BEST-IN-CONFERENCE WINNERS:
2025 TED HOVET UNDERGRADUATE CONFERENCE ON LITERATURE, LANGUAGE, AND CULTURE

NOTE ON CONTRIBUTORS

Emma Childress is a sophomore Professional Writing and Environmental, Sustainability, and Geographic studies double major with a minor in Creative Writing in the Mahurin Honors College. She's a member of the HonorsToppers and the Potter College of Arts and Letter's Dean's Council of Students. In her academic career, she plans to research how language can be utilized to encourage sustainable action.

Christina Colovos is a WKU senior double-majoring in English Literature and Spanish Language. Her creative work centers primarily on memory, time, and perception, while her analytical work explores literature of every kind. She has studied internationally in Latin America, where her experiences deepened her engagement with language, sustainability, and cross-cultural storytelling. Her work is featured in WKU's Talisman, Zephyrus, and Ashen Egg. She is also the 2025 Goldenrod Writing Festival winner. She passes her time daydreaming about national parks, writing poetry, and keeping up an impossibly long Duolingo streak. She plans to pursue graduate study and eventually become a professor.

Allison Dietrich is a sophomore from Louisville, KY, studying Professional Writing and Business Data Analytics. She is a member of the Mahurin Honors College, and she currently works in the Writing Center as a tutor. In her free time, she enjoys thrifting, crocheting, and watching movies. After graduation, Allison plans to continue to pursue her interests in writing and analytics.

Carly Fawcett is a senior English major concentrating in Creative Writing, minoring in Computer Science and Animation, and pursuing a certificate in Game Design. Carly does not have a clue where life will take them post-grad, but if it does not involve writing, they will surely lose their mind. Carly loves Lou Reed, Patricia Anthony books, and their blue Hyundai Sonata.

Sarah Gamble is a junior from Scottsville, KY. She is pursuing a double major in English Literature and Chinese, with a certificate in Professional and Technical Writing, and is already looking forward to continuing her studies across literature and language in graduate school. When not reading, writing, or spending copious amounts of time participating in her many clubs, she enjoys watching video essays and diving down internet rabbit holes.

Abigail Goehner is a freshman with a Literature major and a double minor in Creative Writing and Studio Art. She loves school and hopes to eventually teach English at a college somewhere in the city. She lives to write and read, poetry especially, and runs the Poetry Club on campus. Abigail also likes to draw and sculpt, skateboard, and rock climb. Her goal in writing is to affect; the poetry, prose, and lyrics that inspire her are the ones that make you feel like you've been punched in the gut. You can find her at the open mics at WKU every month—or at Spencer's feeding her caffeine addiction.

Caleb Penick is a senior at WKU from Campbellsville, KY, studying Psychology and Child and Family Services. He is also a part of the Mahurin Honors College. Although he is not an English major, Caleb has had a love of reading from a young age that has inspired him to later take courses that cover literature in broad, general terms and also specializing in Southern and Kentucky literature, for the region he calls home.

Sarah Riahi is currently a master's student at the University of Limoges in France, studying intercultural management, English and Spanish. She spent the final year of her bachelor's degree as an exchange student at WKU, an experience she truly enjoyed, and that allowed her to meet amazing people from many backgrounds. Her interests include literature, culture, and learning languages. She

would like to thank Dr. Hughes for endorsing her essay and for being such a supportive and inspiring professor.

Allison "Alli" Sadler is an alumna of WKU, having received her BA in English in December 2025. Previously, her work has been featured in WKU's annual Goldenrod Poetry Festival, the WKU *Talisman*, and the *Sigma Tau Delta Rectangle*. She served as President of WKU's chapter of Sigma Tau Delta, Pi Iota, from 2023 to 2025. If Alli isn't writing, she's elbowing her way through a mosh pit with her husband or adding to their shared vinyl collection.

Bella Wahbeh is an English for Secondary Teachers major at WKU. She is originally from Columbus, IN, but has lived in Bowling Green for the last 12 years. She has always been captivated by reading and writing, and that interest developed into a lifelong passion for language. She loves writing in particular because it provides an opportunity to communicate one's meaning exactly as intended through careful attention to phrasing and diction, in a way that isn't always possible when speaking extemporaneously. This fascination can be seen clearly in her comparison of two translations of the opening stanza of *The Odyssey*.

Jennika Warner is a full-time student and a full-time mother of two children. She is heading into the nursing field to become a Labor & Delivery Nurse. Jennika was born and raised in Alaska, where subsistence practices and seasonal foraging shaped her understanding of community, culture, and the land. Her I-Search project grew from a desire to explore how climate change, tradition, and food security intersect in rural Alaska. She hopes to continue learning from Indigenous knowledge-keepers and to advocate for sustainable, culturally grounded approaches to environmental change.

NOURISHMENT AND DEATH IN *THE OVERSTORY*

by Emma Childress

> Before it dies, a Douglas-fir, half a millennium old, will send its storehouse of chemicals back down into its roots and out through its fungal partners, donating its riches to the community pool in a last will and testament. We might as well call these ancient benefactors giving trees.
>
> Richard Powers, *The Overstory*

The main theme in Richard Powers' *The Overstory* is the importance of death and how it's vital for new growth in a forest. As one tree completes its lifecycle and decomposes, it nourishes the young trees. One way he establishes this theme is through making the trees characters, not just a part of the setting. He explores how this influences humans and their experiences because "humans pay attention to stories about other humans" (McMain and Torres 1148). Powers gives the trees a voice to speak to humans, and this voice is present throughout the entire novel, signified through a choppier writing style and italics. The use of the tree's voice makes "us reconsider the role humans play in a more-than-human world" (1148). In the novel, the two characters that have the closest interaction with trees are Patricia Westerford and Olivia Vandergriff. Both characters face near-death experiences at the beginning of the novel; the trees speak to them in these moments, and it causes them to undergo a major transformation. Their near-

death experiences can be seen as a metaphor for the importance of death in a forest. Both Patricia and Olivia die in an act to protect trees, and their death largely impacts other characters. Their deaths help to save forests, but figuratively, their deaths help other people grow. In *The Overstory*, Patricia and Olivia's stories act as a metaphor to show how crucial death is for a forest through the importance of their initial near-death experiences, their activism that came as a result, and the impact their deaths had on others.

To begin this metaphor, Powers initiates a fundamental change in both Patricia and Olivia's identities after their near-death experiences. In the novel, Patricia is established as having a strong identity and connection with trees as a child. She pursues a degree in Forestry and earns a doctorate for her research on the tulip tree. While studying maple trees, she realizes they can communicate with each other through signals to warn about insect invasions. She publishes the study, but other scientists berate her work and say it is impossible, which leads to her losing her position teaching at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She is humiliated and feels "meaning [drain] from her like green from a maple in fall" (Powers 127). She cooks a meal with Destroying Angel to pass her suicide off as an accident. As she sits down to eat it, "something stops her. Signals flood her muscles, finer than any words. Not this. Come with. Fear nothing" (128). After this feeling, she struggles with the idea that her "animal fear was willing to make her" carry out this attempt and goes hungry for the night (128). The trees remind Patricia not to fall victim to her anthropocentric fears, but instead to set herself free "to discover anything" (128). She returns to nature and begins to find purpose in studying it again. She regains her childlike curiosity and wonder, and she nourishes it because of the trees' instructions. Patricia is able to return to nature with the passion she once had "with few claims on her time and none on her soul" (129). Her near-suicide attempt allows her to return to the forest and who she once was.

Early on, Olivia feels like she has no purpose in life and is watching it pass her by. She is going through a divorce, failing classes, and spending most of her time drunk or high. She doesn't even know the tree she has lived under for a whole semester (146). She dies for a minute and ten seconds from touching an outlet with damp hands. When she wakes up, she recalls someone telling her the purpose of life. Desperate to find the voice again, she follows her intuition to take a trip out west. On her trip to follow the voices, she "drives like her life might be worth something" instead of recklessly like she would've done days prior to her death experience (164). As she listens to the voices of the trees, she begins to feel more purpose within herself—she recognizes that she must help save the trees. This small sense of connection pushes her to change her life and act meaningfully towards it. She drives carefully, notices a logging train, and begins to pray to these voices, hoping they lead her in the right direction. Before her near-death experience, she allowed life to pass her by, and she did not see the value in her own life; once she hears the trees, she sees purpose in her life.

Despite undergoing a major change, both characters continue to carry older parts of themselves. For Patricia, it rekindles the passion that was taken away from her by other humans. For Olivia, it gives her a sense of purpose and direction that she never had. Death brings both of them another chance at life to explore hidden sectors of their past identity. In court, Patricia says large pieces of older forest must stay intact for a forest to live and breathe (282). Both carry older parts of themselves that help create the person they become after their near-death experience. Olivia's spontaneity and wild passions aid in the success of her forest and climate activism, and Patricia develops her childlike curiosity into something grander—to develop a seed bank and write her book. Because everything is connected, the two needed to undergo a large

transformation that allowed them to shed the pieces of themselves that were holding them back.

To continue the metaphor of the importance of death, Powers has both Patricia and Olivia channel their new and strengthened identities into meaningful activist work. Patricia writes her book, *The Secret Forest*, to "describe the joy of her life's work and the discoveries that have solidified in a few short years" (217). She documents her experiences and knowledge of nature to help the public understand the power within trees and forests. She pushes through the anxiety of "be[ing] mocked and misunderstood in the press" to finish the book. This would not have been possible if it were not for her near-death experience that released the humanly claims from her soul and time (129). Her death gives her a sense of enlightenment to write this book (Ostalska 299). *The Secret Forest* becomes a nationwide sensation. Many people in the novel begin to understand, respect, and love trees because of her book. Additionally, Patricia starts a seed bank to collect all of the seeds of tree populations that are threatened. She takes her knowledge and takes direct action to help protect the future of trees. Ultimately, Patricia's transformation gives her the freedom to fully commit and pour herself into their work, and she uses this freedom and sense of identity to help others grow into their own versions of freedom and identity.

After Olivia goes west, she stages a sit-in in Mimas, an ancient redwood. Nick, who sits in with her, notices that she "speaks the creature's name like it's an old friend," and she feels at ease amidst the branches (Powers 262). Olivia and Nick spend their time in the tree reading and strengthening their connection to the forest; Nick feels as if he is transformed from just being around her and pledges to go anywhere she goes. The tree is cut down, and they're arrested, but they continue protesting. She becomes a leader of other characters such as Nick, Adam, Douglas, and Mimi as they band together in protest (335). They look to her for wisdom or where to

go next. Before death, she would not have been the leader type as she felt she had no purpose; however, in death she became more in touch with nature and herself. She uses this to go on to do good through leading others in acts of civil disobedience and environmental protest, and she acts as a mediator for the trees to help communicate what they need. Her actions set examples, and she holds knowledge that others can use to protect their own trees. Powers situates "the individual in relation to others in a subject-subject relationship that acknowledges lived differences" (Simmons 89). All of the characters value each other and what their individual experiences bring to this movement. Each of the characters reveres Olivia because her experience is so unique. By placing each character around Olivia, they are able to learn from her and change their own ways. As the novel progresses, the characters become more involved in saving the forest and continues their own efforts to advocate for preservation. This can be compared to how death and old growth in a forest contribute to the development of new growth.

To finish the metaphor, Powers emphasizes the impact both Patricia and Olivia had on other characters, especially after their death. At the end of Patricia's story, she commits suicide in front of an audience. She says the best thing a person can do for tomorrow's world is to remember how to die (464). She proves this point by committing suicide on stage by drinking tree extract from Tachigali versicolor, or the Suicide Tree. This tree's offspring can only survive if a mother tree falls and opens up space in the canopy for light to come in (455). This is a powerful moment because she was actively doing a lot of work to save trees; however, she acknowledges that nature can only thrive if humans leave the smallest impact possible. Still, her death is seen by a room full of people who are heavily impacted by it. Earlier in the novel, Patricia testifies in court to halt a logging project, and she points out how "everything depends on everything else" in a forest (282). She says

that a dead tree "is an infinite hotel" to an ecosystem that contributes to new tree growth. Patricia's suicide will contribute to the fight to protect trees, and her courageous act will give the movement more life from others who are inspired by her. She acts as a falling tree to shed new light, a radical eco-perspective, on the seedlings of people who can continue this fight.

Olivia dies during a protest, while destroying a sawmill in California. Her last words are: "this will never end—what we have. Right?" (352). This goes on to "haunt" Nick. The novel ends with his creation of a piece of art that uses downed wood to spell out "Still." He looks at it and recalls Olivia's last words. He has continued to carry on Olivia's mission that people are the ones who need help, not the trees. He recognizes that this artwork is being "nourished by the rot" and "new trunks will form the word in their growing wood" (Powers 502). This artwork was inspired by Olivia's death. In Olivia's initial near-death experience, she was able to transform herself to give back to the world. In her actual death, her actions inspire others to carry on this legacy. This shows how death or old growth is vital to the flourishing of new growth. Olivia's death nourishes Nick's activism. He creates powerful artwork to spread the novel ideas she had.

Both Olivia and Patricia die in heroic ways for the trees. Their deaths largely impact others and carry on a legacy. In their death, people's perspectives are widened, and their motivation becomes stronger. This is similar to how a tree's death can open up light for a new tree and feed the land around them. Their deaths are vital to furthering and expanding the movement to preserve and respect forests. Powers uses the characters' stories as a metaphor, showing how their activism and deaths encouraged others' activism work as a dead tree does in a forest, nourishing new growth.

In conclusion, Richard Powers' *The Overstory* uses the characters Olivia and Patricia to function as metaphors for the importance of death to a forest. The novel displays this through

their initial near-death experience, their transformation, and their actual death at the end of the novel. This novel covers the idea of death in a nuanced way that shows why it is important to discuss the parts of nature that make us uncomfortable. Gary Snyder writes that nature writing has the potential to be "the most vital, radical… and morally challenging kind of writing…to help halt one of the most terrible things of our time—the destruction of species and their habitats, the elimination of some living beings forever" (Snyder 261). Powers does this in *The Overstory* through the acknowledgement and metaphor of how important death is to the forest flourishing. Powers makes the reader confront the uncomfortable idea that death can bring on positive change. In exploring this difficult topic, Powers crafts a compelling novel that is likely to change a reader's perspective, similar to how characters in the novel have their ideas challenged.

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Hell Without Heaven: How David Fincher's *Se7en* Reimagines Dante's *Inferno* for a Godless Age

by Christina Colovos

We live in a fallen world. Sin is unpunished, unnoticed, and even encouraged, leaving morality void of much direction. Now imagine this world organizing crime into a moral hierarchy: eyes are given for eyes, and teeth are given for teeth. These ideas are documented as the very foundation of the modern legal system, yet they are unfortunately idealistic and fallible. Dante Alighieri writes about such justice in his *Commedia*, namely the renowned *Inferno*, by correlating each sinner's fault to their eternal punishment—their contrapasso—and their eternal placement in hell's hierarchical land. In doing so, he crafts a rigid legal system that rightly punishes what ought to be punished, thereby inventing an ideal sense of justice. Many modern works examine Dante's ageless themes of justice and redemption, including director David Fincher's 1995 film *Se7en*, whose protagonists David Mills and William Somerset must scurry to uncover a rampant serial killer who commits murders based off of the seven deadly sins. Even though *Inferno* is not strictly built around the seven deadly sins, the movie explicitly alludes to its themes of evil, moral hierarchy, and justice, yet excludes any progress towards redemption. *Se7en* reimagines *Inferno* for a godless age—a world without redemption, where humans still crave moral order but must invent it through violence and obsession.

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Western Kentucky University

Hell cannot exist without God. Without the redemption that He offers, there is no value in good or evil, in heaven or hell. Evil becomes cheap without this divine spectrum. Film director David Fincher imagines a deeply bruised world whose inhabitants remain spiraling in moral darkness, bypassing any opportunity for redemption, whereas Dante is able to progress past *Inferno* towards purification in *Paradiso*.

If we are to compare Tracy, the wife of protagonist and lead detective David Mills, to Dante's lover Beatrice, understanding their similarities unveils new perspectives on why *Se7en*'s world is so damning. First, we must understand that the two protagonists are cinematic representations of Virgil and Dante: wise, stoic Somerset is a detective on the verge of retiring who serves as a guide and an emotional anchor throughout the film's unpredictable waters. Mills, on the other hand, is young and passionately curious, ready to enact vengeance on the allegedly crazed killer. If we understand Mills as a stand-in for Dante—as both are being guided through hellish conditions by someone more experienced—then we can assume that Mills' Tracy also represents Dante's Beatrice. The irony is that Beatrice is never physically present in *Inferno*; she appears near the end of *Purgatorio* and serves as Dante's guide and a leading character all throughout *Paradiso*. If Fincher equates Tracy with Beatrice, and Dante equates Beatrice with heaven, then what should Tracy's death at the climax of Se7en represent? The answer is clear: with nobody to stand in as a doorway to heaven, there is no longer a pathway to redemption for the characters of *Se7en*. Even though Beatrice also dies in Dante's *Vita Nuova*, an extracanonical piece to the *Commedia*, she is still an active character through the persistence of her spirit. Tracy is never mentioned as a viable redemptive option after her death; this is because Beatrice dies on earth, not in the inferno. Tracy lives in a modern hell, where "earth" is simply metaphor. Were Beatrice to die while Dante is in hell, the story would be aimless. However, when heaven dies while you are actively in hell, as in Mills' case, there is nothing

to move towards. You remain boiling in a ceaseless inferno. Dante transcends hell and eventually reunites with Beatrice on his journey to heaven, but Mills cannot move on towards redemption because his heaven has just been slaughtered. This twisted inversion gives a cold retelling that leaves Dante (Mills) eternally stranded in the fallen world, transforming him from a traveler to an inhabitant.

Fincher's creation of a godless world continues when exploring the closing images of both the film and the text. Both images are in light, yet *Inferno*'s is redemptive and progressive whereas *Se7en*'s is damning and regressive. Throughout the film, every scene is shot either in the pouring rain or in the dark corridors of a building: "what has been called the '*colour noir*' (Darke 19-20) aesthetic of the movie becomes a metaphysical darkness that stands for loss of enlightenment and for hell itself" (Allen 1158-9). The rain finally ceases at the film's end and viewers see the sun for the first time, much like how Dante and Virgil climb out of the dark pit of hell and "came forth to look again at the / stars" (34.139-40). With the film's light comes a glimpse of hope and redemption, just as *Inferno*'s light signifies a progression towards purgatory; however, the light brings metaphorical darkness when Mills fulfills the sin of wrath. John Doe, the film's serial killer, murders Tracy out of an act of envy, and Mills' discovery of his wife's slaughter pushes him to murder Doe himself, thereby fulfilling the final sin of wrath and bringing the sadistic game to completion. The realization of Doe's crime happens during this hopeful, sunny scene. The painful truth is that there is a longing to escape: "I just don't think I can continue to live in a place that embraces and nurtures apathy as if it was a virtue" (*Se7en* 01:29:15-23) and a chance at redemption: "Give me the gun, David. David. If you kill him…he will win" (*Se7en* 01:59:39-53) but Mills literally murders that opportunity. The film therefore portrays evil as willful rather than innate, suggesting that humans are created good, and fall into evil as a distortion of the natural state. The choice to kill Doe is a deviation from the

intended order that shows how the characters get a glimpse of escape and restoration from the fallen world, yet must watch as he destroys this and reinforces a pattern of cyclical and ceaseless evil.

During the same scene, the film is framed in an interesting, symbolic position. As Somerset is attempting to dissuade Mills from firing the gun, the camera oscillates between extreme closeups of each character. This intimate framing is not only intended to induce anxiety and anticipation—placing viewers directly in front of the action—but is also intended to create a sense of unity and empathy; being placed so close to their faces, viewers cannot help but be placed directly in the minds of the characters. Doing so allows us to feel the same intensity that they are experiencing, thereby permitting us to explore their own psyches and motivations. Closeness to a character inevitably associates itself with empathy and support. Even if viewers disagree with the general morality of the film, it is difficult not to feel anxiety for Mills, and perhaps even Doe, during these intimate shots. As the gun fires, however, the camera immediately shifts to a much more distant position. Placed several yards behind its previous position, this jarring switch in perspective severs viewers from their recent understanding of and involvement in the characters' minds. Interrupting the camerawork in such a way is certainly intentional, and can be made to represent the characters' sudden detachment from God, humanity, and morality. As understood with the appearance of light at the film's end, Mills is presented with hope and opportunity, yet permanently splits the boundary between ruin and redemption. His symbolic spiritual severance is made physical in the jarring framing of this closing scene.

Similarly, as he walks away from the scene, the shots include an aerial view from a nearby helicopter. The expanse here can again symbolize the distance and impossibility of redemption, but can also be equated with God's point of view. Assuming Him in

heaven, God would look down on the scene with the same vantage point that the helicopter offers. Even though God is never presented as a physical character in *Inferno*, He is still a spiritual presence serving as the source of order and justice. Dante and Virgil end *Inferno* by climbing up to behold the stars, a symbol of their journey towards God and *Paradiso*. The shot from the helicopter's, or God's, perspective represents what could have been; Mills is seen walking away from his crime and from salvation, a harsh contrast to Dante's climbing up towards God. Mills increases the distance between himself and the camera, emphasizing the striking distance between God and man after he chooses to bypass redemption and regress into sin.

Fincher's creative reimagining of *Inferno* for a godless world is also evident in his use of moral collapse to establish moral order. An underlying theme of divine order weaves through Dante's text. Three heavenly women—the Virgin Mary, Lucia, and Beatrice—are compelling Dante's journey, seeing it as a sort of rescue mission from the dark land he is currently in: "Why do you not have boldness and freedom, / seeing that three such blessed ladies have a care / for you in the court of Heaven, and my speech / promises you so much good" (2.123-126). *Se7en* is also motivated by such causes; when asked why he did the things he did, John Doe responds, "The Lord works in mysterious ways" (*Se7en* 01:50:11-13). He implies that divine order motivates his crimes, believing himself to be a restorer of justice and a vessel to mankind by revealing what a tragic place the world has become. Clearly, though, his work is anything but salvific. The harm he perpetrates on his victims radiates the lostness of his world.

Even though Doe fails to live up to this sense of divine motivation, he does uphold Dante's theme of *contrapasso*, or mirrored punishments. In a climactic moment of confession, Doe admits "I won't deny my own personal desire to turn each sin against the sinner" (Se7en 01:46:25-31). The language here

reorients the punishment to the initial sinner—the victim—and suggests that the murders were personalized to the individual. The idea of a death that mirrors a sinful life is a direct allusion to Dante's *contrapasso*, as evident in characters like Bertran de Born: "Because I divided persons so joined, I carry my / brain divided, alas, from its origin which is in this / trunk. / Thus you observe in me the counter-suffering" (28.139-42). Bertrain, guilty of provoking the revolt of Prince Harry against his father, has turned the Prince against both the "head" of the family and the "head" of the realm. As a punishment, he loses his own head and must carry it around (Allen 1157). John Doe upholds this gruesome notion by executing long, painful deaths forcing the sinner to indulge in the very thing they typically commit. The glutton in the movie, for instance, is tied up and forced to consume spaghetti until his stomach literally bursts. Although the *contrapasso* punishments are harsh, they are arguably structured and logical. In *Inferno*, the punishment intensifies as the levels of hell descend and as the sins become more damaging to oneself, to others, and to God. John Doe's murders also become increasingly personal to the point that Mills' own wife is murdered for the sake of the game, and to the point that John Doe himself is killed as part of it. Where the initial victims had little to no relation to any of the major characters, the climax intensifies the sin by perpetrating personal violence.

The violence may be catastrophic for the unsuspecting victims, but it also arranges crime into a moral order, albeit a perverted one. John Doe lives in a world without divine order and therefore must invent it through violence. The murders represent both moral collapse and moral order; where the legal system fails to implement justice, the killer must invent it himself, perverting the laws of what we consider upright into a deranged sense of justified order: "We must think hard about the contradiction that religion, sin, retribution, and torture appear to have formally disappeared from the modern legal and penal system, that Se7en's depiction of "medieval" justice is more accurately a dark fantasy about what

present justice is not" (Allen 1153). Allen is responding to Carolyn Dinshaw's question that "the medieval represents things that can't be eradicated" (Dinshaw 122-23), agreeing that these outgrown ideas continue to haunt modern culture, even when we think them foreign. Though torture was prevalent for Dante and is now officially gone from modern legal systems, John Doe's punishments are disturbingly medieval. We claim to be past medieval cruelty, yet the film suggests that impulses towards moral judgment, punishment, and violence still lurk beneath the surface of modern justice. His crimes are of course feeding into the moral decay of the city, but his motive of restorative justice implements visible order into an atrophying world.

Fincher's reimagining of *Inferno* exposes what happens when a world loses both its moral compass and its access to redemption. In Dante's depiction, hell is horrifying, but it is coherent and motivated by divine love through intermediaries like Virgil and Beatrice. *Se7en*, void of such love, is an aimless land where order must be invented in a loveless, violent way. John Doe's grotesque *contrapasso* imposes order by replicating the violence and despair that already saturate the city. Tracy's symbolic death, as the Beatrice-figure, shatters any remaining possibility of ascent, reiterating that redemption cannot exist where there is no God, and Mills reflects a sinful regression to a fallen world. *Se7en* therefore depicts a modern society estranged from divine love and transcendence, capable only of producing distorted spinoffs of justice through its yearning for righteousness. The upholding of medieval concepts like torturous punishment implies that evil is cyclical and that we remain fascinated by sin, punishment, and moral hierarchy. Fincher retells Dante for the collapsing world, warning that without redemption to guide justice, humanity remains trapped in its self-made inferno.

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THE REVERSAL OF GENDER ROLES: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF FEMINISM WITHIN *THE METAMORPHOSIS* AND *NERVOUS CONDITIONS*

by Allison Dietrich

Although vastly different in geography and culture of origin, *The Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka and *Nervous Conditions* by Tsitsi Dangarembga illustrate the coming-of-age of two young women who each seek autonomy despite the harsh patriarchal structures that confine them. Comparing these two texts allows for an increased awareness of the effects of feminist efforts on different forms of societal structures, with *The Metamorphosis* functioning as a benchmark for traditional Western feminism and *Nervous Conditions* as an expression of feminism arising within an African culture struggling with colonialism. Across different times and places, the two leading female characters from these texts employ the same method of distancing themselves from the patriarchy: taking the societal roles of their brothers. This essay argues that both Grete and Tambu struggle towards emancipation from the patriarchy by taking on their brothers' roles— a strategy that is somewhat liberating but ultimately fails to incite structural change.

In both *The Metamorphosis* and *Nervous Conditions*, female characters initially assume traditionally feminine familial roles. At the beginning of these two texts, both Grete, the sister of Gregor in *The Metamorphosis*, and Tambu, the female narrator of *Nervous*

Conditions, have assigned roles within their family. While Grete's role is leisurely, stemming from her wealthy background, she is still subject to traditionally feminine tasks, such as completing housework. Tambu is also responsible for these feminine tasks, but hers are much more intense and harshly enforced. In Tambu's familial structure, men in the family strictly enforce a patriarchal structure through violence and degradation, as seen in Tambu's brother's insistence on his sisters unnecessarily fetching his luggage. Additionally, male patriarchs in her family assume decision-making for females, as exemplified when Tambu approaches her father over the issue of obtaining an education and he says, "Can you cook books and feed them to your husband? Stay at home with your mother. Learn to cook and clean. Grow vegetables" (Dagarembga ch. 2). This elucidates the idea that there is no other option for women within this patriarchal structure besides housework and marriage, leaving women in Tambu's family no autonomy in their own life choices. However, in both Grete and Tambu's familial structures, there is a clear hierarchy in which men dominate the family and women are subject to housework and chores, regardless of class and cultural differences. This patriarchal similarity between familial structures highlights the similarities of feminist struggles cross-culturally and sets the stage for female emancipation and independence that both Grete and Tambu will fight for.

In their efforts to acquire independence within their families, both Grete and Tambu take on the familial roles of their brothers. In *The Metamorphosis*, Grete grows into the role of caretaker and eventually into a position of power and leadership after the transformation of Gregor into a bug. As Nina Pelikan Straus, Professor Emeritus at SUNY Purchase College, explains in her analytical text on gender roles in *The Metamorphosis*, "Having passed through stages of submission and sympathy, through the burden of symbolically mothering a being that resembles a sickly and degenerate child, and having replicated her brother's stages of

maturation and professionalism (for she now has a job), Grete initiates her liberation" (665). It is through the maternal role Grete takes on after Gregor's transformation, where she is in charge of cleaning and feeding him, that Grete becomes fully a woman in the familial structure instead of a young girl. Through this new wave of self-ability and opportunity afforded to her by her transition into a woman, Grete pushes past her domestic role and begins working as a salesgirl. This new job, which is seen as untraditional for a female in this upper-class household, follows that of her brother's coming of age, in which he became a breadwinner and therefore a patriarch of the family. In Grete's instance, it is through this womanhood and career that she is able to gain influence within the family, which she eventually uses to advocate for killing Gregor.

In Tambu's case, it is only through her brother's death that she is able to pursue education, despite the protests of her father. When Tambu's brother, Nhamo, was alive, he was the sole son of the family, and therefore, he was the one to pursue an education to bring their family out of poverty—just as their uncle, Babamukuru, had. Even though Tambu expresses her desire for education to her family multiple times before Nhamo's death, she is denied the ability to go to school for more than one year because of financial difficulties and is even mocked by Nhamo for trying to raise her school fees. In a conversation between Tambu and Nhamo, where Tambu expresses her desire to attend school, Nhamo teases that "Wanting won't help" because, he explained, "It's the same everywhere. Because you are a girl" (Dangarembga ch. 2). Despite Tambu's persistence and drive to raise her school fees by selling mealies, her brother belittles her for being a girl who desires an education, even stealing her mealies to prohibit her from gaining the money to cover her school fees. In this way, before his death, Nhamo functioned as a dominating male figure in the familial patriarchy who tried to bar Tambu from receiving an education,

but ironically, it is through his death that Tambu will obtain an education.

After Nhamo's death, Babamukuru and Tambu's father discuss how to carry out the "emancipation" of their family through education. After much discussion of how unfortunate it is that there are only daughters left in the family, Babamukuru suggests, "Er — this girl — heyo, Tambudzai — must be given the opportunity to do what she can for the family [receive an education] before she goes into her husband's home" (Dangarembga ch. 3). This idea, that she is the last resort because of her gender and therefore she must be married off regardless of education, alongside the objectification in his reference to her as "this girl", illustrates not only the strict gender roles present within their society, but also the dominance of the patriarchy in having sole discretion over women's autonomy. Still, despite her lack of autonomy in this decision, it is through her brother's death that Tambu is able to pursue her true goal: to obtain an education.

Within both texts, there is a stark parallel between the methods Grete and Tambu underwent to gain their independence. For both of them, it was through their brother's death (either physically or metaphorically) that they were able to pursue independence within their familial structures. For Grete, the sole actions of becoming a woman through her caretaking abilities and her career gave her influence within her family, but it was not as simple for Tambu. It is through Nhamo's death that Tambu is able to pursue an education, but even while receiving this affordance, she is still subject to the patriarchal structures within Babamukuru's house, alongside the societal attitudes and gender roles of their culture. In this way, the cultural differences and patriarchal strictness are elucidated, in which Grete has more capability to remove the structures of sexism that are working against her independence than Tambu does.

For both characters, the moment of actualization of independence appears in similar ways, but results in largely disparate reactions by the male patriarchs of their families. For Grete, her moment of independence comes when she stands before her parents, strikes the table, and declares, "I am unwilling to utter my brother's name before this creature, and therefore will say only: we have to try to get rid of it," to which her father agrees, "She is right a thousand times over" (Kafka ch. 3). In this scene, Grete speaks her mind with conviction, and because of her status as caretaker of Gregor and an adult woman, is respected by her father, and the family moves to a place of opposition to Gregor until he eventually dies from starvation.

In Tambu's instance, her moment of independence comes with much less conviction than Grete's. For Tambu, when she decides to protest the wedding Babamukuru orchestrated for Tambu's parents, instead of rising and speaking with authority as Grete did, Tambu could not physically get out of bed to attend the wedding due to her mental obstinacy. As Obioma Nnaemeka, Nigerian American academic and Chancellor's Professor of French at Purdue University, analyzes in her novel exploring womanhood in African Literature, "The more Tambudzai and Nyasha attempt to comply with their own oppression, the more nervous their condition gets, and the more pronounced their symptoms become" (47). Nnaemeka asserts that by attempting to assuage her fears of the wedding for so long in order to please Babamukuru, Tambu only became mentally and physically broken down, which is manifested in her paralysis. Through this lens, Tambu's defiance can be seen as a form of freeing herself not only from the patriarchy but also from the mental and physical degradations it has had on her. Even knowing the severity of the consequences of her defiance, Tambu still speaks out and tells Babamukuru that she will not be going and stays resolute even after he threatens to stop providing for her. Tambu's defiance and resolution despite the

consequences is her true moment of independence within the novel, even though it leads to weeks of hard labor mandated in punishment by Babamukuru.

In Grete's moment of independence, she was able to gain respect from her father and allow her opinion to be heard, but Tambu suffered severe consequences and gained no advancement from her act of defiance outside of her own integrity and freedom from the symptoms of oppression. However, despite the respect Grete gained from her assertions, she still failed to fully escape the patriarchal structure, as the last lines of *The Metamorphosis* read:

> Growing quieter now and communicating with one another almost unconsciously by an exchange of glances, they [Grete's parents] thought about how it would soon be time to find her a good husband. And when they arrived at their destination, it seemed to them almost a confirmation of their new dreams and good intentions when their daughter swiftly sprang to her feet and stretched her young body. (Kafka ch. 3)

In these final lines, gender roles and traditional societal expectations of marriage are brought to the forefront. In this way, it becomes clear that Grete did not fully escape the patriarchy because it is still expected of her to get married, despite her short-lived independence.

Furthermore, the idea that her parents will pursue finding Grete a husband without confirmation of Grete's willingness further shows the lack of autonomy Grete continues to have within her family. Thus, it is demonstrated that Grete's independence served only to improve herself, namely her confidence and assertiveness, and had no impact on the societal structure at all, as she is still forced to follow gender norms by getting married to a man, which will only perpetuate a lack of autonomy for women. As Straus analyzes:

> Her self-empowering, the transference of a woman into a position where a man used to be, does not transform the social system, however, but merely perpetuates it. When women become as men are, Kafka seems to be saying, there is no progress. Such metamorphoses merely exchange one delusive solution for another…It is Grete who will now sell and be sold, who will perpetuate the system of exchanges and debts that was formerly Gregor's business. (666)

Through this lens, Grete's resistance to the patriarchy is revealed, in which she takes on the role of her brother, as only beneficial to the capital system. In this way, it is shown that despite her intentions, Grete's form of opposition to the patriarchy merely resulted in a substitution of bodies to which capitalism can profit. The changing of roles, of sister into brother, has no effect on Grete's independence, as she will still be forced into a marriage in which she will be expected to be subservient to her husband.

In Tambu's case, a similar phenomenon can be observed. Ending on a cliffhanger, *Nervous Conditions* gives no conclusive truth as to how Tambu will progress through her education, and whether she will be able to escape the patriarchy. However, there appears to be an almost mirror image of her within her aunt, Maiguru, who had obtained a master's degree but still married a man. Despite her degree, Maiguru's main role is caring for her family. Although Maiguru had gotten a degree just as prestigious as her husband's, their society chooses not to recognize it, instead representing it as if she had merely gone to take care of her husband. In one scene, Tambu addresses Maiguru's education, to which Maiguru sarcastically explains, "Why should a woman go all that way and put up with all those problems if not to look after her husband?" (Dangarembga ch. 5). Maiguru's sarcastic reply elucidates that this is not the life she wanted, yet despite her education, she is still forced into a subservient role as wife.

Through Maiguru's experiences and her family's response, it is clear that no amount of education a woman can obtain will take away the societal expectation of her getting married and falling into a wifely role. Through this lens, a prediction for Tambu's life is revealed: she obtains education but is still forced to get married and care for her husband, relinquishing all the independence she might have gained. In this way, it becomes apparent that Tambu's act of resistance by pursuing education in her deceased brother's footsteps will be largely inconsequential in upending the patriarchy and allowing women to be seen as equals.

In the cases of both Grete and Tambu, it is evident that a push towards independence by way of taking the traditional roles of their brothers is not expected to have any impact on societal structures and the patriarchy. Instead, these acts work to perpetuate the system, in which, despite independence or education, women are still forced into marriage without autonomy. In this way, societal structures and the patriarchy are not affected negatively, as no change is inflicted when a female character takes the role of a male character. Instead, while respect and education could be gained, there is still an expectation of female subservience to males within marriage, which continues to hold women back by perpetuating the patriarchy. In order to incite structural change resulting in a positive step towards female equality, feminist resistance must be stronger than simply a role reversal, but neither text indicates a solution. Instead, it is suggested that the solution is unknown, at least to the two female characters who, despite their efforts, will most likely be reduced to the role of wife, regardless of their opposition and resistance.

Through these texts, it is clear that there needs to be a change. As feminism currently stands, there is a large push for women in male-dominated fields, whether professional or educational. These texts explain that a role reversal, where women take on a male role, may not be the most beneficial to equality. Instead, these texts

argue that something larger must occur to assert female equality and uproot sexist structures that are prevalent cross-culturally.

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"I'm Not Here to Prove that the Whale is Gay, but *Moby-Dick* is a Love Story"

by Carly Fawcett

Introduction

Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* is, at this point, synonymous with the adventure genre of American literature. A story of humanity's epic quest towards the inevitability and ineffability of God and nature, it features death, tragedy, and fast-paced whale action among cetology and the building of suspense. However, hidden in plain sight is a different story that drives the plot until the very end—a softer one compared to the rough and tough depiction of the adventure aboard a whaling ship. It is a story of love.

Sure, *Moby-Dick* is an adventure story, but the adventure itself exists as a catalyst for the relationships built and grown on the Pequod during its voyage. When observing the relationships between crew members, the quest for the whale becomes a plot element that would not be properly fulfilled had the stories of love not been properly told throughout the story. Through the evaluation of love story elements in each individual chapter, it is clear that *Moby-Dick* is a love story.

Methods

In order to show that *Moby-Dick* is more largely a love story, I measured each chapter to determine whether or not it reflects the

progression of love in the aforementioned relationships. This measurement was evaluated based on the following criteria:

1. The chapter contains elements of the aforementioned relationships.
2. These elements enhance the dynamic of these relationships and/or move their stories forward.

This criteria set was determined in part by inspiration from Roxane Gay's "(How to Write) A Love Story." In her essay, Gay reflects on the complicated nature of teaching her students what a love story truly is. Ultimately, she discusses that most any story about any kind of love, even if it's a "hate story" or "anti-love story," qualifies as a love story (19). She culminates by saying, "Every story I write is a love story. This is a love story" (24). Her reflection informed my criteria by professionally corroborating the fact that any story about love is a love story, consequently qualifying *Moby-Dick* for an evaluation of its love story contents.

If the events and themes of a chapter move the love story forward and consequently align with the love story criteria, it was highlighted pink and measured against the overall number of chapters to determine what percentage of *Moby-Dick's* 135 chapters tell a love story.

Close Reading of Relationships

Before the evaluation of results, it is necessary to give proper preface to the relationships that are central to the love story that is *Moby-Dick*.

Ishmael and Queequeg

The most prominent and most explicitly homoerotic relationship in *Moby-Dick* is the relationship between official husbands, Ishmael and Queequeg. When they meet during their short stay at the Spouter-Inn, they "seem ready to embark on a tender and lively romance" according to David Greven, author of *Men Beyond Desire* (269). The two men unite in an almost meet-cute

way in being forced to share the inn host's marriage bed, and they soon start behaving like a married couple. Ishmael "found Queequeg's arm thrown over [him] in the most loving and affectionate manner. You had almost thought [he] had been his wife" (Melville 36). Although they shared a bed of marriage right away, they became officially wedded in Queequeg's culture not long after. It was through a ritual of smoking a pipe together, and then Queequeg "pressed his forehead against [Ishmael's], clasped [him] round the waist, and said that henceforth [they] were married" (56). Marriage between them meant that Queequeg agreed to die for Ishmael if the situation called for it, similar to common wedding vows even in traditional American culture today, e.g. "'til death do us part."

The two slip right into the dynamic of a healthy, happy couple. In an article published in the *Journal of Nineteenth-Century American Literature and Culture*, Kellen Bolt reflects on the fact that the presence of Queequeg in Ishmael's life eradicates his suicidal ideation and negativity, embodying a loving partner (311). In the very beginning of the story, Ishmael resigns his poor state of mental health to the fact that he needs to get out to sea. It is important to note that this positive surge in his mental health as a result of Queequeg's presence takes place before the two even board a whaling ship. Ishmael and Queequeg are extremely quick to bond and reach such an intimate level, and they are immediately able to quell each other's discomforts.

It is established early on—by the tenth chapter of *Moby-Dick*—that Ishmael and Queequeg are a couple. Although Ishmael's perspective gets less involved in the happenings of the Pequod later on, the love story of Ishmael and Queequeg does not end there. In Patrick Colm Hogan's *American Literature and American Identity,* he argues that even though Ishmael and Queequeg are self-referred to as "twin brothers" in Chapter 72, their relationship does not falter in its homoeroticism as Ishmael admires Queequeg's attractiveness

during their monkey-rope operation (168). They continue to show affection and love for each other as the whaling journey continues, growing and developing as individuals and as a coupled unit.

In Steven B. Herrman's "Portrait of Same-Sex Marriage in Moby-Dick," he notes that when Queequeg falls ill in Chapter 110 and is expecting to die, he "sacrifices his life willingly and consciously for his bosom friend" (70). As Ishmael and Queequeg persevere on their whaling trip, Queequeg ends up having to follow through on the promised wedding vow he made all those chapters ago. Although he does not die from that illness, he still sacrifices himself for his husband. The only reason that Ishmael survives the wreck of the Pequod is through the use of Queequeg's coffin as a life buoy (Melville 427). Because of this, one could even argue that Queequeg and Ishmael's love is so vast that it transcends the bounds of the wedding vow, "'til death do us part," since even in death, Queequeg carried Ishmael to safety and survival. All of these homoerotic aspects of their relationship "initiate an entire transformation" within Ishmael, causing him to call himself "Ishmael" as opposed to his true name and reject traditional American social norms (Bolt 319). Like any true love story, the love interest, Queequeg, enacts a great change within the protagonist, Ishmael, creating a complete arc of the beautiful rise and the tragic fall of their relationship.

Ahab and Starbuck

The relationship between Ahab and Starbuck is less recognized as a queer and romantic relationship in academia—perhaps because it is more tragic and unhealthier—but Ahab and Starbuck nevertheless emulate a complicated version of the traditional roles of husband and wife. Throughout the Pequod's journey, Starbuck acts as a voice of reason for Ahab. He is the only member of the crew to oppose Ahab when he first reveals that the point of the voyage is to defeat Moby Dick at whatever cost. Starbuck knows Ahab well, and he feels comfortable and knowledgeable enough to

speak out against the captain from a place of concern and worry. This concern and worry must come from a place of care—love, even—for Ahab, whether it is romantic or not. Arguably, though, it is akin to the ways that wives traditionally look after their husbands, which was especially expected of them in the century this book was written.

When Starbuck realizes that he can stop the Pequod's doomed journey and see his family again by killing Ahab with a musket, he backs down. Even the thought of his wife and children is not enough to get him to betray his beloved captain, because both Starbuck's and Ahab's "[h]eteronormative desire fails to motivate men to action" (Bolt 317). Starbuck does not seem to care as much about the prospects of his heterosexual lifestyle as he does about Ahab's life and misguided ambitions.

This care of Starbuck's is not one-sided, however, as Ahab reciprocates it in a more possessive and consequently more masculine way. Starbuck is always at Ahab's side, and "Starbuck's body and Starbuck's coerced will were Ahab's, so long as Ahab kept his magnet at Starbuck's brain," even if Starbuck knew in his heart that Ahab's quest was doomed (Melville 177). This notion of leading a lover to the ends of the Earth, even if the means are misguided (and especially if they are doomed to fail), is reminiscent of almost any tragic love story.

Up until the very end, Ahab leans on Starbuck for a sense of reason and even domesticity in the face of his wild ambition. In Chapter 132, "The Symphony," Ahab reflects on his abandonment of his wife, having spent much more time whaling and with Starbuck than with her. He calls upon Starbuck to quell his fears and doubts, saying, "Starbuck; let me look into a human eye; it is better than to gaze into sea or sky; better than to gaze upon God… I see my wife and my child in thine eye" (406). With this loving comparison of Starbuck to his wife, Ahab proceeds to tell Starbuck to stay on board instead of chasing after Moby Dick with him. He

wants to protect him, not wanting Starbuck to endanger himself "with the far away home I see in that eye" (406). With these words from Ahab, it is plain to see that Starbuck is everything to him: his wife, his child, his humanity, and his responsibility to protect. Ahab and Starbuck love each other, even if at times this love is twisted and misguided, and this love story between the two enhances the quest for Moby Dick and adds layers to not only their development as characters but also to the tragedy of their dismal end.

The Crew

While the love story of the crew is not told in the traditional sense of love stories between two individuals, it is still a story of the love that develops the crew members and propels their journey forward. Some of the aspects of this love are inherently sexual and romantic, but the crew's story of love is largely platonic. Yes, their end goal is to hunt whales and defeat Moby Dick, but these goals are out of the question of possibility without the bonding between the crewmates along the way. They support and lift each other up without turning their backs on one another: a common practice in treacherous times on whaling ships.

The romantic and homoerotic aspect of the crew's love story is mainly shown by Chapter 94, "A Squeeze of the Hand." This chapter famously shows Ishmael's perspective of the love and bonding among crew members as they squeeze whale spermaceti in order to turn the clumps back into the fluid sperm. Ishmael intentionally squeezes not only the sperm, but his crewmates' hands in affection while "looking into their eyes sentimentally," and he says, "let us squeeze ourselves into each other" (323). It is safe to say that there is no heterosexual or heteromantic explanation for this behavior. As is said best by Hogan in *American Literature and American Identity,* "please, Melville could not possibly have missed the implication of the word 'sperm' here" (169). The image in the reader's mind of this scene creates a world of homoerotic love and acceptance that is scarcely otherwise found in

images of nineteenth-century America. It is so much of a "male heaven" and "model of homoerotic-homosocial bliss" in Ishmael's mind that the reader cannot fathom these characters in heterosexual relationships, especially because Ishmael is prepared to squeeze sperm forever (Greven 269). This idea allows the reader to put the crew of the Pequod outside of heterosexuality completely as it shows them as the epitome of togetherness.

David L. Rosenthal of Well Cornell Medicine refers to this scene of togetherness as a "mutualism" that brings about a "fusion of identities" with all the crew members (58). They all come from varying backgrounds racially, economically, and religiously, but they abandon their differences and disputes to bond over some sperm squeezing. I probably should not include completely personal opinions like this in this paper, but I must say—that is beautiful. It is a bright pillar of love, affection, and inclusion which serves as a juxtaposition and even an attempt at prevention to the doomed end that is to come for the Pequod. It brings the reader back to the safe, real, original mission of their voyage: to hunt whales and sell their products (Bolt). Just like Ahab's dependence on Starbuck as a voice of reason, the crew members' homoeroticism and love for each other are what ground them to safety and their purpose.

Results and Discussion

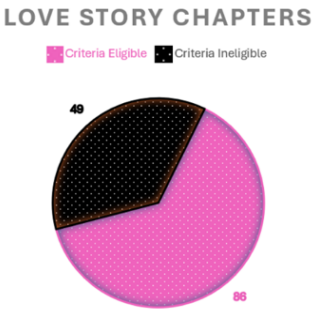

Figure 1. *Pie chart that shows 86 out of 135 chapters fit the love story chapter criteria, while 49 out of 135 did not.*

A	B	C	D
Chapter #	Title	Love story?	Explanation
34	The Cabin-Table	Y	Crew has dinner together.
35	The Mast-Head	Y	Ishmael refers to himself as a romantic young man, too distracted to watch for whales.
36	The Quarter-Deck	Y	Testament to Ahab and Starbuck's relationship--he is the only one to oppose Ahab in his crazed Moby Dick hunt.
37	Sunset	Y	Another romantic soliloquy from Ahab, allowing us to dive deeper into his character and add a layer to his relationship with Starbuck.
38	Dusk	Y	Starbuck's soliloquous counterpart to Ahab's in the last chapter. He laments his relationship to Ahab in that he feels he cannot abandon him and must follow him to the ends of the Earth.
39	First Night-Watch	Y	Stubb reflects on the crew and sings a sweet song about the crewmates' love

Figure 2. *Excerpt from the spreadsheet with evaluation of each chapter.*

Figure 1 shows that 86 out of 135 chapters of *Moby-Dick* fit the love story criteria, which leads to the conclusion that 63.7% of *Moby-Dick*'s chapters—the majority—tell a love story, whether that be Ishmael and Queequeg's, Ahab and Starbuck's, or the crew's. Figure 2 shows an example of how chapters were evaluated and explained.

As the results show, a majority of *Moby-Dick*'s chapters qualify as a love story; therefore, the book itself is, in fact, a love story. The relationships between the characters and members of the Pequod dominate the plot and therefore drive it forward.

It is important to note that most of the chapters that do not qualify for love story classification are cetology chapters. This suggests that most of the chapters that are not love story eligible

are ineligible not because they are adventure chapters, but because they exist to provide information and build suspense, among other justifications for cetology. This leaves the predominance of the plot to be driven by the love stories among the characters.

It is also important to note the limitations of this study. Since the criteria leave a lot of room for subjective evaluation of plot and character elements, it is possible that if someone else conducted this study, it may yield different results. There are also other ways that one could quantify the amount of love story elements in *Moby-Dick*. Since the chapters are of varying length—from a couple of paragraphs to several pages—each chapter being weighted the same amount may not be the most accurate way to measure this. If I had a larger time frame or larger scope for this project, I might evaluate the quantity of love story elements by page count or word count of each chapter, giving each chapter a different weight in the overall results.

Conclusion

Through the evaluation of relationships present in *Moby-Dick* and the measurement of chapter content against love story criteria, *Moby-Dick* is a love story. Yes, it is one of the most renowned adventure books in American literature, but it is important to measure and reflect on the multitudes of other angles that *Moby-Dick* can be evaluated from. These measurements and reflections can bring about new perspectives on the characters and scenes as well as Melville's perceived intentions in the creation of the story.

It is also always important to study and uplift queer stories, especially in academia where these stories are disproportionately unrecognized and underrepresented. *Moby-Dick* scholars have acknowledged this specifically within the realm of Melville's work, critiquing the fact that many who study *Moby-Dick* "undermine" the true nature of Ishmael and Queequeg's homoerotic relationship (Bolt 296). While it is true that many of these scholars published

work during a time when queer research was less accepted and validated in literary academia, it is true that the ideas promoted by these scholars are still present in the twenty-first century. It is scholars like these who give fuel—or should I say, whale oil—to the flame that is the need for more research and analysis of queer love stories in classic literature.

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A Kind of Painful Progress: America's Feigned Progressivism Represented Through the Angels and Heaven in Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*

by Caleb Penick

America is "the greatest country in the world,"—a falsehood that continues to permeate what it means to have American patriotism, and the belief that America is a forward-thinking, progressive melting pot relative to the other first-world countries. But America is "a melting pot that never melts" (10), according to the Rabbi in Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*. This statement alludes to the false reality of an America that is supposed to be made up of immigrants and dreamers, those who yearn for progress and a betterment for all, but rather resembles a stew with chunks of differing cultures that do not quite mix due to differing ideologies. This feigning of progress, or more aptly, a firm denial of progressive ideals, is the America that I have come to know. An America that carries out raids on immigrant families and lends aid to an ongoing genocide. An America symbolized in Kushner's *Angels in America*: from angels carrying out an Anti-Migratory Epistle to the grounds of Heaven representing a maimed San Francisco, a theme of stagnation and embracing traditional views, and the "disastrous" results of progress, resonates with the current state of America. Kushner's *Angels in America* offers a glimpse,

through the characters of the Angels and the setting of Heaven, of an America that hides behind an illusion of progress that fails to live up to the ideals it promotes.

Before discussing the significance of Heaven taking the form of San Francisco in Kushner's *Angels in America*, it is essential to establish the necessary context. When growing up and coming into my identity as a young gay man, in a time when it had become more acceptable than ever before, I frequently remember talk of the "gayest city in the world," San Francisco, California. I can envision sitting in the pews of a small-town Methodist church, dreaming of making a pilgrimage to the gay holy land, to see the pride flags hung in window-sills and gay men walking around without fear of being scrutinized. This idea of "the gayest city in the world" is not just based on cultural stereotypes and the dreams of a young gay man wanting to get out of his small town, but is also based on historical significance. The California Gold Rush was a time when men participated in a long, arduous journey to the state to secure a fortune through the laborious task of gold mining, with San Francisco as one of the main cities of this era (Flanagan). During this time, women were not seen as capable of this kind of hard work, confining them to stay at home while the men went off to find "riches" that were, in many ways, perhaps more taboo than gold. During the Gold Rush, men often found companionship with one another and participated in cross-dressing (Flanagan). This continued after World War II, when many soldiers were released from service in San Francisco, which was the major Navy port during the war. This resulted in many gay servicemen staying in the city, rather than returning home due to fear of rejection, further cementing the city as a safe haven for queer people (White). The gay history of San Francisco goes even further than these two events, but these examples show how this city served as a beacon of progress for queer people in America, a beacon that is shown as mutilated and broken in *Angels in America*.

Over the course of the play, the character of Prior, a gay man suffering from acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS), is visited by an Angel and later visits the home of the Angels, Heaven. This version of Heaven, however, is much different than the ethereal, pearly-white gates that are often depicted in religious imagery. In the setting description of Perestroika Act V, Scene II, Kushner writes, "Heaven looks like San Francisco after the Great Quake: deserted streets, beautiful buildings in ruins, toppled telegraph poles, downed electrical cables, rubble strewn everywhere" (262). The Great Quake that Kushner refers to is the earthquake that struck San Francisco in 1906, devastating the city. This representation of heaven is significant because it shows how the Angels of the story, like many of the current conservative views of America, occupy a place that is known as holy and good, but in actuality destroys the symbols of progressive views developed in our society. During Prior's visit to Heaven, he also notices that the Angels utilize outdated technology and materials, as noted in Kushner's stage directions: "The tabletop is covered with ancient and broken astronomical, astrological, mathematical, and nautical objects of measurement and calculation, cracked clay tablets, dulled styli, dried inkpots, split quill pens, disintegrating piles of parchment, and old derelict typewriters" (271). The angels' use of ancient, traditional techniques in their work continues to show that they value older methods rather than embracing the innovations of progress.

Heaven, a land known for its pearly-white gates that rests on a sea of clouds, is actually a destroyed symbol of progress where its government uses outdated means to enact judgment on its followers. Does this sound familiar? The heaven presented in Kushner's *Angels in America* reflects the current state of America, a country that was founded on progressive ideals that have since been replaced by a desire to regress to traditional values. For example, in 2025, nine states introduced bills that have challenged the marriage equality of same-sex couples, with some wanting the

Supreme Court to overturn the landmark marriage equality case, *Obergefell v. Hodges*, completely (Lambda Legal). The re-emergence of homophobic legislative acts is not only scary as a gay man, but also shows the importance of Kushner's choice of a destroyed San Francisco, a symbol of queer progress, to represent the mangled state of America's current views. The mangled state of America is not only expressed through acts of regressing queer progress, but also through repeals of other progressive ideals. In 2022, the Supreme Court made the decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, the landmark case that legalized the right to an abortion in the United States, which has now allowed more than 14 states to ban abortion (Marshall). The overturning of *Roe v. Wade* marks another attempt to return to traditional views by a system meant to embody a persona of progress. The Heaven seen in *Angels in America* mirrors the current state of the United States of America, especially in instances of proposed and overturned legislation that center on progressive ideals that have been pushed back toward traditional views.

Another aspect I would also like to touch on is that, while reading *Angels in America*, I got the impression that Heaven can look different for each individual person. Although there is no clear distinction stated in the book, during Perestroika Act IV, Scene III, Belize describes Heaven, in a similar vein to Prior, as a destroyed San Francisco, but after this description, Roy says, "The fuck it was" (Kushner 223). Though we never confirm what kind of Heaven Roy sees upon his death, I like to assume that it shows him another version of Heaven that represents a lack of progress, an adaptable framework that anyone can use. I think this also begs the question of what other characters in the play see as Heaven, given that many of them have their own problems with halting progress, particularly those from backgrounds different than queerness. In an analysis by Ranen Omer-Sherman, he examines the aspects of the unspoken alliance between Judaism and

queerness, comparing "European genocidal history and America's homophobia" and how both experiences have led to a form of "social progress" (82). The character of Louis presents an interesting opportunity to examine what his heaven would look like; how would it combine the two forms of social progress that his identities have accumulated? I do not know, but I think this shows how adaptable the framework of Heaven can be for the characters and the audience. I think if I were to go to Heaven, it would look like a Tower of Babel-esque deer stand on the edge of a ravaged corn field. My own personal hell, but one that represents a version of my life devoid of the progress that I have made, and instead shows the traditional values that my family wanted of me. I think the concept of Heaven, as presented by Kushner, is purposely adaptable so that any reader can place themselves in their own version of Heaven, showing not only the feigned progressivism of America or social movements but perhaps a personal absence of progress.

The Angels in *Angels in America* not only uphold traditional values to halt progress in Heaven, but they also come down to humans and carry out their Anti-Migratory Epistle. Before discussing the significance of the Angel's message, I feel it is important to establish how Angels have been depicted in religious and cultural traditions, and how this differs from Kushner's play. In an analysis by Amy Schindler on the connection between Angels and the AIDS epidemic, she describes the transition of changing angelic symbolism: "Since biblical times, angels have been typically depicted no longer with flaming swords and vast numbers of eyes, but instead these mighty messengers have been portrayed as placid and overweight babies" (51). No longer are there monstrous beasts with thousands of eyes to be feared; instead, there are cherubs who end up as brooches on old women's church clothes. Schindler continues her analysis by describing that humans seek angels because they want an intermediary to bring a message from God, but those with AIDS saw him as being unwilling to work with

them due to their sickness (57). This directly resulted in those with AIDS seeking, not God, but the intermediary angels who were seen as a "non-judgemental divine force" (Schindler 57). The way that Kushner depicts Prior's initial encounter with the Angel melds all of these ideas. In the absence of God, a man with AIDS is visited by someone he thinks is a holy, beautiful, non-judgmental intermediary, but instead is a being who has taken over judgment and carries out a dangerous message of halting progress. This contradiction sets the stage for the Angel's Anti-Migratory Epistle's later impact on Prior and the audience, creating an atmosphere that beckons them to question what they are being told.

The Angel's Anti-Migratory Epistle is the first time we meet the Angel and learn their anti-progress ideology, representative of America's own feigned progressive stance. When the Angel first speaks to Prior after the reveal of the book and the odd sexual encounter, she preaches on how humans must halt progress, saying, "STOP MOVING! Forsake the Open Road: Neither Mix Nor Intermarry Let Deep Roots Grow…You DO not 'Advance,' You only Trample…If you Cannot find your Heart's desire–In your own backyard–You never lost it to begin with" (Kushner 172). This frames progress as an evil, painful process, one that tramples those in its path and creates more trouble than it is worth, especially for the Angels, as progress has caused God to leave Heaven, leaving them saying, "He grew weary of Us. Our Songs and Fornications. His Angels: Who cannot Imagine, who lack that Faculty…Seeking something New…Our Father-Lover Unleashed Eternal Creation's Potential for Change" (Kushner 168-169). Human progress has quite literally wounded Heaven and caused God to abandon his judgment of the mortal world. The concept of God abandoning humanity due to progress is not isolated to *Angels in America*; this is rhetoric that has been perpetuated by Christian, conservative spokespeople in recent years. To quote Bobby McKay, a writer for *The Baptist Paper*, "We have drifted so far from

God's original intention for us that we now see the results of a broken society." The use of the word "drifted" in this context seemingly refers to the progress that we have made as a society, which some may consider a sin, such as interracial marriage, gay rights, and the legalization of abortion in some parts of the country. To the Angel, or more aptly, certain political parties and groups in America, progress denotes a moral decline and should be avoided to revert to "tried and true" traditional values. The Angel's Anti-Migratory Epistle represents a desire to regress to tradition rather than promote progress that improves the lives of others, even if it is painful at times to lose the nostalgia of the past.

The pain of progress is something we have all experienced, whether it is moving away from home to attend college or going through a break-up you know is for the best. The same goes for the progress we make in our country to better our society. For those who have experienced the past of America, the "Golden Days" as some refer to them, I can see how it may be hard to let go of traditional ideals in favor of ones that challenge your perspective. For example, it was incredibly hard for my dad to handle my coming out, a conversation that, when relived, makes my skin crawl, but one that was wholly necessary. A necessity for progress is one that I think Kushner promotes through his play. Kushner's view of progress can be assumed to need a starting point—traditional views—in order to know where we most need to improve so that we do not repeat or get stuck in the mud of nostalgia (Ceballos Muñoz 5). I think the character of Harper sums it up best towards the end of the play, "Nothing's lost forever. In this world, there is a kind of painful progress. Longing for what we've left behind, and dreaming ahead" (Kushner 285). I think that this kind of hopeful send-off communicates that, despite the Angel's Anti-Migratory Epistle and the destroyed state of Heaven, there is still hope for a brighter future. This translates perfectly into the current state of American politics. Although many hold

political ideologies rooted in anti-progress, there is still hope that the ideals America was founded on continue to prevail.

America is not the greatest country in the world because it hides behind feigned progressivism while differing political ideologies try to return to traditional values, a problem symbolized in Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* through its representation of the Angels and the setting of Heaven. The "disastrous" results of progress are represented through the destruction of San Francisco, a shining beacon of progress for gay rights, and the Angels' use of ancient, derelict technologies to enact judgment. The themes of stagnation and embracing traditional values are represented through the Angel's Anti-Migratory Epistle, which scolds humanity for embracing progress, such as the current progress of marriage equality and women's right to bodily autonomy. Kushner emphasizes through his play that there is still hope that remains in the process of painful progress, which learns from tradition and seeks to improve our society for the better, even if we lose the nostalgia of the past. Although the current state of America continues to simply hide behind a facade of progress while actually wanting a return to traditional values, there are still those that, like Prior, must take a stand against these regressive views and push forward to reach the ideals America once promoted.

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The Politics of the Female Body: Rebellion and Survival in Jacobs, Chopin, and Alcott

by Sarah Riahi

Introduction

In 19th-century literature, the female body often became a battleground for societal control, where women were expected to conform to ideals of purity, passivity, and submission. However, in *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin, *Behind a Mas*k by Louisa May Alcott, and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs, the female protagonists push back against these oppressive norms, using their bodies as sites of rebellion.

In *The Awakening*, Chopin follows Edna Pontellier, a married woman and mother who gradually awakens to her own desires and sense of selfhood. As Edna grows increasingly disillusioned with the roles of dutiful wife and self-sacrificing mother, she seeks emotional and erotic fulfillment outside the boundaries of marriage. Through this pursuit, her body becomes a means of challenging the domestic and social expectations that confine her.

By contrast, *Behind a Mask* centers on Jean Muir, a governess who secretly manipulates Victorian ideals of feminine weakness and innocence in order to gain power over the men and women around her. Rather than openly rejecting social norms, Jean exploits them, using her performance of fragility and virtue as a strategic tool for social advancement.

In a far more brutal context, Harriet Jacobs, writing under the name Linda Brent, recounts her life as an enslaved woman subjected to constant sexual harassment and abuse by her enslaver. Denied legal ownership of her own body, Linda makes painful and morally fraught choices in an effort to protect herself and her children, revealing how survival itself becomes a form of resistance under slavery.

Despite their similarities, these texts offer distinct portrayals of bodily resistance. By contrasting the ways in which Edna's sensuality, Jean's performative femininity, and Linda's endurance are shaped by race and class, it becomes clear that while all three women reclaim their bodies, only Linda fully exposes the political stakes of female embodiment.

The Awakening

In *The Awakening*, Kate Chopin uses Edna Pontellier's body as a powerful symbol of her evolving consciousness and her struggle for sexual and emotional autonomy. From the start, Edna's body is bound by the expectations of the Victorian "mother-woman" ideal; a woman devoted entirely to her husband, children, and domestic duties. Women like Madame Ratignolle "idolized their children, worshiped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels" (Chopin, Ch. 4). Edna, by contrast, begins to question and ultimately rejects this model. Her bodily awakening is gradual and deeply intertwined with her emotional development, particularly through her relationship with Robert Lebrun and her sexual affair with Alcée Arobin. These relationships are not merely romantic or transgressive; they represent critical turning points in Edna's reclamation of her own physical desires, breaking away from the societal expectations that treat the female body as a vessel for reproduction and male pleasure.

Chopin subtly aligns Edna's bodily sensations with her psychological emancipation. Her first successful swim, for instance, is a moment of profound self-realization: "She wanted to swim far out, where no woman had swum before" (Chopin, Ch. 10). This act of swimming symbolizes Edna's desire to move beyond the literal and figurative boundaries placed upon her body. Literary critic Sandra Gilbert sees this scene as a metaphor for an immersion in the self and a rejection of the roles into which patriarchal society casts women, also claiming that "Edna's last swim is not a suicide... but a death associated with a resurrection, a pagan, female Good Friday that promises a Venusian Easter" (Gilbert)

Rather than framing Edna's death as a defeat, Gilbert argues that Chopin, drawing on mythological imagery, particularly Aphrodite and Venus, suggests a rebirth through the sea, which is consistently aligned with femininity, eroticism, and freedom. Through such acts, Edna reclaims her body not only as a site of pleasure but to articulate her autonomy.

At the end of the novel, Edna returns to the sea and surrenders herself to it which brings this metaphor full circle. From the beginning, Chopin frames the ocean as a space of both desire and escape, writing, "The voice of the sea is seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude... The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace" (Chopin, Ch. 6). Here, the sea becomes both a maternal and erotic force, representing the duality of Edna's struggle: the longing for personal awakening and the impossibility of sustaining her freedom within the confines of her society. This tension between selfhood and social expectation ultimately defines Edna's fate, and, as W. Jones observes, "She cannot reconcile her own ambivalent feelings about the traditional view of woman's role in society with the modern view of the individual personality." (W. Jones)

However, Edna's struggle also takes place within a framework of racial and class privilege that shapes both the possibilities and limits of her rebellion. While Edna Pontellier's journey in The Awakening is marked by emotional intensity and personal risk, her ability to explore her body and her desires is ultimately made possible by her position as a white, upper-middle class woman. Unlike Jean Muir in Alcott's *Behind a Mask* or Linda Brent in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Edna has the luxury of dissatisfaction. She seeks emotional and sexual freedom, not physical survival. Even her final act, walking into the sea, is framed as an aesthetic and symbolic gesture, not a literal escape from oppression. Scholar Elizabeth Ammons contrasts Edna's fate with that of women like Linda, arguing that Edna's ability to choose death is itself a privilege denied to enslaved women whose lives were already circumscribed by forced reproduction and bodily violation (Ammons).

Moreover, she is not economically dependent on her husband, nor is her body directly exploited or owned by others. Her privileges, social status, race, and financial security, shield her from many of the material consequences that other women face when they step outside societal norms. Elizabeth Ammons claims, "Edna Pontellier is able to swim dreamily to her death for one very clear and highly political reason: Black women will raise her children." Her awakening is facilitated by the invisibility of class labor and the sacrifices of women who do not have those options. Black characters are mostly portrayed in background roles, often unnamed and voiceless, serving as laborers or caretakers for the white characters. Their presence is constant, yet their individuality is nearly erased, reflecting both the racial dynamics of the 19th-century and the limitations of Chopin's narrative perspective.

Furthermore, Edna's journey toward self-discovery is tied to her social privilege, which grants her the space, both literal and psychological, to question the roles assigned to her. Her time at

Grand Isle serves as more than just a vacation, it becomes a space where she is temporarily freed from the expectations of wifehood and motherhood. Removed from the domestic routines of New Orleans society, Edna can explore alternative lifestyles, particularly through her immersion in Creole culture. This exposure challenges Edna's internalized norms and gives her permission, in a sense, to begin feeling different. Her encounter with Mademoiselle Reisz is especially important as her devotion to art and solitude shows Edna an alternative to the submissive "mother-woman" ideal embodied by Madame Ratignolle. Edna's awakening is only possible within the consequence-free setting of the vacation, highlighting how freedom for some women is shaped by the material conditions that others cannot afford to ignore. In this light, Edna's awakening is ultimately more accessible because it unfolds in a world that allows her the time, space, and safety to reflect, explore, and rebel. Her struggle is existential and emotional. Her story is not less meaningful, but it is less constrained by the brutal realities of race, class, and servitude that define the other two female protagonists' experiences.

Behind a Mask

In *Behind a Mask*, Louisa May Alcott presents Jean Muir's body not as a space of personal liberation, but as a meticulously controlled tool of manipulation, a strategic performance of femininity designed to exploit societal expectations. Unlike Edna, whose physical awakening signals a rejection of traditional gender roles, Jean weaponizes her body by performing the very traits that society idealizes in women: fragility, submissiveness, and beauty. Jean can manipulate her appearance and use femininity to her advantage precisely because she is perceived as desirable within a patriarchal white framework. The character of the governess is particularly vulnerable to patriarchal expectations because of her ambiguous social position. She is neither fully a servant nor an

equal to the family she serves. She is vulnerable to patriarchal expectations, especially due to her lower social status. These expectations serve as tools of control, meant to keep women like Jean in their place and prevent them from threatening the class and gender order. This system of control operates through objectification as much as through social hierarchy. As Korycka argues, "The objectifying gaze turns the woman servant into a reflection of the male employer's desires, which are largely based on the patriarchal placement of the woman in the private domestic sphere, where she happily performs the duties destined for her." (Korycka 99). Alcott's narrative, however, reveals how consciously and strategically Jean inhabits and exploits this role.

Alcott frequently draws attention to Jean's theatrical control over her appearance, her ability to manipulate her facial expressions, her voice, and even her breath, suggesting that her body is not a natural extension of her selfhood. Her manipulation hinges on the fact that Victorian femininity was not only idealized but also performative, and Jean's mastery of that performance enables her to infiltrate and dominate the Coventry household. She does not reject femininity but reclaims it as a mask, using her body to undermine the very men who would confine her to domestic servitude. This strategy is especially important given Jean's precarious class position as she is a working-class woman seeking financial security, making her manipulation a form of survival.

Moreover, her role as governess requires her to not only embody ideal femininity herself, but to teach and enforce it in others. She is tasked with shaping the behaviors and values of the children in ways that align with the upper-class standards of Victorian society. She is teaching the very attitudes that she seeks to master in order to climb the social ladder and secure a marriage with Sir John Coventry, despite her own ambiguous position within the social hierarchy. This irony is deeply significant because it highlights the central theme that social class is not inherent or

biological, but a construct that is learned, reinforced, and performed.

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl

In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet Jacobs (writing as Linda Brent) presents the enslaved Black female body as a site of both exploitation and resistance, where survival itself becomes an act of defiance. Her narrative is very radical. At a time when Black women's voices were systematically erased, Jacobs insists not only on speaking but on being heard, on her terms. She does not want to receive pity from the reader, she aims to express her memories to make an autobiographical representation of the fight for female bodily autonomy, as explained in "Reader, it is not to awaken sympathy for myself that I am telling you truthfully what I suffered in slavery. I do it to kindle a flame of compassion in your hearts for my sisters who are still in bondage, suffering as I once suffered" (Jacobs, Ch.5). Unlike Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening* or Jean Muir in *Behind a Mask*, Linda's body is not hers to perform or liberate in conventional terms; it is property, subjected to the violence, scrutiny, and sexual desires of white male power. Her body is directly depicted as a "piece of merchandise" (Jacobs, Ch 1), "piece of property" (Jacobs, Ch 1); a life that can be bought. The enslaved female body is an instrument of labor, but unlike white women's domestic labor, which could be romanticized, the labor of enslaved women is compulsory and brutally enforced. Their biological properties, such as being able to bear children, are used as a tool for economic gain.

Dr. Flint's persistent attempts to force Linda into a sexual relationship are emblematic of slavery's systemic abuse of enslaved women's bodies. Her objectification started at a young age, when her master used her social status to instill fear within her. Jacobs emphasizes that the psychological torment of being pursued or abused by white men was as damaging as physical violence.

However, despite constantly being under threat, she refuses to surrender to Dr. Flint's control, instead crafting strategies of resistance.

As scholar Isabel Pumeda Cabanas notes in her thesis, the typical female body, often objectified and reduced to a sexual object in broader patriarchal society, takes on a distinct and even more troubling meaning within the context of slavery. While white women might be idealized or sexualized within a framework that still allowed them some societal protection or moral authority, Black enslaved women were both hypersexualized and entirely stripped of control over their own bodies. They were denied the right to consent and were punished by both the institution of slavery and the society around them, if they attempted to express or reclaim their sexuality. With that being said, one of Linda's most controversial decisions is when she entered a consensual sexual relationship with Mr. Sands, a white man who is not her master. This decision, condemned by her readers, society, and herself, was in fact an assertion of agency under impossible conditions. "It seems less degrading to give one's self, than to submit to compulsion," Jacobs explains (Jacobs, Ch. 10). Her use of her body here is neither romantic nor liberatory in the traditional sense, it is complex and political. Linda's bodily choices are shaped by the raw imperatives of survival under a regime of racialized gender violence.

During her seven years of confinement, Linda took control of her own body and fate by physically removing herself from Dr. Flint's reach, even though it meant enduring years of isolation, extreme physical suffering, and emotional torment. Her bodily suffering was a deliberate and calculated cost she chose to pay in order to retain her autonomy and protect her children from the abuse of slavery. By keeping herself hidden, Linda actively resisted the sexual and physical exploitation that is representative of the

enslavement of Black women, rejecting Dr. Flint's attempts to control her body.

Through Linda's testimony, Jacobs illuminates the specific intersection of race, gender, and power in the 19th-century American South, showing that bodily autonomy for Black women was not merely a philosophical pursuit but a matter of survival. In contrast to Edna and Jean, whose struggles for agency unfold within the relative safety of white womanhood, Linda's battle is waged from a position of profound vulnerability. Her story reveals that resistance does not always take the form of escape or revolt; it often looks like endurance, strategic compromise, and the painful assertion of selfhood in a world determined to erase it.

Conclusion

In examining the female protagonists in *The Awakening*, *Behind a Mask*, and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, it becomes clear that while all three women assert control over their bodies as a form of resistance against patriarchal and societal expectations, the nature of this resistance varies significantly based on race, class, and the broader socio-political contexts in which they exist. Edna Pontellier's sensual exploration of her body in *The Awakening* reflects a privileged struggle for self-liberation within the boundaries of upper-middle-class white womanhood, yet it remains confined by the very social structures that allow her freedom. In contrast, Jean Muir in *Behind a Mask* uses her body as a weapon, manipulating societal ideals of femininity for social power, but her resistance is performative and carefully calculated within the confines of her precarious social position. Lastly, Linda Brent's story in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* presents a far more painful struggle for bodily autonomy, where survival itself becomes an act of rebellion. Unlike Edna and Jean, Linda's resistance is shaped by the brutal realities of slavery, race, and the exploitation of Black women's bodies, offering a more politically charged and poignant

portrayal of female rebellion. The contrast between their experiences invites readers to critically examine the diverse ways women have historically fought against their oppression, and how the politics of their bodies reflect larger social, racial, and gender dynamics.

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Hero or Human?: Comparing Translations of the Opening Stanza of *The Odyssey*

by Bella Wahbeh

> Sing to me of the man, Muse, the man of twists and turns
> driven time and again off course, once he had plundered
> the hallowed heights of Troy.
> Many cities of men he saw and learned their minds,
> many pains he suffered, heartsick on the open sea,
> fighting to save his life and bring his comrades home.
> But he could not save them from disaster, hard as he strove–
> the recklessness of their own ways destroyed them all,
> the blind fools, they devoured the cattle of the Sun
> and the Sungod blotted out the day of their return. . . .
>
> Translated by Robert Fagles (1996)

> Tell me about a complicated man.
> Muse, tell me how he wandered and was lost
> when he had wrecked the holy town of Troy,
> and where he went, and who he met, the pain
> he suffered in the storms at sea, and how
> he worked to save his life and bring his men
> back home. He failed to keep them safe; poor fools,
> they ate the Sun God's cattle, and the god
> kept them from home…
>
> Translated by Emily Wilson (2018)

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According to Lawrence Venuti, a translator doesn't simply reproduce a text verbatim in a new language, but rather "rewrites the original to appeal to another audience in a different language and culture, often in a different period" (1). This is what Robert Fagles and Emily Wilson have done in their translations of The Odyssey. Fagles told a tale of valiance and heroism that was suited for an era when popular media was prone to depicting leading characters as infallible and upstanding, while Wilson portrayed Odysseus as more nuanced and morally grey, which is fitting for an age of readers fond of realistic characters with layers and shortcomings. Venuti instructs readers to "savor the translator's diction and phrasing, the distinctiveness of the style, the verbal subtleties that project a tone of voice and sketch the psychological contours of a character" (2). If one does this when reading Fagles's and Wilson's translations, it becomes clear that nearly every word was chosen with care to create a specific, distinct portrayal of Odysseus and his difficult journey. Fagles opts for descriptors that portray Odysseus as clever, valiant, and honorable.Wilson uses language that holds Odysseus accountable for his mistakes while also reminding readers that, though he is mythologized and heroicized, he is, in fact, just a man, like everyone else.

The opening stanza of *The Odyssey* sets the tone for the rest of the poem, painting a picture of Odysseus's struggles and laying the framework for them to be recounted. As such, Fagles's rendition of the stanza establishes an image of a glorious hero who prevailed through tragic circumstances, and his opening lines feel almost like a request to a bard to tell a familiar and admired story: "Sing to me of the man, Muse, the man of twists and turns / driven time and again off course" (Fagles 1.1-2). On the other hand, Wilson's rendering is somber and wistful and perhaps offers a more accurate characterization of both Odysseus and the circumstances he faced: "Tell me about a complicated man. / Muse, tell me how he wandered and was lost" (Wilson 1.1-2). Fagles's use of "sing"

implies an exciting and entertaining (but also possibly performative and dramatized) tale to come, while Wilson's plainer choice of "tell" intentionally does nothing to glorify the narrative to follow. Further, Fagles's use of the definite "the man" indicates that Odysseus is renowned enough that this simple invocation is enough to make clear who the speaker is referring to. Wilson, though, refers to Odysseus as only "a … man," the indefinite article taking him off of the pedestal and setting the stage for him to be characterized as imperfect and realistically human— he makes mistakes and lies to protect his image, just as any other man. There is also significance to their respective translations of *polytropos*, which, according to Wilson, translates literally to "many turns" (Mason 48). Fagles sticks close to this definition with "the man of twists and turns," which, in combination with "driven time and again off course," suggests that Odysseus's troubles were completely outside of his control and that he was simply being dragged along his 'twisted' voyage by the strings of fate and the whims of the gods (Fagles 1.1-2). Conversely, Wilson loosely translates *polytropos* to "complicated," a word with both a denotative meaning and mixed connotations that reveal that Odysseus is not "interpretively straightforward–" that he isn't strictly good or evil, hero or villain, selfish or selfless, but a flawed antihero whose intentions are mainly pure, if misguided (Mason 49).

According to Wilson's interpretation, Odysseus wasn't merely "driven … off course" (Fagles 1.2), instead he "wandered and was lost" (Wilson 1.2), as seen in the fact that many of the trials he faced were the unintended consequences of the decisions he made. Furthermore, Fagles's description of Odysseus's actions in Troy as "plunder[ing]" implies that it was part of the glory of war and gives no indication that this plundering was wrong or that its lasting effects mattered (Fagles 1.2-3). In contrast, Wilson notes that Odysseus "wrecked the holy town of Troy," which suggests that he left destruction in his wake (Wilson 1.3). This foreshadows all the other destruction his bad choices and selfish actions bring

throughout the story, as his men all perish and he leaves many of those he meets worse for wear without the slightest concern about the consequences his actions have for other people. Then, both translators spend the next few lines characterizing the overall nature of Odysseus's journey as one of bouncing from place to place, encounter to encounter, always returning to the sea in between.

Fagles draws attention to Odysseus's charisma and adeptness at understanding the inner workings of the minds of all those he meets during these encounters, saying, "many cities of men he saw and learned their minds" (Fagles 1.4). He then underscores the tragedy of the situation, painting Odysseus as an unfortunate victim of his circumstances: "many pains he suffered, heartsick on the open sea" (Fagles 1.5). All of this leads to a characterization of Odysseus as a hero skilled at adapting to and solving problems he had no role in causing. Wilson also describes Odysseus's pain and suffering, but she uses simpler language and a more objective lens, opting not to get into the details of his interactions and instead saying, "where he went, and who he met, the pain / he suffered in the storms at sea" (Wilson 1.4-5). Through this phrasing, Wilson concedes that Odysseus did suffer, but doesn't grant him the pity of victimhood, because, as she later acknowledges, he mostly brought his troubles upon himself through his failures.

The translators then go on to express Odysseus's goal of getting himself and his crew home safely in subtly different ways. Fagles chooses words like "fighting" and "comrades" to imply that Odysseus desperately struggled to protect the men with whom he was friends and colleagues (Fagles 1.6). This version of Odysseus cares about his shipmates and wants to ensure their safe arrival just as much as his own. Wilson, on the other hand, opts for the more passive "worked," reflecting Odysseus's lack of commitment to getting home as quickly as possible—in fact, he repeatedly chose to dwell longer than necessary in situations that delayed his

homecoming (Wilson 1.6). Furthermore, the phrasing of Wilson's "he worked to save his life and bring his men / back home" makes the men feel like an afterthought rather than equals. The line break puts a physical division between "men" and "home," symbolizing the fact that, though Odysseus survived, the men never did make it home (Wilson 1.6-7). Here, Odysseus is depicted as almost negligent of his crew, treating them as his subordinates (note that they are called "his men" rather than any descriptor suggesting equality) and prioritizing his own life over theirs—a trend that continues problematically through the rest of their time together as Odysseus distances himself from them and they lose trust in him as their leader. Finally, Fagles claims that though Odysseus strove hard, "he could not save [his men] from disaster," shifting the blame onto the "recklessness" of the "blind fools" for incurring the wrath of the Sun god (Fagles 1.7-10).

Because Fagles has built up Odysseus to be this righteous, unerring hero over the last few lines, the fault for his men's deaths cannot possibly lie with him—it must lie with the men themselves, or the gods, or any force other than the epic hero that is Odysseus. In sharp contrast to this, Wilson blames Odysseus outright, saying that "he failed to keep them safe" and sympathizing with the "poor fools" whom he was meant to protect (Wilson 1.7). As king and captain, it was Odysseus's literal job to lead these men to safety, and Wilson refuses to give him a free pass for his mistakes and irresponsibility that unwittingly led to their painful, unnecessary deaths.

In sum, Fagles's translation highlights Odysseus's *metis* (cleverness) and other positive qualities and implies that he has achieved the *kleos* (renown) he so craved. His hero's journey is recounted through language that glorifies it and calls for sympathy towards Odysseus. This characterization and tone appealed to readers in Fagles's time who preferred strong, faultless leading characters whose qualities they could aspire to. Conversely,

Wilson's translation uses plain, direct language to underscore Odysseus's *hubris* (pride), among other flaws, and to characterize the events of the story as the consequential *nemesis* (divine retribution) that the gods rain down on him for his actions, rather than simply unfortunate circumstances. This caters to modern readers' desire for complex characters who act more like real people and face real consequences for their mistakes, allowing readers to relate more to the characters and story. As David Damrosch wrote, "world literature is always as much about the host culture's values and needs as it is about a work's source culture" (201). Therefore, while the *metis* and *kleos* may be just as present and thematically important as the *hubris* and *nemesis* in the original text and culture, each translator has chosen to focus on and emphasize certain factors over others in order to best suit the needs of the host culture at their time of writing.

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From Berries to Salmon: Protecting Alaska's Foraging Heritage in a Changing World

by Jennika Warner

Part I: Proposal and Research Questions

Foraging is a vital part of life in Alaska, especially in rural villages where people rely on wild foods to survive long winters that stretch from October to May. From spring through fall, Alaskans harvest plants like fiddleheads, nettles, fireweed shoots, and devils club. They also hunt for bears, moose, deer, and seals. Berry picking and dipnetting for salmon in places like Kenai and Copper Landing are essential seasonal traditions. Foraging shapes community practices, cultural transmission, and seasonal rhythms across the state. This essay examines how foraging supports social and cultural sustainability, the environmental risks that then these practices such as erosion, flooding, and permafrost degradation. Additionally, to understand how foraging supports local Alaskan communities, it is more than life beyond just food. It preserves culture, teaches traditions, and brings people together. We need to explore the environmental risks that threaten this way of life, such as erosion, flooding, and permafrost degradation caused by climate change. Also, to explore how tourism and modern development affect foraging areas, and what solutions exist to protect these lands. My goal is to learn how Alaskan communities can continue foraging sustainably while adapting to environmental and economic pressure.

1. How does traditional foraging contribute to the social and cultural sustainability of rural Alaskan communities?
2. How does climate change impact the availability and quality of wild food traditionally forged in Alaska?
3. How can local communities balance traditional foraging practices with modern economic and conservation needs?
4. How does overharvesting, tourism, and modern development threaten Alaskan foraging ecosystems, and what solutions can protect these lands for future generations?

Part II: Content for the Community Problem

Foraging in Alaska is a primary way for residents to access sustainable, land-grown food.

However, it presents several challenges for local communities. In the article "Frozen Commons: Food Security and Food Sovereignty in Rural Alaskan Communities and Tribes," Selby and Mo explain that climate change is affecting both the availability and the quality of wild food. According to the authors, "Thawing permafrost and increased coastal erosion have led to habitat loss and the displacement of key wildlife species, making it even more difficult for communities to locate and harvest traditional food sources" (Selby and Mo 1). This environmental disruption reduces access to wild foods not only in villages in rural Alaska, but also bigger cities like Wasilla and Anchorage. Moreover, permafrost damage affects not just plants but also Alaska's limited road system. While repairs near major cities like Anchorage can be completed quickly, in remote areas such as Kotzebue or small villages, repairs may take two to four weeks. In addition to climate-related issues, overharvesting—especially from commercial fishing—poses another threat. Selby and Mo note, "Commercial fisheries further intensify food security issues for rural Alaskan communities by depleting river fish stocks beyond sustainable

levels" (1). To get ahead of commercial fishermen, Alaska residents often go dipnetting- using long-handled nets to scoop salmon from rivers during their annual spawning runs.

Building on the environmental concerns raised by Selby and Mo, traditional land stewardship and local governance are central to protecting Alaska's foraging places. The Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) transferred large tracts of land to village and regional corporations, creating locally controlled land bases that many communities now manage through tribal councils and corporate structures; these arrangements enable community-led rules for harvesting, access, and habitat protection (U.S. Dept. of the Interior; Murray). Community monitoring programs and school-based stewardships initiatives document changes in berry phenology, abundance, and teaching safe harvesting practices (Van Den Berg; Sitka Sound Science Center), while biocultural stewardship techniques such as selective thinning, transplanting, and place-based care are being used to support berry resilience in a changing climate (peer-reviewed stewardship study). Indigenous-led monitoring projects that combine Traditional Ecological Knowledge with scientific measurements (for example, sea-ice and phenology programs) show how locally driven data and governance can guide adaptive management and sustain both food security and cultural practices (George; AAOKH).

While local governance provides the foundation for community stewardship, federal analyses highlight the larger environmental trends that complicate these efforts. The EPA also emphasize how climate change and governance affect foraging communities. An article by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) titled "Community Impacts" explains that climate change threatens food security and disrupts the ecosystems across Alaska. The report states, "…earlier ice breakup, later freeze-up, and thinning ice make travel and seasonal harvesting more dangerous and less predictable" (EPA). These highlight how changing

conditions directly affect foragers, making traditional harvesting more difficult and riskier. Furthermore, the article emphasizes the importance of place-based governance and local decision making. According to the EPA, "… Indigenous and rural communities depend on traditional use to define security and self-determination." This underscores how climate change not only impacts food access but also affects Indigenous communities' ability to manage their own resources and practices. These rights include the ability to hunt, gather, fish, and determine how their natural resources are used and protected.

Beyond climate change and local governance, another growing concern is the impact of tourism on Alaska's fragile foraging ecosystems. In this article, "Eco-Tourism: Balancing Conservation and Economic Growth in Alaska" Harper, the author, explains that while ecotourism significantly boosts the state's economy and generating millions in revenue, it also brings serious environmental consequences. The author states, "… trails, lodges, roads, and other developments erode soils, damage vegetation, and fragment areas that produce wild foods and support wildlife" (Harper 1). While these developments may benefit the tourism industry financially, they are unfortunately damaging Alaska's natural landscapes. Another concern is pollution and water contamination. Harper warns, "Higher tourist generated litter, wastewater, and emissions can degrade water quality and contaminate forage areas, lowering the safety and quality of wild foods." These impacts not only threaten the environment but also reduce the availability of safe, traditional foods for local communities.

Part III: Problem Solutions

While these challenges threaten Alaska's food security and cultural traditions, Alaskan communities are not powerless; they are actively creating strategies to protect their lands, traditions, and food systems. To begin with, let us address the growing impacts of

climate change on Alaska's ecosystems. The communities are turning to both traditional knowledge and modern infrastructure to adapt and protect their food sources. One effective solution is for villages to track permafrost thawing, ice conditions, and wildlife migration by combining traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) with scientific data. In Utqiaġvik (Barrow), indigenous-led monitoring of sea ice has helped hunters adapt safety procedures (George). This approach is successful because it builds resilience and empowers communities to anticipate and respond to environmental changes.

In addition to climate concerns, another major challenge is overharvesting from commercial fisheries, which requires stronger regulations and community-centered practices to ensure salmon populations remain sustainable for future generations. Stricter regulations of commercial fisheries would help enforce catch limits and seasonal restrictions to protect salmon runs. This strategy has been carried out in Bristol Bay's salmon fishery, which is often cited as a model of sustainable management ("Management and Science"). It is successful because it ensures long-term food security while balancing economic needs. Furthermore, expanding the resident-only dipnetting program would provide Alaskans access before the commercial fleets arrive. This expansion would reinforce sovereignty and sustain traditional food practice among Alaskans.

Beyond fishing, improper harvesting of plants—especially berries—has led to noticeable declines, making education and community land management essential solutions. If teaching is not done in the household, Alaska school systems could teach safe harvesting practices as an afterschool activity. In Southeast Alaska schools, berry stewardship programs have already been introduced. These programs build cultural respect and ensure that future generations continue traditional responsibility (Van Den Berg). Additionally, adults who recently moved to Alaska should take the

berry stewardship program when they apply for their driver's license. This will help prevent over-picking and help build cultural respect. Lastly, Tribes and villages under ANCSA should set rules for forging and protecting fragile ecosystems. This governance helps balance cultural traditions with modern economic needs, and the local decision-making ensures that the rules reflect community values and ecological realities.

Finally, tourism, while economically beneficial, also places strain on fragile ecosystems. Solutions such as eco-tourism regulations, visitor regulations, and visitor education can help balance conservation with growth. For example, when tourists arrive in Alaska, flight attendants could hand out brochures containing information about respecting the land, cultural traditions, and foraging tips to avoid over-picking or damaging crops. In addition, visitor restrictions in sensitive areas, along with enforcements of "leave no trace" policies and permit requirements, would further protect fragile ecosystems ("Laws and Policies"). This has already been implemented in Denali National Park, where access is limited to protect wildlife and vegetation ("Denali National Park"). Such measures are successful because they balance economic benefits with conservation needs.

Part IV: What I Learned

When this project began, foraging was understood primarily as a subsistence practice that supplies food for rural communities. Research broadened that view: foraging is embedded in a larger system of cultural continuity, local governance, and adaptive management. Climate-driven changes such as permafrost thaw, altered ice regimes, and increased erosion which interacted with tourism, infrastructure development, and commercial pressure to create complex risks for both plant and animal sources.

Moreover, I found it interesting to see how communities are already responding to these challenges. For example, indigenous-

led sea ice monitoring in Utqiaġvik combines traditional ecological knowledge with science to help hunters adapt safely (George). Similarly, Bristol Bays salmon fishery showed me that stricter regulations can work when managed carefully ("Management and Science"). Additionally, the community responses combine Traditional Ecological Knowledge with scientific monitoring and place-based governance. Under ANCSA and through tribal and village corporations, many communities manage land and set local harvesting rules; school-based stewardship programs and community monitoring projects document shifts in berry phenology, abundance, and teaches safe harvesting practices. Finally, Southeast Alaska schools teaching berry stewardship programs gave me hope that education can make a real difference in preventing overharvesting (Van Den Berg). These examples made me also realize that solutions don't have to be abstract, they can be practical, community-driven, and already in motion.

The research process revealed overlapping challenges that required careful synthesis. At first, organizing the material was difficult because climate impacts, tourism, and governance interact across systems. This is affecting fishing, plant communities, and access to traditional foods. Focusing on solutions and asking how each strategy addressed a specific problem helped provide structure and clarify why certain approaches could succeed. Overall, foraging in Alaska emerges as much more than food system: it is a nexus of resilience, sovereignty, and respect for the land. The project underscored the need to balance sources, center community-led stewardships, and think critically about how environmental and cultural issues intersect. Sustainable outcomes appear most likely when traditional; knowledge is paired with targeted policy, education, and scientific partnerships. The lessons that extend beyond Alaska to broader conversations about sustainability. In conclusion, foraging in Alaska is not simply about food, it also represents survival, culture continuity, and respect for the land.

These solutions demonstrate that resilience arises from communities that honor both tradition and change.

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The Horror of Love: A Comparison of *Together* and Aristophanes' Myth in Plato's *Symposium*

by Sarah Gamble

On July 30th, 2025, audiences in theaters watched Millie and Tim, the principal characters and couple of the film *Together*, try in vain to avoid the inevitable melding of their bodies into a singular androgynous being after having been cursed by a cult. They separate from each other, gruesomely saw their own limbs, and snort crushed diazepam in an attempt to relax their muscles and pull apart—but an invisible force drags their contorted bodies together over and over again until they surrender to their bodies fusing into one. This strange amalgamation of Tim and Millie is not necessarily an unfamiliar story, however; the film is blatantly reminiscent of Aristophanes' myth of love as told in Plato's *Symposium*. The following paper aims to juxtapose Aristophanes' myth against *Together*'s horror-shaded perspective to identify society's differing approaches to understanding relationships, and asks the following question—is the idea of love worth sacrificing individual identity and independence?

Returning first to the myth of Aristophanes allows us to evaluate its position on love. It describes that all humans were once circular beings made up of two faces and eight limbs, and of the male sex, female sex, or intersex, which is androgynous (a male half

and a female half). Zeus, the King of the Gods, threatened by their power, separated each circular-human into what we are today. Thus, he began what Aristophanes claims is love: the search for wholeness, which can be achieved by finding our split "other-half," who is, for all intents and purposes, our soulmate (*Symposium* 189d-191d). Our lack of wholeness obviously indicates that we are currently incomplete creatures, leading to lives of grief, dissatisfaction, and loneliness. The fable frames separation as our punishment, while maintaining that finding our "other-half" is the ideal which will return us to our natural and original state: complete, together, and happy. While Aristophanes, a famous comic playwright of his day, clearly meant for his speech to convey a comedic perspective on love, it still breaks down our core desire for partnership into a legendary fable about human nature. Nonetheless, the seeds of the myth have sprouted into stereotypes and preconceptions that still exist today, which are especially reflected in our society. Notions about relationships, while dated, expect lovers to remain together in life-long partnerships, and this manifestation of love is idolized as the ultimate goal. In a sense, the myth of Aristophanes functions as a sort of allegory for the societal standards of today, with the harmful side effects being engaged by the film.

We may also consider how alternative analyses of the myth can be applied to the relationship as a concept. Scholar Anthony Hooper argues Aristophanes' actual claim in *Symposium* is that we, as separated or incomplete beings, can live a fulfilling and flourishing life despite our desire for unity as long as we can satisfy our own needs, such as by using sexual gratification as an outlet to temporarily stifle our want for perfection (578). This is in opposition to the academic argument proposed by Arlene Saxonhouse, contending that "our original form is the telos of human existence and the standard by which we judge the good life" (Hooper 2), with *telos* referring to purpose or goal. The former position is arguably very present in our society's approach to

relationships, as in fact, many partnerships are temporary and based solely on sexual gratification and not emotional connection. While love can be a means by which we achieve fulfillment and life satisfaction, it is not necessary, which is perhaps a more modern belief but indeed an existing one. And, as for the latter, Saxonhouse's argument can be looked upon as reinforcing the myth's capability to serve as a metaphor for societal and cultural ideas by claiming the goodness of our lives can be evaluated based on how close we are to achieving the whole perfection of our original forms.

Together contrarily explores how love can be divisive and horrifying when it results in a corrosive codependency. Scholar Bodo Winter asserts that horror movies are especially adept at displaying metaphors in effective ways, such as by using visual imagery to elaborate upon or reinforce pre-existing metaphors (164), and the film has no hesitation about analogizing both body horror and the Greek fable in question. The film utilizes Aristophanes' myth as a twisted metaphor for the downslide of Tim and Millie's relationship into becoming a singular person, functioning as both a lighthouse and curse for the couple. Frustrated by their own differences, with Millie embodying the career-driven, ambitious woman and Tim a jobless, hopeful musician, the narrative is haunted by their own struggles to maintain a relationship. Their inexorable fusion will, on the one hand, grant them the harmony they're seeking by allowing them to connect and understand each other on the deepest level possible. But it also proposes a crippling finality—they will lose their own identities and autonomy when they become lost in each other. While the film's messaging is symbolized in an extreme fashion, a kernel of truth remains—relationships require, to some degree, a sacrifice of independence, and in the special cases of toxic relationships, one can lose their sense of individuality to the consumption of codependence and overreliance on a partner. This

is exemplified by Millie's remark to Tim that "if we don't split now, it'll be much harder later," (*Together* 1:15:54), highlighting how the codependency which develops throughout the plot's progression will inevitably reach a point of no-return; that is, their literal fusion and figuratively becoming indistinguishable from the other. The film's themes also emphasize Winter's aforementioned claim, displaying how the horrific element of the story essentially builds upon societal fears about relationships.

There is also, however, an alternative angle expressed in the film—similar to how there are differing ideas on love in the *Symposium*—but exemplifying an extremist's point-of-view: Millie's co-worker, Jamie, anticipates that the joining-together caused by the curse is "the ultimate intimacy in the divine flesh" (1:23:25). It is worth noting that Jamie is also a fused being, originally composed of two males, which further establishes the film in a basis of philosophical myth. His use of the word "ultimate" implies an intimacy of the highest, and thus most perfect, manner which can only be achieved through the conjoining of soulmates. It is divine because it's a return to our original forms with godlike power, as found in the Greek myth. In relation to the fable, some scholars have even argued that our original, circular shapes are superior to the gods of Greek fame because our completion reveals an absence of need, an unblemished perfection (Saxonhouse qtd. in Hooper 2). Interestingly enough, the Greek gods exhibit human characteristics, including their need and desire to be worshipped, and it is this very desire that alters Aristophanes' Zeus from destroying the circular beings entirely, to instead slicing them in half. Perhaps Jamie's view on love, though shrouded in strange supremacy, is not entirely unfounded. However, considering his ominous, villain-adjacent role in the film, his fanaticism frames the curse's union as frightening and negative; fusion changes from something possibly romantic to a symptom of a madman's belief, intensifying the horror aspect. His conclusion is ultimately more

symbolic of the myth's argument when considering the angles within the film itself.

Aristophanes' myth and *Together* both ultimately offer insight into love and relationships, although through markedly different lenses. Whereas the myth promotes the relationship as an impetus for healing the wound of separation and attaining completion, the film's drastically different view instead underscores the dark side of emotional overdependence through the metaphorization of body horror. Despite these differences, both offer opportunity for thoughtful reflection on the nature of love as we know it, and in the future, literary discussion centered around the presence of gender and sexuality in the film could further an understanding of the myth and the film's connection. But for now, we can return to the question posed at the beginning of this paper—is the idea of love worth sacrificing individual identity and independence? There is no objective answer, but perhaps take a glance at Tim and Millie, and then decide for yourself.

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Tiny Autobiography

by Abigail Goehner

When I was a small child, my mother had a trick to get my siblings and me to read. At bedtime she'd pull out a book of our choosing and when we'd show signs of being over it, a choice was given: go to bed or pick another book. It was genius. One of our favorites was a massive science book with a deteriorating cover. It's strange, the threads of personality which run through a life. The subject matter of my Senior year portfolio: portraits of a dissected cat, a human heart, a colorful window through the skin of my chest showing through to my ribcage. My favorite section in that science book was the anatomy section. Bones, organs, vessels, and arteries. Something about it fascinated my little mind and still does now. Insides. I draw the ones you can see and I write about the ones you can't.

Those invisible insides have defined my writing since that writing has existed; I am asked to put my work into context and my mind goes to the first time I fell in love. The best prose and poetry I've ever created comes from a year ago, a period of about four months after a girl who I loved left my life. In my heart that feels righteous, but next to the political and ethical motivations of many of the greats and most of my peers, I am prone to doubt about my writing and my art, to feeling like it's juvenile in some way or lacking the sophistication that words unmotivated by love might hold. But as soon as these words are said I no longer believe them.

Passion may betray my objectivity but it is the soul of the words. Yes, I can write a good essay and speak with vigor about current events, but falling in love was the reason I started writing in the first place. Scientific findings are constantly replacing themselves as what is "correct." Mathematics doubles in size and scope, eclipsing itself, every few decades. Political systems devour themselves and are reborn and rebelled against and devoured again every year, everywhere. But ancient romantic poems are as relevant now as they were in their year of creation. I don't claim that my work is at all more legitimate than these peoples', but I would be lying if I said the modern devaluation of the arts wasn't something I feel compelled to push back against. From the perspective of an artist, this societal focus on money—more specifically, viewing education and work as objects which lead to things that matter, and not holding intrinsic value in their own right—feels incredibly backwards. Centuries of desperation in the lower class and greed in the upper has, depressingly, made money the focus of most people's lives, and this is no accident.

Politics, whether I or anyone else may admit or realize it, are hugely influential of what we create and put out into the world. And considering the presence of politics in my writing is a funny thing as a lesbian. No matter my intentions in a piece, or that piece's subject matter, it will always be interpreted as liberal and even radical if my identity is mentioned. This permeates from a truth of my daily life: whether I like it or not, my very existence is a political statement. Especially in the conservative suburbia I have tried and failed to escape from my entire life—holding a girl's hand while I walk down the street of my hometown is somehow radical. It's for this reason that my personality is so intense and self-assured, why it floats three inches off the ground at all times, existing entirely separate from whatever town or large community I find myself a part of: it's forced to. Sorority girls, frat boys, and their high school-aged prototypes have always elicited a type of

wary fascination in me; what must it be like to be born with your path set before you and be entirely content with that path? To connect with Southern culture with the enthusiasm they do? Discomfort and disconnection with my surroundings and the aforementioned path laid before me has defined my entire existence. At around twelve or thirteen, the usual age that people begin to develop into who they will eventually become, I found with dismay that I was growing in a slightly different direction than everyone else. Whether it was caused by my creative tendencies, years of reading and subsequent fandom culture, an atypical sexuality (and every complication of gender which comes along with that), or a combination of all of these, I couldn't tell you. What I can tell you is that being told I was different and weird when I was simply being myself affected me more than I'd like to admit. That dismay I mentioned earlier aged finely along with me, it grew into a satisfying sense of individuality—warm pride towards the parts of myself other people didn't like. But exclusion does damage. Some of the insecurities I developed during that part of my life are so ingrained into my understanding of myself that I don't believe they will ever fully leave me. I may hate my hometown, but it hated me first.

Today, I'm standing in front of a small auditorium of people and reading an essay I wrote. That is something any younger version of myself never would have predicted. I wasn't a writer as a kid. Some people seem to have been telling stories since they could talk, but my creative focus for most of my life has been visual art. It was not only what I was known for but what I knew myself for. When I got to middle school, though, there were recurring instances of recognition for my writing by a few of my teachers: in sixth grade, my history teacher singled a bashful twelve-year-old me out in front of class to praise an informative essay, and at the end of that year my English teacher, on the last day of school, handed me a gift bag. Inside were pens and a purple journal, and a note that said, "keep writing." I did. I have one of the pens she gave me

in my pencil pouch here, in college, as an English major. I see now how important this encouragement was to my growth, not only as a writer but as a person. I went into high school with faith in myself, and though it wasn't until my senior year, near the end of the year at that, when I realized this is what I want to study, that decision stood supported by years of people I trust believing in me. I cannot fully express how wonderful the English teachers I had my last three years of high school were, only that, even if I had no faith in myself or my abilities whatsoever, I could conclude from the sheer volume of kind words they gave me that I am a good writer. Nonetheless it was such a strange realization to come to, after devoting the first sixteen years of my life to my art, that I am a better writer than I am an artist.

But what makes someone a good writer? Artistic ability can be learned, practiced and honed like any other skill. I didn't even start writing separate from my schoolwork until high school. There are details from throughout my childhood which may be to thank—my parents made a point not to babytalk my siblings or myself, using big words and, as they put it, "adult sentences" with us, even as toddlers. As a result, my sister and I were both young children with startlingly sophisticated speaking styles and large vocabularies. I also read when I was young, book after book of fictional series about animals and battles and survival and love. The books I read continued to grow along with me, and they shaped me as we went. *Call me by Your Name* drew me in with a relatable plot about obsessive teenage love, but it was the unmatched beauty of the sentences, the way André Aciman filled hundreds of pages with pure poetry, that brought me back again and again. I read it for a second time and then a third. Then, my senior year of high school, in the thick of my first heartbreak, my sister mailed me a copy of *Crush*, the first book of poetry by Richard Siken. Never before had words sliced so deep; never had they reached out of the page and gripped me the way his did. *Crush* is about love and violence, the

interplay of the two, and, at the time, it was the equivalent of my guts scooped out of my abdomen and splat onto the page in front of me. *Frankenstein, Either/Or, Pride and Prejudice*, it kept happening. Again and again I saw myself on the pages, I strengthened my capacity for empathy by reading, I strengthened my capacity for writing by reading.

I was talking with a friend recently, someone with the same introspective traits I have but whose passion lies in medical research, (and, Zeke, if you're here, forgive me for the imperfect quotation, I'm working from memory). He said this about English classes, specifically writing:

"It's not something you can just work hard at to get better, like other subjects. It's something that you have or you don't."

My brother, my perfect academic inverse, who excels in every STEM class that brings me to my knees, but failed English once and Philosophy twice, said something similar a few weeks ago.

"You can't fake it! You have to care."

Ghost in the Shell and Posthuman Identity: Acceding to Ambiguity via Cyborg-Humanness

by Alli Sadler

In her seminal work of cyborg political theory, "A Cyborg Manifesto," renowned consciousness historian Dr. Donna Haraway defines the term "cyborg" as "a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction." Though cyborgs have materialized in science fiction since the early nineteenth century, some of the most prolific fictitious cyborgs emerged in the 1980s and 1990s with box-office hits *RoboCop* and *The Terminator*. Set in dystopian futures, depictions of corruption, oppression, and excessive violence set the tone for (speculative) cyborg-human relations. Perhaps it was in response to these conflict-ridden approaches to cyborg-human relationships that director Mamoru Oshii adapted manga artist Masamune Shirow's *Ghost in the Shell* to film. Set in the year 2029, *Ghost in the Shell* (1995) takes place in New Port City, Japan, amidst the backdrop of global cyber warfare. Major Motoko Kusanagi, assault-team leader for Public Security Section 9, attempts to locate and destroy the "Puppet Master", a known criminal hacker; however, Kusanagi begins to question the nature of her cybernetic-human identity and consequently, her relation to "Project 2501"—a sentient lifeform that inhabits a cyborg "shell" (or body), claiming to be the Puppet Master. Rather than clearly define the boundaries between cyborgs and humans, *Ghost in the Shell* contends with the

ambiguity of cyborg-human identity in a decidedly posthuman society; by examining these ambiguous and contradictory selves, the film transcends the duality of cyborg vs. human, culminating in a newly synthesized being—a self greater than the sum of its parts.

As a cybernetic human, the ambiguities of Kusanagi's identity are made evident the moment she appears on-screen; these incongruities between her human consciousness, or "ghost," and her cyborg body later manifest as the (then-unknown) voice of Project 2501 interrupting her thoughts. Kusanagi begins, distinguishing between the terms "human" and "individual": "Just as there are many parts needed to make a human a human[,] there's a remarkable number of things needed to make an individual what they are […]. All of that goes into making me what I am. Giving rise to a consciousness that I call 'me'" (*Ghost in the Shell* 00:31:46-00:32:07). Kusanagi explicitly acknowledges the distinction between "human" and "individual," grappling with the pluralities of her more-than-human identity. This is in keeping with the rhetoric of Chicana feminist Gloria Anzaldúa, who writes of a similar concept in "Towards a New Consciousness." Anzaldúa writes, "She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode—nothing is thrust out, the good the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned. Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else" (79). In response to Kusanagi, Project 2501 interjects with a short quote: "'For now we see through a glass, darkly'" (*Ghost in the Shell* 00:32:25-00:32:35). Project 2501 is quoting the Bible, excerpting a longer scripture: "For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known" (1 Cor. 13.12). Not only does this line foreshadow the eventual meeting (and merging) of Kusanagi and Project 2501, but it also prescribes the actions Kusanagi must take to transcend her current cyborg-human duality. She must allow herself to be "known" by Project 2501, an entirely nonhuman entity, and commit to existing within a contradictory state—choosing neither her humanity nor

her cyborg prosthesis, yet simultaneously claiming all the "irreducible differences" that exist between them (Haraway, *Companion Species* 48).

The merging of Kusanagi and Project 2501 represents more than mere acquiescence to the nonhuman "other"; by agreeing to integrate their consciousnesses, they transcend their initially prescribed dualistic labels. Though Project 2501 is initially referred to as a "bug" (*Ghost in the Shell* 00:01:13-00:01:22), it asserts itself as "an autonomous life-form" after gaining access to a cyborg shell (00:48:14-00:48:18). The audience to Project 2501's bodily awakening balks at the idea of a sentient nonhuman entity, writing it off as a "self-preserving program" (00:48:19-00:48:22); as such, the lifeform's request for political asylum (as a tool of industrial espionage) goes unacknowledged. Because Project 2501 is not human, its attempts at communication are disregarded—demonstrating the anthropocentric attitudes of a society that does not yet recognize nonhuman sentience as capable of socialization and interaction. However, when Kusanagi eventually meets with Project 2501 at the film's climax, they are able to communicate telepathically via cyborg brain augmentation, creating their own mode of interconnectivity. Dr. Erika Szymanski examines this decentering of humanness in communications in her article, "Conversations with Other-than-Human Creatures: Unpacking the Ambiguity of 'with' for Multispecies Rhetorics," stating, "In contrast, beginning from a definition of communication that is not inherently anthropocentric, such as the capacity for creatures to affect and be affected by material-semiotic exchanges (and, again, many Indigenous cosmologies), centers social exchange rather than any one creature's characteristics" (145). It is through this mode of communication that Kusanagi and Project 2501 agree to merge, making it "impossible to distinguish one from the other" (01:10:42-01:10:46). Afterwards, when Kusanagi/2501 awakens, they are in a new body—a child-sized cyborg shell, suggesting their rebirth as a

newborn entity. The boundaries between them have disintegrated, leaving behind what Anzaldúa refers to as a "new consciousness." She declares, "In attempting to work out a synthesis, the self has added a third element which is greater than the sum of its severed parts. That third element is a new consciousness" (79-80). As they look across the New Port City skyline, the film concludes with a final line from the entity, suggesting their newfound boundless potential: "And where shall I go now? The net is vast and limitless" (01:17:16-01:17:21).

Ghost in the Shell suggests a framework by which we may structure our relationships with cyborg entities in a posthuman future; though cyborgs and other nonhuman entities currently function as "object-lessons for human reflection" (Szymanski 141), in the times to come, we may consider the ontologies of objects beyond their relation to humanness. For now, we may work on accepting the condition of our own humanity—in the words of Dorothy Allison, "…flawed, and extraordinary."

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