wide
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Wide Angle
a journal of literature and film

Mission Statement

Literature and film continually reimagine an ever-changing world, and through our research we discover our relationships to those art forms and the cultures they manifest. Publishing one issue each semester, *Wide Angle* serves as a conduit for the expression and critique of that imagination. A joint publication between English majors and faculty, the journal embodies the interdisciplinary nature of the Department of English at Samford University. It provides a venue for undergraduate research, an opportunity for English majors to gain experience in the business of editing and publishing, and a forum for all students, faculty, and staff to publish their best work. As a wide-angle lens captures a broad field of vision, this journal expands its focus to include critical and creative works, namely academic essays, book and film reviews, and commentaries, as well as original poetry, short fiction and non-fiction, and screenplays.

Contents

From the Editors' Desks
Special Series: The Digital Humanities

Commentary

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You Can't Outrun the Herd: Community in *The Waves*

The foundation of the world was once set upon pillars of belief, of tradition, and of God. People could access their identities through the common narrative and through the availability of collective truth. But dangerous ideas began to erase the solidity of the absolute in the twentieth century; massive wars, scientific discoveries, and innumerable challenges to organized religion contributed to the deluge of doubt that swamped the human mind. Nihilistic writers began systematically eliminating the existence of universals and absolutes, while advocating for the human ability to create purpose and construct meaning apart from traditional forms of authority. Friedrich Nietzsche, along with numerous other individuals, disseminated writings which declared that truth was simply an illusion and proclaimed previous beliefs to be void of value. Such writings contributed to an overall culture of nihilistic modernism, which asserted that one should react positively to the universal freedom of choice and live a creative life by rejecting community and living in solitude and isolation. This singular method of existence proved troublesome and impossible to many. These ideas had instituted an inherently meaningless existence, with only one option of escape: "abandon the herd" (Fritzsche 1). This new conception of livelihood completely altered the intellectual structure and atmosphere of society and introduced many complex challenges to living in modernity. One such challenge that stemmed from the new philosophical culture was this: how does one find a stable, identifiable self in the constant flux of society? In rejection of the nihilist emphasis on isolation and the subsequent trend in modernity towards intense individualism, one woman's writings

provided a new solution to the challenge of existence. Virginia Woolf acknowledges the challenge of identity formation in an existentialist world and emphasizes the inescapable influence of community on the individual through the evolution of six individual characters throughout her novel *The Waves*.

The structure of Woolf's novel acknowledges the existence of a constantly changing world and allows her to craft her argument in response. Woolf puts forth her own idea of flux through her prose poems, each of which describes separate time frames within the natural cycle of a day and reflects the lifespan changes of the individuals in respect to their shifting identities. The poems describe in detail the state of the waves, the sun, the birds and the sky; each of these identifiers shifts and adjusts in respect to the passage of time, reflecting both fluctuations in the character's identities and a continuation of the chronology. For example, the first prose poem describes how the "sun had not yet risen," the "sea was indistinguishable from the sky," and the waves were "following each other, pursuing each other, perpetually" (Woolf 7). The birds remained in the trees and only responded to one another: "one chirped high up" and prompted another who "chirped lower down" (7, 8). The description of the identifiers in the first poem mirrors the descriptions of the characters in the first section of the novel. They "melt into each other" and "make an unsubstantial territory" (16). The ambivalence and uniformity of the waves and the sky represent a lack of solid identity in the individuals, as they are simply children whose identities meld together in the first section of the book.

This is an extremely different picture from the eighth prose poem, in which the sun "had sunk lower in the sky," "the waves no longer visited" the length of the shore, and the sky was full of "islands of cloud" (182). The birds "swooped and circled high up in the air," and one even took its leave of the group and struck out on his own and "sat solitary…opening its wings and

shutting them" (182). The prose poem, in this case, emphasizes the ability of the characters to choose their level of involvement in the community after establishing their own individuality. This is evidenced again through the writing in the eighth section of the novel, describing the character's awareness of their "eternal flux," how they "changed and changed," yet recognized how their identity has "become robust" through their interactions with one another and apart from one another (249, 257).

These prose poems both acknowledge the natural fluctuations of a lifetime and show Woolf's recognition of the need for a solution in a world of constant alteration. In an existentialist system, the individual creates their universe and their identity without external influence. Woolf proposes something new: the evolution of six individuals throughout her novel elaborates what she believed to be the essential factor in identity formation: community. Woolf's six stream-of-conscience perspectives reveal the internal responses of individuals to the modern world and highlights the importance of internal and external influence in the formation of personal identity, stringing the characters together through their interactions with one another. Despite their individual natures, the characters ultimately define themselves in relation to each other. Excluding the prose poems, the entire novel is filtered through the perspectives of these six separate individuals: Jinny, Rhoda, Susan, Louis, Neville, and Bernard. Each character's life experience discloses different aspects of Woolf's beliefs about modernity and identity.

The character of Jinny provides the first form of identity development present in Woolf's philosophy. Jinny's identity is based solely on her physical appearance and the external influence of others' opinions, showing the inescapable importance of community on identity formation. From her youth, Jinny is preoccupied with her own body. She kisses Louis in the bushes as a young child and revels in her body's response: "I dance. I ripple. I am thrown over you like a net

of light. I lie quivering flung over you" (13). Throughout the novel she takes immense pride in her beauty and the movements of her body. She is sensuous and craves constant attention. She adores the party scene, declaring "this is my calling, this is my world" upon entering a room of elegantly decorated individuals (101). She judges her worth in the glances and attention of others, how many men desire her, and how many women envy her. She makes her life about beauty, cultivating it in her body and her home. She makes numerous references to her makeup and appearance throughout the novel, saying, "I will powder my face and redden my lips," as she fills vases with "extravagant flowers" and displays "gaily covered" books in case anyone comes by (195). She fears she will lose her identity as age begins to steal away her appearance: "I am not young. . . . I shall soon look into faces, and I shall see them seek some other face" (193-4). If she loses her beauty, she believes that she will cease to matter to the community and therefore lose her sense of self. Jinny's conception of her identity lies in other's opinions; her creation of identity rests entirely on others, and for Woolf, Jinny proves that community is inescapable in the formation of a personal conception of self.

In the same way, Susan is defined through other characters, yet does so in opposition to others. Susan fashions her own identity through her reliance on the simplicity and order of the natural world. As a child, Susan is angered by Jinny and Louis's shared kiss and finds solace and comfort in nature, saying she will take her "anguish and lay it upon the roots under the beech trees" (13). As she grows older, she grows to "hate the smell of pine and linoleum," claiming that all in the manicured school she attends "is false; all is meretricious" (33). She feels out of place inside of the carefully measured lines of society and dreams as a young girl of returning to her father on the farm where she belongs. She finds herself in the routines of the world and declares, "I am the field, I am the barn, I am the trees. . . . I cannot be divided or kept apart" (97). She

strongly identifies with the cycles of the natural world, finding peace and focus in her

observations of life on the farm. She finds her happiness in the simplicity of kneading bread,

wandering the fields with her setter, and loving her father with sole affection. As she grows

older, she is overcome by the "bestial and beautiful passion of maternity"; the act of motherhood

fills her veins with life, and "life pours through" her as she is "spun to a fine thread round the

cradle, wrapping in a cocoon" around her child (171). She is ultimately defined by her choice to

conceive, to pursue the natural calling of motherhood, and to seek out the simplest of natural

joys. In this regard, Susan defines herself through her relation to two separate communities. The

first community, one of organized schooling and forced social connection, is proven to be

detrimental to her, creating "some hard thing" within her (98). In her rejection of this community

as unnatural, she seeks another to define her. The second community is one that she returns to

from her early youth: a community centered around nature, her connection to the farm, her

father, and the physical world. Her attachment to the deeply animalistic aspects of maternity also

ground her and define her in the simplistic community of natural bonds. Susan bases her identity

on her responses to two separate worlds; her conscious choice to pursue one and abandon the

other determines her identity.

Louis is also torn by a separation between the community and the self. Louis defines

himself both in relation to his fear of not being a traditional member of the community, and

through his efforts to become a valued member of the community. Throughout the novel, Louis

repeatedly mentions how his "father is a banker in Brisbane," and he speaks "with an Australian

accent" (19). His national identity causes internal conflict within him, causing him to doubt

himself throughout life. He feels that he is "born entire out of hatred, out of discord" (39). In

school, he tries to wait to respond and attempts to copy others because "they are all English" and

laugh at his accent and his customs (19-20). The bullying he experiences from the community around him strengthens his identification with mediocrity and deficiency (19-20). As he grows older and attends school with the other boys, he feels inferior due to his inability to boast, since his father's position in colonial Australia is insignificant and unworthy of comment in comparison to the other boys' fathers' positions (31). His actions are driven by a "fear of laughter" (52). Through this fear of communal disapproval, he develops an extreme love for order and uniformity, stating, "I like the orderly progress…we put off our distinctions as we enter" (34). Louis's love for the rules, for obedience, and for authority increase throughout the novel as he realizes the unity and solidarity that is created in his world by rules that equalize. Apart from the rules, apart from school, he is overcome by "envy" and "bitterness" because he has "no firm ground" upon which to stand in life (65-7). As he grows older, he defines himself through his identity as "an alien, external" and his extreme love of order. His feeling of alienation causes him to rely on external order in the community around him to provide a foundation of identity. Louis feels a desperate need to "reduce to order" all that is around him, forcing the fluidity of people and events into structure (167). He makes himself "compact," "clear-cut," and "unequivocal" (167). In addition, he despises the disorder of his feelings and conscience and declares: "if I do not nail these impressions to the board and out of the many men in me make one. . . . I shall fall like snow and be wasted" (170). Since his identity is rooted in his ability to control himself and the events around him, his fear of not being a traditional English member of the community drives him to become the most authoritatively English man he could become. His identity is defined through his fear of the rejection of the community, his sense of inferiority, which he channeled into a sense of complete control over his livelihood, and a confidence in his ability to create order. Yet when he is alone, his identity crumbles, and he feels

that he will never forget the "solemn and severe convictions and the discrepancies and incoherencies that must be resolved" within himself (170). He struggles to maintain his identity apart from the community; when he is alone, he loses his sense of order, authority, and control and cannot make sense of himself.

In a similar fashion, Neville seeks to control the world around him. Neville creates his own identity through his passion for love as the cure for the innumerable ills of the universe. As a child, he is "too delicate" and is often left alone; however, in contrast to some of the other characters, he does not mind solitude (24). He enjoys the "reprieve from conversation" and ponders his own thoughts and experiences (24). At school, he falls madly in love with Percival, hiding an "absurd and violent passion" that he cannot express (51). Through his experience of such passion, he awakens to his desire for "privacy and the limbs of one person" (52). Through his interaction with the powerful lure of Percival, Neville finds an excuse to exist within the realm of community. For Neville, the "piffling, trifling, self-satisfied" world in which he lives becomes bearable in the presence of Percival (70). Through the presence of Percival, "all oppression is relieved" and "the reign of chaos is over" (178). For Neville, Percival is the order of the universe, the foundation upon which he can build a conception of himself and of the world. When Percival dies later in the novel, Neville is devastated. He seeks only to find another form of love to replace the emotion he has lost, his grounding force of identity. He claims that life has "meaning only under the eyes of love" (178). He defines himself in his need to "oppose the waste and deformity of the world" by making his life tidy, neat and virtuous (180). He enjoys the presence of another individual and feels a need to "abolish the ticking of time's clock" with companionship (181). Nearing the end of his life, he remains firm in his conviction that to live is to "oppose ourselves to this illimitable chaos" (226). His hatred of the depravity of the world

drove the formation of his identity through his solitude, the death of Percival, and his reliance on others to negate his internal meaninglessness.

While Neville struggles to exist in a depraved world, the central character of Bernard fights and fails to find a foundation worthy of his identity. Bernard's conception of self is formed in complete reliance on the community; he is unable to define himself in the novel and believes that he is multiple individuals throughout his life. At the start of the novel, Bernard is extremely interested in words and the power they have over others. He is imaginative, people oriented, and "molds his bread into pellets and calls them 'people'" (25). He keeps a journal of phrases to use in his future novel, collecting words "for future reference" (36). His personal inclination to read, write, and speak are important in his attempts to form his personal identity. He is constantly involving himself with others, seeking their company, and soon fails, "unless talked to" (37). Without the presence and approval of others, he feels left out. He "cannot bear the presence of solitude" and, through his inability to be alone, his identity is created and changed by those around him (133). To be himself, he needs "the illumination of other people's eyes," and, without such attention, he enters a "territory of non-identity" (116). He declares that he "is made and remade continually" and that he is "not one and simple, but complex and many" (134, 76). Even in his old age, he wonders how he still "must dig furiously like a child rummaging in a bran-pie to discover" who he is (216). Woolf uses Bernard as an example of how identity has the potential to be fluid but remains dependent on the individual's interactions with the community.

Woolf's emphasis on the inevitable influence of community is further proven through the character of Rhoda, who ultimately defines herself in otherness and attempted separation. Rhoda establishes herself through opposition to reality and the community around her but still must use others as her guides, as the ropes that tie her to the physical world and allow her to create her

divergent definition of self. In the classroom as a child, Rhoda watches the chalkboard and is driven into her imagination: "Look the loop of the figure is beginning to fill with time; it holds the world in it . . . the world is entire and I am outside of it, crying, 'Oh save me, from being blown forever outside the loop of time'" (21-2). Rhoda is constantly searching for a way to root herself to daily life. In her bed, her feet must touch the rail to assure her "of something hard" so that she "cannot sink" into the realm of dreams and illusions (27). Yet she is "turned," "tumbled," and "stretched" by her fantasies (27-8). At school, she begins to develop an inability to look into a mirror, claiming, "I have no face," multiple times throughout the novel (33, 43, 130, 222-3). She feels that others have faces because "their world is the real world" (43). She must "look first and do what other people do" in order to continue the ruse that she too lives in their world (43). Even as she grows older, she is terrified of interactions with those she does not know and asks, "what face can I summon?" to protect herself from the necessity of living in a world of people seeking to fraternize with her (106). She "cannot make one moment merge into the next," stating, "I cannot deal with it as you do," and making endless comparisons between herself and others, creating her identity as something separate and divergent (130). Even as she nears the end of her life, she sits at a table among the other characters and is caught up in a daydream of being in a jungle with "parrots shrieking" and a wind that "ruffles the primeval trees" (223). Despite the apparent divide between Rhoda and the rest of the characters, without the examples of common standards within the community, Rhoda would be unable to define herself as a contrasting figure. Additionally, Woolf uses Rhoda to portray the option of defining oneself in contrast to community and demonstrate the failure of such opposition. While the other characters simply seem to fade out of life, Rhoda's suicide proves her inability to exist outside of

the community. Through her unwillingness to join the others and her staunch refusal of community, Rhoda pursues her own demise.

Woolf's novel is extremely complex, conveying the natural fluctuations and challenges of the modern world while offering six lives as evidence of the foundation for individuality created by the community. While Nietzsche and other nihilists advocated a life away from the "herd," Woolf's realistic vision recognizes the inevitable presence of the community and the constant influence of that presence on the individual. For Woolf, one simply cannot outrun the herd; community is a monumental aspect of life, and the belief that one can simply abandon it is untrue. No matter how far one runs, she or he will always be defined by relation to a community, whether it is through acceptance or rejection of that community. To fully understand Woolf's characters and their unique responses to the challenges of modern life, one must analyze the intricate transformation and complexity of each individual in relationship to his or her community and their specifics perceptions of self. Woolf broke the traditional rules of literature to convey a unique philosophy of modernity through a multitude of perspectives. *The Waves* gives weight to the impact of community on the individual and provides a more realistic picture of the opportunities and limitations of the modern world. In a society that is increasingly connected yet continues to worship the separations of individuality and choice, *The Waves* brings hope. The positive message of *The Waves* stems from its reminder to the reader that one is never fully alone; all individuals are connected in some way to the community that surrounds them. In an intellectual atmosphere of insignificance and meaninglessness promoted and perpetuated through Nietzsche's philosophy, the novel gives hope of purpose. It is a reassurance that identity is a challenging concept for all in a world of elaborate communal connections, yet no one is ever truly isolated. Each person affects the next. After all, isn't everyone a part of the herd?

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Holly Moore

Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief* and its Use of Narrative Empathy

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Introduction: *The Book Thief* and the Theory of Narrative Imagination

Set in 1939, Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief* follows a few years in the life of a young immigrant girl while she lives in war-torn Germany. The unorthodox narrator in this novel is Death, who shares his unique viewpoint of the details of this time period. As an omniscient and omnipresent power, he often reminds readers of the larger scope of the war. He has a specific interest in one girl, the beloved book thief: Liesel Meminger. Considered "a foster child's coming of age during WWII," *The Book Thief* poignantly shares this young girl's story (Koprince, n. pag.). Throughout the novel, he follows her, seeing her quite a few times before it is her turn to officially meet Death, and he often decisively spills the details of what is to come. With narration being a major focal point of the novel, Liesel finds salvation through words and books.

With a focal point on narratives, *The Book Thief* can be better understood through Martha Nussbaum's theory of narrative imagination, which illuminates the power of Death as the narrator, telling the readers fine points of the future and giving them a chance to process the events while also eliminating the shock and poignant power of death. Because of the narrator's choice to uncover information before its expected time, readers are led to notice other important aspects of the text. By knowing the deaths to come, readers are not overly upset when they occur but instead focus on the characters experiencing the loss. In her book *Cultivating Humanity,* Nussbaum writes, "to become world citizens we must not simply amass knowledge; we must

also cultivate in ourselves a capacity for sympathetic imagination that will enable us to comprehend the motives and choices of people different from ourselves, seeing them not as forbiddingly alien and other, but as sharing many problems and possibilities with us" (85). Literature in so many ways chooses the thoughts and beliefs of the next generation; these preferred narratives will shape who these citizens become. As a children's text, *The Book Thief* engages young readers in the process of becoming empathetic citizens, willing to fight for loved ones and those who are not given a voice, which makes *The Book Thief* an invaluable work.

With a spotlight on the power of narrative, *The Book Thief* reveals how important these stories are, which can be seen through Liesel Meminger's desire to steal, possess, and read books. Eventually, she is given two narratives that are made for her, and at some point she decides to write her own as well. Death as the narrator uses two sources to gather information about her life: the three times he met her and the narrative (her life story written in her own words). When Death encounters Liesel the first three times, it is not because he has come to take her life but to take the life of someone close proximally or relationally to her. In the beginning, Liesel Meminger's brother dies while on the train to meet her foster parents, Hans and Rosa Hubermann. She then lives with them in the small town of Molching, Germany. The novel focuses on her interactions with the neighborhood kids and her time on Himmel Street, which include learning to read, Nazi book burnings, thievery, playing soccer, hiding a Jew named Max, and much more. Death also reminds readers of the other thousands of souls he has taken, referring to the Jews and those dying from the war. *The Book Thief* is about more than a young girl during the Holocaust because it focuses on the power of narration and its ability to save.

Throughout *The Book Thief*, Death as the narrator constantly ruins the suspense of characters' deaths in order to prove the consistency of death rather than its ability to shock.

Commonalities of humanity between the readers and the characters, such as a lack of control and the threat of death, allow for the readers to have more compassion for the characters. In addition to this, because Death shares details about the future, the readers digest them before they happen so that when they do occur, readers are paying attention to the characters' grief, allowing the readers to have a profound sense of empathy towards the characters rather than focusing on the readers' personal suffering. Death builds a platform of grief and sorrow by informing readers of the deaths that will transpire. This also takes away the shock of each single death and gives them power as a whole, reminding the readers of the Holocaust's horrors. In Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief,* an unusual narrator portrays the power of revealing details about the deaths to come in the text, which consequently makes their impact more compelling, providing the readers with a vivid awareness of the Holocaust's haunting reality.

Understanding the Perspective of Death and Comprehending his Narrative

Before presenting the way that death unites the readers and the characters with the same eventual fate, Death's role as the narrator must first be understood, since it is through Death's perception that readers comprehend the reality of his narrative. One can assume that Death as a character is not in the readers' immediate sphere of understanding, which emphasizes the use of imagination in attempting to comprehend his narrative voice. In his thesis, Adam Suk writes "Death's likeable nature and rhetoric is put into contrast with these horrible events, caused by humans. The readers are thus encouraged not to fear death, since death is merely a consequence of evil. Instead they should be wary of humans since, at least in these events, they are the cause" (29). To some extent Death has a few human-like traits, which allow the readers to grasp the idea of who he is, but he is also unmistakably different, eventually giving the readers the opportunity to witness humanity through his distanced perspective.

In pursuit of helping the readers understand Death, one can observe his humanizing qualities. Gipson in his thesis about narration in *The Book Thief* observed that "in addition to his anthropomorphized personality and physicality, Death humanizes himself by employing the strategies of engaging narration that allow him to speak directly to the reader and develop a shared reading and narrating experience" (8). Gipson additionally points out that the importance of a gendered Death is that "by identifying himself with the male gender, Death makes it easier for readers to orient themselves to death as a character, since we utilize gender identity as a method for orienting ourselves to other humans" (6). The choice of a distinctively male narrator may be due to Death often being depicted as such in Germany, which can be seen in art such as Albrecht Durer's painting "Knight, Death, and Devil." According to Suk in his thesis on narration in the text, Death's gender is mentioned three times, and one of them is on the first page of the novel (27; Zusak 2, 5, 309). Not only is Death gendered, but he also is capable of impulses and mistakes, which the reader can relate to. When explaining that he has a difficult time watching the humans who survive, the ones with "punctured hearts . . . [and] beaten lungs," Death says, "they're the ones I can't stand to look at, although on many occasions I still fail," which also reveals Death's compassion, allowing the readers to sympathize with him. In discussing his job, Death asks, "who could ever replace me?" an intriguing question which leads him to explain that in order to endure his job, he "make[s] distraction [his] vacation" (Zusak 5), which to some degree proves that he does not like his job or at least he is overworked and needs a break. Notably, Death does not have entire control; he also has rules to follow. In explaining the characters that choose to meet Death on their own terms by taking their lives, he says, "they were too resourceful. . . . I was in no position to refuse" (503). While many would assume the typical tropes of characterizing death, Zusak's narrator is entirely different; when Liesel's

community was destroyed, Death proves that he cares: "please again, I ask you to believe me, I wanted to stop. To crouch down. I wanted to say: 'I'm sorry child.' But that is not allowed. I did not crouch down. I did not speak" (13). Pushing against the traditionally accepted view of death, Death's desire to be compassionate humanizes him for the readers. In Fincel's thesis, she points out that when Death takes Liesel's brother in his arms, the brother "warm[ed] up completely. Healing" (27), which proves that "Death is not only decay, but also recovery and immortality" (Zusak 21). In one instance, Death writes about "a group of French Jews in a German prison, on Polish soil," and his deep compassion is further revealed when he says, "Please believe me when I tell you that I picked up each soul that day as if it were newly born. I even kissed a few weary, poisoned cheeks" (350). While Death is distinctly not human, he also has a few traits that allow the reader to understand him.

While Death is a contrasting character who surprisingly cares about humanity, he is also aware that for some death is a relief. He points out that he does not need a distraction from taking souls away from earth. This is not because he enjoys the work or likes his job, but because Death feels for those who remain on earth—not necessarily for those who have died. He needs a diversion from the "leftover humans. The survivors." Death experiences a heavier anguish for those who survive than those who die, as if he grieves those still walking on earth because the living must carry sorrow with them (Zusak 5). While many view Death with fear, some see him as hope and relief, and Death himself is aware of this.

Although Death has a few human-like characteristics, he also separates himself from humans with obvious details. Death is a non-human individual for specific reasons. In describing himself, Death defends himself: "I am not malicious. I am a result" (6), which leads the readers to wonder if he is not the one to blame for the existence of death. Fincel clarifies, "Death places

himself in the role of an observer, unable to impact what occurs in the world; he can only clean up the mess by taking care of the souls as they leave the bodies" (15). A unique character, Death is strangely, sarcastically proud of himself: ". . . it's lucky I'm quite miraculous. No one else could carry close to forty-five thousand people in such a short amount of time. Not in a million years" (506). Even Death's approach to existence is distinctly different. At one point he "inhale[s] a color," confirming that he is unmistakably not human (7). Another fascinating habit of Death is his continual endeavor to explain emotions. When Liesel's brother dies, he asks the reader to "think bits and pieces of floating despair. And drowning in a train" (30). Through a variety of Death's idiosyncrasies, the reader understands that he is not human but a peculiar entity all to himself.

These distinct behaviors of Death allow for the reader to observe humanity through his lens as a nonhuman. Gipson explains Death, writing that "overworked and weary from witnessing human violence and tragedy, Death narrates Liesel's story in a desperate attempt to recuperate the redeeming qualities of the human race" (2). Throughout his explaining, Death cannot comprehend the good and evil of humans. Grappling with the nature of humanity, he observes Rudy, Liesel's best friend, and mentions "in years to come, he would be a giver of bread, not a stealer—proof again of the contradictory human being. So much good, so much evil. Just add water" (Zusak 164). On the last page of his story, Death discloses, "I wanted to explain that I am constantly overestimating and underestimating the human race—that rarely do I ever simply estimate it. I wanted to ask [Liesel] how the same thing could be so ugly and so glorious, and its words and stories so damning and brilliant" (550). He separates himself, allowing the reader to observe humanity through his lens. In Debora Almeida de Oliveira's essay on the temporal dimension of *The Book Thief*, she writes, "those who orient the narrative have a

decisive role in how events and attitudes are comprehended by the narrate, as their choices of what to show and what to say give space, to specific interpretations" (142). Death, therefore, asks questions about humanity as he struggles to understand why humans kill other humans.

As the readers are forced to observe the text through the lens of Death, they are also separated from the immediate pain of the text, allowing them to notice the characters' pain. In her thesis, Fincel demonstrates that "Adams further suggests that there are multiple places within the novel where the reader is directly confronted with the reality of death, suffering, and physical decay, but also shielded from it by the personification of death" (5). In order to comprehend Liesel's story, one must understand the perspective of Death as he tells the narrative, commenting on reality and spoiling the ending, which shields the readers from the devastating suffering of the Holocaust.

Death as a Common Vulnerability between Reader and Characters

Empathy requires understanding. In order to fear for another person's safety, an individual has to recognize similarities shared with that person. In this instance, it involves a reader feeling for characters, which some would argue is invalid because, according to Suzanne Keen in "A Theory of Narrative Empathy," "the very nature of fictionality renders social contracts between people and person-like characters null and void" because the readers cannot step into the story and help the characters; therefore, according to Keen, no social contract exists between readers and characters (212). However, others argue that this lack of a required social contract actually causes readers to have more empathy for characters due to its fictionality. With no foot in an authentic world, readers are not threatened by an upcoming and tangible danger. The unreality of fiction allows readers to feel even more deeply because the threatening occurrences cannot affect them; they are protected by the lack of reality. However, this novel

also involves real events, which confuses the argument slightly. Many of the instances in this book did happen, but these events are in the past, and for the sake of this discussion this piece of history will be kept in the past, although its implications are present in modern times as well. It will be assumed that they do not presently threaten the readers. In order for the readers to relate with the characters, some common ground must be between them, and in *The Book Thief*, the certainty of future death connects the reader to the characters.

The readers can empathize with the characters, because the uncertainty of an absolute death is a reality in everyone's life. Nussbaum writes that "compassion requires one thing more: a sense of one's own vulnerability to misfortune. To respond with compassion, [one] must be willing to entertain the thought that this suffering person might be [himself]. And this [one] will be unlikely to do if [he is] convinced that [he is] above the ordinary lot and no ill can befall [him]" (91). The readers are aware that their realities will all end in death, so naturally they can relate to the characters in the text. Additionally, on the third page of the text, Death, the narrator, writes: "*** HERE IS A SMALL FACT *** You are going to die." From the beginning, he highlights the readers' humanity and their future realities. He will come for all. Death continues writing: "it suffices to say that at some point in time, I will be standing over you, as genially as possible. Your soul will be in my arms. . . . I will carry you gently away" (Zusak 4). The readers are aware of this uncontrollable outcome; inevitably death will come. By reminding the readers of this fact, Death is also building a platform for them to feel compassion for the characters because they know that they, too, will be affected by this expected reality. Most readers are somewhat aware of the uncertainty of life and fully conscious that there are circumstances that are out of human control. Generally, people do not choose how or when they die, but they will meet death nonetheless. Another aspect of death that unites the readers with the characters is that

the living deal with grief. The readers who have lost loved ones can relate to this reality. Death describes Liesel as "an expert at being left behind," and many readers may relate to this experience of loss (5). From the beginning, Death as the narrator reminds readers that death not only affects the characters of the text but also is an unavoidable outcome for the ones reading the novel as well.

In order to have compassion, the readers must have the ability to relate to the character, placing themselves in the character's position. For instance, Nussbaum states, "compassion . . . promotes an accurate awareness of our common vulnerability. It is true that human beings are needy, incomplete creatures who are in many ways dependent on circumstances beyond their control for the possibility of well-being" (91). It is the common vulnerability of humans that leads to compassion and allows the readers to find commonality between themselves and the characters in the text. The readers know that Death is always near in the text, and Liesel experienced death deeply when she lost her brother. It is only natural that Liesel also considers losing other loved ones, but it especially emphasizes death in light of the war and the Holocaust. Death does not let the readers forget about this communal future, saying "it's true for the vast majority—that death waits for no man—and if he does, he doesn't usually wait very long" (Zuzak 350). The commonality of death between the readers and the characters in the text unites them with a shared sense of human fragility.

The Importance of Narration in Connecting Readers and Characters

While death has been certain since the beginning of time, humans have found comfort in clinging to narratives in order to make sense of a harsh world that surrounds them. Jerry Hoeg describes narration saying humans "use imaginative models to make sense of the world, not just to understand it abstractly but to feel and perceive our own place in it—to see it from the inside-

out" (1). Narration allows humans to grasp their place in the world. To further this point,

Nussbaum writes:

> ". . . the ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person
> different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of that person's story, and to
> understand the emotions and wishes and desires that someone so placed might
> have. The narrative imagination is not uncritical, for we always bring ourselves
> and our own judgments to the encounter with another; and when we identify; we
> will also judge that story in the light of our own goals and aspirations." (10-11)

This passage lays the groundwork of imagination as necessary for humanity. If everyone clings

to his or her own narrative because of a shared humanity, then this will continue to unite the

readers and the characters.

In order for the readers to be empathetic toward the characters, the readers must see

similarities in the text that correlate to their own lives. This uniting of narratives allows for the

two to find commonality. For compassion to exist, "it seems, then, to be beneficial for members

of a society to see themselves as bound to one another by similar weaknesses and needs"

(Nussbaum 92). Toward the end of the text, Liesel finds her neighborhood destroyed, and she

drops a black book (her life narrative), which Death tells the reader that he picked up "and

[would] view it several thousand times over the years" (Zusak 14, 535). Through this

understanding, the readers know that they also have a story that they carry with them, whether it

is written or not, which unites the reader and the character. In order for a community to come

together, they must first understand their individuality, which allows them to form a stronger

bond. Furthermore, "compassion requires demarcations," which means that readers must

consider who they "count as [their] fellow creatures, sharing possibilities with [themselves]"

(92). In order for the readers to be drawn into a character's story, they must comprehend what ties them together with the character before they can be fiercely compassionate. When Max, the Jewish fist-fighter who lives in the Hubermann's basement shares his story with Liesel, she feels a strong bond grow between them, but it takes time. For a few weeks, Max says nothing and is a blank character with no relation to Liesel until she asks about *Mein Kempf*, to which he responds, "It's the best book ever. It saved my life" (214). Liesel had to know how, and "the course of his survival was related, piece by piece, as if he were cutting each part of him and presenting it on a plate" (217, 218). With the copy of *Mein Kempf,* Max paints over the words with his own narrative to share with Liesel. Not writing for himself, Max writes this story that focuses on his life and the gift of their friendship as a late birthday gift for her, which is a reminder that our stories are not only for us but also for others (224-37). The idea that everyone has his or her own life story intertwines the readers with the characters.

While the text naturally reminds the readers of the ways in which their lives parallel with the characters in the novel, Death also stresses this resemblance. For instance, Death emphasizes that the readers and the book thief are alike: "often, I am reminded of her, and in one of my vast array of pockets, I have kept her story to retell. It is one of the small legion I carry, each one extraordinary in its own right. Each one an attempt—an immense leap of an attempt—to prove to me that you, and your human existence, are worth it. Here it is. One of a handful" (14-15). The book thief's narrative is not the only story that Death keeps; it is not the only one that matters to him. There are fellow humans who are like the readers, who also have valid stories to tell. This distinction compares the main character with the readers, pointing out their similarities to the readers. By addressing all of humanity and all of the stories he carries, Death reminds the readers that it easily could have been them.

Throughout *The Book Thief*, there is a weight to the importance of narration in Liesel's life and also in Max's. Both of them write their own narratives, refusing to let *Mein Kampf* define their lives and their stories. By stressing the power of narratives, the narrator reminds the ones reading that they also have a life story that they will carry with them because, as Keen writes, humans are "story-sharing creatures" ("A Theory of Narrative Empathy" 209). Proving that humans must be able to create, understand, and claim their stories, Hoegg in his essay about the evolution of narratives writes that "a universal, cross-cultural, narratological grammar is the precondition for entering and constructing human society" (2). Narration is a critical way in which the readers and the characters relate to one another.

The Purpose and Power of Death Revealing Details Ahead of Time

If correlations between the readers and the main character establish empathy from the reader toward the character, then it must also be noted that they both share the inability to control the future and its outcome: "compassion involves the recognition that another person, in some ways similar to oneself, has suffered some significant pain or misfortune in a way for which that person is not, or not fully, to blame" (Nussbaum 90-91). In so many instances, Death tells the readers what will happen: a string of misfortunes that are out of the character's control. Death does not merely drop hints as to what will happen; he often states exactly what will occur: "when Max Vandenburg arrived on Himmel Street carrying handfuls of suffering and Hitler's *Mein Kampf*? Was it reading in the shelters? The last parade to Dachau?" (Zusak 30). Before these instances occur, Death points to specific occurrences that the readers will eventually understand. Max Vandenburg had to travel in disguise, carrying *Mein Kampf* so that he was not caught. Further on in the text, Liesel reads to the citizens of Molching in the bomb shelters to distract them from their fear, and in the last marching parade to Dachua, Max is among the Jews that are

walking. The narrator gives details so that the readers have an idea of where Death is leading them, even if the details are vague. In Oliviera's essay on the temporal dimension, she explains foreshadowing in the text: "as the narrator sprinkles the narrative with hints of coming events, which sometimes are just cleared up many chapters ahead, the narratee [sic] becomes curious and focuses on the story, waiting for the moment when he will finally fully understand the actions that led to a specific result" (319). These clues pique the interest of the reader. When the readers meet Max, the Jew that the Hubermann's hide in their basement, the readers trust him because the readers knew he was coming. The readers are not shocked or surprised with the direction of the narrative because he is already familiar with Max. Even small details, Death hands the readers consistently before their actual debut: "the bombs were coming—and so was I [Death]" (Zusak 335). Death reveals his own self-awareness, "Of course, I'm being rude. I'm spoiling the ending, not only of the entire book, but of this particular piece of it. . . . I don't have much interest in building mystery. Mystery bores me. It chores me. I know what happens and so do you. It's the machinations that wheel us there that aggravate, perplex, interest, and astound me" (243). In the essay on temporal dimension, Oliveira explains "the matter in this narrative is not what is going to happen, but how things are going to happen, which produces a great amount of tension and also expresses a fatalistic point of view" (318). In *The Book Thief*, the characters are not to blame for the atrocities that they must endure. By telling the reader of what is to come, the narrator reminds the readers that the characters have done nothing to warrant such suffering.

Many of the characters are undeserving of the agony of this time period. Their actuality is not simply harsh but heartbreaking. Death writes in a matter-of-fact manner: "far away, fires were burning and I [Death] had picked up just over two hundred murdered souls. I was on my way to Molching for one more" (Zusak 488). This is Death's job, and he was heading to pick up

the pilot who had crashed outside the town of Molching (Zusak 488). This emphasizes the bleak

reality of death during the war and the Holocaust. For the first time, the narrator foreshadows the

book thief's impending loss of her community: "again, I offer you a glimpse of the end. Perhaps

it's to soften the blow for later, or to better prepare *myself* for the telling. Either way, I must

inform you that it was raining on Himmel Street when the world ended for Liesel Meminger"

(497). Shortly after explaining when Liesel will meet him, Death shares how he will take the

lives of Liesel's loved ones long before her death: "in short, Himmel Street was flattened. . . .

Rudy Steiner slept. Mama and Papa slept. Frau Holtzapfel, Frau Diller. Tommy Muller. All

sleeping. All dying. Only one survived." Before it happens, Death gives readers the details of

what is to come and prepares the way for the sorrow. Death continues this pre-event narration:

"their bodies were laid out, like the rest" (498). When it actually transpires later in the text, the

readers are not shocked by these events, which allows them to sympathize with Liesel rather than

simply observe from a stunned perspective. The readers knew the deaths were coming and,

therefore, have already acknowledged their reality so she can be present with Liesel's pain. A

witness could never feel the pain of the victim, but the witness can feel a deep empathy and

identify a larger picture: the Holocaust as an entire entity. Through these particulars, Death also

gives the readers a foundation by which to better understand the occurrences in the text.

By consistently sharing details of the future, Death also points to those who are causing

these horrors as he attempts to grasp the way in which humans are sometimes good creatures that

can cause great damage. While Death has a rather fatalistic point of view of the world, he is

interested in the humans who attempt to take action for the good of others. For example, Alex

Steiner, the older brother of Rudy who is Liesel's best friend, took the place of Rudy when the

Nazis came for him, and Death writes: "You save someone. You kill them. How was [Alex]

supposed to know?" (Zusak 547). The readers cannot comprehend the ambiguity of it all. Alex Steiner attempted to be his brother's salvation but instead took Rudy's saving grace. Alex feels guilty, which may lead the readers to wonder whether anyone can be blamed for such tragedy. Alex could not blame himself for trying to save his brother, and yet "the only thing he truly *did* know was that he'd have done anything to have been on Himmel Street that night so that Rudy survived rather than himself" (Zusak 547). Through these moments of fatalism, Death also is aware of who is to blame for the horrors of this time period, and in the beginning of the novel he explicitly tells the readers. Death records his thoughts about the bombing of Himmel Street: "They were glued down every last one of them. A packet of souls. Was it fate? Misfortune? Is that what glued them down like that? Of course not. Let's not be stupid. It probably had more to do with the hurled bombs, thrown down by humans hiding in the clouds" (Zusak 12, 13). Suk explains it, pointing out that "Death is hinting at the chilling fact that he is not doing the killings. He only takes care of the souls of the dead, but humans are those who kill" (30). Both the character and the readers live in a world that they do not have complete power over. This communal phenomenon, a state of existence in which events that no one deserves often transpire, assists the readers in empathizing with the characters in *The Book Thief* while Death reminds the readers who is to blame for such tragedy.

Similar to the way that young citizens must be taught that tragedy will come, the readers are told that tragedy is coming. In life it is not uncommon to receive incredibly ambiguous lessons on certain subjects before they occur. Nussbaum addresses these helpful examples by explaining, "as children explore stories, . . . they are led to notice the sufferings of other living creatures with a new keenness. At this point, stories can then begin to confront children more plainly with the uneven fortunes of life, convincing them emotionally of their urgency and

importance. . . . Let him see around him all these abysses, and, . . . hold on . . . for fear of falling into them" (Nussbaum 93). The narrator asserts the fact that hard and difficult situations are coming to the characters. With the lack of mystery, the readers are allowed to observe a straightforward and overall perspective of the time. For instance, Death tells us that in "September – November, 1939" two things happen: "1. World War Two begins. 2. Liesel Meminger becomes the heavyweight champion of the schoolyard" (Zusak 73). By putting these two events next to each other, Death may be reminding the readers that war is as common to these characters as a schoolyard fight. It is sad, and although they should not carry the same weight, many of the characters cannot stop living just because life has become too much to bear. The children are not to be blamed for the war. This contrast also reveals the child-like strength of continuing to press on. Like a child, the ones reading are told what will happen beforehand in order for them to better understand and observe the story as a whole.

Preparing the way of sorrow, Death purposefully informs the readers of who will die so that the ones reading can better comprehend the situation. In many ways this relates to what Nussbaum writes: "tragedies acquaint the young citizen with the bad things that may happen in a human life, long before life itself does so. In the process they make the significance of suffering, and the losses that inspire it, unmistakably plain to the spectator; this is one way in which the poetic and visual resources of the drama have moral weight. . . . the drama makes compassion for suffering seize the imagination" (93). Since the readers knew what was coming, the reality of these characters' deaths is made "unmistakably plain" to the readers, whereas the characters experiencing death may be somewhat dazed and confused by what is happening to them. The characters may also be unable to comprehend the full gravity of their present situation. In Fincel's thesis, she points to another's argument: "Adams argues that *The Book Thief* 'functions

simultaneously to confront its readers with a knowledge of historical horror and to protect them from it" (232). This protection comes in the form of foreshadowing. The readers are not constantly being shocked by another heartbreaking death, but they are also not naïve enough to ignore that this affects the character, which allows the readers to have a more profound respect for Liesel's reaction to finding her street bombed, understanding that it is not maudlin or dramatic. Liesel walks around her street in a daze, but there is a purpose in the fact that the readers knew it was coming (Zusak 533-35). The readers are not overwhelmed by the reality of it; they are allowed to stand from a distance and observe while also still having a personal connection to the characters. It would be too much death for the readers to assimilate in a truly emotional way because it is too much for anyone to comprehend. Telling the readers who will die invites a deeper sorrow, not a hysterical one, and almost an understanding of the overwhelming power of death. Before the narrative has a chance to harden the readers towards the harsh realities of death, the narrator steps in and lays a softer foundation, warning the readers of what is to come.

By telling the readers who will die and when, Death also provides the readers with some closure before the event happens, which allows for the pain to be more personal and less shocking. He also reminds the readers that to some death may be helpful, even hopeful. When Death speaks of Rudy, he explains, "he was a giver of bread and teddy bears. He was a triple Hitler Youth athletics champion. He was her best friend. And he was a month from his death." Poignantly, Death then adds, "[Liesel] was saying goodbye and she didn't even know it" (Zusak 518). Death also throughout various points of the text shows the readers the characters' legitimate hope for the survival of their loved ones. But at some point Liesel comes to realize that she was unsure if she wanted them to live: "I don't want to pray that Max is alive and safe.

Or Alex Steiner. Because the world does not deserve them" (521). When all of Liesel's loved ones are bombed, Death slowly and methodically tells the reader how he took each soul on Himmel Street. In addition to the grief that is felt for Liesel's loved ones, there is also a sense of relief. Frau Holtzapfel's "face seemed to ask what in the hell had taken [Death] so long" (529-33). Children are taught what death is and how it will affect them long before they will hopefully encounter it, and *The Book Thief* is no different: it prepares the readers for what is to come before lives are actually taken in the text; in doing so, it reminds the readers that life always leads to death.

While Death often gets ahead of himself when telling the book thief's story by sharing details of the future, he does this pointedly in hope of preparing the readers for the astonishing amount of death that they will soon encounter in the novel. Death's desire is not to flood the readers with grief but to allow them to step back and comprehend the full depth of what is occurring, what is coming, and what will ensue. Sharing the deaths to come, the narrator in the text uses this technique to allow the readers to digest the realities of this time period.

Empathy and the Voices of the Silenced

Consequently, by partially ruining the suspense of the deaths that occur in the text, the narrator is emphasizing the Holocaust in its fullness, allowing the readers to focus their attention elsewhere. If empathy to a great degree depends on one's ability to find resemblances between oneself and the characters, then do readers have the ability to place themselves into shoes entirely different from their own? For the current purpose, Keen suggests that "human beings are basically similar to one another, with a limited range of variations," which supports the idea that empathy can occur across boundaries ("Theory of Narrative Empathy" 212). Although Hollan and Throop point out that there may be differences in empathizing "with real and imagined

people," for the sake of this argument the assumption is that they are the same (386). By highlighting the Holocaust in light of the deaths, Death may be attempting to tell the ones reading that the point was not about death but what the Jews died for. It is a reminder of those who were not given power. In Nussbaum's chapter on narrative imagination she explains how "considerations of empathy more frequently lead to an expansion of traditional list of works read . . . searching for accounts of the experience that have previously been overlooked" (105). The point is not that people died but that so many voices were silenced. In *The Book Thief,* Death switches the spotlight to another important focal point: the Holocaust as a whole.

While the deaths throughout the text are heartbreaking, it must also be noted that the Jews had no say in their outcome. Death, in some small way, is attempting to give them their voice and power through his narrative because it is about much more than a horrendous massacre. In the theory of narrative imagination, Nussbaum writes "that the poet in effect becomes the voice of the silenced people" (96). It can be said that Death crafts his narrative like a poet; Oliveira and Maggio, in their article about Death as the focalizer, write that the way in which Death does this is "poetically revealing, with the support of colorful imagery and imaginative syntax constructions that remind [one] of idyllic poetry" (142). Death is his own kind of poet tuning in to the voices of the silenced. There are quite a few moments throughout the text when Death mentions the Jews. While Liesel is at the Nazi book burning, Death considers the ease with which someone could have died from this riotous event, but then he adds "there was, of course, the matter of forty million people I picked up by the time the whole thing was finished. . . . Allow me to return us to the fire" (112). When the bomb raids begin to occur and all the citizens of Molching must move themselves to a basement, Death comments, "the Germans in basements were pitiable, surely, but at least they had a chance. That basement was not a washroom. They

were not sent there for a shower. For those people, life was still achievable" (376). Obviously,

Death is alluding to the concentration camps' gas chambers, not the actual showers. In another

heartbreaking entry, Death's diary reveals his thoughts:

> For me, the sky was the color of Jews. When their bodies had finished
>
> scouring for gaps in the door, their souls rose up. When their fingernails
>
> had scratched at the wood and in some cases were nailed into it by the
>
> sheer force of desperation, their spirits came toward me, into my arms, and
>
> we climbed out of those shower facilities, onto the roof and up, into
>
> eternity's certain breadth. They just kept feeding me. Minute after minute.
>
> Shower after shower. (349)

In this passage, Death is reminding the readers of all of the other victims of the war,

specifically the ones who do not have a voice. Throughout the text Death frequently

shares details about the larger view of the Holocaust.

While Death gives a broad perspective and specific details of the harsh realities of the Jews,

he also allows the readers to become intimately familiar with them in light of Max Vandenburg.

Throughout the story there are multiple times that the Jews are forced to walk through town like

some kind of horrible parade. In reference to them, Death sarcastically wrote: "Perhaps the death

camps were kept secret, but at times, people were shown the glory of a labor camp like Dachau"

(391). In the first walk through Molching, Hans Hubermann hands an older Jewish man a piece

of bread, and while the readers can see this unnamed man's struggle, they are not connected to

him (394). By placing Max in settings with other Jews, it becomes easier for the readers to see,

imagine, and empathize with them; Max is the Jew whom the Hubermanns' hide in their

basement, and by knowing him the readers are more connected to the Jews' plight because they

are no longer blank names and faces but a beloved friend. Death writes: "Nor was there any scaling back on the extermination and punishment of a Jewish plague. . . . In those camps, many people were still made to work, and walk. Max Vandenburg was one such Jew" (507). After Max leaves, Liesel always looks for him among the marching Jews. Eventually she finds him, and they share a powerful reunion (512). Because of Max Vandenburg, most readers are better able to empathize and understand the plight of the Jews in this text.

By altering the attention of the readers from the poignant pain of grief, Death accentuates the importance of not letting these stories be forgotten. Death knows that these voices were extinguished, but he desires for them to no longer be quieted. At many different instances in the novel, the narrator reminds the readers of other realities during the war, especially in light of the Jews. During one such occurrence Death admonishes the reader: "we've both had it too easy till now, my friend." He then adds, "*** A GUIDED TOUR OF SUFFERING *** . . . Please—try not to look away" (138). It is in this moment that Death introduces the reader to Max, the Jew. Death is fully aware that it is a difficult story to swallow, reminding the readers not to give up, forget, or look away. Even Liesel has a difficult time processing the parade as she watches Jews march through her town. Looking for Max, Liesel writes, "alleviated the pain of simply watching." Liesel is embarrassed for even thinking such a "horrible thought" (502). Liesel says this because she was thinking of her own suffering while watching so many others be shamefully paraded through town when she should be considering their perspective, "*their* pain." This may also lead the readers to question their interaction with the text since it is not about the readers' sorrow but the characters, the people who lived through the Holocaust (502). Before sharing the bombing of Himmel Street in vivid detail, Death talks about the narrative Liesel wrote about her own life: "the black book is disintegrating under the weight of my travels. That's another reason

for telling this story. What did we say earlier? Say something enough times and you never forget it" (529). Even Death refuses to forget her story among all the other stories that he carries; it is as if he wants to remind the readers as well that these are important stories. In his last line, Death writes: "I am haunted by humans" (550). When dealing with deep, weighty sorrow it may seem more desirable to cast it off and forget, but Death seems to be telling the readers to not let the narrative of so many disappear.

While Death communicates to the reader the occurrences to come in order for the readers to not be devastated, he also does it to shift the attention from death as a whole to those who are dying. Death is determined for these people to not be quieted and for their stories to be heard. In Oliveira and Maggio's article, they observe that Death "focuses only on the inner voices of those he considers the victims of the war, be them [sic] Jews, poor German citizens or soldiers who die in the name of an unfair political regime" (136). For the readers to understand that *The Book Thief* is about more than a young girl who experiences death in dramatic ways is imperative because the novel is the story of so many people who suffered through the Holocaust.

Narrative Imagination Unites the Narrator's Techniques

Through a narration style that ignores chronological time, Markus Zusak makes the deaths of the characters more impactful, powerful, and emotional by highlighting the haunting horrors of the Holocaust, which can be understood through Nussbaum's theory of narrative imagination. Often, empathy relies on one's ability to conceptualize oneself in the shoes of another person, and this often requires the use of one's imagination. In an exploration of empathy for characters and readers, Suzanne Keen decided "human temperaments shape reading more than reading shapes people's temperaments," which further proves that in order for humans to be compassionate they must first witness their communal connection with the characters ("Readers'

Temperaments and Fictional Character" 298). Similar to the way in which literature saves Liesel's life, it also has the power to save a culture of new readers.

In order to analyze the root of the text, the reader must first decipher Death's voice and personality, finding similarities and differences in their separate identities. Before continuing on, Death clarifies that the coming reality of death also threatens the readers, not only the characters in the text. Throughout the novel, the narrator regularly reminds the readers of the power of narratives. Exploring the various reasons for Death's disruption of the suspense in *The Book Thief*, the readers notice that the weight is placed on the consistency of death rather than its ability to traumatize, on the characters' suffering rather than the readers', and on the voices of the oppressed rather than those who caused the devastation. In Bonnie Brady's thesis, she epitomizes *The Book Thief* "as a coming of age novel, a love story, a war story, and a psychological study of human characteristics, relationships, and motivations" (19). Through the weaving of his story, Death crafts a story that is compelling without being dramatic while also accentuating the larger narrative of those who were acutely affected by the Holocaust.

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Commentary

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Critical Views of Satan in *Paradise Lost*: Is He a Hero or Not?

In discussions of *Paradise Lost*, one issue that has sparked controversy for centuries is whether or not Satan is the hero of the poem. Although he is clearly evil and flawed, Satan has some fascinating qualities as well. Throughout the poem, Satan is willing to risk eternal suffering in Hell for the sake of his cause: breaking free from the tyrannical God. He fights to create his own monarchy after being cast out of heaven, which makes him seem more heroic and even sympathetic to some readers. Generally, John Milton's ideas and writings welcome controversy of all types, and his ambiguous portrayal of Satan is evidence that he is not afraid of conflict. Many Enlightenment thinkers believe that the Messiah is the only hero of the story, not Satan. Some Romantic critics argue that Satan must be the hero of the poem, while many modern scholars contend that Milton's image of Satan is more complex and suggest that he is a pseudo-hero. This potential for a variety of explications of stories and characters is what makes great literature. When readers from different time periods and places are able to draw new conclusions from a text, it becomes universal and timeless through evolving conversations such as this one. These views make his role in the poem more profound, and they make interpreting *Paradise Lost* even more challenging. The question of whether Satan is a noble or heroic character in *Paradise Lost* remains, and it most likely always will. This commentary will not attempt to answer that question but will instead muse over the ability to explore the different views of Satan that add to the richness of his character.

Students, professors, and critics alike will never be able to know with certainty why Milton wrote Satan's character with such ambiguity, but many have proposed possible sources of inspiration. One possibility that many people are unaware of is that Milton was inspired by the Junius Manuscript containing the Old English poem "Genesis," wherein Satan is also portrayed with admirable and heroic qualities. A few scholars, such as S.A.J. Bradley, suggest that Junius and Milton were acquaintances and that Milton actually consulted Junius when thinking about his own poem. Bradley explains this further: "Both poets, as a direct consequence of opting for an epic heroic genre, risk counterproductively investing the rebel angel with an admirable dignity and heroic appeal which are inherent in the traditional diction and manner of the genre" (12). If this is true, Milton may have drawn on familiar resources, such as Junius, to create his own version of Satan rather than his own imagination.

The real critical analysis of *Paradise Lost* begins in the eighteenth century. One understanding of Satan's heroism comes from Joseph Addison, a writer and politician during the Enlightenment period. Religious commentary during this time aimed to reform faith and bring religion back to its non-confrontational roots after years of political and religious conflict. People like Addison wanted to stay true to their faith in God, but they wanted to avoid controversial subjects. This view is evident in Addison's commentary on Satan in *Paradise Lost.* His point represents one of a larger group who says that Satan is not heroic in any way and that all of his shortcomings further prove the unmatched glory of the Messiah. In his book *Criticisms on Paradise Lost,* he explains that "*Paradise Lost* is an epic, or a narrative poem, and he that looks for a hero in it searches for that which Milton never intended; but if he will needs fix the name of a hero upon any person in it, it is certainly the Messiah who is the hero" (Addison 36). He argues that Milton did not intend for the readers to search for a hero, but if they wanted to pick a hero it

should not be Satan. This is a credible argument, considering that Satan's identity as evil incarnate is his defining characteristic. He is the definition and embodiment of evil, and therefore he is fundamentally incapable of being anything more than the protagonist of the story. While this explanation is an important part of the discussion, it may oversimplify Satan's role.

Percy Shelley's interpretation of Satan challenges the words of Joseph Addison, who assumes that the Messiah is the obvious hero of the story. Shelley is a prominent literary figure from the Romantic era who suggests that readers cannot ignore the grandeur of Satan in the poem. In his essay "A Defense of Poetry," Shelley argues that "nothing can exceed the energy and magnificence of the character of Satan as expressed in *Paradise Lost*. It is a mistake to suppose that he could ever have been intended for the popular personification of evil" (Shelley 56). Shelley believed that Milton may have unintentionally portrayed Satan as a noble rebel "who perseveres in some purpose which he has conceived to be excellent in spite of adversity and torture" (57). As a result of Satan's noble intentions and dynamic characterization, he is superior to God and becomes the hero of the story. This perspective causes problems for Addison's interpretation though, because it complicates his more simplistic view of Satan by suggesting that there are honorable aspects of his character. Shelley's Romantic sensibilities allow him to see the depth and complexity in Satan's character, which further develop the Enlightenment views of Satan. Unlike Addison, Shelley is willing to push boundaries and risk religious controversy by acknowledging the depth and complexity of Satan's character.

C.S. Lewis, however, seems to have a less extreme interpretation of Satan in comparison to Addison and Shelley. Lewis, a modern critic, explains that Satan's language in the poem shows that he considers himself a noble character, but even this is a delusion of his identity and his circumstances. In *A Preface to Paradise Lost,* Lewis suggests that although Satan may appear

to be heroic in his rhetoric, he is deceiving himself. Lewis says that "what we see in Satan is the horrible co-existence of a subtle and incessant intellectual activity with an incapacity to understand anything. This doom he has brought upon himself; in order to avoid seeing one thing he has, almost voluntarily, incapacitated himself from seeing it all" (94). Lewis does not refute the pseudo-righteous and attractive nature of Satan completely, like Addison. He does, however, reconcile it with the notion that it comes from Satan's total incapacity to understand reality. Lewis believes that Satan is so far removed from reality that he ironically sees himself as heroic, when he is actually the ultimate villain. This argument puts a new twist on old interpretations of the character by suggesting that Satan may be tricking not only himself but also the reader into believing in his false heroism.

Personally, I think that Satan uses the most eloquent rhetoric throughout the poem, in comparison to the other characters. His language is clever and charismatic, luring not only Eve but also potentially the reader into his manipulation. One of his most memorable soliloquies is in Book I when Satan, the "lost Archangel," finds himself exiled from Heaven as a result of his sin:

> . . . . Farewell happy fields
>
> Where joy forever dwells: Hail horrors, hail
>
> Infernal world, and thou profoundest Hell
>
> Receive thy new possessor: one who brings
>
> A mind not to be changed by place or time.
>
> The mind is its own place, and in itself
>
> Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n
>
> . . . .
>
> . . . And what I should be, all but less than he

> Whom thunder hath made greater? Here at least
>
> We shall be free; . . . .
>
> . . . .
>
> . . . Here we may reign secure, and in my choice
>
> To reign is worth ambition though in Hell:
>
> Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heav'n. (Milton 249-55, 256-9, 261-63)

These lines capture the essence of Satan in *Paradise Lost* by showing how his impressive rhetoric allows him to see himself as noble and potentially allows the reader to see him as noble, too. In the first two lines, the alliteration of "farewell . . . fields" and "hail horrors, hail" gives an ironically rich sound to such a bleak picture of Satan saying goodbye to his "happy fields." This creates a sense of irony considering Satan was so unhappy in Heaven that he would rather spend eternity in Hell. In the next line, Satan uses the conjunction "and" to juxtapose the world and Hell, again creating irony because he sees the world as a hellish or "infernal" place that he rules over, when most people would not compare the world to Hell. Satan goes on to say that his mind is "its own place" that is unchanged by "place or time." Many could argue that Satan's unwavering dedication to revolting against a tyrannical king is noble, while others say that he is fighting a pointless battle that he will inevitably lose. Satan continues by saying that he is "all but less than" (or barely less than) God. He is extremely prideful, but he does admit he is not all-powerful as God is. Then he seems to consider himself a slave who finds freedom from Heaven when he says, "Here at least / We shall be free." His words here seem more like the words of an honorable revolutionary, rather than evil incarnate, which point back to Satan's possible misconception of self. Furthermore, his repetition of "reign" several times in the following lines emphasizes that he even considers himself a worthy opponent of God, because the word itself

carries the connotation of having sovereign authority. When Satan uses the word "reign," referring to his own power, he is indirectly comparing himself to the only completely sovereign being: God.

This speech is brilliant because it can be evidence used in arguments both for and against Satan being a noble hero in the story. In light of this passage, Enlightenment thinkers, such as Addison, have less credibility than others in their argument because they seem to ignore Satan's powerful presence. Romantics could argue that Milton unintentionally sympathizes with Satan here and depicts him as a noble character, while modern critics could just as easily say that Satan ironically views himself as a moral character revealing his delusional thinking. This is just one example of many passages throughout the poem that show the complexity and depth of Satan's character, which is why it is critical to acknowledge and work through these passages diligently as a reader.

Like C.S. Lewis, I lean towards a modern take on Satan's character. Personally, I reconcile Satan's seemingly heroic nature by acknowledging his complexity but keeping him grounded in Christian context: Satan as the Antichrist and God as the King. Satan's role in the Christian narrative is to oppose God and attempt to deceive God's people into opposing him as well. Many of us, as Christian readers, might be uncomfortable acknowledging that Satan could seem heroic or attractive in *Paradise Lost*, because it seems nearly blasphemous. But I believe that Milton did not want the reader to underestimate Satan, because often times the most dangerous evils in the world can be disguised with attraction. Therefore, in order to fully acknowledge the depth of God's character, we must fully acknowledge His opponent, regardless of how ludicrous this may seem. Although Satan seems attractive, and even heroic, this only further reveals his delusion of his own inescapable evil which ultimately reveals God's goodness

in contrast. Diligently working through Satan's character not only elevates our own view of God but also enables us to contribute to the ongoing conversation about the depiction of Satan in *Paradise Lost.* Despite our best efforts of explication, however, we may never know with certainty if Milton intended for us to see Satan as a noble or heroic character; this gives us a wonderful responsibility, as readers and critics, to interpret *Paradise Lost* for ourselves, giving it new life and unique meaning for each of us.

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Essay

Emma Pugh

Mortality and Morality in *Million Dollar Baby*

Clint Eastwood's 2004 film *Million Dollar Baby* tells the story of a young athlete named Maggie Fitzgerald, who, under the relentless training of Frankie Dunn, becomes one of the most famous female boxers of her time, until an illegal punch in the ring leaves her paralyzed and forces Frankie to make a complicated decision. The film focuses on themes surrounding an ongoing complex and emotionally charged debate regarding the value of human life and the warrant of mercy killing. There are several primary arguments regarding the morality of euthanasia. Each of these arguments ultimately becomes a question of what it means to be human and at what point humans are allowed to choose their own destinies. This topic is not as theoretical as it might sound. Every day, families must choose medical treatments for their loved ones who can no longer carry out their own wishes. Just as families must consider what their loved ones would want in specific situations, so too must Frankie fulfill Maggie's wishes and consider what would be in her best interest. Through its effective use of mise-en-scène, shot distance, and lighting to aid the compelling narrative of the film, *Million Dollar Baby* joins the larger conversation regarding euthanasia by arguing that, when an individual suffers and loses quality of life, euthanasia is not only ethical but also compassionate.

One primary cultural understanding of the issue of euthanasia is self-determinism: the philosophy that individuals hold the right to determine their own value and thus choose their destinies. One major proponent of this view was twentieth century physician Jack Kevorkian. Kevorkian reasoned that "absolute autonomy" is a "primal human right" (2). Kevorkian,

nicknamed "Dr. Death," is known for publicly advocating physician-assisted suicide and for being a champion of the terminally ill patient's "right to die." Consequently, he is infamous for directly assisting over one hundred patients to that end, eventually facing charges and conviction of second-degree murder (Rosen). In an interview on ethics and medicine, he asserts the libertarian view that "personal autonomy [or] self-determination" is the highest principle in medical ethics, giving the patient complete control to judge and decide the benefit or value in one's own life (Conley 11). Kevorkian is essentially stating that, in this larger debate regarding the value of life, people bring meaning to their lives by functioning as independent individuals. Therefore, a loss of independence as the individual understands it is a loss of value and is warrant enough for a final decision to choose one's destiny and, thus, dying with dignity. In circumstances in which patients decide to exercise their "right to die," Kevorkian calls those assisting the patient "compassionate" and "civilized" (12).

The polar-opposite position concerning ethics and euthanasia is that all human life has intrinsic value because it is created by God or is, at the very least, regulated intuitively by natural order. An American ethicist named Sissela Bok counters Kevorkian's primary claim of "self-determinism" by arguing that this exercise of apparent individual liberty would be harmful to society and humanity as a whole (Dworkin 139). Bok argues that the legalization of euthanasia would entail grave risks and would in no way deal adequately with the needs of those at the end of their lives. She argues that there are too many unknown factors. What if a patient miraculously recovers? What if physicians start abusing such a law and extending its meaning to patients who are unable to consent or who simply determine that he or she wants to die without adequate justification? What if the request is not truly genuine but is born out of a moment of deep emotional pain and psychological grief? Bok's concerns point to a larger notion that quality of

life does not exist, as factors involving life and death cannot be consistently controlled by human beings, regardless of the power of modern medicine. She conclusively suggests that there is only life, the value of which is not determined by people, or no life at all. Therefore, an attempt to control that which cannot be fully understood "would be a usurpation of God's will or the laws of nature" (113).

A third and more moderate view examines an individual's quality of life. James Rachels, an American philosopher who specialized in ethics, asserts that quality of life is the binary relationship between biological and biographical life. He develops this idea further, saying that biological life, or the animate existence sustained by natural functions of the body, only serves insofar as it assists in the affairs of biographical life (Ruddick 505). Biographical life, a more abstract concept than biological life, includes the social and personal narratives of one's life, as defined by both individual experience and social interaction (Mazanderani 893). Therefore, neither biological nor biographical life can solely determine the quality of an individual life, but rather the binary relationship functions as a unit. Additionally, to determine the overall quality of life in both the biological and biographical senses, modern palliative medicine uses a helpful model that assesses the physical, emotional, and psychological suffering that both patient and loved-ones experience (Ruddick 513). This method proves especially helpful as multiple aspects of an individual's life are considered in understanding the complex and extensive issue of "quality," rather than strictly examining one facet or another.

The film seems to take this more moderate approach to the issue, using formal cinematic elements to wrestle with the question of quality of life in terms of how these three domains affect Maggie and those who know her. Notably, the film's use of mise-en-scène, shot distance, and lighting reveal powerful insight into its position on the topic of mercy killing. Through these

formal elements, *Million Dollar Baby* makes the claim that a significantly diminished quality of life authorizes and even invites the consideration of mercy killing in order to maintain dignity and alleviate pain.

Perhaps most obviously, the film uses mise-en-scène to assess the physical quality of Maggie's life throughout the course of her initial training and after the life-altering fight. Before the tragic incident, Eastwood trains Maggie to become physically fit and mentally tough. While her makeup is minimal, she always has flushed cheeks and pink lips. Her simple makeup for the majority of the film differs from her appearance toward the end of the film, as her lips are chapped, and her face is pale, with the exception of moderate bruising (1:36:12). Additionally, the plainness of her appearance is contrasted further as, later in the film, Maggie has a neck brace, tubes, and IVs protruding from her body, obstructing the audience's view of her features. A book published by John Hopkins University examines the end of life portrayal in *Million Dollar Baby,* especially in light of Maggie's shifting physical depiction throughout the movie, saying, "When we first see her out of bed as she is transferred into her wheelchair, Scrap says, 'It took several hours every day to get her ready for the wheelchair,' perhaps implying it was not time well spent" (Lutfiyya 231). Eastwood is clearly depicting a visible decrease in quality of life as Maggie's countenance reflects the life draining out of her.

Additionally, Maggie's attire changes significantly throughout the film to reflect her physical state. In a sequence which covers a period of months as she starts training, Maggie's worn, earth-toned workout clothes evolve from long sleeves and pants to shorts and a sports bra (00:37:15). As the sequence continues and Maggie's physique is revealed beneath the initial baggy clothes, every muscle is distinguishable, portraying an athleticism and physical health that starkly contrasts her later physical condition as she faces bed sores and paralysis that show her in

a significant period of sitting or lying down for the first times in the film. The next significant costume Maggie wears is a gift from Frankie as she rises to fame. The vibrant green and white silk robe with "Mo Cuishle" written in gold lettering on the back becomes a signifier for Maggie at the peak of her athletic career (1:06:53). The vibrant green color is an extension of the earthy green tones Maggie wore in training but represents a pinnacle of vivacity and vigor that Maggie later loses as she lies in bed wearing a crisp white hospital gown (1:40:18). The complete lack of color reverses the natural muted tones and the vibrant, flashy, green robe, shifting from an overt liveliness to something unnatural and artificial. Through color, the film comments on the quality of life in moments of clear, physical efficacy and fortitude as opposed to unavoidable dormancy.

Similarly, to further demonstrate a loss in physical quality of life, *Million Dollar Baby* juxtaposes the dark, dingy gym where Maggie spends most of her time training and the bright, clean hospital where she remains incapacitated. Though the gym is grungy, it feels comfortable and lived in, implying an abundance of life experiences that have ensued within its walls. On the other hand, the hospital feels sterile and, ironically, inhospitable. The film's vivid and clear use of mise-en-scène attempts to enhance its position that physical suffering adds to a loss of overall quality of life which constitutes the consideration of euthanasia as a remedy.

To assist with the viewer's understanding of Maggie's quality of life before versus after the incident, *Million Dollar Baby* employs effective cinematographic elements, specifically shot distances, in order to reveal the characters' emotional positions throughout the film. Before sustaining the life-altering injury, shots of Maggie tend to be medium long or long shots, highlighting her physique and athleticism as the audience can see her whole body. In this case, cinematography not only works together with mise-en-scène to speak to Maggie's physical quality of life but also allows the audience to see the stubbornness and determination written on

her face as she throws a punch or completes a conditioning workout. Similarly, in scenes in which Maggie is actually fighting a match, the cinematographer chooses to depict Maggie from either long, high shots through the ropes as if from the audience's perspective or medium shots to emphasize a particularly aggressive round of punches. These moments help to create the social narrative of her life, as the relational shots incorporate how other people view Maggie as a force to be reckoned with.

After her injury, however, the shots are much closer and more intimate, moving away from the physical talents as an athlete and viewing her as an individual. The audience sees Maggie primarily through close ups or medium close shots. Oftentimes, there is a sequence of shot-reverse-shot cuts between a medium close shot of Maggie and a medium close shot of Frankie to denote a relationship that has moved from that of a boxer and her trainer to something more familial. The nickname Frankie gives Maggie reinforces this parental relationship, as Frankie reveals that the Gaelic phrase "Mo Cuishle" means "my blood" as Maggie lies on her deathbed (2:03:15). Additionally, the frequent two shots are of Maggie and Frankie, but they too generally uphold the more intimate theme by maintaining medium close shots to reveal affection and love. The notable close-up shots, however, reveal a more personal moment of vulnerability rather than a shared emotion. In her initial request of Frankie to euthanize her and put her out of her misery, there is a particularly effective close up shot of Maggie as she remembers the culmination of her accomplishments at her height of fame, saying, "Don't let me lie here 'til I can't hear those people chanting no more" (1:54:04). While the line is sufficiently moving, the close up shot is arguably more effective in revealing the emotional grief Maggie is facing. Similarly, Frankie visits the church in an attempt to find guidance as he faces an immense moral dilemma, and the audience gets a close up on Frankie's face as he sobs (1:58:27). The close-up

shot exposes a deep-rooted pain within the character and a vulnerability that has been unrivaled previously in the film, allowing the audience to see slight details like rolling tears and a dripping nose that make the scene all the more powerful. Through images like this, the cinematic decisions regarding shot distance play a larger role in the film by giving the audience access into more personal, emotional moments. In doing so, the viewers must determine the level of emotional suffering both Maggie and her loved ones are facing and, thus, her overall quality of life, prompting larger questions about euthanasia as an option that might be in her best interest.

To further demonstrate Maggie's declining quality of life throughout the film, the lighting is used to reveal the psychological state of the characters at integral moments in the film. Before the injury, Maggie is at the peak of her career, so when she is in the boxing ring, she is placed in the spotlight while the room around her remains dark. The high-key lighting placed on Maggie enacts the audience's perspective as its attention is drawn straight to her (00:56:42). Additionally, as Maggie prepares to face her final fight against the WBA champion of the world, the lighting on Maggie contrasts the shadows casted on her opponent (1:26:41). While Eastwood is portraying the expected good-versus-evil structure, he is also portraying how others view Maggie as talented and noteworthy and how Maggie views herself as capable and confident. Similarly, in the hospital after the incident, Maggie remains in the spotlight, in a way. Oftentimes, when the room is dark, Maggie's bed is saturated in light, making her look almost angelic (1:33:47). As she makes her request to Frankie, asking him to kill her, she is primarily in the light and Frankie is predominantly in shadows by contrast (1:52:08). Later, as Maggie attempts to gruesomely and painfully kill herself by seizing control of the only physical movement she can make and biting her tongue in hopes of bleeding out, she remains in full light, and, again, Frankie conversely watches from the dark hallway (1:55:30). Helen Frowe, a

professor of philosophy at Stockholm University, examines the ethical implications from the film, noting, "[Maggie] treats her desire to die with the same single-minded tenacity that she approached the various . . . obstacles that should have prevented her success in the ring" (247). Therefore, the full lighting serves as an opposition to the extreme low-key lighting around Frankie while simultaneously maintaining a level of confidence and certainty in Maggie as she determinedly expresses her wishes and attempts to fulfill them when Frankie refuses.

The images of Frankie submerged in shadow through extreme low-key lighting are particularly powerful. As he is faced with the moral dilemma to either help someone he loves die or to watch her suffer further, he seems to sink further and further into darkness, as if the pain becomes too much for him. In the scene at the church, Frankie begins searching for answers and breaks into tears due to the conclusion he finally reaches. Frankie's face is cast in a meaningful half-light as he says, "By keeping her alive, I'm killing her" (1:57:34). Likewise, only one half of his face is exposed as Frankie talks to Scrap, an ex-boxer and manager of the gym, confessing, "I killed her" (2:00:23). This internal conflict follows Frankie as he talks to Maggie for the last time, removing her breathing tube and injecting her with enough adrenaline to kill her, his face once again partly obscured by shadow. The low-key lighting is a visual indication of the tormenting psychological conflict he is experiencing. By evaluating the psychological suffering of both Maggie and Frankie as they confront the reality of her injuries and the imminence of a life with diminished quality, the film allows the audience to follow the process of considering the ultimate decision to euthanize Maggie.

Just as the film attempts to examine mercy killing as a complex, multifaceted issue, so, too, does Frankie as he considers various dimensions of Maggie's life. Frankie understands that her physical suffering is great, as the biological aspect of her life is taking its toll on the overall

quality of life. Furthermore, her body's natural functions can no longer serve well in "assisting in the affairs of biographical life," as James Rachel suggests they must in order to constitute quality (Ruddick 505). In terms of the factors of her biological life, her emotional and psychological states have altered Maggie's narrative of her own life, as she realizes that she can no longer have the individual experiences and social interactions that had once brought her fulfillment. Frankie works through his decision to euthanize Maggie in light of these facts, ultimately upholding the argument that one's quality of life is more important than either mere biological existence or a simplistic, liberating self-determinism, taking instead a more moderate approach.

In joining the broader conversation regarding the morality of mercy killing, the film seems to reinforce the positive connotation of its Greek origin of the word *euthanasia* as meaning "good death" (Lutfiyya 225). If "life imitates art," as Oscar Wilde suggests in his 1889 essay "The Decay of Lying," then fictional sources like More's *Utopia* and Eastwood's *Million Dollar Baby* must be taken seriously as legitimate contributors to complex and difficult ethical issues such as euthanasia (5). Because art is capable of evoking powerful emotion and prompting reflection, two functions that contribute to the quality of one's life in the biographical sense, art brings a distinct and necessary compassion to issues involving the quality and value of the human life, of which physiological factors are only one part of a larger story.

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Ethan Sanders

Building the Masculine Identity through the Feminine in *City of God*

Fernando Meirelles and Kátia Lund's *City of God* (2002) tells the stories of two sharply contrasting masculine identities within Cidade de Deus, west of Rio de Janerio. Though the film's portrayal of masculinity within Cidade de Deus ranges across racial and socioeconomic identities, the stories of the protagonist and the antagonist parallel each other in both of these aspects. This similarity makes the contrasting characters intriguing and brings the origin of their differing masculine identities into question. The protagonist and narrator of the film, Rocket, is a non-confrontational, young photographer who wishes to escape the violence of Cidade de Deus. The film's antagonist, Li'l Zé, is a violent drug lord seeking to take over Cidade de Deus. Both are young black men of roughly the same age who grew up during the sixties in Cidade de Deus, a housing project by the Brazilian government for the homeless of Rio de Janerio. Despite their shared background, the two young men take drastically different, yet intertwining, paths.

Rocket's and Li'l Zé's diverging masculine identities and similar origins present an opportunity to introduce Judith Butler's theory of performative gender into the film. The theory is underscored through the actions of the characters highlighted by the film's formal elements. Butler says in her work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*: "That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality" (136). According to this theory, if Rocket and Li'l Zé have differing masculine identities, it is not because of some difference they possessed from the

beginning but one that they each constructed as individuals. The similar origins of Rocket and Li'l Zé offer them a "blank page" on which to perform the actions that will construct their identities. Thus, as the formal elements of the film underscore the actions of Rocket and Li'l Zé, they are underscoring the construction of their gender. However, they construct these identities in a unique way. *City of God* uses formal film elements to underscore the protagonist's and the antagonist's masculine identities in relation to the feminine identities portrayed in the film in accordance with Butler's theory of performative gender.

To answer how Rocket's and Li'l Zé's paths to constructing their gender identity diverge, one must look at each character's secondary motivations. Aside from wishing to escape Cidade de Deus and become a photographer, it is established early in the film that Rocket is trying to lose his virginity to a young female character, Angelica. While he is not successful, Rocket does enter into a relationship with Angelica, and his motivations grow and change because of this relationship. Li'l Zé, by contrast, is shown to make very poor attempts at beginning a relationship with any of the female characters of the film. Instead, he pays for sex or rapes women. The pursuit of such a relationship drives Li'l Zé into the final act of the film and brings his masculine identity into its full realization. Both Rocket's and Li'l Zé's masculine identities are heavily shaped by the actions they take because of their relationships with feminine identities. The film's selective portrayal of their interactions with feminine characters underscores the evolution of Li'l Zé and Rocket's masculine identities.

To define the feminine, Butler says, "one is not born, but rather *becomes* a woman, it follows that *woman* itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end" (33). In this way, the feminine is the same as the masculine. Both are in the process of being constructed. However, just as the female characters are often

overlooked within the film, the construction of the feminine is not a focus of the narrative. Thus, the feminine in the film is left as an identity in relation to the masculine. This identity is not always of opposition but of difference to masculinity, and it is seen in the film only through the masculine's interactions with the feminine.

These interactions with the feminine are significant because they are often centered around major choices for the characters. A character's identity within a narrative is constructed through the choices she or he makes within that narrative. In their book *Looking at Movies: An Introduction to Film,* Richard Barsam and Dave Monahan say that character traits "govern how the character reacts to opportunities and problems, makes decisions, acts upon those decisions, and deals with the consequences of those actions" (126). The conventional way to make these choices carry emotional weight for a character and lend interiority to the actor's portrayal is to allow the emotions to be seen by the audience in close-up or even extreme close-up shots. Barsam and Monahan say that the close-up shot "can provide an exclusive view of the character's emotions or state of mind, yet it can also show a face lacking emotion or thought" (238). In *City of God*, this lack of emotion is exemplified in Li'l Zé. Little to no emotion other than revelry is ever depicted by the antagonist during his close-up shots. The choices these close-up shots underscore make his revelry or his sharply contrasting lack of emotion sinister. When Li'l Zé is captured in close-up shots, he is always in a place of power. In his first close-up, Li'l Zé is laughing as he sends armed children into the streets of Cidade de Deus to chase a chicken (00:02:10) and soon to confront both his rival gang and the police. The next major close-up in this sequence frames Li'l Zé's laughing expression next to the gun he has just drawn as he continues to shout at the children to catch the chicken (00:03:05). This frame captures the masculine identity of Li'l Zé almost perfectly. His is a masculine identity that takes joy in

exerting power over others and sees excitement in violence. Specifically, Li'l Zé is a character of domination. Through power and violence, Li'l Zé brings himself into a state of domination over Cidade de Deus.

The next time Li'l Zé is framed in a close-up shot, he is taking over Blacky's apartment, the headquarters of one of Cidade de Deus' many drug lords. Once again, Li'l Zé is in a place of power and armed for violence. This close-up shot, by contrast to the previous close-up, portrays Li'l Zé with a serious and threating expression. Li'l Zé's head is tilted up, he is looking down on Blacky, and his shoulders are squared to the other drug lord. The shot ends in a freeze-frame that super-imposes the words "The Story of Li'l Zé" onto the frame (00:40:34). The narrative then shifts back in time and carries the audience from the past to the present as the flashback tells the story of how Li'l Zé begins to take over Cidade de Deus violently by killing off the other drug lords one by one. His first two major close-up shots of the film establish Li'l Zé's joy in power and violence. This third close-up shot comes as Li'l Zé shifts into implementing that power and violence to place himself into a state of domination over other masculine identities. Besides the significance of Li'l Zé's dominating masculine impulse, the complete lack of the feminine within Li'l Zé's close-up shots should also be noted. Li'l Zé's lack of feminine interaction is significant because, in contrast, Rocket's interaction with the feminine is central to the development of his masculine identity.

The major close-up shots of Rocket to this point in the film have held very different meanings from Li'l Zé's close-up shots. Rocket's first close-up shot focused on Rocket trapped between Li'l Zé's gang and the cops (00:03:39). Rocket's second close-up shot captured him noticing a camera for the first time (00:33:22). However, most importantly for defining his masculine identity, Rocket's third major close-up shot comes as he is taking pictures of his

friends on the beach (00:34:39). Specifically, this third close-up is Rocket's first interactions with one of the few female characters presented in the film, and only the second named female character so far in the film, Angelica. The first close-up establishes Rocket's fear of Cidade de Deus and his protagonist/antagonist relationship with Li'l Zé. The second close-up establishes Rocket's connection to cameras—his escape from Cidade de Deus and Li'l Zé. The third close-up establishes how Rocket's pursuit of photography, which is essential to his escape from Cidade de Deus, intertwines with his secondary goal of losing his virginity to Angelica. By photographing Angelica and his other friends, Rocket establishes himself in a relationship with Angelica. Though it is not a relationship to the degree of intimacy he wishes, it is a much stronger relationship in friendship than any relation to the feminine that Li'l Zé has been presented as maintaining to this point in the film. In this scene on the beach with Angelica, the camera captures Rocket in several close-up and medium close-up shots. These are far more close-up shots than Li'l Zé has been afforded so far in the film, though he has taken nearly the same, if not more, screen time than Rocket and certainly far more screen time than Angelica. These close-up shots offer an expression of emotion for Rocket and develop his character, and the sudden flurry of close-up shots comes as he interacts with a feminine identity for the first time within the narrative. Angelica's character is even introduced and shot through mostly close-up to medium-close shots in the scene. In a scene that takes the viewer out of the cramped spaces of the narrow alleys of Cidade de Deus to the wide-open space of the beach, the close-up shots do not immerse the viewer in a claustrophobic space. The only interpretation that the close-up shots can give is a heightening of emotions for the characters involved.

It would seem natural to say, since Rocket is the protagonist and Li'l Zé is the antagonist, that these close-up shots portray Rocket as exemplifying a masculine impulse directly opposing

Li'l Zé's. Rocket and Li'l Zé are both generally seeking the same ends. While Rocket is seeking freedom and autonomy from Cidade de Deus, instead of dominance over the city like Li'l Zé, both Li'l Zé and Rocket are seeking safety in the construction of their gender. Li'l Zé seeks safety in overcoming threats, while Rocket seeks to escape these threats. Furthermore, these specific close-up shots of Rocket on the beach are exemplifying another shared characteristic of Rocket's masculine identity and Li'l Zé's. These close-ups, the first real look into the interiority of Rocket's character, exemplify his pursuit of the feminine and the means through which he will construct his gender. In this way, Rocket is once again similar to Li'l Zé. Both characters are shown to construct their gender through their interactions with the feminine. However, though motivated by a sexual desire, Rocket is not approaching the feminine in a utilitarian way, as Li'l Zé is later shown to do. Instead Rocket seeks to enter into a mutual relationship with the feminine through his friendship with Angelica, one in which both the feminine and the masculine participate equally.

This friendship with Angelica reaches its peak in the next few scenes as she breaks up with her boyfriend, and she and Rocket become close friends. The following scene of Rocket and Angelica alone on the beach together is mostly comprised of close-ups and extreme close-ups. However, these close-ups do little more for the construction of Rocket's masculine identity than the close-ups from the previous beach scene. Instead, it is another aspect of film form that develops Rocket's masculine identity—the freeze-frame. *City of God* is filled with freeze-frames. Nearly every time a photograph is taken the frame freezes, and the protagonist is a photographer. However, most of these freeze-frames are simply an image of whatever Rocket has photographed. Yet, just prior to the second beach scene, Rocket explains that he only ever smokes with Angelica. The audience sees a long shot of Rocket running towards the beach to

meet Angelica, and as he says her name in his narration, the frame freezes for a moment (00:49:50). Barsam and Monahan say that "freeze-frames are often used to underscore a significant emotional change in a character" (351). This draws into question what emotional moment the freeze-frame is underscoring for Rocket.

From the previous and subsequent close-up shots, the audience knows Rocket's pursuit of the feminine is a central interior aspect of his character. However, there is more to this freeze-frame than simply the name "Angelica" being narrated over the frame to imply the pursuit of the feminine. The freeze-frame captures Rocket mid-leap as he clicks his heels together in a boyish moment. Rocket's pursuit of Angelica is juxtaposed with the "mature" and "stoic" masculinity of the drug dealers, notably similar to Li'l Zé in persona, who stand pridefully and hold themselves over the other residents of Cidade de Deus. Rocket is, more or less, carefree as he runs through the streets and clicks his heels. Rocket's masculinity is youthful. In this freeze-frame, Rocket has constructed his masculinity into a youthful persona, in sharp contrast to Li'l Zé's. Rocket portrays the younger masculine impulses when compared to Li'l Zé's masculine impulse. This will soon become clear in the next few scenes of the film. However, before Li'l Zé's masculine impulse can be defined as "mature" over Rocket's, the film introduces the feminine into Rocket's youthful masculine identity by the context of the next scene, Rocket and Angelica on the beach together, and the narration of the name "Angelica" over the freeze-frame.

The next comparable moment to Rocket's freeze-frame in the film for Li'l Zé comes a few scenes later during Benny's farewell party (01:12:07). Li'l Zé asks Knock Out Ned's girlfriend to dance. When she refuses to dance with him, the camera holds for a long take on a medium close-up shot of Li'l Zé (01:13:31). After the long take, Li'l Zé goes to tell Benny, his best friend who is leaving Cidade de Deus with Angelica, that he should stay in Cidade de Deus.

Benny tells Li'l Zé that he has to leave, and the scene jumps to a flashback of Benny and Li'l Zé during their childhood (01:14:41). The frames of the flashback are duplicated, giving it an effect similar to Rocket's freeze-frames—the image lingers on the screen and gives the audience pause to reflect on its significance. This flashback solidifies Li'l Zé's separation from the carefree nature of his childhood. While Benny is trying to return to his childhood happiness, the flashback draws Li'l Zé's masculine identity into the "mature" impulse in opposition to Rocket's youthful impulse. His masculinity is one that sees itself as separate from youth. In the rest of the scene, Li'l Zé leaves Benny to confront Knock Out Ned. Li'l Zé forces Knock Out Ned to strip down at gun point, because it was Knock Out Ned's girlfriend who turned down his offer to dance (01:15:53). This scene, with its duplicated frames and narrative flashback, works to establish Li'l Zé's masculine identity as the elder of the masculine impulses; it also solidifies Li'l Zé's masculine impulses for domination through violence and establishes his power over other masculine identities.

Benny's farewell party is also notably one of the first interactions shown between Li'l Zé and a female character. The interaction was brief and ended with the polite, though firm, refusal of further interaction from the female (01:13:31). Due in part to the setting, a dance party, this scene employs extremely low-key lighting. Later in the scene a strobe light is used to create chiaroscuro for a sinister effect during Benny's murder (01:19:03). If not for the cultural assumptions brought to film about heavy shadows and dark imagery, the contents of the scene alone would establish low-key lighting as carrying a dark emotional weight in *City of God*. While this scene is shocking, and the content underscored by the low-key lighting, such lighting is used to a much more haunting effect later in the film, when it fully realizes the corruption of Li'l Zé's masculine identity.

The death of Benny ends the second act of the film and moves the narrative into the final act. Lúcia Nagib describes the final act in "Talking Bullets" as the "darkest," both figuratively and literally. Nagib points out that the first act of the film, which she refers to as "Paradise," is lit with "golden sunlight and the orange hues." By contrast, the final act, "Hell," leaves the camera searching through dimly lit scenes (247). At the beginning of the second act, Li'l Zé confronts Knock Out Ned's girlfriend at night (01:21:28). The low-key lighting sets the audience on edge and as the horrific scene unfolds, Li'l Zé rapes Knock Out Ned's girlfriend. Jaime Amparo Alves notes that the fact that Knock Out Ned's girlfriend is not given a name is telling of the film's treatment of female characters (322). Even more so, it is telling of how Li'l Zé views women. Knock Out Ned's girlfriend is the only woman Li'l Zé directly engages throughout the film, and she is one of the only major female characters not to be named. While the scene is incredibly disturbing on its own accord, what the scene says about Li'l Zé's masculine impulse to dominate is truly troubling. Butler says, "suppression of the Other is one tactic among many, deployed centrally but not exclusively in the service of expanding and rationalizing the masculinist domain" (14). It is through suppression and violence that Li'l Zé constructs and expands his masculine identity, and thus the masculinist domain, when interacting with the feminine. This is the first time the audience has seen what happens when Li'l Zé's masculinity comes into conflict not with another masculine figure, but instead with a feminine figure.

In sharp contrast to Li'l Zé's incredibly disturbing confrontation with the feminine, Rocket's interactions with Angelica are often on the beach, punctuated by high-key, natural lighting (00:49:51). The sinister nature of Li'l Zé's interactions with the feminine are harshly juxtaposed to the open and easy nature of Rocket's relationship with Angelica. The high-key lighting draws attention away from the morality of the scene and towards the physicality of

Rocket and Angelica's relationship. Rocket's body is exposed by the high-key lighting in a way that Li'l Zé's body is never depicted. The lighting lends Rocket both a vulnerability and also a power. On one hand, Rocket's body is exposed on the beach. In regard to the other masculine identities, Rocket's portrayal in high-key lighting lends him to be an easier target of their violence. On the other hand, Rocket's body is on display on the beach. In regard to the feminine, Rocket's portrayal in high-key lighting displays his physicality and aids his character's secondary and sexual aim to enter into a relationship with Angelica. This exposure to Angelica offers her a position of agency in viewing Rocket as well. When Angelica and Rocket spend time together, it is at the consent of both parties. Neither party hides in the darkness as Li'l Zé does (01:22:00). Thus, Rocket's masculine identity allows for the feminine to enter the relationship in a place of equal authority—a harsh contrast to Li'l Zé's masculinity.

While the lighting of the film places the moral aspects of both Rocket's and Li'l Zé's masculine identities' relation to the feminine into opposition, a formal element of film closely related to lighting moves both Li'l Zé's and Rocket's masculine impulses into further opposition. The space in which each character resides fits with and shapes their impulses. In a film deeply concerned with gang territory and socioeconomic divides, physical space is incredibly important to the characters. Li'l Zé spends most of the film in the headquarters of his drug operations. Rocket spends most of his time on the beach or at parties where the influence of the gangs is not prominent. The mise-en-scène of each character's space reflects their masculine impulse. Rocket resides in the wide-open and freeing space of the beach, while Li'l Zé resides in the easily controlled space of the apartment headquarters. In Rocket's space, Angelica and other female characters are welcomed. In Li'l Zé space, the only female character the audience is shown residing there is forcibly evicted from the apartment so that the male drug lords can take over the

space (00:38:05). Li'l Zé's masculinity shapes the world around him in an expression of domination, while Rocket's masculinity enters into an open world in a search for freedom.

With all of this in mind, Rocket personifies the youthful, free masculine in pursuit of a relationship with the feminine, while his antagonist, Li'l Zé, personifies the dominating masculine in a controlling and non-consensual relationship with the female body. Butler's theory of performative identity is, therefore, reinforced by *City of God*, and *City of God* requires Butler's theory for an interpretation of Li'l Zé and Rocket's contrasting masculine identities. Though both Rocket and Li'l Zé are presented as masculine figures within the narrative, they take drastically differing paths in the construction and performance of their masculinity. And these paths result in vastly different identities. These diverging paths begin to break down traditional binary readings of gender as strictly feminine or masculine, as the masculine is clearly fractured into two opposing identities in *City of God*. The formal elements used throughout the masculine's interactions with the feminine in *City of God* create a clear distinction between these two constructed masculine identities. It is not only the presence of the feminine during these interactions but also the actual interaction with the feminine itself that shapes the development of both characters' gender identities.

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Essay

Emily Thorington

From Prominence to Humility and Zero to Hero:

Two Portrayals of Greatness in *The Grand Budapest Hotel*

W es Anderson's *The Grand Budapest Hotel* is a genre-bending film that explores the theme of greatness. With complicated storytelling and characters, Gustave, the well-known hotel concierge, and Zero, the lowly lobby boy, embody the complex theme of greatness in different ways. Zero tells his story about Gustave and the Grand Budapest Hotel to the Author, but at the same time, the camera presents the story from an omniscient point of view. Rather than only seeing the story from Zero's subjective perspective, camera shots frame both Zero and Gustave. In the film, greatness is a description that applies to characters who exhibit immense leadership and character. These characters deeply impact the people around them, inspiring growth in others' leadership and character. Gustave shows greatness in leadership through his outward recognition, and Zero shows greatness of character through his humble loyalty. Through Gustave and Zero, *The Grand Budapest Hotel* presents outward and inward character as two equally significant representations of greatness.

Gustave embodies great success as the leader of the Grand Budapest Hotel who propels the storyline and directs characters to act. Before the camera shows Gustave, Zero tells the Author, "Well it begins, as it must, with our mutual friend's predecessor, the beloved, original concierge of the Grand Budapest. It begins of course with . . ." and a quick cut to the next shot reads "Part 1 M. Gustave" on a dramatic red screen (0:09:05). Zero begins the story not by focusing on his connection with Gustave but rather by placing the current concierge as the

subject who knows Gustave. Zero's decision to make the current concierge the link between the Author and himself distances Zero from Gustave in the storytelling. Richard Barsam says sometimes "the framing implies a view that seems to be coming from no one in particular" (197). Zero's storytelling arrangement allows the camera to tell the story from an omniscient point of view. As a result, the audience reads the greatness of both Gustave and Zero apart from Zero's subjective point of view.

Gustave first appears on screen as independent and sophisticated, and he embodies strong leadership. Framed between two doors on a balcony, Gustave first appears onscreen with his back to the camera in a long shot (0:9:05). The camera frames him as similar to an actor onstage looking at an audience with the light source on his face while the camera captures the shadows on back (0:09:25). Barsam writes on the importance of lighting in reading characters and says, "the way the cinematographer lights and shoots an actor invariably suggests an impression of the character to the audience" (223). The use of lighting in the opening shot of Gustave makes it look as if he is onstage, addressing a crowd from the lofted balcony, and also shows depth to his character by suggesting that there is more to Gustave than his appearance. The camera frames Gustave in the center screen for his commanding entrance. With an overture, along with raising a curtain and lights, Gustave sets the stage for the scene and film in a similar fashion to the opening of a play. Accompanied by fast-paced music, he quickly turns on the room's lights and opens the door to usher in hotel workers. These performative aspects and Gustave's directing of workers show his authority in the hotel. Low-angle shots emphasize Gustave's power while the camera's position in the room captures him directing his hotel workers. He wears the rich color purple, which makes him look regal, befitting his high position of authority.

Gustave wields power as the concierge, directing workers in the hotel from the very beginning, and does so with style. He has panache, eloquent diction, and a suave, polished appearance. Geoffrey O'Brien writes about Gustave's many roles including as the "ultimate intermediary . . . secret preserver . . . shape-shifting trickster . . . doomed protector . . . [and] ultimate benefactor" (O'Brien 23). Gustave is not only the well-respected concierge of the hotel, but he is an "intermediary." He finagles Zero out of trouble with authority concerning identification papers. He is a "secret preserver" as he keeps the valuable painting hidden safely from unlawful owners. Gustave is also a "shape-shifting trickster" because he organizes a jailbreak. He is a "doomed protector" as he takes care of Zero as they run from the law. Furthermore, he becomes an "ultimate benefactor" as he humbly, and with great respect for his successor, gives Zero his concierge position. Gustave's great success manifests itself outwardly in the different roles he leads. Sometimes his actions are visible to a wide amount of people, but other times Zero is his sole witness. O'Brien also mentions "Gustave is in every essence the pivot of the plot" (23). Gustave's character is so dynamic in the plot that he directs the story and people follow him in hotels, out of jail, even up ski lifts and through a monastery.

On the other hand, Zero enters the film with few connections. In a scene outside of the hotel, Gustave's blocking in the foreground shows his authority as he is much larger in the frame than Zero standing in the middle ground. Zero does not have a commanding presence and his quiet responses of "yes sir" and "no sir" contrast with Gustave's bombastic and commanding voice (0:11:46). As Gustave walks through the hotel and speaks with guests and employees, Zero appears essentially the opposite with his short height, hesitant walk, and shy stance as he trails behind Gustave (0.12:44). Zero's lowly position as lobby boy appears to place him as the opposite of greatness in contrast to Gustave's authoritative position as concierge. Gustave

interviews Zero with a series of questions about his education and experience. After hearing Zero's responses, Gustave says and writes down, "Zero" (0:12:46). Then Gustave asks about Zero's family, and Zero responds, "Zero" (0:13:19). Zero has nothing to his name, literally and figuratively.

However, despite lowly beginnings, Zero's greatness of humility and loyalty reveals itself through his endurance of trials. One trial that leads to a turning point in the story is when Gustave escapes from prison. Gustave introduces the prisoners to "the divine Zero" (0:59:07), but then he slanders Zero by telling him he does not belong and asks what made him leave his country in the first place. The camera captures this moment with profile shots of the characters, but the camera captures Zero face forward when he tells Gustave his story (1:00:37). Furthermore, an iris shot puts emphasis on Zero and not the setting. O'Brien states that, in contrast to Gustave, "Zero conveys in counterpoint a steady note of open-hearted sincerity and unwavering frankness that at the pivotal moment helps to open the film to a different level of feeling" (O'Brien 23). This scene is the moment that the relationship between Gustave and Zero changes because of Gustave's recognition of Zero's great inward strength. Gustave says, "You are actually more of a refugee in that sense?" Zero responds, "Truly," and Gustave continues, "Well then I suppose I better take back everything I just said" (1:01:13). Gustave adds, "Don't make excuses for me. I owe you my life. You are my dear friend and protégé, and I am very proud of you. You must know that. I am so sorry, Zero," to which Zero replies "We're brothers," and Gustave nods his head in agreement (1:01:55). The acting in this scene shows Zero patiently enduring Gustave's slanderous remarks and Gustave humbled by Zero's story. O'Brien also discusses the importance of this scene to Gustave's view of Zero. O'Brien says of Gustave: "He thus switches in an instant—solely because Zero has opened his mouth to tell his story—from

exacting master to the benevolent guardian who will not only make Zero his heir but for whom he will finally give up his life" (O'Brien 24). The acting in this scene conveys the change in relationship as Gustave welcome's Zero and sees him as a brother, and indirectly, a hero. The mise-en-scène of the scene includes the characters framed with a door behind them symbolizing how closed off they are from one another. The light centered above and behind them in the scene represents information that illuminates Gustave, who, after the conversation, sees Zero in a new light. The tattered clothes Zero and Gustave wear in this scene match the dirty outdoor barn scenery and are a direct contrast from the formal purple hotel uniforms. Zero's humility and steadfastness are powerful manifestations of his great character.

Lastly, in their final moments together onscreen, a role reversal transition occurs in which Gustave and Zero adopt each other's form of greatness; Gustave embraces humility and Zero assumes authority. The vibrant color of the film switches to black and white and signals a transition in the story on the day the independence of the country ends (1:28:23). The train's transit to a new destination parallels new changes in Gustave and Zero's relationship as Gustave transitions out of his role as concierge and establishes Zero in his place. Gustave says, "I was perhaps for a time considered the best lobby boy at the Budapest. I think I could say that. This one finally surpassed me; however, I must say he had an exceptional teacher," to which Zero responds "True" (1:28:30). Gustave embodies the greatness of humility through giving up his position to Zero, and likewise Zero earns respect and gains authority from Gustave.

Coinciding with the gradual but dynamic transformation of Gustave and Zero by embodying each other's portrayal of greatness, the characters transition into new stages of life wherein Zero continues to rise to prominence in the hotel and Gustave descends with humility. On the train in transit, Agatha voices the changes in Gustave and Zero that bring them together in

an unlikely bond. She says the "two radiant, celestial brothers united for an instant . . . one from the East and one from the West" emphasizing the men as "brothers united" and sharing commonalities (1:28:58). After Agatha speaks, the camera captures one half Gustave's face in a profile shot, and the second profile shot captures one half of Zero's face. Showing each of their profiles facing each other, this shot reflects their unity in two equally valuable forms of greatness. Gustave's excels in status and recognition throughout his life, but Zero notes that "[Gustave] did not succeed, however in growing old" (1:27:53). Soldiers board the train, check his and Zero's papers, and kill Gustave after dissatisfaction with his papers that previously allowed him free travel. He dies without connections, his position, or family. Gustave's humble death parallels Zero's humble beginnings with nothing. On the other hand, at the end of the film Zero rises to the position of concierge and says, "he anointed me his successor, and as the war continued, I served my adopted country from the narrow desk still found against the wall in the next room" (1:27:40). Zero receives recognition as Gustave does at the beginning of the film, wearing Gustave's concierge uniform and standing at the same desk. As the story closes, Zero and Gustave exhibit both inward and outward greatness.

The Grand Budapest Hotel presents outward and inward greatness of character as being equally significant. Greatness of character is visible in positions of authority, connections, and recognition, as well as through steadfastness and humility. Gustave proves his great character through his authority in the hotel, and Zero proves his great character through his loyalty towards Gustave as they traverse the country. Each character demonstrates his ability to grow by exhibiting both outward and inward greatness of character by the end of the film. Anderson's portrayal of greatness challenges conceptions of prestige and offers two examples of leadership. The film raises questions about greatness that continue beyond the present moment through the

imagery of the Author's memorial, the depiction of Zero's headline in newspapers, and even the film about Gustave.

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Commentary

Rachel Williams

Die Hard and *A Christmas Story,* the Mistyped Christmas Movies:

An Analysis of the Christmas Movie Genre

A common debate among fans of Christmas films is whether or not John McTiernan's *Die Hard* qualifies as a Christmas movie. However, this debate does not frequently surround other "classic" Christmas movies, such as Bob Clark's *A Christmas Story*, despite their lack of adherence to the genre's tropes. While both these movies occur at Christmas time, the setting of a movie is not enough to determine its genre. Genres typically develop due to common tropes or character archetypes that define the genre. For example, while the concept of a "Chosen One" occurs outside of the fantasy film genre, it is rare to encounter a fantasy film without the "Chosen One" archetype. Another example is romance movies, in which most films follow a specific formula: the couple meets and falls in love; they encounter an obstacle that usually results in the dissolution of the relationship; but in the end, they reunite for a "happily ever after" ending. Of course, these tropes and character types do not entirely decide a genre. However, most of these tropes do appear to some extent in that genre, and the Christmas movie genre is no exception. According to the example of the established genre tropes of Christmas movies as they appear in *It's a Wonderful Life* and *The Polar Express,* the film *Die Hard* most closely follows the Christmas movie genre's requirements, while *A Christmas Story* actually lacks any resemblance to a Christmas movie at all.

In order to determine whether a movie is a "Christmas movie," we must first establish the Christmas movie genre. The mostly widely acclaimed "classic" Christmas movies include Frank

Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life,* Bob Clark's *A Christmas Carol,* Robert Zemeckis's *The Polar Express,* Chuck Jones's *How the Grinch Stole Christmas,* George Seaton's *A Miracle on 34th Street,* and various adaptations of Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol. A Christmas Story* often appears in the list alongside these titles, but its narrative differs from the others substantially and is one of the few that do. According to the common threads in *Polar Express* and *It's a Wonderful Life,* the Christmas movie genre dictates that the object of the movie is to teach the protagonists a lesson that in some way brings them to a better understanding of and relationship with the people in their lives. Each of these movies features a jaded, cynical protagonist, usually with a particularly negative attitude towards Christmas. This protagonist experiences some threat to his way of thinking or his life, resulting in a change in perspective, typically with the assistance of a guide. This change brings about an improvement to the character's life, usually through repaired or improved relationships.

The jaded protagonist appears in many of the "classic" Christmas films. *It's a Wonderful Life* features George Bailey, a man who, despite his initial optimism, loses dream after dream throughout the first half of the movie, which leads to his wish that he had never been born. Bailey begins the movie differently from most Christmas movie protagonists as a happy, hopeful young man, but eventually, after continuous losses throughout the film, like his dreams of travel, college, honeymoon, and his desired career path, he becomes embittered. After finally realizing that he will go out of business and probably go to jail, he tells his wife, "I don't want the families over here!" in response to her comment about the Christmas party that night (1:26:22). He then goes into a rage, yelling at his children, their teacher, and the teacher's husband. In a later scene, another character in the film tells Bailey, "you're worth more dead than alive" (1:34:40), leading to Bailey's wish that he had never been born, which begins the classic Christmas movie story

arc. Though Bailey does not begin the film as the jaded protagonist required for the Christmas movie genre, he becomes jaded and desperate through his experiences. After this change occurs, his wish that his life were important and the subsequent realization of that wish shape his redemptive character arc in the story.

The boy from *Polar Express* (nicknamed Tom for clarity's sake) has reached a point in his childhood at which he believes he is superior to children around him, namely his sister, because he has logically concluded that Santa Claus is a myth before them. He overhears his sister telling their parents that he had told her Santa Claus was not real, and when the parents reassure her that he is real, Tom pulls out his stash of magazines about the myth of Santa Claus and an encyclopedia that says the North Pole is "devoid of life" (0:04:00). Later, he boards the Polar Express, a decision which lends itself to a less cynical reading of Tom; however, one of the first things he says to his fellow passenger is the question: "Are we really going to the North Pole?" (00:10:58). Tom, like most Christmas movie protagonists, begins the film cynical of his life or the holiday in general and eventually develops a belief otherwise.

John McClane is the jaded protagonist in *Die Hard*, and the opening sequences show the audience his strained relationship with his wife. Holly Genaro, formally Holly McClane, tells her daughter, "we'll see what Mommy and Santa can do" in response to her question if her father is coming for Christmas as the camera pans to a photo of John and Holly (00:04:23). McClane is visiting his estranged wife for the holidays, and he tells his limo driver, whom he calls Argyle, that his wife had moved to California to advance her career, and that he had elected to stay behind as he was unable to pick up and move (00:07:03). When Argyle quips, "you thought . . . she'd come crawling back to you, so why bother to pack, right?" McClane responds, "Like I said, you're very fast, Argyle" (00:07:28). These two scenes establish McClane as a man

estranged from his wife and children and cynical about his wife's career and her ability to succeed in her new job, fitting him perfectly into the role of the cynical, jaded protagonist.

While the tension in *Die Hard,* unlike *Polar Express* or *It's A Wonderful Life*, is much more of a physical threat than a psychological one, it still casts doubt on the protagonist's world view. The conflict in most Christmas movies is a threat to a belief system, such as Tom's discovery that the Santa Claus legend is real or George Bailey's realization that without his existence his whole town would suffer. In John McClane's case, the conflict is the direct threat to his life from Hans Gruber and his gang of terrorists. McClane is the only man in the building who is both aware of the threat and free to act against the terrorists.

Another common element of the Christmas genre is the appearance of a guide. This is one trope that does not necessarily appear in every Christmas movie, but it is an extremely common thread. In the classic lineup, *It's a Wonderful Life* features Clarence, an angel that shows the protagonist the world without him. While not always a staple to the Christmas movie guide, Clarence develops as a character due to George Bailey's influence just as Bailey does from his. In the film, Clarence gains a reward for helping Bailey in the form of wings, for which he expresses an intense desire early in the film. Bailey finds Clarence's copy of *Tom Sawyer* with a message inside thanking him for his help in earning his wings (02:08:41). Though not true of all cases, the guide frequently benefits from the relationship with the protagonist in some way. In *The Polar Express,* there is a ghostly apparition that appears to Tom throughout the movie, reflecting his own opinions and fears and giving them a voice, allowing Tom to come to terms with his faulty beliefs and change them. This guide does not obviously benefit from his interactions with Tom, but he still fulfills the stereotypical role as a guide in helping Tom reflect on his beliefs and see them manifest in a way that encourages him to find redemption.

John McClane's guide through his harrowing adventure is the first officer to respond to the emergency, Sergeant Powell. This is the only character with whom McClane maintains constant contact via radio, though he briefly speaks to both Gruber and the FBI. Powell provides him with support and reassurance throughout the film, warning him about the actions of the police and the FBI throughout the night, which allows him to navigate around law enforcement and terrorists with much more ease. McClane is also instrumental to Powell's development as a character, which is reflective of Clarence's story in *It's a Wonderful Life*. In a heartfelt scene, McClane questions why Powell is no longer a field agent for the LAPD, instead working behind a desk. Powell reveals that he "shot a kid" (01:40:29) and that the mistake haunted him from then on, rendering him unable to bring himself to draw his gun on anyone for any reason. Near the end of the film, after the danger seems to have passed, one final terrorist previously thought dead rises and begins waving a gun, ready to kill McClane. The audience sees a perspective shot from a gun as an unknown character shoots the terrorist, saving the McClanes. The camera then pans to show Powell as the shooter, showing that his relationship with John has allowed him to regain his ability to act in crisis, a vital part of his identity as a police officer (02:05:34). The guide in the film helps the protagonist through his journey, helping him regain a meaningful relationship with the important people in his life, and in return the guide gains something for himself, a frequently utilized Christmas trope.

As each of these three movies develop, the characters slowly begin to see the flaws in their own way of thinking and living, though are not usually able to change their ways fully until a dramatic inciting incident, usually resulting in the climax of the movie. For example, *It's a Wonderful Life* shows George Bailey discovering all the ways his small town is different without his existence. He discovers the changes in the town, the unfortunate fate of family and friends,

and even the death of his brother at the age of nine. However, it is not until he finds his wife Mary and futilely begs for his wife to remember him that he decides he would much rather live his life in jail than leave the world to its fate without him. In *The Polar Express*, Tom sees more and more of the North Pole, touring the elves' workshop, the presents, and the Christmas tree at the North Pole, but it is not until the elves bring out the bells for the sleigh and Tom realizes that he cannot hear them ring that he begins to realize his cynicism is more harmful than helpful. He reaches down for a bell and brings it to his ear, saying "I want to believe," desperately wanting to hear the bell ring (01:11:35). These specific inciting incidents lead to the "restoration" of the protagonist to a more wholesome, Christmas-friendly belief system, erasing their cynicism and giving them a new appreciation for their relationships.

The inciting incident that triggers McClane's character redemption occurs after the terrorists almost kill him and he escapes only by running barefoot across a floor covered in shards of broken glass. He asks Powell for a favor because he's "starting to get a bad feeling up here" (01:45:40). McClane realizes that his odds of survival are low and dropping quickly. He will likely die before having another opportunity to repair his relationship with Holly, so he tells Powell to give his wife a message if he does not make it out of the building alive. His message to her is: "It took me a while to figure out . . . what a jerk I've been" (01:46:05). He laments not being supportive of her career and not being there for her. He also instructs Powell to tell his wife not that he loves her, but that he is sorry. His reasoning for this exact message is, "She's heard me say 'I love you' a thousand times. She's never heard me say I'm sorry" (01:46:47). This is significant because these statements contradict his cynical view of Holly and her career at the beginning of the movie and establish the redemption of his character through his newfound appreciation for the people in his life: the classic Christmas movie character development.

In contrast to these highly structured stories, *A Christmas Story* does not follow the more traditional, linear storyline, instead favoring cohesive vignettes of the Christmas adventures of a young boy named Ralphie. This narrative style choice leads to infertile grounds for a "moral" to develop. However, the singular and most pervasive thread in the story is Ralphie's desire for a Red Rider BB gun. In the film, Ralphie spends the entire movie begging his parents, his teacher, and Santa Claus for a Red Rider BB Gun in as many creative ways as possible. However, he unfailingly receives the same response: "You'll shoot your eye out" (00:07:16). Despite these protestations from everyone around him, his obsession continues until finally he receives the gun for Christmas. Within minutes, the warnings come true and he realizes, "I shot my eye out!" (01:21:39). His gun backfires, and though it does not actually damage his eyes or cause any real physical harm beyond shock, it does lead to Ralphie stepping on and crushing his glasses. While no lasting harm actually occurs, Ralphie proceeds to lie about the cause to his mother, blaming an icicle, and the entire storyline receives no additional attention or development. While this scene is open to an interpretation that listening to adults is good and/or BB guns are bad, there is no concrete resolution to this idea, leaving any chance at a moral incomplete. There is no guide, no one character who is Ralphie's moral compass or encourager in the film, and there is no definite change in beliefs, leaving the elements of the Christmas movie severely lacking in *A Christmas Story.*

Though, of course, preferred Christmas classics will always be left to viewers to determine for themselves, *Die Hard* should not be excluded from that list just because it is an unconventional addition. While the events of the film are much more serious than most Christmas movies, the underlying themes are consistent with Christmas movie tropes, allowing for an easy induction into the genre. John McClane's bleak outlook on life and his relationships

develop into a gratitude for and a desperation to preserve his life as it was, and he receives help

from and provides a reward to his guide, Powell. Though the film does not achieve the

protagonist's redemptive arc in the same way as other Christmas films, it still utilizes that same

arc, the same tropes, and the same character types, earning itself the title of a Christmas movie.

Works Cited

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    Bonnie Bedelia. Twentieth Century Fox, 1988.

It's a Wonderful Life. Directed by Frank Capra, performances by James Stewart, Donna Reed,

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    Michael Jeter. Castle Rock Entertainment, 2004.

Short Story

Trent Carruth

The Walls

I stared blankly at the mediocre plate of food that had been conjured up by Mother. At the same time, Mother stared at me optimistically, wondering in vain if I would force myself to eat any more of her poorly constructed meals. Overcooked carrots and microwaved fish sticks. They were the only things that Mother knew how to make. Father was usually the one to cook dinner for us, as he was much more knowledgeable of the culinary arts than Mother, but now that Father was away, cooking duties were left to Mother, who was far less experienced. I had inquired of Mother on multiple occasions if she had used the overwhelming amount of free time she had to teach herself how to cook any other meals, but she always answered with seemingly innocent fibs about trying to keep up with the cleaning. She failed to realize the effects of her habitual lying. It emphasized the difficult reality that she actively refused to better her relationship with her children. Her children whom she had promised Father to take care of while he was across oceans and mountains and fighting with his fellow men.

Father had been away at war with the Enemy for three months now. He didn't have to go, but he and Mother insisted that there were not enough men on the battlefield. "The papers say so," Mother had told me, showing me an old, wrinkled sheet filled with words that were too big for me to understand and pictures that had so little context that there was no way I could tell what was happening.

I did not spend too much time reading the papers. Not because I maintained any personal vendetta towards those who dedicate so much time to inform the people, but instead because of

how reading of such terrible events sparked so much despair in my heart. Father's heart, however, became full of anger and rage at the things he read in the papers. I lost count of how many times I walked into the kitchen only to listen to him drone on to Mother about what was in the papers that day. His outrage at current events mounted with each passing day. I never understood why he constantly poisoned his mind with such hatred. But it was commonplace for Mother and Father to do things that I did not understand. My attempts to debate their narrow-minded views had become tiresome, so I decided that such efforts to do so would be wasted.

Father's abandonment of his family had come suddenly. He had already packed his bags and left without saying goodbye. Mother insisted that this lack of a farewell was for the best. Brother had already received his draft papers and been away for six months, and I had at least been given a chance to say goodbye. I remember him picking me up and saying, "When I get back, you might be as tall as me!" After he left, I cried myself to sleep every night for a month, wondering why Brother had to leave, what he had done that day, and when he would come home. Mother and Father had heard my wails and at first tenderly reminded me that Brother was strong and wise, and that any fears I was imagining were just exaggerations of a youthful mind. As time went on, the comforts Mother and Father provided became few and far in between, and eventually stopped entirely. I assumed that they had grown exhausted by my constant tears and concluded that the best course of action would be to leave me be in hopes that I would soon forget about Brother and focus on the Nation's troubles.

But my imagination could not be tempered, and I continued to picture Brother on the battlefield with his fellow soldiers, holding their muskets and dodging fire from the Enemy's machine gun fire. I was scared that Brother would be in the dark for too long, but hopefully the soldiers had night-vision goggles. I did not know whether Brother was riding horses into battle or

flying planes across the desert in search of Enemy bases ripe for attack. I did not know what his uniform looked like, or whether he was wearing a uniform at all. What if he had been sent on a secret mission to steal plans? What if he was meeting all kinds of outrageous characters? What if he came back with stories to tell—stories like the ones we listened to on the radio when we were younger? What if his plane had never landed to wherever he was going? What if he himself lacked knowledge of the task to which he would be appointed? What if he had the same innocent naïveté as me? These questions would never be answered.

"The good of the Nation is the good of the People!" Mother and Father constantly felt the need to remind me of this phrase that had gained a fair amount of popularity in recent years. In fact, this belief had been so commonplace for so long that I could scarcely remember a time when people did not mention it. Not only did the people of the Nation tell it to you but also the buildings in town. Everywhere you walked, down the street, in restaurants, in other people's homes, you would see posters of the Leader's face. You would see decorations of the Nation's colors in the walls. Posters depicting the men of the grand army holding their rifles and bayonets with the words "To Victory!" emblazoned above their heads in bold lettering. I had often wondered why these posters covered so much of the walls of the city. "I wonder what those walls look like under all that paper," I would say to Mother and Father, who would scoff whenever I brought up the subject. Their dismissal of my questions led me to stop asking them.

I had remembered this just as I was about to ask Mother if there were any other options for dinner tonight. I had stopped myself from speaking just as I was opening my mouth. I promptly closed it in hopes that Mother had not noticed. Those hopes were dashed when Mother looked at me inquisitively and asked, "What's the matter?"

"Nothing," I replied.

"You were about to say something," Mother continued.

"No," I said bluntly.

"Just because Father is gone does not mean you have no one to talk to. Now what's wrong?"

I had not expected Mother to so quickly use Father as a token in this discussion. She usually saved that for when our arguments become heated. No matter how well-structured my statements would be, Mother would trump them by bringing up how much I missed Father and telling me I was letting my emotions get the best of me. I hated it when she did that.

"What does Father have to do with this?" I asked rhetorically.

"I know you think Father is the better cook, and I don't blame you."

"Then why don't you get better?"

"You're not the only one who's struggling darling," Mother said. The tone with which she said this was so condescending that I stood up.

"So you're saying it's not right to struggle?" I asked. This time I asked it as if I demanded an answer.

Mother stared at me silently, as if she were trying desperately to come up with a response to what I had just said. She took a deep breath, sighed, and said, "Did you read the papers today?"

I refused to believe how much she was deflecting. She spoke with such reluctance that one could easily tell that she knew asking that question was a bad idea. But instead of stopping, she continued, "They say there was an explosion at a base in the east. Many men died."

I looked at my mother, wondering why she would bring up something so cruel. Then I realized, "Father is stationed there."

"Your brother, too," Mother added.

I suddenly felt a deep pit form in my chest. As if a dark cloud began to grow within my lungs. I had trouble breathing. Stars spun about my head as a ringing slowly built up in my ears. Mother did nothing as all this was happening, she just sat there.

"I received a telegram this morning," she said.

I quickly turned towards her after she said this, my eyes wide with fear. She had placed the telegram on the table. I studied the pale, yellow envelope, wondering what precious information it contained. Mother stared at it as well but with a look in her eyes that suggested she partly wanted to know and partly never wanted to know.

"I haven't opened it yet," she continued.

"Open it!" I demanded practically the second she finished talking.

"No!" Mother yelled, interrupting me back. "Eat your dinner," she commanded as if the past minute of conversation had never happened.

I stared in disbelief as she picked up her knife and fork and continued forcing herself to eat dinner. I tried to muster up a response, but I came up with nothing. With each passing second, I felt as if the best course of action would be to follow Mother's lead and continue eating. Those urges soon dissipated.

I reached for the envelope, being sure to do it quickly so that Mother couldn't react in time. But I was too slow. Mother's hand wrapped around the envelope so suddenly it was almost as if she expected me to lunge for it. "Eat your dinner," she commanded again.

I felt something bubble up inside of me. It was a familiar emotion, one that I had felt previously. It was the same emotion I had felt after Father had left. I suddenly felt a need to burst out towards Mother, even though I knew doing so would look unprofessional to her. I settled for

saying something that I knew in my heart I would regret saying, but the need for me to say it was irresistible.

I never got the chance to say it, though. The sirens began to wail.

Mother looked up, at first having trouble understanding what was going on, but soon she realized what the miserable drone meant. "Get to the basement."

Out of instinct, I turned and ran towards the basement, having forgotten about the argument. Fear had replaced the anger in my heart, and I began to have trouble breathing again. Mother and I made our way downstairs, and we sat down in our individual chairs. These chairs were soft, yet worn. They were old living room chairs that Father had moved into the basement. The furniture in the basement used to be plain wooden desk chairs. Father replaced them with these new ones to ease the pain in our lower backs in case we needed to sit in them for a long while.

Father was sure to also provide decorations in the basement. Every inch of wall was covered with posters that Father and Mother deemed inspirational. Soldiers carrying their assault rifles into battle. Brave men riding horses through enemy lines. Airplanes crudely dropping bombs on cities that looked no different to ours. The words "To Victory!" and "Enlighten the World" adorning the posters. Father was also sure to remind us what the face of our Leader looked like, lest we forget. In a frame more decorative than that of the family portrait that hung over our fireplace, the Leader's face stared blankly at its viewer. I stared back while Mother sat silently next to me.

I turned towards Mother, not to say anything, for I felt not a want nor a need to talk to her. I only looked at her to see if this time she would be scared. Of course, she was scared every time the sirens blared, but her fear only seemed to be a fear for the Nation, not for her family. I

stared at her face, while she simply stared at the portrait of the Leader, as if she hoped doing so would affect the outcome of the bombings.

It didn't. It never did, and Mother should have known that. There were still faint booms that varied in volume depending on how close they were each time they landed. The walls would shake, too. Sometimes they shook so hard that a corner of a poster would disconnect from the wall. This was a problem Mother felt the need to fix as soon as it happened. After one particularly close boom, the portrait of the Leader fell. Because of its distance from the floor, part of the frame chipped at the impact. Mother yelped when this happened, as one would yelp after stubbing their toe on a table leg. She quickly jumped up from her seat and rehung the image.

It was then that I noticed that the telegram was missing. Mother had not brought it down with her to the basement. When the sirens had begun to blare, I had forgotten about the telegram entirely in my fear. Now I realize just how foolish I was to let my terror blind me from my priorities. "Where is the telegram?" I asked Mother.

"That is not important right now, darling," Mother answered.

"You left it on the dinner table."

"You need to focus, darling."

"Go get it," I demanded.

Mother simply stared. It felt like hours had gone by before she responded, "Don't be ridic–"

"Go get the telegram," I interrupted.

"I will do no such thing," Mother sternly said.

My next statement is one I will never forget. "The Leader would certainly hate to hear about how you damaged that beautiful frame."

Mother's face turned white at what I had just said. "You wouldn't dare."

I said nothing.

"I am your mother."

I said nothing.

After a brief moment, Mother stood up. "Alright, but only if you will shut up." She then slowly walked up the stairs and, after an exhausted sigh, left the basement and closed the door.

Barely half a minute had passed before a deafening blast occurred just outside the basement door. I covered my ears and was barely able to hear myself scream as I heard tons of stone and wood collapse. After the sound had passed, I sat in my chair trembling in fear, not knowing what to do.

The National Authorities found me the following day. They concluded by the lack of markings on the basement door that I had not attempted to escape my confinement. This confused them as practically no debris blocked my exit. They reported that they had found me sitting in the middle of the basement floor staring at the wall.

I was. Shreds of paper lay around me, and I just stared at what lay underneath: brick and mortar with the occasional nail from a portrait or gunk from the glue of a poster. Without those portraits and posters, these walls were like a blank canvas. They could be anything I wanted them to be. What to put on them or hang on them or draw on them was no one else's decision but mine. I could see something that no one else could see. What my thoughts were able to create. I, and only I, could truly realize the full beauty of what I could see beyond those walls.

The National Authorities inquired if I needed medical attention. I simply replied, "I never knew the walls looked so clean under all that Filth."

Poetry

Bradyn Debysingh

Artes Artis

How's told the tale of fled-flesh forced to bark?
Of rooted seed or fleeing she who knows
How goes her throe from wet to clotted spark
Of fibrous vein feigned quick with human pose?
Poised slow for poisoned arrow piercing shot—
Through lofty heart now bent 'pon bruisèd bark
No, flesh! No, bark! No perch for wearied lark:
The fiery bird in plot twists cold ends naught.
But she to seed or flesh to bark enthroned
In stone dolled down from Nature's peak alone—
Behold! Being now trinitary blown:
The flesh sung bark in Gaea's hearth now cloned.
Woman or tree, can one they truly be?
semper artes artis mutamini!

Poetry

Bradyn Debysingh

What Is Literature to Me?

(Inspired by Countee Cullen)

What is literature to me?
Pen and ink or Being free?
Being captive to the page
Or Page enrapt to Poetry's stage?

A seized moment of fleeting mind
Expressed in marks so freely fine—
The express vessels of heraldry
Drawing that line from you to me.

A tome, a scroll, a screen full score
Atone for muse of ancient lore
To present fiend of fiery kin—
To media mix 'tis but small sin.

For how is Being free to be
But trapped in tempo, limboed sea?
In Bard's eternal lines she grows—
She stretches wide in scribbled clothes.

Poetry

Jillian A. Fantin

melville dreamin'

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ten dollar bachelorette champagne should taste less like a salt lick.
at your party, after you took a single sip from my chilled glass,
coating its rim with your thickly slathered chapstick,
we meandered the artificial grove together, ignoring the impasse,
those soon-to-be-dead love letters stacking against our fragile Lesbos,
as we wove together our bound-to-break Pangaeaic landmass.
please, please, impinge my mouth with one final taste of rose
and you may kiss one more line up my bony spine's snaking styx
so you may forget me. But never forget every moment my clothes
pooled around my ankles, every second we forget politics,
and every instant our shared eyes murmured, "I would prefer not to."
never, never again will I love someone I know I must never kiss.
last night, your soul narrated new life into me, still industrialized from wedded woe.
today, I hold your white roses, watching you join the factory with your unloving beau.

Poetry

Jillian A. Fantin

What happened to the mornings when you said, "Hey Baby"?

I dust, at dusk, our evening coffin's wooden frame, careful feathers
brushing clean this labyrinth of Eve's cracked ribs. My bedmate always forgets
our electric encounters. Whenever the stars sculpt the new day's
lemon juice sun his voice, rasped with affection and sweet words,
coats itself in his daily scrambled eggs—never sunny-side up
—and smooths into sweet tenors for his CEO and sour
be-back-laters for his stepford who cooks his breakfast
every morning. No matter.

It's about time he gets us a new mattress. This old one is so lumpy.

Once I was his aphrodisiac. Now, my artichoke heart remains
blackened since his stale tequila snores first assaulted my senses and melted
Arcadia into a crumpled heap of arteries.
Just like the ashes that flutter down from my waning cigarette,
I have scattered my living remains to keep his world moving.

Goddammit. He knows I have nothing left to wear. Where is he?

Door opens. My cadaver wrapped in a starched suit shrouds the threshold once again.
Silent stomps rattle our bed's bones. Back turned, he reminds me
of the already-invited commotion readying to trespass onto my routine.
My skin tightens. As every last nerve and vein congeals in
unwelcome anticipation, slithering down my spine and
haloing my skull, I stay silent. Revel
in the final quiet moments before I accept
my fate of persephoning myself beside him in his encroaching underworld.

Lucky me. Looks like he did something right.

Bending down to the stiff Balenciaga bag he stood on the floor,
I unwrap my new dress to change into for when his company arrives.

Poetry

Holly Moore

muscles and men

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in construction, no one trusts me.
as if female does not contain the word male,
tall, broad-shouldered, towering at 6'3".
waking before dawn, don't be late or you'll lose the job.
it's a constant boy's locker room, and you better remember
your reflexes, like a professional athlete. glass shatters.
do not become numb to repetition or you might put a nail in your head.
don't do it, no matter how bad you want to.
dating after hours is unacceptable;
dirty—every day, covered in dust—who wants to kiss that?
I teach volunteers how to use a chop saw.
they glare. I learned in a Dominican Republic summer as a missions intern and
they haven't drilled since the age of seventeen, surrounded by empty beer cans.
now I understand why my twice-divorced aunt wears
her Get-the-Hell-Away-from-Me ring on her very own construction site.
when the builder brings his children – they dangle their legs from the scaffolding,
like tiny tan turkey legs.
and we wonder if we should worry as Keegan's feet stand on my shoulders.
my body teeters-totters as I wait for him to finish the stairwell.
don't be concerned; we do this shit all the time.
shortly after the sun sets, my body crumples into the bed
like a ladder toppling onto the cement.
tomorrow, we do it again: tiny houses for the homeless.
pray it doesn't rain. I'd rather not catch pneumonia.

Lauren Morris

My Shameful Truth[1]

My dad should have been a cruise director. Every year before embarking on our traditional week-long sea-journey, he puts on his captain hat and gives us a personal tour of whatever boat we've boarded. His wrinkles lift when he is at sea. My mom and I don't have the will to tell him the truth. For us, there is a certain level of sacrifice involved in going on a cruise. It is his vacation, not ours. After 2012, I never wanted to go on a cruise again.

***

I meandered inside a place shimmering artificially with platinum seats and fake smiles, where crimson and navy-blue walls were ready to duel. It was Club O_2, Carnival Cruise's refuge for teens fifteen to seventeen-years-old. I could feel the bass rattle my chest; neon strobe lights assaulted my vision; the crush of people was a suffocating ocean. I tasted teenage sweat in the air. Platters of honey-dew were the club's only saving grace, and even then, they lay on blinding countertops. I took a glitter-rimmed plastic plate from an unused stack, forked honey-dew onto it, and ate the juicy fruit with my fingers. A brunette girl wearing a Rolling Stones t-shirt and jean shorts with pockets peeking out stood outside the largest circle of swaggering teens, nibbling at a plate full of star fruit. Dancing to *WOW Hits 2012 (Deluxe Edition)*, her hips jolted from side to side as if wooden. At least we had that in common. It was the second day of the

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[1] The names of the people featured in this story have been changed to protect their identities.

cruise, about time to start making friends. She looked quirky and fun, and I wasn't shy then. I'd take my chances on a new friend.

I weaved through teenagers on the light-up dance floor, forced to contort my body to avoid grinding couples. She saw me shape-shifting and belly-laughed. Proud of my performance, I took a spot next to her on the wall and reached out my hand to introduce myself.

"Hi! I'm Lauren. What's your name?" My voice sounded more confident than I was, but no less artificial.

She motioned for me to give her a second; I had caught her chewing. "It's Nicole—Hey, you were great out there," she pointed to the school of grinding teens. "Five stars."

"I'm on every thirty minutes," I curtsied. "So, where are you from?"

"Florida! How about you?"

"North Carolina—"

We were interrupted by torn denim jeans, a t-shirt with a band logo I did not recognize, and a leather jacket that was not at all appropriate for summer. I stepped back a little. Nicole stood her ground.

"Hi, ladies. Who are you fine thangs?" My nose wrinkled as if reacting to spoiled milk. Jacket-boy noticed.

"That was so embarrassing; I'm sorry. Can I try again?"

I smiled cautiously. He took an exaggerated breath.

"My name is Steven, and I'm from Georgia. What are your names?"

Nicole thrust her hand forward, overly eager, "I'm Nicole!!"

I waited to introduce myself until the bubbles of her enthusiasm popped.

"And I'm Lauren. It's nice to meet you, Steven," I smiled when Nicole pressed her lips together in an effort to disguise giddy laughter. She bit her bottom lip and leaned toward me to whisper in my ear. She wanted to go swimming with him. I nodded, ready to speak at a normal volume again. Years later, I realized Nicole wanted to go swimming with *him*; I had not been invited. I wish I would have gotten that memo. If I had, I might have never met Seth.

"It's dark and claustrophobic in here. I'm gonna hit the pool," Nicole flirted. "Wanna join?"

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We agreed to change into bathing suits and meet up at the pool farthest away from the slippery children. Nicole and Steven had already submerged themselves in salt water by the time I arrived. I wasn't even finished lathering myself in sunscreen before Nicole got sick of salt and pulled Steven into the adjacent hot tub instead. It was one-hundred-and-three degrees outside. Today, I wonder if that move was girl-code for "I want to swim with *him*." But in 2012, all I was thinking about was whether I looked good in a bikini. Most people come to the pool to hypnotize themselves with others' bodies while silently judging their own. I could not help but feel the weight of unsolicited eyes as I walked over to the hot tub. I was self-conscious about the space I occupied and the attention my body attracted from swimsuit models carrying salt-crusted margaritas.

The hot tub was empty except for the bare bodies of my new friends. Bubbles filled the space next to Steven where they encouraged me to slip into even greater heat. I felt their steady gaze as steaming water overwhelmed my feet, calves, quads, hips, belly, breasts. The Jacuzzi jets were so powerful I worried their force would unpeel me like a banana. Not only could I not relax

my body because of the heat, I could not relax my mind because of the weight of possessive attention from uninvited onlookers directed toward my boobs.

A hand extended into my peripheral vision. "Hey! I'm Brent!"

Nicole's giggles averted my attention from bodies.

"Oh! Hi! I'm Lauren!" I struggled to find his name in the nooks of my short-term memory. "Was it… Um…?" I paused again. "I'm sorry. What is your name, again?"

"Don't worry about it! I'm Brent." His smile was sincere.

I smiled back; I'd met a friend. We entertained the conventional formula for small-talk.

"So, where are you from?" I asked.

"Florida, just a few miles from—"

Nicole abruptly exploded from the water. "ME TOO!!! Which part of Florida??"

Nicole's turn. I let my eyelids fall and silenced the sounds around me.

Just as my muscles began to relax in the bubbling Jacuzzi water, I felt something foreign spider itself onto my exposed upper thigh. I looked down to see Steven's rough hands. Goose bumps shielded my skin. No one noticed me blush; my face was already red from the water's rising heat. I jumped up like Nicole had before, using myself as a distraction from Steven's hands.

"It's getting really hot in here," I murmured, embarrassed by the alien feeling of touch. "I'm going to go sit down in the shade."

"We can all go to my room?" Brent responded quickly. Perhaps he'd noticed Steven's hands. "My best friend is just chilling there. His parents brought me on the cruise to keep him company. I think he'd like to meet you all." Slight nervousness was present in Brent's voice. I didn't understand why.

Nicole reached for my hand to help her out of the Jacuzzi. "I'm hot, too. Let's meet Brent's friend!" The breeze was much stronger than it had been an hour before. Empty cups scurried across the pool deck. My goose bumps came back. Brent's tone had left a kind of unease in the air.

I should have wrapped myself in a towel and relaxed under the shade of a yellow umbrella.

Brent's room was on the twelfth floor, only two down from the pool deck. He went in first; we waited outside. I wondered why we had to wait. Brent had said that his friend's parents had brought him on the cruise to keep their son company. It seemed odd to me. Why did Brent's friend need company? Couldn't he just make friends like the rest of us? My mind—always concerned with others—ran through the possibilities. Was his friend struggling with social anxiety? Did he have a disability? Was he just extremely introverted? Whatever the case, I instinctually wanted to provide some sort of comfort. I am overly empathetic. Sometimes I wish I weren't.

I could barely make out Brent's voice explaining that he'd made friends and would like to introduce them, and that it would be good for his friend to get out of bed. The other voice protested softly. Brent was rolling his eyes when he opened the door to his poorly-lit abode.

The protester looked down at stiff hands as we entered his space. His fingertips, blood-stained from constant picking, were the first thing to catch my eye. He was sitting cross-legged on one of the two twin beds, spine bristling out of his brittle frame, neck bent like a fetus toward his belly button, gaze fixed on fidgeting fingers sitting harshly in his lap. He was too fragile to introduce himself, too tired to notice me noticing him. Muggy air ran its greasy fingers through the boy's hair. I was afraid that a whisper could break him. I'm still afraid of that.

"This is Steven, Nicole, and—Seth, come on man. I'm introducing people. Look up."

When he did, I felt his eyes settle on me. They haven't turned away since.

"As I was saying," Brent declared, "This is Steven, Nicole, and Lauren. I met them at the hot tub on the top deck…"

Brent went on to describe everything he knew about Steven, Nicole, and me after having known us for thirty minutes. I don't think Seth was listening; I know I wasn't. Our gaze locked uncomfortably, and the sag in his eyes underscored the black hole that would consume me for years. I still wonder what he was thinking when our gaze went unchecked.

Nicole sliced the tension between us: "So, do you guys wanna get food?"

Brent's eyes got big: "Fantastic suggestion!! Seth?"

His quiet voice conceded.

<p align="center">***</p>

I tuned in to him during dinner, but all I got was the sound of his fork raking the plate. He looked up at me a few times, though. His gaze reached inside my head to inquire why I was paying attention to him. It was then that I realized Seth was depressed. I was determined— whatever the cost—to help.

Walking around the top deck at sunset, I finally said something: "Hey, I know Brent introduced us earlier in your room, but I'm Lauren." We started to lag behind the pack. Seth didn't look at his feet or at the pastel colors painting the sky; he looked straight at me. He was quiet, curious: "I'm Seth." The ocean's waves roared on the cold horizon.

In the distance, Brent, Steven, and Nicole aligned five lounge chairs, all sticky and smelling of spilt strawberry margaritas. The others made easy conversation, but Seth and I sat in silence, interpreting the sunset before us. The colors in the sky had no clear start or end; there

were lavender, auburn, and crimson hues, but, somehow, they were dependent on one another for definition. Purple became orange; orange became pink; pink faded into a deep blue that connected the heavens to the sea. The ocean's tumultuous surface reflected the medley of color that hung softly in heavy clouds, and the elements seemed to weave in and out of each other like Seth's contemplative fingers.

Seth was obviously in pain. Not physical pain, but the other kind. The kind that envelops you in darkness. He was absent of hope. He felt hollow, non-existent. He lived in a dream where he just kept falling.

Seth's eyes were irritated from constant rubbing with flaky red fingers. I placed my hand on his back to let him know that I was there. I couldn't pretend to understand how he was feeling. But I could sit there with him.

Lonely tears dripped from Seth's face when he looked up at me. I spoke to him with compassionate eyes, holding his gaze before resting my head on his shoulder. We watched the horizon shrink together.

That night marked the fragile beginnings of his dependency on me. Seth told me later that the moment I rested my head on his shoulder, he felt like he stopped falling. It was his first experience of genuine empathy and connection in years. And it sent a message I never intended to inspire. Though my emotion toward him had been purely platonic, Seth interpreted it as romantic interest. And I can't blame him for that. If I had been in his shoes, I would have held on to my supporter, too. I might have even developed romantic feelings, just as Seth did.

Once he, Brent, and Steven walked me back to my room, Seth called "dibs" in the elevator. (Steven told me after.) I had no idea that I was his object.

The next morning, Seth knocked on my door with warm breakfast cookies. Even over the sweet scent permeating the hallway, I could smell that Seth had showered and was wearing freshly cleaned clothes. He smiled at me with vulnerable eyes and blushing cheeks. From that point on, I knew he was developing feelings, and I knew I wasn't. But I gladly nodded when he asked me to wake up early to watch the sunrise with him; I blushed when he showered me with compliments; I did not argue when he offered to buy me ice cream; I let him hold my hand across the dinner table.

Although my empathy began as an instinctual reaction to his depression, it turned into a way for me to support him while supporting myself. Our relationship was, at that point, symbiotic. I received the affection I so desired, and he received the empathy he so needed. But I let it go too far, and eventually our relationship became parasitic.

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The twelfth deck of the cruise ship was reserved for adults only. It had large, cushioned lounge chairs, canvas hammocks, and a private Jacuzzi. Significantly, the cruise staff did not monitor the area after 11PM. Seth took me there on the third night of the cruise. There were no lights; I could not see the outline of my hands or Seth's face. It was the purest black I've ever known. Seth took my hand and used the flashlight on his phone to lead the way. He found a hammock near the edge of the boat and helped me jump into it. To my surprise, he slid in with me and slithered his chest under my head, forcing my palm to rest on his beating heart. I could feel his mechanical warmth—I did not like it.

The sky's faint stretch of stars lifted my mind's eye towards things outside of itself. I meditated on our universe's terrifying creativity. Seth was doing the same.

"Lauren?"

"Yes?"

"Do you believe in God?"

I paused, looking down at where my nose must have been. "I believe in love."

"Hmm," I felt Seth nod. "I don't know what I believe."

I stayed silent while Seth unpacked his disbelief. Chin up towards the stars, I felt salt water dig into my dry tongue. I was beginning to understand the significance of his feelings for me, and I didn't know what to do to correct them. My thoughts took a red pen to the actions that led me to this moment: I *had* laid my head on his shoulder when we watched the sunset together; I *had* woken up early to join him for the sunrise; I *had* been happy to receive him and his breakfast cookies into my room; I *had* offered my hand when he experienced depressive episodes. Until now, I hadn't realized the extent to which Seth was dependent on me for mental stability; I hadn't realized the depth of his emotion. I had thought his crush would whither when we got off the boat, but now I knew I had been wrong. I had let my need for affirmation go too far, and now he thought my feelings mirrored his.

Seth didn't see me drop my eyes like a dog sick from chocolate. My clothes felt uncomfortable around my skin.

<center>***</center>

One night, perhaps the fourth, Seth took my hand and led me to the ship's top floor to look at the stars. As soon as the automatic doors opened to the deck, the air changed. What was calm suddenly became chaotic in thick darkness. My hair fought the wind's hands as I tried to wrestle my way out of the hand that enclosed mine. Only one light lit the deck, but leaning on an orange rail, I could see the hot tub where Steven's fingers had traced my leg a few days before.

Around me, lounge chairs were stacked in perfectly equal rows.

I wanted to go back inside; I begged the stars to save me from this moment. I thought that if I kept my chin up, I wouldn't have to look at Seth; I wouldn't have to recognize his attachment to me.

When he put his finger to my chin to tip it toward him, I whispered the most honest thing I have ever said to him: "I am afraid of how much you care about me." My eyebrows furrowed; my cheekbones dropped. I knew what was going to happen next.

He held my face and kissed me with tongue. My body stiffened as if I were the tin man without a heart in the Wizard of Oz.

After about five seconds, he pulled back, smiling. My eyebrows remained furrowed, but I tried to force my cheekbones up. I said something about being tired. He intertwined our fingers and walked me seven flights down to my room, kissing me again before I could open the door.

I went into the bathroom and splashed cold water on my face. Kissing had not mended my despair; it had heightened it. I placed my hands around the sink to hold my shaking body upright before asking myself what the hell I was doing. My mind delved into the larger ethical dilemma of honesty in human relationships and the morality of romantic exploration. He kissed me because he believed that that is what we both wanted. I couldn't blame him for that. I kissed him back because I did not have the courage to tell him the truth: that I empathized with him because he needed empathy and because I liked the attention he gave me. I was to blame. I knew that kissing him was wrong, and I did it anyway. Maybe I didn't care about him enough.

<div align="center">***</div>

We dated for two months after the cruise ended. At some point, I tried to convince myself that I did in fact like him. I even wrote a love story in my journal in an attempt to spark romantic emotion in myself. I had to find some way to justify my dishonesty. If I made myself believe that

I did have feelings for him, maybe the reality would hurt less. And maybe I would never have to tell him how I really felt.

Seth broke up with me the day he missed a plane flight to Charlotte, where I lived at the time. He said I was "too good for him" and hung up the phone. I was surprised. So were Brent, Steven, and Nicole. It was all very abrupt, in truth. To this day, nobody really knows why he broke up with me. But if I am being honest, I am glad he did so that I didn't have to.

Even when I wasn't his girlfriend, I was Seth's support system. I discovered his closet of mental illnesses: schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, major depressive disorder. I listened while he told me stories about being domestically abused as a child. I learned that he believes the archangel Raphael, whose name ironically means "it is God who heals," lives inside of him and possesses him through spells of depression and panic. Seth believes Raphael "entered" him while he was using a mud hill as a Slip-N-Slide during summer camp. According to Seth, God cast Raphael out of heaven during a rainstorm on Earth, and he happened to be sliding down the slope on top of which Raphael fell; they collided in the mud and the archangel found a host. Sometimes Raphael would talk to me on the phone.

After we broke up, Seth became another person. He became possessive, angry, and controlling. He hadn't been like that on the boat. At times, I wonder if I made him that way, as if I were Victor Frankenstein.

One day, he showed up on my college campus, demanding to see me. His visit was the culmination of a half a decade's efforts to convince me to marry him. He wouldn't stay away. When I decided to go to college in Alabama, Seth transferred from a university in Florida to a military academy that would be an hour and a half away from my dorm room. Being so close, he'd driven to Birmingham many times before in hopes of securing my love, but he had never

demanded to see me. From that point forward, I knew Seth's capacity for harming himself and recognized the danger that represents to me.

The next week, I forgot to set my status as "offline" after logging on to Facebook. When my computer yelped, *ping!,* I felt like Seth had been waiting for hours to message me. It was 1AM:

"I just want to say goodbye."

I stared at the screen, feeling forced to respond.

I typed slowly.

"What do you mean?"

My shaking fingers did not want to hit "send."

Send.

Seth started typing immediately.

"You responded. I didn't think you would."

"Are you okay?" I wrote.

"I haven't been okay since the day you told me I scare you, Lauren."

My mind traveled back to the orange railings.

"What's going on?"

"I just want to say goodbye."

"But what do you mean by that?"

"What do you think I mean, Lauren?"

I recognized where this was going from the many calls I had received working at a crisis center.

Be direct.

"Are you feeling suicidal?" I asked.

"I just want to tell you something before I go."

"Do you have a plan about how you'd like to go?"

"Yes."

"Where are you? Are there people nearby?"

"I'm in the middle of a forest in West Alabama, Lauren. You're not going to find me."

"Do you have a weapon with you?"

"I have a knife in my hand. I'm already bloody."

I found Seth's military academy on google maps and searched for splotches of green. Two forests nearby. Three police stations.

First police station: No answer.

Second: "Sorry, that's not in our county. I'll transfer you to the station you need."

Third: "All of our officers are already on a job. There's nothing we can do."

Palms sweaty, I stared into the blackness of my dorm room. The bass in my chest pounded again. I thought, it was true; it seemed like no one really cared whether or not Seth lived through the night. I thought about driving an hour and a half to find him in the forest. But I didn't trust Seth's stability. He had a knife. He could hurt me. With a guilty conscience, I made the choice to not sacrifice myself for him. I did the only other thing I thought could help: I called his best friend, Brent.

Facebook *ping!*-ed. *New message.* "Did you call Brent? I only want to talk to you. I don't want to talk to anyone else. No one cares."

Crisis training had not prepared me for this.

Ping! "You know I wanted to marry you, right? Like, to this day, I still believe you were the one."

Ping! "So much of me still belongs to you. I love everything about you . . . how brilliant you are, how funny, how beautiful. I love you. So much. Still. I'd do anything just to hug you one more time."

Ping! "I never thought me loving you would make you run from me."

Ping! "I'm glad you never saw the damage I did to myself."

Ping! "Goodbye, Lauren."

Death's steps were electronic. I can never say Seth didn't know me.

I heard crisis center administrators telling me not to take his words personally.

This is about him, not you.

But I didn't listen.

"Wait, Seth!"

<div align="center">***</div>

For the next two hours, I used Seth's love for me to get him to go back to his dorm room and bandage up his wounds. He promised me that he would wait one more night before killing himself. I know he wasn't trying to scare or hurt me. But he did, and I finally found the courage to talk to someone about it. That person led me to file a report for stalking and abuse and to block Seth on all of my social media accounts. I didn't want to do it, but I did. I felt like a traitor. I was never completely honest with him. He will never understand my actions, and I have to be willing to bear what I put on my shoulders.

Now, when I think about Seth, I don't think about the ways in which he hurt me. I think about his cracking knuckles and the way he dug at his fingernails, leaving them red and splotchy from blood. I want to take care of his scarred hands, hold them so he won't hurt himself. I can't.

Annie Brown

Programmed for Success? Podcasts as Digital Educational Tools

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Any student who grew up in the internet age can attest that while computers, audiovisual materials, and other education technology can be helpful learning tools, educators do not always readily accept the value of technology in the classroom. Every day in countless schools, students silence their phones, close their laptops, and disconnect their headphones, often only to text or browse social media surreptitiously under their desks. For many teachers and professors, the frustration of integrating technology into lessons outweighs the benefits. In my time as a student, I have heard some argue against the utilization of tools such as online materials and learning software due to concerns regarding distractions in and out of the classroom. However, as noted in recent studies by Harika Hamzaoglu and Zeynep Kocoglu, Khe Foon Hew, and Mohamad Rostami et al., an increasing number of educators and researchers alike have begun to recognize the myriad reasons to use digital tools in education.

In recent years, podcasts have become some of the most accessible digital educational tools, as they can be created, stored, and shared largely for free. Teachers with minimal technological skills and even students in elementary school can easily learn the basics of podcasting. Anyone with a computer or smartphone can record and edit a podcast using Audacity or GarageBand, and share it on iTunes, Spotify, Stitcher, Soundcloud, or dozens of other audio hosting platforms. This commentary seeks to examine how the recent studies on classroom education by Rostami et al. and others reveal that, from researching and writing a script to recording and editing audio, creating a podcast teaches students teamwork and problem solving while boosting comprehension skills. Ultimately, these studies suggest that, for many students,

deficits in reading and listening comprehension serve as the root of their academic struggles, but podcasts provide an opportunity for additional instruction and remedial assistance. Indeed, the research shows that audio(visual) materials can radically improve reading and listening comprehension and provide a more personal, engaging experience for all styles of learners.

In their study on the effects of podcasting in the classroom, Rostami et al. found that Iranian EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students not only enjoyed using podcasts in school but also saw improvements in their English reading and writing comprehension. As their study suggests, podcasts can help students who fall behind academically due to absence to "stay current in their classes" and boost reading and writing confidence to ensure students "sustain the lengthy process of learning a foreign language" (Rostami et al., n. pag). Rostami et al. recruited sixty male students ages thirteen to fourteen in Semnan, Iran, in order to assess their English language proficiency before and after implementation of podcasting in their lessons. Half the group continued to receive typical in-class lessons, while the other half were provided podcast lessons as a supplement to their classroom instruction. According to their exit data, a full eighty percent of the EFL students "believed that podcasting changed their attitude to learning English positively" following participation in the study (Rostami et al., n. pag). The results of this study indicate that podcasting has a direct effect on foreign language learners' motivation and comprehension.

Almost anyone can identify with the struggle to learn a new language. Imagine watching a foreign-language film with no subtitles. This would be a frustrating situation indeed, especially if one is being graded on the assignment. For students, reading along with the spoken audio can radically improve listening comprehension and lead to a greater understanding of pronunciation and word meanings. The same principles that applied to the students in the study by Rostami et

al. also apply to students learning in their native language. As a growing number of educators have found, podcasts are often the perfect way to help students struggling with reading, writing, concentration, or motivation in traditional lecture-based language arts, literature, history, or even science courses. Kimberly Calhoun, a teacher in Baltimore City schools, is one educator who was shocked to see podcasts on her kindergarten class's curriculum (Jones, n. pag.). However, despite her initial wariness, Calhoun found that podcasts "served as a way for kindergartners to practice writing, reading, and using their 'strong voice' for presenting" (Jones, n. pag.). In Calhoun's case, podcasts gave her young students the chance to write a few sentences on farm animals, practice reading those sentences aloud, and finally record their brief podcasts for presentation in class (Jones, n. pag.). Using podcasts in this manner can help boost writing and speaking skills in very young students or those struggling to succeed.

While podcasting is a relatively new concept in the realm of digital learning, the pedagogical potential of such tools should be recognized by curriculum developers and teachers alike. Some educators may have concerns that technology in the classroom may isolate students, but podcasting provides educational opportunities simultaneously personal and cooperative. In fact, numerous teachers have begun using podcasts as inspiration for group projects. Jack Murphy, a teacher at an alternative high school in Chicago, attests that podcasting has brought his students together and increased interest in group projects (Murphy 132). After introducing podcasts into his classrooms, he discovered that students can listen to a podcast and write journals for group discussion, perform a reenactment of the story, or even create their own podcast with ease (132). He states that this "is an ideal use of technology . . . as opposed to the prevalent and very negative classroom tech tools which suck individuals into a screen" (132). In the twenty-first century, the average high school student has everything they need to write,

record, and edit: a smartphone and a computer. Murphy attests that a podcast "makes explicit the collaborative nature of creation," which can "often lead to the development of natural solidarity among students, as they discover the similar struggles, successes, fears, and dreams heretofore hidden beneath the social networks they ordinarily relate by" (132). As Murphy shows, an assignment to create a podcast as a group is an opportunity for educators to encourage teamwork, problem solving, and creativity while keeping students engaged.

Michael Godsey, an educator writing for Common Sense Media and The Atlantic, says that he initially brought podcasts into his classroom as a means of keeping his disinterested students engaged with a meaningful narrative, but unexpectedly discovered the possibilities for improving literacy, confidence, and focus (Godsey, n. pag.). He experimented with playing the wildly successful true crime drama podcast *Serial* in class while simultaneously showing the transcripts (Godsey, n. pag.). He remembers, "[I] said something . . . like, 'Here are the words, in case any of you care'" (Godsey, n. pag.). "They definitely cared," he continues, "They all turned their heads . . . and they all got mad whenever I was late in scrolling down" (Godsey, n. pag.). Indeed, for many students, "listening comprehension [is] the primary component for learning language" (Godsey, n. pag.) and the ability to listen along *while* reading can be critical to improving comprehension and language skills.

In addition, the experience of listening to gripping, powerfully written audio dramas such as the smash hit *Serial*, learning historical factoids from the likes of *Stuff You Should Know,* or receiving an astronomy lesson from Neil Degrasse Tyson on *StarTalk* often excites and engages students far more than listening to their teacher. Teachers such as Jack Murphy and Kimberly Calhoun have found that playing podcast audio in class while simultaneously showing the transcript keeps students more focused on the lesson than reading silently or having a classmate

read aloud. This can even facilitate greater group discussion and encourage conversation outside of class (Murphy 132). An excellent educational podcast will be interesting, with the topic explained in a way students can understand, and it will ultimately ask students to think critically about the topic. Podcasts are often recorded in a conversational format, which makes understanding the topic easier and more natural for students while also allowing room for lively debate and discussion between the hosts (Murphy 133; Godsey, n. pag.). As Godsey, Calhoun, Murphy, and many other teachers have discovered, the ability to learn outside of the traditional format of a textbook or classroom lecture gives students a chance for introspection, a chance to think deeply about the topic in ways they may have never explored. Combined with reading a transcript, listening to podcasts may be the key for success in many students' academic futures. However, one roadblock to using podcasts as a comprehension booster lies in transcribing.

While a wealth of digital recording and editing tools exist, there is a serious lack of free and accurate transcription services. As educational science and research suggests, reading *while* listening is vital to improving comprehension. Without a transcript, students miss out on half the possibilities podcasts offer. After researching online transcription services, I found that some of the best, like SimonSays or Scribie, can automatically transcribe audio files but can cost up to a dollar or more per minute, which could render them largely unusable to students and teachers on limited budgets. According to SimonSays and Scribie's websites, they can also take several days to receive the transcript, which can inconvenience students and teachers who need them immediately. For children and educators alike, transcribing a podcast manually is incredibly time consuming and therefore not ideal. A last-ditch free option that I considered is to use Google's speech-to-text function to interpret the audio. However, after testing this out myself, I found that this is a roundabout method, can prove difficult for students to use, and often requires editing and

proofreading due to the inaccuracy of the speech-to-text technology. Additionally, I investigated existing podcasts and discovered that many do not typically provide transcripts of their content, which may deter teachers from incorporating them as comprehension tools. While drastically reducing the benefits for reading and listening comprehension, a lack of transcripts also makes podcasts especially irrelevant to deaf and hard-of-hearing learners. For these reasons, improved availability of transcripts and transcribing technology are essential to the continued use of podcasts in school curriculum.

Now that teachers have the ability to implement podcasts as part of their lessons, it is vital to improve free and fast transcription software. As digital tools become increasingly popular in the classroom, it is important for educators and software designers alike to work cooperatively, while staying open to emerging pedagogical techniques and remaining mindful of the educational needs of twenty-first-century students. Ideally, software designers and educators will work together to develop new, easier-to-use digital transcription tools or even integrate them into existing programs such as GarageBand or Audacity. Perhaps a free software or website could be created to allow simultaneous recording and transcription. This would be similar to Google's speech-to-text feature but hopefully would be even more accurate and necessitate less proofing. Finally, current podcasters must be aware of the needs of their audiences, whether they are hearing impaired or simply looking to understand the audio lesson on a deeper level. Providing a transcript—even if not verbatim to the audio—can transform a podcast from "edutainment" (educational entertainment) into a highly effective tool to improve students' comprehension skills, while also fostering curiosity and excitement to learn.

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Commentary

Claire Davis

Digital Gutters: The Evolution of Comics Online

Comics have come a long way from sitting by the cash register and populating the backs of newspapers. The fact that this year's Academy Awards for best production design and costume design went to Marvel's *Black Panther* alone proves this point, as well as the resurgence of "nerd culture" across television and society as a mainstream pursuit. The public interest in the form as entertainment has also been matched by self-proclaimed "serious" readers; while the image of comics used to be solely the pulp issues of *Archie* or *Superman* in your grandmother's closet, the success of memoirs like Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* have raised the bar and made graphic novels a pursuit for the intellectual. The unique combination of image and text on a page allows an immersive storytelling experience with its ability to convey difficult, painful topics as easily as absurd, fantastic scenarios through a shorthand of both images and text which work in tandem to convey a story.

And, as you might guess, part of the recent boom in comics' success comes from the mighty Internet. The digital world, which shares images and text abundantly in the blink of an eye, was practically created for the form to flourish, stretching the limits of the page and connecting readers from all over the world with one click. It's never been easier to share information and recommendations, and the translation from page to screen seems simple enough. Nevertheless, as comic artists and cartoonists take their work to the Web with all its promises of increased readership and relatively low distribution costs, the form itself has changed drastically,

begging readers to consider how the digital world translates analog stories and what comics really are beyond their materials.

Before I delve into the realm of digital comics, I want to spend a little time discussing the basics of comics in general. The form itself was rarely discussed (if at all) until Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* came into the scene in 1993. A book on comics in the form of a deceptively easy-to-consume graphic novel, *Understanding Comics* made the first case for comics as an art form rather than arguing their value as entertainment. In his argument, he defined comics as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in a deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer," finding especial focus on comics' ability to juxtapose words and images on the page (*Understanding Comics* 9). For him, the visual nature of a comic as a series of related images in one space is inherent to the form; without the reader to draw spatial connections across the page, a comic is only a series of images. As such, he maintains that "the heart of comics lies in the space *between* the panels, where the reader's imagination makes still pictures come alive," and, as a result, the readers define what is left unsaid or what is done off-screen, constantly updating their perception as they gather more information (*Reinventing Comics* 2). This is why the forms of writing and of film (though a very similar form materially in a strip of celluloid) remain wholly distinctive from comics. For comics to work, the reader must see and compare a multitude of panels to each other in the same physical space, unlike other forms, which force any juxtaposition of narrative elements in the mental recollection of the reader. Comics, therefore, are inherently spatial and build from both spatial and temporal distances in ways that writing and film cannot accomplish.

With this in mind, if comics are an inherently spatial form, then how do they act (or, to think more broadly, how *can* they act) in the intangible and undefined space of the Web? The

format of websites as pages held in connection by unmappable links can boggle the mind when trying to physically map an online space, and even the idea of mapping a digital space seems a little laughable when all that functionally matters is pulling up the right page when you need it. However, the format of websites as visual spaces as well as text-conveyors allows a somewhat easy translation for a graphic story to the web. Many "webcomics," such as Noelle Stevenson's *Nimona* and Kate Beaton's *Hark! A Vagrant,* work within traditional boundaries of page formatting, hosting a single strip or page on a corresponding page of an aggregate site, where clicking the "next" button substitutes for turning the page. Many of these as well bear in mind the size of a reader's screen and keep their pages small enough to fit in the space of a standard piece of paper. Hosting comics digitally in this way is an effective translation, but they do not comfortably inhabit the digital world, bounded as they are by screen size, traditional formats, and reader expectations.

However, as Scott McCloud points out, a computer screen isn't so much a page as it is a *window* into digital space (*Reinventing Comics*). A reader is not bounded by the comfortable layout of spreads bound by staples and glue—instead, a computer allows the reader to explore within a space, scrolling to continue the story. The effect is especially marked in horror story comics, like "Sarah and the Seed" by Ryan Andrews, as the reader's decision to scroll further down matches the deepening dread of the principal character as he watches his wife obsessively care for a strange plant that she birthed herself. Likewise, Tillie Walden's *On A Sunbeam*, a comic about memory and relationships as much as it is about space travel, hosts entire chapters on a single page, which makes the reader scroll down the thread of panels as the characters delve deep into their own pasts and descend from space to the surfaces of dangerous planets. She herself describes how the nature of digital space affects her composition of a comic, saying, "A

webcomic is a lot more like jazz. It feels more free form, and it feels a lot less final. When a comic is going straight to print I'm thinking a lot more about the actual 'page.' I'm thinking about page turns, about the whole composition. For a webcomic, I'm thinking about scrolling, thinking about putting reveals low down in the page" (Walden, n. pag.). In a space where the page is nonexistent and drawings could stretch across dozens of screens in full, comic artists are wholly unlimited and are free to ramble wherever they choose.

Some comics push the limits of digital space even farther, breaking the typical progression of reading patterns and the idea of a page. "Hypercomics" are stories that can be read in almost any direction, allowing the reader to follow several plotlines and switch stories at points of intersection. *PoCOM-UK-001* by Daniel Merlin Goodbrey is a classic example; the story is read from right to left, and while the first panels involve the simple story of a man going to buy milk, the story quickly splinters out from the main line of panels into several surreal plotlines as characters interact in the background of his walk, which makes the eventual completion of the quest for milk both fantastic and mundane in comparison to the cloud of winding, tangentially related panels around him. McCloud similarly mapped his own graphic novel, which was first printed in codex, online in a staircase pattern, following the chapters as steps with supplementary panels to the sides (*Reinventing Comics* 226). In both of these instances, the reader takes a new agency beyond following the thread of the story and actually chooses which story to follow.

Another uniquely digital way to format a comic is inspired by the choose-your-own-adventure style. While Choose-Your-Own-Adventure books direct readers to flip to a specific page, webcomics can simply suggest a portal for the reader to dive through by making panels clickable. This format allows the reader to discover differing perspectives on the same story,

such as *The Tale of Three Leaves* by Emily Carroll, or to find completely different outcomes

through their choices, as shown in Carroll's horror comic *The Worthington*, where the reader

chooses which room of the haunted hotel to investigate first. Such a format reorients each panel

as a scene and lengthens the moment that the reader dwells within it. Because each page (and, to

break it down further, each panel) occupies a moment of time within the reader's mind, the

passage of time occurs through the motion of reading further, the reader almost "walking"

through the story. By splitting individual fragments of the story from each other and allowing

choice, the reader elongates the time spent within each page and panel due to internet speed and

the smaller selection of panels to consider at a time. However, the cost of this format comes with

the relative loss of juxtaposition between panels, which can be more effective as a story-telling

device (there is a reason both examples I found were in the horror genre), but also begins to

challenge McCloud's definition of comics as primarily juxtaposed images. Without an

immediate contrasting panel, a string of webpages holding single panels cannot allow the same

process of comparison intrinsic to graphic narrative form, and while Carroll's comics usually

combine at least a few panels on a single page, without that juxtaposition, her art would be

merely sequential and not within the definition of comics.

  All of the innovations that I have discussed so far have involved the messy networking of

pages amalgamated into an order, but the digital landscape offers many other ways to incorporate

layers of interaction within webcomics. One particularly clever way that I only found on one

comic was to hide author's side notes within the alternate text of the page. Alternate text, or alt

text, is a short word or phrase that can be inserted into the HTML of the website to describe the

image to readers and can be found by hovering over the image in question. While it is usually

used to aid sight-impaired users by allowing a description that text-to-voice screen readers can

understand, Zack Morrison uses the space to poke fun at his own characters, situations, and drawing skills in his comic *Paranatural.* The closest analogue to this level of story layering available in analog books are footnotes, which still must be offset from the main text to allow legibility. While missing this layer of the story is not essential to understanding it, by hovering over the panels and reading the author's comments, the reader participates in the comic's humor on a paratextual level while the comic maintains a sense of joviality even in the tensest of conflicts within the panels. By incorporating digital aids that are discreet and unobtrusive, Morrison involves his readers in a search for the overlooked aspects of the world around them, paralleling his characters' own efforts at protecting their town from ghostly invaders.

Finally, with the advent of moving .gif images, webcomics can take their action to a very immediate level unavailable on paper. Readers no longer have to imagine the impact of a fist or the movement of a car across a plain—they can see it again and again as the image repeats on the screen. The effect can be explosive, as in *Thunderpaw: In the Ashes of Fire Mountain* by Jen, which incorporates .gif files to show the fiery explosions that the main characters endure as they journey home during the apocalypse, or nostalgic, as in Boulet's *Our Toyota Was Fantastic*, which is a homage to long, late-night car rides with his family and shows the shifting of streetlamps in the car as a constant, lulling rhythm. While the moving panels begin to blur the line between film and comic, these elements ultimately remain contained by their panel and only repeat their one motion, making the motion itself part of a singular moment played again and again in the same way that a reader revisits the action of a single stationary panel in rereading it in conjunction with its fellow panels.

However, the form of comics online can become unrecognizable to the point of inventing a new form separate from the traditional comic. In the case of *Icarus Needs* by Daniel Merlin

Goodbrey, whose hypercomics were mentioned earlier as an innovation of the form, the comic format becomes a backdrop to the game-like nature of the story as the reader progresses Icarus through panels to find the tools for his escape from his dream. This instance of reader-become-player, while allowing unparalleled reader agency for comics, ultimately breaks the definition of comics as a series of panels intended to convey information and aesthetic sensibilities. Suddenly, the form becomes the world the reader must navigate on a mechanical level, and in unlocking various parts of the story, the reader also locks herself out of the past options and scenarios, making rereading and juxtaposition an impossibility and breaking McCloud's definition. In contrast, while the aforementioned *The Worthington* allows the reader to choose their reading order, their choices do not shift the stories they find behind each paneled door, and the format serves more as a way to bind six short comics together through a common conceit. Because all the stories remain available to the reader, there is a level of necessary juxtaposition preserved that is absent in the interactive comics like *Icarus Needs*.

Likewise, Stevan Živadinović's *Hobo Loco of Hamelin*, a creative reimaging of the Pied Piper's story as taking place within a Depression-era town full of vitriolic politicians and rather human-looking rats, is comprised of seven long panels, each with their own page, that trigger motion and music when the reader scrolls across. While the first panels seem to remain within the definition of comics (albeit while adding plenty of interactive elements), the last panel is effectively a short film lasting about three and a half minutes as a parade of twenty children march out from town, through the woods, and into a cave. While the other panels began their motion when the reader scrolled to a certain point, this page's elements are independent of that interaction; the reader can scroll to the absolute end of the panel at any point, but they do not control the appearance of the devils that open Hell nor the music that plays as Hobo Loco draws

them towards their doom. The only possible way to exert reader agency over this scene would be to skip the page entirely before the animation finishes, but as the project was abandoned at this point, the reader can only sit with Hobo Loco through his despair as he watches the ramifications of his actions, which end only when a rock falls over the entrance and the last fiddling demon fades away. Panels like these, which substitute animation for a story told over several panels, break away from the traditional, static nature of comics and question the form of comics. For decades, static artwork juxtaposed on a page the definition of comics, limited by the technology available. At what point, however, does an animated, moving picture with music overlaid become a short film rather than a single panel? Are webcomics just comics that have adapted to a digital space, or are they a new form, distantly informed by its predecessors but reinvented to a completely new being? I cannot begin to answer all these questions in this paper, but I do think that with the advent of a digital space that can be molded to fit any user's needs, a new definition for the form of comics to account for all the World Wide Web's bells and whistles would go a long way towards resolving these questions about form.

Physical comics and graphic novels are far from becoming extinct, and some stories that began as webcomics have become printed and bound volumes eligible for Eisners, such as Noelle Stevenson's *Nimona* and even Tillie Walden's *On a Sunbeam*. In this rapid discussion across mediums, comic artists are challenging the form internally and pushing the boundaries of print to their limits. No other literary creative form has endured such change in the transition from analog to digital, so there is no precedent by which to judge this evolution. In order to critique and analyze webcomics accurately, their digital nature must be acknowledged and weighed against their physical counterparts as examples of the closest form available for analysis. While this comparison is manageable today with the relatively small number of comics

that fully incorporate their digital medium, critics today have to decide whether the traditional definition of comics is correct, and, if so, whether to include its rapidly mutating Internet cousin in the discussion or leave it to its own, digitally rooted field of criticism.

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Webcomics of Note

Stand Still. Stay Silent. by Minna Sundberg

On a Sunbeam by Tillie Walden

Paranatural by Zack Morrison

Icarus Needs by Daniel Merlin Goodbrey

PoCOM-UK-001 by Daniel Merlin Goodbrey

The Worthington by Emily Carroll

The Tale of Three Leaves by Emily Carroll

Hobo Lobo of Hamlin by Stevan Živadinović

Our Toyota Was Fantastic by Boulet

Bongcheon-Dong Ghost by Horang

Regan Green

A Brief Introduction to Digital Poetry

This has been my second year on the *Wide Angle* staff and, therefore, my second year studying the Digital Humanities with Dr. Wright and the other editors. If there is one thing I have learned throughout these studies, it is that humanities majors and academics have a deep-rooted, primal fear that the Digital Humanities are going to swallow them up. Some of us are afraid that the DH field is a Trojan horse: if we begin to use quantitative data in our essays to substantiate our arguments, eventually English will be a field that does not accept any argument that does not use quantitative data. Some of us are afraid that if we begin erasing the boundaries of our field, our identity will vanish. I found these ideas concerning, but they did not produce much of an emotional reaction in me, perhaps because none of the essays we read or examples we studied incorporated works of creative writing, which is my field of concentration. Technology's conquest of the humanities did not strike as close to home for me as technology's conquest of creative writing would. So when researching for my project, I Googled "digital humanities poetry" just to see if there were any interesting results (and no, the irony of my dependence on digital search engines is not lost on me). One website, called "I Love E-Poetry," names and distinguishes seven different genres of digital poetry including generative, code, visual digital, kinetic, multimedia, interactive, and hypertext poetry (Flores, n. pag.). A glance at the following paragraphs revealed that some of these genres use a randomization function on a computer to produce poetry, taking the writer and any requirement of skill completely out of the process. This was what finally tapped into my primal humanities-major fear and brought out the gatekeeper in me. The concept of poetry being produced randomly by a

computer struck a nerve in me, because it seems to take the art out of a fundamentally artful craft. I was immediately inclined to reject the entire field as a part of poetry at all. So naturally this is the topic I pursued in my project, fully intending to dismiss it as a false contribution to the English tradition by the final page of this piece. However, in the process of my research, I found that this field participates in a larger poetic discourse more than I had realized, and—spoiler alert—I do not dismiss digital poetry in the conclusion of this commentary.

Firstly, it is important to introduce and define digital poetry as well as I can. The "I Love E-Poetry" website says that digital poetry is "a poetic practice made possible by digital media and technologies. . . . [It] isn't simply poetry written on a computer and published in print or on the Web" (Flores, n. pag.). The digital poem is not digital only in nature; its digitality influences its own formation process and appearance. Consequently, it cannot be created on a computer and then published in print form, because it requires a digital medium to be experienced fully. Further, their unique nature lends itself to aesthetic and thematic values different from traditional print poetry. For example, printed poetry has an "investment in a single, authorial 'I'" and a "fidelity to fixed, unchanging text" whereas video / media poetry leans towards an "acceptance of polyvocal expression" and the "pursuit of nomadic, changeable text" (Stein, n. pag.). Much of digital poetry also requires the reader to interact with the content in some way, while print poetry is a closed text (Stein, n. pag.). It is this interactivity that piques my skepticism, although I am not sure that skepticism is even warranted when it comes to poetry because it is so difficult to define in the first place. Digital poetry has been fairly untouched by the prodding pen of the literary critic, so I cannot point to any renowned names in academia to validate my suspicions. I can, however, quote the poets themselves. Emily Dickinson wrote, "If I read a book [and] it makes my whole body so cold no fire ever can warm me I know that is poetry. If I feel

physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry"; Robert Frost said, "Poetry is when an emotion has found its thought and the thought has found words"; Khalil Gibran described it as "a deal of joy and pain and wonder, with a dash of the dictionary" (qtd. in "Twenty Poets," n. pag.). You will likely never find two people with the same definition of poetry, but, for the most part, they all seem to be predicated upon the beliefs that poetry is both emotionally and linguistically oriented. So, if nothing else, I think that these two qualities are fair standards to which we can hold poetry. Unfortunately, I do not have enough pages or time to cover every genre of digital poetry in this commentary, so I will focus on two, kinetic poetry and code poetry, because these provided the most results upon research and have proven to be strong representations of their genre's thematic and aesthetic values.

Figure 1

Figure 2

Kinetic poetry is that which "uses the computer's ability to display animation and changing information over time" (Flores, n. pag.). Figures 1 and 2 are screenshots of a poem in one of the first series of kinetic poetry, *First Screening*, created in 1984 by a poet who went by bpNichols. These poems can be read by playing a video (at http://vispo.com/bp/firstscreening.mp4). A title will appear on the screen, in the case of this particular poem, "Construction One," and then a word or a series of words will move busily on the screen. In this poem, the word

tower appears once at the bottom of the screen and slowly begins to multiply and build upwards into the shape of a tower. Then they are pushed off the screen by an inconsistent column of the word *Babel* moving upwards. I chose to use this series as an example because it highlights two of the greatest values of digital poetry: movement and minimalism.

Another example of kinetic poetry is a work called "a kiss" by Dan Weber (n. pag.), who was involved in the *First Series* as well. It begins with a pale yellow screen and the words "This is a story that unfurls in many directions at once" and then the command "Begin with a kiss," where the reader can click on "a kiss" to go to another page (shown in Figure 3) that offers a variety of options the reader can follow to other pages, which finally offer something that resembles lines of a poem (shown in Figure 4). This pattern continues for four more pages until the reader is taken back to the page shown in Figure 3. I chose this work as an example of kinetic poetry because it emphasizes the interactive quality of digital poetry and because it resembles traditional poetry more than the previous example, being a primarily language-oriented experience rather than a visual one.

Code poetry is poetry that is written to be read by both people and computers. This means that the poem is written within computer code language (such as Java, Python, etc.), so that when it is put into a computer, it can be read and the computer can follow the instructions within the
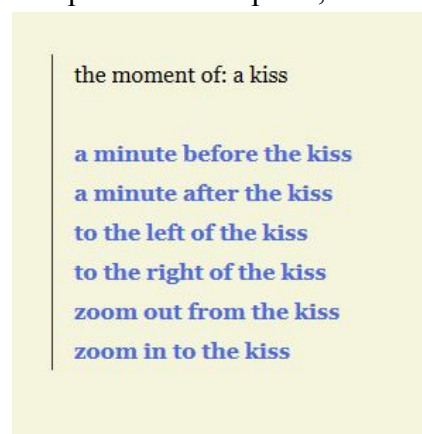
the moment of: a kiss

a minute before the kiss
a minute after the kiss
to the left of the kiss
to the right of the kiss
zoom out from the kiss
zoom in to the kiss

her back was turned to him
the chop chop chop of onions
sink water running
the fabric on fabric rub of the white curtains being licked by the breeze

the reason her back was turned
what he loves about onions
other water they've kissed near
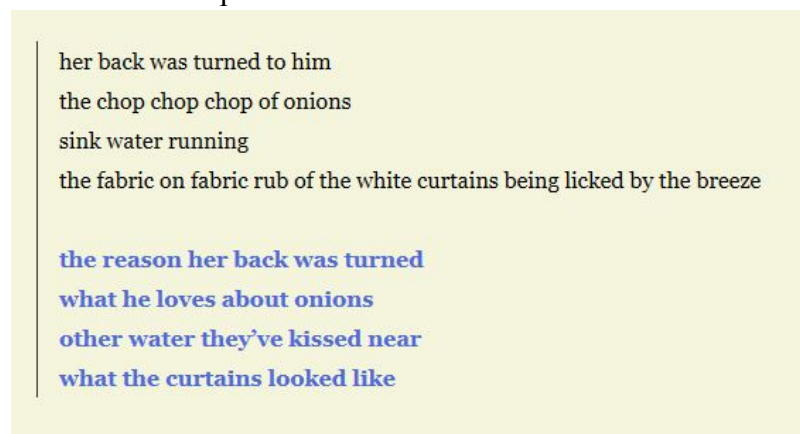what the curtains looked like

Figure 3   **Figure 4**

code to form a visual representation of or supplementation to the poem. Several examples can be found on the website "Code-Poetry" including the one shown in the images on the right (Holden, Kerr). Figure 5 shows the left side of the screen, which is where the computer manifests its reading of the code in the poem (a series of punctuation marks moving so that they appear to be falling raindrops), and Figure 6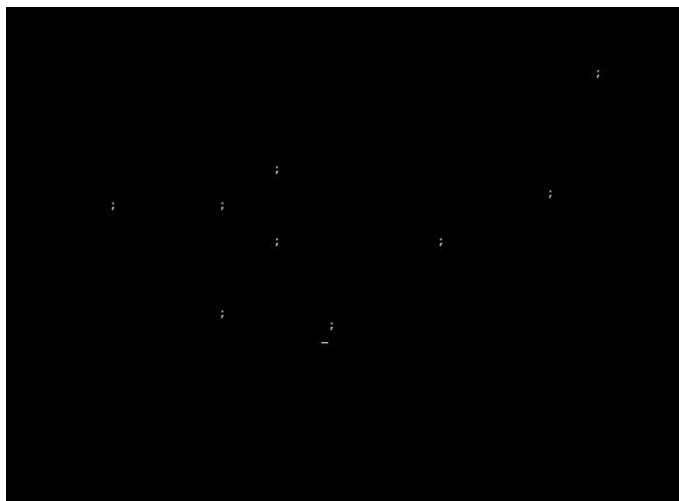 shows the right side of the screen, which is where the code poem itself is located. I cannot explain code language, because I do not understand a lick of it myself, but I can tell you that the unintelligible arrangement of letters, numbers, and punctuation in Figure 6 make up the code that instructs the computer to run the program that renders the raindrops seen in Figure 5. The collection of poems found on this website strongly emphasizes the

Figure 5

Figure 6

dedication of digital poetry to movement and use of the computer's ability to provide an experience that printed poetry simply cannot.

Despite my initial concerns and the obviously untraditional nature of the genres cited above, I do believe that they can be categorized as poetry because they are emotionally and linguistically oriented as much as they are aesthetically oriented. Further, their unconventional qualities do not exclude them from poetry but rather continue a larger tradition of experimenting with and pushing past the standard use of language and form. In the same way E.E. Cummings "helped to liberate lines and formations of poetry from strict arrangements" (Funkhouser 87), digital poetry helps to liberate the content of poetry from being fixed and stagnant. It could even be interpreted as a sort of continuation of the Dadaist reaction against the absolute and interest in mechanical production. Rather than seeing digital poetry (and the Digital Humanities in general) as a threat to the identity of the humanities, we can instead see it as a contribution to the long-held tradition of pushing our own boundaries and exploring new domains.

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Hannah Warrick

Mapping Modernism: Using ESRI Story Maps for English

When brainstorming for my Digital Humanities project, I knew that I wanted to *make* something, but I was unsure if my technical skills were up to the task. I am neither literate in computer code nor proficient in archiving or crafting data models. I am quite proficient in Microsoft Word; however, using Microsoft Word does not make you a Digital Humanist (Wright, n. pag.). In a cloud of frustration, I asked my roommate Mia for ideas, knowing that she was taking a Digital History class and was working on some sort of project. She showed me ESRI Story Mapping, which is a program under ArcGIS, a system for creating, compiling, analyzing, and sharing data through mapping. ESRI Story Maps specializes in creating interactive, multimedia narratives that contain layers of text, images, and maps. I browsed through ESRI's story map gallery, while reading about topics from wildlife in the Midwest to homelessness in Los Angeles, and I began to think how I could apply story-mapping to the English discipline. After all, in the English major, we are surrounded by stories; we both constantly analyze stories and tell them. Thus, for my Digital Humanities project, I decided to create a story map that would trace Literary Modernism throughout Europe and the United States (see the link provided at the end of this commentary). The aim was to create an educational resource with which any English student or bibliophile could interact in order to grasp an overview of major Modernist influences, themes, and authors.

I think that sometimes as English majors we become so invested in the stories of the novelists, poets, and dramatists that sometimes we gloss over the stories of the writers themselves. I found that story-mapping provided a way to engage these two levels of story, the

fictional and nonfictional, the textual and the biographical, within a visual, geographical platform. Literary Modernism especially lends itself to such a collaboration because of the movement's numerous historical and social influences, such as World War I and urbanization, and also its international network of corresponding writers. Of course, in order to keep my project realistic and manageable, it was necessary to limit my focus to an overview rather than a textbook. Theoretically, you could story map the entire Modernist movement, including every sub-movement, country, and obscure poet, but that may take you a while.

Before I could begin building my story map, it was first necessary to collect all the relevant sources and photographs that I would include in my narrative. For the majority of information, I used the *The Encyclopedia of Literary Modernism* by Paul Poplawski, which proved to be a fantastic resource for condensing a large amount of information into readable blurbs. For additional sources, I used articles from the *Poetry Foundation*, entries from the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, and other credible online resources that provided biographical information and links to the author's material. For photographs, I used ESRI's photo library to find photos of World War I and other historical photos, and I used Google Images to find photos of the authors themselves, which were thankfully out of copyright.

In my story map, which I titled "Mapping Modernism," I included three sections: An Introduction to Literary Modernism, Context for Modernism, and Overview of Modernist Writers (U.S. and Europe). Within the latter two sections, I created my "Modernism Maps" using the ESRI base-maps of the North America and Europe as templates and then located the origins of significant events in the modernist movement and birthplaces of the authors with color-coded nodes. For each node, I wrote a blurb expanding on biographical, historical, and other significant information about that event or person. I also provided an embedded link in each blurb to an

additional, credited source that provided further information about that person or event. My aim was to create a platform where a viewer could participate on different levels of engagement, from a surface level to a research level. I structured the Context and Overview sections chronologically, although some of the modernist writers might have preferred otherwise, and included photographs to increase visual immersion.

I found that story maps provided an interactive, educational interface to share interpretations, analysis, factual data, and photos in the humanities. While I did not *make* something such as a textual analysis program or data mining software (and I never will), I was able to *make* something in the sense that I was able to make something accessible on a digital platform. In his article, digital humanist Mark Sample disagrees with colleague Stephen Ramsay, who said at the 2011 annual Modern Language Association convention in Los Angeles, "If you are not making anything, you are not . . . a digital humanist" (qtd. in Sample 255). Conversely, Sample argues that "the heart of the digital humanities is not the production of knowledge; it's the *reproduction* of knowledge" (256). I am inclined to agree with Sample in that Digital Humanities is not a discipline restricted to the technological and computational masters. All the information included on my story map could be found in a research book; in fact, a large quantity of the material came from The *Encyclopedia of Literary Modernism*, edited by Paul Poplawski. However, I don't think this detracts from its value. While some digital humanists may specialize in making and others analyzing, I think there is something to be said about those who specialize in sharing materials for others, since through sharing, we invite others to participate in the humanities, including others who may have not wanted to participate before.

Link to "Mapping Modernism":

https://samford.maps.arcgis.com/apps/Cascade/index.html?appid=ffef0eb3cf2a423ba10ddd8ad7165cc3

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Old Texts, New Tricks: A Case Study of Digital Manuscript Studies


In 1951 a young Jesuit priest and scholar named Robert Busa partnered with IBM in a radical new project. In a switch from the wartime research IBM had conducted in World War II, Busa and IBM's endeavor was scholarly: a lemmatization of Thomas Aquinas's work, grouping together all inflections of each word in Aquinas's corpus under one dictionary heading. Over the span of thirty years, using punch cards, a troop of copyists, and commercial accounting machines, Busa and IBM created the *Index Thomisticus*, printed in fifty-six volumes in 1980, made into a CD-ROM in 1989, and uploaded onto the Web in 2005 (available here: http://www.corpusthomisticum.org/it/index.age) (Vanhoutte 127). Busa's innovation earned him the distinction of being the first to tie medievalism to what would become digital research. Slews of medieval texts have since been digitized and made accessible to the general public on the Web—including manuscripts. As delicate, physical documents, medieval manuscripts are a priority for digitization, providing both a wider access to unique documents and an alternative to handling and potentially damaging the fragile texts. Digitization of manuscripts seems to be a positive situation for everyone (and everything) involved. For the first time in centuries, anyone can access these documents—an undeniably exciting prospect, especially for students at universities without extensive access to physical manuscripts.

However, as I researched digital manuscript studies, doubts arose alongside my initial excitement. How accessible are these manuscripts to the general public, really? Could a professor conduct an undergraduate course in manuscript studies using only digital manuscripts?

Could an undergraduate student curious about medieval manuscripts possibly conduct an independent study of digital manuscripts? There is surprisingly little online advice on how to actually study digital manuscripts—is it really so intuitive? Armed with an eagerness that I hoped would make up for my lack of experience in manuscript studies, I set out to find answers. In the end, I discovered (unsurprisingly) that the study of digital manuscripts is a bit more complex than advertised.

My goal was to translate part of a digitized manuscript as best I could without referencing other translations of the text. Then I would compare my translation with a more reliable one to see how an aspiring medievalist with a moderate grasp of classical Latin and no experience in manuscript studies might fare in translating an original document using only digital tools. I gave myself perhaps
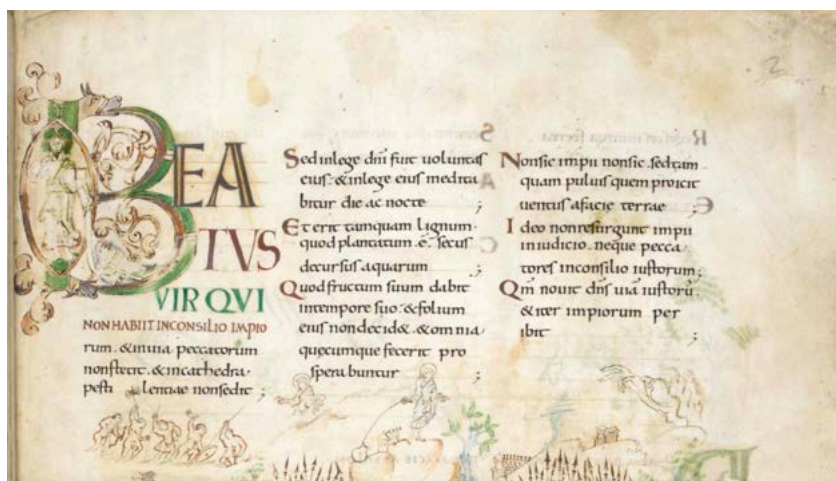
The first psalm in the Harley Psalter (Harley MS 603)

the easiest version of this task: I translated the first Psalm of the Harley Psalter, a remarkably well-preserved eleventh-century manuscript written in clear script and digitized in high-quality images by the British Museum (*Harley MS 603*). The text of most of the Psalms in the Harley Psalter, including its Psalm 1, are rooted in the well-known and widely translated Latin Vulgate,[2] so I could easily check my completed translation against a more definitive one.
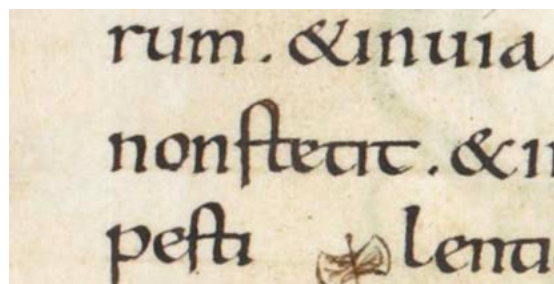
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[2] The Vulgate is a late fourth and early fifth century CE translation of the Bible, commissioned by Pope Damascus I and completed in great part by Saint Jerome. Over the course of the Middle Ages, it became the "versio vulgata," the "popular version" of the Bible.

The Harley Psalter is in beautiful condition, and its digitization is high-resolution—not the case for all digitized manuscripts. Tiny details of the manuscript are visible: the faint guiding lines that the scribe used to measure his or her letters and the patches in historiated initials (the large, illuminated letters at the beginning of passages) in which the top color has worn through to reveal a different base color. It was stunning to work with such a beautiful work of visual art.

Historiated initial at the beginning of Psalm 1 (Harley MC 603)

One of the main reasons I chose to work with the Harley Psalter is that it was written in Carolingian minuscule—a style of handwriting developed in the early ninth century that forms the basis of modern English handwriting, or Latin script. As such, I knew I had a much better chance of deciphering it than other, less standard and less clear scripts. However, that did not mean that reading Carolingian minuscule was unchallenging. In the Harley Psalter, *i* doesn't have a marking dot, *s* looks exactly like *f* when

nonfletit? nonsletit? nonstetit? (Harley MS 603)

preceding *t*, and (most perplexing to me) the scribe uses abbreviations for common words that the reader is expected to intuit. With the help of Adriano Capelli's *The elements of abbreviation in medieval Latin paleography*, I was able to give good guesses for some of these (I learned, for example, that *dni* is probably short for "domini," meaning "Lord") but some eluded me. For example, *uia* or *via* includes the mark that the scribe uses to distinguish abbreviations, but since *via* can mean "road," and I found no better alternative, I settled for that translation—which,

happily, turned out to be correct. I was similarly lucky with *Qm* on the last line, which I guessed stood for "quoniam," meaning "for." Capelli's primer on abbreviations was helpful (and without it I would have been at a loss), but what I really needed was an expert who had the experience to intuit these abbreviations without having to consult a dictionary to find an exact match. In my scouring of the Web for comparative digital manuscript, I came across *Petrarchive*, a digitization of Petrarch's *Rerum vulgarium fragmentua* which simulates this experience—offering both a diplomatic[3] and an edited transcription alongside photos of the manuscript, (Storey et al., n. pag.). However, resources as thorough as Petrarchive are few and far between.

Although I had to tweak the dictionary meaning of a few words to maintain readability, most of the Latin was clear. The only true impasse I found in translating was the word *lentiae* in the first line, which is, as far as I was able to find, a reference to the Austrian city of Lenz. However, since this usage seemed an unlikely addition to the Psalm, I assumed that I was not finding the intended definition and simply omitted the word. Other parts of the passage gave me

lentiae (Harley MS 603)

pause (realizing that the scribe occasionally split words between lines was a breakthrough), but I was eventually able to parse the tricky words and grammar without threatening the accuracy of the translation. By the end of my project, I was able to produce a fairly literal translation of the Latin that was readable—a little victory in itself. Here is my translation compared with the Douay-Rheims translation, a sixteenth-century translation of the Vulgate commissioned by the Catholic Church that closely follows the original Latin:

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[3] A "diplomatic" transcription is one that seeks to reproduce the original written text as close to its original form as possible, including any errors or archaic spellings.

My translation	Douay-Rheims Translation
(1) Blessed man who does not pass into the plans of the impious and does not stand in the path of sinners and does not sit on the throne of death;	(1) Blessed is the man who hath not walked in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stood in the way of sinners, nor sat in the chair of pestilence:
(2) But his desire was in the law of the Lord and in His law he will meditate by day and even by night;	(2) But his will is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he shall meditate day and night.
(3a) And so he will be as a tree which (is) planted beside running waters;	(3a) And he shall be like a tree which is planted near the running waters,
(3b) Which will give its fruit in its time, and its leaf does not fall off, and all whatsoever that it may make will be propagated;	(3b) which shall bring forth its fruit, in due season. And his leaf shall not fall off: and all whatsoever he shall do shall prosper.
(4) Not so the impious, not so, but just as dust which the wind blows across the face of the earth;	(4) Not so the wicked, not so: but like the dust, which the wind driveth from the face of the earth.
(5) Go to God, the impious do not rise again in judgement, nor sinners in the council of the righteous;	(5) Therefore the wicked shall not rise again in judgment: nor sinners in the council of the just.
(6) For God knows the way of the righteous, and the path of the impious will come to nothing.	(6) For the Lord knoweth the way of the just: and the way of the wicked shall perish. ("The Book of Psalms: Chapter 1")

As I compared my translation to the Douay-Rheims, a few main differences jumped out. Surprisingly, the most glaring of these were due to variations in the Latin itself. In line two, the Harley Psalter reads "Sed inlege d[omi]ni fuit voluntas eius," or, as I translated, "But his desire was in the law of the Lord." However, the past tense of the verb *fuit*, meaning "was," is not included in the version of the Vulgate that the Douay-Rheims translation is based on; rather the verb is omitted and simply implied, making the inclusion of *was* in the Harley Psalter a possible scribal correction to the original manuscript. A second difference between source texts was the beginning of line six, the place where my translation most varies from the Douay-Rhiems. The Harley Psalter reads "I deo," which I translated as the imperative phrase "Go to God." However, the word *ideo* can also mean "therefore"—as it reads in the Douay-Rhiems ("The Book of Psalms: Chapter 1"). Although it is most likely that I simply misinterpreted the space between the letters, there is a possibility that my translation is what the scribe of the Harley Psalter intended: after all, many of the source texts that scribes were copying were written without spaces, making "i deo" a reasonable transcription of what may have originally been "ideo." Whatever the intent of the Harley Psalter scribe, the Douay-Rheims Latin source text evades this problem entirely by using a different word for "therefore": "propterea" ("The Book of Psalms: Chapter 1"). Lastly, the enigmatic "lentiae" remains a mystery even after checking the Douay-Rheims translation: the Douay-Rheims source text does not include the word ("The Book of Psalms: Chapter 1"), leaving me to suffer in ignorance.

So, can an undergraduate feasibly conduct research on manuscripts? The answer is yes—sort of. My first foray into manuscript studies through a digital medium was surprisingly successful. The work of transcribing and translating the Harley Psalter was much easier than I anticipated, and my translation was much more accurate than I expected it to be. I did not feel at

a severe disadvantage without the physical manuscript in front of me—the British Library's digitized images were incredibly high-resolution, and its interface was intuitive and easy to use (simply zooming in and out or moving back and forth with basic mouse or touchpad movements). To a large degree, however, my project succeeded because I set it up to succeed. I chose a high-resolution document that follows a well-known and clear Latin text and was written in a script famed for its clarity. If I had wanted to translate a text only accessible in a lower-resolution format, whose source text was obscure and whose script was difficult to read, my experience would have been drastically different. I almost certainly would not have produced a readable translation, much less an accurate one. One of the foremost things I learned from my first project in manuscript studies is how much I don't know about manuscript studies. Although I was surprised at the plethora of the digital resources available for manuscript studies, they were no replacement for an expert in the field. Could a professor with experience in manuscript studies conduct a course using only digital manuscripts? Based on my (limited) experience, I would argue yes. Could an undergraduate independently study manuscripts using only digital resources? Depending on the student and the manuscripts she or he wishes to study, the answer is only "probably." My task (as easy as it was) would have been much easier and its result more accurate with the assistance of an expert or even a peer. I am also skeptical that digital renderings, no matter how high-resolution, can replace the experience of fingering though the worn parchment of a physical manuscript, which offers both a better view of the minuscule details of the text and a greater (if intangible) sense of awe and understanding of the document as a physical object rather than simply a series of words. However, after my project, I am more inclined to share the widespread optimism about the study of digital manuscripts. Although it is

not as straightforward or all-inclusive as it might be touted, under the right circumstances it allows people to encounter a text, a scribe, an ink smear, mediated only by the glow of a screen. On a different note, does anyone out there know what "lentiae" means?

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Contributors

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Rachel Williams is a senior majoring in English with a minor in Communication Studies. She enjoys traveling around Europe, and she wrote her senior thesis on environmentalism in the work of J.R.R. Tolkien.

Emily Youree is a senior University Fellow from Madison, AL, studying English and Classics. She is excited to pursue a doctorate degree in medieval literature at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in the fall. When not studying, she (still) enjoys reading Charlotte Bronte and C.S. Lewis, drinking tea, and wishing she were in England.