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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.

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Essay

Claire Davis

The Difference Between *Nation* and Nations:

Pratchett's Idealization of Anderson's Theories

The question of the relatability of a community and the importance of a shared identity grows with the increasing individuality of the postmodern world, and it is a question that Benedict Anderson is willing to answer in his book *Imagined Communities*. In the first few chapters, he outlines his own definition of the modern nation as “an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (7). Anderson claims that a nation “is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (7). Nevertheless, that imagined community can stretch only so far—Anderson also stipulates that every nation has its limits, arguing that “no nation imagines itself coterminous with mankind” (8). Finally, the idea of the nation must govern the actions of all its participants as an overarching moral and social guide (8). This, Anderson says, stems from the shift in power from the Church to the State during the Enlightenment; without powerful religious ties to connect citizens, nationalism stepped in to serve as a belief system for all to follow (8). Nationalism became the new religion, and just as members of a religion feel connected through their mutual beliefs and condemnation of those outside their ranks, the members of a contemporary nation center their actions and community around their beliefs.

Implicit in his argument and his perspective is also the growing need of an individual to identify with a nation, as the nation becomes a model of power and voice across the world. Without a nation to provide comradeship and identity, an individual has no voice in the global theater and is silenced, as well as cut off, from any idea of an eternal legacy. Anderson's theories about nationalism can help answer some of the questions that popular novelist Terry Pratchett poses in his works. In Pratchett's novel *Nation*, which takes place in a slightly altered Victorian world, he asks his characters (Mau, a Great Southern Pelagic Islander on the verge of adulthood, and Ermintrude "Daphne" Fanshaw, the daughter of a minor English lord) what it means to construct a nation while reflecting the nature of a community in the wake of disaster. After a tsunami wave floods several islands, wipes out all of Mau's tribe (called the Nation), and pushes Daphne's ship onto the island, both children must figure out how to act according to their traditions and the choices laid before them as part of the new Nation, which grows as survivors from other tribes slowly make their way to the island. In this essay, I will prove that *Nation* defies Anderson's claim that nations are inherently politically skewed and flawed through the Nation's reestablishment as a utopic scientific community, rather than as a political one.

While Anderson's theories of the advent of nationalism involve historical events, the gradual spread of empirical knowledge, and decline of religion, Pratchett accelerates the action through the natural disasters of plague and storm. Pratchett's work, then, is concerned more with what type of nation is made from the ground up rather than how a nation shifts over time into an entirely different society. The question then becomes whether Mau's new Nation fits Anderson's model for modern nations or whether he simply rearranges the pieces he was given into a slightly more suitable tribe than before. To answer this question, Pratchett shows two visions of the Nation: the tribe before the tsunami and the society formed after the tsunami as the people pick

themselves up from the wreckage. As Pratchett compares each iteration of the Nation to the others and shows the changes and progress Mau makes in his leadership, Anderson's theory of the shift towards nationalism comes into play. This shift exposes the already apparent inner turmoil of Mau as he struggles with his faith in Imo (the creator), in the wisdom of his ancestors, and in other people as the first stragglers approach the island, bringing their own ideas of the role of a nation to the mix. Mau's memories can reflect only one set of values and one view on how the Nation was successful, which limits the possibilities for renewal and regrowth in the same vein of the previous Nation.

Anderson's vision of a nation as imagined, limited, and sovereign initially does not seem to apply to Pratchett's Nation. At first glance, Mau's new nation differs very little from the previous version for which he yearns: the members, though comprised of survivors from various islands all around the archipelago, all know each other intimately and form real emotional connections to each other. All of them subscribe to the same basic beliefs concerning gender roles, as seen when all the men automatically assume that Daphne, as the only girl on the island, would know how to deliver a baby better than any of the other males: "Look, she *will* know what to do. Women always do . . . she's not a man, she can talk, and she's alive" (Pratchett 137). They even share the same exact customs down to specific rituals, which is shown when the old priest Ataba tries to puzzle out Mau's identity: "You have no tattoos, not even the Sunset Wave. Have you learned the chants? No? No manhood feast? You were not given a man's soul?" (114). With all of these similarities, it might appear that Mau simply remade the old image of the Nation with a few pieces rearranged to fit the circumstances.

Instead, though, the Nation undergoes a radical change through Mau's interior conflict between his religious tradition and his urgent search for answers. While the Nation was held

together by a common religion before the tsunami, now Mau, as the only representative of the old Nation, fights the tradition pushed on him by Ataba and the voices of his ancestors. He resists commands to “just be thankful that the gods spared your life!” and instead says, “I want to find reasons. I want to understand the reasons! But I can’t because there are no reasons. Things happen or do not happen, and that is all there is!” (115-6). Mau’s confusion and insistence for more substantial answers to his questions sets up his furious agnosticism throughout the novel and paves the way for the Nation to steer away from finding a common religion as a unifying force. Anderson’s observations on the connection between the decline of religious control and the rise of nationalism help to explain Mau’s, and by extension the Nation’s, departure from the religious ties that serve as an initial bond within the new community. Anderson also predicts Mau’s existential questioning through his examination of religious history. He writes that while religion fails to satisfy people’s concerns, the concerns themselves do not disappear, leading people to look for another eternal concept on which they can place their faith:

With the ebbing of religious belief, the suffering which belief in part composed did not disappear. Disintegration of paradise: nothing makes fatality more arbitrary. Absurdity of salvation: nothing makes another style of continuity more necessary. What then was required was a secular transformation of fatality into continuity, contingency into meaning. As we shall see, few things were (are) better suited to this end than an idea of nation. (Anderson 10)

In this case, Anderson’s theory holds; Mau struggles to find eternal significance in his life and in his role as the assumed leader of the island. He pours himself into his nation, to the point that when the chief of the Raiders asks Daphne if he has a soul, she responds that “the wave took away his soul, but he has made a new one . . . he made it outside himself. You are walking on it

. . . And don't try to shuffle sideways. It covers the whole island, every leaf and pebble!" (341).

Without faith in Imo the Creator and respect towards Locaha, the personification of Death, Mau has only the Nation to secure his legacy, which he achieves through his leadership throughout the novel.

Because of Mau's dedication to his community and his identity as the only surviving member of the Nation, the Nation itself begins to become more modern but does not necessarily fit all the qualifications of Anderson's nation. For instance, Mau considers other tribes several times throughout the novel, especially the fearsome Raiders, who "worshipped Locaha himself" and ate their prisoners for their brains in both the literal and metaphorical sense, which displays his sense of boundaries (131). Not even after the storm, which must have affected them as well, does Mau consider them viable members of his society. He again proves Anderson right when he claims that "no nation imagines itself coterminous with mankind" (7). In fact, the strongest qualification that the Nation fulfills for Anderson's nation is the fact that it is severely limited in its geographical boundaries and population size.

On the other hand, Mau makes a conscious decision not to make the Nation sovereign over its members despite the apparent tradition of maintaining an interior superiority over the other tribes around the Great Southern Pelagic Ocean. Several times in the novel, Mau consults the Grandfathers through their mystical bond in order to reconstruct the Nation and restore order. Whenever he asks about people outside the Nation, especially the white "trousermen," the Grandfathers respond, "HE IS NOT IMPORTANT! ONLY THE NATION IS IMPORTANT!" (39). The Grandfathers are intent on asserting the superiority of the Nation's survival and all its members over the rest of the world. This attitude closely matches Anderson's concept that a nation is sovereign and "nations dream of being free, and, if under God, directly so. The gage

and emblem of this freedom is the sovereign state” (8). However, as Mau’s memories of the Nation’s past superiority demonstrate, the Nation was freer as a dominant force in the Great Southern Pelagic Ocean, before the tsunami: “The Nation had been strong . . . it had a mountain, and fresh water all the time. It could grow lots of vegetables, ones that most islands couldn’t grow . . . it could *trade*” (101). Ataba confirms this perception, crestfallen when he realizes the Nation is no more: ““But this is the Nation! . . . An island of stone, beloved by the gods! . . . All the time I paddled I was thinking, the Nation will have survived!” (111). The inherent strength of the island before the tsunami leads the Grandfathers to subscribe to the idea of the Nation as a sovereign state, which inverts the order that Anderson proposes in his cultural theories of the formation of nationalism.

In contrast to the Grandfathers’ ideas as well as those of the older people around him, Mau himself does not ascribe to the Nation’s superiority and immediately disobeys the Grandfathers’ orders. One of his first rebellions comes when he buries the dead white man he finds on the island and claims that the first baby born on the island is the Nation’s future, even though it is from a different tribe:

‘He’ll be a new generation. He’ll call this place home. Like I do.’

YOU SHAME THE NATION! HE IS NOT OF OUR BLOOD. . . .

‘Do you have any?’ snapped Mau, out loud. (132)

Mau’s firm belief in breaking from tradition shapes the formation of the new Nation into a humbler community. He ties together the humility from his religion and the burning desire to learn more about the world around him into a focus that turns away from the Nation’s individual strength and towards the strength of a larger whole, one actively searching for answers to the same questions that he has about life and fate and meaning. Avoiding the necessary concept of a

nation's sovereignty makes a narcissistic nationalism impossible, while at the same time providing a guide for individuals to rescue themselves from the uniform image of nations that the modern nation enforces through its very existence.

Nevertheless, the Nation does take another step towards becoming a modern nation by becoming, in Anderson's words, "imaginary." When a ship of Englishmen arrives searching for Daphne, who is now suddenly the crown princess, to take her home, the Nation joins a society larger than the immediate community around them. However, Pratchett takes a different approach from the standard colonial plot of subjugation and assimilation into a larger political community. He thereby complicates the Nation's identity even further:

'Well, at least there is one thing I can do,' said the king, walking over to Mau.

'Sir, I would be honoured if you will join my Empire. Not many people get a choice, I might add.' . . .

'We don't want to join, Your Sire. It's too big and we would be swallowed up.'

'Then you will be prey to the first man who arrives with a boat and half a dozen armed men,' said the king. 'Apart from me, I mean,' he added quickly.

'Yes, Your King . . . That is why we want to join the Royal Society [the eminent scientific community in London].' (386-7)

The Nation's overall concern about being lost within the British Empire again reflects their awareness of boundaries and their wish to remain separate and distinct from other nations. Their desire to find community outside the people on the island leads them to become imaginary through their union with the Royal Society. When Mau and Daphne find evidence in the cave of the ancestors that the Nation used to be an incredibly scholastic and curious tribe who traveled as far as Africa, inventing eyeglasses and fake teeth before the Europeans ever did (368-70), the

connections between the stories of the scientific lectures Daphne used to attend with her father and Mau's tradition become stronger in the mind of the Nation, prompting it to cross physical boundaries. However, the Nation takes this step not to identify with an idea of a far-off king's authority or to take pride in belonging to a singular group, but to learn from the progress and curiosity the Royal Society embodies in its work. Because of this, the Nation is imaginary only in its relationship with the Royal Society's members.

Anderson maintains that the defining characteristic of nations stems from "the 'political' power of nationalism vs. their philosophical poverty and even incoherence. In other words, unlike most other isms, nationalism has never produced its own grand thinkers: no Hobbeses, Tocquevilles, Marxes, or Webers" (7). Since the main concepts holding the Nation together are the value of curiosity and the importance of discovering answers outside of the Nation's power, rather than philosophically empty adoration of the political power behind the nation, Anderson could not call the Nation a modern nation. Instead, the Nation perfects Anderson's theory of the modern nation by substituting empty pride in political power, which is relatively imaginary itself, for a sense of honor in discovery and learning that stems from a place of humility. In an ideal nation, Pratchett argues, faith attempts to connect its members in an intellectually stimulating and fulfilling way. Unlike the faith of the old Nation and of Anderson's modern nation, the faith of the new Nation is grounded in mutual awe and the compassion of other people and not in distant deities or the imaginary strength of the collective. In redirecting the group's faith towards an inherent order and the capacity for good in each other, Pratchett postulates, perhaps a community can save itself.

The Nation at the end of the novel fits few of Anderson's requirements for a modern nation to a tee; the people in the community do feel a "deep, horizontal comradeship" with their

fellow members and the members of the Royal Society thousands of miles away in England, and the Nation also defies Anderson's claim that nations must have the skewed balance in favor of political power to deep philosophy. Pratchett's epilogue shows the Nation in a modern-day context, revealing that the Nation stayed true to its aim to explore the intricacies of the universe through science as well as to avoid assimilation into other nations. Furthermore, both Mau and Daphne return to their respective homes despite their growing romance for the sake of their nations, affirming the importance of their communities over their self-interests: "'Well, she went back for the sake of her nation, and he stayed here for the sake of his. Wasn't that right?'" (398). In this idyllic world where a small island can be a nation devoted to science, Pratchett challenges readers to reconsider their place in a nation as well as the sacrifices they are willing to make to further the goals of the community. However, the perfect image of the Nation as a benevolent place of learning rather than a nation preoccupied with politics and nationalism only comes about in the novel from utter destruction and the loss of tradition and lives. The question remains whether this kind of salvation is possible without such a catastrophic loss, or if the loss itself is what eventually breaks the cycle of misplaced faith. The plague in England is never resolved, and, for that matter, nothing is said about Daphne's reign, whether good or bad, leaving readers without assurance that a nation as gigantic and politically inclined as England (and, indeed, our own modern nations) can make this transition as well. What Pratchett does assure his readers of is the power of individuals to affect their communities with faith in themselves and their future.

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Essay

Keely Smith

Who is the Real Monster?:

An Analysis of Mary Shelley's Discussion of Human Nature and a Prejudiced Community

Aristotle's famed statement, "man is by nature a political animal," demonstrates the importance of community to human nature and is only one of many cases in which the Western intellectual tradition attempts to analyze a human's role in society (*Pol.*1253a1). When considering community as an association of people who work together for the greater good of the group, pre-modern thought has generally arrived at the conclusion that humans will associate when in contact with others. If they decide otherwise, they are acting unnaturally. In fact, Cicero's *First Catilinarian* illustrates the concept of inviting a citizen who does not align with the values of the society, thereby proving his unnaturalness, to leave the community (1.13). The insight of Mary Shelley in *Frankenstein*, however, brings new concerns challenging this traditional concept of community. What if, rather than choosing to leave community, one hopes to join it? Can he or she still be excluded from this community? Is one subjected to unnaturalness, or is it an individual choice? Shelley's *Frankenstein* focuses on how the monster, an unnaturally-made being, craves the naturalness of association despite the outright denunciation he experiences from those within society. In this way, Shelley maintains the essentialness of community while questioning its ability to meet everyone's needs. She dramatizes the effects of exclusion from society in order to demonstrate the natural yearning for community and to critique that community for its prejudices and restrictive societal structure.

The monster that Victor Frankenstein creates experiences exclusion from community within the first moments of his existence due to his unnatural conception, which brands him as intolerable to his creator and society as a whole. As Victor assembles the monster, he “pursue[s] [his] undertaking with unremitting ardour” because he is intoxicated by the thrills of scientific discovery; he does not consider the negative repercussions that result from the unnatural creation of life (Shelley 81). Victor’s horror only ensues when the previously inanimate object first awakens, and he finally witnesses the perilous fruits of his labor. Victor states the monster’s ugliness intensifies with life, saying, “I gazed on him while unfinished, he was ugly then; but when those muscles and joints were rendered capable of motion, it became a thing such as even Dante could not have conceived” (84). Victor’s realization of the monster’s physical repulsiveness is a representation of his reaction to the monster’s unnatural existence and his inability to offer love or care to one outside of community.

Clearly the monster does not even have, as the colloquial expression goes, a face that only a mother could love, not merely because of his physical unattractiveness but also because he does not have a mother or form of community to supply that role. Parental love and acceptance is the first and one of the most important forms of community for natural early childhood development. Mary Lowe-Evans, a professor at the University of West Florida and the author of *Frankenstein: Mary Shelley’s Wedding Guest*, suggests the monster was denied the pleasure of parental love because “his prior condition as the illegitimate product of ‘unhallowed arts’ . . . makes him impossible to categorize and therefore impossible to love” (57). The monster was given life without community, and due to his innate unnaturalness which repulsed even his own creator, there is no way for him to ever be accepted within it.

The monster's unnatural creation might have stopped him from entering into community, but it does not bar him from experiencing humanity. Viewing and interacting with the De Lacey family from afar allows the monster to learn about human communities and realize why he yearns so desperately to be a part of one. Although the De Lacey family endures considerable sadness and poverty, the monster is particularly moved by the fact that they still "enjoyed one another's company and speech, interchanging each day looks of affection and kindness" (Shelley 128). The monster is unsurprisingly enticed by the positive way in which the family members treat each other, largely due to the absence of affection offered by Victor. The mutual kindness demonstrated by the cottagers is the first instance of fondness the monster experiences, and he "longed to join them, but dared not" (127). He holds this family to such high esteem that he begins to realize his own shortcomings and deficiencies and does whatever he can to make interactions with this family possible. The monster devises a plan to "become master of their language; which knowledge might enable [him] to make them overlook the deformity of [his] figure" (130). He is fully aware of his unnatural inadequacies, but he still has enough faith in the family that he, as Sylvia Bowerbank states, "reaches out to man expecting to love and be loved" (425). Until he can do this directly, however, the monster learns how one should behave in community in secrecy by sympathizing with the family's sentiments and assisting them in their labor. During his time observing the De Lacey family, the monster develops an understanding of community to which he attempts to conform despite the fact that in reality he is not, nor will he ever be, included in that community.

The monster is able to gain an understanding of community not only through viewing the interactions of the De Lacey family but also through a romantic education he obtains by means of Safie's instruction and the literature he acquires from the woods. As Safie learns to speak and

read, the monster also polishes his language skills and is able to read texts such as *Volney's Ruins of Empires*, *Paradise Lost*, *Plutarch's Lives*, and the *Sorrows of Werter*. These works compel him to obtain an increased sense of self-awareness and comprehension of what it means to be in community. He learns the roles “of the division of property, or immense wealth and squalid poverty; of rank, descent, and noble blood” in society and realizes, having none of these entities, how he is very much unlike other men (135). He then wonders, “Was I then a monster, a blot upon the earth, from which all men fled and whom all men disowned?” (136). As he begins to understand his own feelings and the reality of his existence, he also learns the importance of peace in a community that should be composed of caring, nurturing individuals. Particularly in reading *Paradise Lost*, the monster contrasts the creation of Adam and how one should be accepted into community with his own creation. He notes that Adam was “happy and prosperous, guarded by the especial care of his Creator; he was allowed to converse with, and acquire knowledge from beings of a superior nature,” which is incorporated into his conception of how an ideal community should function (143-144). Meanwhile, the monster recognizes he is “wretched, helpless, and alone,” becomes embittered by his own creator, and grows envious of the happy community of the cottagers (144). The education he acquires increases the monster’s knowledge of his unfortunate exclusion from community and intensifies his desire to join it.

The monster finally acts upon his longing to enter into community with the De Lacey family only to be rejected once again due to his unnatural appearance. As his time observing the De Lacey’s passes, the monster’s “heart yearned to be known and loved by these amiable creatures: to see their sweet looks turned towards [him] with affection, was the utmost limit of [his] ambition” (146). Knowing that his unnatural ugliness might deter the family from accepting him, the monster devises a plan to first befriend the blind, old De Lacey. He thinks if the elderly

man can get to know him beyond his obstacle of appearances, perhaps the younger family members can be convinced of his worth as well. When he first enters the home, the monster explains to the cottager that he is looking for affection but is afraid because he is a societal outcast. The elderly De Lacey ensures the monster of his idealistic view of community, the kind that the monster desperately desires, when he states, “the hearts of men, when unprejudiced by any obvious self-interest, are full of brotherly love and charity” (147). Unfortunately, De Lacey’s description proves incorrect when the younger family members return; he discovers that he has not accounted for the power of fear-provoking unnaturalness that can instill prejudice in even “the most excellent creatures in the world” (147). Horrified by the monster’s presence and believing that he is trying to harm the old De Lacey, Felix attacks the monster who loves him so dearly, once again rejecting him from community.

The De Lacey family’s rejection of the monster is a fundamental example of the prejudices of society, and Shelley’s use of Safie as a parallel to the monster further emboldens this illustration and her critique of a flawed community. The monster and Safie assume comparable roles as they train to be accepted into the De Lacey community. The monster even mentions that his skill in acquiring language is superior to hers, but in the end, she is still the only one who is welcomed into the community. Safie is stunning with the “countenance of angelic beauty and expression” and naturally created, and the monster is unsightly with an “ugliness . . . almost too horrible for human eyes” and inherently unnatural (132, 118). Shelley specifically notes the importance of Safie’s naturalness through the discussion of her mother as the source of her beauty, intellect, and free spirit in order to contrast her origins with those of the motherless monster (139). In this way, Shelley equates physical beauty with naturalness to explain why the monster, a freakish scientific experiment cannot join community and to critique

what those in community consider as natural or belonging. Safie's naturalness, as demonstrated by her appearance, offers her a role in community the monster can never have. Although Safie and the monster receive an equal education with the De Lacey family, solely "implicit in the Creature's lessons, however, is the flawed logic that makes the social system he mentally masters unworkable for him" (Lowe-Evans 57). Lowe-Evans asserts that the monster must realize "in a scheme where interdependent beings fall into well-defined categories—father, mother, brother, sister—there is no place for one who does not fit in" (57). Because Safie is natural, and therefore attractive, she is admitted into community to eventually take on the roles of wife, sister, and some day mother. In contrast, the monster's unnatural repulsiveness blocks him from community because he is immediately deemed unworthy of obtaining such roles.

Immediate judgments based on physical appearance are repeatedly accepted as justification for inclusion or exclusion from community. When Felix first "saw the lovely Safie . . . the youth could not help owing to his own mind, that the captive possessed a treasure which would fully reward his toil and hazard" (138). His judgment of her worth is based solely on her appearances, which is demonstrated upon their second meeting when "Felix seem[s] ravished with delight when he [sees] her" (133). In contrast, as soon as the young family members first glance at the monster, Felix immediately comes to the conclusion that the monster is trying to injure his father and prepares for attack. Due to his ugliness, Bowerbank suggests the monster has no chance of admission to community because "the rest of the community expresses the same intolerance as Victor does and shares his culpability" (426). Shelley critiques society through this physical comparison of Safie and the monster to demonstrate the included community members' vainness in decisions dictating inclusion and exclusion.

The exclusionary societal structure Shelley critiques demonstrates the injustice of a flawed community that does not provide acceptance for everyone yet still remains a source of obsession for those excluded from association. Especially after his rejection from the De Lacey family, the monster experiences disillusionment with community because he realizes he will never be accepted into a natural, preexisting society. The monster resents the prejudice those in community have against his exterior. He recognizes that he deserves value when he says, “I have good dispositions; my life has been hitherto harmless, and, in some degree, beneficial; but a fatal prejudice clouds their eyes, and where they ought to see a feeling and kind friend, they behold a detestable monster” (147). According to Kate Ellis, “resentment toward (and cruelty to) an ugly helpless creature is perfectly appropriate human behavior” in the novel (136). Shelley uses this preoccupation with appearances to exemplify the pettiness of an entity so essential to existence that it cannot be ignored (136). Meanwhile, Bowerbank focuses on the notion of the unavoidability of community that Shelley demonstrates when she asserts that no matter how often communally excluded beings “condemn society for its unfitness as a home, they just as often long to be part of it as it is, and rage against themselves for their inability to conform” (419). The injustice of the community does not stop the monster from continuing to yearn for association and unsuccessfully attempting to find this sense of belonging in a variety of different forms.

The final form of community the monster attempts to achieve is equally as unnatural as he is; he wants Victor to make a female monster for him. Victor’s refusal to create a new community for the monster solidifies the solitude that an unnatural being must face and the disillusionment with society that Shelley attempts to illustrate. The monster realizes he will never be accepted into a natural community, yet he hopes the existence of another unnatural creation

would allow him to “feel the affections of a sensitive being, and become linked to the chain of existence and events, from which [he is] now excluded” (158). Because Victor is his creator, the monster rationalizes that Victor is responsible for the pain he has experienced and for restoring justice in his miserable life. As William Godwin, Shelley’s father and source of inspiration, suggests in his *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, “The soul yearns, with inexpressible longings, for the society of its like,” and Victor is the only person who can supply the monster with this form of community (228). Shelley ensures that the monster, despite his rage against rejection, proves his rationality, forethought, and intelligence when he makes his request to Victor to demonstrate the injustice of his treatment among other humans. He is a being that has acquired the necessary skills to be a productive member of society, but his unnaturalness automatically subjects him to a life of loneliness. His unnatural state of existence is through no fault of his own; he assumes the curse of solitude from the moment his life begins. Shelley establishes this flaw in modernity by showing no matter how much one might desire to participate in community, “outsiders’ cannot enter; they are condemned to perpetual exile and deprivation, forbidden even from trying to create a domestic circle of their own” (Ellis 137). Victor finally recognizes his responsibility for the wellbeing of the monster he created but upholds his duty to the natural community over his obligation to his creation. Victor fears the negative repercussions an unnatural community of monsters could have on the natural community. He maintains the prejudices of society by believing, despite the monster’s promises, the creation of a female monster “might make the very existence of the species of man a condition precarious and full of terror” (174). No matter how much reason the monster displays in his plea for companionship, Victor is not able to overcome his prejudice against the unnatural.

The more prejudice the monster experiences, the more enraged and frustrated he becomes with the natural community. Shelley demonstrates the consequences of prejudice in society through the monster's aggressive resentment and violent actions against those in the community. In the transition from the monster's original admiration for the De Lacey family to his abject hatred and disappointment with humanity, Shelley emphasizes the way in which "initial benevolence is poisoned by an unjust society" (Bowerbank 424). His eagerness to love and be loved first by the De Laceys and then by a female monster is cast away by his hopelessness to achieve that which his heart most desires. His rejection based on vanity instigates a need for revenge, because, as Godwin questions, "What temptation has he to think of benevolence or justice, who has no opportunity to exercise it?" (229). The monster is frustrated with his inability to directly share affection with others, and the bitter hatred of humanity that evolves within his character leads him to burn the abandoned De Lacey homestead and target Victor and his family. He shows particular resentment toward Victor because of his negligence in manufacturing a creature destined for misery and solitude and his unwillingness to resolve that unhappiness by refusing to create a companion. The monster's revenge, however, exceeds the defilement of Victor's life alone; his tactics directly or indirectly kill everyone Victor cares about, thereby eliminating Victor's immediate community. As author and professor M. K. Joseph writes in the introduction to the 1969 edition of *Frankenstein*, "Frankenstein's story is, in fact, narrated as a cautionary tale" warning against societal prejudices by showing the damage that can be done to community by those who are excluded, especially for superficial reasons (xi). Exclusion from society turns a merely physical monster into an emotional monster as well, and the combination of the two results in violence that supports the prejudice originally at fault.

Through Shelley's critique of and warning against self-perpetuating prejudice in community, one can infer her solution is to create an inclusive community that instead offers love more freely than hate. The aggressive reaction due to neglect of affection experienced by the monster bears witness to the statement made by Christopher Small, author of *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein: Tracing the Myth*, that "the strongest moral implication of the story is that [the monster] should be loved" (311). With love and acceptance from the community, especially early on from Victor or the De Laceys, madness, violence, and misery could all have been avoided. The monster shows how deeply one can be affected by a lack of love and how the pain inflicted by a few can be projected on all society: "Inflamed by pain, [the monster] vowed eternal hatred and vengeance to all mankind" (153). To avoid such adverse results, Shelley emphasizes that the expansion of love must be widespread in the community. The blind, elderly De Lacey is able to avoid prejudice and is willing to accept the monster, but as long as there are an overpowering number of members in the society to maintain these prejudices and discriminate against the excluded, the cycle will only continue. According to Bowerbank, *Frankenstein* sets forth "a moral demand . . . that social community be fluid and dynamic, that it accommodate itself to the aberrations outside its 'love,' that it strive to be in relationship to all the living and not content itself with sterile and selective ideas of community" (425). Humanity's contentment with prejudiced communal structure is a foundation for discriminatory societal norms subject to attack by the socially excluded. In order for this danger to be eliminated, the community must rise above its static contentment with prejudice and love those who desire to contribute.

Unfortunately for those excluded like the monster, Shelley proves her own solution of expanded love from the community impossible and not based in reality. She faces the challenge of proposing to readers what should happen in society while still showing that human nature will

impede this from ever coming to fruition. The monster realizes he will never achieve acceptance into a natural community because “the human senses are insurmountable barriers to our union” (156). No matter how much he attempts to conform, his unnaturally ugly appearance will always be too great for community to overcome. The monster at one point hopes these prejudices were learned from society, but he finds this not to be the case when he meets Victor’s little brother William. The monster believes that “this little creature was unprejudiced and had lived too short a time to have imbibed a horror of deformity,” hoping to teach him otherwise and find in him a companion (154). William’s reaction when the monster embraces him is one of pure horror, and he screams, “Ugly wretch! You wish to eat me and tear me to pieces” (154). William’s response reflects humanity’s natural inclination to fear the unnatural, thereby making expansion of love toward them highly unlikely. Accepting the unnatural into community proves to be against the inherent human tendency to ward off danger, and as William demonstrates, humans naturally see abhorrent appearances as threatening. No matter how beneficial a more liberal application of love and acceptance might be to community, society’s innate prejudices will always hinder this process.

Love and acceptance might be the ultimate cures to exclusion from community, but as Shelley reveals in *Frankenstein*, this ideal reaction is not representative of human nature. Shelley describes the monster’s desperate longing for affection and repeated rejection in order to critique and warn about the dangers of prejudices in society that inhibit the excluded from participating in community. The monster believes “love . . . is his due as it is the due of every living creature; the denial of it is an ‘injustice’ which from beginning to end he passionately resents, and which drives him frantic” (Bowerbank 311). Although the reaction of the excluded might be violent and vengeful against community, they continue to be drawn back to society due to their need to

associate. This contradictory situation then results in a cycle of disappointment and solidified prejudices. When the excluded yearn for affection but cannot find it in community, they become resentful and release their frustrations in manners that only support the preconceived notions and tendencies of those who are excluding them. *Frankenstein* teaches that although some are naturally rejected from community, society itself is responsible for transforming these beings into monsters. The monster wanted to be a benevolent, caring member of the community, but as society repeatedly affirms the idea that he is not fit for community, he recognizes his involuntary destiny and resents the injustice of his creation and lonely existence. As Shelley confronts the concept of solitude, she blames the negligence of the community over the actions or nature of the individual. *Frankenstein* reveals all living beings are either reflections of or reactions to a community in which they may or may not belong. For this reason, the community holds responsibility for who is accepted and rejected, how they are treated, and whatever consequences might arise from such decisions. Shelley's *Frankenstein* brings to life new nuisances of the established concept of community to highlight how it can induce solitude and even provoke its own demise arising from its prejudices.

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Review

Timothy J. Sutton, PhD

Roots of Modernism

Joyce, Simon. *Modernism and Naturalism in British and Irish Fiction, 1880-1930*. Cambridge UP, 2015. 226 pp. \$29.99. Paperback.

Simon Joyce's richly contextualized book, *Modernism and Naturalism in British and Irish Fiction, 1880-1930*, considers naturalism as a long-neglected antecedent to high modernism in Western Europe. Joyce's primary contention is that naturalism "did not simply play a negative role, as one among a series of others (realism, idealism, popular literature) against which modernism came to define itself, but also played a positive and active role in shaping the forms within which modernist fiction in particular would be written" (4). Joyce regularly mentions that naturalism is considered antithetical to modernism, but it might be useful for him to cite direct critical studies to reinforce this important premise for his thesis. This book is most interesting when he focuses on the stylistic relationship between naturalism and modernism. For example, Joyce notes that "naturalism simultaneously insists upon documenting the lives of the lower classes and reflects upon the ethical problem of doing so from the perspective of relative authorial privilege" which leads to "a robust capacity for autobiographical self-reflection" (6). Joyce then traces how this self-reflection logically leads to the minute self-reflection in modernist discourse, especially in the development of stream-of-consciousness narrative techniques in high modernist writers such as James Joyce and Virginia Woolf.

Simon Joyce considers why the term *naturalism* did not take root in countries that had developed realism in their literature. He uses the concept of determinism to differentiate

naturalism from realism. Joyce adopts Lukács's notion that naturalism represents an "attempt to find a method by which the writer, now reduced to a mere spectator, could again realistically master reality" (17). Joyce then suggests that modernism adopts a sense of loss of agency from naturalism and "similarly a rise in international paralysis, but it is a stasis that is produced out of its emphasis upon a subjectivity that is never quite finished with the recording of sensory experience are ready to make concrete decisions" (18). Therefore, modernism has a "potential for solipsism, for instance, or for resigning itself in the face of crushing forces at work in the world" (19). Joyce uses these syntheses of the tropes of various movements in order to demonstrate that naturalism is an important contributing antecedent to modernism and not a movement that modernism primarily defines itself against.

Despite the fact that this book is supposed to focus on British and Irish fiction, the first full chapter (and in some ways the most foundational chapter) concerns French novelist Émile Zola's reception in England. Joyce commences an interesting defense of Zola that emphasizes the stylistic complexity of the novelist, who is usually thought of by modernists as a somewhat tasteless chronicler of the pains of modern living. The chapter does not so much redeem Zola as demonstrate commonalities of Zola's idea and those of early modernists. The next chapter—again focusing on Zola—connects the French author to Impressionists in art. Joyce sees in Zola "a form of existential doubt that we rarely associate with naturalism" (73). After reading these initial chapters, it is impossible not to think this book mistitled: Joyce should account somewhere for the foundational studies of French naturalism.

In the third chapter, Joyce's focus on Ireland synthesizes the ideas in the introduction more substantially. For instance, Joyce notes how Yeats and other Irish Renaissance writers were influenced by Continental literary models; according to Zola, the Irish were "hostile toward some

(most crucially, Impressionism nationalism) and receptive to others, including aestheticism and symbolism” (85). Joyce then commences a revealing analysis of various novels of George Moore. Joyce adeptly analyzes how Anglo-Irish, upper-class women could provide mediums for observing the sufferings of the lower class without providing any meaningful way to assuage native Irish suffering: “Moore felt that English women—even lower class ones—might attain the status of realist heroines. . . . Yet it is hard to escape the sense that [each of these characters] possesses something that her Irish counterpart can never attain: an Englishness that enables her to shift from the determined subject of naturalism to the self-determining agency required by realism” (99). This observation perceptively notes the difficulty Irish writers have in representing the travails of the poor Irish while enacting a form that does not facilitate discussing solutions for wider social problems. Any form of realism in this situation may seem unfeeling.

Joyce’s analysis of James Joyce’s *Dubliners* clearly demonstrates how the Irish novelist “travels through naturalism in order to get” to the psychological complexities of later modernism (108). This argument is compelling and certainly weighs against limited uses of the term modernism that would exclude naturalism from its aesthetic predecessors. Whether or not such a confined conception of modernism is in fact popular today is worth considering; I believe the various connotations of the term *modernism* have proliferated to such an extent that it can now incorporate nearly any previous aesthetic development. But I also appreciate Simon Joyce’s emphasis on the immediate influence of nationalism on the development of later high modernist writers such as James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, the latter of whom certainly would not be considered a naturalist.

Simon Joyce successfully focuses on Woolf’s modernist mechanisms. He observes that “stream of consciousness is in many respects merely naturalism turned in upon itself” (151).

With regard to Woolf, Joyce asks whether she “is damned in her efforts to be literary and by the effort not to be,” which would make her “potentially at fault for daring to write about people outside of her immediate class experience or writing from only within her narrow scope of social experience” (168-169). This sympathetic and perceptive description of critical responses to Woolf sheds some light on Woolf’s difficult position when representing lower classes. It is worth noting that James Joyce does not face the same type of criticism. Is it because he portrays lower-class figures with more accuracy? Or is it because Joyce himself suffered through financial troubles in a way that Woolf never did and, therefore, earned the right to describe these figures without criticism? I do not think gender bias is in play here, as Simon Joyce briefly recounts how E. M. Forster faced many of the same criticisms that Woolf does on the issue.

In this penultimate chapter, Simon Joyce asks, “[Is] naturalism . . . a *style*, with discernible aesthetic qualities and characteristics, or is it instead a consciously anti-literary method that sets itself against the idea of style as an exercise in mystification?” (168). I find this to be the most intriguing question in the book. It points to the question of whether naturalism deliberately, or even incidentally, has a formative impact on high modernism. Joyce somewhat oddly employs Nietzsche as the unifying figure in the conclusion (and I say this again in part because of my expectation that this work would in fact focus on British and Irish writers). A simple change of the title that reflects the actual work done in the book might solve this small contestation. This book goes a long way in interrogating certain modernist figures and (if such a thing is needed) resurrecting naturalism as an important forbearer of later modernist developments. This research can be applied more widely across early twentieth-century literature, not only in Britain and Ireland, but also throughout the West, as Joyce clearly indicates. For that reason, the book is useful for scholars and students of literature alike.

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Essay

Annie Brown

“What Makes a Man?”: An Exploration of Gender in the Coens’ Neo-Noir Films

In *Fargo*, *The Big Lebowski*, and *The Man Who Wasn't There*, the Coens utilize their characters' unconventional personalities as a means of subverting and questioning gender roles in the film noir genre. Credo Reference defines film noir as a “genre of dark, cynical crime film [which is] thematically indebted to the ‘hard-boiled’ school of fiction” (“Film Noir”). These gritty, “pessimistic” films exist in “[a world] of eternal night . . . populated by low-lives, corrupt officials, ruthless *femme fatales* and psychotic gangsters” (“Film Noir”). *Fargo* includes many classic features of the genre, most notably the unflappable, noir-inspired detective, Marge Gunderson. While her gender sets her apart from other noir protagonists, what makes her especially subversive is the contrast between her intelligence and the buffoonery of the men around her. Their failures prove their masculinity to be a farce disguising their weaknesses, while Marge exhibits her courage and heroism. Similarly, *The Big Lebowski* tackles the issue of noir's treatment of masculinity by casting the Dude as an unlikely detective. The Dude exhibits traits traditionally belonging to women in films noir; however, Walter epitomizes masculinity. The differences in Walter and the Dude's reactions to the tumultuous events of the film, along with a focus on the emasculating and manipulative figure of Maude, contribute to the film's subversion of gender tropes. While *The Big Lebowski* mocks modern standards of masculinity, *The Man Who Wasn't There* offers an existential perspective. The film explores Ed Crane's existential struggle to find happiness in the chaotic world of modernity. His feminization and lack of power render him insignificant as a modern man. The Coens utilize clever manipulation of gender

tropes in all three films, revealing the fallibility of film noir's traditional expectations of masculinity, while holding women up as more powerful and capable than typical films noir portray them.

By blending elements of classic film noir with nuanced portrayals of gender, the Coens' create in *Fargo* what is at once an homage to and a critique of film noir. Their comedic subversion of noir gender tropes makes a subtle jab at expectations of noir and sets *Fargo* apart as a multifaceted modern twist on the genre. In traditional film noir, the brooding *male* detective serves as capable, tough, and quick-witted protagonist; however, *Fargo*'s detective defies standards of classic noir by virtue of her gender. Jeffrey Adams points out that, "casting Marge, a woman, as the story's chief detective gives the noir genre . . . [a] humorous spin . . . [and] the fact that [she] . . . is noticeably pregnant heightens the incongruity" (Adams, "Fargo" 109). The film plays her pregnancy for laughs, but Marge exhibits all the wit and intelligence of any Hammett detective. She asserts herself with "unshakable self-confidence" (109), including during her dangerous standoff with Gaear at the wood chipper. When she discovers Gaear in the process of disposing of Carl's body, Marge is visibly horrified; however, she does not give in to fear, but rather chases Gaear down and skillfully apprehends him alone, without help (*Fargo* 1:28:10). Additionally, when Marge interrogates Jerry at the car dealership, she stands up to him in the pursuit of answers. As Jerry yells at her and loses control of himself, she remains composed. "Sir," she says, "you have no call to get snippy with me. I'm just doing my job here" (1:21:30). In this scene, she asserts her authority and maintains control of the situation in a professional manner. By portraying her as a composed and professional police officer, the Coens set Marge apart from other female characters of noir and raise her to the level of the traditional

male noir detective. Conversely, the Coens feminize the male characters in the film, reducing them to ineffective fools ruled by their own emotions.

Compared with Marge's strength and capability, Jerry, Carl, and Wade all exhibit a lack of control over their own schemes and emotions. The causes of the male characters' downfalls are incompetence and an inability to maintain power. According to Adams, Jerry is just a weakling, not a cunning villain (Adams, "Fargo" 109). As he struggles with his plan gone wrong, he loses any ability to negotiate his position of power as he is "thwarted by his father-in-law", Wade (109). In one scene, he goes to ask Wade for a loan. "You're saying we put in all the money," Wade laughs, "and you collect when it pays off?" (*Fargo* 0:21:19). When Wade dismisses his request, Jerry grows more desperate. Wade scolds, "What the heck were you thinking . . . I assume if you're not interested [in the deal], then you won't mind if we move on it" (0:21:56). Jerry, denied his loan and cut out of the deal, loses control of the situation and comes across as a pathetic fool. Later, Jerry walks across the snow-covered parking lot, defeated by his own father-in-law. In a fit of frustration, he futilely beats his car's windshield with an ice chipper (0:23:24). Overwhelmed by a situation he can no longer control, Jerry becomes a blubbering mess. Likewise, Wade tries to maintain an appearance of toughness in his business dealings, but dies because of his own hubris. He insists on meeting Carl in the parking deck and rescuing Jean himself. As he loads his gun, he rehearses his lines with all the confidence of a gritty action hero. "Here's your damn money," he growls, "Now where's my daughter, you goddamn punk?" (1:09:08). Minutes later, he is shot dead in the snow and proven as ineffectual as Jerry.

Although Carl asserts dominance in this scene, he also comes across as overly emotional. Typical films noir characterize women as the emotional sex; however, Marge comes across as levelheaded, while Carl and Jerry's wild emotions make them appear foolish. Jerry screams out

of frustration when he does not get what he wants and howls with anguish when the police storm his hotel room and place him under arrest. While hiding out in the cabin, Carl screams and beats the television when he cannot get signal (0:47:25). His futile rage reduces him to nothing but an oversized child, frustrated by the smallest inconvenience. Ultimately, the Coens use the ineptitude and overreactions of *Fargo*'s male figures to paint them as pathetic, while Marge is the paragon of heroism. In this way, the Coens subvert the gender tropes of noir and call into question the long-held standards of the genre's handling of gender.

While *Fargo* focuses on the emotional fragility of its male characters, the Coens' treatment of masculinity in *The Big Lebowski*'s critiques violent masculinity. Like *Fargo*, *The Big Lebowski* features an unlikely hero; however, unlike Marge, Jeffrey "The Dude" Lebowski is nothing like a noir detective. He is passive and avoids violence entirely. According to Jakub Kazecki, "[the Dude's] failures as an enthusiastic but amateurish detective negate the image of an active hero typical for the film noir genre" (Kazecki 151). This subversion destroys the image of the heroic, masculine man in noir. The Coens employ a "confrontation between the actions of [the Dude] . . . and the dominant ideological constructions of masculinity" (152), which raises questions regarding the representation of men in film noir. The Dude's bowling partner, Walter, is a comically hyper-masculine male "place[d] in the lineage of the well-built, loud, and violent action heroes of war movies" (154). He "lives in the reality shaped by the Vietnam conflict" (154), which makes him appear aggressive and violent; however, his "manly behavior is tested" when he is "provoked by a minor violation of game rules by another player" (154-155). When Smokey steps over the line while bowling, Walter holds him at gunpoint and screams, "Mark it zero . . . Smokey, this is not 'Nam. This is bowling. There are rules" (*The Big Lebowski* 0:17:50). Kazecki argues that his rage at Smokey reduces his "manner of dealing with the world" to

“ridicule” (155). In response to Walter’s rampage, the Dude keeps calm and reminds him, “It’s just a game, man” (*The Big Lebowski* 0:18:00). He admonishes Walter: “You can’t do that, man. These guys, they’re like me. They’re pacifists . . . You’re not wrong, Walter. You’re just an asshole” (0:19:00). In this scene, the Coens utilize the Dude’s questioning of Walter’s reactionary violence to deride the image of trigger-happy male protagonists. Although Walter is no noir detective, he believes that asserting his masculinity can solve his problems. He comes across as an absurd caricature of masculinity, while the Dude, despite his laziness and passivity, apparently leads the more reasonable life. The Dude may be the more level-headed of the pair, but his passivity causes him trouble when he encounters Maude.

The Big Lebowski’s most prominent female character, Maude Lebowski, subverts typical expectations of women in film noir through her cunning manipulation of the Dude. From her first appearance in the film, Maude establishes herself as an intimidating and sexually dominant woman, much to the Dude’s bemusement. When he visits her apartment, Maude greets him by swinging naked overhead while splattering paint on a canvas (*The Big Lebowski* 0:43:25). Clothed in nothing but a robe, Maude confronts the Dude: “Does the female form make you uncomfortable, Mr. Lebowski?” (0:44:00). This odd conversation topic appears to be no accident, but rather is Maude’s tool for introducing herself as a sexually capable and powerful force. She shocks and bewilders the Dude with this question, putting him in an awkward position and compromising his hold on the situation. Maude is also not afraid to ask for what she wants, both materially and sexually.

In the same scene, she demands that the Dude return her family’s rug (0:44:30) and alludes to her already formed plans to use the Dude for sex. Maude is clearly not a demure, sexually submissive woman, but instead manipulates the Dude for her own means. Later, Maude

seduces him with the intent of becoming pregnant. It is implied that ever since she met The Dude and suggested he visit her “thorough” doctor (0:48:11), she has been plotting to use him. By effectively reducing the Dude to an object, she not only emasculates him, but also subverts generic standards by gaining the upper hand in their relationship and putting him in a feminized position. In fact, emasculation is a central motif in the film. Visually, the Coens reference emasculation through the Dude’s nightmares of nihilists chasing him with novelty-sized scissors (1:23:36) and Maude’s large painting of scissors (0:44:35). In essence, Maude’s role as a dominant female force shows that women of noir can be even more powerful than their male counterparts. Like Marge, she exhibits the impressive capability of women in the Coens’ films, but in a more aggressive way. Rather than simply allowing the men around her to embarrass themselves, Maude actively manipulates the men to suit her wishes; however, despite her manipulative tendencies, Maude is not a *femme fatale* in the strictest sense of the word.

Although Maude uses her sexuality as a tool to manipulate the Dude, the Coens do not portray her as a typical *femme fatale*. Julie Grossman argues that, in traditional film noir, the *femme fatale* acts as a “projection of male fear and desire . . . [and] later, as a politically forceful symbol of unencumbered power. . . evil women whose raison d’être is to murder and deceive” (19). Maude indeed manipulates the Dude to impregnate her; however, her goal is never to murder or harm anyone. After realizing Maude’s intentions, the Dude panics, spluttering and spitting out his drink. Immediately, he assumes Maude wants to manipulate and extort him, but she explains that she wants nothing from him: “Look, Jeffrey,” she says, “I don’t want a partner. In fact, I don’t want the father to be someone. . . who will have any interest in raising the child himself” (*The Big Lebowski* 1:31:05). While Maude is using the Dude for procreation purposes, she explicitly states that she has no intent to bother him any further.

The traditional *femme fatale* is “shown to be limited by, even trapped in, social worlds presented as psychotically gendered” which causes them to “express . . . an insistence of independence” in the form of violent and manipulative actions (Grossman 19). For Grossman, this view of the *femme fatale* is a false misreading of the female experience, influenced by “gender fantasies” of the *femme fatale* as “a dangerous body, to be labeled and tamed by social roles and institutions” (19). Despite her sexual liberation and ability to manipulate, she is not a malevolent force. She rejects the trappings of society’s expectations of women but does not behave violently or maliciously. By painting her as a powerful yet relatively innocuous force, the Coens show that women in film noir can “demonstrate complex psychological and social [identities]” as three-dimensional, nuanced characters without posing a real or bodily threat to their male counterparts (Grossman 19). Maude may not be a murderous *femme fatale*, but she emasculates the men around her, revealing the strength of modern woman and exposing the weaknesses of modern man.

In *The Man Who Wasn't There*, the Coens examine modern masculinity through Crane’s attempts to come to terms with his role in the modern world. Crane’s experience in modern America is one of existential alienation. Adams asserts that the film’s “pervasive sense of personal alienation and pessimistic despair” is reminiscent of the Coens’ film noir sources, which draw from the existential struggles of the everyday in “Depression-era America” (Adams, “The Man Who Wasn’t There” 149). Crane’s entrapment in a menial job and loveless marriage leads to the development of his existential dread. David Buchanan describes Crane’s dread as a “struggle to find a place in this changing world,” a struggle which is “associated with the trauma of displacement and loss, dysfunctional relationships, and exploitation that can lead to murder and suicide” (138). In the beginning of the film, Crane explains, “I never considered myself a

barber...I stumbled into it" (0:2:37). A tight close-up of his coworker, Frank's, mouth emphasizes his amiable loquacity, while Crane appears "stoic, uncomfortable, and stiff in his clean, straight barber's smock" (Buchanan 138). He is unhappy with his life, discontented by stagnation and the people around him. According to Buchanan, the "juxtapositions" between talkative Frank and miserable Crane "are indicative of . . . characteristics of modernity highlighted throughout the film" (138). While Frank appears happy working in the family business, Crane does not belong in this nostalgic environment, which gives him a "disoriented" or "detached" quality (138). His feelings embody the existential struggle to redefine identity and find meaningful connection in the world. By seeking to reinvent himself and take a chance on Tolliver's business venture, Crane tries to break from his role as an invisible barber; however, this desire to control an uncaring universe leads to death and ruin. Crane is not the capable detective figure of film noir, but rather is subject to forces beyond his control. Adams writes, "Crane is thrust into an existential predicament from which there is little hope for escape, teaching us that there is no exit from a world ruled by chance" (Adams, "The Man Who Wasn't There" 149). Crane becomes the victim of a seemingly random series of events when he involves himself in financial wrongdoings, kills Big Dave in self-defense, loses his wife, and ultimately faces the death penalty for a wrongful murder conviction. The Coens utilize Crane's story to depict the changing definition of masculinity in modernity. Gone are the days of the infallible, powerful male noir protagonist. Instead, men who try to control the world around them experience the consequences of the existential struggle, which warps them into something apart from their noir counterparts. Likewise, Crane's wife feminizes and emasculates him, resulting in his total loss of control.

The emasculation Crane faces has a long history as a thematic element in films noir. Adams argues that “the noir male protagonist . . . is often depicted as psychologically conflicted, damaged or otherwise emotionally victimized, and thus emasculated” (“The Man Who Wasn’t There” 156). Suggestions of Crane’s emasculation add an intriguingly ambiguous element to his story: his feminization. The Coens portray Crane, like The Dude or other male characters in *Fargo*, as having feminine traits, albeit in a subtle way. His role as a “victim-type” appears to be reminiscent of “the fear of passive homosexuality, which is thought to have been pervasive among post-war American men” (157). Indeed, the film’s homosexual subtext is clear; however, the film never directly addresses Crane’s sexual orientation. Instead, Crane wears an apron, has his legs shaved, is assumed to be homosexual by Tolliver, and uses a “dame’s weapon” (a cigar cutter) to kill Big Dave (157). The closest Crane comes to confessing his ambiguous sexuality is when Tolliver (“the pansy”) flirts with him in the motel. The two men meet to discuss their business partnership, and Tolliver lies on the bed, disheveled (*The Man Who Wasn’t There* 0:15:45). Tolliver gazes at Crane suggestively, winking and adjusting his tie (0:16:56). Crane stares at Tolliver confusedly and asks, “Was that a pass?” (0:17:10). When Tolliver coyly responds, Crane retorts, “You’re out of line, mister” (0:17:15), implying that he is not interested; however, Adams points out that “his stern but gentle rejection of Tolliver’s advances betrays the barber’s uncertainty about his real inclinations” (“The Man Who Wasn’t There” 157). The Coens’ characterization of Crane as feminized and implicitly homosexual points to the film’s question of what defines a man in the modern world. Numerous people demand of Crane, “What kind of man are you?” (1:45:59). While this question relates to Crane’s corrupt morality, it also relates to his sexuality.

The modern cultural majority defines masculinity in more complex terms than the black-and-white characteristics of classic noir. For Crane, becoming a “new man,” as the advertisement taped to his mirror suggests, involves the possible transformation of his sexuality through his relationship with Tolliver and the certain delving into moral corruption through his blackmail and murder of Big Dave (0:3:23). Crane is at once a figure reminiscent of the male heroes of classic noir and a subversion of noir expectations. Indeed, his feminization and ineffectiveness sets him apart from stereotypical protagonists of noir. He is not a dominant masculine force in control of his life, nor does he handle his situation with any aplomb. Instead, his struggle is entirely futile, and the authorities execute him. In an extreme departure from classic noir, the Coens use this film to paint a bleak picture of the emasculated modern male.

Throughout the most famous of their neo-noir films, the Coens challenge standard portrayals of male noir heroes, creating unique and thought-provoking characters who bend gender roles and raise questions about the nature of masculinity. *Fargo*, *The Big Lebowski*, and *The Man Who Wasn't There* offer unique takes on gender and sexuality in the modern world. By poking fun at and stripping power from their male characters and empowering their female protagonists, the Coens expose the flawed portrayals of gender in classic film noir; however, the implications of their commentary go far beyond film. Cultural perceptions of gender are integral to depictions of gender in media. The classic films noir of the 1900s, with their emphasis on traditional gender roles and hyper-masculine males, informed the world's conceptions of what gender roles should be as much as the blockbusters of the twenty-first century shape the cultural landscape today. By offering a nontraditional and subversive view on gender roles, the Coens present a vision of gender that is at once refreshing and critical to a reframing of the modern world's understanding of gender. In essence, the Coens' brilliant and nuanced depictions of gender offer a comedic take

on a topic of paramount importance to the modern cultural landscape. The power of media permeates every aspect of global culture, and the Coens appear to understand the necessity of questioning the toxic standards of gender depicted in films for the past century.

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Essay

Mack Sexton

**“That’s Just Your Opinion, Man”: Authenticity, Expectation, and
the Music of *The Big Lebowski* and *O Brother, Where Art Thou?***

Introduction: The Beat of Their Own Drum

There is no argument to be made that the use of music in the Coen brothers’ filmography is not thematically important; the musical selections in their films lend greater depth to each film through intertextual meaning and, frequently, dramatic contrast. Aside from their 2013 film *Inside Llewyn Davis*, two films stand above the rest in the Coens’ filmography for their use of music. One is *The Big Lebowski*, notable in its eclectic use of classic rock and roll. The other is *O Brother Where Art Thou?*, which uses the blues, bluegrass, and country music to create a sense of place and ultimately question the validity of historical Reality. In both *The Big Lebowski* and *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, the Coens use music to create humor through ironic juxtaposition and, consequently, critique structural expectation and the concept of textual authenticity.

Creedence and California: Music in *The Big Lebowski*

The music of *The Big Lebowski* works intertextually to complicate (if not overtly destabilize) the hierarchies present in the verisimilar world of Los Angeles. This much is clear from the film’s outset with the humorous use of “Tumbling Tumbleweeds” by Sons of the Pioneers, a choice that both establishes a (false) generic expectation for the film and humorously underscores the Dude’s general incompetency. Not only is *The Big Lebowski* not the classic Western that the Stranger implies it is, but also its protagonist is the antithesis of the powerful,

masculine figure that characterizes the genre. Though shot from a low-angle in the same manner akin to the “hero shot” in films like *Stagecoach*, the Dude’s first appearance in the dairy aisle of a shopping mart in a bathrobe is lackluster; the sterile, fluorescent lighting, the effeminate costuming, and Bridge’s performance as the Dude all deflate the audience’s expectations (00:02:32). Yet the song is not entirely irrelevant, as the Dude is a wanderer in the same way that the tumbleweeds “drift” (Sons of the Pioneers 8). The Dude defies easy classification, operating as his own somewhat peculiar and amusing anachronism rather than operating neatly alongside musical signification. Paul Martin and Valerie Renegar argue that this destabilization of expectation is a carnivalesque way of challenging established hierarchies: they write, “[T]he filmmakers place a self-admitted ‘deadbeat’ . . . in the role of the hero, thereby inverting the standards of the American capitalist ideal of success by placing this ‘bum’ at the top of the social ladder” (307). Indeed, upsetting conventionally understood generic expectations “helps shift the viewer’s attention away from the content to focus ‘our assumptions and expectations about . . . film itself” (Martin and Renegar 308). As an aside, we see this same destabilization later in the film through the use of Bob Dylan’s “The Man in Me,” which evokes the themes of masculinity, which are contrasted with the effeminate Dude, a figure characterized by his long hair and dress-like bathrobe.

The audio selection here also introduces a recurring theme that runs throughout the Dude’s misadventures, that the disconnection between expectation and reality results from failed signification. ShaunAnne Tangney suggests that

[T]he frontier has closed, the open space is no longer open to nurture the American Dream . . . [T]his idea is brilliantly illuminated in the opening sequence of *The Big Lebowski*. . . Sam Elliot, a true icon of the western, provides the

voiceover narration while “Tumbling Tumbleweeds” by the Sons of the Pioneers plays in the background. Elliot . . . says, “There was a lot about the Dude that didn’t make a whole lot of sense to me—and a lot about the place where he lived likewise.” Los Angeles does not make sense to the Stranger, a cowboy, because it is not the wide-open space of the frontier. . . . Clearly America has run out of space, and any reevaluation of the American Dream is going to happen here . . .

(5)

The use of “Tumbling Tumbleweeds” suggests a conventional American frontier narrative, that of the wild expanse of the West and the rugged individuals who will “tame” it. However, the cinematography creates a comical disjunction, an audiovisual dissonance that calls the reliability of the Western narrative into question.

The film’s approach to destabilizing expectations is not limited merely to the American capitalistic metanarrative though; in fact, the Coens’ critique of American consumerist culture seems to function to examine the relationship between structural impositions and individual authenticity. We as viewers see this much in the Dude’s choice of music (Creedence Clearwater Revival) and his hatred for music by the Eagles. The Dude’s dislike of the Eagles is well established in the film, both in terms of cinematic form and performative content. In a taxi returning from Malibu, the Dude remarks, “I had a rough night, and I hate the fucking Eagles, man” (01:26:11). As if this alone were not enough, the film reinforces the Dude’s contempt for the Eagles through its use of non-diegetic music. Earlier in the film, we see a montage of the Dude’s rival, the Jesus, in the bowling alley (00:25:11). The sequence shows the Jesus in an uncomfortably sexualized manner, and a panning close-up of the Dude’s face reveals his utter disgust with the rival bowler. However, the music is of importance in this scene; over the top of

the entire montage is the Gypsy Kings's cover of the Eagles's "Hotel California." Film scholar Jeffrey Adams suggests that this dislike "could be interpreted as a response to their commercial co-optation by a capitalist music industry. . . . The Eagles, who rose to prominence . . . after the counter-culture had peaked, presented a belated and commercially diluted imitation of the roots rock revival led by CCR" (128). From this theory, I argue that the Dude's hatred has to do with the empty simulation of a style of music that he enjoys, with the Eagles acting as a hollow signifier for a musical period.

At this point, we should contrast the Dude's hate of the Eagles with his love of CCR. Throughout the film, the Dude expresses his interest in Creedence Clearwater Revival. After the Dude's car is stolen, the police ask him if anything of value was stolen; before mentioning the briefcase full of money, the Dude brings up his tape deck and his CCR recordings (00:41:16). In the light of the Dude's disgust with the Eagles, his love of Creedence takes on new meaning; instead of merely being a band indicative of the late sixties and early seventies, CCR becomes symbolic of a form of authenticity. Adams argues that the Dude's love of Creedence defines much of the film, writing:

[T]he music of CCR advocates a return (revival) to authenticity (credence) and purity (clear water). These concepts were integral to the ethos of the 1960s hippie counter-culture to which CCR made its greatest appeal. . . [T]he Dude still lives by this ethos. Despite his lazy ways and general disregard for social conventions, he clings to an idealistic hope for the best in fellow man while patiently tolerating humanity's inevitable weaknesses. . . He 'abides' or perseveres as the naive antithesis of the nihilists whose claim to 'believe in nothing' merely confounds him. (127)

Through the Dude's love of CCR and his hatred of the Eagles, we can derive meaning from the structural instability of the opening sequence (and indeed, much of the film as a whole). *The Big Lebowski* destabilizes structural norms to examine how signifiers can actually act against the authenticity of a text. The music of the Eagles represents a hollow representation of the music of CCR, lacking any of the context that defined its precursor; similarly, the filmic world the Dude occupies is full of false signifiers, all failing to capture the duality of the characters within the text. Adams points out that many characters in the film "have hidden or falsified identities. They are imposters, or as Walter would say 'amateurs.' Like the 'covers' that copy an original recording, many have double (sometimes multiple) identities" (128). In fact, though the film is chock full of musical signifiers, a surface-level reading of the film yields a somewhat misleading and jumbled interpretation; like the contrast between the Eagles and CCR or the ironic juxtaposition between the Dude's first appearance and "Tumbling Tumbleweed," *The Big Lebowski* is best understood not in terms of its structural components but in how it subverts the very tropes and generic expectations it presents.

That Old Country Sound: Music in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*

In contrast to the eclectic musical repertoire of *The Big Lebowski*, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* specializes primarily in a particular brand of period-specific music. The film uses a combination of bluegrass, country, gospel, and Americana music to depict the Depression era South. Yet much like *The Big Lebowski*, the film uses music to destabilize structural expectations and critique the concept of authenticity. R. Barton Palmer sets the stage for this debate nicely, writing "Playing constantly with notions of cultural authenticity, the film features a soundtrack of supposedly authentic 'Appalachian' music, but there is little in this string of numbers that does not show the homogenizing touch of Nashville" (157). The Soggy Bottom Boys and their song

“Man of Constant Sorrow” lie at the heart of this matter. Not only is their title as a band a humorous jab at the real world band, the Foggy Mountain Boys, but also the lyrics to “Man of Constant Sorrow” are themselves untruthful. In the song, Ulysses claims that “he has no friends to help him now,” and he promises to “meet his lover on God’s golden shore” (Soggy Bottom Boys 11, 25). Not only is his claim about lacking friends patently false (Delmar and Pete are providing backup vocals for the song while Tommy covers on the guitar), but also his claims about “God’s golden shore” are undercut by the fact that Ulysses is a staunchly atheistic figure (00:24:44). Even the performance itself is laced with dishonesty; the scene’s ending in particular comically undermines any sincerity in the song, as Ulysses dishonestly claims that two fictitious members of the band, “Mert” and “Aloysius” have to “just sign Xs” because “only four” of the Soggy Bottom Boys “can write” (00:26:43).

Yet, the inauthenticity of “Man of Constant Sorrow” goes deeper yet. There is the argument to be made that this song is merely a constructed narrative that exists only within the context of narrative itself; however, the inauthenticity goes even deeper than that. Digging through the song and the identity of its singer, Ulysses Everett McGill, reveals an astonishingly layered palimpsest. In his article, "Inventing That 'Old-Timey' Style: Southern Authenticity in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*," Sean Chadwell astutely remarks that

As the singer of “Man of Constant Sorrow,” Everett pretends to be a man from Kentucky, but he’s actually a man from Mississippi who, to get back to his wife, is pretending to be a hardened criminal with a buried treasure—despite the fact that he was actually in jail for impersonating a lawyer; he is played by George Clooney, who pretends to sing the music about being a man from Kentucky and

who is, as it turns out, a man from Kentucky playing the role of a man from Mississippi playing the role of a man from Kentucky. (4)

However, the question of authenticity goes beyond George Clooney's lip-syncing and into the realm of historical accuracy itself. *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* creates an artificial picture of the South through its music that is more concerned with the mythology of the South than the historical reality of the early twentieth-century South. (Of course, this statement implies accessible historical reality; for the purposes of this paper, I will focus solely on the manufactured image of the historical South rather than try to tackle the question of historical truth in postmodernity.) Again, Chadwell examines the historical stereotypes of “hillbillies” and early Americana music, writing that “the fabrication of the hillbilly character, a practice begun in the late 1920s and early 1930s . . . was inspired by the success of the marketing model in which old performers were described as ‘old timey’ . . . More important, the idea that even the music of the fiddlers harkened back to a pure . . . (read Anglo-Saxon) style was itself a fabrication” (5). Rather than portray a fully accurate depiction of the Deep South of the early twentieth century, the Coens choose music and musical figures that create a heightened sense of the myth of the South. Richard Middleton points out that though “the story seems to be set around 1937,” (56) the song “You Are My Sunshine” was “written in 1940 by country musician Davis” (56) and was actually used in Davis's campaign for the Louisiana state governorship in 1944” (56). Middleton also points out the temporal discrepancy that Tommy Johnson presents, commenting, “By contrast, an unknown Tommy Johnson is most likely to have encountered travelling to Tishomingo (Jackson) during his early period of in the late 1920s or early 1930s. Like a dream, then, the film diegesis condenses moments in a historical transition on to [sic] a mythical moment, which can then node within an even longer pattern” (56). The goal of the film is not to

authentically re-create the South as it was but instead to create a filmic representation of the myth surrounding the region. Palmer writes, “*O Brother* does not set itself the task of reinventing ‘a whole period.’ Instead, it plays [reflexively] with cultural stereotype” (156).

The matter of authenticity versus representation gets more complicated when we recognize the important role that black Americans played in the creation of this audio mythology and the many attempts to remove them from the interconnected history of Southern music. Middleton comments that “[b]lack involvement in the folklorization process can be traced back to the early years of the century,” yet the Black presence in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* is relegated to a background role (53). In the scene where the Soggy Bottom Boys record “I am a Man of Constant Sorrow,” the scene is cast in a racial light, when the band poses as a group of black men only to immediately reverse their claim when the radio station manager remarks that, “Yeah, well, I don’t record Negro songs” (00:24:48). The irony of this exchange is, of course, that Americana and bluegrass of the era was heavily influenced by African American folk music, and that the resulting song would likely have been the same either way.

The racial tensions in the film’s music become much more prominent in the movie’s climax, a scene which examines the problematic narrative of the historical South as it currently exists. For example, the KKK rally ironically begins with a rendition of “O Death,” a song that concisely demonstrates the intertwined racial southern musical history. Chadwell again writes

“O Death,” a personal plea to death . . . is an excellent example of the intercultural heritage of much Southern music. . . [it] anthropomorphizes death and addresses it directly. . . In a slave ritual excerpted by John Lovell, the speaker cries out to death: “O! Death! O! Death! A sinner crying oh—! Death! / How can I go with you? / I’m just a flower in bloom . . . / Why will you cut me down so soon?” . . .

Considered bluegrass by contemporary fans, “O Death” clearly has African American roots as well. (7-8)

After sneaking into a fundraiser for Pappy O’Daniel, the Soggy Bottom Boys reveal themselves with their performance of “I am a Man of Constant Sorrow,” comically dressed in overalls, fake beards, and wide-brimmed hats (01:24:32). The image evokes the constructed image of hillbilly musician, yet it is intended in-universe to mask the real identities of Ulysses and his friends.

Homer Stokes disrupts the performance and proclaims, “These boys ain’t white. These boys ain’t white. Hell, they ain’t even old timey!” (01:26:10). Though clearly stemming from a place of hatred, Homer is not entirely wrong in his assessment. The Soggy Bottom Boys are *not* “old timey” but are in fact a caricature made to reflect a time that never existed. The artificial nature of the historical Southern narrative is critiqued one final time in the film. Chadwell describes the film’s conclusion where Homer is run out of town “—the utopian musical fantasy here being that the all-white crowd doesn’t care, after all, about the mixed cultures onstage. . . [S]omething about this scene . . . tempts us with the memory of a South that never exactly existed; [yet], the Coens are exactly right in suggesting that the . . . response of Southerners was a response . . . to something that was entirely constructed” (7). The third act of *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* is certainly problematic in its portrayal of the American Deep South, though this is perhaps deliberate. By using stereotypical music and layers of conflicting meaning, the Coens call attention to the instability of this version of the South frequently assumed to exist and subsequently deconstruct it.

Conclusion: The Perks of Musical Dudespeak

Though the music selections of these two films could not possibly be more different, both films use their accompanying soundtracks to highlight the problems that expectations and

structural conformity, either with the film's specific genre, the portrayal of characters within the respective film, or the legacy of an entire period of time. Both films playfully but deliberately use their music, and the result in both cases is the destabilization and criticism of a structuralist mentality. The Dude in *The Big Lebowski* does not conform to the expectations set by the opening score, yet the soundtrack as a whole suggests that his impossible-to-categorize nature is perhaps more authentic than the generic expectations of the film or the almost stereotypical characters surrounding the Dude. In a similar way, the ironic use of "Man of Constant Sorrow" and "O Death" in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* destabilizes and critiques the narrative of the characters in the film, the entire historical Southern narrative, and the characteristic music that came to define it.

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Poetry

Brady Deby Singh

Because I could not stop the Lead:

A Tribute to Emily Dickinson

Because I could not stop the Lead —
 It kindly broke for me —
 The Fractals were inscrutable —
 What is Poetry?

The Coal did crush — It felt no Pain
 Beneath my clammy Palm
 And so longing to leap the Yon
 It made Ubiquity.

The Sentence moaned upon the Page
 Perhaps — inside my Head —
 Then I blew swift and savor'ly —
 The Snippets now collapsed —

Or rather — They were chased —
 At least that's what it seemed —
 For They do have that funny Way —
 Of the Mind to make — believe —

So I did quickly sweep away
 The last remaining Lead —
 And now replace It back again —
 Fastening on the Head —

Since then — 'tis Summer — and yet
 Feels shorter than the Spring
 I read and swept the Shattered Lead
 Dashed out by Emily.

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Poetry

Bryan Johnson, PhD

St. John, Still a Boy

Where it stands now, you stare at all sides.
Spare the pod. Spoil each tree.
Various limbs turn featureless, the line's grip
lapsed, midway I wreaked
another tiny loop, both
for the local nurse and the bronze
boy's bronze horn.

Many morons displace a body
to the bellows,
late washing
of the singing gallery, not once

will history suffer.
The pleasure camp is long, a boy
goes into the frieze.

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Madeline Perkins

Evelynn, Age Eleven

Evelynn was smart. When she walked into our cabin on the first day, she unpacked her trunk right into the cubby with her name on it. The leaning stack of two weeks' worth of clothes crammed in her single cubby was aesthetically bothersome, at least to me, but I saw her self-assurance and admired the tower anyway. She had been to camp before, and she knew what she was doing. But she wasn't the type of kid to love camp. Her mom had talked to me for a full five minutes about a sunburn Evelynn had gotten the year before—her daughter had fair skin, was supposed to wear a swim shirt, had gotten a horrible burn last year because her counselors didn't take care of her. The whole week after camp, which they spent at family camp, had been miserable for poor Evelynn. That was not going to happen again, she said, or I said, or both. She also showed me Evelynn's water bottle and told me not to let her lose it. So, I thought, hide it?

But even in that first afternoon, when parents flurry around the cabin making beds and taking pictures and finally ripping away like fussy Velcro, I could tell that Evelynn was not concerned by the concerns of her mother. She was independent; could be fifteen, maybe, or thirty-four, though she was actually eleven. Later in the term, she would operate a toy repair shop out of her bunk during rest period. The campers opened lots of little shops throughout the term, but Evelynn's was impressive because she could actually fix anything the other girls had broken. Her eyes were blue, bright blue like computer screens. Her sheets were blue, light blue

with white clouds. Little girls who have blue things have made the impossible decision to like the boy color.

As soon as she finished unpacking, she lay on her bed and started reading a book. Most campers bring books to camp; few make time to read them. One hour in, and Evelyn had already started reading. Because she had been to camp before, she knew that counselors collected all the campers' books on the first night. The books would disappear at dinner, when we dropped them off to be approved by the director, and not all of them would come back. Evelyn and I both knew that Harry Potter would not come back. But she was halfway through the sixth book, and I wasn't going to take it from her any sooner than I had to, so she tucked her curious eyes and kiddish fringe of bangs behind its cover, ignored the bustling around her, and read. I liked this girl.

And I continued to like her. As the first day turned into the first week, she was easygoing, imaginative, and just as smart as I had thought. I didn't focus on liking my campers—it took enough energy to love them—but with Evelyn, it was easy.

It was a Sunday, halfway through the two-week term. Sundays usually involve extra rest time in the cabin, and maybe the afternoon spent at the pool, but this Sunday was a party: Race to Rio. Our cabin rushed from the blob to the bubble ball fields and everywhere in between, completing activities at different locations, each of which represented a different country. The day was cruelly humid, humid to the point that my girls were still wet an hour after we'd finished the Slip n' Slide, and their calves were plastered with squishes of grass. They looked sticky (well, more than usual), and after the three hours of a four-hour party, they were done. If our race to Rio were up to them, we would've quit at the airport connection in Miami.

But it was up to me—to follow the orders I’d been given, to set the pace for the cabin. Leadership, service, what I came for. It was my responsibility to convince eleven people to keep partying. It was the only thing that kept me from lying down in the wet grass and quitting. Along with the fact that the grass was wet, which would make me more miserable than sitting on the paint-peeled bleachers watching my girls slowly give up on the Slip n’ Slide.

Also, my co-counselor Paige had time off that night. She didn’t have to come back for a full twenty-four hours, and even Jack Bauer couldn’t cram as much activity into that period of time as we counselors did with our time off. Three hours in, at my exhaustion’s tipping point, right when we’d gotten to the Slip n’ Slide, Paige left. *Left.* Left to shower, to put on fresh clothes, to leave the grass and gravel for air conditioning and the counselor discount on Q’doba. Left me to be in charge of our eleven girls, with no help but my sanguine facade and vestiges of scripture I dragged through my mind like a towel wiping my sweaty face. I watched Paige give her eleventh hug and trot away.

I yelled after her, “Bye, Paige! Have such a good time! Love you!”

Silently, “Twenty-four hours. I can do it, yeah?”

I sat on the bleachers and watched Emory and Rihanna and Mia and Audrey and Caroline and Catie and Evelyn and Abigail and Kate and Amelia and Caroline slip n’ slide. Finally, camp’s leadership team announced that we were released from activities to go shower before dinner. My girls straggled back to the cabin like tired ants. We showered, went to dinner, and probably had a sweaty dance party, but I don’t remember anything until it was time to go back to the cabin for bed. One of my girls had told us the night before that she wanted to accept Jesus into her heart, so while the girls inside brushed their teeth and put their pajamas on, I sat on the porch swing with Rihanna and talked about faith. Paige and I had been worried that she just

wanted the attention you got from ringing the bell—how camp celebrated a camper’s new salvation—but after she told me about messing up and realizing that she needed Jesus, I grinned and hugged her—she got it. I prayed for her, then we hopped off the swing and headed back into the cabin to announce our news. All the girls in our cabin would slip on their shower shoes and we would commence the dark traipse from the cabin to the bell. Tonight was exciting.

An instant after stepping through the door, I was surrounded by a stream of campers who materialized around me like fish around food pieces. The girls knew that porch conversations were serious, and they knew better than to come get me if anything less than death happened inside. For the eight minutes that Rihanna and I had been talking, anything could have happened.

The rush of girls was all for me, and they were all saying the same thing. They all had one big piece of news, the only important news at the moment:

“Evelynn peed on the floor!!”

“Evelynn peed on the *floor!!!*”

“*Evelynn peed on the floor!*”

Nothing in me moved. My hands, my face, my thoughts—I was still. Or, rather, stilled. Nothing passed through my head. I just stood in the middle of the floor—the floor now, somewhere, wet with pee—and looked. Not for the puddle, wherever it was—my eyes searched out one head, the one with across-the-middle bangs and eyes too smart to be looking my way. Evelynn bobbed into my line of vision behind the swarm of reporters.

“Evelynn?”

“Yes?”

“Did you pee on the floor?”

A pause.

“Yes . . .”

“Evelynn!!”

She just grinned, whether at her own mistake or my reaction I didn’t know. She said, “I cleaned it up.”

“Where?!” My voice grew more incredulous. And more impressed.

“On the bathroom floor.”

“What did you clean it up with?”

“Paper towels.”

Ew.

The final question—

“Why?! Why did you pee on the floor!”

Her face cracked, and her laughter fell out like candy from a piñata. She stopped, waited to see if I would laugh. The other girls, the audience of my Tonight Show, stopped their background hysteria long enough to explain for her: “Amelia made her laugh,” “She just couldn’t make it in time,” “I was just changing into PJs, but I didn’t know she needed in so badly!”

I didn’t laugh yet, but the girls sensed my amusement. No one was in trouble; no one was angry. The worry was gone, the giggles grew, and to a herd of hilarity I said, “Well, show me where.”

She led me into the bathroom and pointed to an area of the concrete floor. The spot was, to her credit, not wet. I found this disturbing. Filthy *and* invisible. I grabbed the bottle of all-purpose cleaner from the countertop, screwed off the squirt lid, and dumped its contents onto the bathroom floor. I smiled, looked into her mischievous eyes, and said, “Wipe it up.”

At the same moment Rihanna's soul had filled with joy, Evelynn's bladder had emptied from laughter. And at that moment, standing in the bathroom doorway holding Rihanna's hand and eyeing Evelynn's cleaning job, I knew that this was the reason I worked at camp. I wasn't furthering my skills or talent—in fact, according to people at college, I was wasting them. But the holes in my resume, the bottle of cleaning solution I'd dumped on that spot on the floor, the times I braided my campers' hair or helped them with laundry or refilled their cereal—nothing about working at camp was wasted.

Little girls like Rihanna need someone to talk to on a porch swing late at night. Little girls like Evelynn don't need someone to teach them how to clean up the floor—she'd already done that, though she needed a little guidance. Girls like Evelynn do need someone who doesn't mind their mistakes. They need someone who treats their spills nonchalantly: a grown-up who doesn't laugh at them, and a friend who laughs with them. Evelynn needed me to let her read Harry Potter because I trusted her mind. She needed me to laugh when she peed because I appreciated her humor. She needed me to let her walk through the sleepy camp back from the nurse even though she only had on socks. I know this because a little girl named Madeline needed this from her time at camp. I had counselors who listened to my elementary confusions and wrote me letters after camp to answer more questions. They also let us jump in the pool after bedtime and helped us win the cabin cleaning competition. My counselors made June the most valuable month of my year. They were my wisest sages and my funniest friends. When I was eleven, I needed both.

And when I was a counselor, I got to do both.

Poetry

Margaret Schultz

God Circa 1955

I am
The rebel without a cause.
Cigarettes rolled in my sleeve,
Hair greased back with a wave.
A curl escapes and hangs before my eyes.

I take a drag,
Stationed outside the Woolworth's
Loitering in the sun,
Checking out chicks,
Killing time.

I sock every egghead
Behind the dumpster after school
'Cause I'm the toughest,
Coolest cat
In this whole damned town.

Blitzed on Russian booze,
I make the engines roar.
The world is mine.
A flash of light, a burning bush.

I breathe out,
Feel the mushroom cloud escape my lips.

I revel,
In the gutted destruction silhouetted against the cruel sky.

I smile, watching
As the frozen globe burns.

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Poetry

Margaret Schultz

Italy in the Offseason

Basilica scaffolds interrupt my view of ancient mosaics.
Venerated and pure
Empress Theodora stands,
Arrayed in Byzantine finery,
To make her holy offering.
The virgin pearls conceal
Voluptuous breasts swallowing her whole—
Cancer ravishing its silent feast slowly.
Outside the discontented sky spits
Soaking my luggage
And three friends who didn't want to pay.

Leather markets display their wares—
Preserved corpses
And flesh that refuses to rot.
But vinyl souvenirs remind me
Of an abandoned couch from the sixties
In a neglected corner
Of the cigarette scented bathroom
In the hotel lobby.

The bones of monks adorn the archways
Blooming a chorus of flowers from graves
Of unburied dead.
I can hear them as I pass
Chanting whispered song:
“No photos please.”

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Poetry

Julie Steward, PhD

Every Woman Needs a Purse

Did I find it in the front yard or a parking lot?
 I don't recall, but I wore the patchwork
 purse of corduroy orange and avocado every day
 in second grade. Every woman needs a purse.
 Even I knew that. Of course, I did not know
 anything about Wagner's Ring cycle,
his drama concerned with the curse of gold
 but I knew a thing or two about my harvest gold
 purse strap, how to cinch it across my not-yet bust
 so it would never fall off a shoulder
 while walking to class or on the school bus
 with Cecily, Sally, and a girl whose name
 I no longer recall. We all wore Marsha Brady hair
 like opera stars, our chosen aria "Muskrat Love."
 Did Tennille love the Captain's *spectacular and beautiful*
heightened drama, or were we, the girls
 in Miss Smith's homeroom, the chosen few
 who knew that The Captain *personified*
the deepest yearnings of romantic spirit?
 O Captain! my Captain! A man so sophisticated
 that the girl for him must surely be she
 who claims to love a good Leitmotif, who swoons
 at Wagner and his *organic whole*
 even as she delicately holds
 her opera glasses until it's time to tuck
 them neatly in her trusty purse.

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Poetry

Julie Steward, PhD

Like a Couple of Punch-Drunk Persephones

we climbed out of that hazy maze
of subway onto Times Square
its glare guilty pleasure
like a matinee alone
or a 4:00 highball before the bone
rattling drunks arrive and start to climb
on their well-worn stools.

The louder the crowd the more casual the secrets
we'd share as easily as a bite of bagel
on the block. Up there, two Jamaicans jostling
in front of us arguing and by the way
you always distrusted your father the same
way I distrusted mine.

The neon shine and hearken
of a Disneyfied Times Square
recalls the time you lost your mother
in the mall and cried in the food
court Chick-Fil-A until
she found you and swore eternal winter
should you ever go missing again,
and as we passed the ads for *Cats*, I confessed
I was abducted by a god and dragged
underground, gagged, in a terrible town
where to have a mouth of teeth was a luxury,
but anyway, listen to these languages
around Times Square, all in thrall of
their own storytelling, none listening
for the call of a young one in Hades except you
who knew what all my stories meant.

And anyway, is anyone ever really lost?
There aren't any gods.
And aren't we all abducted already
by memories like this one I have of
you and me in Times Square, that time we told

tales of various hells, each a reach of fiction.
None of our stories happened
but all of them were true.

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Poetry

Elizabeth Sturgeon

Brothers

Brothers
remains the password hint
to a locked computer.
But its owner
has only a sister,
so guessers take a stab
naming the pair
with failed attempts.

*People look to each other
when pain waves in*

The brown leather
shoes lounge silently
wondering when
they might taste earth again.
They're piling up,
fading into each other
as one
traveled strip of skin.

*People look to each other
figuring out how to act*

The closet spills
worn-out Ralph Lauren
(from the thrift store)
and an orange ski suit that's
nonsensical for
this Florida humidity.

*People look to each other
but no one knows.*

The chess set,
a gift from a friend
of a friend,
is missing a knight.
No one can find it.

The pieces stand still
to keep their mourning
to themselves.

And voices
ask about brothers

imagine the photos
screaming from
the computer files

examine the
freshly polished
newly painted
rubble of a life
gone too soon.

What do I do?

The house welcomes
the grieved
and begs them to
manage the music.

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Isabel Azar

The Importance of Being Erudite

It is a truth universally acknowledged that a student of literature will make as many allusions to his or her passion as possible. The title of this essay is, in fact, a reference to Oscar Wilde’s comic jewel *The Importance of Being Earnest*, and I gave it this particular heading because I intend to answer the question, “Can classic literature aid the student reader in formation of moral character?” I believe it can.

This opinion is one I have held for many years, although it was reinforced by a passage in Elaine Scarry’s essay, “Poetry, Injury, and the Ethics of Reading,” wherein she states,

No matter how loyal and unswerving one’s personal and public commitments . . . part of our interior remains capable of change. . . . It is this part of our interior . . . that literature addresses. . . . But it is not just that literature addresses this . . . honeycombed pliancy within one’s thoughts and spirit. It is that literature - centuries of literature - has created it, or at least enabled it to remain intact even after we are old enough to have become “completed” persons. (48)

Scarry’s remarks sum up the power literature possesses to sway readers on an intimate level—what we read can and does affect us, for good or ill, and nowhere is this more evident than among the impressionable young, especially in their high school and college years. Therefore, it behooves these readers to give due consideration to their habits of literary consumption, since, as Louisa May Alcott’s heroine Jo March comments in *Jo’s Boys*, “[B]ooks are always good company, if you have the right sort” (97). Allow me to give two examples of how this influence

operates. Imagine a girl in her freshman year of high school, in the midst of the popularity battle; she is a bit bewildered by all the social niceties, yet admires the poise of the girls who lead the various cliques. Finally, she is permitted to enter one of these select circles and delights in her new status, until one day when she makes an unwitting faux pas and is shunned by her so-called “friends.” She visits the school library later that day and browses the books until she comes across Jane Austen’s novel *Northanger Abbey*; intrigued, she takes it home and begins reading. Picture her pleasure when she finds that the heroine, Catherine Morland, is equally confused and clumsy when it comes to the nuances of etiquette, yet Henry Tilney, the hero, loves her not in spite of but *for* her innocent, guileless heart. What is more, his sister Eleanor is drawn to Catherine because of her good nature and integrity, and she provides Catherine with genuinely affectionate friendship. Through this classic tale, the young lady realizes that she has only to be her own self, that she has no need to imitate the trendy girls, and that a kind spirit will win far more lasting friends than will the latest stylish pair of boots.

On a more collegiate level, envision a young man whose solution for keeping the sophomore slump at bay is to drown his boredom in alcohol, spending his weekends in an inebriated blur. Eventually, this starts to take a toll on his grades, and as he stumbles out of his English class one Friday afternoon, his professor stops him and hands him a book, saying, “A little recommended reading—just try it. Start at the page I’ve marked with a tab.” The student thanks him and heads back to his dorm room, where he grudgingly opens the volume, Henry Fielding’s *The History of Tom Jones*. Soon he is pulled into the adventures of the impetuous hero, whose conflict between his fallibility and his desire to change strikes the reader close to home. In the end, Tom’s eleventh-hour realization of his culpability, his intention to henceforth live according to the dictates of wisdom, and the ensuing happy conclusion prompt the young

man to amend his own ways and exercise prudence in the future, knowing that such a life yields greater satisfaction than a night of drinking games.

In sum, classic books can indeed enrich a student's mind and morals. Of course, the authors need not pound home the edifying lessons with the subtlety of a sledgehammer; once captivated by the narrative and characters, the young man or woman will absorb the teachings subconsciously, though he or she must consider these messages' import if they wish to harvest the most honey from the literary blossoms. To fully reap these benefits, I suggest that the knowledge-hungry gentleman or lady make notes in the margins of the book, and when he or she is done, write down favorite quotes and lessons learned in a separate notebook reserved for that purpose. Thus, the young scholar will know and relish the vital importance of being erudite.

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Sydney Berry

A Citadel Defending

The academic dream started long ago as an academic reality at the inception of universities. Men, and indeed they were men, would sit about and pour over texts, discuss them, then move on to other works or, as it is expressed today, the so-called “application” of their learning. This dream still exists in places such as Oxford, where, even if only from an external perception, the scholars roam dressed in robes and armed with books, the latter the more essential part of the uniform. Here, students and professors alike are engaged in what Michael Roth calls “inquiry for the sake of inquiry” (qtd. in Brooks 95). The Oxfordian romanticism of the academic dream is separated even from liberal arts universities, where a brief education in the humanities is considered begrudgingly necessary before the student is awakened out of the dream and is set free into the world of practical education, though the leash of academia is still about their neck. Institutions where the liberal arts try to keep the academic dream alive are filled with students who see themselves as exactly that—students, not scholars. They are simply temporary learners who practice inquiry for the sake of studying. They are only considered valid students when they can produce the statement, “I am studying in order to be a *fill in the blank here*.” The idea of the academic dream to them seems purely a charming notion, a thing that once existed, but could never be found in today’s more advanced society. Thus, the academic dream frames the humanities. Any learned humanist would know the reality of the dream from the inside through their experiences of intense discussion within their academic circles and fits of passion that spark late-night, in-depth study of a text.

Suddenly, the tower of intellectual study for its own sake has been forced to turn into a citadel defending its right to exist from attacks by other studies, or what Judith Butler calls “a thriving anti-intellectualism” (19), which use the weapons of practicality against it. In defense, humanists offer ethics, the idea that reading as a scholar of the humanities molds each individual into a moral human being. However, both the attack and the defense seem misplaced. The value of practicality is the banner of those who study business. The value of the quest for ethics belongs to students of religion. What, then, is the value for humanities to carry as a flag for unity in the face of a threat?

Value as a measure for significance and validity seems arbitrary. One may value gold as a monetary standard while another thinks it beautiful but valueless in comparison with other materials. In other words, the ideal of value is more a perception than a reality, but humanists should not fear thriving on a perception. Michael Roth warns readers against such a fear, stating, “I would ask that we not join the rush from reading by trying to contain its ambiguity with a label like ethics” (qtd. in Brooks 97). While others pressure the field to define and measure their value in terms of impact, relatability, desirability, and so on, the humanities must acknowledge that any response, while likely true and fitting, is a perception based in the humanistic background. That is not to say that the responses are pointless, however. A Bachelor of Arts degree can open vocational doors and create a more ethically aware individual, but even these conclusions leave us feeling unencapsulated. These questions and answers are based on the opinion that the contribution of value is the greatest good that one can produce. However, if left to interpret our own perceptions, we will find that the humanities at their core are separated from other studies by a unique passion, a quality that was sacrificed at the death sentence of the academic dream long ago. From this passion for inquiry, a humanist can produce many things:

comfort in the unknown, authoritative voices in the human cultural canon, questions that must be asked despite their answer, order and recognition of patterns in the midst of chaos and change, and the production of new works in order to nourish and challenge the next generation of readers. All of these are perceived by some as valuable, but all of these are also perceived by others as optional.

Passion, however, while not entirely measurable or unique or even valuable, is found at the heart of the humanistic academic reality. It is what makes the humanities comfortable living as an anomaly of the unexpectedly applicable and the occasionally irrelevant. The humanities must continue to disagree that all fields of study are working to the same end. Indeed, humanistic study is not working towards practicality, ethics, value, or productivity at all. The humanities daringly press on to an unknown end, with perceptions and passion keeping the academic dream alive in a context that thought it dead long ago.

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Commentary

*Kassidy Blevins***The Humanities—A Necessary Spill**

““**W**hy do I need to know this?” “Why is this important to me NOW when it is so old?” “What does this have to do with me?” These are just some of the questions I hear about the humanities when I am tutoring or working in the classroom. These are the same questions that some scientists, political leaders, corporation owners, and other people ask. “Why the humanities?” is a question that many people ask, and it ultimately dismisses the practice of humanists as outdated and unimportant. However, the humanities could not be more relevant to society today. The practice of the humanities in reading, writing, and communications is essential and not limited to the classroom but spills over into every walk of life.

Whether you work in construction, like my family, or own a multi-million-dollar corporation, the humanities are essential to daily life. The humanities teach communication, writing skills, and, arguably the most important, reading skills. According to a study conducted in 2013 by the U.S. Department of Education and the National Institute of Literacy, 32 million adults in the U.S. can't read (NCES, n. pag.). That means 14% of our population can't read or write. Society dismisses the need for the humanities when about 1/6 of our own country is illiterate. These are skills that are necessary for everyone. Even in a country where higher education has put an increased emphasis on getting jobs and less on learning, these skills remain essential to every aspect of life in and out of the job market.

As a society, we are losing not only the ability to read but also the responsibility of reading critically. Reading is an ethical practice because it is consequential. As humans, we need to and must read in a way that opens us up to new and differing perspectives. William Germano, a successful publisher and dean of humanities at Cooper Union University, writes, “We want our ethical readers to be changed somehow, to experience an ethically interpretive reading as liberating or troubling so that reading becomes consequential-compelling and important in a dynamic sense, leaving the reader altered” (qtd. in Brooks 100). Reading is a practice that alters and molds minds to see new perspectives and to understand things in a new way. This reading becomes a habit and imbues readers with the skills of interpretation and empathy. Elaine Scarry clarifies that it is not empathy for a character but rather the reader’s ability to understand and see different viewpoints in the world, an essential and necessary skill for ethical reading and ethical living as well (42). Reading has a way of transcending time and space and can take people to a new place, culture, or period in history to broaden our worldview. This act of transcending allows us to be stretched, moved, and altered to see what we may have missed before.

Reading ethically, or reading with an open mind, is a humbling act. The consequence of reading sometimes reveals what people do not know or what they have misunderstood. My freshman year of college, students were required to take a humanities course called Cultural Perspectives, a course that focused on the primary works of classic literature. Even as an English major, I rolled my eyes upon finding out this was a required course. I felt that the classic pieces of literature were not necessary, and, most importantly, I already knew my perspective on culture. However, the class would come to be the most humbling experience I have had in a classroom setting. The class was not a statement of how little I knew or how wrong I could be, but rather how sure I was that I was right, how confident I was in a black-and-white world that

is, in fact, quite gray. The professor taught us how to read critically, to analyze a text from different perspectives, and that taught us to be analytical, skeptical, and open-minded readers, which is essential outside of the walls of the classroom.

The practice of analytical interpretation does not only reveal itself in reading. The practice of reading extends beyond words on a page. People read television screens, radio broadcasts, and podcasts. The habits formed in the reading that people do within the humanities flow over into other sources of reading, such as watching the news, listening to the radio, or even watching a television program. Watching the news or listening to a political debate forces viewers to make a choice about the information they receive. Having done this type of analytical interpretation before while studying the humanities, the habits reveal themselves in this type of reading as well. People inherently begin to see different perspectives and allow for the possibility to have a change of opinion. The practice of analyzing information is an ethical practice that evolves from the work and habits formed in the humanities. We cannot simply box in the skills that come from the study of humanities when they are essential to daily life.

What would our world look like today if we could only see from other perspectives? Perhaps society would be more susceptible to love instead of hate, inclusion instead of exclusion, and helping rather than fighting. If society deems the humanities outdated and unnecessary for today's education systems, I am afraid society is going to diminish what is left of our ethical reading and interpretation skills. It is not about the job market, money, or social status, but rather learning an ethical skill that will spill over into every aspect of human interaction. If you ask me, it is a necessary spill for today and for the future of society.

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Commentary

Bailey Bridgeman

Freedom (?) of Speech: Humanities as First Responder

On February 8th, 1915, D.W. Griffith released his popular film, *The Birth of a Nation*. Loved by many, this film reached new heights in cinematography for its inventive use of camera angles. One hundred years later, filmmakers still agree that Griffith's innovative work challenged the film industry to evolve into what it is today. However, Hollywood was not the only community affected by this film. The film's blatant, white-supremacist ideology struck fear in the hearts of black communities, reassuring them that their nightmares surrounding the Ku Klux Klan were true. In response to this horrific act of racial terror, Civil Rights activists fought against screening the film across the country, on the grounds that it would multiply the effect of white supremacy in the American consciousness. In the end, politicians decided that they could not stop the screenings because that would violate freedom of speech. While this minor defeat may seem like a tragic loss for Civil Rights, it actually reinforces a promising truth, namely that in the midst of a country-wide injustice, there remained strong voices that fought for what was right. Activists, such as Ida B. Wells and William Monroe Trotter, were trained through their education to realize language's power to reverse the narrative of white supremacy in America. They used the skills they gained in studying the humanities to make America a safer place for marginalized people. If there is one thing we should take away from this narrative, it is that the humanities are absolutely necessary for a country that upholds freedom of speech.

Instances such as the battle over screening *The Birth of a Nation* frequently occur in America, and most often freedom of expression wins. As a country that champions individuality, we have rightly decided that individuals have the autonomy to express themselves in whatever way they please, so long as their expression does not infringe on the liberties of another. Unfortunately, it is difficult in a court case to determine if there is a direct link between language and physical harm. Therefore, most often courts err on the side of expression, not oppression. Since people are allowed to express themselves however they see fit, it is every so often that harmful voices make their way into popular media. Activists can fight to remove hateful words from the general public entirely, but unfortunately, as we have seen before, this seldom works. With harmful content circulating the public sphere, it is imperative that people recognize the damage of the harmful language and combat it with counter speech.

During instances of harmful expression, there are two voices one will hear in opposition to the injustice. First are the voices of the victims. When victims share their stories, their plight no longer becomes a distant statistic amongst the millions of others receiving harm, but rather an immediate issue in need of resolve. Studying the humanities is important for these people because it equips them with the necessary verbal skills to articulate their stories in an effective rhetorical manner. Second are the voices of the people trained in the humanities, who are not personally experiencing the harm but notice its negative effect. These freethinkers dig deep below the surface of what our culture produces. After some investigating, it may come up that what lies beneath the surface is systemic, cultural, or social injustice. The humanities train students to see past the norm and recognize dominant ideology at work. Judith Butler keenly notes that “We live ‘in’ ideology as we might live in a certain climate” (Butler 22). She further defines ideology as “a set of beliefs that breezes through us, animating the exchange of thought”

(22). Butler further points out that since ideology completely shades our perception, it can often shield us from noticing injustices in our society.

Sometimes it takes an outsider's perspective to notice injustices in our community that have become "obvious" to us. This is where the work of the English major comes into play. In literary theory classes, English majors are trained to think like a Marxist, a Feminist, a lower-class person, or a person living outside the comfort of America. The list goes on and on, but what is important here is that learning how to analyze literature allows students to "expos[e] th[e] very gap between what has become ordinary and the destructive aims it covers over and conveys"

(26). Unveiling what lies beneath the cultural surface reveals the pitfalls of our ideology and calls for healing perspectives to enter the public sphere.

In a country where we value freedom of speech, it is absolutely necessary that we also have people trained in the humanities, who can sift through the freely flowing content of our culture and point out the harmful injustices hidden in dominant ideology. Without the help of the humanities, our society would sit in what has become obvious to the majority, thereby letting injustice run rampant, unbeknownst to the individuals unaffected by it. In order to have a thriving, ethical society, it is important for people to freely express their individual thoughts, but it is also necessary that we have minds trained in the humanities to dig into culture, speak out against injustices, and challenge their neighbor toward ethical expression.

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Ben Crabtree

The Ethics of Reading a Film

In her position statement, “Poetry, Injury, and the Ethics of Reading,” literary theorist Elaine Scarry argues that three specific aspects of literature, specifically poetry, formulate an ethics of reading: “its invitation to empathy, its reliance on deliberative thought, and its beauty” (42). While these three elements of literature may be intellectually or aesthetically important, it is an overstatement to claim that these elements are the foundation of literary ethics. Before you all revolt and attempt to silence me for disagreeing with *the* Elaine Scarry, I would like to acknowledge that some of the ideas expressed are valuable comments on literary discourse, which could inform an audience on certain aspects of ethics; unfortunately, I think that her argument loses its potency and falls short of its potential because of her misguided vocabulary.

Now that I have acknowledged the problematic language within Scarry’s argument, I would like to use her format of a threefold foundation of ethics to assess the ethics of reading. While Scarry focused primarily on poetry as a mode of uncovering literary ethics, I will engage with the most popular and important new medium of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries—film. In a postmodern world saturated by media and visual stimuli, it is necessary for people to thoughtfully analyze and interact with film, rather than merely watching movies or television in a passive, consumerist manner; this intellectual and analytical engagement with cinema is what I will refer to as “reading a film” throughout the rest of my argument. When one reads a film, he

or she gains a greater understanding of ethics. In this context, ethics are the intrinsic values and inalienable rights that make up the foundation of universal discourse, interpersonal interactions, and personal ideologies. With all of these essential terms defined, I will argue that reading a film informs audiences about universal ethics, allows audiences to interpret ethical dilemmas, and empowers audiences to formulate personal ethics.

At the most basic level, the universal foundation of ethics is twofold: human life is valuable, and anything that interferes with the preservation of human life should be eradicated. While the basis of these ideas is natural, it is necessary for individuals to supplement their experiences, interactions, belief systems, and relationships with outside influencers in order to further root universal ethics within their personal lives. In the modern, media-centric world, film is one of the most important and influential sources of information and education if one thoughtfully engages with the medium. Through reading films such as *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946) and *Interstellar* (2014), one can further understand the value of human existence through the fantastical reflections of reality; while we will never be able to time travel and witness a world apart from ourselves, the fictional plights of George Bailey and Joe Cooper comment on the core values of human life in the context of the universe as a whole. Furthermore, movies such as *12 Years a Slave* (2013) and *Schindler's List* (1993) allow film readers to understand real issues that have threatened human existence, such as slavery and genocide, through observation, in order to solidify a foundation of empathy and activism for human rights. While Scarry argued that “empathy” was a core value of the ethics of reading, I believe it is a supplemental idea that should be paired with activism in order to understand and engage with universal ethics (42).

Once an individual has developed a firm foundation, he or she can begin to explore nuances within ethics. Although most people will confront a handful of ethical issues during

their lives, cinema allows individuals to safely interpret various dilemmas without the repercussions of real life experiences, enabling them to become well-rounded, independent thinkers. *Blade Runner* (1982) and *Ex Machina* (2015) raise questions concerning the ethics of artificial intelligence in relation to human identity. *Children of Men* (2007) and *Million Dollar Baby* (2004) engage in a dialogue about the benefits and consequences of euthanasia, while *Amour* (2012) wrestles with the ethics of mercy killing one's own spouse. In addition to these fictional scenarios, *Sophie's Choice* (1982) and *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (2011) allow audiences to wrestle with their own responses to real life ethical dilemmas. While Elaine Scarry argues that "deliberation" is necessary for formulating ethics, individual interpretation is far more important in uncovering an ethics of reading (42). Although a dialogue helps one reason through opinions concerning ethical dilemmas, he or she must settle on an individual interpretation of the films and dilemmas presented through the form and content.

As an individual grows in his or her interpretation of ethical dilemmas through reading films, he or she begins to formulate a personal system of ethics. While this personal system of ethics is not solely rooted in one's interaction with film, thoughtful engagement with film empowers individuals to synthesize real life experiences with universal ideologies. For example, one person may read *Juno* (2007), a film that engages with various perspectives concerning teen pregnancy, as an adamantly pro-life film, while another person may develop a pro-choice reading of the film. While it may initially seem contradictory, both readings are valid interpretations of the ethical dilemma presented through the film. The result of these readings contributes to the formulation of personal ethics for both viewers, empowering individuals to navigate public discourse with a better understanding and individualized perspective of humankind's intrinsic value and inalienable rights.

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Commentary

Casey Cunningham

Ethics, the Humanities, and the Power of Many Stories

Although I am an English major and have spent the majority of my time in college taking humanities classes, my nonprofit management minor required several classes in the school of business. In Principles of Management, our textbook allotted a full chapter to discuss the “Ethical Issues” of the business world. I think business majors take an entire class about ethics. The claim that the humanities are important simply because they promote ethical thinking may, to those outside the humanities, still seem to be an unconvincing argument for their relevance. Yet in my own experience, discussing Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* in a British Literature class produces an entirely different impact on a student’s understanding of ethical behavior than copying notes from a PowerPoint slide entitled “Six Steps to Avoiding Sexism in the Workplace.”

This comparison alone, for those who have experienced both types of education, may be a sufficient illustration of the importance of the humanities in public life. But it also begs a difficult question: does the study of the humanities (or any type of study) actually have the power to teach people to think more ethically than they did before? In his introduction to *The Humanities and Public Life*, Peter Brooks makes the case that the type of reading practiced in the humanities “can itself be an ethical act” (12) and asks his audience to discuss what it would mean to have “an ethics of reading” (3). I don’t believe one can make the argument that reading literature can be an ethical act in-and-of-itself, but I do think that developing what Brooks refers to as the “self-conscious reading” of the humanities has the ability to open minds, challenge

biases, and cause the reader to consider complexities in a way that promotes a more ethical approach to understanding our world and interacting with unfamiliar ideas (12).

I am a student employee in the Mann Center for Ethics and Leadership, our school's academic center for the development of ethical leaders through practice. One of the main roles of this "center for ethics," is engaging students and faculty to serve in the local community. The name of the center, combined with its efforts to encourage and facilitate community engagement, might seem to imply that we believe the act of serving others is inherently ethical. In reality, the opposite is true; it is because we believe that community work, when practiced in the wrong way, can actually be unethical, that the work of the Mann Center is to teach those who serve to do so thoughtfully, seriously, and consistently. It seems to me that we have the same purpose in teaching and learning the humanities. Because reading, like service, is not an inherently ethical act, casual and thoughtless reading, like casual and thoughtless community service, results either in misunderstanding or in confirmation of previously held stereotypes. We need the humanities to train students to develop a thoughtful, serious, and consistent practice of reading that challenges assumptions and reveals the inadequacy of a single perspective in ethical decision making.

By the time most people are old enough to practice the type of careful reading required in humanistic studies, they already have a personal ethics informed by a wide variety of influences, such as culture, faith, and life experience. So, any sort of formal education aiming to have an ethical impact will either confirm or challenge the preconceived worldview of the learner. In other words, education works to expand our narrow view of the world with new ideas. Elaine Scarry, in her argument for humanistic study, claims that "No matter how loyal and unswerving one's personal and public commitments . . . part of our interior remains capable of change," and

it is this “region of reversibility . . . that literature addresses” (48). Well, addressing that “region of reversibility” seems to be the goal of most types of education, but I agree with Scarry that in the humanities, unlike in profession-specific studies, we tap into the changeable part of ourselves by engaging with stories of our common humanity.

In her TED Talk, “The Danger of a Single Story,” Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie explains the negative power of believing a “single story” about any person, place, or culture. She describes how many Americans have a “single story” of African people as poor, starving, and pitiful (5:56). I sometimes show her talk when I lead reflection sessions for the Mann Center to illustrate the ways in which careless service can confirm incorrect assumptions. A one-time volunteer trip to Africa might reinforce false assumptions, but a consistent partnership over an extended period of time, along with critical thought about the systems creating the problems, replaces a biased, single story of Africa with the individual stories of real people. Again, the need for critical reflection about service parallels the need for the critical reading of humanistic study; Adichie goes on to argue that reading literature is what gives us the ability to reject the single story. She encourages her audience, “Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize” (17:36).

On a basic level, study of the humanities involves interacting with stories of the human experience, from ancient times to the present, and continuing the conversation. Stories are personal; studying stories, unlike learning facts, introduces complexity and ambiguity. Reading stories of oppression, as opposed to memorizing “Six Steps to Avoid Sexism,” opens the floor for multiple views and admits that there may not be a single solution. The humanities are

relevant in public life not because they make us more ethical, but because without them, we risk making unethical decisions simply because we are uninformed or unaware.

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Commentary

*Courtney Daniel***Good Reading and Good Jobs**

Jobs. Nothing is perhaps more daunting for an English major than to go home for vacation, sit around the big family table between Grandma and your Aunt Cindy, and have to explain to them for about the fifth time that, yes, you are still studying English. Their smiles are a bit too forced for your liking, and once again you are left having to defend your future profession and how it is just as important as your cousin Jonathan going into accounting. It's not their fault. Unfortunately, the environment in which young Americans find themselves having to compete is an environment heavily rooted in capitalist views. Many of these views and ideals are product based, with a big question being asked, "What kinds of goods can one produce, and what kind of value can be placed on those goods?" When someone studies English, it may be hard to see any good or service being produced. However, the practice of close reading and the lessons learned from it do provide a service on which a value can be placed. If one practices reading often and in a variety of topics, he or she will have the benefit of openness that will not only work in his or her favor, but also in the favor of others. This has the power to contribute in today's capitalist-driven economy for both readers and those who employ readers.

There is a quote from the book *The Humanities and Public Life* that talks about why the humanities and reading are so vital to society. The quote from Elaine Scarry says, "But though the ethics of reading can surely include the benefits to the reader herself, our focus here is on the way other, often unknown, persons are the beneficiaries of one's reading" (46). This statement

suggests that good readers benefit not only themselves but also other people around them and even those with whom they do not come into contact. In order for that to happen, it must be established as to what a good reader is. A good reader must be someone who reads often and reads a variety of works. It is not merely enough to read things you like, although there is nothing wrong with keeping that up for good practice. A good reader also reads texts that challenge his or her way of thinking. He or she should also take any opportunity to be in discussion about the text. This can either be done with annotations between the reader and the text itself or among other readers. Discussion helps readers understand topics and ideas that appear in the texts they encounter.

Being a good reader, first and foremost, benefits the person doing the reading. It will help the reader to be more open to new ideas and ways of thinking. The more someone exposes him- or herself to other people's opinions and points of view, the more he or she will be able to at least understand and identify the multiple points of view in life. This keeps the reader from falling into the trap of the single story, which is something Chimamanda Adichie talked about in her famous speech, and how dangerous it is to only see life from one perspective. But reading does not mean that the reader will change his or her viewpoints every time they read a new text. Apart from being exposed to new ideas, reading can help strengthen the reader's preexisting views. One of the benefits of reading is finding evidence for ideas and beliefs that make arguments valid and not merely based on opinions.

According to Scarry, being a good reader does more than benefit the reader; it also benefits those around them (46). In an environment driven by capitalist ideas, the word *benefit* is often expressed by dollar signs. I would argue this is a value that can be placed on skills readers possess which can contribute to a capitalist-based economy. For example, good readers are

experienced in critical thinking and problem solving. When reading texts, it is important to fully understand what is being said and work through layers of sometimes dense material. Analyzing also becomes a common practice for readers, which is something that can benefit any employers or company. Jonathan Culler uses the terms “understanding” and “overstanding” when talking about how readers respond to a text. Those learned in the humanities tend to “overstand” a text, that is, “to ask questions the author does not intend for us to ask” (qtd. in Brooks 61). This is an example of critical thinking, in going beyond the words on the page to expand thought and ideas. Good readers also become well versed in writing, and good communication skills in reading and writing are imperative for any type of business. Interpretation is a key concept for readers and a necessary skill, and being a good reader means that interpreting is at least familiar, although not always easy, which comes in handy in the work force. A good reader needs to be someone who is not only willing, but able to interpret a text and read it correctly so that others may understand it as well.

These and more attributes are part of what makes reading such a versatile skill to have in the work force. It is something taught at least on a basic level in grade school, but continuing to become good readers in college is different and much more challenging and, therefore, is not taken into considerable account with majors outside the humanities. In keeping up with the theme of a capitalist economy, I see no problem in that trend. If jobs are limited and one of the values in the humanities is to be a good reader, why should we require other fields of study to enhance their learning of reading? I do not believe it is a skill everyone needs to master, and those who are in the humanities and understand it well should take advantage of what knowledge they have and enter the competitive work place knowing they possess benefits and skills others do not have. That way, come next family gathering when you find yourself seated between

Grandma and Aunt Cindy, you can tell them exactly how having a degree in the humanities landed you your current job.

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Commentary

Nyeedra Davis

Sympathy and Trayvon

After the two weeks we spent with *The Humanities and Public Life*, I feel that now, more than ever, the humanities are important in society. I never thought about how they work in everyday discourse until reading this. The book touches on how things we learn in the classroom help us not only read Emily Dickinson but also interact with society. We are able to see things not just as they are shown to us; we dig deeper to find an understanding. My favorite thing is the essay written by Patricia Williams, “The Raw and the Half-Cooked.” Marrying labels with the use of the humanities shows how much power words really have. She also points out how your position in society determines your narrative. Taking that into consideration, I will argue that agency is an element of the humanities that plays a large role in society.

First, the most obvious thing is that it's important for a society to have sympathy and empathy. English majors have a better chance of being more sympathetic and empathetic because we have spent four years reading stories. We have spent our academic career reading texts closely and crafting a response. In order to craft that response, you have to have an understanding of what you read. Understanding why Jane Eyre makes the choices she does calls for you to think without using your own preconceived notions and think like Jane. In order for the characters to speak to us, we have to read the text and quiet our own prejudices. Because there is a shift from the humanities to industrious and trade educations, there starts to be a lack of sympathy for people. Taking on careers that only require people to read instructions will hurt

society because we will have people who work and don't think. When they read or see something, they will bring their own thoughts to an issue instead of seeing why a person is making the choices they are. If we want to have a society that functions well, we have to have people who study the humanities. Not having that will lead us down a path where society looks like a Facebook timeline.

Second is the power we give not only to words but also to the objects associated with them. Where people land on the social spectrum determines what will be said about them. Patricia Williams says, "You live or die, you speak or vanish, depending on where you are in the grammatical structure of human events" (79). If you are on the wrong side of society's status quo, then a narrative will be assigned to you. That's then how society sees you. This section in her essay was important to me because I thought about how I and other minorities are treated when it comes to telling a story. Williams brings up the Trayvon Martin shooting as an example. Because Martin didn't fall on the right side of society's narrative, he was given one. Never was he seen as a boy who fought for his life, but only as the person who tried to take a life. The words to tell his story during the trial also took the blame off of George Zimmerman and placed it on Martin and his hoodie. She says, "Think of how much the simple cotton hoodie has assumed agentive properties in relation to the figure of the so called young black male" (79). This leads society to see Martin and his hoodie as the reason for his death and not the man who killed him. The agency given to words during this case made Martin get lost in the shuffle because he fell on the wrong side of a narrative.

Lastly, for us to have a socially equal society, there needs to be the humanities. Words in the English language have power, and that power has the ability to make or break a person. Referring to Patricia Williams again, the pictures she shows her students from the earthquake in

Haiti let us see how much power words and labeling bear on a society. When figure 1 was labeled as a looter, she was seen as a thief, whereas when we take a step back and look at the larger picture, we see her as a woman who is desperate (Williams 76). Last semester, I wrote a paper about how southern hip-hop is a discursive practice. When I started it, I thought I knew all I needed to know because we had similar upbringings. Just like then, I thought I knew one thing and learned something different. Our society, while great in some areas, falls short in others. If those who complain about Black Lives Matter, Dreamers, and football players kneeling took the time to listen to these groups and not attack them, they may have a chance to understand. How much better would things be if instead of an argument there was an actual conversation?

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Jacob Foncea

Evaluating Values

Judith Butler concludes her essay “Ordinary, Incredulous” with the dramatic question, “What now is the value of our values?” (37). She explores the culture surrounding the humanities department, in particular its new “regime of values,” and advocates exercising critical judgment (36). In doing so, she asserts the ultimate worth of the humanities beyond academia: the humanities possess a unique ability to assess societal systems of value. This is crucial to society as a whole because the value systems of a society are what direct all other areas of progress and action. No other department is capable of such self-reflective analysis.

Societies produce fields of study dedicated to their values. For instance, the field of computer programming developed because the United States values computer programming. The field of nursing developed because the United States values nursing. The humanities department, if currently under attack, exists because enough members of our society still value the study of human nature and critical thought. Societal values dictate the existence of departments.

Because most departments were created by and exist in societies with specific values and systems of ethics, they approach their subject matter according to the parameters set by these preexisting societal beliefs. The United States, for instance, values profitability. Therefore, the primary focus of the economics department is to determine the most efficient way to maximize profitability. This becomes clear toward the beginning of any introductory economics class when the traditional pie analogy is first made. The pie and its slices are used to represent how wealth is

divided among a society's members. The rest of the semester is spent studying how to best increase the size of the pie, not asking how the pie ought to be divided or whether or not it is even moral to pursue a larger pie in the first place. Those questions deal with philosophical dilemmas, which my microeconomics professor proudly informed me do not concern economists, as economists are scientists and thus concerned only with hard data and efficiency.

However, while economists might think their work is disconnected from any system of ethics, it is entirely driven by the ethical value system of the United States. Increasing the size of the pie is important; dividing it evenly is not. If the United States valued the equality of wealth more than the overall prosperity, then the fundamental premises and conclusions of economics would change.

This is not to say economists are amoral. There is a justifiably moral argument to the aim of almost all economic policies: a larger pie means more pie for everyone, regardless of how it is sliced. Similarly, this is not to say that the United States does not value equality. A number of policies, such as the federal minimum wage law, impede overall economic prosperity for the sake of leveling the distribution of wealth to some extent or another. The example of economics's focus on prosperity is merely a demonstration of how societal values create and determine the premises of problem solving for entire departments. Departments become algorithmic. There are rules to how a question can be solved and parameters that dictate the answers revealed. In this, they are almost reminiscent of Google search settings, fine-tuned to the precise value system of their society.

This makes for a remarkably efficient, consistent system, although it does present a problem. Any conclusions reached by these departments that are incapable of straying from their

societal criterion are received without question. They naturally align with the predominant value system of their society. Who is going to question them?

Unchecked, this tendency could easily lead to grievous action. History has shown that cultural values are not always humane. This can be seen most clearly in famous leaders, such as Hitler, Marx, or even Pope Urban II. Systems of value obviously require scrutiny and careful thought. The standard and unexamined transference of societal values to departmental values simply cannot stand unassisted without taking moral risks.

Such is the role of the humanities. Like other departments, the humanities department exists because it is valued. The difference, however, is that the humanities alone investigate and assess the value system from which they came.

The humanities department does this by studying the human condition. Thoughtful exposure to material such as historical events, cultural shifts, artistic expressions, linguistics, religious texts, and philosophical treatises does two main things: it provides students with an understanding of the values and beliefs people from different cultures and time periods have possessed, and it develops critical thinking. In short, it teaches how to think about humanity.

To a culture that is growing increasingly concerned with questioning its traditions and values, it would seem that the humanities would be regarded as utterly essential to the society's well-being. As Judith Butler wrote in her essay "Ordinary, Incredulous," "the humanities offer a critical perspective on values" (27). What she did not say, doubtlessly because she considered it implicitly understood, is that only the humanities offer such a perspective.

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Commentary

Amy Haupt

How a Degree in English Prepares Students for a Job in the Professional Business World

I am addressing the argument that the study of the humanities is not worth the time and money required to complete, compared to a professional business degree. I would absolutely disagree with this argument and instead argue that my study in the humanities, specifically in English and writing, has prepared me to succeed in the professional business world. As I primarily have experience in the marketing department, I will focus on explaining how a study of English literature has taught me how to construct coherent, original ideas and articulate them in an understandable argument. Additionally, I will argue that a degree in English has helped me to understand the importance of the relationship between my audience and the way and voice in which I present an idea or product. These two lessons are key ingredients in basic marketing that serve as a springboard into a professional career that daily utilizes my degree in English outside of the world of academia.

A central point of studying the humanities is learning how to observe original interpretations of texts and form evidence-based arguments that clearly defend our positions. I view this aspect of my education as a lesson in communication, an essential part in any business degree, as the success of our work depends wholly on the way we communicate it. Because I have, many a time, done extensive research into a topic so as to form and defend an argument appropriately, I see my experience in this process as an incredibly marketable skill in the business world. In Richard Sennett's response to Williams's essay in *The Humanities and Public Life*, he cites the ability to be more than problem solvers but rather imaginative problem finders.

In many ways, this is what we do when we approach research in the humanities (qtd. in Brooks 94). We observe what we identify as problems or questions in a text, and, before we go about solving them, we ask more questions, digging deeper and seeking an original perspective. In the business world, this may look a little different, but the core skill is essential and is fully developed by studying the humanities.

A study of English literature and writing has also allowed me to develop an understanding of the relationship between the author, the text, and the audience. As an author, it is essential to pick words carefully to adequately communicate what one wants. Though many authors do this, there is no guarantee that their intended meaning for the text will be understood in the same way by the reader. This creates a separation between the author and the text, allowing the text to stand on its own and the reader to create his or her own opinion of the text. In the marketing world, this model translates as the relationship between the marketer or the production company, the product or service being marketed, and the person on the other end deciding if he or she wants to purchase the product or service being sold. Studying the humanities has allowed me to understand the audience's or the purchaser's position because I have been that person hundreds of times. Though I am aware that the author probably wrote the text with a purpose in mind, it is up to me to form an opinion on what he or she says. As a marketer, this understanding allows me to separate myself from what I want to or have been assigned to say and evaluate the product at face value, much like I would a text. From this, I can see different perspectives of how the product is viewed from a varied audience whether it be people of different ages or occupations or different intentions for the product being sold. With this knowledge, I can better craft a marketing strategy that will reach the desired audience. For example, if I were assigned to increase traffic on a website, and the website is selling products or

services having to do with senior living, I would craft my language, my search engine optimization keywords, and the overall accessibility of the site to best serve that desired age group. Rather than using millennial lingo or a high-tech design, I would focus on simpler, larger text and an easy to access page.

Now, you could say that this is a skill any marketing major would have taken a specific class on, but that is my whole point. These are two specific skills that I have learned studying English, and I would argue that my marketability as an entry-level hire is highly competitive with any business major given the experience and internships I have had, for English course credit I might add, not to mention the increasing marketability of skilled writing. I am convinced that anyone who has been taught how to write well and is willing to put in the work to understand the processes of a professional field, whether it be law, marketing, or entrepreneurship, will be able to find a job post-graduation because a decrease in the study of the humanities means a decrease in trained writers. This world will always need people who can clearly communicate ideas in writing and back them up with research, and it will always need people who can understand the “why” behind the people who buy the products.

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Commentary

Katie-Bryn Hubbard

Inside the Humanities:

Reading the Coens' *Inside Llewyn Davis* for the Macro and the Micro

I know that some of you have seen the Coen brothers' film *Inside Llewyn Davis*, but for those who have not, here is a quick summary: a folk musician named Llewyn, in the wake of his partner's suicide, is failing in the music industry for no apparent reason. The Coens use this premise to play with narrative structure. A close reading of this film reveals a unique tension. The film opens with Llewyn playing an appropriately morose song entitled "Hang Me, Oh, Hang Me" (00:00:28). The film closes with an almost exact reenactment of the opening scene, with the exception that after playing "Hang Me, Oh, Hang Me," Llewyn goes on to play "Fare Thee Well," a less gloomy song earlier established to be one recorded and performed by Llewyn and his late band mate, Mike (01:34:50). I take two key lessons from this film. I first see that the circular narrative structure of the film represents the deconstruction of narrative. Beyond this intellectual musing, I also see that art, in this case music, can be a means to emotional catharsis. The study of the humanities, as exemplified in my reading of *Llewyn Davis*, allows us to understand the meaning of our lives intellectually and emotionally.

The first lesson makes an intellectual point. It resists the conventional narrative structure audiences expect, therefore representing the philosophy that narrative is artificial and reality does not operate on distinct cause-and-effect terms. Thus, it provides a macro-level understanding of the reality it claims to represent and offers up a philosophical viewpoint with which one may agree or disagree. I do not wish to commit the intentional fallacy and claim that the film

represents the Coen brothers' personal conceptions of truth and that by engaging with the film we engage in conversation with the authors, as Charles Larmore would suggest (50). I do not think this strategy is a useful way of thinking about communing with texts, especially in the case of a film. So many creative minds (actors, cinematographers, etc.) contribute to the creation of the text that an attempt to separate each person's input and converse with each contributor would be in vain. We would, therefore, have to conflate them all, which would misrepresent any one person's true perspective. A better perspective to bring to the text, a perspective developed by the study of the humanities, is that by writing this film the way they have, the Coen brothers have contributed to the discourse concerning narrative and postmodern philosophy. By engaging with the text, audience members may do the same. Film, therefore, has the power to allow audiences to participate in a global discussion—the “shared interpretive labor” Ralph Hexter refers to in his essay (86)—that shapes how we perceive the world.

Beyond the film's capacity to usher us into the human conversation about meaning and truth, *Llewyn Davis* also helps us to understand and empathize with emotional healing, like that which Llewyn undergoes through his music. Here the film seems to be lodging a defense of art as a means to catharsis. Even if the narrative has been deconstructed and the end is the beginning repeated, this time the audience is treated to Llewyn's second song, and there is room for hope. We, the audience, can reasonably believe that Llewyn is not destined to remain hopeless. His music will be a source of emotional comfort for him, even if it never makes him financially successful.

Of course, this is not to say that learning to consume and create art makes us better people, per se. Llewyn is not necessarily a better person by the end of the film. He is, however, changed. His encounter with the beauty of his own music is in the vein of Elaine Scarry when

she says, “beauty interrupts and gives us sudden relief from our own minds” (46). The music has encouraged in him a greater sense of security as an independent musician, and he is at peace with his partner’s death. Likewise, spending time reading the film does not make me a better person, but it does increase my awareness of myself and of the philosophical context in which I exist. These two alternate readings offer me the opportunity to consider both macro-level questions about the nature of narrative and of reality and micro-level concerns about emotion and responses to art. In this way my humanities training works much as the sciences do: I can consider the nature of the universe just as astrophysicists consider the nature of the galaxies, and I can question the minutiae of myself just as quantum physicists and microbiologists seek to understand the tiniest particles that make life possible. In this way, the humanities offer greater understanding of things both big and small, and isn’t such encompassing knowledge what all of us, as human beings, actively look for?

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Commentary

Ryan Lally

Slow Reading in Public Life

“The time that my journey takes is long and the way of it is long.”

—Rabindranath Tagore, “12”

Recently, I used a popular search engine to look up speed-reading courses offered in my area. As expected, I received my results (approximately four million of them) in the blink of an eye. Each link offered improved ability, increased efficiency, and oftentimes twenty percent off. The occasional “The Truth about Speed-reading” or “What I learned about Speed-reading” offset the overall effect of my search, a unified catalogue of ambitious programs aiming to fire synapses at a record pace and mold words into a coherent lump of comprehension. Indeed, it seems that the act of reading itself has conformed to, as Judith Butler would say, the value system of the “deliverable” (33-36). Speed-reading makes words an unfortunate means to a desired result, a slog through a swamp, as if words were a frozen dinner, reading a microwave, and comprehension an enchilada dinner for one. I take issue with this reevaluation of language. Speed-reading runs counter to the entire project of the humanities, which stresses the need for close and careful consideration of texts, the contexts they emerge from, and the contexts in which we meet them. I hope to show, through the prose translation of the poem already partially quoted above, that words are much more than tools—they are a form of life. The act of reading, indeed, is the act of living. The implications of this awareness are manifold in our public activities.

“I came out on the chariot of the first gleam of light, and pursued my voyage through the wilderness of worlds leaving my track on many a star and planet.” –Tagore

I find this image of leaving tracks compelling, especially in light of this wisdom from Elaine Scarry: “Texts remake us. If I say I am a Keatsian, it means that I read Keats and I have been partly remade by Keats” (qtd. in Brooks 69). As this speaker places his mark upon a heavenly body, that landscape is irrevocably changed. His “pursu[it],” however, does not appear to be rapid. In leaving his mark, the “wilderness of worlds” has become specified into “many a star and planet” (28). This speaker has taken the time to reflect upon his experiences, changing his perspective on the “wilderness.” The stars are not the only body that has changed. In sharing that proximity and leaving a “track” of the self behind, the speaker has become vulnerable to a repercussive act. This speaker’s journey is changing him, and he journeys in order to be changed. So too, when we read, we are opening ourselves to change. Every poem we read, every *x* we solve for, every oral history we transcribe, and every conjugation we make forms us into the people we want to be and the citizens we have to be. When we speed-read, when we, in effect, marginalize the humanities in the name of productivity, we stagnate intellectually and emotionally. This assertion leads us to a disturbing irony: we are sacrificing progress for progress.

“It is the most distant course that comes nearest to thyself, and that training is the most intricate which leads to the utter simplicity of a tune.” –Tagore

Psychologist Jessica Love, summarizing a study comparing speed-readers to what we would call average readers, notes: “The researchers determined that speed-readers were able to read so quickly because they made fewer fixations than did normal readers: instead of reading every word, the speed-readers sample the text, reading a few words here and there” (67). This type of speed-reading, which seems to me to be synonymous with skimming, points to an alarming trend in Butler’s postulated deliverable scale of values. I simply do not think it possible for a couple stray words to provide a complete meaning, just as I do not think it possible to understand a situation from only one perspective. If we blow past lines of this poem, or any other text, we are not faithfully taking the journey Tagore has written for us, the journey that makes us who we are. Skimming is a shield to all manner of discourse, preventing us from being changed by new thoughts and new experiences. This effort of rapid selectivity runs counter to the practice of reading in the humanities, which encourages vulnerability, inclusion, and reflection. Speed-reading is to pace through the wilderness without leaving a track, to be as static as possible in the face of change. Inevitably, corporate reading, that strategy proposed by Ralph J. Hexter to “keep someone from saying more than he or she knows,” declines for the sake of efficiency (87). The reader becomes an egoist as more and more voices are skimmed with an ever-decreasing rate of content understanding. Soon, there is only one perspective that matters, to the detriment of dialogue, civic unity, and any sort of social cooperation. Beyond these concerns, we also need to recognize that there is a complex, interweaving synthesis of information required for even the simplest of mental tasks. If we cannot understand the simple “tune[s]” of our daily lives, how will we be prepared for tragedy, for conflict, or for love? Only by reading texts outside of our own perspectives, with diligence and deliberation, can we begin to understand our own lives and the lives of those around us. As the poet writes, “The traveller has to knock at every alien door to

come to his own, and one has to wander through all the outer worlds to reach the innermost shrine at the end” (28). We have to listen to many voices before we can begin to hear our own.

“My eyes strayed far and wide before I shut them and said ‘Here art thou!’” –Tagore

Here, the speaker illustrates the fulfillment of his journey. He has “strayed,” suggesting a long, wandering activity without a distinct location. Letting his eyes move beyond himself, the speaker has seen incredible wonders without a forced goal in mind. He is not acting towards efficiency or deliverable outcomes. He shows that the slow interchange of ideas and perspectives different from his own is far more important. He has “knock[ed] at every alien door,” indicating that he has cooperated in his community and interacted with others in order to understand himself and his place in the universe (28). In the careful contemplation of the life of another as communicated in words, we become oriented in ourselves, and we know our place in society. The humanities, which at their core teach us how to approach texts to fully comprehend them, guide us in this quest for self- and social understanding. Only after we make this progress can we make any other form of progress in public and private life. The speaker concludes, “The question and the cry ‘Oh, where?’ melt into tears of a thousand streams and deluge the world with the flood of the assurance ‘I am!’” (28). Though it may not be efficient to read at a pace below one hundred words per minute, the reward of such study is nothing less than living a complete life. Without this drive, inculcated by the humanities, what would communication be, other than a puff of smoke in the mute and unhearing air?

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Commentary

*Hannah Lee***Defenders of Humanity**

We have been tasked with answering the question of whether or not the study of the humanities is relevant in our society today outside of academia. As students of the field, we passionately say, “Yes,” and it is a simple concept for us to see. However, the seemingly obvious virtue of our focus has somehow fallen underfoot of those with the ability to provide funds but have no appreciation for wordsmithing. Convincing those who do not understand our ways to at least acknowledge our worth is no small endeavor, and I find it hard to believe that there is one argument or answer to convince everyone without doubt that there is an intrinsic value in the humanities. Still, we must strive to impart our knowledge and defend our profession if we wish to keep our society from crumbling.

In a digital world filled with facts and figures and data analytics, we are the defenders of the human skill set. The humanities are important because they teach humans human skills. By diligently practicing our craft, we learn how to think critically and analyze every piece of information that is given to us. We do not accept information at face value. We know that there is often an alternative implication in every speech given, every song written, every piece of biased news. Our profession helps us sift through the pomp and deceit. It helps us be responsible citizens because we have experienced similar situations in the texts we study and we know that pretense instigates destruction. As we begin to see patterns and issues in society that mirror the texts we study, we cannot help becoming rather skeptical of what we are fed by the media, politicians, advertisers, and others trying to sell us something.

According to Jonathan Culler, one of the ways we do this is through understanding and “overstanding” texts and any information given to us (qtd. in Brooks 61). We know that we need to have a basic understanding of what is happening and said on the surface. However, we also know that stopping at simply understanding what someone has written or said is not strategically sound. We must reasonably “overstand” these texts as well. “Why was it said?” “How was it said?” “Why that word choice?” “What do they stand to lose or gain from saying this?” By practicing these two techniques within the context of the humanities, we are better able to discern how far to take each technique in a social or work atmosphere. By constantly reading texts in this way, those who study the humanities are better able to know what reasonable questions to ask in order to have a deeper understanding of business papers, legal papers, advertisements, and political statements, to name a few.

Too many people are obsessed with reducing businesses and other professions to simple numbers. The problem with this is that they take the humans out of the equation. Qualitative obsession reduces businesses to simple numbers, which makes it harder to perceive the customer as a person. Once businesses do this, they are more liable to make unethical decisions because they do not see the stakeholders as people, but as a number in an equation. Therefore, businesses need people who have studied the humanities. They need someone who knows how to communicate effectively with stakeholders in a way where the diction is comprehensible. Businesses need someone to make sure that the company has a positive image, which is often done through some form of communication.

Essentially, people who focus their careers on any form of quantitative profession risk losing their jobs in the progressing years, because computers are increasingly able to calculate and analyze data without humans. However, there has yet to be a computer that can think

critically about a text the way a humanities student can. The humanities give humans experience with crafting words and deciphering hidden messages. This is not a field that will be easily overtaken by computers, because it contains the soul of society. So, yes, the humanities are relevant in our society today because humans are increasingly encouraged to be less human, and they are discouraged from studying an area that teaches them to think critically and independently.

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Commentary

*Lauren Morris***Harnessing the Power of Language and Empathy:****A Responsibility of the Humanities**

I have been attempting to craft a definitive statement defending the humanities by rendering them essentially ethical. Not only have I been thinking about the humanities solely through the lens of ethics, I have also been treating the question, “Is the humanities relevant to society and to our lives and work outside academia?” as if there were only one valid answer. In doing so, I have forgotten an important lesson of the humanities: that my response is just one of many. The humanities may or may not be essentially ethical. Perhaps I have come to this conclusion because I am not sure that “the humanities” have essential qualities that could deem them “ethical” or “unethical.” Regardless, they do nurture a sense of responsibility toward language that I believe is necessary in a successful community—particularly in one where informed voices can create change.

In this kind of community, all people have the freedom to share voices; therefore, it is important that we find ways to practice listening. I echo Derek Attridge when I claim that to communicate is to make oneself vulnerable, and to respond critically is to affirm that communication: “If texts represent an attempt—fragile, vulnerable—by someone else to communicate with us, we might conceive our responsibility to be one of respectful attention to that communication” (qtd. in Brooks 7). When we read, we listen to and engage with all kinds of voices, perspectives, and ideas, and our response reflects our treatment of those ideas. I realize

while I write this that it sounds as though I am anthropomorphizing texts, and I want to be sure to avoid the intentional fallacy by affirming that texts are distinct from authors. I still admit, however, that when we read we practice empathy; in Richard Sennett's words, we pay "attention to someone with whom [we] cannot identify" (qtd. in Brooks 67). The humanities aim, I hope, to teach us to empathize with voices that we do not recognize or understand, especially those that seem "other." The most respectful and attentive way to hear those voices and to critically consider the ideas they present is to put them in conversation with other voices, celebrating thought-provoking ideas while expanding their communicative horizons.

We are not only responsible for listening to diverse voices, we are also responsible for holding others accountable for linguistic interpretations. Kwame Anthony Appiah discusses humanists' responsibility to hold scholarship accountable: "like all artistic practices, reading flourishes only when people—as creators and audience—are committed to continuing an ongoing conversation. That is the commitment that I think gives reading an ethics in the first place: It generates obligations to others" (qtd. in Brooks 58). The "ethics" of reading takes on urgent relevance when language can shape lives. Our responsibility toward language stems from the idea that language has the power to impose an identity on a group of people—the power to change reality, even.

I cannot help but think of John Searle's illocutionary speech acts—constructions of language that *create* rather than *represent*—on this point. Judith Butler engages with Searle when she explains, "Within speech act theory, a performative is a discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names" (Butler 13). A classic example of a performative takes place at a marriage ceremony when a person pronounces a couple to be husband and wife, thereby changing their social reality. Other examples are more troubling, however. When we call people

“illegal aliens,” for example, we reduce their humanity to criminal status and fail to recognize them as holistic individuals with the same rights and freedoms as ourselves. Patricia Williams drives home this point when she speaks from experience: “For us in the legal academy, the line between human and subhuman, or person and thing, is perpetually urgent” (78). A sense of responsibility toward language becomes crucial when we realize that language can make humans subhuman and that our objectifications of individuals through language can be translated into law.

Language is always changing, so our perceptions about people and ideas are always changing. As humanists, we are responsible for evaluating these changes. Does this mean that we will soon be forced to come up with a singular ethics of reading? I do not think so, because reading is a never-ending conversation. We will have many ethics of reading; however, when we put them in dialogue with one another, we admit the literary and social importance of empathy, the power of language to change reality, and the burden of the humanities to protect texts and people from linguistic manipulation.

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Commentary

*Angela Napolitano***The Humanities and Education**

Something I have learned over the years is that when you are forced to defend something that means so much to you, you start to understand more and become more passionate about what you are defending. Faith is something that is questioned on a daily basis, yet we never say that it should be done away with. If you believe in something, educate yourself in ways you never thought were possible. This is how I view the humanities. The more people question me about my future, the more educated I become about the humanities. I am able to defend it because of the skills I have gained from studying the humanities. The humanities provide our society with well-rounded, educated people by exploring skills of deeper thinking, understanding the language, and achieving personal connection.

Humans are complex beings. In order to understand people, we must master the skill of deeper thinking. This is where the humanities come in. We have the ability to move past the facts and explore the complexity of the situation. They assist us with the ability to question and to understand the situation as a whole. Without the urge to know more, we leave everything at surface level. There is no meaning behind anything we do if we cannot support our claims. In the same way, to support your claims you need to be able to deconstruct the text or situation. The humanities, again, provide the skills we need to do that. I have learned over the years to look at a text and determine the different meanings that come from just the words on the page. Without the humanities, I would have just read the words on the page and left it at that. The humanities leave us with the urge to wonder about the situations.

Patricia Williams claims in Peter Brooks's book *The Humanities and Public Life* that photograph titles shift the perspective of the viewer just from the words they use (77). This comes from understanding the language. When we use the skills of deconstructing the words, we are able to see how the placement or tense of the word can provide different meanings. Using these titles as an example, the word *looter* shows the person as a looter and not anything else. But if the artist stated, "The man who is looting," then the word *looting* provides the reader with an understanding that the man is performing the act of looting and that there is something deeper going on. We are then able to question this man's deeper identity. How can we prevent this from happening? What is the reason is committing this act? Richard Sennett explains, "The labeling of who is in the image becomes the interpretation of what the image is about. That is a radical way of restricting the publicness in the images and how we understand their public value by essentially assigning the value to who they are, rather than what they are doing" (qtd. in Brooks 93). We are able to find different problems within society from just understanding the power of the language that is being used by asking questions that might not yet have been explored.

Without the humanities in education, there would be no other way to teach these skills. These skills are crucial to society and the education world because they help us explore the deeper issues and connect to others on a deeper level. Every person is going to react in different ways to whatever he or she reads or sees. People who understand the humanities and see the importance of them can see the different lines people draw and effectively communicate to those lines. Becoming an educator, I need to be aware that my students are not all on the same page. It is my job to find their individual lines in order to get the most out of my lessons for each student. I have learned that connection is the most effective way to teach something. If I do not

understand how the students react, how will I be able to teach them about the novel we are reading in class in a sense that they will understand and be able to connect to?

The humanities not only help us educate people but also make connections, understand the language, and perform deeper thinking. I am constantly using the skills that the humanities have given me to defend the importance of the humanities. I strive to be the educator that not just provides the answers for the students, but challenges them to explore the unanswered problems in the subject they are questioning. How can we defend something so close to us, such as our faith, without knowing enough facts to support it? In order to do that effectively, we need to have our humanities. Without them, what is the point?

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Madeline Perkins

Humans in Humanities: Stuck in the Past or Worth the Pursuit?

The study of the humanities encompasses disciplines such as History, English, Classics, Philosophy, and Linguistics. The titles of these majors cannot be turned into words with an -ist—one cannot be an English-ist or a philosoph-ist—and those that can (historicist, classicist) do not bring to mind a marketable job. This differs from studies in the sciences, where the major “chemistry” can turn into “chemist” and “physics” turns into “physicist.” Similarly, business majors and education majors and nursing majors are each professionalized, and thus their titles easily turn into the names of jobs: businessmen, educators, nurses. Yet, the humanities majors do not provide such obvious fluidity between the collegiate and professional spheres. If students choose to major in English, the lack of a job as an “English-ist” requires the students to question whether they can think of a job for which they’ll qualify with an English major. This quick word study calls attention to the question of whether the humanities are marketable outside of the university. If studying them cannot turn into a common, necessary job, then the study of the humanities is hard to defend.

Why, then, are there so many students choosing to major in the humanities? Why would otherwise bright students choose to spend hundreds of hours and thousands of dollars on an education which will not benefit them at all?

But there are obviously students choosing to study the humanities. And these students are not turning into sixth- and seventh-year seniors because of a lack of jobs, haunting the halls as twenty-five year olds who have nothing constructive to do outside the university setting—they

go off and graduate like everyone else. Here's what we're seeing: although humanities majors do not slide into a certain field of work, they shoot into the job world with a subtext. Their CV does not communicate "English-ist," but it does communicate the ability to communicate convincingly about topics of care.

Everyone—both individual humans and corporate businesses—cares about things or people or places. These topics of care differ between different people and different groups, and each person or group cares about a limited number of things. For example, a construction company cares about making money and worker safety; they likely do not care about the importance of Olympic gymnastics or furthering women's rights.

This word "care" is a matter of emotional inclination, but it is also a matter of action. If our construction company cares about worker safety, they will paint dangerous areas yellow and release memos and institute special training. Their care is not a detached, esoteric, unconvincing care; it is, rather, a care that manifests itself by their actions. The owner of the construction company may care strongly about women's rights and manifest this by her actions, but if she does not continue that care through the actions of her company, the company does not care about these rights in the same way that they care about making a profit or protecting their workers.

People and companies often endorse things they care about strongly enough that they wish to promulgate it among others. Feminists want other people to care about equal rights for women and men. Competitive swimmers want other people to come to their meets or take up swimming as exercise for themselves. Chefs want other people to eat the food they've made. It is this desire—the desire to indoctrinate others, to convince them to join you in caring about things—that makes studying the humanities valuable.

The humanities trains students to proficiently express care—whether their own or that of other people. They train students to listen to the cares of others, understand them, and explain them.

History makes us draw conclusions from the texts of the past. English makes us draw conclusions from the texts people have written. Classics makes us connect past and present human thought. Philosophy makes us engage with different perspectives and question ourselves as humans. Linguistics makes us engage with the power of language and the importance of culture.

As we practice the humanities, we work the muscle that makes us care. We read situations and texts and people. We discuss them. We form arguments about them. And this process, integral to each sector of the humanities, is not a process that threatens or bullies. It does not require a hard product or monetary outcome. But it requires that we think. And thinking breeds understanding, and understanding breeds care. And this care, dangling by association rather than rigged by devotion, is a difficult thought to thread. It can be threaded only by someone who understands both sides of an argument, by someone who understands the points of an argument as well as the people behind them. This suggests Larmore's idea of the ethics of the vulnerable, in which he says that "[i]n general, the moral point of view consists in seeing in another's good a reason for action on our part" (54). It is a care that moves through understanding into action.

And this is what makes the humanities student valuable outside the ivory tower. An engagement with interpersonal interactions, an understanding of movements and motivations, a care that pushes past personal priorities. The humanities are not valuable because they create a product, but because they create shared care.

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Commentary

*Emily Van Dyke***The Value of the Humanities**

An apprehensive shadow falls over humanities departments and continues to ask one question: how will these majors foster the ability to pick up a paycheck at the end of every two weeks? The question falls upon parents, friends, and relatives around the Thanksgiving table as they all become susceptible to the illusion that pursuing a humanities degree will result in only one conclusion: you will soon be shamed back to your childhood bedroom with your idle diploma hanging on your wall. However, this pressing belief that there is no value in a degree that is not a “professions” degree is clearly untrue. The humanities cultivate a skill set that makes students valuable not only to the workplace but also to society. Rather than a path that leads to one simple outcome, the humanities offer a whole set of alternative roots. These numerous pathways offer a freedom that resides in cultivating a four-year degree that develops translatable skills, which benefit many professions. Through the humanities, students learn the valuable skill sets of communication, research, analysis, and interpretation. The humanities encourage free and independent thinkers who enhance the individuality and creativity of society.

In our society, which is overcome by social networks and online interactions, people have lost the ability to communicate. As texting has become our basic means of interaction, society has lost the ability to clearly and efficiently communicate ideas. However, the need to communicate is engrained into almost every job. Unless someone is working in a solitary lab, human interaction is vital to the workplace. As an English major, one of our main functions is to

communicate with texts and interact in dialogue with other scholars. While the ability to write is slipping away from the majority of professions, the humanities support and enhance this skill that is essential to human interaction. William Germano states, “To write with care—and with as much clarity as contentions will support—in turn enables readerly interpretation. The ability to write well is a developable skill, and to write with courage and clarity is to honor the reader, which is the beginning of ethical engagement in any field, any profession” (qtd. in Brooks 101). This ability to write well is a functional skill that will greatly benefit the professions, as good communication is the basic requirement for effective social interaction. In addition to written communication, spoken communication is a tool that can dictate who gets hired in the professional world. The one thing that can be the determining factor of a job offer is the communication throughout the interview. In most interviews, the simple question, “What can you tell me about yourself?” completely baffles the fresh graduate who has been trained in all aspects of his or her profession, but has not learned the value of communication. In that one moment, the mind goes blank, and the interviewer will immediately wonder about the person’s ability to interact with colleagues and supervisors. While the skill of effective communication is often overlooked, the humanities strengthen this tool that will translate throughout society.

Additionally, the humanities engage the ability to research and locate patterns throughout an extensive amount of information. The humanities assign many projects that require the capability to dive into a wealth of information and emerge only with what is relevant to the task at hand. This process requires active reading, analysis of texts, and the responsibility to manage a time-consuming task. The typical humanities student will continue to dig for information even if it is not blaringly obvious. As English majors who delve into topics that are unexplored, it is sometimes difficult to locate the various sources that will support our information. However, this

degree teaches its students to continually pursue its topics and to hunt the dusty book in the third floor of the library until we find our answer, an asset that would translate to many jobs. The ability to ask the obscure question, to continually search through research, and to dig until the answer is found is a valuable strength that will incorporate into many aspects of life.

Finally, the humanities encourage students to find interpretation and meaning throughout various texts and contexts. This tool serves to create free thinkers that engage in their own creativity. This inventiveness translates into the professional world, as individuals are able to think outside of the norm in order to generate alternative options. Richard Sennett states, “In the United States, technical work is distributing itself such that people who come from high-status, high-prestige institutions are give more freedom to be fully creative, to be craftsmen, to imagine possibilities, to be problem finders rather than problem solvers” (qtd. in Brooks 94). The skills that originate from free thinking translate into an ability to look at an assignment in a new light. Rather than approaching a task from the obvious angle, the humanities student has been trained to creatively attack the project from multiple sides. This creativity will enhance society, as without creative and free thought, people will become isolated in their unanimous understanding. People need to be able to explore their own individuality, their own ability to imaginatively construct an opinion, which separates them from mindless computers completing tasks.

While the humanities cannot be mathematically calculated for their worth based on a set salary, the skill set that the humanities develop is extremely valuable for many professions and for a freethinking society. The humanities cultivate abilities such as communication, research, and interpretation, which serve to enhance vital components that are deeply embedded into professional fields.

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Benjamin Crabtree

1967: A Reflection on Cinema's Turning Point Fifty Years Later

When I reflect on 1967, I find it difficult to comprehend how a single year could contain such a wide variety of historical events. In California, doctors successfully preserved the first person in a cryonic chamber, heightening possibilities and anxieties concerning the medical resurrection of individuals after their deaths. In the United States, millions of people protested the mobilization of troops in Vietnam, while armies of teachers protested inadequate salaries across the nation. The appointment of Thurgood Marshall as the first African-American Supreme Court Justice and the legalization of interracial marriage in the *Loving v. Virginia* case continued to improve racial equality following the Civil Rights Act three years earlier. The first Super Bowl encouraged the consumerist culture of middle class America. Simultaneously, the first issue of *Rolling Stone* magazine and release of revolutionary albums such as The Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* and *The Velvet Underground and Nico* (produced by pop artist and *enfant terrible* Andy Warhol) proliferated the "sex, drugs, and rock and roll" counterculture enrapturing the youth, fueling Anti-Vietnam angst and rebellion against traditional American values (Pearson, n. pag.).

In a manner similar to the sociopolitical, cultural, and countercultural changes occurring around the globe, international filmmakers experimented with cinematic form and tackled diverse subject matter to remain relevant and revolutionary in the ever-changing world. In France, the innovative auteurs of the *Nouvelle Vague* ended their defiant movement, which deconstructed film form in order to create a new cinematic language. Creative and personal

differences between the primary directors, especially Jean-Luc Godard and François Truffaut, led to the New Wave's sudden conclusion. Godard released his blood red Maoist manifesto *La Chinoise*, which led François Truffaut to repudiate his former friend and creative partner. A few months later, Godard released one of his most accessible and poignant films, *2 or 3 Things I Know About Her*, which explored anxieties of female empowerment within the confines of domesticity. While this film allowed the director to reconcile his relationship with critics and audience, Truffaut was not as forgiving. Fortunately, it did not take Godard too long to infuriate the public again with *Weekend*, an angry, experimental revisionist road trip film. Jacques Demy followed up his masterpiece *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* with a candy-coated catastrophe *The Young Girls of Rochefort*, which pushed Demy off the map for nearly a decade. While things did not go well for the first Jacques, auteur and comedian Jacques Tati released his magnum opus *Playtime*, a critique of consumerism centered on Monsieur Hulot's physically comedic romp around Paris, which Tati expresses as a technology-saturated maze of modernity.

Although the French New Wave disintegrated, the movement simultaneously inspired many international auteurs to continue the revolutionary work of Truffaut and Godard. Spanish artist and filmmaker Luis Buñuel melded New Wave editing techniques with his signature surrealism in *Belle de Jour*, directing Catherine Deneuve in the best performance of her career as a seemingly submissive housewife with a fascinating feminist secret. In Sweden, independent director Vilgot Sjöman examined the tumultuous nature of female adolescence in his unpretentious experiment *I am Curious (Yellow)*, which influenced films as diverse as *Carrie* (1976) and *Winter's Bone* (2010) to *An Education* (2009) and even *Clueless* (1995). In Japan, young visionaries such as Seijun Suzuki and Nagisa Oshima catapulted the nation's filmmakers into one of the world's most revolutionary and controversial cinematic movements—the

Japanese New Wave. Suzuki's *Branded to Kill* combined his signature kaleidoscopic color palettes with exaggerated depictions of violence, while Oshima's *Japanese Summer: Double Suicide* addressed taboos of violence and sexuality to critique the traditionalist culture and cinema of Japan at the time. These early films of the Japanese New Wave subverted gender and political perspectives through formal and narrative experimentation without stooping into exploitation; unfortunately, the films that would follow in their footsteps focused more on manipulating moral boundaries than expanding the cinematic language.

While the diverse various international auteurs were busy experimenting with cinematic form and addressing difficult topics and revolutionary ideas within the content, the United States seemed to be trapped in an endless abyss of superficial, escapist cinema. While these films entertained the masses and maintained a fairly steady flow of revenue into the pockets of stars and producers in Hollywood, many young filmmakers expressed discontent with the lack of diversity and experimentation within the aesthetic and intellect of American filmmaking. In the spring and summer of 1967, shallow musicals, such as the campy Elvis movies *Clambake* and *Double Trouble*, David Swift's rigid adaptation of the Broadway show *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*, and Gene Saks's embarrassing *Barefoot in the Park*, exhausted audiences and film artists alike with their repetition and narrative safety. Similarly, mindless movies including the jingoistic *Dirty Dozen*, the absurdly misogynistic Bond film *You Only Live Twice*, and Richard Lester's nauseating WWII comedy *How I Won the War* led audiences, producers, and young directors to desire a new Hollywood that was not afraid to take risks and experiment with cinematic form and content.

In September of 1967, Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* shot into movie theaters across the nation. Although the marketing campaign and subject matter mirrored the abundance of

expendable actions movies that littered the cinemas throughout the 1960s, *Bonnie and Clyde* masterfully subverted the genre and character expectations, playing with the cinematic form, gender norms, and Vietnam-era anxieties all the while. Over the next couple of months, Hollywood completely changed from a graveyard of disgracefully safe movies into a hotbed of edgy, revolutionary cinema; the New Hollywood was born. Both Norman Jewison's *In the Heat of the Night* and Stanley Kramer's *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?* poignantly addressed the changing racial landscape of the United States after the Civil Rights Movement, catapulting Sidney Poitier into stardom as the first mainstream African American leading man. Simultaneously, Stuart Rosenberg's subversive crime drama *Cool Hand Luke* and Martin Ritt's revisionist western *Hombre* solidified Paul Newman as the quintessential countercultural hero, fighting conformity as a member of a Southern chain gang and part-Native American outlaw. Alongside *Cool Hand Luke*'s commentary on criminality, Richard Brook's adaptation of Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* used expressive black-and-white cinematography to nuance America's black-and-white view of criminals. These topical and transcendent dramas paved the way for further experimentation in other genres and modes of filmmaking, including documentaries and comedic cinema.

D.A. Pennebaker's *Bob Dylan: Don't Look Back* and Murray Lerner's *Festival* utilized the techniques of the French New Wave to craft cinema verité documentaries centered on the revolutionary music of the 1960s, which inspired the American youth to fight for social change and freedom of expression. Mel Brooks reshaped the American comedy with *The Producers*, which is a self-aware satire of the entertainment industry, complete with an obsessive-compulsive attorney, a part-time producer/part-time gigolo to rich old women, and tap-dancing Nazis led by an alcoholic Hitler. In the final full week of 1967, auteur Mike Nichols further

redefined the American comedy and solidified the foundation of the New Hollywood movement with his subversive masterpiece, *The Graduate*. Powered by excellent performances by Dustin Hoffman and Anne Bancroft, a brilliant script by Buck Henry and Calder Williams, and an era-defining soundtrack by Simon and Garfunkel, *The Graduate* propelled American comedy down a path of experimentation and innovation for decades to come, inspiring filmmakers as diverse as John Hughes, Wes Anderson, and Lena Dunham. Even in today's cinema, one can see the ripples of influence from Hollywood's New Wave through creative uses of cinematic form to comment on and critique sociopolitical issues.

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Commentary

Casey Cunningham

My Least Favorite Question: Or, Why I Don't Have a "Favorite Book"

I've always been what most people would call an "indecisive person." (Well, really, I could go either way, but *maybe* that would be an accurate description of my personality.) But I've thought about my least favorite question a lot, and in this case, I think I'm justified. I would choose just about *anything* else: favorite sport, restaurant, color, place, holiday. I'm not saying I *won't* struggle with those, but eventually, I'll give you an answer. Just please, for the love of literature, don't ask me to tell you my favorite book. Yes, I am an English major. Yes, I get this question a lot. So trust me when I say that it isn't without a substantial amount of serious thought, critical reflection, and earnest soul-searching that I come to this conclusion: I don't have a favorite book. And furthermore, I shouldn't be forced to choose one.

I'm not saying that having a favorite book is a bad thing, but I am questioning the productivity of asking or answering the question, "What is your favorite book?" The point of asking this question, in my experience, is usually an effort to learn the personality and literary tastes of a reader. Yet the vagueness of the question itself almost always leaves any answer in need of additional explanation to come close to satisfying its goal. Especially as an English major, I find it rather sad that a serious interest in another person's literary experience is so often trivialized by the hasty assignment of a single label of favoritism—"Oh, so you're a Jane Austen fan." All this is to say that, rather than enduring a miniature existential crisis each time this troublesome conversation arises in literary circles or making up a meaningless answer to satisfy innocent inquiries of friends and relatives who are, more than likely, only trying to make

conversation, I propose that we can begin to have more meaningful and accurate discussions of literature simply by asking and answering better questions.

When I was a child, I did have “favorite” books—not just one, even then, but several—that I found most enjoyable and satisfying. Now, as a more mature reader, I seem to be stuck in the position of either falling back on those amusing childhood reads to name a “favorite,” or attempting to sound scholarly by citing some well-known work of literature. In a letter to a fellow writer, Gustave Flaubert asserts, “Do not read, as children do, to amuse yourself, or like the ambitious, for the purpose of instruction. No, read in order to live” (qtd. in Crystal 104). I read now, as I did in childhood, because I love to read. However, as a mature reader, my desired outcome has changed, and the types of books I find most influential have changed along with it. I read now, as Flaubert so accurately summarizes, “in order to live”—to engage with other lives and views and worlds, even when they challenge and stretch me.

In general, when I think of my “favorites,” I think of things that I like—chocolate, summertime, fresh flowers—things that make me happy, secure, and comfortable. If I selected a favorite book based on these criteria, I would need to choose one that was pleasant and fun. Yet when I read, I don’t always want to be happy, well-pleased, or comfortable. In fact, most of the books I’ve read since coming to college have challenged me; I’d even say that the best ones have made me sad, or confused, or downright uncomfortable. I would feel awkward citing *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison as my *favorite* novel, but you’d probably have a better chance at learning my real tastes as a reader if we discussed that book instead of whatever cheesy romance novel most recently made me happy. Though it may sound like an oxymoron, the more I read, the more I find that the books I “like” most are the books I don’t like at all.

After struggling for years to come up with an accurate response to the “favorite book” question, I think I’ve finally decided—I’ll change the question instead of changing my answer. In his essay “Don’t Ask Me What My Favorite Book Is,” literary critic Jonathan Russell Clark argues that many of the books people name as “favorites” could be more accurately categorized as either “Personally Inspiring Reads” or “Significant Reading Experiences” (n. pag.). Both of these labels are more effective ways to begin asking readers about the books they have found most important, with the added benefit of erasing the need for a single, representative title.

The term “Personally Inspiring Read” expands on the traditional idea of a “favorite” to include books that were intimately important at any point in a reader’s life, from childhood favorites to embarrassing “guilty pleasures” to books that motivate a reader to push through in a difficult time of life (Clark, n. pag.). As the girl who read the entire elementary school library as a fourth grader, I find that many of my “personally inspiring reads” are the beloved children’s novels that I’ve read and reread at least a dozen times—books like *The Boxcar Children*, *Anne of Green Gables*, and of course, the Harry Potter series. These are the books that captured my imagination and first sparked my passion for reading and studying literature. Each of them, and many more, hold an intimate place in my heart, but none of them can accurately represent my current literary taste. Asking, “What are books that you have found personally inspiring?” allows us to talk about these books while admitting that the books that have inspired us through the years are not always an adequate expression of our literary interests.

A “Significant Reading Experience,” on the other hand, is defined by Clark as a work that “demonstrate[s] how a book can be memorable, significant, unforgettable, life-altering—and still not be something we’d list as a favorite” (n. pag.). This description easily brings to mind a number of the novels that I found to be simultaneously moving and beautiful yet incredibly

difficult or painful. For example, this past summer I decided to focus my reading on books dealing with racism and social justice. I read *The Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison, *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker, *Go Set a Watchman* by Harper Lee, and *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson. All of these books were incredible reads emotionally and intellectually; I engaged with the struggle of racial prejudice through the eyes of authors both white and black and through stories both fictional and true. Undoubtedly, each of them now stands as a significant reading experience in my life, and yet the label “favorite” does not seem to do them justice. Instead, I hope to begin asking and answering the question “What are your most significant reading experiences?” to open the door for an engaging and honest conversation about the reasons we read and the books that move us.

Part of the beauty of reading comes from the complexity and ambiguity of literature and the vast variety of books one can read. Without the pressure to choose a favorite, readers are free to explore not only the cheerful stories, but also the challenging, uncomfortable ones. We can encourage one another to give value to these reading experiences through conversation. From inspiring books to significant books, to every type of book in between—I may not have a favorite book, but I have any number of other kinds of books to choose from.

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Commentary

Regan Green

Not Your Mother's Meursault

For my Existentialism class, I was recently reading articles about Albert Camus's *The Stranger*, a French novel about a simple man named Meursault whose mother has died. Because I'm an English major, I was much more attracted to the literary studies than the philosophical analyses. This probably resulted in a poor presentation (my apologies to Dr. Putt), but it lured me into a rabbit hole of reviews and interpretations that illuminated my view of foreign literature. I was particularly drawn to a piece by Arthur Scherr about the discrepancies between the two popularized English translations of *The Stranger*, translated by Stuart Gilbert (1946) and Matthew Ward (1988). He claims that the translations render entirely different narrators based solely on the styles of their narratives (Scherr 264), although other articles point out that the distortion of content contributes to this as well (see Campbell and Sebba). We often credit the authors for the work of the translators. Nobody says they love the simplicity of Matthew Ward's prose or Stuart Gilbert's eloquence. We say we love (or hate) Camus. But even a quick glance at the two popularized translations of *The Stranger* will show that translators should not always be taken at their word.

The Stranger begins with one of the most iconic openings in the Western literary canon: "Aujourd'hui, Maman est morte," (Bloom, n. pag.). Even the nuanced translations of the first sentence are pivotal in the portrayal of Meursault. The French word *maman* is used to connote familiarity, much as English speakers would say, "mama." *The Stranger* was originally translated into English in 1946 by Stuart Gilbert, and this edition reads, "Mother died today," emphasizing the emotional detachment of the French word *mère* (Bloom), a word Meursault

does not use to refer to his *maman*. The use of *mother* indicates a cold and reserved relationship. This detachment is consistent with Meursault's relationships elsewhere, but the point is not that he is emotionally removed from everyone; the point is that he is emotionally removed from everyone but his *maman*. Camus himself said that "the curious feeling the son has for his mother constitutes all his sensibility," and Sartre's explication of the novel notes that Meursault's use of the word *maman* (Ward vii) is quite peculiar, because he is otherwise remarkably distant from his social circle. Though the use of *mom* would be closer to a literal translation, it still would not quite capture the intimacy of the relationship. Forty years later, Matthew Ward's 1988 translation instead opened "Maman died today" (3). With a sense of something both faraway and homey, Ward's preservation of *maman* maintains the narrator's unbalanced warmth for his mother. In Ward's own words, he endeavors "to capture what [Camus] said and how he said it, not what he meant. In theory, the latter should take care of itself" (vi).

Readers see this manifesto exhibited elsewhere in the novel, such as in Meursault's encounter with the character Salamano and his ever-present dog. The original text reads, "Il était avec son chien," in which the past tense verb *était* conveys a habitualness, indicating that Salamano is always with his dog. Because Gilbert aimed to translate the meaning rather than the wording, he translated it, "As usual, he had his dog with him." But Ward's text reads only, "He was with his dog" (vi). This rendering applies the "American method" that Camus used in writing the original novel: it is simple and succinct and emotionally distant in much the same way that a Hemingway or Faulkner narrator would be (v). As Scherr puts it, the candid prose of *The Stranger* is "designed to convey the immediacy and starkness of existence" (268). Salamano is "with his dog" in the same way he would be with his wife or with a friend. Ward points out that near the end of the novel, Meursault remarks that Salamano's dog is worth as much as his

wife. Readers would not be able to reckon with this unexpected comparison if they had not seen Salamano and dog through Meursault's eyes earlier (vi). Moreover, the staccato, innocuous sentences of the American method reflect Meursault's character: he is comfortable, honest, and does not ruminate over or romanticize his experiences. Gilbert's ornate, speculative translation does not render Meursault as fully or purely as Ward's.

Not only does Gilbert misrepresent the way Camus wrote, he also distorts the content so that Meursault's thoughts and actions notably deviate from those in the original text. Most of these are minor moments, but they are hardly inconsequential. Standing alone, each instance may seem trivial, but in summation they fabricate a pseudo-Meursault who acts more than he thinks and thinks more than he feels. The Meursault that Camus writes is an irrational, instinctive creature. He makes decisions based on instinct and does not question himself. But, as Helen Sebba notes in her article "A Strange 'Stranger,'" Gilbert writes a different Meursault. Sebba references several scenes in which this is evident. When Camus's Meursault feels that he is happy, Gilbert's Meursault "realize[s]" that he is happy. When Camus's Meursault decides to go for a swim, Gilbert's Meursault decides that "a swim would do [him] good." When Camus's Meursault explodes in a rage that pours out of his heart, Gilbert's Meursault pours out "all the thoughts that had been simmering in [his] brain." In Gilbert's translation, Meursault rationalizes actions that had no reason before (Sebba 338). He justifies his decisions rather than making them primitively without hesitation or doubt. The thoughtful man we meet in Gilbert's text is not the reflexive one to whom Camus introduced us.

As a student who completed her required foreign-language credits several French-less months ago, it would be *très* hard to read *The Stranger* in its original text. But I have to wonder how much of Meursault is lost in translation, even with Ward's version. All I can do is trust the

faceless names who wrote the articles I've cited when they say Ward does it best. Until we all learn to speak in the tongues of Kafka, Nabokov, and Camus, can any of us genuinely say that we have read them? In the end, as James Campbell points out in his article, "Creative Misreading," we've truly only read their translators, not the authors. Because of this, translators have a massive weight on their shoulders, for they carry the writers' very names. They unavoidably create a new piece of literature in their work, and because of this I can no longer say I've read Camus. I can only say I've read Ward.

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Commentary

Lauren Morris

(You Should) Read Film, Too: A Response to the Alleged Hierarchy of Art

Discussing the ethics of reading at a humanities symposium, Wesleyan University President Michael Roth claims, “I think all of us would find it odd to believe that we are becoming, as a culture, better people, more empathetic, or more capable of imagining others because of television or because of YouTube” (qtd. in Brooks 96). Roth’s comment seems to rest on the assumption that literature, or print media, is somehow superior to film, or audiovisual media. This attempt to create a hierarchy of art is longstanding, unwarranted, and unnecessary; reading a page from a novel and reading a shot from a film may be two different pursuits in that the investigator scrutinizes different narrative and formal elements to determine meaning, but neither needs to be ranked to show that it is a valid art form and way to communicate.

Every active imagination has the power to “direct” or “produce” texts as if they were movies. Some imaginations have the opportunity to share their interpretations with the movie-going world and display their art in theaters. Seeing a film in a theater can be a sensational experience, perhaps even more sensational than reading written text in that it excites more physical senses. This is not to say that written text cannot be equally immersive—humanists know this to be untrue. What I am suggesting, rather, is that film is immersive in a different way: as opposed to books, which require inventive imaginations, film requires sensory attention. To experience a film completely, you must hear and see it; to experience a book or poem completely, you need only your eyes. Film allows me to access others’ imaginations by

presenting them on a screen. When I read a novel, I narrate dialogue and paint mental pictures of imagery the text presents. By contrast, film directors and producers predetermine those things through audiovisual effects. Some might argue that this fact reduces room for individual interpretation, and others cite this as a “proof” that literature is superior to film. I do not agree; while film does take away one’s ability to invent the world of a text by oneself, it also opens more doors to interpretation by introducing audiovisual elements for analysis. Like each line of a poem, each shot is its own unit of meaning. Both are endlessly dissectible when students are equipped with the necessary literary tools and theories.

Film explores a facet of narrative that is uniquely audiovisual. Cinema can communicate through music, for example. The songs in *La La Land* (2016) not only identify emotional responses to important scenes but also put the film in conversation with Jazz’s rich history. *The Shining* (1980) employs a ringing crescendo—a background note that becomes increasingly louder and more intrusive—to heighten psychological suspense; viewers hear monotonous ringing but stop registering it as sound until its absence makes a scene painfully silent. Dialogue, tonal emphasis, and intonation are all elements to consider when reading a film, but more interesting are the ways in which directors and producers can edit them. In the 1990 TV series “Twin Peaks,” David Lynch asked actors and actresses to pronounce their lines backwards (Lafrance, n. pag.). After recording scenes in this backward fashion, Lynch reversed the film, making the language recognizable yet distorted (Lafrance, n. pag.). This method disorients viewers and communicates that the setting in which the scene takes place, the Red Room, is corrupt and otherworldly. Furthermore, film is unlike print media in that it can communicate without language, whereas written text relies primarily on words and form to build ideas. Silent

films, such as *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), do not need spoken dialogue to be culturally, historically, musically, or aesthetically significant, for instance.

As humanists know, perspective changes everything. The focus and location of the camera with respect to subjects and objects in a scene can alter viewers' perception of a scene or character dramatically. While framing is relevant in every film, it is particularly successful at the beginning of *Citizen Kane* (1941) when it introduces an epistemological uncertainty that is developed throughout the remainder of the film. Blocking becomes especially interesting when sets change. Stanley Kubrick shot *The Shining* (1980) in multiple buildings so that the blueprint of the hotel in the movie would be unpredictable, nonsensical, and disorienting. Color is another audiovisual element that written text does not typically utilize. *Her* (2013) takes place in a near utopia that assumes warm color palettes like orange and brown. The film's seldom use of cool colors provides a contrast that draws attention to warm colors in comparison. Finally, special and practical effects help create immersive, imaginative worlds in movies like *Star Wars* (1977) and *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015). Like all texts, films portray not only humans, but also monsters—and everything in between; *Jurassic Park* (1993), *Avatar* (2009), and “Stranger Things” (2016) are excellent examples of audiovisual texts that bring non-human creatures to life.

All of these elements make up an audiovisual experience that can be interpreted endlessly—just like a written text. So studying a movie is not less academic than studying a book. Film does not have to be something we do solely for enjoyment, just as literature does not have to be read “just for fun.” Perhaps a quick analysis of Cormack McCarthy's 2005 novel *No Country for Old Men* and its 2007 film adaptation will help illustrate my claims. McCarthy creates confusion by not abiding to traditional standards for punctuation and grammar. The novel presents events in a straightforward way that builds tension not by yelling at readers with

exclamation points (!!), but by remaining calm—even disinterested—in crisis. Some contractions have apostrophes and some do not. There is no clear pattern. This writing style becomes a vehicle by which the novel communicates the chaos that results when people seek meaning where there is none. The Coen Brothers' adaptation cannot use punctuation to create these effects; instead, the dialogue is flat, monotonous. A drowning tone akin to the hum of a refrigerator sets the tone for the emotional stoicism of the film. The characters rarely raise their voices or show any kind of emotion; and it is their uncomfortable and inappropriate stares, not their intonation, that give the film a sense of doom. Moreover, the film's lack of music leaves viewers emotionally unprepared for upcoming events; silence breeds uncomfortable suspense. Through different methods, both the novel and the film effectively capture the nihilistic perspective and explore the tension between destiny and self-determination. Both are worthy of academic analysis, and humanists should read both.

Neither film nor literature represents a superior art form; both have the tools to create successful, thought-provoking texts. As for me, I know very little about film and its history. This, I believe, is the biggest gap in my humanist education. Of all the classes I have taken in college, I have analyzed film only four times, and I am an English major. I have analyzed poetry, novels, and non-fiction in every other class I have taken at Samford—even in Scientific Inquiry. To me, this communicates a disposition toward Michael Roth's quotation, a common view that film is not as important as written text. I think this view is unguided. To be well round in literary texts, we have to read film. Because film, after all, is text.

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Commentary

Hannah Warrick

What is L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Poetry Other than a Headache?

I'm subscribed to poets.org's "Poem-A-Day" email list, where I receive my daily dose of poetry so I can start the day off feeling properly enlightened. I'm always glad to receive a poem from Walt Whitman, Sylvia Plath, or if I'm lucky, T.S. Eliot, but recently I have received poems that explore new types of poetic expression that sometimes leave me frustrated, confused, and insecure about my own analytical abilities. The following excerpt comes from the poem "Chronic Meanings," written by American poet Bob Perelman, which inspired one of these bouts of frustration:

On our wedding night I.

The sorrow burned deeper than.

Grimly I pursued what violence.

A trap, a catch, a. (17-20)

When I first read this poem, I felt strangely schizophrenic as I jumped from unfinished thought to unfinished thought, each one seemingly unrelated to the preceding line. I read it again, slower this time, and searched for any type of recognizable pattern or poetic form, but I was still unable to piece together any general theme, idea, or narrative. The stanza above is one of twenty-five that contain the same disorienting sentence structure, and while the title suggests an overall "meaning" to the poem, I had trouble in finding such a meaning at all. Did Perelman just draw these lines out of a hat, scramble them together, and *voilà*—a poem? Is "real" poetry supposed to

be this infuriating? In one last attempt to conquer this confounding poem, I researched Bob Perelman in order to discover where this poem belonged.

These narrative-lacking, syntax-breaking, and form-challenging poems find their home in the language poetry genre, taking its name from the literary journal “L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E” published in 1979, edited by poets Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein (Bartlett 742). The journal was dedicated to exploring a new kind of writing that emphasized language as a means of creating meaning rather than a means of describing experience. In other words, by deconstructing language and thoroughly understanding grammar, syntax, and vocabulary, poets such as Bob Perelman, Lyn Hejinian, and Ron Silliman created a new genre of poetry by constructing meaning primarily through the language itself rather than a pre-existing narrative “behind” the language. Of course, all writers use language to convey meaning, but language poets refuse to have this meaning predetermined, arguing that language creates a new experience in the act of reading itself that is subject to the particular reader. This avant-garde movement was largely a reaction against the “workshop poem,” the “prevailing aesthetic” in America at the time which demanded a distinctive speaker and narrative to dominate the poem (Bartlett 743). The first two times I read “Chronic Meanings,” I read it as I would read one of these workshop poems by asking the typical questions: Who’s the speaker? Where’s the story? What’s the point? By trying to answer these questions, I was able to discover what exactly sets language poetry apart from other genres and attempt to decipher this enigma of a poem.

First of all, who’s the speaker? While a distinctive and clear speaker is paramount to a traditional poem’s success, language poets often find a distinctive speaker or voice to be reductive to the poem because of its isolating effect on the reader. Richard Palmer, a language poet, said in an interview, “I’m not interesting in *myself*—that’s just this guy who sits here

drinking coffee and making a fool of himself . . . a self that is transformed through language, however, interests me, though that already includes the reader as we are all part of a shared language” (qtd. in Bartlett 745). Personally, I have always gravitated towards writing and reading poems that contain a first-person speaker, perhaps because of the natural flow of narrative from a fixed, personal viewpoint, but I had never thought that this viewpoint could be limiting. If we look at poetry as a conversation between the writer and the reader, workshop poetry allows the poet to dominate the conversation, giving the reader little opportunity to interject. However, in language poetry, the speaker and author are both absent from the conversation, letting the reader almost “create” the poem for herself as she reads it. For example, although Perelman does include the subject “I” in some lines of “Chronic Meanings,” the “I” is not tied to particular person but instead acts as a doorway for the reader to enter the poem. Through Perelman’s use of disruptive syntax, the reader is forced to interact with the poem and, in a sense, finish the sentences for herself. The speaker is not a fictional character. The speaker is certainly not Bob Perelman. The speaker is the reader. The speaker is you.

So, if the speaker is essentially the reader, what does this imply for the narrative? First of all, trying to apply the term “narrative” to a language poem is a daunting, if not impossible, task because the poem as a whole is not seeking to convey a single story. When I looked at Perelman’s poem for the third time, I tried my best not to workshop the poem but instead took each line as its individual unit. The first line of the poem reads, “The single fact is matter” (1). My immediate question was, “The single fact is matter *does what?*” Please, Bob, finish your sentences. Unfortunately for me, the confused reader, he did not want to finish them. Throughout the entire poem, Perelman chooses to cut off his sentences mid-way, leaving the reader scrambling for a resolution. The next line, “Five words can say only” (2), does not finish the

fragment above but instead begins a new thought, as do the next ninety-eight lines. Thus, each line is an unfinished moment that is completely vulnerable to my interpretation. As both the speaker and the reader of the poem, I must engage actively with the text and construct my own “mini-narratives” based on these prompts that Perelman gives me. While the reading of a language poem is largely subjective, this is not to say that language poetry severs itself from all external influences. By omitting a distinctive voice, the language poem acknowledges the larger world in which it participates, which includes social, historical, and political influences that are larger than the individual self (Bartlett 745). What a language poem does refuse to address is a fixed identity or narrative which it finds to be reductive and deterministic. For the language poets, such a poem is no different than a professor rabbit-trailing about his spring break, or as Palmer described, an average guy making a fool of himself at a coffee shop. While there may be an interesting story, there is no engagement with the audience, and where there is no engagement, there is no art.

I find such a position on workshop poetry to be a little harsh. Of course, I think that a good poem should engage the reader and stimulate creative thought, but I do not necessarily agree that a fixed identity, narrative, or idea prevents this from happening. I have read many poems that anchor themselves in specific narratives or ideas to which I respond with my own personal experiences or broader questions about the poem’s message. While a narrative poem may appear to be a simple transference of exposition from writer to reader, I think that it has the potential to be much more significant. A good story is never told for its “literal” meaning. The best stories are those which contain truths that are not only literal but also metaphorical, adding to the grand literary conversation that has existed for ages. However, I think that language poetry adds to this conversation as well by raising important questions concerning the uses of language

and especially the writer-reader relationship. How much effort should the reader invest in reading a poem? How much should the poet leave to the reader's imagination, and how much should she make clear? Language poetry suggests that the audience should have a more active role in reading poetry, and I am inclined to agree.

At first, I was a little skeptical of this language poetry genre. Maybe if I throw a random period there, cut off a word here, and then flip the whole thing upside-down, my poem will instantly become "brilliant." Fortunately, a headache is not the goal of language poetry, although this is a common side effect. More importantly, the genre has given me a new perspective on language itself, especially how it relates to storytelling. I have always assumed that language simply describes a past experience, but language can instantaneously create a new experience if the reader is willing to critically engage with the text. I believe that the language in "Chronic Meanings" has done just that, demonstrating how a sentence, idea, or narrative is not always as simple as a beginning, middle, and end. Sometimes stories and poems are schizophrenic, other times they are logical, but either way they both have the potential to be enlightening.

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Commentary

Emily Youree

“The Sound of the Koto” and Why We Should Listen to It

““**W**hat class is that for?” When I told my friends that I was reading the short stories of Higuchi Ichiyō¹, their responses were so identical that it started to strike me as odd. Each time, I replied the same way: “It’s actually not for a class!”

Higuchi’s stunning accomplishments in her short life could make any college student feel like an underachiever. She wrote in Japan in the late nineteenth century, her remarkable career spanning only four years before she died of tuberculosis at twenty-four (Danly vii). She left a legacy of twenty-one short stories, four thousand poems, and an autobiographical journal. She widely regarded as one of the most brilliant writers of the Meiji period (Danly vii). I had been considering dipping my toe into Japanese literature, and learning about this tenacious, talented young woman was the perfect catalyst for me to act upon the notion. I was surprised when most people thought that it was required reading, but upon further thought, their assumption was perfectly logical. Most of our exposure to world literature has been in an academic setting. The concept still pricked at me, though: why should foreign works be relegated to the classroom? We should not focus on world literature only when required. We should not automatically choose an American or British book over a foreign one at Barnes and Noble. I suspect that we all believe these statements, but we seem to act on them only rarely. We value world literature in theory but not in practice. How many non-English books do we read each year? How many are not for a

¹ In the traditional Japanese naming format, “Higuchi” is the author’s family name.

class? In my case, not counting Higuchi, the answer is zero. As I read Higuchi's works, I more deeply understood both why we do not read world literature and why we should.

The difficulty of context is the most immediate barrier to reading foreign literature. These works immerse us in foreign settings, use names we cannot pronounce, develop characters with thought processes that are different from ours, and craft themes that make little sense to us—a perfect recipe for literary culture shock. Moreover, world literature sprouts from cultural literary traditions with which we are unfamiliar. Higuchi draws heavily upon the centuries-old Japanese poetic tradition (about which I know nothing), and in reading her work, I often felt as if I were walking into a conversation with no knowledge of what had been said before my arrival. It was disorienting and made me question whether I should even be trying to join the conversation at all.

However, it is worth pushing through this initial confusion and frustration over context. Eventually, when I stopped trying to pick apart Higuchi's prose and simply let her speak to me, I recovered the euphoria of learning through reading. One of her early short stories, "Koto no Ne" or "The Sound of the Koto" describes a destitute "beggar boy," a ruffian whose heart only became more warped as he grew (Higuchi 180). One day, when the boy hears the haunting music of a koto² played by a solitary young woman (180), he is "reborn," "enter[ing] a world where a hundred different flowers are in bloom" (181). The story exudes the hazy aura of a fairytale: the koto's song is an otherworldly ideal, the woman a graceful heroine of the Japanese past. The boy represents Higuchi's experience with the Japanese present at the beginning of the Meiji Reformation: downtrodden and impoverished for reasons beyond his control. The present turns to its history for healing, but though the song of the past is beautiful, it is hopelessly unattainable.

² A traditional, thirteen-stringed Japanese instrument.

No history book could paint as moving a picture of Japan's tumult and longing in the face of Westernization. Despite the overwhelming slew of information and culture shock that American readers meet when reading foreign texts, these works invite us to see the world through a different lens, even if it takes our eyes some time to adjust to it.

In addition to the difficulty of context, world literature, especially pre-twentieth-century world literature, may appear to apply to our lives much less than American or British literature. However, we live in an increasingly global world: the more interconnected we become with other cultures, the more foreign literature applies to us. Furthermore, beyond the pragmatism of globalization is the simple truth that across the globe human nature remains the same. I read Higuchi's short story "Jūsan'ya" or "The Thirteenth Night" shortly after discussing Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour" in American Literature and was stunned by their similarity of thought. Higuchi's story centers around Oseki, a young wife and mother who returns to her parents' house to declare that she wants to divorce her wealthy, abusive husband. Her parents are horrified and heartbroken for their daughter, but her father convinces her to return to her husband for the sake of her young son and the benefits that her advantageous marriage has brought her family. Oseki agrees, with the chilling statement: "If I could think of myself as already dead, that would solve anything . . . [. . .] From tonight I will consider myself dead—a spirit who watches over [my son]. That way I can bear [my husband's] cruelty for a hundred years to come" (Higuchi 249). The story was published one year after Chopin wrote of another young wife who came alive at the news of her husband's death only to die upon his return. A year and an ocean apart, the two women were asking the same question: must marriage be a kind of death? Just as the questions of the old classics still apply to our lives, the questions in foreign literature are, at their roots, the same questions we ask in America.

The last major barrier to foreign literature is perhaps the most difficult to overcome: it is hard to access. Higuchi Ichiyō is one of the most revered writers of Japan and the most celebrated female author of the Meiji era (Danly vii). She is even featured on the Japanese five thousand yen note (“Bank of Japan Notes and Coins Currently Issued”). However, the English-speaking world’s knowledge of her comes almost exclusively from Robert Lyons Danly’s dual biography and collection of her works, *In the Shade of Spring Leaves*, published in 1981. Danly’s work is well researched and well written, but it is unsettling to me that the citation section of Higuchi’s Wikipedia article—and of this essay—consists almost entirely of his one biography (“Ichiyō Higuchi”). Language barriers create a funnel through which only a fraction of material can pass at a time, and American readers often have limited access to the works of foreign authors. However, limited resources are hardly an excuse for not using them at all, and the only way to remedy this lack of supply is with an increased demand. The only way around this obstacle is through it, to the literary treasures that await.

“Sonder” is a word recently coined by John Koenig, author of *The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows* (“Beautiful new words to describe obscure emotions”). It is defined as “The realization that each random passerby is living a life as vivid and complex as your own . . . an epic story that continues invisibly around you like an anthill sprawling deep underground, with elaborate passageways to thousands of other lives that you’ll never know existed . . . ” (“sonder”). Reading Higuchi’s work has instilled in me a literary sonder, an awe at the enormity of the world of literature and a helpless longing to explore at least some of the passageways I would otherwise never set foot in. It is not always easy, but as I stumble through Higuchi’s short stories I feel the familiar, childish wonder of good literature: an ocean, a century, a culture away, this brilliant writer is speaking to *me*, teaching *me*. She speaks, and I, albeit clumsily, understand. So read

Higuchi Ichiyō. Read twentieth-century Chilean poetry, read medieval Mandinka epics, read Romantic-era Russian novels, read modern Iranian graphic novels. Foreign literature is worth it.

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