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THE OSWALD Review Undergraduate Research and Criticism In the Discipline of English: Volume 1 Fall 1999

TOP



THE
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In the Discipline of English



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THE OSWALD Review

A National Journal of Undergraduate Research and Criticism in the Discipline of English

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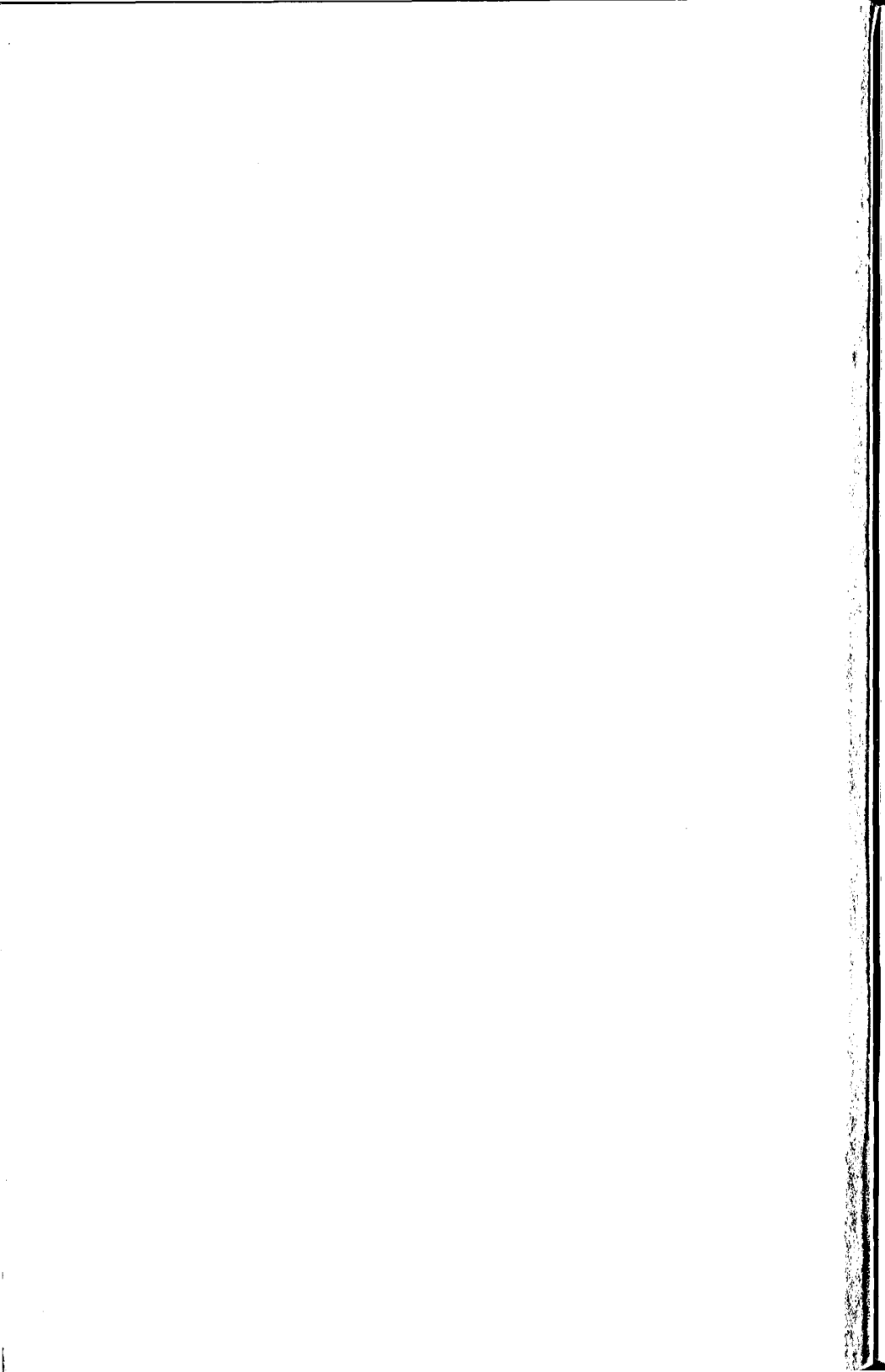
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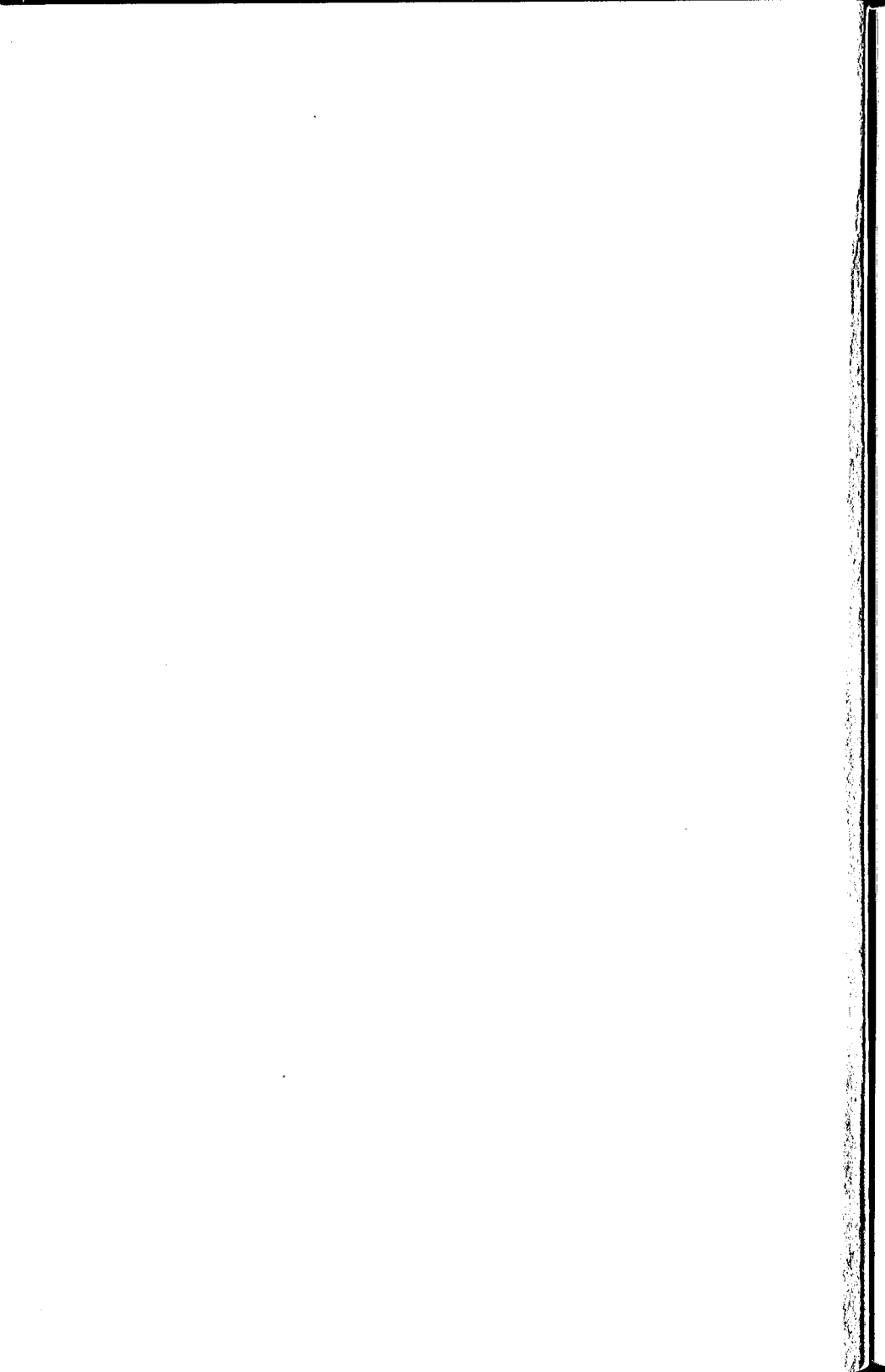
THE OSWALD *Review*

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CONTENTS:

- 1 **The Hierarchical Structure of *Beowulf***
 Aaron Sinkovich
 Mansfield University
- 8 **Noble Groping: The Franklin's
Characterization in *The Canterbury Tales***
 Jason deYoung
 Winthrop University
- 14 **Jane Eyre's Quest for Truth and Identity**
 Christina J. Inge
 University of Maryland
- 21 **An Hour of Millenium: A Representation
of the Communion Ritual in "Babette's Feast"**
 Pamela Lane
 Rollins College Brevard
- 27 **Mordecai Manuel Noah's *She Would Be a Soldier:*
An American Expression of Personal Identity**
 Jamie Smith
 Mercyhurst College
- 36 **Down and Out with Thoreau:
Reversals of Perspective and Paradox in *Walden***
 Peter Capuano
 College of the Holy Cross
- 50 **Salvation and Rebirth in
The Catcher in the Rye and *The Bell Jar***
 Erica Lawrence
 Washington University, St. Louis







The Hierarchical Structure of *Beowulf*

Aaron Sinkovich
Mansfield University

The story of *Beowulf* is usually divided into two parts: (1) *Beowulf*'s battle against Grendel and this monster's mother and (2) *Beowulf*'s battle against the dragon. This division of *Beowulf* is delineated through time as well. In the first part, *Beowulf* is in his youth; the second is a representation of *Beowulf* in his old age. In his essay "*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*," J. R. R. Tolkien articulates the nature of this division: "It is essentially a balance, an opposition of ends and beginnings. In its simplest terms it is a contrasted description of two moments in a great life, rising and setting; an elaboration of the ancient and intensely moving contrast between youth and age, first achievement and final death" (Tolkien 108). This interpretation is credible when the focus is primarily on *Beowulf*, but it assumes that the primary organizing force (and perhaps the most likely source of meaning) in *Beowulf* is *Beowulf*.

If we decenter *Beowulf* within the story, the text must be organized around a different principle. Although I still argue that the text is divided into two distinct sections, I believe the distinguishing agent which organizes these two divisions is different, and it is, in actuality, this agent that gives rise to the elements distinguishing the two divisions. This agent is the precipitating event that marks the beginning of each of the two parts and the subsequent movement of the narrative. In the first part, the event is the construction of the large mead hall, Heorot. In the second part, the event is the theft of a piece of treasure, a precious cup from a dragon's lair. These two events are vital to the story; without their presence, the story could not proceed or might proceed differently. As such, these two events are what determine the story, and they are the same in that they both represent a human disruption or provocation. In both parts, it is this initial human disruption and provocation which causes the monsters to wreak havoc.

Taking a step back, we can say that an equilibrium exists before the provocations in each part. Everything is at peace. The monsters co-exist without violence toward the people. And in both parts, they are co-existing

in what appears to be a balance. The people are above ground, and the monsters are below ground: Grendel and his mother live in a cave at the bottom of a mere, and the dragon inhabits a cave. This up/down balance represents harmony, peace, and order in the world. It is this balance that the people disrupt when they build the mead hall and steal the treasure.

Focusing on this up/down balance, we can describe the action within each division of the text as following a basic structure. This pattern is essentially *peace--human provocation--monster attacks--monster is destroyed--peace*. Since peace is characterized by an up/down dichotomy, I will analyze the movement associated with the actions of the basic plot pattern to illustrate how the up/down balance is disrupted and restored.

The first division of the story begins with peace or, more accurately, non-violence between Grendel and the Danes, until there is a precipitating event causing this equilibrium to be disrupted. This event is Hrothgar's construction of Heorot, because it is the mirth in this mead hall that causes Grendel to rise from the mere. The motion associated with this rising from the mere is upward, and, thus, the up/down balance is broken. The result is a twelve-year reign of terror during which Grendel viciously attacks the Danish people. Eventually, the hero Beowulf comes to the aid of the Danes and battles with Grendel. In the fight, the hero rips an arm from Grendel and the monster flees to his cave under the mere; the movement is downward here. Believing the monster's scourge is over, the people rejoice and celebrate. The up/down balance has been restored because Grendel is again under the mere. However, the equilibrium is upset again when Grendel's mother rises (upward movement) from the mere and attacks Heorot in revenge for her son's defeat. Although Grendel's mother returns to the mere, the hero sees that his work is not done and follows Grendel's mother (downward) into the mere where he finally destroys both monsters, preventing them from upsetting the equilibrium again. And with the monsters dead at the bottom of the mere, the up/down balance has been completely restored and peace returns to the Danes.

It is interesting to note that the hero brings the head of Grendel back to Heorot to show that the monster has been destroyed. I believe this illustrates that, although there are two monsters and two battles in the first division, the focus is on Grendel. This may account for Grendel's mother's lack of a proper name--a device which seems to deemphasize her role; she is more a part of Grendel, rather than a separate monster. With this in mind, I feel justified when I reduce the basic plot structure of each division to *peace--human provocation--monster attacks--monster is destroyed--peace*.)

The second division of the story follows the same structural pattern as the first. It starts with an equilibrium which is accompanied by peace in Beowulf's kingdom. The up/down balance consists of the Geats living above ground and a treasure-hoarding dragon living in a cave below ground. The

dragon, who has been living contently in his cave for over three hundred years, is also referred to as a "worm," further emphasizing his place below in the up/down balance. The equilibrium is broken, however, by a human disruption--the theft of a "precious" cup from the dragon's treasure. At this point, the angry dragon rises out the cave and attacks the people; the upward movement of the dragon upsets the up/down balance, and chaos replaces peace in the Geatish kingdom. Eventually the dragon is slain (brought down in a sense) and the carcass is pushed over the cliff wall and falls downward into the sea. The equilibrium is restored.

Since the monsters are referred to as being evil, it may be easy to interpret this story as the struggle of good against evil. Indeed, Tolkien expresses the general theme of this story as "man at war with the hostile world and his eventual overthrow in Time" (Sisam 116-17). However, his viewpoint, as I have said earlier, lays the primary focus on Beowulf; therefore, his death, which Tolkien sees as a defeat, becomes integral to the interpretation of the story. The "hostile world" wins in the end. Yet, the critic Kenneth Sisam in his book *The Structure of Beowulf* points out the fault in interpreting the monsters as evil: "The monsters Beowulf kills are inevitably evil and hostile because a reputation for heroism is not made by killing creatures that are believed to be harmless or beneficent—sheep for instance. So the fact that monsters are evil does not require or favour the explanation that, in the poet's design, they are symbols of evil" (116). In other words, the monsters are evil because the conventions of the heroic epic dictate that this must be. Even so, the poet may not have intended that the monsters' association with evil be interpreted as part of the thematic unity of the story, for they may symbolize something other than evil. This undermines support for the good/evil opposition. I might add that the monsters are humanized to some extent, for their "evil" comes from emotions and principles inherent in humans. These simply aren't monsters terrorizing without reason. Instead, they act from human motives. Grendel suffers from jealousy; his mother seeks revenge; and the dragon is angry because a piece of his treasure has been taken. This further breaks down the distinction that the monsters are evil and the humans are good. Perhaps, we should jettison the good/evil opposition.

The basic structure can then be reduced one step further by removing—at least for now—the distinction between monsters and humans. We are left with the structure in its most reduced form. Recalling the previous arguments, I stated the structure as *peace--human provocation--monster attacks--monster is destroyed--peace*. The pattern with the monsters and humans leveled is now transformed into *equilibrium--provocation--upheaval--suppression--equilibrium*. When the structure is analyzed, the story seems to be about the need to regain order after it is upset. Furthermore, provocation and suppression are linked because the underlying agent which causes them are the same. The story of the structure can be interpreted then as the need for

one to regain order after he upsets it. Is this the meaning of *Beowulf*?

Returning to the monsters, I am not ready to completely eradicate Grendel and the dragon. Perhaps, we should ask why the monsters belong to the bottom half of the equilibrium. Why is order maintained when the monsters are on the bottom and the humans are on the top? Since we have removed good and evil, we cannot say evil must be suppressed by good. Instead we must look elsewhere. Sisam points to another opposition proposed by Tolkien—youth and age—and its respective counterparts of strength and weakness, and shows how these two dichotomies breakdown because Beowulf, although he dies in the end, maintains his strength to kill monsters even in his old age (114-115). This breakdown suggests that the binary oppositions are faulty, and perhaps the two sets of oppositions simply shouldn't be related. Since we decentered Beowulf in the structure of the story, the youth and age dichotomy must be dismissed because it focuses on Beowulf. The strength and weakness dichotomy can stay because, although Sisam points out the immense strength of Beowulf, this dichotomy can be applied to the structure. The hero continually proves that human might is stronger than monster might. Therefore, the monsters belong to the bottom half of the equilibrium because they are weaker, and the humans belong to the top half because they are stronger.

This strong/weak opposition is a salient feature of *Beowulf*. It is an opposition which defines the most important ideal of warrior society—the thane/king relationship (Abrams et al. 23). This dichotomy is based on strength and weakness. The king is stronger than the thanes which he retains, but there is a mutual respect between the two: the thanes serve the king, and the king rewards them for their loyalty and service. It is a dichotomy that produces order within society. The stronger dominate the weaker. Likewise, the humans dominate the monsters. In fact, the strength of Beowulf is probably the outstanding reason for his rise to kingship. And because the stronger must dominate the weaker, it is fitting that Wiglaf believes the Geats will be attacked by the surrounding nations when Beowulf dies because this death makes the kingdom weaker.

In relation to the previously outlined structure, the equilibrium is then characterized by a strong/weak opposition. Naturally, the strong counterpart takes the upper position, and the weak counterpart takes the lower position. Perhaps, we should then describe the equilibrium as a hierarchy. It is this hierarchical balance which creates order. In *Beowulf*, the monsters cannot take the top position in the equilibrium and live above land because they are weaker; thus, they are exiled to live below ground, and thus, hierarchical order is maintained. And as with most uprisings within hierarchical societies, the weaker component usually rises up against the stronger because the stronger has provoked them, normally through its power. Similarly, the provocation within the basic structure of *equilibrium--provocation--upheaval--sup-*

pression--equilibrium can be described as a provocative use of power by the stronger component. In both cases—the construction of Heorot and the theft of the cup—the precipitating events by the stronger component are embodied in a use of power which, whether intentional or not, provokes the weaker to rise up. When the weaker breaks the equilibrium and hierarchy, strong and weak clash, resulting in disorder. The order will not return until the weaker counterpart is suppressed and returns to its place in the hierarchy. We are then left with the story of how hierarchies unravel and restore themselves.

As the main character, Beowulf brings unity to this story of hierarchies. He connects the two divisions of the text. But more importantly, Beowulf continually maintains the hierarchies within the narrative. When Grendel and the dragon leave their place in the hierarchy, Beowulf destroys the monsters and restores the hierarchy. He is the agent that always suppresses upheaval. We should also note that, although Beowulf restores order, he is not the source of the disruption which caused upheaval in the system: Beowulf did not build Heorot or steal the cup. Rather, Beowulf knows his place in the hierarchy. He does not disrupt it but seeks to preserve it. As the strongest man alive, he could easily usurp the kings Hrothgar and Hygelac. However, Beowulf remains constant in his place within the established hierarchy. Given his propensity for upholding hierarchies, Beowulf can be seen as an ultimate embodiment of the hierarchical order affirmed within the structure.

So far I have illustrated that the up/down movement of *Beowulf* illustrates the hierarchical structure of the narrative where the stronger dominate the weaker. However, this structural pattern emphasizes other hierarchies within the text. As I have said earlier, the monsters are driven to leave their place in the hierarchy by what we can consider human motives—jealousy, revenge, and anger. These can be considered all the same in that they represent emotions. In contrast, the monsters are repressed by the outstanding responsibility or duty of the king to protect his people from harm. If we classify these two elements within the up/down structure, we can say that emotion takes the lower position and duty takes the higher position. It is just as easy to see the up/down movement in terms of duty and emotion, where duty is trying to maintain precedence over emotion. Like the strong-over-weak hierarchy, the duty-over-emotion hierarchy is reflected in the structure as something that creates order within warrior society.

Another hierarchy creating order emerges when we examine the numbers of those involved in the top and bottom positions of structure. In the bottom position, the monsters act as individuals, fulfilling their personal desires when attacking the Danes and Geats. However, the top position of the hierarchy represents the group, for Beowulf's repression of the monsters benefits all the Danes and Geats: it is something that everyone desires in order to regain peace. And in the end, the group triumphs over the individual, for the monsters are destroyed. Thus, the structure suggests the precedence of the

group over the individual.

If we view these different hierarchies—strong over weak, duty over emotion, group over individual—along a continuum, we begin to see that the up/down movement of the structure illustrates not only a hierarchy of power, but also a hierarchical system of values in the story. The character of Beowulf can be seen as an extension of this hierarchical structure, for his behavior always adheres to these various hierarchies which order life. Appropriately, the text emphasizes Beowulf's exemplary conduct by utilizing the up/down movement of the basic plot structure, for when Beowulf conquers the dragon as his last heroic deed, the news of his accomplishment is carried up to a cliff top and announced to the city. And when Beowulf dies, the text says that the funeral pyre was to have a high barrow appropriate to Beowulf's deeds. The Geats are even described as building a high monument on a promontory to commemorate Beowulf. These "high" references in regard to Beowulf further suggest the importance of the hierarchies illustrated by the up/down movement of structure and the preference for the values along the top half of the continuum since it is these values that Beowulf demonstrates.

To maintain peace and harmony within society, the need for order is paramount. The various hierarchies illustrated by the structure are the source of order for society in this story.

After deemphasizing Beowulf in *Beowulf* and looking closely at the up/down movement of the structure, we have seen how hierarchy of strong over weak was unraveled and restored. Now, after illustrating the existence of other hierarchies within the structure, we can say that analyzing the structure leads to this assertion: disrupting or breaking the hierarchies which order society will result in chaos and destruction that can only be suppressed when the hierarchies are restored. This seems to be the underlying message of *Beowulf* buried in the structure. And although Beowulf is the great hero of this story, he is only great because he is a reflection of the hierarchies established in the structure for ordering life within society.

At the outset, I stated that J. R. R. Tolkien describes the structure of *Beowulf* as essentially a balance. If we look at Beowulf the hero, this may be so; but even then, it has been shown that the binary oppositions which characterize this proposition are in some ways faulty. However, when we look at *Beowulf* the story, the structure may be better described as a hierarchy, with the structure's movement between top and bottom illustrating the strong and weak components that exist and struggle within hierarchies. Indeed, the up/down movement of the structure reveals that there are many hierarchies present within the text which contribute to the search for meaning in *Beowulf*. Consequently, it is the hierarchical nature of the structure that should be emphasized rather than the balance.

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Noble Groping: The Franklin's Characterization in *The Canterbury Tales*

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Chaucer's characterization of the Franklin is quite complex and multifaceted, seeming to contradict itself. In the General Prologue (GP) the Franklin's presentation is lovable, the perfect drinking buddy, but during the interlude between his own tale and the Squire's Tale (SqT) his presentation is negative. The Franklin appears subservient, groping at nobility. The contradiction would appear to be another casualty of Chaucer's unfinished masterpiece. I believe, however, the contradiction does not exist, that we are too far removed from Chaucer's time and his academic studies to realize what he is doing from the start. There are no incongruities in the Franklin's character if we look at the subtle details.

In the General Prologue, Chaucer purposely juxtaposes the Franklin's gleeful and insatiable life with that of the stoic Sergeant of the Law, who is clouded in a fog of reticence. For the reader, the Franklin is presented as the better of the two; the Franklin is relaxed, willing to share; he's friendly and open. The descriptions of the Sergeant keep the reader out: the Sergeant is an impenetrable and flawless character:

His purchasyng myghte nat been infect. Nowher so bisy a man as he
ther nas, And yet he semed bisier than he was. n termes hadde he caas
and doomes alle That from the tyme of Kyng William were yfalle.
Therto he koude endite and make a thyng, Ther koude no wight pynche
at his writyng. (Chaucer GP ll.320 - 326)

These lines lock us out of the Sergeant's true character. We know solely that he is knowledgeable of the cases and judgments of England since William the First, that his contracts are unbreakable, and that his dress is simple and unassuming: "medlee cote,/Girt with a ceint of silk"(GP ll.328-29).

Therefore when we read the Franklin's description, it's as if the carnival has come to a factory town: the drab of the Sergeant succumbs to the Franklin's ruddy visage. The first and second lines of the Franklin's introduction commence this feeling of warmth and good times: "Whit was his berd as is the dayesye;/ Of his complexioun he was sangwyn" (GP II. 332-33). If there are more important lines of the Franklin's character, I do not recall them. For modern readers, especially Americans, these two lines are reminiscent of Santa Claus, which creates nostalgia of jolliness and giving (Donaldson 87). The educated medieval reader would have received a similar, yet slightly different reading. According to Muriel Bowden, in her book *A Commentary on the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales*, the educated medieval audience would have been familiar with the *Secreta Secretorum*, a primitive, medieval medical text used during Chaucer's day. The book details, among other things, descriptions of a person with a 'sangwyn' disposition:

The sangywe by kynde should lowe Ioye and laughynge, and company of woman and moche slepe and syngynge: he shal be hardy y-nowe, of good will and wythout malice: he shalbe flesshy, his complexcion shalbe light to hurte and to empeyre for his tendyrnesse, he shall have a good stomake, good dygescion, and good delyverance... he shall be fre and lyberall, of farye semblaunt. (174)

Also Walter Curry in his book, *Chaucer and the Mediaeval Sciences*, defines a man controlled by blood as "hot and moist, after the nature of air" (10). These descriptions, then, help to explain the rest of the Franklin's preliminary characterization in the General Prologue. That is to say, the medieval reader, or listener, understood why the Franklin was presented as such a "good times fellow," why he required "the morwe...sop in wyn" (GP I. 334), and why he was so hospitable, compared to *Seint Julian*, the patron saint of hospitality, and had "ful many a fat partrich... in muwe" (GP I.349).

I go through this comparison to show why we latch on to the Franklin. Not since the Friar's description, in the General Prologue, have we had such a tantalizing character; we feel a closeness to him, as he has a warmth and charm not presented in any other character. He is a human character. But Chaucer says something subtle during the introductory block of the Franklin's characterization: "For he was Epicurus owene sone" (GP I. 336). This brief descriptive statement may have, for many medieval scholars with a devotion to Boethius, stopped the Franklin's party.

Epicurus, an infamous Athenian philosopher, taught that man's natural aim was pleasure, sought through philosophical discussion and reasoning. But where things get confused is Epicurus' belief that all wisdom and culture has its roots in the "pleasure of the stomach" (Russell 243). He maintained

that the pleasures of the mind are the contemplation of the pleasures of the body, mainly seeking the absence of pain. Epicurus went further by developing a dichotomy of pleasure: *dynamic* pleasure was the achievement of an "desired end," but had pain involved; *static* pleasure existed on a plane of "equilibrium," resulting in the desired end, but without pain (Russell 244). Epicurus preached the second type of pleasure, which sought a middle ground of existence, advocating, therefore, moderation in its truest sense. This philosophy, however, has been viewed as hedonistic, misconstrued as gluttonous and foul, a philosophical disaster and seen by many as contradictory to Aristotelian 'moderation.' The misconception that Epicurianism sought only secular pleasures (especially food) wears well on the Franklin, given his characterization. Therefore, when Chaucer says the Franklin "was Epicurus ownene sone," we don't even raise an eyebrow--but we should.

Chaucer was a great admirer of Boethius, translating his work and placing many of his philosophies in the *Canterbury Tales*. Therefore, if we look in Boethius' work, searching for ideas connected to the Franklin, we find something interesting. In *The Consolation of Philosophy*, the Muse of Philosophy tells Boethius that soon after the unjust death of Socrates, "the mobs of Epicureans and Stoics and the others each did all they could to seize for themselves the inheritance of wisdom that he left. As part of their plunder they tried to carry me off, but I fought and struggled, and in the fight the robe was torn which I had woven with my own hands" (Boethius 39). According to the Muse, these plunderers believed they had achieved true philosophy, but actually they had only a swatch of her robe (Boethius 39). Chaucer, in his *Boece*, translates the Latin as the Epicureans had "perverted" philosophy (Chaucer 820). Chaucer surreptitiously places the subtle description of Epicurus being the father of the Franklin as foreshadowing, for with this remark, Chaucer brands the Franklin as suspect. From this point we, the readers, should be wary of the Franklin's possible attempt to pervert an established unit, just as the Epicureans attempted destruction of "true" philosophy.

This brings me to the Franklin's second type of characterization: the presentation through narration, beginning at the end of the Squire's Tale. The Franklin praises the Squire on a fine tale, "wel yquit and gentilly" (SqT l. 674). Note the word playing a heavy role in this interlude is *gentilly*, which carries a definition of "noble rank or birth, belonging to the gentry; having the character or manner prescribed by the ideals of chivalry" ("Gentil"). This degree of medieval class, some critics believe, the Franklin does not have (Semblan 136). Some scholars, such as R. H. Hilton, place the Franklin "among the country gentry," while others see the Franklin as insecure of his social position (Smebler 137 & 133). If this reading is true then the Franklin is possibly one step below gentry or perhaps, as R. M. Luminasy paraphrases

Professor Kittredge, "a rich freeholder, not quite within the pale of gentry, [but] the kind of man from whose ranks the English nobility has been constantly recruited" (Lumiansky 184). Therefore, if we take this interpretation, the evidence of his wishing to rise is easily found. The Franklin's high praise of the Squire's disjointed tale, and his comparison between his son and the Squire is one example. The Franklin says of his son,

I have a sone, and by the Trinitee, I hadde levere than
twenty pound worth lond, Though it right now were fallen
in myn hond, He were a man of swich discrecioun
As that ye been. (SqT ll. 682 - 86)

The Franklin, of course, is trying to appeal to the 'yong' Squire, whose father is the worthy 'knyght.' The knight's social ranking could help the Franklin attain the social standing of nobility or gentility, and he continues this flattery until he is reprimanded.

Here begins the problem: the earlier description, excluding the Epicurean subtlety, shows the Franklin as confident, a man who had held many important positions-- "knyght of the shire," and "a shirreve and a contour" (G P ll. 355 & 360). Everything about him seems to point towards gentry, including his dagger and "a gipser al of silk" (Bowden 176). How do we reconcile these powerful positions to the Franklin's later characterization as a man bent on class mobility? To do this, we return to the Muse of Philosophy: the Epicureans thought they had found true philosophy through only a rip of her robe; the Franklin is tearing at the clothes of the nobility, battling for their status of gentry, attempting at what Kittredge calls founding a lineage (Lumiansky 184). Yet the Franklin ostensibly comes up short: "'Straw for youre gentillesse!' quod oure Hoost" (SqT 695). Therefore, we can see the Franklin's portrait as satire: like the Epicureans, the Franklin has not only his literal appetite for food, but also a gluttonous, symbolic appetite for superior social standing. We see this particular Franklin having a strong desire for advancement, unhappy with the respected positions of knight of the shire, sheriff, and contour. The Franklin has swallowed these occupations in hopes of achieving the ranking of a noble title.

On first reading, at a superficial level and without knowledge of Boethius, there seems to be a glaring contradiction in the Franklin's characterization, causing a slight uneasiness in the reader: a great poet such as Chaucer had created this obvious discrepancy. I have tried to show that Chaucer from the start knew what he was doing, selecting the name Epicurus to create a juxtaposition with the Franklin, which erudite readers would identify as a subtle technique used early to present the Franklin as an obvious hypocrite and glutton. Chaucer understood that some of his readers would catch the finespun reference, while others would not, and, therefore, the

contradiction would remain. Through his use of Epicurus, however, he allusively explains the Franklin's character.

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Jane Eyre's Quest for Truth and Identity

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Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre* contains, in its opening pages, what is arguably one of the most remarkable confrontations in British literature. Young Jane resists the abusive treatment of her cousin John Reed, who is older and far more powerful, physically and especially socially, than she can ever be. John's eventual physical attack on Jane is "provoked" by her assertion that he is "like a murderer . . . like a slave-driver . . . like the Roman emperors!" (5). This negative description of her cousin reflects reality as the girl sees it. Her reality, though, is not recognized in the Reed household. By giving voice to her version of reality nonetheless, Jane is actively resisting the oppression she faces in the household. As punishment for her act of resistance, the eponymous heroine is confined to the frightful "red room" (5-14). This opening confrontation sets the stage for what will be the central struggle of the work. Jane's struggle to make her voice heard and to express the truth of her own experience.

Jane Eyre is very much the product of the specific time and place in which it was written, an environment in which a woman, especially an economically disadvantaged one, has to struggle greatly so that she might speak of her own vision of reality. According to the critic Maggie Berg, *Jane Eyre* reflects the contradictory nature of Victorian society, a society that was in transition, and one in which people were forced to discover new ways of finding and defining identity. The world that Charlotte Brontë inhabited was rife with dichotomies. While some women agitated for greater rights, society as a whole exalted the image of the saintly, self-sacrificing woman, happily confined to the home. While laws were passed to alleviate some of the appalling conditions to which many people, especially women and children, were subjected to in factories, poverty remained rife even among certain people, such as clergymen and governesses, who were engaged in professions that required a fair amount of education. That these social contradictions

manifested themselves in the author's own life has long been known. That much of her work is at least partly autobiographical is also known. These truisms are part of the Brontë myth. Although it would be a mistake to assume, as did one early critic, Mrs. Humprey Ward, that "Charlotte Brontë is Jane Eyre . . . you cannot think of her apart from what she has written" (qtd. in Levy 4), it is logical to assume that experience is essential to the creation of fiction, and that Brontë's work is no exception (Levy 1-5). It is quite a supportable proposition that, extraordinary though the specific events of Jane Eyre's story may be, the emotional reality of oppression and the struggle for identity that her story depicts is representative of the emotional reality of many Victorian women's lives. Virginia Woolf's belief that Brontë's work was decisively influenced by her experience as a nineteenth-century woman appears to be true, even if her assertion that this influence was highly negative, because "her imagination swerved from indignation" (76) may not be.

Jane Eyre, like many women in her time, is economically devalued and socially marginalized, largely because of her gender, but also because of her lack of an independent source of wealth. Living in a society in which she has few options for earning a living when she is obliged to do so, and in which women are considered inferior to men, she faces a considerable struggle to survive physically and psychologically. She faces perhaps an even greater struggle to be acknowledged as an equal by men and by persons of both sexes whose social status is above hers. Moreover, as a member of an oppressed class of persons, she faces a culture that does not generally reflect or even acknowledge her experience.

At Gateshead, her early mental development is influenced by the tales told to her by the servant Bessie and her own readings of such works as *Gulliver's Travels*. The fairy tales present her with conventional images of passive femininity, meant to condition young women to seek socially advantageous, idealized marriages, the usual fate of the fairy-tale heroine. Jane's own reading, in contrast, present her with masculine images of independence and adventure. These images influence her, even as she learns that expectations fed by fairy tales are neither practical nor fulfilling (Rowe 70-77). The truth of Jane's life is far from paradigms. She cannot and will not become a passive fairy tale heroine, but a masculine life of independence is neither practicable for a woman in her time, nor is its emotional isolation truly fulfilling. Thus, Jane cannot rely on conventional concepts and imagery to define herself.

However, others do attempt to define her in terms of conventional images. Mrs. Reed and her household view Jane very much as the stereotypical penniless orphan, who should be humble, meek, and grateful to her kindly benefactors. Even the maid, Miss Abbot, feels the need to tell her that:

You ought not to think yourself on an equality with the Misses Reed and Master Reed, because missus kindly allows you to be brought up with them. They will have a great deal of money and you will have none: it is your place to be humble, and to try to make yourself agreeable to them. (6)

That Jane refuses to conform to this image signifies to the Reeds some form of depravity. Rochester, too, although he loves and admires her, wishes in some ways to remake her in the image of an ideal wife. For instance, he attempts to coerce her into conformity to traditional concepts of female beauty by dressing her elaborately.

Jane is thus threatened repeatedly by various forms of oppression. A key aspect of this oppression involves pressure placed on her to conform to standard roles and to identify with the roles which others would have her assume. Such pressure is a direct threat to the integrity of her true self.

Jane's primary weapon for defeating the economic and gender-based oppression she encounters in order to maintain the strength and integrity of her identity is her voice. More specifically, it is her dogged insistence on using her voice to express the truth of her experience that helps her to resist.

Rosemarie Bodenheimer suggests that, while at Gateshead, Jane uses her voice to defend herself against the oppression and cruelty of the Reeds. She struggles to assert the "truth of her character" and verbally attacks Mrs. Reed as a means of self-defense (157). There is more, however, to Jane's use of her voice than this. Although she is too young to articulate or even understand the full ramifications of her situation, her verbal outbursts are more than the efforts of a child to protest or fend off cruel treatment. They also represent the use of truth as a weapon that the weak and disempowered can employ against their oppressors. Throughout the novel, speaking the truth is often Jane's only form of defense.

Nor are her later assertions of the truth, as Bodenheimer suggests, entirely the efforts of an author/protagonist to tell the story of her experience in a manner that is consistent with authenticity and accuracy (155-167). When Jane writes, "I dared commit no fault; I strove to fulfill every duty; and I was termed naughty and tiresome, sullen and sneaky" (Brontë 9), she is describing a situation in which those with power over her are in control of what is recognized as the "truth of her character" and her circumstances. It is to this situation that she must respond by asserting the truth as she knows it. This pattern is repeated at Thornfield. Rochester initially permits her to be frank with him (Bodenheimer 159), but when the two become engaged, he begins to try to dress her lavishly in an attempt to transform her into an ideal wife: decorative and obedient. He thus attempts to subvert and ultimately control her identity, thereby effectively silencing her (Brontë 252-257). Bodenheimer suggests that he is attempting to involve her as a character in his

own fantasy world, as indeed he is (164-166). However, this attempt has more to do with his desire to compel her conformity to a traditional gender role than with his desire to shape reality.

Indeed, as the couple set out for Millcote to buy Jane her new clothes, the dynamics between them begin to change. Jane reflects: "I half lost the sense of power over him. I was about mechanically to obey him, without further remonstrance . . ." (252). She does not mechanically obey Rochester, but it is a near thing. Rochester, for his part, speaks of his future "possession" of his fiancée: "I mean shortly to claim you-- your thoughts, conversation, and company-- for life" (252).

These incidents, in which Jane's resistance falters, are temporary moments of conformity. Her resistance remains strong, and perhaps can even be said to become stronger as she recoils from her lapses in strength. After the shopping episode at Millcote, she becomes "determined to show [Rochester] divers rugged points in [her] character" (259), ostensibly to be fair and give him a chance to break the engagement. Yet it becomes clear that her actual agenda is to remedy the power imbalance within the relationship. Again, by expressing aspects of her nature deemed rugged (i.e., not socially acceptable for a woman), she seeks to induce Rochester to acknowledge the truth of her character as she sees and expresses it. To recognize her true self would be to cede her considerable power. Rochester, although in some ways vexed by Jane's intransigence, is also partly relieved by this chance at release from standard gender roles:

He was kept, to be sure, rather cross and crusty; but on the whole I could see he was excellently entertained, and that a lamb-like submission and turtle-dove sensibility, while fostering his despotism more, would have pleased his judgment, satisfied his common sense, and even suited his taste less. (260)

Her power struggle with Rochester by necessity involves less than transparent behavior. Yet her attempt to assert power within the relationship is grounded in her assertion of "the truth of her character."

Jane thus resists Rochester's efforts at domination, declaring that she will not "stand in the stead of a seraglio," and indeed would, if he were to acquire one, "go out as a missionary to them that are enslaved--your harem inmates among the rest" (Brontë 255-256). Here again, she speaks the truth in order to resist a more powerful individual's attempt to oppress her by obliging her to conform to a standard role and thereby deny the truth of her own identity. However, despite having once said, "I am a free human being with an independent will" (240), she comes close to losing that will by permitting Rochester to choose her clothes, those important outward symbols of identity, for her. Despite her efforts to resist his domination, he is too

powerful by virtue of his stronger social position. She cannot ultimately be stronger than he is until he has been weakened and she strengthened.

She escapes from Rochester's impending domination when she flees Thornfield. During her sojourn with the Rivers siblings, she acquires a fortune and a family, the two things she needs in order to have a place of her own in society. This sojourn, although in some ways a detour in the plot, is more than a convenient means of providing her with these necessities. Rather, this segment of the work illuminates many important aspects of the novel's themes. For instance, Jane does not face oppression in this environment, and as a consequence she does not need to speak out about her experience as a means of resistance. Eventually acquiring a fairly independent existence as a schoolteacher, she does not even have to explain who she is. Even so, however, she must ultimately employ the truth in order to remain free.

As at Thornfield, she faces domination by a potential husband. Like Rochester, St. John Rivers is a man who is not willing to face the truth of his own existence, let alone Jane's. Refusing to acknowledge such truths is linked with oppression throughout the novel. St. John's offer of marriage and a life as a missionary is somewhat attractive to her. Although it would be difficult, it would provide her with a purpose in life. However, it would also mean submission to St. John.

His offer of a marriage of convenience would entail deceit, for the couple would be married in outward appearance only. This deceitful arrangement would be inextricably linked to Jane's loss of identity. And loss of identity would lead to loss of freedom:

As [St. John's] curate . . . I should still have my unblighted self to turn to: my natural unenslaved feelings. . . . There would be recesses in my mind which would be only mine, to which he never came; and sentiments growing there, free and sheltered, which his austerity could never blight . . . But as his wife--at his side always, and always restrained, and always checked--forced to keep the fire of my nature continually low . . . this would be unbearable. (389)

Jane must reject this arrangement by confronting St. John with her reality. He is reluctant to accept this reality, but she continues to resist until he does.

Finally, revealing the truth of her identity quite literally provides her with the money and status that make her "an independent woman," (416) able to live on her own terms. When she proves to be the long-sought heir (an interesting pun on her name), she claims the material rights that have always belonged to her. But more importantly, she always claims the human rights that are due her, regardless of her social status.

Thus, Jane Eyre finds better weapons to use in fighting to preserve her

personal integrity than “silence, exile, and cunning” (Joyce 247). For silence and cunning, she substitutes voice and frankness. Although she does briefly choose exile as a defensive weapon, she returns from it when she gains the means to coexist peacefully with Rochester and the world as a whole, secure in her identity and free to tell her truths and have them be heard.

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An Hour of Millennium: A Representation of the Communion Ritual in “Babette’s Feast”

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American readers were the fortunate recipients of Isak Dinesen’s tale “Babette’s Feast” when it first appeared in *The Ladies Home Journal* in 1950. Biographer Judith Thurman tells of the challenge that inspired Dinesen to write for the American market. Her British friend, Geoffrey Gorer, bet that she she could not write something that would be accepted by *The Saturday Evening Post*. He encouraged her to “write about food . . . Americans are obsessed about food.” The result of the wager was “Babette’s Feast,” which was, by the way, rejected by *The Saturday Evening Post*. *Good Housekeeping* likewise turned it down, and it was only reluctantly published by *The Ladies Home Journal* (329).

Two years later, a Danish booksellers’ organization honored Dinesen for her extremely inexpensive pocket-sized edition of the story, “which she had hoped people would buy and send as a sort of Christmas card” (Thurman 374). This work with a humble beginning became a huge success. It was adapted for film in 1987 by Gabriel Axel and was later honored with an Oscar for best foreign film. Both the story and the film still receive world-wide attention as the tale continues to elucidate a surfeit of significance.

Since Dinesen did not claim to be a Christian, it is interesting that “Babette’s Feast” is so rich in biblical symbolism. Isak Dinesen (pseudonym of Karen Blixen) was raised by Unitarians and claimed to have been mostly affected by Mohammedans, but she had an enormous interest in Christian theology at the time she wrote the story. She organized several “theological dinners,” including among the guests a Catholic priest, a Lutheran pastor, and several other Christian church authorities. Dinesen searched to understand the concept of the faith, but never claimed to have a “real understanding in a connected sense” (qtd. in Thurman 374).

Humor is predominant in Dinesen’s tales. Thurman notes that “Babette’s

Feast" was "one of Isak Dinesen's most deft and exquisite comedies" (329-30). However, the comic element is somewhat unusual in this particular story. According to Dinesen, humor "is an affirmation and acceptance of life in all its forms, the opposite of rebellion." It is a way of saying "yes to life, an acceptance of whatever fate will bring." Dinesen loved humor and considered all tales to have a vein of comic spirit. It allowed her to accept what could not be explained, including the "strange kind of reliance on the grace of God," a concept that she never seemed to embrace (qtd. in Johannesson 51-53).

Nevertheless at her "theological dinners," Dinesen was obviously influenced by the conversation, especially that of the sacramentalist Catholic priest, because "Babette's Feast" is replete with reflections of the sacred meal of the Mass (Beck 213). The tale transcends the tangible and conveys the spiritual through culinary communication, creating a masterful allegory of the Lord's Supper, a precursor of the Wedding Supper of the Lamb as depicted in Revelation 19:9. Dinesen's talent for portraying abstractions lies in her ability to metamorphose weighty concepts into magical tales. In "Babette's Feast," she limns us with a representation of Christ embodied in the person of Babette Hersant.

In the story, Babette finds herself alone as a result of the short, but violent, French Civil War in the late 19th century, her family's involvement with the Commune of Paris having left her widowed and childless. From the beginning, Babette suffers for her position. In her own country, she is a radical who stands up for the Rights of Man and is subsequently persecuted, and in asylum, she resides as an alien. Despite her circumstances, Babette is nevertheless equipped to persevere and obviously destined for a higher purpose. She travels from her home in France to the foreign land of Norway and enlightens the people of Berlevaag who are pious and religious, but abysmally unfamiliar with the nature of the God they claim to serve. Babette's humble arrival at the home of Martine and Philippa, the daughters of the town Dean, parallels Christ's arrival in Jerusalem just prior to His death. As a Christ-type, Babette becomes a savior of people and a catalyst for miraculous mercy.

It is fitting that Babette the savior would double as an artist. In an essay published in 1963, Ann Gossman sees in Dinesen's work a "pattern of destiny against which the individual must search for his identity." Gossman observes that this search is evident in some of Dinesen's earlier stories, a theme that she portrays through sacramental imagery. In search of her identity, the artist Babette longs to find an audience to which she can express her talent. In order to reveal the sacred quality of the relationship between the artist and the audience, Gossman notes that "Dinesen makes use of imagery that suggests the Communion service" (319).

The townspeople of Berlevaag religiously renounce the pleasures of the

world and believe that asceticism is the key to their salvation. Dinesen satirizes what Gossman calls the "ethical blindness" of the townspeople—essentially an "egotism that underlies their charity" (324). In this setting, Dinesen portrays the belief promoted in the New Testament that righteousness is naught unless the Spirit is interjected into the deed. Babette prepares the table at which this realization occurs to her Danish friends. Her winnings in the French lottery enable her to prepare exotic gustatory delights that her peers had repudiated for religious reasons. Through these foods, the people of Berlevaag share in a mystical communion and are transformed by its magic, if only for a short while. Consequently, Babette the artist has found an audience at which her "utmost" can be expressed.

Animal imagery was commonly implemented in the Bible as a semiotic tool to explain the abstract. Dinesen's experiences in Africa created in her a fondness for this technique, and "Babette's Feast" provided an appropriate setting for it to be employed (Johannesson 40).¹ Turtle soup terrifies Babette's dinner guests, in part because they had vowed to adhere to an abstemious diet. But surely it is significant that the turtle, the main ingredient of the soup, was an unclean animal according to Old Testament law. Just as the apostle Paul declares all foods appropriate for consumption in Romans 14:14, Babette presents the turtle to her guests, signifying that their redemption is not connected to their rituals.²

Among Babette's guests, significantly numbering twelve, is General Lorens Loewenhielm. He had been a guest at the table of the Dean many years before, communing with him and his two daughters in their usual meager celebration of piety. Loewenhielm was hopelessly attracted to one of the sisters, but because of his shyness, he failed to win her heart. He consequently "shook the dust" off his riding boots and departed to fulfill great ambitions.³ After many years of traveling the world and feasting at the tables of kings, Loewenhielm realizes that he is incomplete. In a search for a meaning to his life, he returns to his first love, the beautiful Martine.⁴ The General describes his pursuits as pyrrhic victories that had failed to profit his spirit. As he passes a mirror in the two sisters' home, he laments the vain reflection it offers. Likewise Matthew 16:26 warns, "What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?"

General Loewenhielm's soul is nourished at Babette's dinner, which is reminiscent of those she prepared at Café Anglais years before in Paris. Dinesen describes Babette's craft as a "love affair of the noble and the romantic category in which one no longer distinguishes between bodily and spiritual appetite or satiety" (Dinesen 166). Each course of her meal further connects her twelve dinner guests to each other and also to the Spirit of God. But most importantly, it is the wine, like the blood of Christ, that causes this connection to occur.

The evening proceeds with the general's prophetic announcement of the

infinite nature of divine grace. Because the people of Berlevaag had remained spiritually immature, they found themselves trapped in a web of disputes. As they are touched by the spirit of the wine, they begin to forgive each other of past transgressions. For the first time, they experience perfect love as described in First Corinthians.⁵ Their anger subsides, and they erase the "record of wrongs" they had noted for so many years. They confess to each other and are forgiven. Through the wine they had forbidden to themselves for so long, "grace [had] chosen to manifest itself" (Dinesen 165).

As the people of Berlevaag are immersed in the Spirit of God, snow baptizes their town. They rejoice in the new life they are given and frolick in the snow, "gamboling like little lambs." With their "sins washed white as wool," they join hands and sing blessings to each other and become a real church, the future bride of Christ (Dinesen 169). Their engagement for the spiritual marriage is consummated with a feast, a communion of bread and wine.

Significant to the sacrificial meal is the host, which Dinesen appropriately chose to represent with quail. During the Israelites' "wandering" through the desert, God miraculously supplied quail from the heavens to the Jewish community to ease their hunger, and noted to Moses that because of the miracle, "Then you will know that I am the Lord your God." When the Israelites saw the quail, they asked Moses what it was. He said to them, "It is the bread the Lord has given you to eat" (Exod. 16:12-15). Bread is also symbolic of Jesus, who called himself "the living bread that came down from heaven" (John 6:51). The well-chosen entrée that Babette presents to her guests was also bread, the host in the form of quail. The "*cailles*" were appropriately prepared "*en sarcophage*." What better way to represent the Eucharist than with a derivative of the word "sarcophagus," which literally means "flesh eater."

It is appropriate that Dinesen chose France as the home of Berlevaag's savior since France was the home of frustration and revolution, where bread was the only thing that stood between life and death. Because bread is a symbol of Christ's sacrifice, the Eucharistic minister who presents it represents Christ. Babette, the Celebrant, is conspicuously absent from the table, but obviously in control of the liturgical action. Like Christ, it is her sacrifice that makes the communion possible. Also paralleling Christ's sacrifice, Babette's guests fail to appreciate the person who gave everything so that they could have life. Heroically in the end, Babette forgives those who had caused her suffering, including the French general who executed her husband and son. All are pardoned, and new life begins as Berlevaag becomes the "New Jerusalem" for which they had longed as they savor "one hour of the millennium" (Dinesen 169).

Karen Blixen herself was no stranger to suffering, and her work reflects her experiences through which she sought to derive answers to philosophical

questions. Blixen expressed in the pages of her writings the issues she pondered, with her work evidencing her great debate. It is ironic that the woman who concluded that Christianity was “a disease caught from the tradition of dualism” (Thurman 338) would reveal so beautifully in “Babette’s Feast” the most salient tenets of the faith.

End Notes

¹ Karen Blixen married Baron Bror Blixen-Finecke and traveled to Africa with him, where she spent nearly twenty years among exotic animals. Her years there are recorded in *Out of Africa*, her memoirs.

² Paul writes, “I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself.”

³ To the Jews of the Old Testament, dust symbolized sorrow. Shaking the dust off their feet represented the decision to move on and put their sorrows behind them. In Matthew 10:14, Jesus advised His disciples: “If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake the dust off your feet when you leave that home or town.”

⁴ In Revelation 2:4, John encourages his readers to return to their first love, the love they had for Christ.

⁵ The apostle Paul writes in I Corinthians 13:4-6, “Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.”

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Mordecai Manuel Noah's
*She Would Be a Soldier: An American
Expression of Personal Identity*

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Books which imitate or represent the thoughts and life of Europe do not constitute an American literature. Before such can exist, an original idea must animate this nation and fresh currents of life must call into life fresh thoughts along its shores

Margaret Fuller
Woman in the Nineteenth Century

Throughout the nineteenth century, Americans struggled to find a national identity separate from that of Great Britain. Expressing different thoughts, beliefs and values through the venue of literature was one way that the nation tried to gain its independence. Mordecai Manuel Noah, a Jewish playwright of the 1800s, created his "American" drama by writing plays that reflect and critique public notions about human conduct and society in order to both counter and confirm incipient American stereotypes. Instead of merely imitating the European, and specifically, the British styles and subject matters of literature, Noah brought "fresh thoughts" to the "new" nation by writing some "of the earliest dramatic presentations of an American theme [with] no foreign model to guide [him]" (Friedman 156). Openly confronting the societal boundaries set forth by white, middle-class men, Noah sought to expose the tensions that existed throughout an America composed of different cultural traditions, identities, and ideologies. In his play, *She Would Be a Soldier*, Noah critiques American society through the portrayal of four "type" characters: Jerry Mayflower, the American farmer; Captain Pendragon, the Englishman; Christine, the nineteenth century woman; and the Indian chief, a noble savage. As Noah presents the stereotypes embodied in these characters through satirizing descriptions and actions, the audience discovers that one's personal and national identity do not necessarily parallel the "normal" standards of culture and society.

Through his depiction of Jerry Mayflower as a drunken pig farmer, Noah mocks the idealization of an "authentic" American farmer. As an admirable citizen and a decent, hard-working man, the ideal American farmer is someone who is best educated by both books and nature. Because of his broad intelligence and knowledge of the land and animals he is thought to be a more well-rounded person. In the age of a Jeffersonian democracy and agrarian society, the ideal American is defined in *Letters From an American Farmer* by Crèvecoeur:

He is an American, who, leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds. . . . The American is a new man, who acts upon new principles; he must therefore entertain new ideas and form new opinions. (857)

It seems as if this farmer realizes the diversity that exists in the "new" nation and understands that all men, farmers included, must work together to create an America that its citizens can be proud of. The farmer goes on to explain,

Here (in America) individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men, whose labours and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world. Americans are the western pilgrims who are carrying along with them that great mass of arts, sciences, vigour, and industry which began long since in the East The American ought therefore to love this country much better than that wherein either he or his forefathers were born. (Crèvecoeur 857)

Respecting the ideas and opinions of all people, Crèvecoeur's farmer implies that people of all nationalities and races are valuable to America's national identity. As a man who is dedicated to his people, land, and country, the ideal American farmer is held up as a good role model to all those who wish to be respectable American citizens.

By creating Jerry Mayflower, Noah portrays a man who is exactly the opposite of the ideal American farmer. Because he is not well-educated, Jerry is depicted as a "country bumpkin" who does not seem to work very hard. As a farmer, he must understand the land and the laws of nature; because of his limited education this seems to be all that he understands. Unlike the ideal American farmer, Jerry is narrow-minded and does not respect everyone around him. One indication of Mayflower's level of education is shown when he is told how smart Christine is. He remarks, "O, fiddle-de-dee, I don't mind how larned she is, so much the better—she can teach me to parlyvoo, and dance solos and duets, and such elegant things,

when I've done ploughing" (Noah 1381). Furthermore, proving that he does not accept all people as equal, Mayflower protests when he hears that Christine is able to shoot a deer from any distance—

Bring down a buck? I don't like that—can't say as how I like my wife to meddle with bucks. Can she mend—knit garters—make apple butter and maple sugar—dance a reel after midnight, and ride behind her husband on a pony, to see the trainings of our sogers—that's the wife for my money. (Noah 1382)

Believing that females and other minorities are lesser individuals, Mayflower thinks that women do not contribute as much to society as white men such as himself do. This assumption serves as a direct contrast with the beliefs and actions of the ideal American farmer who is willing to let everyone participate in the creation of the "new" America. Thus, while Jerry Mayflower is a farmer, and also an American, his character fully contradicts the so-called ideal as well as the typical American farmer.

Like Jerry Mayflower, Captain Pendragon, another of Noah's characters, counters the stereotype that society has imposed upon him. As a very proper and snobbish man, this ideal British character appears as a foppish "foreigner whose exaggerated opinions, dress, and soldierly mannerisms serve to mark [him] out for ridicule" (Gallagher 138). Since the typical Englishman benefits financially from the colonies in America, he looks down upon those who are not as "well off" as he. Clearly, he does not wish to associate with Americans or visit their "back woods" country.

Although Captain Pendragon seems to fit the stereotype of the foppish Englishman, his character develops into one who kindly and thoughtfully accepts the beliefs and ideas of the people around him. When he is introduced, Pendragon, dressed in the "extreme" of fashion, is complaining about the lack of food and resources in America. Revealing his great sense of pride and British nationalism, he refers to himself as "the honourable Captain Pendragon, of his majesty's guards, formerly of the bluffs" (Noah 1389). By bestowing this title upon himself, the captain implies that he ranks higher in society than his American counterparts. Appearing very snobbish, he looks down upon Americans because they do not have such delicacies as anchovies or hyson and souchong tea. When the tavern waiter offers him bear meat for dinner, Pendragon exclaims,

Bear meat! Why, what the devil, fellow do you take me for a Chickasaw, or an Esquimau? Bear meat! the honourable captain Pendragon, who never ate anything more gross than a cutlet at Molly's chop-house, and who lived on pigeons' livers at Very's, in Paris, offered bear meat in North America! I'll put that down in my travels. (Noah 1388)

Thinking that only savages and uncivilized people eat bear meat, Pendragon's refusal of American food implies that he believes himself to be better than a savage. Later, when the Indian chief arrives and informs him that he is to be under Indian leadership, the audience learns that Pendragon is not as superficial as he first seemed. After the Indian chief explains the military situation, the captain speaks of him, stating, "A very clever spoken fellow, pon honour; I'll patronise him" (Noah 1389). By calling the Indian "clever spoken" and being sincere in this compliment, Pendragon demonstrates the fact that he cares about more than just his own appearance and well-being. As the play progresses, the captain reveals that he is even more open-minded by agreeing to dress like an Indian during battle and by acting benevolently towards the Americans when he is captured. Taking up the philosophy, "Enemies in war—in peace, friends," the captain addresses his American captor with the words, "Sir, you speak very like a gentleman, and I shall be happy to taste Burgundy with you at the Horse Guards" (Noah 1397). In this friendly statement, Pendragon exhibits qualities of courtesy and respect for the American soldier; qualities that are not found in the "type" character of the Englishman. Creating Pendragon to be fairly similar to the typical Englishman, Noah also depicts the captain as a kind, fair man who has learned to accept the customs and views of other races and nationalities.

The third character that Noah portrays in his play is Christine, a strong-willed woman whose character completely counters the stereotype of the nineteenth century woman. During the 1800s, females were stereotypically fragile, helpless creatures who were happy and content being subservient to their husbands. Placed in the "appropriate sphere" of the home and family, women did not need education because they would never amount to anything more than a house wife. The dialogue that follows is taken from *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* by Sarah Margaret Fuller (1717) and reveals the overall attitude that men had towards any attempt to remove women from their assigned "sphere" in the nineteenth century:

'Is it not enough,' cries the irritated trader, 'that you have done all you could to break up the national union. . . but now you must be trying to break up family union, to take my wife away from the cradle and the kitchen hearth to vote at polls, and preach from a pulpit? Of course, if she does such things, she cannot attend to those of her own sphere. She is happy enough as she is. She has more leisure than I have, every means of improvement, every indulgence.'

'Have you asked her whether she was satisfied with these indulgences?'

'No, but I know she is. She is too amiable to wish what would make me unhappy, and too judicious to wish to step beyond the sphere of her sex. I will never consent to have our peace disturbed by any such discussions.' (1717)

Along with the idea that women happily belonged in the home and were content to serve their husbands came the belief that girls should get married while they were young. Any female who was not married or did not at least have plans to marry was called a spinster and was thought to be unattractive or undesirable. Likewise, any woman who did not comply with the idea of subservience was seen as a stubborn, insensible girl who would never "catch" a husband.

Rebelling against the stereotype of the nineteenth-century woman, Noah characterizes Christine as a brave, strong-willed woman. Because she was raised differently from other females and she was given a military education by her father, Christine is able to "crack a bottle at twelve paces with a pistol" and "bring down a buck, at any distance" (Noah 1382). Her education and intelligence is more than one would expect to find in a woman living in the 1800s. When her father expects her to marry a distasteful man that she does not even like, Christine develops a plan to disguise herself as a male soldier and follow her true love to an army camp. Proving her courage and resourcefulness, she disobeys her father, dons a frock coat, pantaloons, and a hat, and runs away before anyone notices. Because of her military education and the survival skills that she has been taught, Christine is able to pass herself off as a male soldier when she arrives at the camp. Throughout the play, she never exhibits the qualities of the female "type" character. Instead, she reveals to the audience that she *is not* happy conforming to society's standard ideas of how women should behave; Christine never appears in a kitchen or a house and is never seen taking care of her family. She bravely escapes an unwanted marriage and pursues her own happiness.

Like Mayflower, Pendragon, and Christine, the character of the Indian chief does not fit the standards that society places upon him. Throughout early history, American Indians have been denigrated as ignorant savages who do not know how to behave in a civilized world. Immigrants to America did not understand the customs and cultures of these native people. Thus, they labeled them dirty, uneducated, and many times, inhuman. Furthermore, many people thought that Indians were immoral and corrupt because they did not worship the same God that the white people believed in. This stereotype comes, in part, from the literature of the colonial period in America. Because most writers at this time were very religious Puritans or Quakers, texts "supported the colonists' negative representation of Native Americans as 'savages' who inhabited Satan's domain" (Harris 342). People who encountered Indians described them as "murtherous wretches," "ravenous

Beasts," and "Barbarous Creatures" (Rowlandson 343-45).

Instead of the "type" character of the typical ignorant native, Noah portrays the Indian chief as the ideal "noble savage." As illustrated in the following passage taken from Benjamin Franklin's "Remarks Concerning the Savages of North America," there were a few people who understood the Indians to be dignified, polite, and noble:

The Indian Men, when young, are Hunters and Warriors; when old, Counsellors. . . there is no Force, there are no Prisons, no Officers to compel Obedience, or inflict Punishment. Hence they generally study Oratory, the best Speaker having the most Influence. The Indian Women till the Ground, dress the Food, nurse and bring up the Children, and preserve and hand down to Posterity the Memory of public Transaction. These Employments of Men and Women are accounted natural and honourable. (754)

Franklin goes on to compliment the Indians' order and decency in conducting public councils and their excessive use of politeness in both their conversations and actions. Like Franklin's idea of the ideal Indian, the Indian chief in *She Would Be a Soldier* is remarkably well-spoken, well-educated, and extremely benevolent and polite. Brave enough to protest the white man's encroachments, the Indian chief is also sensible enough to realize that not all white men are enemies. When he and Pendragon are captured and brought to the American camp, the chief exhibits courage and great forgiveness by accepting a wampum belt as a peace token from the American General. Expressing his gratitude to the General, he declares, "I accept the token (of friendship); forgive my rage, and pardon my unjust anger. Protect our warriors and wives. . . soften their prejudices and remove their jealousies. Do this, and the red man is your friend. . . we are no longer foes" (Noah 1399). In no way does Noah's Indian chief resemble the "type" character of the ignorant native. Educated, well-spoken, brave, honorable, and polite, the chief is the epitome of the "noble savage."

Through his portrayal of Mayflower, Pendragon, Christine, and the Indian chief, Mordecai Manuel Noah "calls into question the construction of 'race,' 'nation,' and identity that were being established as a founding ideology while the colonies were becoming the so-called 'United' States" (Mulford 968). As an American-Jewish citizen, Noah used his drama to present the idea that one can find the traits of a particular stereotype or ideal in any person, not just in the race or nationality that is stereotyped by the dominant culture. One critic claims, "When [the theatre audience of the time] saw a Jew on the stage [they] expected to view a stereotype, and Noah was not prepared to satisfy this expectation" (Harap 266). Instead of placing a Jewish character on the stage, Noah exhibited so-called "Jewish" qualities in the

character of Jerry Mayflower. At this time, Jews were associated with kosher foods, large amounts of money, and patriarchal attitudes. By attributing these qualities to Jerry, the most undesirable character in the play, Noah demonstrates that almost anyone in society can display a Jewish stereotype. Likewise, he questions the characteristics of the other "type" characters, Christine, Pendragon, and the Indian chief, by letting the audience know that one's personal identity does not have to be based upon race, nationality, or gender.

Because of its themes of cultural diversity and its confrontation of ideologies and societal norms, Noah's drama is considered to be specifically American. During the 19th century, America was different from European countries in that many different nationalities and races were mixed together within its boundaries. People from different countries around the world immigrated to the "new" nation to form a new nationality of Americans. Since Noah's play uses "fresh thoughts" to reflect the societal tensions that existed throughout America due to the conflicting opinions and prejudices of the people. It is classified as an uniquely "American" drama. This American drama, and many others like it, contributes to the venue of literature that the nation used to express its national identity. Each race and culture that makes up the United States is essential to the national identity of the country. Noah's play helps the audience realize that without the personal identities that are unique to the people of each community and culture, the national identity of America would not be as varied and as distinctive as it is today.

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Down and Out with Thoreau: Reversals of Perspective and Paradox in *Walden*

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Henry David Thoreau's literary account of the natural world in *Walden* presents us with one man's chronicle of life alone in the Massachusetts woods. Repudiating his fellow Americans' concerns of progress, betterment, and accumulation, Thoreau lived alone in spartan circumstances for over two years in an effort to confront the most essential aspects of life. The insularity and isolation of the author's most characteristic gesture, though, make it difficult to understand exactly what Thoreau wants his readers to identify as Nature's role in their own spiritual development. Some critics assert that Thoreau's presentation of the narrator in *Walden* as an exclusive and unqualified egotist prevents the reader from attaining any sort of higher truth or spiritual awakening. Thoreau, though, realizes the danger of his exclusiveness and foregrounds the idea of why he went to the woods without implying that everyone must perform the excursion in identical fashion. In this sense, Thoreau's ethic of individualism and seeming misanthropy belie his most important message of unification and serve to offer new paradigms through which to assess the crucial connection of the natural world to spiritual fulfillment.

In order to emphasize the importance of this connection between nature and perspective, Thoreau employs a variety of unconventional narrative techniques that not only help to qualify his own spiritual awakening but also serve to reverse or displace the reader's expectations at the same time. Thoreau's stay at Walden affords him with this unconventional perspective with which to accurately assess the human connection with Nature and its relation to a heightened spiritual awareness. This crucial new perspective greatly increases the scope of Thoreau's personal conception of living "deliberately" and eventually puts him and the attentive reader in communion with a higher spiritual force at the conclusion. It is this new perspective, reversed and consciously turned away from life's superfluous details, that

eventually allows Thoreau to say his "head is hands and feet" as he burrows and mines his way to transcendent truth in the woods surrounding Walden Pond. In an effort to draw the reader's attention away from the dross of traditional societal concerns and toward life's most visceral elements, Thoreau constructs his narrative within a larger pattern of reversed expectations and paradox intended to expose the corporeality of truth imbedded deep within the natural world.

A consideration of the facts surrounding Thoreau's personal life, however, does little to dispel common criticism that portrays him as an egocentric elitist claiming to know, infallibly, all that is right or wrong in society. Lending a certain credence to this criticism, Thoreau attacked the concerns of conventional society but lived alone for his entire life, absolved himself from regular employment, refused to pay poll taxes, and never married after graduating from college. Although wary of missing too much in harping on the text's isolationist nature, Lawrence Buell concedes that *Walden* "appears almost violently anticonventional" from his standpoint (Buell 135). George Hochfield is critical of Thoreau's insularity and, in his estimation, Thoreau presents the hero of *Walden* in an "absolute and unqualified light" because of his "demand for a total commitment from the reader" (Hochfield 433). This demand for absolute commitment on the reader's part causes Hochfield to see in Thoreau an unjust (and presumably unqualified) "take him or leave him" stance that reflects its author's unbridled egotism (Hochfield 433). Continuing his vituperation of Thoreau's exclusiveness, Hochfield takes a phrase from *Walden* and exclaims that "we ought to be cautious about someone who stands alone and excludes himself from 'the mass of men'" while trying to show us how to properly live at the same time (Hochfield 436). Thoreau's intentions, though, have far less to do with a Nestor-like promulgation of right and wrong than they do with the unification of the spiritual and the natural beyond (and beneath) a radical alteration of perspective. This altered and unconventional new perspective is consistent with Thoreau's own desire to live at Walden where he could confront the spiritual truth located at the "bare bones of existence" in the earth.

Hochfield's assessment of Thoreau's demands for "absolute commitment" on the reader's part is, to some extent, valid. The fact cannot and need not be concealed that *Walden* does require an extensive commitment from the reader. In the most physical sense, the text is a written work that attempts to take its readers from a "hurry and waste of life" to a point of spiritual awakening and "Spartan simplicity" in a matter of a few hundred pages (Thoreau 92-3). Any endeavor that has such a proselytizing motive must be regarded as an extremely onerous task and, therefore, requiring a serious commitment from the reader. As a result of the inherent difficulty in generating a profound change in any reader's spiritual awareness, Thoreau employs several organizational devices within the text to engage the "committed"

reader.

A closer look at Thoreau's paragraph structure reveals a complex movement of prose that acts as a microcosm for the entire process of shifting perspective and spiritual awakening. These paragraphs frequently begin with long but deceptively simple sentence structures that describe very ordinary topics or actions for many lines. Following this elementary first sentence is a series of unconventional metaphors and comparison that take the reader to a deeper spiritual context. The last sentences of the paragraph often revert back to the ordinary and use puns to take the reader back to a place similar to the original starting point. As John Broderick notes, "the closing sentence—often humorous—serves two functions: it completes the release, but it also recalls the journey just completed" and, in doing so, Thoreau "has kept his reader aware of starting point and destination" (Broderick 136). This unique and unconventional prose structure enables Thoreau to relay a difficult and deeply personal feeling of heightened spiritual awareness to a large group of readers by offering them a new natural perspective from which to assess their own pursuit of life's truths.

Indeed, Hochfield's "absolute and unqualified" narrator of *Walden* demands a certain commitment from the reader in order to comprehend, mentally and spiritually, the microcosmic pattern of journeying that takes place in many of Thoreau's most powerful paragraphs. Buell argues that *Walden* demands a "sustained, minute, but open-minded meditation" on the part of the reader in order to relinquish autonomy to the natural and transcendent world (Buell 23). In a similar analysis, John Broderick states that "Thoreau's best paragraphs take the reader from the mundane 'known' to the transcendent knowable and back again" (Broderick 135-6). The first paragraph of *Walden* is characteristic of the out-and-back movement Thoreau employs:

When I wrote the following pages, or rather the bulk of them, I lived alone, in the woods, a mile from any neighbor, in a house which I had built myself, on the shore of Walden Pond, in Concord Massachusetts, and earned my living by the labor of my hands only. I lived there two years and two months. At present I am a sojourner in civilized life again. (3)

The paragraph begins rather deceptively as the first sentence drags on and on but, nevertheless, appears simplistic in its composition. The committed reader, however, will notice that this first sentence is made up of short units or phrases enclosed in a series of commas that "put the 'I' at greater and greater remoteness from the world of the ordinary reader, removed by solitude, by locality, by personal construction of his dwelling, and by activity—manual labor" (Broderick 135). This section of prolonged detachment or removal of Thoreau from the reader signals the journey into the realm of the

“transcendent knowable” where spiritual awareness becomes heightened. The last sentence brings the reader (and Thoreau) back into a world from which he or she has just been removed, hopefully better off for experiencing an alteration of perspective.

In his assessment of *Walden*'s prose structure, though, Broderick fails to analyze the most trenchant example of Thoreau's singular paragraph format which brings the reader in and out of an intense spiritual journey to expose the truth located within the natural world. The paragraph appears about one third of the way through the book in “*Where I Lived and What I Lived For*”:

Both place and time were changed and I dwelt nearer to those parts of the universe and to those ears in history which had most attracted me. Where I live is as far off as many a region viewed nightly by astronomers. We are wont to imagine rare and delectable places in some remote and more celestial corner of our system, behind the constellation of Cassiopeia's Chair, far from noise and disturbance. I discovered that my house actually had its site in such a withdrawn, but forever new and unprofaned, part of the universe. If it were worth the while to settle in those parts near to Pleiades or the Hyades, to Aldebaran or Altair, then I was really there, or at an equal remoteness from the life I had left behind, dwindled and twinkling with as fine a ray to my nearest neighbor, and to be seen only in moonless nights by him. Such was the part of creation where I had squatted:—What should we think of the shepherd's life if his flocks always wandered to higher pastures than his thoughts? (87-8)

Consistent with the out-and-back narrative format, the paragraph begins with a deceptive first sentence that appears rather simple in its content while simultaneously auguring the journey yet to come. The sentence houses many portentous words like “changed,” “universe,” and “attracted” that all play major roles in the reader's eventual journey through the paragraph. The middle sentences take the reader from a mundane starting point to a remote and more “celestial corner” of the universe where Cassiopeia's Chair resides. Here, Thoreau emphasizes the human potential for realizing truth in the simplicity of the natural world as he refers to his own remoteness in astronomical terminology. Thoreau hints at the enormous depth of the human spirit by claiming that “he was really there” at the celestial corner of the universe and then reinforces the expansiveness of this notion by comparing himself to a star “twinkling with as fine a ray to [his] nearest neighbor.” By bringing the reader to the edges of the universe and figuratively “near” constellations barely visible to the naked eye, Thoreau sets up the reader for the last sentence about the shepherd, which brings him or her back to the temporal world of the journey's starting point.

In this sense, Thoreau creates a new perspective for the reader by elevating the spiritual awareness and then emphasizing that awareness in a return to the mundane. A complete and indefinite immersion in this world of heightened awareness would be far less effective than the out-and-back structure that Thoreau utilizes. Had Thoreau decided to take the reader into this new natural and spiritual realm without using a return mechanism, the later perspective would be acquired but without any tool to assess the progress made. Perhaps Broderick captures the essence of this journey best when he argues that "the movement of Thoreau's prose enables us to go somewhere else and, thus, extract the maximum benefit from both the going and the coming back" (Broderick 139). Understanding where one is in relation to where one has been yields more resources with which to pursue truth and "live deliberately."

Like many Thoreauvian critics, George Hochfield remains entirely unconvinced that the journeying nature of *Walden's* prose has this capacity to awaken spiritually the reader. Citing his belief that Thoreau's own physical separation from society precludes his credibility to inform other how to live, Hochfield avers that "Thoreau never speaks with hesitation about matter of which he is no less ignorant than the rest of us" (Hochfield 435). On another level, Hochfield doubts that Thoreau ever underwent a spiritual awakening at Walden Pond and criticizes an egotistical Thoreau for labeling as frivolous what the great part of his neighbors see as important: "perhaps Thoreau is right [about his own beliefs] but perhaps he doesn't know his neighbors and the world they live in very well" (Hochfield 436). He continues, writing that "the Nature that is allowed to emerge in *Walden* is predetermined by the need of Thoreau's relation with it, and is not the result of any experience imaginatively combined" (Hochfield 442-3). Thoreau, though, realizes the danger of his journey's exclusivity and uses his own experience in the woods to focus the reader's attention on the potential for spiritual awakening possible when viewing life from nature's perspective where the conditions of living have been radically simplified.

Throughout *Walden*, Thoreau emphasizes the role that his simplified perspective, gained from journeying "far from noise and disturbance," plays in his own connection with the natural world. Thoreau intends his personal perspective to awaken his readers to the possibilities of confronting life in its simplest form; the changed perspective is not so much a complaint about the way we live as it is a device to show his readers the way life might be. Consistent with the thrust of his own spiritual awakening, Thoreau spends far less time repudiating life's superfluous "details" than he does emphasizing the importance and simplicity of truth located below his countrymen's traditional concerns. In the section "*Where I Lived and What I lived For*," Thoreau criticizes the way that life from the traditional perspective appears rushed and "too fast," but before he does so, he takes an entire paragraph to foreground the

reason why he went to the woods. The first sentence of this paragraph contains five uses of the word "I" as it describes Thoreau's phenomenological pursuit of truth: "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived" (Thoreau 90). Thoreau uses this sentence at a critical juncture in his text in order to establish the reasons that compelled him to go to the woods and to preface what he discovered socially and spiritually as he came to perceive life from a perspective rooted in the earth. The critique of modern life that follows represents his own interpretation of our squandered spiritual potential that becomes apparent from a natural perspective located beyond society's traditional concerns.

In addition, Thoreau's repeated use of unifying images and metaphors in the ensuing paragraphs that criticize society only weaken Hochfield's argument that *Walden* is narrated by an "absolute and unqualified" egotist. By using a first person plural narrative technique, Thoreau includes himself in his own captious appraisal of society and, thereby, makes any reader's personal journey more accessible. The constant repetition of "we" allows Thoreau to re-enlist himself in the society of humankind that could realize its full spiritual potential through a simplified connection to the natural world: "we live manly," "we are determined to be starved before we are hungry," "how shall we get to heaven in season" (Thoreau 91). Thoreau continues his efforts to include himself in the society he criticizes as he says "Our life is frittered away by detail" and "Our life is like a German Confederacy" (Thoreau 91-2). At Walden, Thoreau experienced life from the most elemental perspective, and this allows him to differentiate between superfluous "detail" and the "elevation of purpose" that he finds to be paradoxically located below the traditional concerns of society. In order to reinforce his notion of "journeying" to the new natural perspective that allows him to make such differentiations, Thoreau constructs the last paragraph of this chapter in the same repetitious "I" narrative that he began with when he stated his reasons for going to the woods. Once again, this brilliant strategy takes the reader from the "I's" of the first paragraph to the "we's" of the middle sections and back again to "I's" in the chapter's concluding paragraph—ultimately leaving the reader with a new perspective and better resources with which to "live deliberately."

This microcosmic pattern of spiritual journeying that takes place in many of Thoreau's most powerful paragraphs acts not by itself to alert the reader to the possibility of new perspectives, but rather in conjunction with the steady emphasis of downward movement of prose in later sections of the text. Both organizational structures established by Thoreau, the out-and-back journeying and the prevailing downward movement of prose, serve to create a more truthful and fundamental perspective within which the reader can assess his or her own development. Not only does Hochfield reject Thoreau's

attempt to include himself in the reader's society, but he also contests the downward movement of Thoreau's prose; "Thoreau looks down upon the rest of mankind from a very 'elevated' standpoint" in *Walden* (Hochfield 434). According to Hochfield, Thoreau's "fierce concentration on themes of 'elevation'" isolates the narrator from the reader and, therefore, prevents any genuine "elevation of purpose" or unity in the book to transpire (Hochfield 433). Contrary to these assertions, Thoreau repeatedly depicts truth in *Walden* with a thrust beneath the text that is meant to be reached by *downward* rather than upward movement. In the colloquial sense of "getting to the bottom of things," Thoreau shows the attentive reader that truth lies not only in the conventional parameters of behind or beyond, but also *beneath* the "sandy bottom" of the stream (Thoreau 98).

In one sense, Thoreau shows us how it is necessary to travel into the mundane "known," to the transcendent knowable, and return back again to the known in order to gain the broad perspective from nature that is vital to our perception of life's elemental truths. In much the same way, Thoreau's emphasis on the downward movement of his prose forces the reader into a new (albeit lower) perspective where the "Spartan simplicity" of life and its truth become more apparent and more accessible. At these lower depth, the details of our existence that cause us to "fritter" our lives away no longer clutter our vision of the truth and, because of this crucial elimination, we see more clearly what Thoreau means by fronting only "the essential facts" of life.

Thoreau's stalwart dedication to the lower foundations of truth appears often in his criticism of society's unwarranted concern with "elevated piety" (Thoreau 326). This theme of lowering one's thoughts and actions to a new perspective in the natural world acts as an extension of his earlier advice for his readers to "simplify" their lives by reducing the number of their daily affairs. In his "*Conclusion*," Thoreau depicts the natural perspective and his ensuing spiritual fulfillment with words that describe a down (and not "elevated" attractional pull): "I love to weigh, to settle, to gravitate toward that which most strongly and rightfully attracts me; -not hang by the beam of the scale and try to weigh less, -not suppose a case but take the case that is" (Thoreau 330). Here, Thoreau uses the downward momentum of his words to highlight the idea that "truth" must be regarded at its most foundational terms in nature, beyond and below the dross of society's traditional concerns. Continuing to emphasize the "hard bottom" of truth in other sections of *Walden*, Thoreau exclaims that his "head is an organ for burrowing," and that "life near the bone" "is sweetest" (Thoreau 98, 329). The repetition of this "downward" vocabulary helps Thoreau to reinforce his message that spiritual fulfillment comes not from complicated pious perspectives, but rather from a simplified "coextensiveness of the human body with the inanimate earth" (Buell 170).

Contrary to Hochfield's subscription to a detached and "elevated" narrator in *Walden*, Thoreau repeatedly instills this downward thrust within

the narrative in an attempt to strip away life's "shams and delusions" and expose the "hard bottom" of truth: "Let us settle ourselves, and work and wedge our feet downward through the mud and slush of opinion, and prejudice, and tradition, and delusion, and appearance, . . . till we come to hard bottom and rocks in place, which we can call *reality*" (Thoreau 9708). Not only does this passage's downward thrust contradict Hochfield's assertion of *Walden's* general "elevation," but Thoreau's continuous use of "us" and "we" throughout the paragraph also repudiates Hochfield's original argument that its narrator is egotistical and exclusionary.

At one point, Thoreau describes Walden Pond as a "lower heaven itself so much more the important" and later speaks of "burrow[ing] [his] way through the hills" that surround this place of transcendent truth (Thoreau 86, 98). The downward thrust of the following passage reveals Thoreau's intentions to transcend (and reverse) the boundaries of time and space as he "mines" truth from the earth at Walden:

Time is but the stream I go a-fish in. I drink at it; but while I drink I see the sandy bottom and detect how shallow it is. Its thin current slides away, but eternity remains. I would drink deeper; fish in the sky, whose bottom is pebbly with stars. I cannot count one. I know not the first letter of the alphabet. I have always been regretting that I was not as wise as the day I was born. The intellect is a cleaver; it discerns and rifts its way into the secret of things. I do not wish to be any more busy with my hands than is necessary. My head is hands and feet. I feel all my best faculties concentrated in it. My instinct tells me that my head is an organ for borrowing, as some creatures use their snout and fore-paws, and with it I would mine and burrow my way through these hills. I think the riches vein is somewhere hereabouts; so by the divining rod and thin rising vapors I judge; and here will begin to mind. (98)

Juxtaposing the most remote portions of the universe with those closest to earth, Thoreau draws a comparison between the infinite scope of the human potential and our connection to the natural world. Just as "eternity remains" in the "sandy bottom of the stream" Thoreau exhorts us to see our infinite spiritual potential by emphasizing that the outermost limits of the universe are at once the innermost limits of the human soul. The simplified perspective he gains at Walden allows Thoreau to comprehend "how shallow" the understanding of our own spiritual potential really is. To emphasize this point Thoreau continues to compare the stars farthest out in the heavens to the pebbles embedded closest to the earth's soil. In this sense, the "bottom" of the sky is "pebbly" with the same elements that make up the stream bed and the vast geometry of space that lies between these fixed points houses our

spiritual potential. It is this meshing of dichotomous principles that allows Thoreau to complete the reversal as he claims that his "head is hands and feet" while he minds and burrows his way through the "shams and delusions" of life to expose the "hard bottom" of the truth in the earth.

One would rightfully expect that a text chronicling a journey of heightened spiritual awareness would rely on images of ascension and upward movement but Thoreau reverses this traditional expectation in order to emphasize the importance of perspective in the reader's pursuit of truth in the natural world. The downward thrust of Thoreau's prose acts in conjunction with a series of similar reversals and paradoxes to simplify and remove obstacles that impede the reader's eventual arrival at a spiritual awakening within the natural world. By challenging the ingrained habits of thought and actions with meaningful alternatives, Thoreau directs his readers to new perspectives and highlights these new perspectives with his extensive use of paradox within the text. As Joseph Moldenhauer notes, "the peculiar impact of the paradox lies in our recognition that an expected meaning has been dislocated by another, remaining within our field of vision but somewhat out of focus" (74). The new perspective gained by the use of paradox serves as an extension of Thoreau's reversal structure and it helps to show readers the difficult (and unconventional) truth that Thoreau himself has experienced. On this premise, the unconventionality of these truth becomes emphasized in a series of equally unconventional reversed expectations and paradoxes designed to broaden the reader's perspective, a broadening which eventually takes the reader on a similar journey. Perhaps Moldenhauer captures the essence of paradox in *Walden* best when he writes that "Thoreau translates the reader, raising him out of his conventional frame of reference to a higher one, in which extreme truth become intelligible" (75). Although these words may appear to be part of a metaphor of elevation, the frame of reference rises only in the sense of its capacity for truth—an ineffable truth which is revealed by a foundational perspective where "detail" has no place. The repeated patter of reversed expectations that pervade the text of *Walden* is consistent with the essence of Transcendental thought which accentuates the perception of a spiritual reality behind (or in this case beneath) the surfaces of concepts.

The system of reversed and unconventional paradoxes in *Walden* emphasizes the need for alteration of perspective in its endeavor to expose the corporeality of truth to the reader. In his essay, Moldenhauer carefully identifies several important aspects of Thoreau's "category of paradoxes":

[Thoreau's] constant reference to fish, berries, and other common natural objects in the language of coins, precious gems, and rare metals; his praise of the humbled simpleton as the exalted sage; his assertion that the woods and ponds are religious sanctuaries; his descriptions of his labors and pastimes, and his solitude as

Praising Thoreau for his "rhetoric of powerful exaggeration, antithesis, and incongruity," Moldenhauer fails to acknowledge that Thoreau's narrative within each paradox *reverses* the traditional narrow perspective in an attempt to furnish the reader with a different and more truthful perspective. In one such reversal where Thoreau uses the metaphor of farming. He says "let [the land] lie, fallow perchance, for a man is rich in proportion to the number of things which he can afford to let alone"; then explains "For I knew all the while that it would yield the most abundant crop of the kind I wanted if I could only afford to let it alone" (Thoreau 82-3). In response to Thoreau's reversal of expectation and perspective, Moldenhauer understates the effectiveness of the paradox when he refers to it only as "a queer analogue to the commercial theory of increasing profits by lowering costs" (Moldenhauer 75). Not only is Thoreau's statement a "queer analogue" but it is also a complete reversal of the traditional commercial perspective and Thoreau's monetary reversal, here, culminates in this poignant exclamation: "Give me the poverty that enjoys true wealth" (Thoreau 86).

Thoreau realizes that a writer has to capture the reader's attention before changing the reader's opinions and, therefore, he employs several less conspicuous reversals intended to disrupt conventional thinking and offer more expansive perspectives of truth. The conventional narrow perspective sees "life frittered away by detail" whereas the simplified natural perspective achieved by confronting only the essential facts of life helps one "to affect the quality of the day" and to "live deliberately" (Thoreau 90). In an important reversal of common expectation that Moldenhauer fails to acknowledge, Thoreau speaks of his position in the woods next to a family of birds: "I found myself suddenly neighbor to the birds; not by having imprisoned one, but having caged myself near them" (Thoreau 85). Here, Thoreau confronts and reverses the ordinary circumstance in which one would keep a caged bird as a pet in the home as he claims that he himself was the one "caged" near the birds at Walden. In this reversal, Thoreau imprisons himself to become free in a natural world where the autonomy of the self is sacrificed for a simplified perspective that exposes the corporeality of truth embedded in this earth.

Thoreau also uses a similar pattern of reversed expectations while describing the physical location of his living conditions in order to emphasize the freedom that a simplified natural perspective confers upon its beholder. Paradoxically, Thoreau draws the reader's attention to this freedom by portraying his living site at Walden as physically cramped yet spiritually capacious. From the vantage point of his hut, Thoreau attests that he "could not see over or beyond the woods" which surrounded him and that the view from his door "was still more contracted" than the previous (Thoreau 87). Just as Thoreau burrows his way through the hills to the depths of life's most

essential truth, the downward thrust in this depiction of the hut's physical placement defies conventional expectations of being able to "see" beyond his lower depths. Given this rather tight description, the casual reader infers that Thoreau certainly felt cramped or confined by his hut's placement. In a reversal of expectation, though, similar to the freedom he acquires while caged near the birds at Walden, Thoreau reveals the liberating effect of nature when perceived from a standpoint uncluttered by detail: "There was pasture enough for my imagination. The low shrub-oak plateau to which the opposite shore arose, stretched away toward the prairies of the West and the steppes of Tartary, affording ample room for all the roving families of men" (Thoreau 87). Here, Thoreau draws freedom from the earth and seems to harness at least some of the infinite spiritual potential that connects remote regions of the earth to equally remote sections of the untapped human spirit. By describing the confined setting of his living situation and projecting upon it the commodious images of Tartary and beyond, Thoreau establishes the vital connection between the potential of the human spirit and the physical spaciousness of the natural world. Lawrence Buell accurately refers to this connection he claims Thoreau turns "nature to human uses, as a barometer of and stimulus to the speaker's spiritual development" (Buell 123).

At this juncture it is important to acknowledge that Thoreau includes such emphasis on perspective, paradox, and reversal to draw the reader's attention away from the traditional concerns of society and towards the fundamental truths located within the natural world. At the point where we view the world from this lower level of truth and refuse to reenter life on the same terms as before, nature allows us to "witness our own limits transgressed," and the realization from this transgression helps us as humans to recognize a power that transcends our own earthly conceptions (Thoreau 311). By witnessing "some life pasturing freely where we never wander," the scope of our perspective increases enormously and it serves to solidify our participation in a universe "wider than our [previous] views of it" (Thoreau 318, 320). When the reader realizes and experiences this connection between individual human existence and nature, Thoreau attests that an elevated spiritual awareness emerges from the radical shift in perspective. It is the acquisition of this reversed but unified view of creation that compels Thoreau's readers to that "the whole tree itself is but one leaf," that all the fish in the pond are "all one active fish," and that despite its many forms, "all purity is one" (Thoreau 307, 311, 220).

The difficulty in interpreting Thoreau's awakening arises from his apparently contradictory diction that simultaneously emphasizes on pure spiritual power while containing Biblical echoes, quotations from metaphysical poets, and allusions to Greek and Hindu gods. In his essay "Five Ways of Looking at *Walden*," Walter Harding notes this difficulty when he says that "Thoreau creates a certain allusiveness in his spiritual awakening that is meant

to entice and attract the reader who wants to achieve his or her own spiritual awakening" (Harding 150). Harding continues, suggesting that Thoreau's responsiveness to nature's laws, his spirited condemnation of materialism and intense concern for simplified living, and his battle against societal tradition all play important roles in concealing the deeply spiritual elements in his journey to Walden. In effect, the downward thrust of the narrative even applies to the religious context of *Walden* insofar as its placement is below all of the other concerns that appear to conceal its significance.

Because the enormity of his own spiritual awakening at Walden resists definition within the narrow confines of modern religion, though, Thoreau criticizes the belittling aspects of formalized religions as he repeatedly emphasizes the constraints they place on an otherwise infinite human potential. Thoreau wants to remove these constraints (the "cages" and the "shallow water") and expose the squandered spiritual potential located below our traditional (and often religious) concerns: "a tide rises and falls behind every man which can float the British Empire like a chip" yet "We tolerate incredible dullness" from "sermons [that] are still listened to in the most enlightened countries" (Thoreau 332). Thoreau continues his criticism of formalized religion in the same paragraphs he mocks "the established order on the surface" where sermons offer "words of joy and sorrow" when they are really (underneath) "only the burden of a psalm, sung with a nasal twang" that leave humanity to "believe in the ordinary and the mean" (Thoreau 332). Thoreau's words, here, enjoin us to penetrate this "established order on the surface" and delve below the religion of words and into the transcendent truth embedded within the earth.

With time and energy spread out over many of life's superfluous details that cover our fundamental connection to the natural world, the infinite scope of the human potential shrinks dramatically to the point where "we think that we can change our clothes only" (Thoreau 332). Because "we are acquainted with a mere pellicle of the globe on which we live," Thoreau points out that our society has become a stagnation of perpetual social conformity that knows of nothing else (Thoreau 332). He wants us to acquire, through a process of casting off and shedding of the un-essential, the fundamental natural perspective that enables him to use the outermost limits of the universe to penetrate the innermost depth of his spirit as he mines truth from the land at Walden. Robert Pogue Harrison captures the essence of Thoreau's paradoxical acquisition of truth in the simplicity of the natural world when he states that "all that is to be learned about what real and not real lies in the exteriority of our inner lives" (Harrison 227). Thoreau wants his readers to see that the conventional search for meaning in society stunts the unlimited spiritual potential that is embedded within all of humanity's participants. Since Hochfield retains the rigid narrow perspective that Thoreau warns his readers against, it is no wonder that he never perceives any "such drama of unity" take

place in *Walden* (441). In his own way, though, Thoreau shows us that humans need “the tonic of the wilderness” in order to acquire the simplified natural perspective necessary to realizing that our lives are not stagnant at all—rather that “the life in us is like the water in the river” (Thoreau 332).

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Salvation and Rebirth in *The Catcher in the Rye* and *The Bell Jar*

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Critics often consider J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* in the same light. Both novels are set in the 1950's and depict the protagonist's struggle with both time-inclusive and time-exclusive social standards. Not that the novels are entirely forums for social commentary; on the contrary, the main character in each book, Salinger's Holden Caulfield and Plath's Esther Greenwood, becomes very real to the readers when they realize the depth of the personal turmoil and depression that each character so keenly suffers. Thus, we see a two-fold interpretation for the construction of Holden and of Esther: first, a critique of society by the author as filtered through the eyes of his or her character; second, the author's creation of a life-like and wholly suffering character, emotionally and intellectually introspective and often modeled after the author's own life. I shall refer to the former--the character examining and reacting to his or her circumstance--as the outwardly directed self, and the latter--the character examining and reacting to his or her internal--emotional and mental--world--as the inwardly directed self.

With a suffering character in a suffering world, the central need and push in both novels is for some sort of salvation and rebirth if there is to be any growth or ascension from depression. Furthermore, we come to realize as readers, this salvation is wholly contingent upon the protagonist's relationship to humanity. For Holden, his rebirth comes when he turns from the outwardly directed self to the inwardly directed self. Holden's journey involves mostly his outwardly directed self, feeling alienated and confused by unsettling social standards, searching for a real human connection. All of the characters he discusses or encounters become failed figures of rescue for one reason or another, until he meets with Phoebe towards the end of the novel. With Phoebe, Holden finally discovers a real human connection, and consequently this connection allows Holden to turn inward and realize his own need for rescue. This realization becomes Holden's salvation and, at the

same time, an important rite of passage.

Salvation for Esther, however, is a bit more complicated. Her transition from outwardly to inwardly directed self does not occur as an epiphany at the end of the novel. Rather, Esther's turn inward is in the form of a slow descent brought about by severe depression. In fact, the majority of the latter half of the novel focuses on Esther's inwardly directed self, as she is removed from society and placed in a mental institution. With this kind of juxtaposition of being immersed in and then removed from society, Esther grapples with this question: what really needs to be fixed, the society or the self? For Esther, contrary to Holden, the turn inward and then the institutionalization represents rock bottom--the hit after the fall--rather than some sort of turning point. So why does the transition from outwardly directed self to inwardly directed self work for Holden but not for Esther?

Human connection is the key. How can one have human connection in a society which is so flawed? Holden struggles with this throughout the novel, but somehow he stumbles upon this connection that he so desperately needs through Phoebe's character. Thus, in *The Catcher in the Rye*, we get a sense that the society may not be able to change, but human connection is still possible regardless of whether or not social standards change.¹ This is what Holden needs in order to be redeemed from his isolation and depression: he chooses to change, and the proof of that choice is his institutionalization. Holden does not need to be the catcher in the rye. Rather, he needs to be caught. In *The Bell Jar*, there is also a sense of an immobile society, but Esther is unable to come to terms with this stagnation. Plath creates a stickier relationship between the individual and the society here. Something needs to change in order for Esther to form a connection to other people. However, because of her depression and her conflict with what society and the people closest to her would have her be, Esther keeps society away and society keeps Esther away. In a sense, Esther doesn't know who to be in order to find a real connection. The debate between whether the society needs to change or she needs to change is unresolved, and remains so even at the end of the novel. Consequently, we are not sure whether or not Esther can escape the trap of being under the bell jar even at the novel's conclusion.²

Thus, whether it be because of the opposite genders of the protagonists or differing intentions on the part of the authors, *The Catcher in the Rye* and *The Bell Jar*--though similar in their structures and motifs--provide us with an intriguing and wrenching stalemate on the possibility of redemption for the struggling soul. Strangely, the construction of the two novels is comparable with respect to the overpowering need for redemption through reconnection, but the end results of nearly identical desires are vastly different. While Salinger implies that real human connection is possible for the once outcast person in spite of society, Plath asserts that this is a quite questionable conclusion because of social expectations and the nature of the per-

son who cannot conform to its norms. Who is more realistic? Perhaps it depends upon the individual. Holden and Esther are, after all, very different characters despite any similarities of circumstance. Perhaps Esther has not yet discovered what Holden has, or maybe Holden's epiphany is, in actuality, merely a suspension of his own bell jar. Or perhaps both authors are on target, and we can account for the novels' varying outcomes by acknowledging the contrasting treatment of men and women at the time. Whatever the case, there is a definite divergence that begs for closer examination.

In *Catcher in the Rye*, Holden seems to wander aimlessly--from boarding school to boarding school and then from place to place in the city--but in actuality, he is on a mission, as embodied throughout by the symbol of the red hunting cap. Holden's mission is one for connection, something real, a touch of humanity, in the midst of a world he sees as fake and disturbing. As he travels, he encounters various characters, through whom we discover Holden's great disgust for society and the root of his seemingly self-imposed isolation. With every person Holden actually meets in the course of the novel, there is some reason or other he cannot connect with him or her. For instance, the novel opens with Holden standing alone on a hill next to a cannon overlooking the football game where all of his schoolmates are. This is how Salinger introduces us to Holden: a somehow shunned and disconnected figure, about to be kicked out of school, unable to tell his parents, and ambivalent between a desire for retribution and a yearning for reconnection due to his lack of belonging, due to his homelessness.

From this, it is easy to see why Holden has such feelings of inadequacy, of disappearing in the heart of winter just as his ducks do. He describes his journey to Old Spencer's house at the beginning of the novel:

It was icy as hell and I damn near fell down. I don't even know what I was running for--I guess I just felt like it. After I got across the road, I felt like I was sort of disappearing. It was that kind of a crazy afternoon, terrifically cold, and no sun out or anything, and you felt like you were disappearing every time you crossed a road.
(5)

This sense of disappearing continues throughout the novel until Holden ceases his journeying, which staggers back and forth throughout between running away and searching, searching and running away. Perhaps Holden does both at once. That is, he flees from an incomprehensible and artificial world wrought with impossible social expectations, and at the same time he searches for human connection. An insoluble, heartbreaking circumstance. Either way, Holden is outwardly bound. Alienated and disconnected, he cannot possibly understand himself, just as he cannot bear to go home.

Conveniently--for Holden's isolation, that is--the people Holden actually encounters, he despises, and consequently, they become failed figures of rescue for this troubled and lost young man. Old Spencer is the first character Holden physically encounters--as opposed to just discussing--and he sets up the precedent of misunderstanding and disconnection for Holden. Holden speaks of Spencer somewhat favorably and nostalgically before he actually goes to Spencer's home:

...if you thought about [Spencer] just enough, and not *too* much, you could figure it out that he wasn't doing too bad for himself. For instance, one Sunday when some other guys and I were over there for hot chocolate, he showed us this old beat-up Navajo blanket that he and Mrs. Spencer'd bought off some Indian in Yellowstone Park. You could tell old Spencer'd got a big bang out of buying it. That's what I mean. You take somebody old as hell, like old Spencer, and they can get a big bang out of buying a blanket. (7)

Holden admires Spencer's ability to find life worthwhile, through something as insignificant as a Navajo blanket, despite his old age and the fact that "...whenever he dropped a piece of chalk at the blackboard, some guy in the first row always had to get up and pick it up and hand it to him" (7). However, this admiration does not imply connection, and we come to see that Spencer and Holden do not understand each other at all. Spencer's great advice to Holden is "Life *is* a game, boy. Life *is* a game that one plays according to the rules"(8). Of course, we already know from the outset--Holden's being manager, instead of member, of the fencing team, and his failure to show up at the big football game--that Holden somehow cannot or is determined to not be a participant in any game. Thus, Holden and Spencer remain disconnected, and Spencer fails as an authority figure and role model. So when Holden "shoot[s] the old bull to old Spencer" (13), his mind lingers--as it will periodically throughout the novel--on his homeless ducks. Finally Holden has to leave Spencer, just as he leaves his home and his school:

I felt sorry as hell for [Spencer], all of a sudden. But I just couldn't hang around there any longer, the way we were on opposite sides of the pole, and the way he kept missing the bed whenever he chucked something at it, and his sad old bathrobe with his chest showing, and that grippy smell of Vicks Nose Drops all over the place. (15)

Suddenly, Holden can only see Spencer as a decrepit, sick old man who keeps missing the point, who cannot teach Holden how to be content with a Navajo blanket.

Human connection fails for Holden with his peers also. The majority of this derives from misconstrued conceptions of masculinity. For instance, Holden sees Stradlater as the social ideal for a man: athletic, handsome, "oversexed," self-absorbed, and insensitive. Holden's introspection and sentimentality, however, interfere with his ability to identify with Stradlater, who couldn't care less that Jane's name is Jane and not Jean, that Jane is a dancer, that when she and Holden play checkers, she never moves her kings from the back row. As Holden muses, "That kind of stuff doesn't interest most people" (32). Stradlater proves his lack of sensitivity once again when he rejects Holden's essay about Allie's baseball mitt. Holden has great respect for Allie, whose mitt "...had poems written all over the fingers and the pocket and everywhere. In green ink. . .so that he'd have something to read when he was in the field and nobody was up at bat" (38). With this image, Allie is able to do something Holden cannot--that is, merge sensitivity with masculinity. This sentiment for Allie also makes it difficult for Holden to be a man in the same way Stradlater can. Holden describes how he punched out all of the windows in the garage after Allie's death. He explains, "My hand still hurts me once in a while when it rains and all, and I can't make a real fist any more--not a tight one, I mean" (39). After relating this inability to make "a real fist" Holden gets into a fight with Stradlater, who, in Holden's eyes, prefers to see Jane as a girl to "give the time to" rather than as a real person. Holden, who ends up with a bloody face from Stradlater, cannot bring himself to hit Stradlater with anything but words. On that note, Holden leaves school for good.

Thus, characters Holden physically encounters in the book fail as saviors or teachers or role models, which only exacerbates his disconnection both from them and from his own inner self. However, Holden holds on a pedestal the characters whom he is unable to encounter physically, such as Allie or Jane. Holden only reminisces about them--about Allie's baseball mitt, or about the single tear Jane leaves on the checkerboard. The problem here is one of reconciliation of self with world and is metaphorically linked to Holden's struggle with masculinity, which in itself is a culmination of greater social expectations. Holden cannot reconcile physical and emotional intimacy: masculinity as defined by Stradlater's character is undercut for Holden by his own sentimentality. For instance, when Jane drops that tear on the red space of the checkerboard, Holden has genuine sympathy for her, but when she is sobbing on the swing a few minutes later, Holden does not quite know how to comfort her--his kisses teetering on the boundary between something consoling and something sexual. Holden even admits that this incident "...was the closest we ever got to necking" (79). Jane--whom Holden describes as different from other girls because she does simple, sweet things like holding Holden's sweaty hand through a movie--becomes a purity

symbol for Holden. Unlike Stradlater, Holden sees Jane as untouchable. And throughout the novel, Holden is unable to call her, though he cannot get her off his mind. Jane's significance, then, is similar to Allie's: the absent possibility of salvation and reconciliation. Holden cannot stop thinking of Jane, just as he continually prays to Allie every time he steps off a curb:

Every time I'd get to the end of a block I'd make believe I was talking to my brother Allie. I'd say to him, "Allie, don't let me disappear. Allie, don't let me disappear. Allie, don't let me disappear. Please, Allie." And then when I'd reach the other side of the street without disappearing, I'd *thank* him. (198)

Allie is dead, however, and Jane is untouchable.

The impossible manifestation of the ideal, embodied by Jane and Allie, is what Holden runs to; Stradlater is what Holden runs from. And all the time, Holden is running, searching. In order to stop this, in order to live, Holden needs a reconciliation between the impossible and the unavoidable, between purity and sickness, between the aspirations of self and the reality of society. Holden almost finds this in Mr. Antiolini, himself a figure somewhat removed from society, yet functioning within it. His advice to Holden is to stay in this world, to not disappear. He says:

Something else an academic education will do for you. If you go along with it any considerable distance, it'll begin to give you an idea what size mind you have. What it'll fit and, maybe, what it won't. After a while, you'll have an idea what kind of thoughts your particular size mind should be wearing. For one thing, it may save you an extraordinary amount of time trying on ideas that don't suit you, aren't becoming to you. You'll begin to know your true measurements and dress your mind accordingly. (190)

Mr. Antiolini is trying to encourage Holden to turn from his outwardly directed self, with so much contempt for society, to his inwardly directed self, so that Holden can begin to know himself and, subsequently, have a place in society. Mr. Antiolini warns Holden from assuming the "catcher in the rye" role: "'I don't want to scare you,' [Mr. Antiolini] said, 'but I can very clearly see you dying nobly, one way or another, for some highly unworthy cause'" (188). Mr. Antiolini then gives Holden the quote by Wilhelm Stekel: "'The mark of the immature man is that he wants to die nobly for a cause, while the mark of the mature man is that he wants to live humbly for one'" (188). It is as if Mr. Antiolini anticipates Holden's desire to be the catcher, to be the one to save the children from falling off the cliff, to save what is innocent and pure and real from the world, to wipe off every "fuck you" inscribed on the

stairs in schools, in museums, on gravestones. But this desire emphasizes the distance between the real and the ideal, a circumstance which torments Holden. Mr. Antiolini tries to bridge the gap between these two realms by inverting the dynamic between savior and saved. He tells him that it is *Holden* who is heading “. . . for a special kind of fall, a horrible kind” (187). Rather than being a savior, Holden needs to be saved. Unfortunately, this advice is undermined by the homoerotic scene in which Mr. Antiolini affectionately strokes Holden’s head. Holden immediately bolts, taking with him another failed possibility of human connection. Whether or not this is a sexual gesture, Holden perceives it as such, and the integration between self and society fails with this further confounding of sexuality and affection.

Ironically, Holden’s salvation comes through his interaction with a child rather than with an adult. It is due to Phoebe, his eleven-year-old, pre-adolescent sister, that Holden is saved from his “fall.” She very pointedly corrects Holden when he relates his desire to be “the catcher in the rye”: “It’s ‘If a body *meet* a body coming through the rye!’ old Phoebe said” (173). Thus, she subtly alters Holden’s perception of his place in the dynamic of human interaction: it is about connection, meeting, rather than saving. Still, reconciliation of all of the polarities Holden struggles with is not yet attainable. Throughout the final scenes in the book, Phoebe is relentless in her caring for Holden and in her unguarded emotions. Something abstract for Holden is now manifest in a real human form. Phoebe has purity and innocence. She is unafraid to show herself. Yet she is not naive. She is intelligent and shrewd when it comes to the ways of the world. She is the picture of integration and reconciliation. However, Holden resists Phoebe’s reaching out to him, as he is stuck on continuing his fall alone. He thinks he is protecting her against his fall by leaving her.

The turning point in Holden’s mindset comes when he realizes Phoebe will not let him go. Holden thinks he is meeting with Phoebe to say good-bye, but Phoebe has a different agenda:

Finally, I saw [Phoebe]. I saw her through the glass part of the door. The reason I saw her, she had my crazy hunting hat on—you could see that hat about ten miles away. . . I went out the doors and started down these stone stairs to meet her. The thing I couldn’t understand, she had this big suitcase with her. She was just coming across Fifth Avenue, and she was dragging this goddam big suitcase with her. She could hardly drag it. When I got up closer, I saw it as my old suitcase, the one I used to use when I was at Whooton. (205-206)

Phoebe is determined to go with her brother, with his cap and his suitcase. For Holden, this is another child about to fall off the cliff, and he re-

fuses to let her come with him. Phoebe, however, is relentless and sticks to him all the way to the zoo. Contrary to what Holden thinks, Phoebe wants to save him--by showing him that she will *meet* him, stay with him, connect with him by way of the hunting cap and the suitcase. No matter what Holden says, Phoebe will not accept Holden's leaving alone. It finally settles into Holden's mind that he cannot be the catcher when he watches Phoebe on the carrousel:

. . . [Phoebe] walked all around it. Then she sat down on this big, brown, beat-up-looking old horse. Then the carrousel started, and I watched her go around and around. . . All the kids kept trying to grab for the gold ring, and so was old Phoebe, and I was sort of afraid she'd fall off the goddam horse, but I didn't say anything or do anything. The thing with kids is, if they want to grab for the gold ring, you have to let them do it, and not say anything. If they fall off, they fall off, but it's bad if you say anything to them. (211)

Holden cannot be the catcher because he would be preventing life from happening. Watching Phoebe teetering on her horse in the pouring rain, Holden observes,

I felt so damn happy all of a sudden, the way old Phoebe kept going around and around. I was damn near bawling, I felt so damn happy, if you want to know the truth. I don't know why. It was just that she looked so damn *nice*, the way she kept going around and around, in her blue coat and all. (213)

Finally, Holden is connected to someone, to a child, to innocence and purity living in this society, teetering on a beaten up old horse, reaching for the gold ring, going around and around. It is all right that Phoebe is on the brink of a literal and metaphorical fall because she is reaching for the gold ring, and unrelenting. There is an inevitability to the fall. Holden has himself been a child who has fallen while reaching for the gold ring, the aspiration of being the catcher. It is as if Holden is watching the past few grueling weeks of his life in watching those children on the carrousel. He has been going nowhere, and it is time for Holden to outgrow that ride. At the same time, he, along with Phoebe, along with the entire world, is immersed in a circular process: fallen becomes caught becomes catcher becomes fallen becomes caught. This realization is integration, living, and salvation.

Just as Holden's struggle is wrought with the irreconcilability of polarities, so too is Esther's struggle in *The Bell Jar*. Both characters are stretched and torn in the limbo zone between what they want and what they think the world wants for them. In this way, both feel alienated from society. Conse-

quently, both are in desperate need of salvation from this isolation and of rebirth into society through human connection. However, we cannot help but to feel the novels' dissenting moods with respect to this salvation. If we consider the metaphor of the bell jar, it is as if we are able to throw the casing casing entirely off Holden, to view him wholly without the barrier. With Esther, we can only raise the bell jar so far; peek in at her sheepishly; slide our vague glance at her through a tiny crack. We can almost get a better view of her through the glass--a frustrating dilemma: to see her real self partially or to see her displayed self wholly. Holden is freed, released, while Esther is only teased with the possibility of a similar freedom. Consider the ending in both novels: ironically, Holden's freedom coincides with his checking himself into a mental institution, while Esther's almost-freedom coincides with her pending release from a mental institution. Furthermore, though it hardly seems possible, Esther's struggles throughout the novel are infected with even more vagary and ambivalence than Holden's. Consequently, there is a subtle and ambiguous fall into Esther's inwardly directed self, as opposed to Holden's more blunt realization of his own self at the end of *Catcher in the Rye*. Esther's shift into her inwardly directed self parallels her institutionalization, as does Holden's. Here, Holden's narrative ends abruptly, while Esther's takes on a whole new life, so to speak. In *The Bell Jar*, this drawn-out narrative shift--Esther's fall into her inwardly directed self--is a lonely one, without connection, and thus we do not get the sense that someone has saved her by the end of the novel.

There seems, sadly, to be too much of the "almost" with Esther. In fact, the closest Esther comes to a successful connection is with her woman psychiatrist, Dr. Nolan. Dr. Nolan tries to provide Esther with emotional liberation through psychiatric treatment, just as she tries to give her sexual liberation through the recommendation of birth control. Esther describes her visit to the gynecologist:

I climbed up on the examination table, thinking: "I am climbing to freedom, freedom from fear, freedom from marrying the wrong person, like Buddy Willard, just because of sex, freedom from the Florence Crittenden Homes where all the poor girls go who should have been fitted out like me, because what they did, they would do anyway, regardless. . . ." (182)

This freedom, however, only results in more pain, in an uncontrollable flow of blood, in yet another visit to yet another hospital, in more doctors trying to sew her up, in a clinical, cold, and lonely reward. Whenever Esther tries to be who she wants to be, the world around her still imprisons and chants: neurosis is unacceptable; institutionalization is weakness; women must be virgins until they marry. It is as if there were bell jar on top of bell jar on top

of bell jar. Society is a large, unrelenting hand ready to slam the casing back down every time Esther tries to lift it. It is fitting that Esther literally encounters glass everywhere she goes.

Furthermore, just as we do not know whether Esther is saved, or reborn, we do not know whether her failed attempts at human connection are a result of society's standards or of Esther's own desires. For example, when Esther recalls Buddy's diagnosis that Esther is neurotic for wanting to live both in the country and in the city, she replies to him,

Well, you were right. I *am* neurotic. I could never settle down in either the country *or* the city. . . . If neurotic is wanting two mutually exclusive things at one and the same time, then I'm neurotic as hell. I'll be flying back and forth between one mutually exclusive thing and another for the rest of my days. (76)

True to her word, Esther does want mutually exclusive things throughout. She desires to be reborn, yet the images she describes of birth and reproduction are clinical and grotesque: twisted fetuses in jars and an anonymous woman in the midst of a painful and blood-soaked delivery. Esther describes with contempt the drug they give the woman so that she will not remember her pain in delivery:

I thought it sounded just like the sort of drug a man would invent. Here was a woman in terrible pain, obviously feeling every bit of it or she wouldn't groan like that, and she would go straight home and start another baby, because the drug would make her forget how bad the pain had been, when all the time, in some secret part of her, that long, blind, doorless and windowless corridor of pain was waiting to open up and shut her in again. (53)

It is fitting that Esther identifies with this woman: Esther knows that rebirth is necessary, and death is necessary for rebirth, whether this death be one of memory or of pain. Yet, why desire to be reborn when it only entails reliving what has been forgotten or feeling what has been numbed; that is, reviving what has been killed in order to live again? Similarly, Esther wants to lose her virginity, yet she scoffs at Buddy's nakedness, at his "turkey neck and turkey gizzards" (55). She feels herself diseased and sick, then pure and innocent from countless baths--". . . I guess I feel about a hot bath the way those religious people feel about holy water" (17)--and from the simultaneous coffin and womb of the breezeway where she swallows a bottle of pills.

Even in her connections to other people, Esther wants mutually exclusive things. This conflict of desires continues through to the novel's conclusion and reinforces Esther's ultimate inability to connect with another per-

son. For example, her indecision over whether to identify with Doreen or with Betsy at the beginning of the novel parallels Esther's feeling of ambivalence towards who she is as a woman. The difference between Doreen and Betsy is comparable to the difference between the sexy girl and the nice girl, respectively, that Esther sees in the movie:

Finally I could see the nice girl was going to end up with the nice football hero and the sexy girl was going to end up with nobody, because the man named Gil had only wanted a mistress and not a wife all along and was now packing off to Europe on a single ticket. (34)

On one hand, Esther chases after Doreen, Doreen's independence, Doreen's complete disregard for the activities and functions that the fashion magazine maps out for her. On the other hand, Esther sees that Doreen loses in the long run for stepping out of the rigid social standard of what a woman should be. Esther muses, "I felt if I carried Doreen across the threshold into my room and helped her onto my bed I would never get rid of her again" (18). If she marries herself to who Doreen is, she cannot ever be what Betsy is--the pure and innocent, perfect picture of what society would have a woman be, the "Pollyanna Cowgirl" (5). After leaving Doreen in the hallway instead of taking her "across the threshold" of Esther's room, Esther says,

I made a decision about Doreen that night. I decided I would watch her and listen to what she said, but deep down I would have nothing at all to do with her. Deep down, I would be loyal to Betsy and her innocent friends. It was Betsy I resembled at heart. (19)

As if to prove this assertion to herself, Esther then takes a bath to purify herself and wash off all of the dirt she has collected from spending time with Doreen. Sure enough, however, Esther reneges on her decision by going out with Doreen again, by recollecting the layers of dirt she has just scrubbed off. This leaves Esther ambivalent between what she should and should not be: ". . . I wondered why I couldn't go the whole way doing what I should anymore. This made me sad and tired. Then I wondered why I couldn't go the whole way doing what I shouldn't, the way Doreen did, and this make me even sadder and more tired" (24-25).

Likewise, Esther's relationship with her mother and father exemplifies her internal conflicts between living and dying, confronting and ignoring, health and illness. Esther's mother's idea of resolution is forgetting and ignoring. "'We'll take up where we left off, Esther,' [her mother] had said, with her sweet, martyr's smile. 'We'll act as if all this were a bad dream'" (193). Of this Esther thinks, "To the person in the bell jar, blank and stopped

as a dead baby, the world itself is the bad dream" (193). Ironically, this insistence on the part of the mother to cure by overlooking is combined with her overbearing physical presence and importance of holding the family together. Esther's father, however, is dead, markedly absent from Esther's physical life, yet emotionally haunting because of this absence. Thus, Esther's mother consumes her physically and ignores her emotionally, while Esther's father consumes her emotionally and ignores her physically. It is difficult to tell which parent Esther finds more contemptible.

Thus, the ambiguity surrounding the possibility of Esther's redemption stems from repeatedly failed human connections. Though she tries to connect just as much as Holden does, Esther never really has a Phoebe. When Holden turns inward at the end of his narrative, it is a safe, positive move because he is united with the rest of the world in the shared modern condition of the inevitability of fall. This connection is pointedly absent from Esther's shift inward. The only fall seems to be Esther's. Society screams: you are sick, neurotic; you need to be fixed; you are not like the rest of us. Thus, her institutionalization is only a continuation of a lonely and personal descent into madness. This is why Esther's recovery is less hopeful than Holden's at the novels' conclusion: while Holden resigns his desire to be the catcher in the rye, Esther cannot seem to entirely break free from the bell jar prison. She carries it with her, or rather, it follows her, like the ghost of her past, as an eerie premonition and reminder of Plath's own suicide ten years after the biographical events in her novel. Thus, we are not at all calmed by the conclusion, or lack thereof. We are just as confused as Esther is on the question of her rebirth. In fact, the most conclusive image that Plath offers of her salvation from the imprisonment of the bell jar also leaves us doubtful of resolution. Esther explains at a crucial moment towards the end of the novel, "The bell jar hung, suspended, a few feet above my head" (176). We want confirmation of her salvation and rebirth, and so, too, does Esther: "There ought, I thought, to be a ritual for being born twice--patched, retreaded and approved for the road" (199). Somewhere in this statement whispers a resignation that there is no such ritual. In actuality, we never even hear the doctors' verdict concerning Esther's sanity at the end of the novel, and Esther does not tell us what it is.

Thus, while we can sort out the ambiguity and tensions in Holden's struggle, we can only describe these things in Esther's. There is no reconciliation of polarities for Esther, and therefore, her tenacious possession of mutually exclusive facets of her life remains intact. She is freed into another kind of imprisonment, just as she is reborn into a slow death process. Unlike Holden, Esther does not procure connection to others in this process. With Esther, it is only *her* process, lonely and clinical; with Holden, it is a shared, universal, and human process. The danger of delving inward without human connection is apparent in this contrast between Esther and Holden. Salva-

tion comes with reconciliation, with *meeting*. It is a complicated web involving the inwardly and outwardly directed selves and human connection in the midst of both. Holden's salvation is achieved through this connection; Esther's salvation will depend upon the glass that stands between her and the rest of the world.

End Notes

¹See Carol and Richard Ohmann's review, "Reviewers, Critics, and *The Catcher in the Rye*," for another possibility of reconciliation between social and personal desires. Through the nostalgia created from art, from writing, and from remembering, reality seems less oppressive. Specifically, they say, "Art forms the needed bridge between the desirable and the actual, provides the mediation by which social experience, rendered through much of the story as oppressive, can be embraced" (34): *Critical Inquiry: A Voice for Reasoned Inquiry into Significant Creations of the Human Spirit* vol. 3 (1976): 15.

²Some critics believe this conclusion to be more resolute and more optimistic in terms of Esther's recovery. Susan Coyal, for instance, describes the final scene in terms of a birth scene, and is thus confident in Esther's recovery: see "Images of Madness and Retrieval: An Exploration of Metaphor in *The Bell Jar*," *Studies in American Fiction* 12.2 (1984): 161. However, considering Plath's suicide ten years after the events in her book and her novel's largely autobiographical nature, I believe the question of Esther's recovery is a bit more complicated and difficult to ascertain.

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