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The Oswald Review of Undergraduate Research and Criticism In the Discipline of  
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# THE *Oswald Review*

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THE *Oswald Review*

## CONTENTS

THE POET LEGISLATOR.....	7
Thomas Simonson University of North Carolina, Charlotte	
THE STILL UPROAR OF CONRAD'S PRESS: A BREAKDOWN OF "HIGH" LITERATURE IN THE MODERN METROPOLIS.....	29
Alexandra Mulry University of North Florida	
A FINE LINE: CONFLICTING INTERPRETATIONS OF HOMOEROTICISM AND SELF-LOVE IN NELLA LARSEN'S <i>PASSING</i> .....	39
Emily C. Shue Ursinus College	
STONES AND SOULS: THE FUNCTION OF ALCHEMY IN MODERN YOUNG ADULT FANTASY .....	50
Lauren Mitchell College of Charleston	
THE IDENTITY IN-BETWEEN: A HISTORICAL CLOSE READING OF SYLVIA PLATH'S "MORNING SONG" .....	66
Allison Barrett St. Mary's College of Maryland	
THE MONSTROSITY OF LANGUAGE: <i>FRANKENSTEIN</i> AND THE DESCENT INTO CULTURAL MISREPRESENTATION .....	76
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Thomas Simonson

### The Poet Legislator

In *A Defence of Poetry*, the great British Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley declared “Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world” (46). While today’s poets may not occupy the same cultural space as Shelley’s contemporaries, his declaration of their occupation’s distinction is still largely indicative of the influence artists of the West have, and the roles they take on because of that influence. Given the freely activist stances of filmmakers, authors, and other creative individuals, it should not be surprising that poets too can perform the same role as their flashier counterparts working in other media. In fact, the American government still provides for an official position, the Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry, which has been held by many distinguished poets.

Unlike their British counterparts, however, the duties of American laureates are kept to a minimum specifically to enable the success of each appointee’s projects. Instead of focusing on state compositions, the laureate comments freely on events and devotes considerable energy to promoting the arts. As such, despite their influence and position, they are not obligated to be political. However, in keeping with the model set forth by Shelley, Natasha Trethewey’s work was decidedly political when she served as the laureate from 2012-2014. It is important to note that this approach did not develop when she assumed the position; Trethewey has emphasized throughout her career her conviction that artistic occupations present the artist with an opportunity to act in response to the wrongs they perceive. Following in the footsteps of her forerunner, Rita Dove, her laureateship was characterized by a blending of political advocacy and artistic outreach. Trethewey sought not only to bring poetry to new and widespread audiences, but also to stir in those readers an augmented engagement with the historical problems facing their country.

Before we proceed, a clarification of what I mean by political may be in order: Trethewey’s work is not political in the sense that it exhorts readers to adopt certain policies or even to take certain

positions. Her tactics are far subtler and more incisive. She aims for the reader's sense of moral justice by providing historical and contemporary narratives, then targets their emotions by featuring a reflection on what the poem has related. Many of her pieces end with a distinctive flourish that signifies a truth that has been illuminated, and the reader must not let it escape his/her grasp. Centering as her work does on narratives that coalesce into emotional lessons, her work is political because it aims to accomplish an internal realization or communion in its readers that promotes external affirmations of equality and solidarity. As such, there is broad critical agreement that the content of her work, its historical and contemporary contexts, its ubiquitous references to race, makes it political.

In particular, I will explore the ways in which her latest volume, 2012's *Thrall*, functions as part of a larger project—one which aims to amend historical erasure, to expose the enduring racial factions of society, and to invoke a call, in chorus with others, for unified change. To support such a reading, in this paper I will refer to various texts in Trethewey's oeuvre, but will most closely examine poems from *Thrall*, in order to add to the critical conversation established in this area of the scholarship by Katherine R. Henninger, Pearl McHaney, Joseph Millichap, Malin Pereira, and Nagueyalti Warren on three fronts: first, while Trethewey has long been acknowledged as a poet-historian correcting historical erasure (Henninger), I examine how her embrace of the solubility between poet and persona in the lyric poem instructively connects the historical to the personal; second, although Trethewey has been categorized as a "race writer" by default, with attention sometimes centering on certain figures (Millichap), I will favor a focus on biracialism (Pereira) in order to point to the nuanced ways in which her work's use of familial biracialism symbolizes the past and present racial turmoil of American society; third, instead of interpreting poetic form chiefly as a protective barrier between difficult topics and the reader (Warren), I investigate how Trethewey's use of form, in embodying elements of the West's artistic traditions, tailors for the widest audience possible her activist message of acknowledging, then correcting, racial inequality.

### 1. Rewriting History

To correct the gaps in historical narratives, Trethewey uses multiple personae to tell interrelated stories. Rather than narrating exclusively personal stories, Trethewey concerns herself as well with

historical individuals who represent the vast portions of society that have remained unacknowledged in much of American literature and throughout much of the nation's history. Speaking of poems inspired by her grandmother, she describes a permeable membrane through which she and the personae that represent fellow "Othered"<sup>1</sup> individuals become unified: "She became a character for me. I'm not separate from that character, and I don't think I would have been able to write those poems if each feeling expressed and what her character goes through in every poem wasn't something that was close to home, something I knew very well. So it's still my pain, but I have taken someone's life and made a picture out of it" ("An Interview," Petty 4). This principle is at work throughout Trethewey's oeuvre: Her first collection, 2000's *Domestic Work*, pairs poems narrated by a speaker who refers to the poet's own experiences with others that speak from the psyches of working-class women as they reflect on their physical labor, and the labor of existing in gendered, racialized bodies. The 2002 collection *Bellocq's Ophelia* again explores this theme, this time as Trethewey writes from the perspective of a mixed-race woman struggling for agency in early 20th century New Orleans. Recalling the format of *Domestic Work*, the opening section of *Native Guard* (2006) chronicles Trethewey's emotions following the death of her mother, before her perspective shifts and eventually settles on that of a black soldier who narrates the series of sonnets at the heart of the book. In her most recent collection, *Thrall* (2012), Trethewey comments on her personal experience of biracialism and simultaneously speaks from the triangle of perspectives present in ekphrastically described biracial families: white fathers, black mothers, and mixed-race children. Each of these volumes blends Trethewey's personal experiences with the experiences of individuals from the past. This rescuing of the past from cultural erasure might have limited her work to a poetic variation of historical fiction, were it not for the political charge that results from Trethewey's additional step: she juxtaposes what has been recovered with what she has experienced. The poetry thus acknowledges and vivifies the previously erased contents of the past.

Trethewey herself makes the case that this association between personal and historical personae is what lends many of her poems their weight. Referring to the titular figure of her 2002 collection, she says, "Ophelia's exploration of mixed race identity and being looked at and all of those kinds of

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<sup>1</sup>In the context of this essay, the term will refer to female or non-white individuals.

things are my issues, but how much different might it have been if I wrote all those poems just from my point of view? [...] That sort of lyrical self-investigation that we like to do so much [...] I can't imagine doing it without a social and historical context" ("A Conversation," Haney 30). The incorporation of others' voices enables Trethewey's work to evade the drawbacks of traditional author-centric first-person speakers. The poems that speak with a historical figure avoid the appearance of a poet preaching. They instinctively remind readers of the speakers who narrate works of nonfiction, in which validity is presupposed owing to the responsibility the medium carries. As such, the utterances of Trethewey's historical personae can be better received than comparable statements understood to originate exclusively with an autobiographical speaker. This is more to avoid the "navel-gazing tendencies in modern poetry" than it is to conceal what Trethewey offers of herself in her work (Henninger 55). On the contrary, she makes it clear that the distinction between herself and the persona that speaks allows for greater clarity, not concealment: "I think you are allowed to investigate the self a little bit more comfortably behind the thicker mask, this distant historical mask of a persona" ("An Interview," McHaney 46). In wearing a mask, Trethewey is free to enjoy the unfiltered expression such a disguise affords, as poem and poet merge in a manner that is neither purely autobiographical, nor a fabrication of the poet's identity. She describes this process when referencing a debate with her father:

My father always tells me, 'You have to stick to the truth, you have to tell truth in a poem.' I believe that, [...] but when I write my poems, if those stories become true, they really do become yet another piece of the story. I've listened to chunks of my grandmother's stories, and I've gone and written a poem that I've just created, out of my imagination. I came back to my grandmother, and I read it to her. And she says, "That's just how it was; it happened just like that." Now that's impossible, but it just becomes the truth for her and me ("An Interview," Petty 15).

Trethewey's historical narratives are incorporated into her own personal history, just as her historical personae are vitally linked to a persona indicative of the poet herself. She describes the intention of this overlaid pattern in this way: "I made it a rule for myself that I was going to write these

poems using this ‘she’ who became my character. And my ‘she’ was going to be filled with all sorts of characteristics that are my own, but she was going to be living in a different time and having different experiences” “An Interview,” (Petty 15). Trethewey’s tactic allows her to comment with personal authority from the perspective of others. Not merely content to recount her family history, however, Trethewey exercises her activist ambition by recounting stories from the perspective of individuals who would not otherwise be the subject of a book of poetry, let alone that of a history textbook. The relationships between fact and fiction, personal and historical are transformed via this artistic process.

While much praise has been directed to Trethewey for amending erasure, recent scholarship has not always emphasized these connections between Trethewey’s historical speakers and her autobiographical ones. Katherine Henninger describes the persona Trethewey utilizes in her autobiographical pieces not in terms of proximity, but distance, which is employed for safety: “The persona that narrates these poems in past-tense is the adult survivor [...] an adult child not just of particular parents but of the racialized past” (64). While connecting Trethewey’s personal poems to her historical ones, Henninger argues that the function of the persona is to insulate Trethewey from the “immediacy of that offering” of herself as symbolic, “reducing its threat” by relying on a constructed persona (57). This argument accounts for readers’ tendency to read the poet into the text, but emphasizing the metaphysical distance between Trethewey and any speaker that may represent her may only be so useful. Indeed, even if it weren’t for Trethewey’s making the connections explicit within the poems, there is the maxim that writers usually write what they know, or at least what they have psychologically explored in order to artistically recreate. Thus, while Trethewey’s personal narrator may insulate the poet, the relationship between the two is necessarily intimate. Indeed, what identifies Trethewey’s work as political is accomplished not by separating herself through personae that are valid when she is not, nor by separating herself from painful experience through the utility of a constructed persona, but by specifically uniting a personal self with a historical self, to bring what was omitted into the spotlight. Trethewey tells related stories, or, more profoundly, an old story which is topical and being relived in the present day.

To do this, Trethewey’s historical and personal personae undergo transformative assimilations.

This occurs over the course of her collections, as their respective sections shift from personal narratives to historical narratives, occasionally within a single poem, as when Trethewey injects herself into a historical scene for comparison. Offering varied examples of this exchange of identity, *Thrall*, much like the preceding volume *Bellocq's Ophelia*, features Trethewey's narration of personal experiences and historical readings of biracial children. The ekphrastic piece "Knowledge" inhabits a past event set forth in a painting, describing men of science poring over a woman's body, only to dramatically alter course when Trethewey interjects by placing herself and her father within the event: "Each learned man is my father / and I hear, again, his words—I study / my crossbreed child—misnomer / and taxonomy, the language of zoology" (lines 31-33). Her comparisons are not merely insinuations of persistent cultural trends: rather, she problematizes the notion that racial dynamics have undergone a paradigm shift in the time between her experiences and that of the historical eras she references. Trethewey's purposeful juxtaposition of these time periods and their respective personae draws attention not to broad themes of the human experience, but to the endurance of a very particular affliction her society has been unable to heal.

Trethewey's personal fixation on her father's cold terminology ("my crossbreed child") is echoed in her description of a biracial child in "Taxonomy 4": "the child / [...] cannot slip their hold [...] all her kind / in thrall to a word" (lines 26-32). Like Trethewey, the child in the latter is bound as if in a "hold" by the word which qualitatively defines her. This relationship is also seen in "Taxonomy 3": "the child / [...] turns toward the father, / reaching to him / as if back to Spain, / to the promise of blood" (lines 6-14). In this moment as well, the child of the poem recaptures Trethewey's depiction of herself. The child "reaches" for the blood validity of the father in this piece just as Trethewey reaches back through memory to "hear, again, [her father's] words: [...] my crossbreed child" ("Knowledge" lines 31-33). These words signify the same influence that the fathers of the "Taxonomy" pieces have over their children's blood and its worth: "crossbreed" is a devaluation.

The title poem of *Thrall* features another biracial child whose experience is strikingly parallel to that of Trethewey's. This poem's speaker, the son of a painter, confides, "only once / did he fix

me in paint / my color a study / [...] the yoke of my birth / gone from my neck" (lines 70-77).<sup>2</sup> The inescapable "hold" mentioned in "Taxonomy: 4" is present here as "the yoke of my birth." The yoke is not featured in the painting the poem describes, but like Trethewey and the child in "Taxonomy 3," here the speaker fixates on the status that has only been "fixed" by paint (or color) controlled by a father. The child's color is "a study" in color, another instance of devaluation, as the painter's son goes on: "I ground his colors / my hands *dusted* black / with *fired* bone *stained* / blue" (lines 15-18, my emphases). This image utilizes color on multiple levels, depicting with rich visual imagery the condition that each of the biracial children refer to in looking at their father, whose whiteness and blood is devalued, "dusted," "fired," and "stained" when it is present in biracial bodies.

The placement of Trethewey's contemporary experience of biracialism within the framework of historical moments is thus a prime example of her mingling of an autobiographical self with a historical identity, the visage of both taking shape in conjunction with the other. Her artistic choice sends a clearly political message, that the experiences of individuals long relegated to the past are being relived in the society of the poet. She suggests that the record of the past can be illuminated, alarmingly, by its similarity to the present, when many are still grappling with inequality. The poems provocatively suggest that the thrall evident in *casta*<sup>3</sup> paintings from hundreds of years ago is experienced by a poet in one of the most advanced Western societies of the 21st century. Trethewey is not talking about the origins of America's "racial problem" and her personal experiences as vaguely connected elements; rather, she is telling one story, inextricably linked across time and space, and the political ramifications of making this point are clear. Only the most desperate of bigots would assert that race as it is experienced today has nothing to do with race as it was constructed hundreds of years ago, but few would readily point out, as Trethewey does through paired narratives and linked personae, that the "race problem," at its ideological core, is as topical and damaging now as it was at the onset of this country's formation. Calls for equality like those of the Black Lives Matter movement and invocations for respect like those heard

<sup>2</sup> I have reproduced Trethewey's idiosyncratic spacing here and in quotations elsewhere.

<sup>3</sup> A *casta* was a system of racial classification originated by Spanish conquerors of the Americas in the 18th century that delineated names and hierarchical placement for the children of various mixed-race unions. Trethewey's *Thrall* consists, largely, of ekphrastic poems that "read" *casta* paintings that depict examples of such unions, invariably featuring white fathers, black mothers, and biracial children.

on Beyoncé's *Lemonade* are contemporary reminders, like Trethewey's, that there is much unfinished work in perfecting American society.

## 2. Unmasking Society

In juxtaposing, and mutually empowering, personal and historical speakers, Trethewey's focus is squarely on the presence of race in American society. Dismissing summaries of her work that prioritize the historical or the contemporary narratives, Trethewey has pointed to the inevitable connections between these elements: "I get a little annoyed that people aren't necessarily setting my personal experiences within a larger historical context. To me, that's the only way it makes sense. My little memories are actually memories of a culture. My experience of race [...] has everything to do with the laws at the time, which are a kind of [...] history of the nation" ("The Larger Stage" 20). In *Thrall*, she tackles this inextricable union through ekphrastic pieces describing works of art depicting biracial families, and pairs with them poems reflecting on key moments of racial identification within her family's history. Although she admits that "race always appears in my work because I have a racialized experience of America," she clarifies that "*Thrall* is the book that is actually most about race that I've ever written" ("Southern Crossings" 167). In some ways, the book can be thought of as continuation of the work begun in *Bellocq's Ophelia*: moving beyond that book's solitary biracial speaker, in *Thrall* Trethewey speaks for the biracial children within the ekphrastic historical poems. From these collected perspectives, she approaches biracial families—both from paintings and from resurrected memories—by paying attention to the triangular position of three individuals present in each depiction: the biracial child, a black mother, and a white father. Instead of fixating on the inherent conflicts between rote representations of the black/white binary opposition, Trethewey focuses on the psychological space at the center of this familial triangle. The thrall she refers to is a dynamic, multi-directional force: it does not flow exclusively from the white men toward the black women, nor from the mixed-race children toward their mothers and/or fathers. Rather, each point of the triangle can be seen as an arrow pointing to the remaining two, and their shared thrall is the binding element that collectively symbolizes the American experience of race.



Before turning to the first figure within this triangular symbol, it is important to discuss Trethewey's identification with biracialism itself. She emphatically declared in one interview: "I am the quintessential Southern writer! Quintessentially American too! The story of America has always been a story of miscegenation, of border crossings, of integration of cultures and again, I embody this in my person" ("Southern Crossings" 165). The correlations between the biracial children of the ekphrastic poems and her autobiographical persona are clear, as she implies in admitting, "the more I've gotten interested in writing about history and making sense of myself within the continuum of history, the more I've turned to paintings, to art. I look to the imagery of art to help me understand something about my own place in the world. By just beginning to contemplate a work of art, I find myself led toward some other understanding" ("A Conversation," McKee 137). This quest for the undefined, and identifying with what is traditionally suppressed, is suggested again when Trethewey acknowledges a compliment from Rita Dove that her work is syncopated: "In poetry, infusing poems with a syncopated rhythm would be putting emphasis where one would not only not expect it, but would not want it— [...] the biraciality" ("An Interview," McHaney 57). Perhaps it is fitting, then, to examine the biracial children within *Thrall's* symbolic families.

### *Biracial Children*

Despite the presence of biracial children in each of the poems, critical opinion does not always incorporate an acknowledgment of their equal power in effecting *Thrall's* symbolism. Millichap, for example, points to Trethewey's father, and, by extension, to the white fathers within the book, as "the focus throughout *Thrall*" (Millichap 194). Such a reading relies upon Trethewey's dedication of the book "to" her father, and, in turn, an emphasis on the collective gazing backward of the book's biracial children at their white fathers, much like Trethewey herself is perceived to be resting her gaze on her own white father. Such a reading is perhaps most clearly represented in the child within "Taxonomy 3," in which the child "turns toward the father, / reaching to him / as if back to Spain, / to the promise of blood" (lines 11-14). However, focusing chiefly on this facet of the turbulent negotiations of power within the biracial families of the *casta* paintings leads to an incomplete observation of the scene. As indicated by the title of the book, Trethewey's focus is on the "thrall" of enforced systems of racial

status that affect each figure of the biracial family depicted in the casta painting reproduced on the book's cover. Reducing this thrall by prioritizing the biracial child looking to the white father leads to an incomplete observation of the scene, for it does not acknowledge the close, competing presence of the black mothers in the paintings, who both unite and compete with the white fathers in the child's quest for identity and validation. The child in "Taxonomy 3," for example, is indeed turned toward the father, but is positioned securely in his mother's arms. It is impossible to make a pair exclusive within this larger trinity, which is named within the poem as a "trptych." The poem concludes that this child, along with "all her kind," are "in thrall to a word" (32). While it is immediately apparent that this concluding line refers to the condition of biracial children, the larger implication is that "all her kind" refers to each of the humans in question, not exclusively to those bearing the burden of similar racial markers. Indeed, the biracial child is in *Thrall* to one of the various words that a title like "Taxonomy" connotes; however, relative to race, each of the elements of the triptych are in thrall to this identification by their respective relation to it. It is not the presence of whiteness that makes the white fathers "free," it is the property of race at work that does that. As such, they too are subject to the "thrall" that determines the fate of each figure of the triangle.

Additionally, following Trethewey and the biracial children's line of vision to white fathers and interpreting that as indicator of their place in the hierarchy of the book's attention may divert from both what Trethewey is doing and what the biracial children in her poems represent. In dedicating the book "to" her father, the poet is not merely "in dialogue with the man and his work" (Millichap 194); rather, her position is one of agency in addressing him not only as an equal, but from a position of instruction and even of interrogation. This would not be the case had she dedicated the book "for" her father. Analyzing the dynamics of Trethewey's complaint in writing to her father requires a focus on what is passing between racialized individuals who are struggling to communicate, rather than on either individual's discrete significance. For, while Trethewey has described *Thrall's* content as a very "intimate conversation," such a description does not exclude those intimate conversations proceeding from indignation: it does not deny the assertive power of the book, in which the poet, addressing her father, can be thought of as addressing whiteness, and thus, the thrall of race itself.

The first poem of the book is the bizarrely titled “Elegy”—written for a father who is still living—in which the descriptions of her father are unapologetic, even defiant. There is a daring condescension in lines such as the following: “You must remember how / the river seeped in over your boots / and you grew heavier with that defeat” (lines 10-12). This defeat is not mentioned in passing, as she elaborates: “I kept turning to watch you, how / first you mimed our guide’s casting / then cast your invisible line, slicing the sky / between us; and later, rod in hand, how / you tried—again and again—to find / that perfect arc” (13-18). As in the preceding quote, her father is depicted in terms of “defeat,” trying “again and again” to master a cast. Importantly, his daughter has already cast well enough to catch “two small fish” (19). On another level, Trethewey’s admission that she “kept turning to watch” means that she neither shirks from this image of her father, but perhaps even welcomes it—both during the experience that triggered the poem, and again in writing the poem and having it lead the collection.

However, merely following the direction of Trethewey’s gaze on the white fathers of *Thrall* diverts attention from what both she and the biracial children in the collection represent: contemporary Americans wrestling with the cultural memory that partitions each of us according to traditionally defined racial meaning. The biracial children in *Thrall* look to their white fathers not in simple admiration but in full cognizance that their fathers signify validity, which in turn affects their own process of self-identification. The child in “Taxonomy: 3” looks “to the promise of blood” for the legitimacy in which their fathers—in which whiteness itself—luxuriates. They are seeking to dismantle racist constructions by identifying with the whiteness they have partially inherited. This is the purpose of the backward glances, and the fixation is not because of the importance of the white fathers, but in defiance of it. Within the larger symbol of biracial families, the biracial child embodies the longing of many modern Americans to disentangle themselves from racial ideology. The biracial child is thus integral to Trethewey’s image of biraciality as the American condition. This can be seen in the book’s content as well as its cover, which reproduces one of the casta paintings of a biracial family. Interestingly, when speaking of the similarly revealing cover art for her preceding collection of poetry, *Native Guard*, Trethewey could easily be describing *Thrall* itself: “Being of mixed blood, is the larger metaphor that the cover suggests, and that is the intersections of white and black, north and south, slave and free. [...]”

Those very intersections are in me, in my very blood, they're in the country, they're in the very nature of history" ("An Interview," McHaney 53). She points to the condition of biraciality again as being a symbol of our society's paradoxical unity, problematized as it is by racism and other distortions of difference.

### White Fathers

This is not to say that the white fathers are not richly informative referents within the symbolism engendered by *Thrall's* biracial families. Within that larger framework, aspects of the traditional patriarchy and privilege of the American white male appear in these fathers. Despite the love they bear their children, they are consistently described as ostensible masters, depicted with objects in hand that contribute to the tension of possible violence. The very first poem sets the tone for this reading: the aforementioned "Elegy," already discussed as an indication of Trethewey's willingness to challenge her father, here emerges as significant for the object in her father's hands. She describes him with "rod in hand, [...] slicing the sky." The rod suggests any number of instruments of power, as it slices the sky. This imagery is reflected in "De Español de India Produce Mestiso," which features another father's hand, which, "*beneath / its crown of lace, / curls around his daughter's head; / she's nearly fair / as he is*" (lines 8-13, my emphases). The hand is "crowned" by lace, which suggests superiority in the same way that the fishing rod, like a scepter or whip, suggests power. Again, in "Mano Prieta," Trethewey describes her father in similar monarchical fashion: "His armchair is a throne / [...] his hand draped / across my shoulder" (lines 7-11). Images from both earlier poems are present here: the white father is positioned like a king through his use of an object, in this case a throne, which corresponds to the fishing rod/scepter and the lace crown. The hand in "De Español de India Produce Mestiso" which curls around a daughter's head is "draped" on Trethewey's shoulder in "Mano Prieta". Each image suggests the blessing one receives at the significantly placed hand of a monarchical figure.

Thus, even moments of tenderness are rendered with unmistakable implications of the power dynamics existing between the white fathers and those around them: In "De Español y Negra; Mulata," a father demonstrates only "what looks to be / tenderness: [...] caressing / his daughter's cheek, the

painter's light / finding him—his profile glowing as if / lit beneath the skin. Then, the dominion / of his touch: with one hand he holds / the long stem gingerly, pressing it / against her face—his gesture at once / possessing both” (lines 7-16). While a tender image on the surface, Trethewey's description divulges more: his touch is described only as possessing “dominion.” The stem he holds is pressed “against her face,” not like a gift, but as a forced transfer, a “gesture [...] possessing” both the child and that which he presses against her face. Similarly, in “*Thrall*,” a poem written from the perspective of a mixed-race male, the speaker confesses of his painter father: “Only once / did he fix me in paint / my color a study” (lines 70-72). Instead of painting his biracial son from a motivation of affection or pride, even this deeply personal act is “a study” in which the child is “fixed.” Then, in “Torno Atrás,” Trethewey encapsulates the connections between these historical fathers and her own in describing another white painter father. Like the other white fathers, he bears an object, and is dominant even in a moment of affection. He “renders” his wife “homely” (lines 6, 7), his hand holding a brush. Trethewey does not mince words in comparing this individual to her own father: “you might see why, to understand / my father, I look again and again at this painting, how it is / that a man could love—and so diminish what he loves” (27-29). In the personal and the historical contexts, then, the white fathers are uniformly depicted with objects and in postures that symbolize their privileged position.

With love from the fathers thus distorted, the pair of epigraphs that open *Thrall* take on enormous meaning. Trethewey quotes an initial couplet, “What is love? / One name for it is knowledge” by fellow Southern poet Robert Penn Warren, and answers it with another quote, this time from T. S. Eliot: “After such knowledge, what forgiveness?” In viewing the love of *Thrall*'s white fathers as conflated with knowledge, another aspect of these figures' symbolism becomes clear. While not depicted as kings or fathers, as the men in the preceding discussion were, the men in “Knowledge” are still in distinct positions of power, bearing objects of equal significance, and placed in symbolic dominion over an Othered figure: “The anatomist presides / [...] in his hands / instruments of the empirical—scalpel, pincers” (lines 13, 18-19). The anatomist is not merely present; he “presides” over the body of a woman. His authority is evidenced by his placement over the figure and by the instruments he holds, the scalpel and pincer, which, while tools of science, suggest violence and pain as well, even as they enable the

anatomist's empirical dominion. Mirroring this image, another man is nearby, his hand symbolically on a stack of books (25). Like the anatomist, he is not the object of anyone's gaze, and is "presiding" over the female, even as his hand guards and monopolizes the stack of books, in a nod to the poem's title. This explains why the men unfailingly "diminish" even what they love, muddling that greatest of humanity's capacities with the coldness that proceeds from racial ideology, here closely connected to the idea of knowledge.

For in each of the images of white fathers, Trethewey incorporates details which point to the Enlightenment's ideological genesis of race, a mental condition that allowed and even encouraged the supposedly superior sex of the supposedly superior race to "love" and improve (through knowledge) the lesser varieties of humankind through rightful dominion. The objects which have been pointed to—the fishing rod, the monarchical crown of lace and armchair/throne, the scalpel and pincers, the stack of books, the painters' brushes and Trethewey's father's pen—all represent not only dominion, but dominion through knowledge and learning, manipulated to render the white males as inherently superior. Most of the objects are phallic symbols, and each is part of a larger set of symbolic images that connect the fathers with America's colonial founders of race. As Trethewey points out in "Torno Atrás," the American problem with race lies squarely in the account of the white men empowered by an abuse of knowledge:

If I tell you such terms were born  
in the Enlightenment's hallowed rooms, that the wages of empire  
is myopia, you might see the father's vision as desire embodied  
in paint, this rendering of his wife born of need to see himself  
as architect of Truth, benevolent patriarch, father of uplift  
ordering his domain. (lines 22-27)

The painter who has "fixed" his son through a color study, the father who presses a stem against his daughter's face, another who embraces his daughter with a hand "crowned" with lace, and Trethewey's own father, who "studies" his biracial child: each could be seen as men needing to see themselves as an "architect of Truth, benevolent patriarch, father of uplift / ordering his domain" (26-

27). Her father, she suggests, she can understand by looking “again and again at this painting” because it models “how it is” for him to be the way that he is (28-29). The men’s continued subscription, unknowing or not, to constructed superiority, nestles contemporary examples of patriarchy and racial hierarchy squarely next to historical examples. Indeed, “Enlightenment,” another poem featuring Trethewey’s father, unabashedly references Thomas Jefferson to demonstrate this. Describing his appearance in a painting, Trethewey points to the disjunction between the founding father’s countenance and his moral knowledge: “At Monticello, he is rendered two-toned: / his forehead white with illumination— / a lit bulb—the rest of his face in shadow, darkened as if the artist meant to contrast / his bright knowledge, its dark subtext” (lines 2-6). The “two-toned” visage of Jefferson alludes to his whiteness and troubling support for racialized hierarchies, even as he fathered biracial children.

The white men from the historical sphere of the ekphrastic paintings, including Jefferson, symbolize within Trethewey’s depiction of biracial *families* the role of whiteness in the construction of race. The separations of time and space are discarded entirely, because Trethewey is not merely focusing on the physical objects in these men’s hands, but the symbolic power that their positions have in describing the social order as it existed, and as it struggles to endure. In every incarnation throughout the book, the fathers are thus depicted as apparent heads of morally ambiguous power struggles, rendering loved ones—and, by extension, anyone who is neither male nor white—in diminished fashion. Like their biracial children, the book’s men become tied to contemporary biracial families, which, Trethewey concludes, are as cross-hatched as American society itself: “History [...] links us—white father, black daughter—/ even as it renders us other to each other” (“Enlightenment” lines 52-54). Given Trethewey’s efforts in uniting historical and personal personae, and historical and personal stories, her suggestion that biracial families are symbolic of American society should not be discounted. Trethewey acknowledges the damage that racial constructions have wrought by using the image of the family, a unit that is understood to supersede differences, real or imagined. Depicting a family in racial turmoil thus inevitably provides an adumbration of the desired reverse: a family, and society, that is whole, no longer destroyed by racial inequality.

### *Black Mothers*

The final figure within Trethewey's three-part symbol of biracial families is that of the black mother. The mothers within the paintings described in *Thrall* are paired continuously with mentions of a "luminous" or "lit from within" white male. Contrasting with him, a darker woman is usually mentioned moments later, like an inverted shadow that is the object of imposing physical and cultural whiteness. This is communicated from the first pages of the book, as "Miracle of the Black Leg" introduces a concept of blackness through a sequence of poems that refer to paintings depicting a legendary surgical procedure by which a black slave's leg is severed and then surgically attached to a white man whose own leg has just been amputated. Trethewey refers to the many paintings featuring this garish scene, pointing to the black slave's appearances in each of them as a displaced and negligible component: "Always, the dark body [is] hewn asunder," separated from itself and from its surroundings by difference and rendered meaningful by its relative position to whiteness. In the "Miracle" poems, the black body becomes what has been forgotten, in addition to what has been usurped. The stolen leg represents a multitude of bodies and souls which have been possessed, and rendered inferior and disposable: "If not for the dark appendage / you might miss the story beneath this story— / what remains each time the myth changes" (lines 5-7). What remains each time is the black body, normally concealed into the background of the paintings, just as the humanity for which it stands has been brushed into the dark recesses of history. Initiating a theme she will revisit repeatedly in the book, Trethewey observes, "in one painting / the Ethiop is merely a body, featureless in a coffin, / so black he has no face" (3. 1-3). Her word choice in these lines is stunning, indicating the painters' extreme disregard for their black subjects: the boy is "merely" a body—a description which points to the painter's rendering of the black body as something completely lacking personhood. He and his face are "featureless," as though the individual were already dead and ripe for plundering even while he was alive.

This sensation of noticing a black individual melding into a dark backdrop bears similarities to those black women toward whom Trethewey's poems turn to next: In "Taxonomy: 2," the mother's face is "so black she nearly disappears / in the canvas, the dark wall upon which / we see the words that



name them” (lines 17-18); this dark wall is constructed by the painter, both to illuminate the name of his work and to all but erase the black woman also featured. The mother is present enough to “nearly disappear,” as though her presence is required for the subject of the painting, but coerced into the shadows for the viewer. The following poem, “Taxonomy: 3,” represents a woman’s womb as a “dark cradle / of mixed blood” (lines 7-8), her reproductive properties as blended with an absence of whiteness as her physiognomy. This image is discernible again in “Taxonomy: 4” in the mention of a mythic “stain: blemish: sullyng spot” (line 14) that marks non-white individuals. Such descriptions point to the ideological framework of the artists behind the *casta* paintings, who would have believed that the “stain” or “blemish” embodied in these women was inescapably reproduced in their representations of them. As reported by Trethewey in “De Español y Negra; Mulata,” the artists’ view of these women is occluded enough that they darken their surroundings, so that their bodies appear “like spilled ink spreading on a page” (line 27). Using the image of ink within this simile augments the theme of stains and blemishes, even as the mother in that poem is eclipsed by a “flat outline, / the black cloak making her blacker still, / the moon-white crescent of her eye / the only light in her face” (20-23). Only that part of her body which perceives whiteness, as she advances “toward” her husband and child, can bear any “light in her face.” In contrast to this eye, her hand “gestures—a dark signal in the air” (26), as though she possesses blackness for the painting’s sake, not only physically and reproductively, but supernaturally.

If the white men of *Thrall* represent patriarchy and the racial entitlement spawned by the Enlightenment, then these women, as glimpsed in Trethewey’s ekphrastic re-representations and in references to her own family, stand for the subjugated spheres of society. But paired with these acknowledgments of the women’s raced experiences are subtle allusions to the mothers’ collective defiance of the system. These images frequently depict the black mothers exercising agency through their position in relation to their biracial children, which parallels the white men exercising authority through the same means. In the most significant example, the mother in “Taxonomy: 1” dares to point to the joint contributions which have resulted in the state of their child: “The mother, glancing / sideways toward him— / [...] gestures / with one hand a shape / like the letter C. See, / she seems to say, / what we have made” (lines 30-31, 34-38). This image is the cover of the book, and its importance

lies not in part because of this aspect of the woman's appearance. She points to the child, toward whom the father is smiling, as evidence of her worth. This is not because of an inherent lack of worth on her part, nor simply an acknowledgment of the quantum of whiteness her biracial child possesses. Rather, she points to the biracial child because therein lies the undoing of what separates her from the whiteness encapsulated in the white father. Biracialism, to the mother, offers definitive proof of just how arbitrary their differences are, and the child is the best indication of her point that the white father can understand. It is more effective than her dignified clothing, for "the scarf on her head / white as his face, / his powdered wig" (32-34) can be removed. Such significations of status are not as effective as the gesture to her living child, the flesh and blood indication that the racial differentiation of father and mother is not insurmountable.

Additionally, even those women who are not rendered in positions of elevated status, who are clearly symbols of subjugated lives, demonstrate defiance. In "Taxonomy: 2," the mother is featured at the stove; she has to "contort" to keep an eye on her child, "her neck twisting on its spine, red beads / yoked at her throat like a necklace of blood" (lines 12-15). This is an image of profound discomfort: her physical burdens are twofold in that she is working at the stove but is also tasked with watching her child. The red of her necklace resembles blood, and the necklace itself is "yoked" at her throat like a chain. But what is startling about the image is the mother's ability to be "watchful" and protective of her child, despite these challenges. The father is neglectful, "transient, rolling a cigarette, myopic— / his eyelids drawn against the child / passing before him" (10-11). Despite the lack of violence in this image, and the allusion to the advantage of her child being able to "pass" before his father without harm (and, as suggested by Trethewey's word choice, to pass for white) the mother is protective, twisting away from the stove at which she has been stationed. This suggests that she is attuned to her child, yes, but also that her presence is not negligible in the triangle—despite the constraints of her circumstance, she exerts influence and control over her child.

"Taxonomy: 3" too features a similarly guiding mother, who cradles her child with a "careful grip" in the father's presence (line 26). Trethewey again points to such an image in "Help, 1968," in which she describes a woman "holding her charge" (line 7). While it is fair to point to the relegation of

these women to strictly maternal roles, it is equally vital to recognize how the women utilize the status of motherhood to assert their worth. Protectively nurturing the “charges” which they are seen holding indicates their importance, not their disposability. In a disarming demonstration of this, Trethewey then connects these reconstructions of the past to her own mother: “I think of my mother and the year / we spent alone [...] / when [she] took me for walks, / she was mistaken again and again / for my maid” (4-5, 14-16). When questioned about this by passersby, she reveals her mother would “say I was her daughter” (17). Like the woman in “Taxonomy: 2,” Trethewey’s mother points to her child as evidence of the personhood and worth she possesses. In many respects, this continues the work of undoing the erasure of black women which Trethewey began in *Bellocq’s Ophelia* and *Domestic Work*. In *Thrall*, however, her mother enters the text not only as a memory but as an individual whose experiences are made timeless by their association with the black mothers of the paintings Trethewey describes. As in each of the images of mothers in *Thrall*, the pervading shadow of physical blackness is drawn to the forefront of Trethewey’s poems to bring them into the light. This reversal of erasure affixes what has been obscured onto what is being revealed, like a palimpsest.

Trethewey is therefore not only correcting erasure; she is doing so in a meaningfully nuanced way by using symbolic, biracial families. Trethewey critiques racial inequality and necessitate its resolution by using this symbol, which incorporates both those in power and those in subjugation, as well as those wrestling with an indeterminate position relative to the others. It is not coincidental that the image Trethewey chose for the cover of the book features all three individuals comprising this symbol—a white father, a black mother, and their biracial child in a perfect triangle. And betwixt them, in the black space of the canvas? The title of the book: *Thrall*, that condition that binds and unites each of the individuals to each other. Through the intimate, willful connection of her white father and black mother to historical representations of biracial families, American society is thus not revealed to be black and white, or even black, white, and various shades in-between. Instead, in its racial incarnation, American society is revealed as a system of thrall itself, affecting each shade of race and flowing between and through each participant in the system which has been in place to varying degrees for our country’s entire history.

Yet such descriptions should not lead the reader away from the importance of Trethewey's use of a family. This is why the women and the biracial children in her poems cannot be described as longing for and legitimized by whiteness—since the families they form disrupt the idea of racial incongruity through miscegenation. The mothers point to their children as proof of racism's tenuous nature, while the biracial children's challenge of their fathers represents the current generation's increased resistance to its strictures. The family features individuals within a larger unit that transcends differences. This is analogous to the common bond of humans that exists beyond the fetters of social constructions like race and gender. Trethewey points to her desire to rely on these connections, as well as her conviction that such connections are not only appropriate, but beneficial:

I am greatly influenced by the words of James Baldwin, who wrote, 'This is the only real concern of the artist: to recreate out of the disorder of life, that order which is art.' I felt that I had been given, as all Americans have been given, a very disorderly history; in my personal life as well, among my family, there were many disorderly things, and I saw poetry as a way to make order out of them, to make sense out of and grapple with the disorderly stories and histories we have been given. ("Inscriptive Restorations" 1025)

Trethewey builds upon the goal of rewriting history to include each of its participants, unmasking as she does the multiracial face of American society. Whatever their appearance in the larger landscape of society, she extracts the identity of the figures in the *casta* paintings "to make sense out of and grapple with the disorderly stories and histories" of her family and her country.

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Alexandra Mulry

The *Still Up roar* of Conrad's Press: A Breakdown of "High" Literature in  
The Modern Metropolis

In Joseph Conrad's *Notes on Life and Letters*, he writes that "The printed page of the Press makes a sort of still uproar, taking from men both the power to reflect and the faculty of genuine feeling; leaving them only the artificially created need of having something to talk about" (121). This observation indicts the simple-mindedness of the press, its power, and its pandering to sensation and anxiety as the ultimate form of "hack writing," which his friend and fellow novelist George Gissing documents in his 1891 novel, *New Grub Street*. It also features in Conrad's fiction in interesting ways. *The Secret Agent* (1907) plays out first in the press, in London, the most populous city in the world, and then examines an anarchist atrocity that shocked England. The result is a fascinating duel between the novelist's skeptical engagement with empathy and nuance and his identification of the press as a commodity, which in its muffled bluster, as he described in a letter to the *New York Times*, is devoid of the "irreconcilable antagonisms that make our life so enigmatic" (Mulry 9).

The fact that Conrad's novel is his first venture into the Edwardian cityscape is significant. In his 1903 essay "The Metropolis and Mental Life," Georg Simmel wrote that the metropolis "reduces all quality and individuality to the question: How much?" (176). This reduction is what transforms the press into the "still uproar" that Conrad describes, and makes it an opportunistic trade which sacrifices artistic nuance for profit. Ultimately, the press does not have to be right—it only needs to be titillating, absolute, and without skepticism. Art, on the other hand, must surely do more. It is this changed relationship between high art and mass culture, and their increasing proximity to one another in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, which Conrad and other novelists such as Gissing attempt to expose in their own work.

In *The Secret Agent*, this exposure occurs as the press seeks, but ultimately fails, to explain the mysteries of the 1894 Greenwich Bombing, and the resulting domestic tragedy. In framing the novel

this way, Conrad ultimately is writing a reply to Gissing's own depiction of literature emerging within the highly urban and industrial metropolitan centers. Mindful of his own need to court the press in search of popularity, and mindful too, of its relative power to spread simplistic narratives as a kind of virus, Conrad's *The Secret Agent* is a very modern text in which the battle between high culture and mass culture is joined with the ideological conflicts of anarchism and public order to compete for the power of the word. The examination of this "battle," as well as Conrad and Gissing's dialogue, reveals the ongoing tensions between high art and mass culture. It also reveals *The Secret Agent* as both a self-aware analysis of high modernism and the ultimate exemplar of it.

This flawed simplicity of the press organism is first seen surrounding the event which operates as the novel's epicenter. The information released by the press following the 1894 Greenwich Bombing exposes its failings. Newspaper reports released about the bombing were concerned with the brutality of the atrocity, and broader threats of global espionage, rather than with the human drama or reality of what occurred. The horror of an anarchist blowing himself up as an act of conspiracy sells more copies and proves a more useful narrative in the provocation of public outrage by cementing the "Anarchist" as a monstrous figure of popular nightmare.

The papers did not concern themselves with the underlying political motivation of the event or the social inequities driving anarchist protest. There is no mention of what Conrad describes in his "Author's Note" as "the criminal futility" of the act (*The Secret Agent* 249). It accomplished nothing, aside from the death of the bomber, Martial Bourdin: no one else was hurt, no great symbolic structure was destroyed (though Conrad makes much of the Greenwich setting). This sensationalizing of the event reveals the press as the voice of capital, seeking to benefit from the resulting clamor of its consumers. This can be observed in an excerpt from *The Pall Mall Gazette* following the bombing, which announced that "The London police have discovered an Anarchist conspiracy, which [...] will prove to be the most desperate and dangerous of any revolutionary plot that has ever had its headquarters in London" (1894:7). The announcement is filled with sensational language such as "anarchist" and "conspiracy," and conveys the press's ferocious agenda to titillate the public by exploiting social fears and anxieties.



The press's first reports of the bombing appeared in the late edition papers that same evening. Subsequent reports in *The Pall Mall Gazette* and *The Times* continued the general tone and sensational intent of the aforementioned excerpt, going so far as to describe the mutilated body of the bomber. The *Gazette* reports that "The first to arrive [on scene] found a man half crouching on the ground, alternately moaning and screaming. His legs were shattered, one arm was blown away, and the stomach and abdomen were ripped up, slashed and torn in a dreadful fashion" (1894:7). The press celebrates the physical wreckage in bold type, and uses it to sell more copies and further stoke public anxiety to keep the story current. Their only concern was to sell the story as widely, and for as great a profit, as possible with a shocking narrative that shaped itself more quickly than the facts presented themselves.

After an immense amount of embellishment and sensationalized reports had been fixed into the public consciousness, the press retracted most of their initial accounts. Only a couple of days after the bombing and initial reports, *The Times* conceded that "The miserable man was not blown to pieces, as at first alleged, nor was he covered with the remains of the explosive in the form of a sticky black substance like printer's ink" (1894:9). This report demonstrates the corrupt tendency of the press to report first and ask questions later. Unfortunately, fallacious and titillating reports with ensuing retractions are still commonplace in today's media landscape.

Gissing mocks this very type of fallacious pandering in *New Grub Street* when hack-writer Jasper Milvain tells of a London newspaper that published two opposing reviews of the same novel, an example of a contemporary marketplace which panders to the public's fleeting interests (16). It is no wonder then why these novelists struggle to reconcile the devaluing of the written word when it was, and often still is, treated as nothing more than a commodity meant to satiate the restless appetite of the public. It endeavors to indulge rather than inform, no matter how vulgar popular taste becomes. Stories are pumped out on an assembly-line of dramatic embellishment, and while they are loud and exciting, they're empty. When this taste for vulgarity dictates what literature is produced, the result is a breakdown in high culture and the loss of artistic nuance. Gissing exposes the greed and dishonesty of hack writing by placing it next to the higher form of the skilled novelist, but ultimately allows the former to triumph. Conrad, however, going a step further as if in response to Gissing's own resentment,

cleverly chooses to expose this form of hack writing by outdoing it.

The accounts published by *The Pall Mall Gazette* were sensational enough, and they used graphic language to horrify and thrill their readers; however, Conrad magnifies this in *The Secret Agent* tenfold with Chief Inspector Heat's description of Stevie's body, the blown-up man in Greenwich Park. Heat exclaims "Of course. Blown to small bits: limbs, gravel, clothing, bones, splinters-all mixed up together. I tell you they had to fetch a shovel to gather him up with" (166). The embellishment has an immediate and visceral effect on its "consumer," because, as readers, we do not arrive at this description with firsthand knowledge of Stevie's death. The narrator does not allow us to experience the bombing in real-time. Instead, the death of Stevie, a character who represents purity and innocence, and for whom the reader has cultivated a sense of empathy throughout the novel, is reduced to a sensational headline in a newspaper, a bloody name-tag in a coat, and a horrific description by the Chief Inspector. The preceding newspaper description of the event was summarized by Ossipon to the Professor in the Silenus Restaurant. Ossipon looked at the paper and explained that "All round [there were] fragments of a man's body blown to pieces. That's all. The rest's mere newspaper gup" (57).

This same device of allowing the press to inform the reader of crucial events in the narrative is used to great effect in the paper's announcement of Winnie Verloc's suicide, and even her fear of capture and conviction in the build up to it. The press's resounding and absolute view of her death is that there is "An impenetrable mystery [which] seems destined to hang for ever over this act of madness or despair.' Such were the end words of an item of news headed 'Suicide of Lady Passenger from a cross-Channel Boat'" (242). "Madness or despair" is repeated again and again as a kind of white noise, and yet says nothing of substance in regards to her death, who she really was, or the complex narrative that had led her to commit this violent act against herself. Conrad's implicit criticism of the press's common dismissal of the "real" story is contrasted by the development, in his narrative, of the "domestic drama" between a husband and wife.

This is not to say that the press wouldn't delight and clamber to publish something as sensational as a domestic murder, but they are only interested in the sensation of the What, and not the potentially unexceptional reason behind the Why. Mass culture wants a headline, but Conrad wants

the story. He understands the higher calling of the artist to fulfill a greater aesthetic; as Fredric Jameson notes in *The Political Unconscious*, the novelist strives to “arrest the living raw material of life, and by wrenching it from the historical situation [...] preserve it, beyond time, in the imaginary” (238). This is what Conrad does in *The Secret Agent*: he “preserves” the story and the “living raw material of life” rather than exploiting it with a few sensational phrases that briefly entertain the public.

Just as with the death of Stevie, Conrad denies the reader the ability to experience Winnie’s death as it occurs. Instead, Conrad skillfully fractures the chronological framework of the narrative and juxtaposes the limits of the newspaper against the potential of the novel. This is achieved through Ossipon’s character, who, like his creator, struggles to account for the paper’s helplessness to get at the heart of the thing, the “criminal futility,” the domestic drama, and life of the woman, Winnie. Ossipon’s character depicts this limitation as a disparity between what the papers provide their consumers and what the dismissed truth—no less compelling—actually is. As the narrator describes this situation, it was “An impenetrable mystery’ [...] as far as all mankind was concerned. But what of that if he alone [...] could never get rid of the cursed knowledge” (243). The narrator continues, and clarifies, that the information and “knowledge [of Winnie’s suicide] was [only] as precise as the newspaper man could make it” and that being informed is not the same thing as “knowing” (243).

The newspaper informs the reader that “by what [the crew and passengers] could see of [Winnie’s] face she seemed to them to be dying” (244). Conrad responds to this with Ossipon’s insight, for “Comrade Ossipon knew that behind that white mask of despair there was, struggling against terror and despair, a vigour of vitality, a love of life that could resist the furious anguish which drives to murder and the fear, the blind, mad fear of the gallows” (244). Ossipon notes the more complex truth of the moment; Winnie was not a woman on the verge of death, but a woman struggling to live. The subtle beauty of Conrad’s insight here makes this nuanced shift. The press, focusing on “madness and despair,” misses the complex domestic narrative that Conrad provides.

Jameson describes this ability as “Conrad’s [...] narrative hermeneutic—what really did happen? Who knows it all? What impressions do people have who possess only this piece of the puzzle [?]” (222). In support of this narrative ideology, it seems that in reading *The Secret Agent* we are not

meant to discover the truth of the event; in fact, few of Conrad's characters actually want to uncover the truth. Many of them insist of remaining on the surface of things. What we are meant to discover is the wisdom of skepticism, of asking "what really did happen?" and of demanding more from the "still uproar" of modern-day life. This was an ideology Conrad held onto even throughout his own necessary engagement with the press during the late 19th and early 20th century (he was a skilled exploiter of the literary marketplace), as publishers, newspapers, and writers conformed to the mass-market and the metropolitan appetite for sensationalism.

The three-volume drama of the Victorian era was a dying relic and the age of newspapers, short volumes, and magazines had arrived, an era where the hack-writer prospered and the novelist struggled to succeed. In *New Grub Street*, Jasper Milvain exclaims that "Literature nowadays is a trade. Putting aside men of genius [...] your successful man of letters is your skillful tradesman. He thinks first and foremost of the markets; when one kind of goods begins to go off slackly, he is ready with something new and appetizing" (5). Like Milvain, Conrad also recognized the changed nature of the literary market, as well as the potentially profitable result of engaging with it.

The changed nature of modern life in the metropolis, with its increased commodification and advertisement, forces the modern artist to court the press. Jameson marks this change by observing that "the printed text is wrenched from its concrete position within a functioning social and communicational situation, and becomes a free-floating object, which [...] 'has the attitude of life, and yet if you ask it a question it [...] gives one unvarying answer'" (220). *The Secret Agent* is a novel which manipulates the marketplace, while discoursing on it, without ever losing the human element or *soul* in its pages.

Conrad's first submission for publication was a short story entitled "The Black Mate" to a magazine (called *Tit-Bits*) writing contest for sailors in 1886. He did not win. This magazine represented everything that was both shallow and successful in the contemporary marketplace, especially human interest stories and sensational melodramas. Even the name of the magazine, suggesting the fragmentary and ephemeral, titillates the tongue and is reduced to two syllables, as if appealing to the short attention span of the metropolis.

In *New Grub Street*, Gissing both anticipates and ridicules this kind of publication through his character Whelpdale, who desires to acquire a similar kind of publication called “Chat” and transform it into something even more sensational and successful. He exclaims that “Instead of Chat I should call it Chit-Chat [...] Chat doesn’t attract anyone, but Chit-Chat would sell like hot cakes [...] No article in the paper is to measure more than two inches in length [...] what [people] want is the lightest and frothiest of chit-chatty information-bits of stories” (422-423). In many ways, both authors are holding the consumers more responsible for the literary damage and changed market than the producers of these vulgar “bits” of stories, since it is mass-culture and the bustling metropolis which seems to dictate literary production.

Conrad’s first published novel was *Almayer’s Folly* in 1895, and only one year after its publication in book form he published the novel in a Dutch newspaper, *Nieuwe Rotterdamsch Courant*. Publishing in the newspaper, or in serialized form, often proved more lucrative for Conrad than having his novels published in book form, especially through his serialization in America and the publicity which surrounded it. His stories and works appeared in American magazines and newspapers (where they were often syndicated) and were fragmented by advertisements so that readers had to engage with the commercial-market as they consumed higher literature. In this relationship, the market benefits the novelist, but perpetuates the fragmentation and breakdown of the novel’s higher values.

However, despite the benefits, Conrad’s distrust of the press remained. In *Notes on Life and Letters*, he writes “There must be something subtly noxious to the human brain in the composition of newspaper ink” (121). His distrust of this “noxious” property, “this prophetic bosh in blunt type on [...] filthy paper,” as it’s described by Mr. Vladimir when he dismisses Ossipon’s anarchist leaflets, is evident throughout *The Secret Agent*. One example of this distrust occurs when Mr. Vladimir attempts to explain the course an anarchist attack must take to elicit the desired level of outrage from a public which has been overexposed to sensation by media and mass culture. He exclaims that “An attempt upon a crowned head [...] is sensational enough in a way, but not so much as it used to be. [...] It’s almost conventional” (25). He concedes that “Every newspaper has ready-made phrases to explain such manifestations away. [...] You can’t count upon [the public’s] emotions either of pity or fear for very

long” (26). This goes back to Conrad’s remark that the press removes the “faculty of genuine feeling.” For a bomb to elicit the true noxious and titillating means of the press, and “to have any influence on public opinion [...] must be purely destructive” and visceral (26). This relationship between the public and the press degrades the nuanced complexity of literature and the novel. It promotes the sensational novel while degrading the art of storytelling, as Gissing predicts, and Conrad demonstrates, in that fertile landscape which Jameson discusses as the “culture industry” (207).

Conrad and Gissing are not alone in struggling with this changed relationship between print and culture. In *Group Portrait*, Nicholas Delbanco cites a confession of H.G. Wells, another contemporary of Conrad’s (and dedicatee of *The Secret Agent*), and author of such works as *The Invisible Man*, that he would “rather be called a journalist than an artist, that is the essence of it, and there was no other antagonist possible” (142). The beauty of Wells’s statement, that he’d “rather be called a journalist than an artist,” is that he essentially states that the task of the journalist, to report life’s drama with a simple and marketable vision, is so much less agonizing than the “organic quality” demanded of the artist and novelist. It is ironic that a writer of such opinions would be made the dedicatee of Conrad’s novel. In a 1911 talk based on his essay “The Contemporary Novel,” Wells goes on to say that “he has been thinking about novels for twenty years—since his first review of [Conrad’s] *Almayer’s Folly* [and] the novel is, he proposes, an instrument for the amelioration of the people’s lot” (Delbanco 156). Wells essentially declares that the novel’s higher purpose is to improve the “people’s lot,” and while he begins this statement with a reference to Conrad’s work, *Almayer’s Folly*, the difference between the two novelists’ agendas could not be more distinct.

Conrad told Wells that “The difference between us is fundamental. You don’t care for humanity but think they are to be improved. I love humanity but know they are not” (Delbanco 158). This embrace of skepticism within Conrad’s work illustrates the higher values possible through the novel form. The higher value will not be found in novels that act as “instruments for the amelioration of the people’s lot,” nor will it be found in the press’s “still uproar,” which acts “according to the instrumental dialectic of means and ends” (Jameson 220). For Conrad, the value of high literature and culture “lies in the courageous recognition of all the irreconcilable antagonisms” (Mulry 9). It does not lie in mass

culture, nor does it lie in the capitalistic form of the press which depends on “only the artificially created need of having something to talk about” (Conrad, *Notes* 121).

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Emily C. Shue

A Fine Line: Conflicting Interpretations of Homoeroticism and Self-Love  
in Nella Larsen's *Passing*

Though identity is fluid for many in the post-modern world, we have not fully left behind many pre-conceived, static definitions of race, sexuality, class, and gender. Hence the importance of “passing”—a way of hiding in the semblance of one identity while also occupying another that is not seen—as a type of non-binary, ever-changing mobility between different identities with which we still struggle. “Passing” is destructive to the stable order of codes and definitions that denote our place and purpose in the world.

Nella Larsen's 1929 novel *Passing* interrogates identity within the context of race, gender, and sexual identity, and examines the consequences of failing to remain within the pre-existing structures of these identities. By “passing” as a white woman, Clare Kendry's identity is already unfixed. When she rekindles her childhood friendship with Irene Redfield, who has remained a member of the black community since their schooldays in Chicago, she defies the binary definitions of whiteness and blackness. Clare's attempt to reclaim her own, self-denied blackness occurs through Irene, as she attempts to “pass” through her friend, almost as a portal, to a world she left years ago. Irene's attempts to justify her own identity as “correct” in comparison to Clare fail when it becomes clear that Clare represents something seductive and absent in Irene's own life. This desire is often read as repressed lesbianism, but their relationship can also be read as the result of each woman's complex, sometimes contradictory attempts at self-love and validation. While Irene wishes to be rid of the increasingly complicated presence of Clare in her life, something holds her back from cutting ties completely, some intangible quality both tempting and abhorrent. As Clare becomes more and more a part of Irene's world again, the identities of both women shift and blur. Clare's marriage to a white man who despises “black scrimy devils” (Larsen 40) seems almost forgotten, and Irene's identity within her own marriage to a black doctor begins to lose the stability and permanence she is so fiercely determined to keep.

Many critics claim that Larsen's rendering of the relationship between Irene and Clare is ripe with deliberate homoerotic subtext. Deborah McDowell argues that Larsen's use of the erotic in *Passing* serves to "reopen the question of female sexuality" by placing both Clare and Irene in heterosexual yet passionless marriages, in order to safely "flirt [...] with the idea of a lesbian relationship" (88). While McDowell chooses to make lesbianism her focus, Judith Butler insists that the separation of race and sexuality is impossible because such identities overlap. Privileging sexual difference over race prioritizes sexual difference as both "more fundamental than other forms of difference," and a jumping off point from which other differences, such as race, gender, and social class are derived (6). To gain a better understanding of texts, we must understand race and sexual difference as intersecting components. To separate the two is to fail to acknowledge the historical, cultural, or linguistic intersections between sexuality and race. While Butler builds on McDowell's argument and enriches it by focusing on racial difference, both critics still believe that the erotic in *Passing* is purposefully homoerotic.

In exploring the differences between sexual desire and the desire for a different self, I do not attempt to discount entirely McDowell's interpretation that Larsen's writing had homosexual undertones. Instead, I intend to build on Ann duCille's theory that "homosexuality is often encoded textually as self-love or narcissism" (106). Larsen was one of many prominent female writers during the Harlem Renaissance, a time of artistic liberation for the black community. McDowell claims that by constructing a subtext of homoeroticism, Larsen is "exploring the Catch-22s of black female sexual desire and expression" during a time when expression of female sexuality, especially black female sexuality, was "strangle[d] and control[led]" (McDowell 94-7). The literary representation of black women with sexual passion was severely limited, steeped in both sexism and racism. The feminine in black women was confined to sexist and racist stereotypes, denying agency or freedom. There was the hyper-sexual and promiscuous "Jezebel," seductive and dangerous; "Mammy," a figure incapable of any sexual appeal or desire, mother and nurturer of white children and adults alike; and "Sapphire," whose only desire was to emasculate and control men. "Jezebel" made rape or sexual assault against a black woman acceptable, due to her alluring nature, "Mammy" robbed black mothers of sensuality or desire, and "Sapphire" was an angry, savage black woman (Bennet and Yarbrough).

While McDowell's reading translates Larsen's lesbianism into a representation of black love and sexuality, as though she only "flirt[s] with the idea of female sexual passion" (McDowell 94), I believe that this homoeroticism is a more complex representation of female black self-love and sexuality in a doubly oppressive society. While the Harlem Renaissance was indeed a time of inspiration, love, expression, and beauty for the black community at large, it occurred in a time and space in which love for blackness was condemned, and women of any race were forbidden from complex identities beyond patriarchal norms. Larsen's subtext of homoerotic desire between Irene and Clare is not, therefore, a textual strategy to convey lesbian desires, but a textual strategy in which "loving blackness becomes inextricable from loving femaleness" (Landry 27). The forbidden desire of *Passing* is not merely a disruption of mandated heterosexual identities, but rather a critique of societal restrictions on ethnic and feminine pride, told through the desires of two women.

Each woman serves as the other's passage to a more satisfactory "self," in the sense that Irene reaffirms her selfhood through Clare, while Clare attempts to construct an entirely new selfhood through Irene. However, their attempted transcendence of sexual and racial boundaries ends in the death of their new identities, and in the literal death of Clare. Irene's identity as a woman relies heavily on her status as a mother, wife, and active member in the black community. She is married to a black man, Dr. Brian Redfield, who, along with one of their two sons, is too "dark" to pass (Larsen 36). She maintains that "to her [...] safety, security, were all-important," but her charmed life is plagued by Brian's desire to move to Brazil, a desire which she does not share. He is "stealing away the sense of security [...] and] permanence" in her life, agitating the "fear that crouched, always, deep down within her" (57). Nell Sullivan writes that it is this "problematic *I*," or unstable identity, that causes her to "seek(s) an idealized image to represent herself" (377). Irene's image of this transposed identity is shown through Larsen's use of mirrors, since the "key scenes between Clare and Irene happen [...] before [Irene's] mirror" (378). In one scene, Irene is seated "at the mirror," brushing her hair. Sullivan points out that "Irene is looking in the mirror when Clare enters" (378), and Larsen's narration states that Irene is "looking at the woman before her" when she experiences "a sudden inexplicable onrush of affectionate feeling," which drives her to clasp Clare's hands and remark in awe, "Dear God! But aren't you lovely,

Clare!" (Larsen 64-5). This scene shows Irene's confusion of their two identities, as "the woman before her" could, due to the mirror, refer to either Clare or Irene (Larsen 65). Sullivan goes on to claim that when Irene cannot "master" the "superior image" she sees in Clare the dual identities Irene has constructed and merged become "more problematic" (378). While Sullivan's deconstruction of Irene's projection onto Clare is valid, I suggest that Irene does not only see Clare as the idealized image which she herself longs to embody, but rather subconsciously attempts to justify and protect her own identity through what she sees as Clare's "shortcomings" as a black woman.

While Irene herself is capable of passing, she does so very rarely. Her reunion with Clare takes place at the Drayton Hotel, a place which Irene is sure she would be "ejected from," if they somehow knew she was "a Negro" (Larsen 16). To Irene, her own, rare occupation of white space is based solely upon necessity. Her presence at the Drayton is merely an escape from the "brutal staring sun," while Clare's passing is, to her, an "abhorrent thing" (28). Immediately, there is a clear distinction between the two women which defines Irene's passing as positive, while Clare's passing is deemed negative. Although both women are passing, and therefore denying identity as a singular, impermeable truth, Irene's passing is temporary under specific conditions. To Irene, Clare's passing destroys the notion of community, while hers is merely a short rebellion, undertaken only when potentially beneficial. Clare embodies all that which Irene does not have, and, furthermore, she embodies all that which Irene claims so vehemently to disapprove of. Irene's identity, then, as a good mother, wife, and black woman is secured by Clare, who represents both the "other" and the "self." By personifying negative aspects of the "other" to Irene, Clare establishes and strengthens the positive aspects of Irene's identity. She is able to better "[identify] with the communities that define her" through Clare's "difference from those communities" (Toth 63).

Despite her numerous resolutions to be "through with Clare Kendry" (Larsen 31), Irene finds herself drawn back again. Through this closeness she is able to compare her place in the black community, which confirms her blackness, to Clare's absence from it. Irene's denunciation of Clare's "downright selfishness" in allowing her husband to use racial slurs is followed immediately by Irene's sense of "duty" to Clare through "ties of race," which she claims Clare attempted to "sever" (52). This

designates Irene as within and Clare as without. Likewise, Irene is quick to deny her own acquiescence to Clare's views of motherhood. During a tearful outburst, Clare laments her loneliness, saying while Irene is "free," "happy," and "safe," she is not. Moreover, Clare admits to being "used to risks," and a risk or two has little effect on her life if she's "not safe anyway" (67). However, Irene reminds her that she is a mother, and there may be "consequences" for Clare's "little girl," a reminder that Irene refers to as a "weapon" she uses to "assail" her friend (68).

Larsen's choice of words hints that Irene harbors a concealed aggression. By likening the conversation to a battle in which a "weapon" is needed, Clare is labelled an enemy against which Irene must defend herself. But defend from what? When Clare is at her most vulnerable, recovering from tears, their conversation is raw and personal: Clare admits her selfishness, her fear, her loneliness. Irene, meanwhile, answers with "impatience" and "cool formality." She feels a "resentment" that is eventually "swept aside." Clare is not the enemy, but a projection of the real enemy—Irene's own resentment towards the limitations of motherhood and marriage. Irene does not quell these feelings; instead, her resentment is "swept aside" by some outside force, while "her voice held an accent of pity" (Larsen 66-7). While her voice sounds piteous, she does not feel actual pity. When Clare replies that motherhood is "the cruelest thing in the world," Irene's initial reaction is to "agree" with what was "so often in her heart of late," which suggests that Clare's ability to "put [it] into words" has touched some concealed desire or thought in Irene (68). But she represses this agreement with the words that a "good" mother would speak, and reminds Clare that "mothers are all responsible for the security and happiness of [their] children" (68). Once again, Irene carefully separates herself from Clare's "selfishness," despite sharing similar thoughts. However, these attempts ultimately fail. What began as justification of her own identity in contrast to Clare uncovered the possibility that they are, in fact, very much alike. These similarities suggest that Irene desires something "other," and therefore desires Clare, Sullivan's idealized "other," in a manifestation of eroticism.

Irene's first reaction to Clare, even before they became reacquainted, was mild disapproval. Clare's interaction with the waiter, Irene decided, was "too provocative" (Larsen 15). Clare is continuously defined by her physical features, which Irene describes with a combination of envy,

admiration, and contempt. Not only is Clare “too good-looking,” with her “tempting mouth,” “mesmeric” eyes, and a smile that leaves Irene feeling “petted and caressed,” but she is liberal with her sexuality, and Irene is not the only one who falls under her spell (4, 9, 10). When visiting Clare, Irene reproaches herself for allowing Clare to “persuade” her to come with a “voice that was so appealing, so very seductive” (32-3). However, under the spell of Clare’s smile, “Irene’s annoyance with herself fled,” and she is reminded of how much she enjoys simply being in Clare’s presence (33).

This open and constant sensuality, according to duCille, is Irene’s “alter libido” (105). Brian Redfield calls sex a disappointment and “a grand joke,” showing no physical desire or affection towards his wife. Although their marriage is devoid of passion, Irene insists that it is a happy one—a self-deception that is disrupted by Clare’s sexuality. She admits that Clare is “capable of heights and depths of feeling that she, Irene Redfield, has never known” (Larsen 66), and suspects an affair between Clare and Brian, regardless of her own admitted lack of evidence. Irene’s obsession with Clare’s physical beauty is easily understood as latent lesbian desire, but it is also a manifestation of Irene’s repressed insecurities with regard to her own failed sexuality and her desire to have a forbidden sexual identity as a black woman. Having a sexual identity at all as a black woman was to exist in the double bind of sexism and racism, and to embrace black female sexuality was to embrace female blackness. Larsen’s critique of societal perceptions of black self-love, specifically a black woman’s love for herself, is clear just “because she gave her characters sexual feelings at all” (McDowell 94). The focus on Irene’s physical obsession with Clare is not meant to show Irene’s desire to be with Clare sexually, but her desire to *be* Clare, to possess the sexuality she herself seems to lack, to “wear the experiences of Clare’s fetishized body” (duCille 104), and harness the sexual freedom she has denied wanting or needing. Irene can no longer use Clare’s shortcomings to validate herself when her own husband desires Clare.

In writing a possible relationship between Irene, Clare, and Brian, Larsen also “reconfigures the triangle of desire and women’s roles within the triangle” (Landry 26). Clare’s sexuality is a vital part to her transition from the white community to the black. Clare describes herself as “lonely,” in a world in which she is “not close to a single soul” (Larsen 67). Her desire to re-enter the black world conflicts with her presentation as a white woman married to a white man. Clare cannot be seen as a black woman

while still conforming to the conventional ideals of white beauty and white happiness—more accurately, beauty and happiness through whiteness. A large part of Clare’s passing is her appearance: the color of her skin, her physical whiteness, is only a part of her presentation of whiteness. If she is, by all accounts, visibly white, she is also visibly privileged. Wealth, confidence, grace, and charm are all signifiers of her whiteness. Her marriage to Jack Bellew and his acceptance of her whiteness is what holds this in place, and merely confirms the idea that whiteness is not only synonymous with, but also a prerequisite to, beauty. In order to re-enter the black community, Clare must reject herself as beautiful in relation to whiteness, and regain beauty in relation to blackness. By acknowledging the black female body as beautiful, she does not only love blackness in an aesthetic sense, but find value in her reclaimed identity as a black woman.

This reclamation is possible only through creating and inhabiting an identity aligned with and existing within blackness, something made possible through Irene. Clare consistently displays her affection in intimate, sometimes physical ways. In their first encounter, Clare stares unabashedly at Irene with an “intense interest” and with eyes that “were ready to smile” (Larsen 16). Both Clare and Irene begin their rekindled friendship on the basis of physical attraction. Regardless whether this attraction is sexual in nature, it is undeniably strong. Clare’s flirtatious nature is not merely a tool, but also a means of expressing warmth. Her effect on Irene is often comforting, and she displays what Irene calls an “obvious gladness at their meetings” (30). Upon meeting Clare again, Irene’s irritation vanishes after Clare greets her with a smile and a kiss (33). Later, her resolve to ask Clare to leave is immediately forgotten after “a kiss on her dark curls” (65).

This display of physical affection, while short, is significant. The deliberate mention of Irene’s “dark curls” is a signifier of black female beauty, and Clare’s kiss is not only for Irene, but specifically for her hair, a sign of black womanhood. Clare’s hair is a “pale gold” (Larsen 161), another physical trait that holds no sign of blackness, while Irene’s curls are “a sign of beauty tied to a distinctly African-American and female identity” (Landry 41). Irene’s mixed racial identity was “always” interpreted as “an Italian, a Spaniard, a Mexican, or a gipsy” (Larsen 16). Before recognizing Clare in the hotel, Irene reminds herself that she had “never [...] even remotely seemed to suspect that she was a Negro” (16).

It is clear that her skin is not dark enough to signify blackness. By kissing Irene's curls, Clare chooses to bestow an act of intimate affection on the most prominent physical symbol of Irene's blackness. After their first meeting, Clare tells Irene to send affection "to your father," giving her "this kiss for him" (30). Clare later greets her "with a kiss" again. The only time Irene does not receive a kiss hello or goodbye is in the presence of Clare's husband. Bellew, believing he is in the presence of a white woman, punctuates his conversation with racial slurs and stereotypes. Unable to hold in her "anger, mortification, [and] shame" (42), Irene parts with a simple handshake, a neutral gesture that lacks physical intimacy or affection. It is not until two years later that Clare and Irene meet again, and "before Irene could greet her," Clare kisses Irene's "dark curls" (65). Estranged for years after a conversation about hating blackness, Clare's first gesture is to kiss these curls, showing "her longing for a woman of mixed ethnicity who consciously allies herself with the black race" (Landry 39). The curls have always represented "Irene's desire to align herself with African Americans," and now, with a kiss, "Clare's desire for that desire" (40).

Later, when Irene asks her husband, Brian, what he thinks of Clare's beauty, he denies any attraction to her solely based upon her whiteness, claiming he likes his "ladies darker" (Larsen 80). This changes later in the novel, when Clare has become a regular attendee of parties and social events in the black community. Brian's interest in her, as a man who prefers "darker" women, shows that she is becoming "darker," if not literally. This moment implies that she has successfully found self-love through Irene, and succeeded in her construction of a new identity.

However, Clare's life as a newly black woman is short. Her ties to whiteness are not easily broken, and the unclear, unforgiving line between black and white will not allow Clare to exist without a fixed identity as white or black. Josh Toth writes that the possibility of a "self" is reliant upon "a stable community [...] that encompasses and defines the individual" (55). While Irene's "self" is defined by motherhood, marriage, and blackness, Clare's "self" is depicted as fluid, undefined, and inaccessible. She attempts to find her "self" in blackness through Irene, but the space she attempts to occupy in the black community is unable to contend with her unfixed "self," which leads to her death. By moving back and forth between blackness and whiteness, and simultaneously belonging to two communities at odds



with one another, she threatens to perform what Toth refers to as “deauthenticating community” (55). Clare’s shifting identity “provokes hysterical and violent reactions [...] that speak to our [...] potentially dangerous need to maintain the illusion of [...] stable identities” (57).

While Toth claims that Clare’s death is not, as bell hooks argues, a “punishment” for loving blackness in a white supremacist society (Landry 27), but a demise necessitated by the social order to restore balance to a divided world, I would argue Clare’s death is a combination of these two interpretations. Clare’s ability to love blackness in a white supremacist society was dangerous. The very idea of a white and black society is derived from absolute, unchanging definitions of the self and the community to which that self belongs. Because her “self” was not derived from adherence to such social standards, but from another black woman, Clare’s selfhood was deemed inauthentic. Her attempts to define herself as a black woman through Irene challenged both the white supremacist ideals of society and the foundations of identity politics within that society (Landry 57). Clare Kendry was guilty of choosing to identify as a black woman over a white woman, and she was guilty of obtaining this identity in blackness by appropriating a fellow black woman in order to obtain her identity. Clare’s relationship with Irene, in which she has access to the black community without being a literal part of it, becomes a transgression against the race she refuses to fully embody. Clare Kendry’s death alludes to the fact that a love for blackness is not only discouraged, but deadly. Likewise, her attempt to transcend “self,” and therefore definitions of self that support racial divides, serves as an example of the consequences of nonconformity.

Larsen does not resolve the question of identity in *Passing*. Rather, she constructs a text that renders the very question itself dubious. Is it truly possible to pass through the definitions of race, sexuality, and gender? Does Clare’s death signify that this is truly impossible, or simply that we make it impossible by demanding strict, boxed-in identities? Can the “self” only exist as what society dictates it should be? Is “passing” an act of denial, or an act of survival? Clare Kendry’s death is two-fold. By successfully passing through multiple, contradictory identities, she threatened the laws of identity necessary to maintain order. It is not the act of passing that disrupts the social order. Rather, it is a refusal to pass: the visible non-conformity of multiple selves, and the inability to perform those selves

correctly. Failure to present a cohesive identity suggests that there are no stable definitions of identity or self, which endangers hierarchal power structures disguised as “natural,” and threatens to render them obsolete.

The “finale” is death, not answers. DuCille argues that Larsen’s lack of finality puts Clare and Irene in a position to hold these questions up to “scrutiny, if not ridicule, as signs of *the times*” (108). Larsen forces readers to examine black self-love, female sexuality, and nonconformity through homoeroticism as a textual narrative, which represents a forbidden identity in and of itself. By producing a text so complex and rich, Larsen reminds us that even within a time of free-thinking and revolution such as the Harlem Renaissance, black women were silenced and their femininity regulated. Clare’s and Irene’s attempt to disrupt this narrative by refusing to conform to a singular identity again and again alludes to the presumed safety of whiteness and security, and the dangers of blackness and disruption of the social order. In *Passing*, Larsen asks how, if at all, black women are to exist in a culture with such strong ties to white supremacy and sexism. She shows the intimate struggles within a culture that assigns “selves” produced through a social order contingent upon racism, sexism, and control. Through Clare and Irene, Larsen explores the possibilities of passing through and beyond those limits to transcend social regulations and reclaim black femininity.

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## Stones and Souls: The Function of Alchemy in Modern Young Adult Fantasy

### Introduction

In the minds of people who lived about five hundred years ago, the concept of alchemy wasn't a fanciful legend; it was a seriously practiced science that held the promise of turning lead into gold, mortals into immortals, and even decaying remains into fully-revived human beings. However, to most people today, these once-sacred alchemic notions now tend to seem at once laughably implausible and completely obsolete. Indeed, in the same way that Latin is often thought of as a "dead" language, alchemy is often thought of as a "dead" tradition—an old-world magic that became irrelevant the minute modern science came in and debunked the possibility of its existence. Still, although alchemy is undoubtedly impossible, the practice's most basic principle—taking lackluster raw materials and turning them into something far greater—continues to exist and thrive in today's works of fiction, giving protagonists and villains alike an outlet to defy death, wield supernatural power, and recover what they've lost.

Specifically, alchemic themes have a particularly strong presence in two widely-beloved young adult literary gems: *Harry Potter*, a whimsical coming-of-age British novel series about an orphaned wizard; and *Fullmetal Alchemist*, a steampunk war manga series about two teenage brothers employed by their fictional country's alchemically-driven military. At first glance, it might seem to readers none the wiser that these two stories have nothing in common with each other—and that they have nothing to offer beyond escapist entertainment—but it's uncanny how similar and sophisticated they are, alchemic overlaps notwithstanding. Firstly, J.K. Rowling and Hiromu Arakawa—the two respective authors of the above series—are both extremely successful female writers whose publishers initially forced them to take on ambiguously gendered pen names in order to appeal to an expected male/teenage demographic. Additionally, although both series were conceived and carried out on

different sides of the world, they were written around the same time: the original British version of the first *Harry Potter* novel debuted in 1997, with its seventh and final book published worldwide in 2007; the original Japanese chapter of the first volume of *Fullmetal Alchemist* debuted in August 2001, with a new chapter of its eventual total of 108 published monthly until June 2010. Regarding the two series' plots, they share several general arcs: both deal with flashback accidents that caused people to lose their original bodies (Lord Voldemort's attempted murder of *Harry Potter*, and the Elric brothers' failed attempt at reviving their dead mother); and both deal with a proposed genocide of a supposedly inferior race (pure-blooded wizards against non-magical people [muggles] and immortal Homunculi against regular humans). Above all, the most striking similarity between these two series is a mutual fascination with and exploitation of alchemical items—primarily the legendary Philosopher's Stone—that help to uncover the workings of the soul.

#### Part 1: Alchemy in History

To those who have read the first *Harry Potter* novel and/or even just a few chapters of Arakawa's manga, the Philosopher's Stone will have become a very familiar and distinguished object. After all, it's the life force that could've granted Voldemort a newly immortal body (were he to be given the chance to use the stone), and it's the driving force that promises to restore Edward and Alphonse Elric's natural human bodies (should they manage to obtain a stone for themselves). Before either of these stories came into the world, though—way, *way* before—the Philosopher's Stone existed as powerful legend at the heart of real-world alchemic theory. In *Alchemy: Ancient and Modern*, H.S. Redgrove writes that “Alchemy is generally understood to have been that art whose end was the transmutation of the so-called base metals into gold by means of an ill-defined something called the Philosopher's Stone” (1). Indeed, as the vagueness in Redgrove's writing implies, part of what makes this object so intriguing is that there *is* no absolute, consistent fact of what it's called, where it's from, or how it works; the legends and rumors vary from retelling to retelling. For instance, it's known as *the Sorcerer's Stone* in all American editions of Rowling's first novel, but the Stone—which will be used as a working shorthand from here on out—also went by other names in different instances. (A popular alternative is

the “Elixir of Life” or “Elixir of Longevity.”) In fact, sometimes it isn’t even portrayed as a *stone*; certain storytellers depict it as a potion or as a solid-liquid hybrid, as Arakawa does in her drawings. On top of that, the understanding of the Stone’s origins has also evolved. While *Fullmetal Alchemist* lore states that the Stone is created by sacrificing multiple human lives, actual researchers seem to have thought that easy-to-find, non-essential bodily ingredients could do it. Indeed, Lawrence M. Principe’s *The Secrets of Alchemy* illustrates this theory by mentioning different alchemic recipes that call for things like salt, hair, and even urine—all of which could supposedly lead to the formation of the Stone (119).

Most notably, though, aside from producing gold, as Redgrove has it, the Stone has also been linked to medicine as an object thought to heal the sick or wounded, bring the dead back to life, and/or keep people from dying at all. It seems to be this last purpose with which practitioners, wishful commoners, and monarchs were most fascinated. Especially given that this idea of creating immortality came about in a time when life spans were depressingly short and disease frighteningly prevalent, it only makes sense that people would want to find some way out of their bleak fates, and so they turned to the practice of alchemy as a last-ditch and often spiritually-taboo way of defying the course of nature. Indeed, perhaps the most famous among all alchemic scholars is Nicholas Flamel—a man fictionalized as a centuries-old creator of the Stone in *Harry Potter* but who lived from the mid-14th to the early-15th century as a desperate, fruitless seeker of the Stone and its powers. According to Don Keck DuPree in “Nicholas Flamel: The Alchemist Who Lived,” the real-life alchemist in question wanted to find the Stone not only “to bring his wife, Perenelle, back from the dead and gain immortality for himself” but also “to create gold for him to do good works” (74). Interestingly, unlike the common scenario of someone researching alchemy *solely* to make themselves rich or live forever, Flamel seems to have had multiple, morally-conflicting motivations for going after the Stone. He wanted to defy death, but only so that he could bring back his beloved wife. He wanted to learn how to make endless amounts of gold, but only so that he could enrich the lives of the poor people around him. Taking these facts into account, it’s hard to say definitively whether he was *justified* in wanting to find and use the Stone. However, his case study still illustrates that dabbling in alchemy almost always involves some amount of moral transgression on the part of the alchemist—an issue that will be discussed in much more detail

later with regards to Rowling's and Arakawa's works.

After all, as prominent as the story is in today's pop-culture, the Philosopher's Stone and the pursuit thereof isn't the only aspect of alchemic theory worth mentioning. One often overlooked but important detail is that even though it never produced anything tangible, just *practicing* alchemy allowed old-world researchers to hone a sort of basis for modern-day science. Indeed, in *Disknowledge: Literature, Alchemy, and the End of Humanism in Renaissance England* Katherine Eggert states that "alchemy lent method, if not quite yet science, to what would become the scientific method of hypothesis and experiment" (4). Still, for all the empirical exploration that alchemy kick-started—and all the financial and medicinal rewards it promised to help people reap—Eggert maintains that alchemy was far from being a perfect, universally accepted practice.

At first, this perspective might seem counterintuitive; after all, how could something so *hopeful* possibly be bad? Firstly, the advertised "alchemists" who went around peddling such addictive ideas to overly-eager customers—only to leave them penniless and as mortal as ever— inadvertently stigmatized their own craft. As Eggert puts it, "by the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the very word *alchemy* was convenient shorthand for obfuscation, misguided learning, and outright scams" (5). Secondly (and more importantly), to some religiously moral sticklers, it didn't matter how supposedly noble or widely-beneficial one's goal with alchemy was; just the very *pursuit* of alchemy—and all the lucrative, death-defying trimmings that came with it—was an unforgivable act of avarice that would essentially curse whoever was bold enough to attempt it. DuPree emphasizes this point by mentioning the true story of a man named Marco Bragadino—an early modern Italian alchemist who initially made a fortune selling useless "miracle" drugs to a gullible, infertile woman. The scammer later got his comeuppance when he was jailed and then beheaded for trying to make a customer out of a duke who eventually saw through Bragadino's tricks (80-81). Regarding Bragadino's story, DuPree remarks that "Clearly, approaching alchemy and the Philosopher's Stone with cynical or self-seeking motives could rebound on the alchemist" (81). Indeed, never is this statement truer than with regards to the plots of both *Harry Potter* and *Fullmetal Alchemist*, wherein several main characters—protagonists and antagonists alike—consistently face dire consequences for daring to toy with the promising but damning power of alchemy.

## Part 2: *Harry Potter* and the Temptation of Immortality

As many dedicated readers might testify, one of the reasons the *Harry Potter* series is so compelling is because it consistently imparts a plethora of life lessons to its readers: that circumstances of birth and potential for greatness have nothing to do with each other; that there is always a silver lining in every horrible situation; that the ability *to* love and *be* loved is the greatest power there is. However, as inspiring as these books tend to be, they also feature plenty of dark, cautionary, hard-to-swallow lessons as well, and among these is a very important one that is also driven home in Arakawa's manga series. In short, playing with, running from, or trying to come back from death *never* works out for the people who try—and there are plenty of means through which people try, most notably the aforementioned Philosopher's Stone.

Although it plays a much smaller role in *Harry Potter* than it does in *Fullmetal Alchemist* (it's only featured in the first book and very briefly mentioned in the sixth and seventh), the Stone still has a significant amount of lore surrounding it within Rowling's novels. For one thing, as one of Hermione's schoolbooks points out in the series' first novel, *The Sorcerer's Stone*, "*the only Stone currently in existence belongs to Mr. Nicholas Flamel [...] who celebrated his six-hundred-and-sixty-fifth birthday last year*"—which, eerily enough, is just a year shy of reaching 666, a satanic number in Christianity (220). Just from this fact alone, it's obvious that the Stone is an extremely rare and powerful item that can work death-defying wonders for its owner. However, those wonders don't come easily; after all, as Hogwarts headmaster Albus Dumbledore mentions to Harry five books later in *The Half-Blood Prince*, "[the Stone] must be drunk regularly, for all eternity, if the drinker is to maintain their immortality"—which means that the Stone, while effective in keeping drinkers alive, isn't at all reliable or foolproof and is a very inconvenient way to go about becoming immortal (502). Still, despite these shortcomings, the Stone is the first thing that the very desperate, bodiless Voldemort goes after to try to rebuild himself after killing Harry's parents and losing his original form in *The Sorcerer's Stone*. At this early point in the story, though, he's not looking to extend his life as is; he just wants to have an independent, solidified body again—which, all things considered, is arguably the tamest, *least* evil thing he tries to do



throughout the entire series and should not be enough yet to give alchemic karma a reason to punish him. Nevertheless, the fact remains that getting a new body, while not a pursuit that hurts someone else, is still something that Voldemort wants to do for *himself*. So, the Stone—wired through the Mirror of Erised (the backwards spelling of “desire”) to give itself up only to people who want to “find it, but not use it”—is only accessible to Harry, a boy who merely wants to keep the Stone from Voldemort long enough to bring it back to Dumbledore for safekeeping (300).

Interestingly, this representation of the Stone seems to be unique to the world of *Harry Potter*. After all, in most other fictional representations of the object—in *Fullmetal Alchemist*, too—anyone who *wants* to use it *can* use it at the risk of his or her own moral guilt. Here, though, because no one but Flamel and his wife actually gets the opportunity to drink from the Stone in the first place, it’s not portrayed to be as nearly damning or dangerous an item as it usually is. Still, by the end of *The Sorcerer’s Stone*, Dumbledore has realized that “the Stone was really not such a wonderful thing” and works with Flamel to have the only known Stone destroyed, leaving the ancient alchemist to die naturally and the shattered soul of Voldemort to continue seeking a way to create a new body for himself (297).

However, even though Voldemort goes without a physical form for a long time (he doesn’t get one until he performs a sacrificial blood ceremony at the end of the fourth book, *The Goblet of Fire*), this ethereal essence of the Dark Lord initially doesn’t have to worry about dying out, owing his resilient existence to a seven-part backup plan that he’s had in place for many years and has gone to extreme lengths to protect: his collection of Horcruxes. First brought up in a flashback in *The Half-Blood Prince* by the very impressionable master of potions Horace Slughorn to the very curious teenaged student Tom Riddle (Voldemort’s original name), Horcruxes are, as Slughorn reveals, “object[s] in which a person has concealed part of their soul” (497). Such a description may seem innocent enough, but Slughorn soon goes on to explain that making use of such a resource doesn’t come without cost. After all, as he mentions, “Splitting [the soul] is an act of violation, it is against nature” (498). Not only that, but murder is required to make a Horcrux, and according to Slughorn, murder is “the supreme act of evil [...] Killing rips the soul apart” (498). This fact, combined with their outright unholiness, causes Horcruxes to be considered one of the vilest forms of magic in the wizarding world. Just *considering*

taking advantage of such a shady practice is understandably unfathomable to most wizards. After all, the Horcruxes aren't an explicit form of alchemy *per se*, but like traditional alchemic items, they still require sacrifice and constitute an unnatural tampering with the soul, so they're feared by most people and are never handled by the faint-of-heart. To Tom Riddle, though—someone who has always feared death above anything else—the Horcruxes are an irresistible and seemingly fail-safe method for him to obtain immortality and invincibility, and so he has absolutely no qualms about creating one for himself.

In fact, after hearing what can be accomplished with just *one* Horcrux, Tom presses the idea much further than probably anyone else before him had thought to do, slyly suggesting “Wouldn't it be better, make you stronger, to have your soul in more pieces, I mean, for instance, isn't seven the most powerfully magical number [...]?” (498). Indeed, despite Slughorn's warnings, creating multiple Horcruxes is exactly what Tom pursues, purposely infusing six different pieces of his fractured, morally-ruined soul into his own diary and other personal items that belonged to three out of the four Hogwarts founders (he never manages to make a Horcrux out of any of Godric Gryffindor's possessions) as well as his obedient pet snake Nagini. Afterwards, having created his half-dozen Horcruxes and placed what he was *sure* were impenetrable layers of protection around them, Tom/Voldemort foolishly lets his guard down, deluded into thinking that he's now impervious to any kind of retaliation. As he slowly and painfully comes to realize, though, the Horcruxes are far from being flawless safe havens for his soul, seeing as—in the final novel *The Deathly Hallows*—Harry and his friends *do* find ways to obtain and destroy the Horcruxes, poisoning, stabbing, and burning them one by one until all that's left to go after is Voldemort himself. What's more, in addition to the aforementioned Horcruxes, Voldemort unwittingly stores a seventh Horcrux inside *Harry Potter* himself the night that he attacks baby Harry and his parents. Unfortunately for the Dark Lord, though, this accident ultimately sets him up to kill off a vital part of *himself* when, in *The Deathly Hallows*, he casts a failed *Avada Kedavra* killing curse at Harry that only attacks the Horcrux and not the life of his most dangerous rival.

So, although at first they appear to offer Voldemort a surefire way to escape death, the Horcruxes turn out to be just as ineffective as any other method to do so—and this is the most crucial fact when discussing the role of the Horcruxes within the context of alchemic themes of the *Harry*

*Potter* series. After all, it's not how powerful the Horcruxes are (because they certainly are powerful) but how *impermanent* they are. They might seem to be the best way for someone to go about becoming immortal, but in the end, they're just a temporary solution to an unsolvable problem—like an extra-sticky Band-Aid that effectively covers a deep cut at first but eventually peels off after being dipped underwater or picked at one too many times. Remarkably, though, Voldemort never quite grasps the impossibility of immortality or truly comprehends the issues with his plan—not while he's alive, and not even while the deformed, shrunken representation of what's left of his soul moans and withers away in the second-to-last chapter of *The Deathly Hallows*. As Dumbledore tells the sympathetic Harry, "You cannot help"—reaffirming the inevitable doom that befalls those like Voldemort who seek out ways to live forever (707).

Although he's arguably the most prominent example, Voldemort isn't the only character in the *Harry Potter* series to try to exploit death-defying items. And while it is the most explicitly "alchemic" (as opposed to "magical") item in the story, the Philosopher's Stone isn't the only *stone* that Rowling's characters use in alchemic fashion. As part of a wizarding children's story called "The Tale of the Three Brothers" that's featured in *The Deathly Hallows*, the Resurrection Stone is introduced as one of three objects that the titular Peverell brothers earn from a personified Death after using magic to cross a typically-impassable river. The other two objects—the Elder Wand and the Cloak of Invisibility—are given to the first and third brothers respectively, but the Resurrection Stone is given to the second brother, who is described as "an arrogant man" and tells Death that, as his prize, "he want[s] to humiliate Death still further, and ask[s] for the power to recall others from Death" (407). The Resurrection Stone is designed to do just that: to bring the deceased back into the world of the living. However, through Death's malicious loophole, those who are resurrected don't come back to life *exactly* as the second brother had hoped; rather, they appear as pitiful, ghostly versions of their former selves—as is the case with the second brother's fiancé, who "was sad and cold, separated from him as by a veil. Though she had returned to the mortal world, she did not truly belong there" (409). Consequently, not being able to bear seeing his fiancé suffer like that, the second brother's sadness and self-loathing drives him to suicide, thus giving his soul back to Death as should've happened at the river.

Indeed, judging by the example of the second brother's fate, it's a fruitless endeavor to try to reunite with dead loved ones by taking them back from the grave, but that knowledge doesn't stop other people in the series from seeking out the Resurrection Stone's power in heated moments of desperation and longing. Most shockingly, even Albus Dumbledore—the wise, level-headed, and beloved headmaster of Hogwarts—eventually admits to Harry at the end of *The Deathly Hallows* that he once shamefully let himself be tempted by the allure of the Resurrection Stone (then one of Voldemort's Horcruxes made into a ring), hoping to use it to bring back his deceased family members. He especially wants to reconnect with his little sister Ariana, whom he may have killed decades prior in a freak crossfire accident. As he laments to Harry in the King's Cross Station, "I picked [the ring] up, and I put it on, and for a second I imagined that I was about to see Ariana, and my mother, and my father, and to tell them how very, very sorry I was" (719-720). Essentially, Dumbledore wanted the Resurrection Stone to heal old wounds, and for his part, Harry finds no fault with that, exclaiming "It was natural! You wanted to see them again" as if Dumbledore's explanation is a perfectly reasonable excuse (720). After all, Harry empathizes with this temptation, having given into it himself just one chapter beforehand, when he calls on the spirits of his parents as well as Sirius Black and Remus Lupin—the latter both family friends—to comfort him as he makes his way to Voldemort to be killed. However, what sets Harry's desire to defy death apart from Dumbledore's—and indeed, from Voldemort's and the second Peverell brother's, too—is the fact that he *means* all along to eventually give himself over to death without a fight. He never tries to make himself immortal out of a fear of dying, and he isn't hoping to use resurrection to ease a selfish loneliness. (In fact, once he's seen all he can bear to of his four deceased loved ones, he throws the Stone into the Forbidden Forest so that it can never lead another person astray again.) Instead, he admits in the penultimate chapter of *The Deathly Hallows* that he "meant to let Voldemort kill [him]," to which Dumbledore replies "And that [...] will, I think, have made all the difference" (708). Indeed, as one of its core messages, the *Harry Potter* series emphasizes that the only way to avoid the repercussions of alchemic pursuit and become a *true* "master of death" like Harry is not to prolong and/or revitalize lives that are naturally meant to end but to *accept* death and face it head-on when the time comes.

### Part 3: *Fullmetal* Parallels

Switching gears to a lesser-known but still heavily moralistic series, Hiromu Arakawa's 27-volume manga (or Japanese-style graphic novel) *Fullmetal Alchemist* deals with many of the same alchemic themes of immortality, sin, and the permanence of death; it just explores them in a much more explicit way (which isn't surprising given the series' title). The main story revolves around two teenaged brothers: Edward Elric (Ed), the titular, double-amputee elder brother who wears metal "auto-mail" prosthetics and serves as a state alchemist for his country Amestris's military; and Alphonse Elric (Al), the younger brother who exists as a soul attached to a large, humanoid suit of armor and tags along on Ed's missions. At the start of the first volume, it's revealed that the two brothers got into their strange bodily predicaments a few years prior, having tried to use "human transmutation"—a taboo alchemic ritual—to revive their recently-deceased and beloved mother, Trisha. Sadly, though, the attempt quite literally blows up in their faces, leaving Ed with no flesh below his left knee and Al with no body at all. What's worse, the ritual turns out to be a failure; all it creates is a moaning, misshapen pile of bones and blood that quickly dies again. Still, being a sort of alchemic prodigy, Ed is able to salvage some minor relief from the situation, sacrificing his right arm as payment so that Al's soul can stay bound in the physical world. Left with nothing but each other and the bitter, hard-hitting realization that—even with alchemy's help—bringing back the dead is truly impossible, Ed and Al decide to leave their rural home and lend their alchemic powers and know-how to the Amestrian military. In doing so, they hope that their involvement will lead them to find something that, up until now, they'd only ever heard of in their absentee alchemist father's leftover research notes: the Philosopher's Stone.

Mostly drawn as a tiny, viscous, pebble-shaped solid but also occasionally appearing as a liquid in a corked test tube, the Philosopher's Stone is an extremely important and widely-desired object in the lore of Arakawa's series, thought to be the solution to otherwise impossible problems. Unlike in Rowling's novels, though, there's not just one Stone in existence, and its power isn't only limited to granting immortality. In response to someone who thinks he and Al want it for further attempts at human transmutation, Ed clarifies in Volume 1 that "The reason we want the stone is to get our

original bodies back,” implying that it has restorative healing powers (66). However, this is hardly the only thing the Stone is good for. After all, to certain power-hungry fighters, possessing the Stone is a way to strengthen attacks so that they can more effectively wipe out their enemies. To Lin Yao and May Chang (a respective prince and foreign alchemist from the Xing country), it’s a gateway into the good graces of their dying emperor, who plans to make an heir out of the first person who can bring him a way to cheat death. To the seven immortal Homunculi (who will be explored in more detail later), it’s a precious life force that also grants them rejuvenation and nearly flawless invincibility. Still, regardless of what it’s used *for*, the catch to using the Stone at all—similar to the catch to using the Horcruxes—is that it’s made from the mass murder of human lives. Just as is the case with Voldemort, some of Arakawa’s characters—like the sadistically murderous Amestrian soldier Solf J. Kimblee as well as all the Homunculi—have no issues with the Stone’s origins and never hesitate to take advantage of its powers. However, to the well-meaning Ed and Al, this fact is an immediate deal-breaker. (Incidentally, though, in two separate life-or-death situations much later in the series, Ed and Al are each forced to make use of a readily-available Stone in order to survive, but neither brother ever ends up using one to get his body back as originally planned.) Still, during their childhood and then at the start of their journey, this horrifying truth isn’t something that the Elric brothers are aware of. It’s only during Volume 3 after meeting up with Tim Marcoh—the Amestrian doctor forcibly hired to make Stones out of war prisoners—that the brothers learn how the Stone is created, after which point they’re loath to use it for their own goals. Playing on the fact that he can’t regain his old body without compromising his morals, Ed cynically remarks “I guess God really does have it in for us sinners,” showing that, despite his good intentions, he’s just as vulnerable as anyone else—real or fictional—to the promises of the Stone (470).

Although Ed considers himself and his past actions to be sinful, there are other ill-meaning characters in the series, however, who do far worse things with alchemy. In particular, the main antagonists of the series—the aforementioned Homunculi—exist with Philosopher’s Stones at their physical core but only use them for truly evil purposes, killing off as many Amestrians as possible so that these people’s souls can be harnessed in a mass-scale transmutation of the entire country. Created by a humanoid being called Father, the Homunculi are each named after Christianity’s seven deadly sins—

Lust, Gluttony, Envy, Greed, Wrath, Sloth, and Pride—and each have an appearance and personality tailored to fit that name. For instance, Lust is a busty seductress who spears her victims with her razor-sharp fingernails; Gluttony is a short, obese man who tries to eat anything—and anyone—in sight; and Envy is an androgynous, shape-shifting murderer who revels in turning people against each other. Still, intimidating though the beings sound, the Homunculi's supposed invincibility is just as exploitable as the Horcruxes's, as the Elric brothers and their allies eventually defeat each of the Homunculi throughout the series in the same sort of race-against-the-clock way that Harry and his friends go after Voldemort's soul-infused treasures.

More importantly, as each of the Homunculi is an extension of the so-called Father's soul, he has supposedly expelled each of these sins from his own being with the creation of each Homunculus. When questioned in Volume 24 about why he wants to be rid of these innate human flaws, Father responds by saying "I do not wish to be human. I will become a perfect being" (414). Interestingly, this logic is horribly similar to Voldemort's desire to rise above mortality through the creation of his seven Horcruxes. Although they go about it in different ways, both antagonists use alchemic techniques to split their soul into seven distinct and accursed pieces, hoping to erase traces of their humanity.

With regards to the protagonists of *Fullmetal Alchemist*, though, their biggest similarity to those in *Harry Potter* lies in a blatant desire to bring back dead loved ones—especially parents, as evidenced through Harry's visions of James and Lilly Potter in the Mirror of Erised in *Sorcerer's Stone* and Ed and Al's sharp pangs for their mother throughout the entire series. Still, *attempting* to revive the dead is just as sinful a practice to the Amestrians as the Horcruxes are to the wizarding world. In fact, in speaking of Ed and Al in Volume 1, a minor character accusingly shouts "Those two dared to do the one thing forbidden to alchemists [...] the unspeakable crime of human transmutation!" (59). As mentioned earlier, this crime involves toying with nature to try to revive someone but only coming up with a half-dead, non-human mess of flesh—which, interestingly, is very similar to how those affected by the Resurrection Stone in *Harry Potter* come back as sad, ethereal versions of their former selves. Indeed, both series emphasize the fact that neither magic nor alchemy is enough to overcome death, and so people should stop making attempts to do so. For the Elric brothers' part, because they were

so traumatized by what happened to Trisha, they have learned the pointlessness and repercussions of human transmutation and can't ever be tempted to do it again.

Still, they aren't the only characters in *Fullmetal Alchemist* to learn about the impossibility of resurrection the hard way. A housewife-slash-alchemy-expert named Izumi Curtis and a military colonel named Roy Mustang are two additional protagonists who get drawn in by the lure of human transmutation—even knowing full-well that there are dangers involved with such a taboo ritual. Izumi is so desperate for a child after a miscarriage that she tries to use human transmutation to revive her unborn baby—a process that ruins her internal organs and causes her to vomit blood regularly. Additionally, when Roy sees his cherished friend and lieutenant Riza Hawkeye get her throat slashed by a crony of the Homunculi, he's painfully tempted to use human transmutation to save her life, ultimately being forced into it at the cost of his eyesight. Interestingly, though, as with the Elric brothers' case, none of these bodily side-effects are random. In fact, Father gloats in Volume 25 that “For every human who dares challenge the natural order, a fitting punishment is meted out to put them in their place,” which explains the codependent Elric brothers' cold, metallic bodies, the motherly Izumi's infertility, and the ambitious visionary Roy's blindness (125).

After all, extremely harsh though it is, this karma is a hallmark of the series' alchemic lore, acting as an example of the following principle explained by Ed in Volume 1: “The basis of alchemy is the ‘equivalent exchange!’ That means that to obtain something, something of equal value must be lost” (26). Indeed, this metaphor is the foundation of the entire story; it's the logic behind many of the main characters' actions, especially the attempted human transmutation of Trisha, when Ed ruefully laments to Al that “All I could get for one arm was your soul” (64). (Interestingly, in the *Harry Potter* series, Dumbledore makes an eerily similar remark to Harry in *Half-Blood Prince* when, in relating how his hand has been ruined from wearing the ring-turned-Horcrux, “a withered hand does not seem an unreasonable exchange for a seventh of Voldemort's soul” [503]).

Accordingly, then, getting Al's *entire* body back—not just his soul—should naturally come at a very high price, and it does. In the final volume of the series, after Al offers up his soul

to get Ed his flesh-and-blood right arm back, Ed ends up sacrificing his ability to use alchemy



to pull Al's withered human form back into the physical world. However, he's not upset about losing this power. Smiling knowingly, he says "Even without alchemy I'll still have all my friends," to which a being called Truth—the personification of alchemic karma—proudly responds "That's the correct answer, alchemist" (520). This moment echoes Harry's abstract moment of revelation with Dumbledore in King's Cross; here too, an otherworldly being praises the main character for figuring out the best way to deal with death. Indeed, just as Harry discards the Resurrection Stone and then returns the Elder Wand to Dumbledore's grave so that neither item can ever corrupt another person, Ed also becomes a sort of "master of death" when he relinquishes his alchemic powers for the good of someone else, finally realizing that the answer isn't to *defy* death but to *welcome* it with open arms—even if one of those arms used to be made of metal.

### Conclusion

Given all the above examples, it's clear that the two very different series—one about wizardry and the power of love, the other about alchemic forces and brotherly bonds—have much more in common than it initially seems, and this link mainly comes from the ways in which alchemy is featured throughout each of their stories. For instance, both series feature the Philosopher's Stone—a real-world legend—and take certain pieces of this legend as inspiration for the Stone's role in their own plots. Additionally, both series' main antagonists—Lord Voldemort and Father—use dark forces to create seven supposedly indestructible objects and beings that are all eventually destroyed. What's more, just like with the second Peverell brother and Dumbledore's use of the Resurrection Stone, *Fullmetal Alchemist* offers instances of protagonists letting love tempt them into death-defying sin: Ed and Al want reunite with their mother; Izumi Curtis wants to raise her unborn child; Roy Mustang wants to save his lieutenant. Oddly, though, none of these instances should be considered examples of particularly evil desires, and yet all six of these characters are still severely punished for such, losing parts of their bodies (as in the case with those who use human transmutation) and even their lives (as in the case with the second Peverell brother). Finally, the two main protagonists of the series—*Harry Potter* and Edward Elric—are two selfless yet flawed characters who ultimately achieve their goals through learning to

accept death instead of trying to overcome it.

Overall, then, what all these overlaps suggest about alchemy's use in fantasy is that it *isn't* a perfect, miraculous way to overcome death, like people from centuries ago once thought. Instead, it's an outlet through which characters learn that death *can't* be overcome under any circumstances—not even through methods as mighty as the Horcruxes or human transmutation. Still, as depressing and anticlimactic as it may seem, this ultimate takeaway from both stories isn't at all meant to be a hopeless reminder that death is an inevitable and unforgiving force. Instead, it's meant to reassure readers that death is simply a part of life and isn't nearly as scary or horrible as people tend to make it out to be. After all, as Dumbledore wisely remarks in one of his most famous lines from *Sorcerer's Stone*: “to the well-organized mind, death is but the next great adventure” (297).

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Allison Barrett

The Identity In-Between:  
A Historical Close Reading of Sylvia Plath's "Morning Song"

Sylvia Plath, one of the most celebrated poets of the twentieth century, has become one of the world's most well-known psychiatric patients. Her writing tends to be viewed less as commentary on history and culture and more often as a presentation symptomatic of her mental state. Dr. James Kaufman has even coined a term that links creativity and mental illness in female poets: the "Sylvia Plath Effect" (Bailey). A recent Google search on "Sylvia Plath mental illness" produces 1,010,000 results; a search on the same search engine with "Sylvia Plath historical significance" brings up around 593,000 results—a drastically reduced number.

It is no secret that Plath suffered from mental illness, but this kind of assessment limits the readings of her work. Annika Hagström claims that Sylvia Plath has become more legend than anything: Hagström goes through an exhaustive list of the different ways in which Plath's death is used to illustrate gender inequalities, but more so to depict the stereotypical life of a mentally-unstable, spiritually-tortured individual. Another scholar, Zsófia Székely, finds Plath's mental history significant and interesting in the context of her work, but only considering that facet "limits [the work's] power." She argues that Plath's poetry should be read in the context of history and human identity, rather than as Plath's attempt to exorcise her demons.

While these scholars look at Plath's work less as a pathology of the mind and more as a pathology of the time, we still need to explore its historical relevance. For example, the concept of motherhood appears in the first poem of Plath's posthumous *Ariel* (1965), "Morning Song." A reader may be inclined to view the poem as diagnostic of a mental illness such as post-partum depression, but this interpretation neglects the fact that this poem was written in a time of great tension for those experiencing motherhood. It is my intent to explore Plath's poem "Morning Song" through close reading as a lens into the historical context relevant to human identity, especially maternity. In

identifying the issues these mothers faced during this time period, Plath's poem represents the difficult transitions many mothers encountered in order to meet mid-twentieth century American cultural expectations.

On the surface, Plath's poem "Morning Song" details a moment in the life of a woman who wakes up early in the morning to attend to her crying child. Upon breaking down the figurative language, however, we see through the comparisons between seemingly arbitrary inhuman subjects and the speaker or her child that these associations point toward complex relationships, such as those indicating not only distance between mother and child, but also a disassociation of the speaker from herself. In addition, there are meanings located in the associations made through the speaker's perspective that communicate her perception of motherhood, involving the shift from being the "speaker" to also a "mother." These perceptions complicate the relationship between the mother and her child, and even reveal the loss of the speaker's identity as it existed before becoming a mother. This loss of identity speaks to the mid-twentieth century's concept of what constituted a mother, resulting in the loss of self that the speaker of the poem experiences as she loses who she once was and cannot become the woman American society demands.

This loss of identity is *not* just a symptom of private pathology; rather, it is suggestive of the struggles many mothers face when attempting to define themselves through the relationship with their children. For example, "Morning Song" begins with the speaker-mother detailing the birth of her baby, comparing the baby to a "New statue" (lines 4-5). By comparing her baby to a lifeless statue, Plath implies that the baby lacks a personality, a life, or even basic humanity—the infant is inanimate and removed from the speaker. The notion of a baby as a statue in a "drafty museum" (line 5) also reinforces the idea that the baby, like a statue, was created by an artist as something to be admired by others; however, the speaker reveals her distance from the infant by housing it in a "drafty" museum. In other words, an uncomfortable current of air flows between mother and baby: the baby is something to be looked at, but not held. This distance, illustrated early in the poem, shows the immediate trouble that the mother encounters when attempting to define her child as a living being, and demonstrates a kind of detachment within the mother-child relationship.

Even more evidence of this distance between the mother and her child in the poem can be seen not just in the descriptions of the baby itself, but also in the speaker's choice of phrasing when she describes herself as a mother in relation to the infant. A sense of space between the speaker and her baby demonstrates a gaping rift separating the mother and her child. The speaker begins the following stanza with the statement, "I'm no more your mother/ than" (lines 7-8). This phrasing already prepares the audience for an illustration of the distance between the mother and child. The use of "no more" inevitably followed by "than" implies not only a disconnection with the object of comparison, but also a seeming disavowal of ownership of the object. This disavowal can be clearly seen if one chooses to interpret the phrasing of "I'm no more your mother" as "I'm not your mother," perhaps serving as a commentary on a kind of interpersonal separation, but also possibly a statement on the physical separation that occurs between mother and child during birth. However, through Plath's choice not to use that direct phrasing, and to instead write, "I'm no more your mother," there lives a connection between the mother and child—albeit a considerably strained, distant connection. Plath uses this distance to further demonstrate the broken relationship between speaker and child.

In addition to demonstrating distance in the mother-child relationship, the line "I'm no more your mother" could also reflect the speaker's internalization of her perceived failure to meet social expectations of motherhood. In her essay "Gender," Myra Jehlen makes the claim that gender "is not a category of human nature" but instead "cannot[es] history" (265). Therefore, it would be logical that Plath's historical and cultural context would influence the construction of her poem, as the feminine gender has become inseparably intertwined with the American cultural concept of motherhood. In the mid-twentieth century, particularly the 1950s and 60s, American women were relegated to certain roles. The men returned from World War II and women left the workplace where they had struggled to earn a position during the earlier era of the New Woman. They returned to the home, where they took care of the children and other domestic affairs. Betty Friedan, writer of the ground-breaking text *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), suggests that this return to the Victorian conceptualization of women as innocent creatures who were made for reproduction and submission (referred to as "Angels in the House" in a 1854 poem by Coventry Patmore) was likely influenced by the then-popular thought that

it was a female's "biological destiny" to be a mother (36-38). In turn, this theory was backed by many of the leading scientists, particularly Dr. Benjamin Spock, one of the leading theorists at the time on child development. While Spock later qualified some of his earlier work, much of his writing leans on the assumptions that all females are "natural" mothers, and that the mothering role is inherent. For example, in his book *Problems of Parents* (1962), he claims that while all parents should have a sense of devotion to a child, because the child is the mother's "forever," it is assumed that she in particular will be devoted to the child (4-5). In other words, the child is not entirely the mother's responsibility, but it's the mother's role always to serve the child, often in self-sacrificing ways. And, in fact, during this time period, there was an assumed "symbiosis" between mother and child (Friedan 289). Additionally, Diana Curtis mentions how, during the post-World War II period of Plath's writing, the concept of a mother rejecting her child was entirely taboo (185). Mothers of the WWII generation felt guilty for not connecting to their children as was expected. According to Diane Eyer's *Motherguilt* (1996), mothers of the 1950s and 60s followed the pronouncement of the "baby gurus" of the time like a religion—in particular, Spock's word was law (3-7). With this belief so pervasive within American culture, of course a woman with a child who did not live up to these expectations would feel some sense of estrangement from her role as a "mother," as Plath demonstrates in "Morning Song."

Following the implied distance in the poem is the comparison of the experience of motherhood to the different states of a cloud, which is representative of the speaker's changing role as a mother. The altered states of the cloud illustrate the loss of the identity of the speaker as she once knew herself. In the poem, we see that the speaker thinks, "I'm no more your mother / Than the cloud that distills a mirror to reflect its own slow/ Effacement" (lines 7-9). With the set up for motherhood and distance already seen in the first line, the comparison to a cloud would lead one to think that the mother is the cloud and the events that affect the cloud are the effects of motherhood. The poem depicts the cloud as vapor that is "distilled," or, as the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) defines it, condensed into water droplets. This would lead the reader to believe that the cloud—the mother—goes through a change in state: the cloud becomes water droplets that fall to the ground. And through having the cloud "distil a mirror," Plath creates an image of a mass of visible vapor that disappears as droplets of rainwater pool

like a puddle to create a reflective surface, a “mirror” in which the speaker sees herself disappearing. By comparing the speaker to a cloud that dissolves into water droplets, Plath suggests that the role of motherhood forces an altered state upon the speaker, who slowly drains away until she is “effaced.” The OED also defines “efface” as an act that one does to “rub out” or “obliterate” something “so as to leave no distinct traces” of whatever existed before. (Interestingly, effacement is also the medical term used in the process of childbirth: OED defines it as the “obliteration of the cervical canal.”) As the mirror forms from the distilled water, the speaker’s reflection disappears. The speaker’s “effacement” then could be her identity prior to motherhood dissolving away until “no distinct traces” of who she was before remain. Instead, the shattered pieces of her—the droplets of the effaced identity—form the product of the process which erased her: the child. The mother and the child cannot exist simultaneously, so the mother’s identity leaks away as a result.

This loss of identity in assuming the role of the mother is unsurprising in Plath’s historical environment, as many women—despite popular culture’s depiction of them—experienced a loss of direction in terms of self-definition. Friedan writes that in the 1950s and 60s, a “woman no longer has a private image to tell her who she is, or can be, or wants to be” (72). Like Plath’s speaker in the mirror, the woman Friedan describes becomes lost as her reflection, her understanding of herself, fades away. The mid-twentieth century woman as she was before motherhood is lost in an identity fog: the New Woman had an idea of who she was and what she wanted to do, but the Happy Housewife and Good Mom live only for feminine fulfillment (Friedan 33-68; Eyer 69-70). So, as we know, she looks to popular culture to “decide every detail of their lives” (Friedan 72). Therefore, those who dominate the culture dominate women’s personal images. If a woman fails to meet these images, she is offered no alternatives, and becomes lost: she is not the person she was before, and she could not be a mother, so she is nothing. This nothingness could be the effacement of Plath’s speaker—a removal of who she was and, because she feels this distance from her child and therefore does not meet the standard of “mother,” the placement of her into a nameless role.

We see in the following sections of the poem, however, that the loss of the mother’s previous identity leads to the formation of the child’s. This formation of the child’s identity, in contrast to the



earlier comparison with a statue, indicates an evolving relationship between the mother and child. For example, the speaker notes that the child breathes “moth breath” and that the baby’s mouth is “clean as a cat’s” (lines 10, 15). The associations in these instances illustrate how the child possesses characteristics that remind us of non-human attributes, which is reminiscent of the comparison to the museum statue, also a non-human object. However, there is a significant difference: where the statue is simply a cold slab of stone, both moths and cats are *living* objects. From statue to moth to cat, we see the speaker’s description of the child evolving from the “statue” that was presented earlier in the poem to organisms that possess sentience, a kind of consciousness. Additionally, the dehumanized metaphors are softening as they are brought to life, invoking images of the gentle brush and beat of whispering moth wings, as well as the plush fur of a cat. These softer images are more in line with how we conventionally picture babies: soft, delicate beings that require contact and warmth. This evolution of comparisons reflects the relationship between mother and child: as she grows accustomed to the baby, the offspring gains more of an identity both to her as a living being and as a historical subject.

It is only after the woman has been “effaced” that the child begins to become alive, but this birth of the child’s life arrives at the expense of both the child and mother’s human identities. Friedan explains how mothers who had lost their sense of purpose through motherhood began searching for one in their children: they would obsess over details of their children’s lives and begin to place the children in situations they themselves wished to experience (282-309). This kind of vicarious learning is what Friedan deems “dehumanizing” to the child, as he or she becomes a medium of living for the woman who, stuck in the identity fog, cannot see that she is still alive (282). Carol Hanisch defines “Mother love” as “[A] woman finding her identity through another person. That’s a terrible burden on the child and [...] also a paralysis of the woman’s human development” (79). In essence, the mother’s humanizing of her child after the loss of her own human identity leads to the dehumanization of both of them.

This formation of the child’s identity does not, however, eliminate the detachment of mother from baby. An illustration provided in the latter half of “Morning Song” demonstrates this relational gap: “I wake to listen:/A far sea moves in my ear” (lines 11-12). If, as popular wisdom has it, a person may “hear the sea” in a seashell when he or she holds it up to the ear, a reader might interpret this

line of the poem as the speaker listening to a shell to hear her baby. The fact that the speaker needs something like a seashell—i.e., a mediator—to hear her child implies a disconnection between mother and child. However, if we take into account Plath's transcontinental move from the United States to England, we may interpret the "sea" as that which separates her from who she was prior to becoming a mother. The drafting of this poem was done in England, a continent away from her home in New England, a place she had left as a single, career-driven woman. It was only after arriving in England that she met her husband and had children. In this context, perhaps the "sea" is the distance Plath feels between who she was before she became a mother. Either way, the mention of "a far sea" suggests a distance, a vast relational disparity between the mother and child as well as between the mother and her prior non-mother self. "Sea" also serves as a reminder of another word that appears earlier in the poem: "draft." Both "sea" and "draft" contain currents, and, as they are used in the poem, one can infer that the currents in both of these images work to carry the speaker farther away from the object she is trying to view and hear: her child.

Additionally, the line "Wake to listen" points toward the speaker's pre-maternal identity replaced by the "effaced" self. Earlier in the poem we saw how the speaker loses a sense of who she was before motherhood, and now we see a new sense of identity forming—one entirely devoted to serving the child. We not only see that the speaker lies awake to listen for her baby's cries, but also that "One cry" sends her "stumbl[ing] from bed, cow-heavy" (line 13). So the speaker listens attentively, waiting for that "one cry" that she will need to address. She also refers to herself as "cow-heavy," which compares the speaker to a domesticated animal that lives to feed others. The attention the speaker has and the way she perceives herself suggests that she takes on a new identity: one devoted to serving the baby. According to this interpretation of the speaker's choice of words, motherhood wipes away the speaker's previous ideas about herself and her role, and replaces it with a considerably restrained one: a mother expected to prioritize and devote herself entirely to her child. As a result, the mother's identity, too, is dehumanized: she perceives herself as livestock, a cow kept in an enclosure to serve only as a source of food for her child.

The poem concludes with the speaker looking out the window at the morning sky, and the way

in which she views the world around her in this moment reflects the loss of her previous identity—the major cost of motherhood for the speaker. The speaker comments, “The window square/ Whitens and swallows its dull stars” (lines 15-16). This language conjures a series of images: that outside the “window square” the night sky is filled with stars. When morning comes, the dawn “swallows” the “dull stars.” The shift from night to morning indicates a major change in the perception of the surroundings and time. The morning that the speaker perceives—this shift in environment and time, from night to day—results in the “swallowing” of the stars. With the mention of “swallowing” one cannot help but think back to the “cat’s mouth” that appeared earlier in the poem. The cat, as we have seen, is representative of how the mother understands her child. Therefore, it is possible for one to hypothesize that the “cat’s mouth,” that is, the *child’s* mouth, is the one doing the “swallowing.” So the star, an object known to shine brightly in the night sky, is swallowed—possibly by the child—and dulled by the shift to morning. Like the cloud, this change in surroundings/time and personification of the sky is an implicit comparison to the effects of motherhood on the mother. “Morning” also drastically differs from the “night” before, as it is a dawning of a new day that swallows the night before it. In other words, the identity of the speaker before she became “mother” is lost to the introduction of a child and the great shift that accompanies motherhood. As the stars that once shined brightly are now swallowed and dimmed by morning, the speaker, who once knew herself as someone else, undergoes an alteration as a result of motherhood. Motherhood results in the speaker’s loss of her prior identity, and confusion about who she is now because she does not meet American society’s expectations of who she should be.

With this interpretation of the effects of the impending morning, we can finally begin to understand the title of the poem. Assuming that the words “Morning Song” replicates the morning that the speaker depicts near the end of the poem, the title potentially holds within it the loss of identity that morning’s end inevitably brings as a result of the child’s existence and the experience of motherhood. Furthermore, “morning” is a homophone of “mourning,” the act of grieving over a loved one. So the title “Morning Song,” as it details the loss of the speaker’s previous identity before it was “effaced” or dehumanized by motherhood, is also a “mourning” song.

Székely’s article “Giving Birth to Ourselves” makes the interesting suggestion that a number

of Plath's poems that focus on birth-giving can, in fact, be interpreted as a kind of giving birth to a mother's new self. Specifically, in relation to poetry in general, she states, "Birth-giving is a kind of resurrection—losing an old self and a body, receiving a new one." I believe that this approach can easily be applied to "Morning Song": the narrator is struggling to find a new identity, the previous one presumably lost after having given birth to her child. However, Székely later comments that, although birth-giving often functions as a symbol of resurrection, she suspects that the various birth-giving moments in Plath's poetry are very much affected by the oppressive time in which they were written, resulting in poems that contain birth-giving that is not resuscitative of the mother's self, but instead produces experiences associated with "aggression and distance" as the speaker becomes "swallowed" by motherhood. Because of her status as a woman and mother, the speaker lives in a society that does not offer any alternative paths for her; she is trapped in this identity in-between, a being that is stuck in a moment that is neither night or day, but instead is white-washed like the fog that effaces those it swallows.

We see now that in Plath's "Morning Song" a series of intricate comparisons which reveal the complicated difficulties of the mother-child relationship, especially the loss of the speaker's previous identity and the formation of a new one as a consequence of motherhood. While such "distance" and "loss" of motherhood may sometimes bring negative connotations, perhaps it was Plath's intention to break the mold into which society has forced mothers and to construct new expectations of the life-changing role. Whether it was Plath's intention or not, with these redefined boundaries, today's readers can gain a deeper understanding of and hopefully empathize with young mothers who are confused, depressed, or feeling a general disconnect with what is expected of them based on predefined roles. Understanding the spectrum of emotions that accompany birth may lead to greater acceptance of the evolutions and changes women experience with motherhood. Unfortunately, Plath died before this identity in-between could be exposed in the rise of second-wave feminism. Fortunately, however, for today's readers, "Morning Song" provides a text of solace, an opportunity for those mothers who feel inadequate or otherwise unable to meet certain social standards to feel validated in a way that Plath might not have had the chance to know.

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Diandra Alvarado

The Monstrosity of Language: *Frankenstein* and the Descent into Cultural Misrepresentation

*The world was all before them, where to choose  
Their place of rest, and Providence their guide*

(Milton, XII 646-47)

In “Exploring the Universe with John Milton and Mary Shelley,” David Poston recounts his experience of teaching *Frankenstein* and *Paradise Lost* to his students, highlighting their responses to these complementary works. As they study both narratives, his students begin to ponder the “mystery of the universe and the ways of God and humankind [...] cultural past and culture future [...] their] own nature and limits” (Poston 28). Undoubtedly *Frankenstein* can evoke intense emotions and thoughts in regards to creation and responsibility, especially when the Monster is not merely a grunting disfigurement that wreaks havoc without reason. However, by pairing *Frankenstein* with *Paradise Lost*, Poston allows his students to discover the similarities between Shelley’s Monster and Milton’s Eve—creations that were neglected and ostracized by their creators, ultimately leading to their sin and downfall. Milton created “a God [...] that] manipulated an Eve who was [...] unprepared to deal with Satan, just as Victor, playing God, sent his creation into the world [...] unprepared and uncounseled” (30). From this interpretation, the students begin posing questions about these creatures, and how they were “both victims of their creator” (31). Poston’s students’ analytical observations of Milton and Shelley mirror the popular interpretation of *Frankenstein* in terms of Victor’s thoughtless neglect of his creation.

It was easy, almost instinctual, to come to the same conclusion when I read *Frankenstein* for the first time. From a young age, Victor had the desire to play God and go beyond the capabilities of man, unaware of the consequences and responsibilities of his actions. However, there is more to Shelley’s tale regarding responsibility and the Monster’s fall than Victor’s abandonment. Poston and his students dive deeper into this text, utilizing the tools of the reader-response school of criticism to do so. Poston’s students kept a notebook of their comments and reactions to each chapter of *Frankenstein*,

allowing them to pause their reading and think critically about whatever struck them as interesting or troublesome. This method led one of the students to make an insightful observation of Shelley's work: "I believe if the creature hadn't read *Paradise Lost* he would have remained good" (33). Such a statement provokes many questions: what effect does *Paradise Lost* have on the Monster? Does it shape his destiny? Does it play a larger role in how people view each other, creation and themselves? As Poston states: "*Paradise Lost* represents a culmination of centuries of cultural tradition, an immeasurably deep storehouse of myth, literature and theology" (28). Therefore, crucial questions present themselves: how deep are the roots of that "cultural tradition" in society and the minds of common people? How deep are those roots in the mind of Victor?

With these questions in mind, other schools of thought needed to be employed. Peter Brooks' "Godlike Science/Unhallowed Arts: Language, Nature, and Monstrosity" employs a structuralist approach to Shelley's work, discussing how the Monster's mastery of language serves as a compensation for his deformed figure, making him an eloquent creature. This is true; through language, the Monster learns reason, demonstrates a refined intelligence, and can easily appeal to a person's compassion. The Monster is mindful of the power of language and how to utilize it in order for people, even for mere seconds, to realize that he is a being with thoughts, feelings and dreams. Brooks highlights a moment in the novel when Victor's disposition towards the Monster momentarily shifts from disgust to compassion: "His words had a strange effect upon me. I compassionated him" (Shelley 147). This passage conveys the Monster's purpose with language, in regards to creating relationships. It is a means of connecting with man, despite obvious physical differences. It is language that will allow the Monster to be man's equal. Structuralists emphasize "the symbolic order [...] of language, the systematic and trans-subjective order of the signifier, the cultural system into which individual subjects are inserted" (Brooks 207). It is only in language that the Monster feels that he can overcome his physical deformity, thus enabling other people to look past his outer appearance. Through the symbolic, the Monster then believes he can transcend monstrosity to become a human being worthy of compassion and friendship.

Once identifying language as a symbolic order, Brooks then suggests that the Monster's exclusion from communication is in fact monstrous itself, with regard to the chain of existence.

According to Brooks, “the term chain [...] identifies meaning as residing in a systematic network of relation, in the symbolic”—thus a signifying chain (208). The Monster wishes to “become linked to the chain of existence and events, from which [he is] excluded” (Shelley 147). However, the Monster cannot communicate with man because the latter is unable to look past his physical appearance. Since positive communication with man is improbable, the Monster believes he will only begin to signify through the creation of a female monster that he can communicate with on a similar level. Therefore, the Monster views a mastery of language as a means for integration into existence and recognition. Brooks views Shelley’s narrative as a commentary on language, with its power to express love, purpose, and compensate for an appearance that is not true to one’s self.

However, as the Monster’s acquisition of language has shaped his perception of identity and morality, it has also consequently limited his perception of self. This is prevalent when the Monster conveys how he views himself to Victor: “Remember, that I am thy creature; I ought to be thy Adam; but I am rather the fallen angel, whom thou drivest from joy for no misdeed. Everywhere I see bliss, from which I alone am irrevocably excluded” (Shelley 100). Eloquently spoken, yes. A misinterpretation of roles and identity? Perhaps so. Through his readings and internalization of *Paradise Lost*, the Monster concludes that his only role in this world is that of Lucifer—a fallen creature that was cast out of Heaven, destined to cause chaos and pain to others. Although the Monster was “united by no link to any other being in existence,” God created Adam, “a perfect creature [...] guarded by the especial care of his Creator [...] as well as] allowed to converse with and acquire knowledge” (124). The Monster, therefore, sees more disparaging difference than similarity between himself and Adam. Even though the Monster has an empathetic nature, only ever wanting companionship, he is led to believe that he is incapable of such pleasures since it does not fit the “wretched, helpless and alone” role of Lucifer (124).

The Monster expands his knowledge, widens his vocabulary, and develops a nuanced sense of ethics and morality. Yet, in doing so, he has also limited his sense of identity, subjecting himself to the restrictive identifiers present in hegemonic language, established centuries before his creation. He is left with the shortcomings of contextual language that is shaped by one of the most important,



well known texts in the world: the Bible. Although the Monster does not directly read the Bible, he is familiar with *Paradise Lost*, which is “a natural extension” of the text (Poston 33). The Monster wishes to overcome the limitations of his deformed figure through the notion that “language as a symbolic order [...] must compensate for nature” (Brooks 210). While Brooks does recognize that language is vital for the Monster in his pursuits to be part of the chain of existence, he makes a paradoxical statement about such language: “the Monster unerringly discovers language to be on the side of culture rather than nature, and to imply the structures of relation at the basis of culture” (209). Although Brooks mentions culture as an important component of language, he does not delve deeper into the kind of culture we see the Monster encounter through his reading of *Paradise Lost*, which shapes his self-identification.

In “Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and Milton’s Monstrous Myth,” John B. Lamb uses a new historicist and post-structural approach to illustrate the implications that language can have on identity, specifically on how *Paradise Lost* shaped the Monster’s misguided understanding of self. Lamb argues that identity is a verbal construct: a product of cultural naming that has led the Monster to an unavoidable misnaming of his role amongst man (305). In the early stages of the Monster’s life, during his acquisition of knowledge and education, the Monster becomes most familiar with *Paradise Lost*. The Monster regards this work as “true history” (306).

Shelley makes a clear link between language and the creation of the monstrous. The Monster characterizes language as a “godlike science” that he has mastered, believing that this will allow him to compensate for his hideous form, which would then enable him to shape his own history and gain control of self. However, Lamb makes a clear association between Milton’s two fallen male figures and the Monster’s shaping of his own identity. Since Milton’s work serves as a “commandment of being,” the Monster views Adam and Lucifer as his only two options for autonomy and selfhood (306). After an internalization of the text, since he is not beautiful and perfect like Adam or admired by his Creator, the Monster can only identify with the Lucifer figure. Lucifer exemplifies the only figure that has achieved true autonomy through his isolation, which parallels the Monster’s experience amongst men.

While Poston focuses on the parallels between Eve and the Monster, Lamb highlights the shared likeness between the Monster and Victor, in regards to the essence of their pursuits. Victor

and the Monster both “seek mastery over origins and the fullness of presence” (Lamb 312). While Victor uses science and philosophy to go beyond the realm of human capabilities, the Monster tries to use language to transcend the boundaries of self, escaping the limitations of life and identity. Ironically, though, it is language itself that is monstrous: it has become a cultural system with a pre-established hierarchy that defines all possible definitions of being—in this instance, Adam or Lucifer (312). Therefore, the monster is not a master of language, but rather language masters his identity, which has been limited by the cultural hierarchy in language.

Poststructuralists like Lamb believe that there are frameworks and systems of language that create hegemonies to establish a hierarchy. Therefore, critics of this school of thought deconstruct the language of the text or analyze the rigid limits that language has on interpretation. Lamb argues that Shelley consciously used *Paradise Lost* as the Monster’s guiding text in order to expose how “the illusory bourgeois individualism” present in language limits self-expression and identity (306). When the Monster had no knowledge of language or the use of it, he was a creature of free will. He was not limited by labels or prescribed social roles. Although detached from other human beings and communication, he was not shackled by a “monstrous” self-fulfilled prophecy that he falls into once language and its cultural implications identify him as so. Lamb’s focus on the effects of *Paradise Lost* on the Monster and the institutionalized limitation of identity illustrates its predominant presence throughout history, especially in the 19th century when the molds of self-expression began to crack. It is the “monolithic and monologic voice of *Paradise Lost*” that created “ontological boundaries” within Shelley’s era (317). New historicists believe that literature should be interpreted within the context of that historical and cultural period; Lamb associates Shelley’s work with the cultural misnaming of identity in the 19th century as a result of the “limited and limiting taxonomy of language,” with *Paradise Lost* as its guiding material (312). Like the Monster, society has adopted certain ideologies in works like *Paradise Lost* as “true history,” which has thus created a linguistic system to inhibit all forms of self-expression and identity. Shelley’s novel serves as a representation of how Milton’s epic creates a false sense of identity due to residual concepts and ideas that existed in 19th century culture (308).

Although many critics have discussed the effect of language on the Monster, it is crucial to

examine further how these limitations in the linguistic system not only aid in the Monster's fall, but Victor's as well. This idea of the cultural system in language is exemplified through the reader responses that Poston incorporated into his critique. Poston recognized that in the several communities in which he taught, "the Bible stories [were] often the first and best-known stories, ones which have real value as part of the students' culture" (33). Since these biblical stories are many people's first exposure to morality, society is more inclined to treat them as a guiding text, much like how the Monster treated *Paradise Lost* as his guide. If the Bible is prominent in modern society it can be assumed that it had an even firmer hold on those in the 19th century when those ideals were habitually encouraged.

This point relates back to a question posed earlier: how deep are the roots of that "cultural tradition"? Yes, the pre-established hierarchy of language present in *Paradise Lost* and its implications on the Monster has been analyzed thoroughly. However, the significant impact that such language has on Victor, his views of the Monster, and his sense of responsibility for it, have yet to be analyzed fully. Lamb recognizes that Victor juggles the two ideals of Adam and Lucifer. Victor regards himself as a "rebellious angel" who has gone against his father's wishes in pursuit of the beyond (309). Even so, while identifying himself with the Lucifer figure, he also has an Adam-like focus on beauty and good. Victor views his creation as a failure—a heinous, disgusting Monster with its "horrid contrast with watery eyes [...] shriveled complexion and straight black lips" (Shelley 57). His clear disappointment with his creation signifies the impact that *Paradise Lost* has had on his perception of what/who is worthy of his love and admiration, or, conversely, his disdain and hate. His mind is shaped by this hegemonic language; therefore, due to those predetermined influences, Victor's creature is thus monstrous and unworthy of compassion. However, if analyzed closely, it will become clear that Victor is also working within a limited set of identifiers before him, leading to a misguided perception parallel to his Monster.

Although Victor grew up with a fiery desire to explore the depths of science, his mind was heavily influenced by the hegemony of language. Through his study of natural philosophy, Victor wants to obtain the "glory [of the] discovery if [he should] banish disease [...] and make man invulnerable" (Shelley 29). Already at a young age, Victor wants to emulate God. Rather than study his admired predecessors and add to their findings of natural philosophy, he wants to be an almighty force that

goes beyond man to perform the impossible. After the tragic death of his mother, Victor forsakes this ambition and his studies. Interestingly, one would think that a personal tragedy like this would further inspire someone who wants to rid the world of all disease. However, it is the natural philosophy professor, M. Waldman, who awakens Victor's early ambitions. During one of his lectures, Waldman depicts natural philosophers as God-like, with a language richly infused with religion:

They ascend into heavens; they have discovered how the blood circulates, and the nature of the air we breathe. They have acquired new and almost unlimited powers; they command the thunders of Heaven, mimic the earthquake, and even mock the invisible world with its own shadow. (Shelley 37)

As Victor listens to this speech, a stirring in his chest begins. In awe of natural philosophy, he is inspired to resume his previous studies.

Victor's response to these few lines is paramount in understanding how Victor then reacts once his creation is animated. Victor does not want to be ordinary, like Adam. He does not want to be painted in God's image—a mere fraction of the divine capabilities that He has. No, Victor wants to be God and have that power of creation. Like the Monster, Victor is only familiar with a limited set of roles that language and its predetermined, cultural influences have given him. He does not want to be Adam, and even though he, at times, feels like a rebellious angel that goes against the grain, it still does not render him the power he seeks. Therefore, Victor is only left with one other role and an ambitious one at that—God. Victor's exposure to works like *Paradise Lost* and religiously-infused language has led him to consider himself a God-like figure. With language being a central component to the human experience, Victor is left with limited determinants of destiny and identity—much like his Monster.

In order to expose the deep roots of hegemonic language in the 19th century that led to both characters' fall, a close reading of Victor's first reaction to the birth of his creation is crucial. As Victor's creation "breathed hard" and "had a convulsive motion [to] its limbs," the only sensation that Victor feels in that moment is "breathless horror and disgust [in his] heart" (Shelley 48). Victor finally accomplished his heart's desire: he has created life from death—he has performed an act of God. In this pivotal moment, Victor has fulfilled the only role he felt that he could fit; however, Shelley illustrates the constraints of language and its cultural influences that deny Victor the satisfaction of his creation.

All that Victor sees is a “wretch—the miserable monster” (49). Although this creature had done nothing heinous, destructive or evil, Victor has already deemed it as a Monster. Victor knows nothing of the Monster’s disposition or innately gentle nature. Victor can only base this conclusion on one thing: his culturally molded inclination to label the creature as Satanic because, as the Monster later laments, he is not beautiful like “thy Adam” (91).

Victor shares the same view as the Monster in regards to identity and its culturally-based language. This is evident when Victor claims his creation was a “thing such as even Dante could not have conceived” (Shelley 49). Such a statement illustrates the unconscious interweaving of biblically-influenced work and perceptions of self. Victor’s repertoire of associations and identities are based upon the system of language that has determined all facets of self and identity. Therefore, like the Monster, Victor is not only susceptible to mislabeling himself but also unjustifiably calls his creation a wretch. When Victor later encounters his Monster and listens to his tale, he comes to a realization about his creation and his certain responsibilities: “For the first time, also, I felt what the duties of a creator towards his creature were, and that I ought to render him happy before I complained of his wickedness” (97). This is the first time that Victor acknowledges his responsibility as a creator, as well as his part in his creation’s misery. This passage illustrates that Victor, from his limited selection of roles, has chosen one that he thought was most in his likeness. In some ways, Victor is like God in *Paradise Lost*—they both created beings and sent them into the world, without direction or knowledge. However, it is far more crucial to recognize that Victor, unconsciously, alludes to his Godlike self-identity when regarding himself as a “creator.” This conveys the hegemonic system of language that presented itself in Victor’s early rearing with this biblical subtext, deeply woven into the lament of his experience with the Monster.

Although Victor’s early childhood inquiries centered on science, these interests help to better explain how he came to mislabel himself and his creation. Victor, as a young child, possessed a strong sense of self-awareness and curiosity. While his dear friend, Clerval, and cousin, Elizabeth, devoted themselves to romance texts filled with adventure and chivalry, Victor’s inquiries were more “directed to the metaphysical, or in its highest sense, the physical secrets of the world” (Shelley 26). The study

of metaphysics goes beyond physics—it’s “the science which treats of beings abstracted from all matter, particularly those purely spiritual, as God and the human soul” (Johnson 1). Furthermore, according to Descartes, metaphysics “[is] the principles of knowledge, among which is the explication of the principal attributes of God, of the immateriality of the soul, and of all the clear and simple notions that are in us [...hence] all Philosophy is like a tree, of which Metaphysics is the root” (1). Victor’s fixation on the study of natural philosophy stemmed from these divine inquiries—the same core values and beliefs present in Christian texts, especially the Bible. Therefore, it is evident that Victor’s early exposure to these texts sparked an interest in the beyond and a yearning to learn the “secrets of heaven and earth” (Shelley 26). Victor, like the Monster, was introduced to specific texts during a critical period in his childhood, when the mind absorbs vast amounts of knowledge and language. Therefore, this acquisition of metaphysical knowledge and its associated language laid the groundwork for his perception of self and the world. Biblical texts are his roots, natural philosophy the trunk and branches that stem from the tree directly influenced by such a foundation.

During this acquisition, while Victor becomes familiar with natural philosophy, it is the Bible that inspired his desire to learn of the “inner spirit of nature and the mysterious soul of man” (Shelley 26). It is the Bible that cultivated Victor’s mind, thus leading him to search for other means to study the beyond. Victor unconsciously associates much of what he encounters with biblical allusions that are present in his own language, much the commonplace language of his time. Just as Lamb recognizes, language holds within it a hierarchy of associations and cultural influences that shape values and perceptions. In hindsight, this shaping explains why Victor equates himself to God and condemns his creation—the representations and self-identifiers prominent in language leave him with a limited bank to work within.

Aside from Victor’s more explicit reference to religiously based metaphysics, keep in mind that Victor is telling his story to Walton in this novel. These are his words—his associations and influences present in his language. That being so, the nature of language and its hegemony is painstakingly clear in Victor’s rhetoric. For instance, when Victor recollects his first meeting with Elizabeth, he describes her features as “celestial” or “saintly” (Shelley 27). Victor continues to use these

religiously-based, ethereal terms to describe Elizabeth throughout the novel, just as he uses demonic rhetoric in reference to the Monster. Similar to the way the Monster uses *Paradise Lost* to find his identity, Victor uses his religious upbringing to identify himself as well as others he has encountered throughout his life. These allusions and associations from the Bible are his introduction to language. As mentioned before, those first experiences on an impressionable mind have lasting effects, such as Victor's culturally-molded repertoire that he employs daily. Each image and being that Victor crosses enters the eye and travels to the mind, where language and its cultural associations dwell.

Shelley uses Victor's rhetoric to depict the deep roots of culture in language, especially its ancient teachings and values that are found in the Bible. The Monster's and Victor's language serves as a representation of how its cultural hierarchy can be a danger to one's identity. When Victor goes off to school, he encounters a professor who chastises him for his inability to adapt to a modern way of thinking—an inability to broaden his perception. Professor M. Krempe equates Victor's study of natural philosophy to “fancies [that...] are a thousand years old and as musty as they are ancient [...especially] in this enlightened age” (Shelley 35). Even though Krempe is arguing for the superiority of chemistry over natural philosophy, this scene directly correlates with Shelley's understanding of how dated cultural influences present within language deform identity and inhibit the pursuit of knowledge.

As Lamb points out, Shelley ultimately implies that the damage from this limited field of language can only be healed through the expansion of self-identification. Shelley's narrative points us beyond Milton's hegemonic epic “in search of another ‘true history’ of what we are” (Lamb 319). The disagreement between Krempe and Victor further exemplifies this idea: Victor's study of ancient natural philosophy is embedded in the religious context of creation that only offers a select few identifiers and roles. Ancient philosophy and the Bible provide narrow ideas of nature and identity, in which progressive thought and understanding of being and existence are absent. In other words, Shelley's novel is a warning. Knowledge and forms of identity will always continue to grow; however, this growth must be adapted into cultural language, expanding the hierarchy to include all facets of self-expression. It is imperative to recognize new works—*new language*—as supplements to commandments of being, in order to progress scientifically, culturally and socially.

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