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The Oswald Review of Undergraduate Research and Criticism In the Discipline of English: Volume 26, 2024

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The Oswald Review
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Contents:

Editor’s Preface ................................................................. 7

Self-consciousness and Alienation in Pirandello’s
One, No One, and One Hundred Thousand ......................... 8

Francesco Satta
University of Wisconsin, Madison

Colonial Body-Logic in George Orwell’s Burmese Days:
A Contrapuntal Critique ...................................................... 23

Riley Mays
University of Southern Maine

Swashbuckling Politicians .................................................... 44

Silas Fier
University of Massachusetts, Amherst

Wilfred Owen and Shell Shock:
The Initial Sympathetic Understanding of PTSD ............... 66

Rachel Eubanks
University of South Carolina, Aiken

Submission Guidelines .......................................................... 85
Welcome to the 26th issue of *The Oswald Review*. My editorial assistant Kristen Worley and I think you’ll find the enclosed essays both interesting and enlightening. Francesco Satta’s philosophically sophisticated essay focuses on identity and consciousness in a Luigi Pirandello novel, while Riley Mays turns a sharp eye on the complex colonial discourses of Orwell’s *Burmese Days*. Silas Fier takes us on a voyage through the politics of 17th and 18th century piracy, while Rachel Eubanks expertly plumbs the psychological depths of Wilfred Owen’s poetry.

In the interests of full disclosure, Francesco Satta (currently a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin) and Rachel Eubanks have been students the University of South Carolina Aiken, and both served as editorial assistants for past issues of *The Oswald Review*. Nevertheless, their essays have passed through the same double-blind review process set up for all submissions, and we are proud to publish their work here.

Douglas Higbee
Editor, *The Oswald Review*
Self-consciousness and Alienation in Pirandello’s
One, No One, and One Hundred Thousand

Francesco Satta

“What are you doing?” my wife asked me as she saw me strangely lingering in front of the mirror. “Nothing,” I answered, “I am checking out right here, inside my nostril. It hurts me a little when I touch it.” My wife smiled and then said: “I thought you were just checking toward which side it bends.” I turned like a dog whose tail has been stepped on: Does it bend? Me? My nose?” My wife placidly replied: Of course, dear. Take a good look at it: it leans to the right.”

—Luigi Pirandello, One, No One, and One Hundred Thousand.

Many scholars consider modernism to be a broad artistic and literary movement that reflects a crisis in the representation of reality through art. The artists capture in the temper of times the end of an era and the beginning of a new one. The values and certainties that shaped past centuries no longer seem to be suitable for understanding the events that distinguished the twentieth century. The security of human consciousness, which with its reason was believed to give order and meaning to the world, seems to rapidly collapse.

This existential collapse represents the intimate reflection of what, universally, is happening in the outside world. Technological innovations and the outbreak of World War I and II have produced a radical reevaluation of Western culture’s foundations. Modern cities become a sinister

1 The translations of Pirandello from Italian are my own.
place and an environment hostile to men. Cities change in appearance and become places “Where all is fake and mechanical […], an artificial, distorted world, […], a word of fiction, and vanity” (Pirandello 56). This distance between man and his environment creates a gap between needs and opportunities, between dreams and reality. It is within this context that Pirandello’s work comes to life. The problem of identity, so dear to the Italian writer, develops from the awareness that history is at a turning point. The modern subject experiences a deep sense of emptiness due to the sudden collapse of a traditional source of value. Men and women are thus left to themselves without any external reference that could provide for their integrity. As Luca Somigli points out, “[t]he tragic-comic—that is, humorous—condition of the modern subject lies precisely in his inability to live fully his passions and desires, as he is haunted by the awareness that there are no outside agents to endow his actions with meaning” (85). And, according to Anthony Caputi, “[w]ith the loss of traditional structures was also lost not only the building blocks of moral system and purpose, but the means by which individuals defined themselves and what they are about in the world” (63).

For the protagonist of Pirandello’s One, No One, and One Hundred Thousand, the search for an authentic identity represents the meaning of Vitangelo Moscarda’s life. By failing to recognize his identity through the environment he belongs to, Moscarda experiences a sense of alienation toward himself and his environment, the city of Richieri. Because of the absence of any external categories of meaning, Moscarda’s consciousness represents his last chance to give shape and meaning to his character and consequently to his existence. However, Pirandello shows how conscious-
ness, while it may be all we have left, is itself at stake and does not represent a valuable source of knowledge and meaning. In this novel, Pirandello, through Moscarda’s descent into madness, addresses how self-consciousness produces a gap between our self-identity and our outer or social identity. This gap represents the primary cause of our alienation.

The crisis of personality that permeates the novel stems from the difference between Moscarda’s self-perception and the one his acquaintances have of him. This difference generates what we previously referred to as a deep sense of alienation and disorientation which also characterize, on a bigger scale, modernity as a whole. The novel opens with Moscarda’s wife Dida’s comments on his nose, which mark the beginning of the protagonist’s alienation. She points out to her husband that his nose “bends.” Shortly after this declaration, Dida continues by adding that other parts of Moscarda’s body show some imperfections as well. These innocent considerations take Moscarda by surprise. The protagonist begins to question his own knowledge of himself: “I didn’t even know well my own body, the things that most intimately belonged to me: nose, ears, hands, legs” (Pirandello 10-11). Moscarda’s alienation starts within himself. The protagonist feels like a stranger to himself, as suggested by the expression “I didn’t even know well my own body” (10). Moscarda’s alienation further develops as an introspective event, symbolized by the mirror. In looking at his reflection in the mirror, Moscarda apprehends that many different Moscardas inhabit his body without his knowledge. From this introspective phenomenon begins his project of establishing a more authentic self. This experiment brings Moscarda to take refuge in a mental asylum immersed in nature, far away
from the social environment that shaped his existence. Throughout this project, Moscarda understands that there exists a gap between our self-identity and our outer or social identity. This gap represents the primary cause of our alienation. For the sake of existing within a social environment human beings freeze their identity into a form so that a clear and defined personality can be established. Consequently, Pirandello shows that the way we see ourselves differs from the way people see us from the outside. Having a self-conception implies the possibility of seeing the difference between our inner and social self. At the end of the novel, this difference dissolves. By ceasing to be the Moscarda he was within his social environment, the protagonist develops a connection/dialogue with that openness of being that Pirandello refers to as life. Within this new and more open state of consciousness, Pirandello’s identity is free to remain fluid and not bounded into a rigid and static form.

The primary reason for Moscarda’s estrangement from his character lies in the gap between his idea of himself and his acquaintances’ idea of him. Moscarda points out that his self-identity does not coincide with his social identity. Enrico Garzilli asks his readers a key question in relation to Pirandello’s work: “Which is the true reality of the person? Is it the sum total of the judgements of others or does it have a constant and fixed reality?” (84). Moscarda becomes aware that his identity is the result of a negotiation between his self-perception and what his acquaintances think of him. Consequently, Moscarda recognizes the limits of self-consciousness in establishing a constant, fixed, and universal identity.

In light of these considerations, we can conclude how Moscarda’s
body turns out to be an entity socially manipulable and less personal than he thought. In other words, we can affirm how, according to Pirandello, unity and solidity are not categories of human identity. Pirandello suggests our identity is the result of the encounter between the perception we have of ourself and the perception others have of us. Moscarda feels trapped in a body that does not fully belong to him: “Lastly, that body in itself was so much a nothing and a nobody, that a wisp of hair could make it sneeze, today, and carry it away tomorrow” (Pirandello 34). Moscarda becomes aware of the influence that others possess in shaping his identity. Pirandello implies that, in society, we are not who we think we are. Many Is inhabit our body. The number of different Is amount to the number of people who know us and possess an opinion about us. The discovery of this truth implies the recognition of an I who is a stranger to Moscarda but also socially real. This gap between these two different levels of perception (individual and social) represents the cause of Moscarda’s alienation.

To break this gap down, Moscarda undertakes a process of discovery and then annihilation of his social identities. This process originates after Moscarda, in looking at his reflection in the mirror, fails to see how his acquaintances might see him from the outside. In the chapter “Pursuit of the Outsider,” Moscarda tries, while looking at his reflection in the mirror, to catch himself in natural actions with the attempt to see himself with the eyes of a stranger. At the end of the experiment, Moscarda asks himself: “How could I remain eternally condemned to carrying him with me, inside me, visible to others and at the same time beyond my vision?” (Pirandello 25). This “pursuit” results in Moscarda’s awareness of the exist-
ence of a stranger who lives within his body and who he is not able to see. Ann Hallamore Caesar notes how, “by rejecting his mirror image, Vitangelo has taken his first step in shedding all those aspects of life that contain, fix, freeze, and define each and every one of us” (147). Observing his image reflected in the mirror, Moscarda is unable to assert a fixed identity that can define him socially. Moscarda later points out how “That, just as I took this body of mine to be the person I wanted and felt to be, so it could be taken by someone else who would give it a reality in his own fashion” (Pirandello 34). Moscarda’s acquaintances all see him differently and thus have all assigned him a different identity based on their idea of him. It is through an introspective act, symbolized by the mirror, that Vitangelo Moscarda’s alienation develops. Moscarda becomes aware that his social identity is as real as his self-identity. Moscarda internalizes and accepts this truth; nevertheless, he admits the impossibility of knowing how his acquaintances see him from the outside. Moscarda needs to be aware of what the people of Richieri think about him. Only after this first step toward a wider awareness of Moscarda’s acquaintances’ perception of his personality will the protagonist have the chance to destroy it and bridge the gap previously mentioned.

Moscarda’s character is shaped significantly by the random circumstances in which he finds himself living, in particular the setting and Vitangelo’s family name. His father, Francesco Antonio Moscarda, owned a bank in Richieri. He was recognized by the inhabitants of Richieri as a terrible usurer. Vitangelo inherited the fortune left by his father, which also includes bank ownership. He has therefore unintentionally inherited the title of usurer assigned to his father. Because of that, he is regarded by all citizens with
contempt. Among the people hostile towards Vitangelo, there is Mr. Marco di Dio, who becomes a victim of Vitangelo’s project.

Marco di Dio feels a deep hatred toward Vitangelo. Di Dio and his wife have fallen into absolute poverty because of the many debts accumulated over the years with the bank of Francesco Antonio Moscarda. The latter repeatedly subsidized di Dio, who at the time was a failed artist and entrepreneur. Di Dio feels a strong hatred toward Vitangelo, being the son of the man who ruined his life. Moscarda takes this opportunity to shatter one of the many Vitangelos that inhabit him with the aim of finally dissolving the gap between self and social identity.

Moscarda decides to act irrationally, against what would be the intentions of an usurer. He decides to liquidate the bank, evict Marco di Dio and his wife, and then surprise them with a new house and ten thousand lire to invest in a new art studio. This irrational act results in the label of fool attributed to Moscarda by the citizens of Richieri. Although Moscarda seems to have managed to destroy the image of the usurer, he is now considered a fool by the entire town. Moreover, Moscarda’s unreasonable act will threaten his relationship with Dida.

Vitangelo soon learns Dida’s idea about him. Dida considers her husband a childish, foolish, and inept individual whose nickname is Gengè: “Gengè had a reality for my wife Dida. Nevertheless, I couldn’t consider that a consolation in any way, because I assure you, it would be hard to imagine a creature more foolish than this Gengè so dear to my wife” (Pirandello 63). Gengè represents the identity Dida assigned Moscarda and through which Dida interprets his behavior. Consequently, Dida judges Vitangelo’s act
toward di Dio as an innocent and stupid joke put together by her child-
ish husband. After having discovered that di Dio considers him a usurer
because of his father’s past, Moscarda learns that for his wife he is a naïve
man with little intelligence. Moscarda recognizes this identity as socially
real but refuses it. Vitangelo then decides to break off his relationship with
Dida and leaves the house where he and his wife lived together. Moscarda’s
alienation reaches a peak. He feels now not only a stranger within his own
body but also to the society which conferred on him the different personali-
ties he recognized as socially real. By refusing the label of usurer and inept,
Moscarda irreparably distances himself from society. In this way, Pirandello
shows that the reason for human beings’ alienation must be found in the
insurmountable distance between our self-conception and others’ judgment
about us. This conflict exists because human beings possess an introspective
faculty. We can think about ourselves and thus have an idea about who we
think we are.

Freezing identity into a form means defining ourselves. Defining
ourselves means to be through a limited set of qualities which define our
identity. Having a fixed and rigid self-identity and a fixed and rigid opin-
ion of others increases the distance between our self and social identity.
Pirandello argues that having a clear and fixed sense of ourself is a mystifica-
tion of the concept of identity. We are not but can eternally be. Within the
Pirandellian context, to be means to exist statically. Accordingly, we are not
but can be. Pirandello address this concept in chapter VII of book three: “A
parenthesis necessary for all,” Moscarda affirms:

We performed an act. We believe in good faith the entirety of our
identity to be in that act. We realize unfortunately that this is not so, and that the act, on the contrary, is always and only performed by one of the many individuals we are or can be [...]. [W]e realize, I mean, that we are not fully in that act, and therefore it would be a horrible injustice to judge us from that alone (Pirandello 87, emphasis mine).

Human beings are thus a possibility. This means that in defining ourselves within a limited set of qualities we deny identity its nature. Our identity does not constitute a fixed, predetermined set of qualities but represents an openness.

Moscarda addresses this openness by recognizing that nature, unlike man, lacks a sense of inner identity and thus there is no conflict with a social identity. As he expresses it toward the end of the novel: “But we also attribute this peace to the earth and the plants, which seems to live only for the sake of living, only in this stupidity they can live” (Pirandello 53, emphasis mine). With the term “stupidity,” Pirandello grasps the state of innocence and lack of self-awareness which allows nature to live peacefully: “Ah, to get rid of your consciousness, like a stone, like a tree! Not to even remember your own name anymore” (Pirandello 54). Nature can exist peacefully because, for instance, a rock or a tree does not know that it is called a rock or tree.

It is no coincidence that Moscarda refers to names. The name represents the sum of the set of qualities through which we define ourselves in society. Commenting on Adriano Tilgher’s thesis, according to which Pirandello affirms that life must take on a form, Somigli points out how “in
this sense, identity is nothing more than the construction and fixation of an image of the self by isolating certain elements from the flow of existence” (85). Recognizing that “in abstract, we cannot just be” (Pirandello 85), man must freeze identity into a form if he wants to exist within a social environment. This form is represented by the name. We attribute to our name a rigid set of qualities which define us. If we want to exist in society, our self-identity must be fixed and static. Nevertheless, having a clear sense of inner identity represents the primary cause of the conflict between self and social identity. This conflict generates alienation.

Consequently, without a name there is no self-identity, and without self-identity there is no conflict. The absence of the contrast between the two constitutes the resolution to the problem of alienation. Moscarda affirms that “without the name we don’t have the concept, and the thing remains in us as if blind, indistinct and undefined” (Pirandello 223). Without the name, the essence of our self-identity, the latter remains “indistinct and undefined,” and thus open. In this openness we can authentically be. Immersed in nature, Moscarda loses his self-identity because he is detached from the environment where the name “Vitangelo Moscarda” assumes its meaning. For this reason, Gregory Lucente can affirm that “[Moscarda’s] entire project—when carried out within society—is in practical terms an utter failure” (27). But once away from the social environment where the name Vitangelo Moscarda has meaning, the protagonist can experience the openness that allows him to break down the gap between self and social identity and finally become one.

In nature, Moscarda experiences the fluidity lacking in a social
environment. Fiora A. Bassanese points out that “if the city is a ‘constructed world’, nature offers infinite fluidity and mutability” (67). Within this fluidity and mutability, Moscarda’s identity undergoes a constant rebirth: “Because I die at every instant, I am reborn new and without memories: alive and complete, no longer inside myself, but in everything outside” (Pirandello 225). Moscarda has lost his rigid, fixed self-identity, and the name “Vitangelo Moscarda” no longer has a fixed and defined meaning. Moreover, away from society, there are no external points of reference that can confirm or deny the essence of Moscarda’s identity. This can happen also because Moscarda now lives in a place “that lives for itself, and for you it has no trace or voice” (19). As opposed to a social environment, which is a human construction, nature lives for itself. Because of that, in nature there is no such thing as social identity. Without social identity there cannot be conflict with our self-perception. Robert Dombrowski affirms how “[…] at the novel’s end, when, having taken refuge in a mental asylum, [Moscarda] loses his specific identity in becoming one with nature, thus losing the self that had been endangered by the scrutiny of others, paradoxically avoiding non-being by ceasing to be” (94). By losing his “specific [self-identity]” Moscarda has dissolved the gap between inner and outer identity. His identity cannot be “endangered by the scrutiny of others” because nature has no voice for human beings. The problem of the distance between inner and outer identity is resolved. Having lost its specificity and determinacy, Moscarda’s identity can remain fluid, without being trapped into a form, and is thus free to die and be reborn eternally. He now embraces that openness that, according to Pirandello, represents the primary source for an
authentic life. Being in contact with the constant flux that is life, Moscarda no longer feels slave of his self-consciousness but connected to that openness which allows identity to remain fluid without being trapped into a form.

In society, circumstances exist which shape our identity, and which go beyond our will; nevertheless, they indelibly mark our identity. Di Dio considers Moscarda an usurer merely because his father was one and Vitangelo inherited his bank. Accordingly, these circumstances drive people to have an opinion about us that we do not recognize as accurately and representative of the totality of our identity. Because of that, a gap exists between our self-identity and social identity. This gap exists because, as opposed to nature, we possess an introspective quality which allows us to generate an idea about ourselves and thus to possess a self-perception. The conflict between self and social identity generates alienation. Pirandello shows how we tend to judge people’s words and actions through the fixed and rigid idea we have of them. This is the result of the human tendency to freeze identity into a form. In doing so, we deny identity its fluidity. We enclose ourselves in our misleading consciousness and we consider our rigid and fixed ideas about a person or about ourselves an absolute and undeniable truth. Consequently, we deny ourselves any genuine openness toward the other and ourselves.

At the end of the novel, when Moscarda has taken refuge in a mental asylum immersed in nature, his self-identity slowly dissolves. Moscarda “[merges] in nature […] in the abandonment of self-consciousness to an unthinking, unseeing, unreflecting, unconscious life-form” (Bassanese 67). The name “Vitangelo Moscarda” has no meaning in the unfamiliar environ-
ment Moscarda lives in. Nature, as opposed to humanity, lives for itself and lacks consciousness. By living for itself and not in relation to human beings, in nature there is no danger for Moscarda’s I to be “endangered by the scrutiny of others” (Dombrowski 94). By losing his social identity and because of the absence of an entity that could endanger Moscarda’s self-identity, the gap we described cannot exist. This is the reason Pirandello mentions nature can live peacefully. Nature has no self-consciousness. Without self-consciousness there is no self-identity and without self-identity there is no gap between self and social identity. Without this conflict there is no alienation.

To overcome the problem of alienation within a social environment, Pirandello proposes to rethink our identity and that of others as in constant flux. This is possible only by avoiding defining it, thus, freezing it into a form. By avoiding this process, our identity and that of others would fluctuate in that openness that characterizes life, since life is a continuous flux and man is a possibility. Pirandello invites us to let others be, to live, ourselves, authentically. Our existence in society is dependent on others in that identity is always a negotiation between the perception we have of ourselves and the one others have of us. Therefore, others play a key role in our existence. We are if our identity is confirmed by the society we live in. We exist if someone confirms our existence. Only by authentically opening ourselves to others can we hope to live peacefully in society as one whole and to find the solution to the problem of alienation.

Moscarda’s individual experience sheds light on the general condition of the modern subject and on the relationship between consciousness and truth. Through Moscarda’s identity crisis, Pirandello seems to reject a
type of thought that we could refer to as ideological or closed in itself. As a matter of fact, Moscarda conveys, albeit in his tragic end, a form of thought that, as opposed to the ideological, undergoes a constant renewal and thus it is open to that constant flux that, according to Pirandello, characterizes authentic life. In the sudden dissolution of any solid source of meaning which threatens to systematize reality, Pirandello shows how truth constitutes something irreducible to a well-defined shape or system.
Works Cited


Colonial Body-Logic in George Orwell’s *Burmese Days*: A Contrapuntal Critique

Riley Mays

**Introduction**

Colonial literature has long been a site of fascination for the Western literary sphere. Rising to critical prominence in the 1930s, the genre bloomed when metropolitan Europe became consumed with questioning the fascist logic levelled by their own countries (Buchanan 1). Situating anti-imperialism during this period finds us in English-occupied India, a principal site of anxiety where the impending decline of empire, threat of racial mixture, and crumbling social and political structures were being negotiated (Rao & Pierce 117).

A prominent example of colonial literature is George Orwell’s 1934 novel, *Burmese Days*. Following Flory, a disillusioned Englishman living in Burma, the novel examines the hypocrisies of British rule and the unrest caused by imperial conquest. The novel’s anti-imperialist stance can largely be identified in Flory, as he openly critiques the British occupation in India throughout the novel: “Of course we keep the peace in India, in our own interest, but what does all this law and order business boil down to? More banks and more prisons—that’s all it means” (*Burmese Days* 33). In his verbal accusations, Flory acts as a conduit for anti-imperialist commentary.

However, despite his criticisms, Flory is unable to confront the other members of the European Club. This hypocrisy, which is ridiculed throughout the text (Flory is often termed “weak” [165] and “a coward”
for his nonconfrontational tendencies), reveals an additional level of critique of British rule: even those who are against it remain passive, and therefore complicit, in colonization. This was an effect of colonization that particularly irked Orwell, perhaps because he saw it in himself: as a young man, Orwell worked as a police officer in colonial Burma, a post which he apparently abandons to his disgust with the British colonial system. In an essay, “Shooting an Elephant” (1936), Orwell discusses his experience as a police officer: “In a job like that you see the dirty work of Empire at close quarters […] all these oppressed me with an intolerable sense of guilt. But I could get nothing into perspective. I was young and ill-educated” (1). It is with this perspective and experience that Orwell wrote *Burmese Days*, as a testament to his anti-imperialist sentiments.

Yet, where Orwell’s critique materializes, so does its antithesis. Despite his anti-imperialist stance, Orwell relies on highly-racialized Western tropes of the East to describe Burma, invoking a Same-Other dualism which inevitably muddies the validity of his critique. We may understand this discrepancy through the lens of Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, which illustrates that the fantasy of the ‘Orient,’ or the socially constructed term that is liberally applied to Asian countries east of Europe, is envisioned from the perspective of the ‘Occident’ (the West) within colonial literature. “In quite a constant way,” Said writes, “Orientalism depends for its strategy on this flexible positional superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand” (*Orientalism* 7). In anti-imperialist literature, this positionality allows the author to assume a critical position towards colonization while
remaining complicit in its theoretical justification. I am interested in how Orwell’s critique undoes itself through the presentation of bodies—specifically the opposition of colonized/colonizer bodies. Relying on Said’s theoretical framework, I investigate the shortcomings of Orwell’s satire and literary subterfuge and how the staying power of his criticism ultimately reproduces colonial body-logic that imprisons rather than liberates.

**Contrapuntal Theory and Body-Logic**

While colonialist fiction varies greatly in form, effect, and intention, many scholars will agree that this genre relies on and reproduces a Same-Other dualism in which the colonized are configured as the unrecognizable and alien ‘Other’ whilst colonizers are represented as the fixed, omnipresent ‘Same’ (Yancy 3). This dualism can be applied to the concept of the Orient and the Occident. Rather than referring to a material or geographical realm, the Orient and the Other are better understood as ideas that, as Said writes, “have a history and tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West” (*Orientalism* 13). This process is precisely what Said terms ‘Orientalism,’ or the production of fictions deployed by the West to relegate the Orient in relation to (and ultimately below) the Occident.

To analyze the process of Orientalism, Said deploys contrapuntal theory, a literary methodology that requires engagement with the perspectives of both the colonizer and the colonized (*Orientalism* 59). Deriving from musical terminology, ‘contrapuntal,’ in which two melodic lines are played at the same time, this theory attends to the existence of dual narra-
tives represented in colonialist literature (Shabanirad & Miranda 26). In the
counterpoint of Western classical music, Said argues, various themes “play
off one another” without necessarily privileging one over the other, yet in
the “resulting polyphony there is concert and order, an organized interplay
that derives from the themes” (Culture and Imperialism 51). In the same
light, we may read and interpret Western colonial fiction. This definition is
critical to our analysis because it encourages us to acknowledge dual per-
spectives, excavate biases, confront historical context, and more specifically,
discover who is *ultimately privileged* in the literature itself. When applied to
Orwell’s work, this framework enables us to locate the unsettling ruptures in
*Burmese Days* where the novel’s function as a political commentary stutters.
Applying contrapuntal theory to *Burmese Days*, I locate the primary dys-
function of the novel’s imperialist critique in its reproduction of colonialist
body-logic.

Before we move to the text itself, it is critical to define body-logic
and how it is a particularly insidious form of colonization that has long-
lasting repercussions for indigenous and colonized communities. Utilized
by Brendan Hokowhitu in his analysis of colonized physicality, “body-logic”
symbolizes for him the mixture of spiritual and physical elements, or what
a culture “feels like” (278). I wish to suture this definition with feminist
scholarship which considers how Western logic has configured the human
body to fit its social constructs. Combining these definitions is not with the
intent to divorce the term body-logic from its original meaning—which
is created by and belongs specifically to indigenous scholarship—but to
expand upon its premises to examine how the body has been a site of colo-
nization not only as a physical object but as a metaphorical subject (and, hence a subject of fiction). When I employ the term ‘body-logic’ here, I reference the cultural, historical, and figurative elements that compose how we think of and contextualize different bodies.

The body has always been a principal site of colonization. In *Discipline and the Other Body*, authors Rao & Pierce explain how colonization purposefully conflates culture and biology to serve its purposes of “othering” bodies and asserting cultural and political dominance (5). Colonialist literature specifically engages with this practice by employing imaginative elements to rehearse anxieties surrounding ‘primitive’ colonized bodies. Here, the Other is cast as wild, raw, animalistic, uncivilized, hyper-sexual, lazy, and foolish in direct opposition to the European, cast as restrained, confident, intellectual, and gentlemanly (*Boehmer* 269). This corporeal colonization is precisely what undermines Orwell’s imperialist critique in *Burmese Days*. Consider Orwell’s depiction of a Burmese man working in Flory’s garden: “He was a lymphatic, half-witted Hindu youth [...] His tongue was also a size too large for his mouth [...] and he] hacked at the dry ground with heavy, clumsy strokes, his tender back-muscles quivering” (*Burmese* 76). In this description, Orwell deploys many Orientalist tropes: the character is described in infantilizing terms (“half-witted”) and inadequate for labor. Note closely how Orwell specifically locates the inferiority of this character in his body—he is unfit for labor because he is “lymphatic,” his muscles “tender,” and he is half-witted because his tongue is “too large” for his mouth. That Orwell portrays a colonized body as a weak body is important; it aids and abets the project of Orientalism, giving biological
justification for a socially constructed dyadism. These degrading depictions of indigenous people are replete throughout the novel. For example, even when the Burmese people revolt against the blinding of one of their children by a European club member, Flory finds it “difficult to believe that Orientals could be dangerous” (249); he is “surprised” when he finds out that his body is “covered with bruises” (256) even after fighting them in the flesh and nearly being suffocated by the crowd. Furthermore, Orwell describes Burmese characters throughout the novel as “fat and lazy,” (76) “grotesque” (104), “peasants with gnarled muscles” (144), and “hideous as demons” (97). What emerges from this portrayal of colonized bodies is the belief that their alleged inferiority is biological, natural, and fixed. Thus, Orwell’s political project is undermined by his reliance on the very colonialist discourse he is trying to critique.

**Performance and the Colonial Gaze**

The most visceral illustration of Orwell’s reproduction of colonialist body-logic is the depiction of the Burmese *pwe*, a form of traditional Burmese performance combining music, dance, and drama. In this scene, we witness an encounter between the European and Burmese cultures that is negotiated by the observation of indigenous bodies. The only two white Europeans in the crowd, Flory and Elizabeth drop in on this cultural event as temporary observers, merely surveying the “native crowd” as an exotic spectacle (*Burmese* 104). The initial observations of the *pwe* come from Elizabeth, who notes the perceived differences of the Burmese characters. Significantly, Elizabeth perceives this difference in the bodies of the indige-
nous people around her, viewing their alleged malformation as symptomatic of their racial inferiority. For example, the magistrate of the town, U Po Kyin, is described as trying to twist his “elephantine body” around to look at Elizabeth and Flory as they walk into the room (102). The characterization of U Po Kyin as “elephantine” is noteworthy, as it not only degrades his size—a common trope in colonial literature, which typically nurtures a hatred for larger bodies—but also draws from primitivist dialogues by comparing him to an animal. The former observation has been well-studied; in “How Colonialism Shaped Body Shaming,” author Livia Gershon discusses how British occupiers in India often associated heaviness among elites with “weakness, laziness, and cowardice” (np). Indeed, one observer even attributed the “rotundity” of vegetarian Brahmins to “ghee and indolence” (np).

The comparison of U Po Kyin’s body to an elephant is drawn from a long history of colonizers comparing darker-skinned bodies to “jungle animals.” For example, as early as medieval times, black bodies were considered monstrous, sinful, and animalistic by white Europeans. For example, the black subject functioned as the Other “wild man” who was attributed an “aggressive” and “animalistic” sexuality, thus, dialectically opposed to the ideal Christian who lived a life of self-discipline and social order (Defalco 23). It is these tropes, which have been consistently revisited by the colonialist imagination, that ultimately contributed to the primitivist ideology that codified indigenous and black bodies as hyper-sexual and wild creatures. Thus, calling U Po Kyin “elephantine” is not merely an unsavory description, but a vestige of fraught historical discourse derived from white encounters with the racial Other. In this light, Orwell’s depiction of the
Burmese reveals an over-reliance on racist portrayals of the indigenous body, ultimately upsetting his critique of imperialism.

Elizabeth’s observations continue as she encounters many other Burmese men and women during the *pwe* and systematically identifies them as problematic Others. At the beginning of the performance, she notes the crowd of “smelly natives” that she notably identifies as “feral” (*Burmese* 103). The description of the Burmese men as “feral” directly correlates to the construction of the wild Other as animalistic, hypersexual, and disgusting to behold. This is a perception that is also applied to Elizabeth’s observations of Burmese women. For example, a female performer is described as curved at the hips like “petals of a downward-pointing flower” as she meanders through the crowd “languidly,” tosses her cigarette at the men in the orchestra and writhes her “slender arms” (*Burmese* 104). This physical description is amplified by the narrative that accompanies her dance moves: her hands become “like snakeheads,” and her posture becomes “grotesque” (*Burmese* 104). These characterizations clearly echo the scientific discourse of the eighteenth century that tried to pinpoint Black female physicality as animalistic (“snakelike”) and Other (“grotesque”). Considering this string of observations, Elizabeth’s encounter with the Burmese attendees of the *pwe* is a direct embodiment of the colonialist gaze. Even Flory, who is purportedly sympathetic to the Burmese, describes their dancing as “diabolical,” “savage,” and “ugly” (*Burmese* 105). This assessment is disturbingly reliant on the visual aspect of performance. In essence, the critique of indigenous bodies represents an attempt to biologically naturalize ideas of colonization and racial hierarchy. When we place this history in conversation with Orwell’s
representation of the *pwe*—perceived by two European colonizers, who are both intrigued and disgusted by the bodily presentation of the indigenous Other—we begin to unravel weaknesses in *Burmese Days* that have the unfortunate effect of re-inscribing colonialist discourse onto indigenous bodies and relegating them as both Other and inferior.

**Orwell and Strategic Location**

Of course, one might counter this argument by observing that Orwell degrades his European characters to a similar degree as his Burmese characters. Certainly, Orwell is not favorable towards the Englishmen's bodies, either—one man at the club is described as “tiny, wiry-haired,” another “bloated,” and another with a “beefy, ingenuous face” (*Burmese* 20, 21). The protagonist is scorned for the “hideous” birthmark on his face, which gives him a “battered, woebegone” look (17). However, this counterargument is troublesome, for it fails to account for the political, social, and cultural imbalances that texture this novel and the world within which it is produced. In Orientalism, Said emphasizes “strategic location” (28), or a way of describing the author’s position in a text concerning the Orient. When we read *Burmese Days*, we must consider the reality that Orwell is a white European who was born in English-occupied India and, in his young adulthood, worked in the Indian Imperial Police as an officer. Immediately, this creates an imbalance of power between his characters and himself.

This power imbalance is further perceptible in Orwell’s essay “Shooting an Elephant,” which employs racist language that inevitably demonizes colonized bodies, even as he rebukes colonialism. He describes
the Burmese as “sneering yellow faces” and “wretched” prisoners with “grey, cowed faces” (1, 2), all of which degrade the indigenous body and concretizes their identity as the racial Other. Interestingly, Orwell seems aware of this contradiction. He writes: “Theoretically—and secretly, of course—I was all for the Burmese and all against their oppressors...[but] I was stuck between my hatred of the empire I served and my rage against the evil-spirited little beasts” (2). In Orwell & Empire, Douglas Kerr points out the hypocrisy implicit in this perspective: “although he became a critic of this business of empire, he had been its willing agent. Nobody forced him into making his career in the East after he left school [...] He chose the Indian police” (7). Furthermore, the internal conflict that Orwell describes in “Shooting an Elephant” seems to suggest a degree of hindsight that comes from a more informed perspective, perhaps developed later in Orwell’s anti-imperialist political stance. Yet, this self-awareness fails to metabolize as he still relies on racist language to depict the Burmese people and persistently places himself as “in the right” even when criticizing his own actions. We see this again in The Road to Wigan Pier when Orwell describes his final break with colonial Burma. Though he claims he was “not going back to be a part of that evil despotism,” in the same breath, he writes of the “innumerable” prisoners, subordinates, peasants, servants, and “coolies,” that he had beaten in fits of rage, justifying this by adding that “nearly everyone does these things in the East [...] orientals can be very provoking” (Road 148). It is also pertinent to note that Orwell wrote on more than one occasion that, though he decried imperialism, he believed that you can rule a subject race “if you honestly believe yourself to be racially superior” (“As I Please”). This quote illum-
nates our discussion of colonization, race, and power imbalance in Orwell’s work, as it demonstrates that his conceptions of power are inextricable from racial hierarchy. Emphasizing strategic location thus reveals to us the inconsistencies of Orwell’s personal politics, which ultimately resurface, re-packaged and fitted with new characters, in *Burmese Days*. Despite his open rejection of colonialist “despotism,” Orwell nevertheless repeats the very imperialist discourse he is attempting to critique.

Unfortunately, Orwell’s lack of self-reflection is not uncommon in colonial literature. As Abdul R. JanMohamed demonstrates, colonial novels often take one of two approaches, each with the unfortunate result of endorsing colonization to an extent: imaginary texts are defined as texts that are outright in their defense of colonization, while symbolic texts are largely preoccupied with the “egalitarian imperatives of Western societies” and often “thematize the problem of colonialist mentality and its encounter with the racial Other” (66). JanMohammed defines the latter approach as a purportedly innocent, objective depiction of the racial Other that nevertheless “valorizes the superiority of European culture” (65). Rather than seeing the Other as a bridge toward “syncretic possibility,” symbolic texts use the indigenous body as a mirror that “reflects the colonialist’s self-image” (65). The author cites E. M. Forster’s *A Passage to India* and Rudyard Kipling’s *Kim* as pertinent examples of the symbolic canon, as both novels attempt to find “syncretic solutions to the Manichean opposition of the colonizer and the colonized” (66). The concern with this form of representation is that while it appears to invest in the positive integration of difference, it is simultaneously seduced by the Same-Other framework. As a novel that attempts
to examine the political and cultural gulf between European colonizers and the Burmese people whilst still relying on Eurocentric discourse to do so, *Burmese Days* inevitably aligns with the “symbolic” category.

Another curious overlap between symbolic texts and *Burmese Days* is the continued use of racialized tropes and physical stereotypes *despite* purported anti-colonialist positionality. For example, in *Kim*, which chronicles the life of an Irish orphan in India, Kipling also relies on racialized tropes of indigenous bodies: the Indian men in his story are described as “wild-eyed, wild-haired,” with “dull fat eyes” and the Indian women are described as “withered and undesirable” (np). These specific tropes ascribed to Indian or Burmese people are anticipated by the canon of Orientalist literature that co-constructs a mythology of the biological inferiority of colonized bodies. It also contributes (consciously or not) to physiognomy: the study of systematic correspondence of psychological characteristics to facial features or body structure (Britannica). This discipline was specifically leveled against Black, indigenous, and other people of color as a mechanism of colonization. For example, in a pamphlet from 1850, African American features are described as indicating natural “subservience,” echoing a common justification for slavery (Redfield np). Unfortunately, Orwell casts his characters in a similar vein: Burmese characters are described as “half-naked,” “barbaric,” “hideous as demons,” and “savage” (*Burmese* 97). Because Orwell draws from racialized stereotypes to describe and satirize his Burmese characters, and uses the body to communicate national character, his narrative by default privileges European colonizers and falls in with other symbolic texts of this genre. His critique thus becomes, inevitably, illegitimate.
Perspective, Power, and Patriarchy

Perhaps the starkest example of this dynamic can be found when examining the opposition between Ma Hla May and Elizabeth. Both objects of Flory’s desire, these two women (one Burmese, one English) are composed in relation to and opposite one another. Where Elizabeth is “youthful” (Burmese 80), Ma Hla May is a “hag” (273); Elizabeth’s face is “chalk-white” (80), but Ma Hla May’s is “grey” (273). Where Elizabeth’s features are “delicate, regular” (82), Ma Hla May’s are “grotesque” and “shapely” (53). The latter description of Elizabeth is fascinating: the adjective “regular” implies that Elizabeth’s features are according to custom, defined, and natural. This characterization of Elizabeth positions Ma Hla May (who, in all manners, is portrayed as the opposite of Elizabeth) as definitively irregular: against custom, unnatural. Indeed, this juxtaposition is one that Flory notes himself. When the two women briefly meet, Flory observes: “No contrast could have been stranger; the one faintly colored as an apple-blossom, the other dark and garish” (87). Equating Elizabeth to an “apple blossom,” a white flower indicative of amorousness and virginity next to Ma Hla May’s “metallic” gleam and “cylinder of ebony hair” (87) speaks volumes to the overt racialization of these characters and the hyper-valuation of the Western body. The dialectical opposition of these characters is thus co-constructive: it naturalizes the assumption that the Burmese are inferior through a series of physical characterizations that rely on racialized tropes. Because of this racialized power imbalance, the perspective of the novel shifts: it is always the English looking in on the ‘Oriental,’ scrutinizing, analyzing, and never the other way around. This dimension disproportionately critiques
colonized bodies and borrows from racist vocabulary to do so, ultimately reproducing a harmful body-logic that deeply undermines Orwell’s critique.

Specular dimensionality is a power schema that applies not only to discourses of colonization but patriarchy as well; and as many feminist scholars have previously examined, it is impossible to have one without the other. In “Architecture from Without,” Diana I. Agrest investigates the specular dynamics of Western conceptions of the male and female bodies. She writes that the dominant use of logocentrism and anthropomorphism (both frameworks that think in terms of ‘negative’ and ‘positive’ space) has long configured how the Western world has viewed the human body. In this framework, the positive construct is the male body; the negative construct is the female body (Agrest 29). This, of course, inevitably privileges the male perspective and views man as the complete Self in dialectical opposition to woman, or the Other. This script of Western body-logic becomes even more treacherous when it intersects with racial discrimination; a combination of oppressions that African American feminists such as Claudia Jones have defined as “double jeopardy” (Lynn 2). A fruitful demonstration of this can be found in the portrayal of the relationship between Ma Hla May and Flory. For example, when Ma Hla May asks for money from him, she is described as laying “prostrate in front of him, face hidden, arms extended, as though before a god’s altar” (Burmese 155). The power imbalance of this tableau is stark. It not only emphasizes how Ma Hla May is desperate and “maniacal” (263) but also positions Flory in the position of a god. Notably, this scene is from Flory’s perspective: we are quite literally looking down upon Ma Hla May as she prostrates herself on the floor. These dynamics
are reinforced again when she confronts Flory for taking her virginity and rejecting her in favor of a white woman. Bursting into the church, Ma Hla May is immediately described in terms of her physical appearance: “Her face was grey with powder, her greasy hair was tumbling down [...] She looked like a screaming hag of the bazaar” (272). This characterization immediately locates Ma Hla May’s alleged madness in her physical body, transforming her from the young girl she was mere weeks ago to a “grey hag.” This description reveals more about those perceiving her than her actual material presence. In clearer terms, we are given a portrait of Ma Hla May through the colonizers’ eyes: we view her body as old and hideous even when we know her to be a young and attractive woman.

This is an obvious example of the specular dimensions of *Burmese Days*: even in a scene that is supposed to function as a public ruination of Flory’s reputation, the power dynamics of this scene ultimately focus on the degradation of Ma Hla May. A lone Burmese woman amongst white clergy, she becomes a spectacle for reprobation; and it is only because of Flory’s connection to her that he is considered an outcast. The portrayal of these characters’ bodies thus reproduces Orientalist discourse by relying on and concretizing the Self/Other, specular/ocular, colonizer/colonized discourse.

Colonial Embodiment

Orwell’s critique is finally devastated by the ending of the novel. When he is rejected by Elizabeth, publicly humiliated by Ma Hla May, and without hope of redemption, Flory decides to end his life. Some scholars, such as Praseeda Gopinath, have interpreted Flory’s suicide as a metaphor
for the futility of British occupation, suggesting that colonization harms not only the colonized but all involved (220). However, to metaphorize Flory’s suicide, a decisively embodied act, without considering its physical implications, would be a disservice to our analysis of the text. Critical to this scene is its physical nature: Flory’s death is a bodily manifestation of his desire to destroy what ostracizes him from the community. When we come to this question—what ostracizes him—we are faced with the political and cultural ambivalence that contextualizes Flory’s character.

An Englishman by birth but raised in Burma, Flory continually feels frustration about the liminality of his identity and inability to commit either to the role of the colonizer or a supporter of the Burmese people. This difference manifests physically on his body in the form of a birthmark, a physical demarcation that separates him from the other Europeans, and something that Flory always remembers when he “had done something to be ashamed of” (Burmese 54). It is what Gopinath terms the “visual, bodily manifestation of Flory as a developing, not fully functional, late imperial Englishman” (216). This analysis of Flory’s birthmark gains significance at the end of the novel, when Orwell writes that is “finally, the birthmark that had damned him” (Burmese 278). In other words, it is the birthmark that ultimately prevents Orwell from ever attaining the identity of an attractive Englishman that he both despises and craves (278).

Flory fails in many ways to fulfill the role of the ideal English gentleman: he cannot hunt, he flounders as a merchant, he is unattractive, and is ridiculed by other Europeans. Each of these characteristics aligns him closer to the Other rather than Self (and thus, in the context of the
novel, closer to the Burmese people). Flory’s inability to conform to English standards thus constitutes his “weakest spot,” and U Po Kyin is aware of this when he prompts Ma Hla May to publicly humiliate Flory in front of the other Europeans, particularly Elizabeth (Burmese 244). When he kills himself, after realizing that he will never be able to perform the role of the perfect Englishman, Flory is in a sense attempting to “kill off” the Burmese part of himself. In this lens, we may understand Flory’s suicide as an act that attempts to ameliorate the projection of racial identities upon the body. This, of course, leads us to the problematic nature of Flory’s death, which is that it symbolizes the undesirability of living even tangentially to the colonized people. While this may not be the conscious thesis on Orwell’s part, the subliminal philosophy speaks clearly; the othering of Flory and the violence leveled against his character all ultimately suggest that the colonized body is the weaker body.

Conclusion

Applying a theoretical framework that relies on historical context and power dynamics, we can begin to unravel Orwell’s Burmese Days as a colonial commentary and locate its areas of collapse. Specifically, our analysis snags upon Orwell’s depiction of colonized bodies, which borrows from a racist vocabulary and ultimately contributes to an ongoing Orientalist discourse that undermines anti-colonialist critique. This, as we have examined, has the unfortunate effect of naturalizing indigenous communities as the ‘weaker’ and ‘Other’ bodies, creating a socially constructed hierarchy that positions Europe and the West at the center. Of course, our analysis
raises the critical question: why is the codification of bodies more significant, more overpowering than Orwell’s intended critique? To assess this question, it is critical to assess the longevity of Orwell’s depiction of racialized bodies—how body-logic is particularly long-lasting because it grafts socially-constructed stereotypes onto the physical realm in a way that alters our physical interactions: our perspectives, our policies, and our politics. To effectively undermine colonialist logic in our critiques and our activism, we must eliminate racial biases and dualist schematics that trap bodies in a pseudo-logic, moving to a more inclusive and positive body-logic.
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Swashbuckling Politicians

Silas Fier

Organized crime has taken many different forms over the past millennium, and through the development of watercraft and maritime technology, the gangs of rebellious sailors known as pirates were able to thrive. Piracy has been fantasized about in popular movies, the most famous being the recent *Pirates of the Caribbean* series, which portrays piracy as careless, selfish, and valiant. But this false reality takes away from the importance of piracy and its impact, especially as a major catalyst for political change, chaos, and maritime law. Their pillaging, alliances, and influence had an immediate impact on their political climate. Pirate crews became private nations and possessed power, conducted by a strong leader at the top of a social hierarchy, whose individual interests were to be aligned with those of his crew. Like any land nation, pirates relied on a leader to organize the hierarchy, create laws, make definitive decisions, command war, and distribute wages. Captains took on this role, and while their voyages were driven by human greed and the quest for wealth outside of the traditional model of “work,” they ruled with the same mindset as traditional kings, queens, and presidents. Captains used their communication and relationships with governments to gain respect, power, allies, and safety. However, this power was more tied to malicious intent, as piracy was based around crime, and many serious government companies, provinces, and even intergovernmental relationships were affected by the actions of pirates. Crews exercised their interests within their
own beliefs and defied those of governmental law on land. Captains acted on their desires and supported their crew, influencing the world around them due to their political decisions and notoriety.

Background

Piracy is defined as any sort of robbery or violent action for private ends committed outside the space outside any state authority (Jenkins). A pirate, as an individual, is one who engages in these actions, usually with a crew. These men were usually considered opportunists and varied by race and nationality. Between 1672 and 1726, the Golden Age of Piracy, sea bandits rose to numbers above two thousand, and many of these crews originated from the establishment of colonies by European powers of the era. This staggering number even outnumbered the quantity of British and Spanish Navy crews in the Caribbean. These bands of outlaws plundered merchant ships, coastal towns, and even other pirates.

Due to their illegal actions, pirates were portrayed as uncivilized criminals who only responded to power and strength. While these groups were certainly criminals, it is hard to call them uncivilized. Of course, the concepts of strength, brutality, and power were still relevant, as they tend to be in congregations of aggressive men, but the purpose behind their systematic order of power is often overlooked due to their criminal offenses. Most crewmembers derived from merchant and privateer ships, giving up on their lives as commissioned sailors in favor of being part of a freelancing crew with little regulation by the governments that ruled on land. As a result, due to their history as law-abiding citizens, they brought with them their auto-
cratic hierarchical government to their new life from these backgrounds.

The truth is that these groups were very organized. Pirate ships, described by Patrick Pringle in his book *Jolly Roger* as “sea-going stock companies” (106), often elected a captain, crafted rules for day-to-day conduct, equally divided spoil, and appointed certain tasks to a “quartermaster” to ensure the captain did not have overwhelming power. Elected captains treated their vessels like an established state, creating relationships with other pirates and keeping peace in pirate-friendly areas. For example, early European settlements, specifically English ones which were loosely supported by their navy, were subject to repeated plunder and became hub for crime and piracy. This was the case for the British settlement of what is now known as Jamaica. None of the crew and vessels of the thirty-ship naval fleet that was used to conquer the island remained, and the defense of the land and its resources was left up to “independent men-of war” (Hanna 102). These men of war were specifically under instruction by the acting Jamaican governor Sir Thomas Lynch. Known for being harsh on pirates following his personal conviction and execution of Dutch pirate Peter Johnson, Lynch surprisingly decided to hire pirates to protect the area (Royal Collection Trust, 2024). This allowed selected Caribbean pirates a haven for trade and away from harsh legislation, while also acting as mercenaries and supplying the valuable resource of deterrence that the British Navy could not offer. This friendliness towards pirates, especially in the colonies, was an example of privateering. During war, monarchies would “sponsor” pirates, known as privateers, to plunder enemy vessels. It is this practice that was the origin of so many notorious pirates.
Captain Henry Every

In a debate on who is the greatest pirate ever, the man who was labeled “King of Pirates” would be an obvious choice. Henry Every, the famous Red Sea pirate, did not begin his career in the colonies like most pirates of this period. A bloodless mutiny overtook the English naval vessel the *Charles* after eight months of unsuccessful voyaging, and Every was elected captain by his peers. After a brief stint in the East Indies, Every sailed his crew and ship, renamed the *Fancy*, to Madagascar. After taking two ships near Madagascar and joining forces with other English buccaneers like Thomas Tew and his ship the *Amity*, Every now commanded a pirate fleet that began ruthlessly pillaging ships, specifically those of the Great Mughal of India, Emperor Aurangzeb (Burgess). The Mughal and his regime were very active in the world of trade, as India was a very important area for desired resources in Europe. Every, who knew the wealth that was on these ships, strategically created a net to catch Indian vessels, which would lead to one of the most notorious robberies in the history of piracy.

On September 7, 1695, Captain Every and his fleet raided a group of the Mughal’s ships, capturing two in a bloody, two-hour-long battle. There were extensive casualties on both sides, with one of the most notable being Tew, but Every seized the * Fateh Mohammed* and the *Gang-I-Sawai* and the goods they carried. The riches of these ships were incomprehensible to pirates at the time, as Every amassed over £155,000 (over £18.5 million today) from both vessels. Yet the real prize was the importance of the people on board the *Gang-I-Sawai*: the Indian accounts that discuss the encounter claim that an elderly member of the Mughal’s family was on board, while
British folklore of Every’s story claims that it was Mughal’s granddaughter that Every took and peacefully married. However, the more accurate representation is that the pirates killed almost all the men and raped all the woman on board, regardless of status. It can be inferred that Every understood the severity of this moment, as it was the most heinous sea crime to date, and this action would lead to a significant economic and political fallout between the British and the Mughal (Hanna 189).

When the Gang-I-Sawai reached port in Surat, India after the raid, the entire town was outraged, and some of this outrage was directed at the British East India Company (EIC). Riots began throughout the city, and the EIC’s headquarters was one of the flashpoints. The mob threw stones, rammed doors, attempting to break in and claim the heads of the English. The riots were only quieted by the governor of Surat, who dispersed the crowds and arrested the forty workers in the office building, awaiting direction from the Mughal. The incarcerated men wrote a fervent plea to Sir John Gayer, the local representative of the EIC and governor of the English colony of Bombay (now Mumbai). Gayer made a plea to the Lords of Trade, an administrative body created by Charles II to manage ties between Britain and its colonies. It was through this that the British first learned of Every’s treachery. In the meantime, Emperor Aurangzeb ordered a raid on Bombay, cursing the English, including his business partners, as “criminals and infidels” (Burgess 891). The attack was only halted due to an extremely generous contract produced by the British, where the EIC would fully compensate the Mughals for their losses, as well as providing English escorts for all Indian ships commissioned by the Mughal from that point on. The
British could not risk losing their highly profitable colony in India, so such a serious contract was deemed necessary. But the most important clause in the deal was the promise of revenge, which was the only way to salvage the English economy and profits generated from their Indian colonies. This was because though the Mughal agreed to spare the Englishmen of Bombay and Surat, he made it clear that all trade between the British and the Indians was to be frozen until Henry Every was hanging from the gallows. To save the intercontinental trade between the nations, the Board of Trade, which replaced the Lords of Trade in 1696, placed a bounty of £500 (approximately £92,200 today) on Every’s head. Thus began the first ever global manhunt. Networks of global military forces, local law enforcement, governors, merchants, and amateur bounty hunters all had their eyes out for the man and his crew (Johnson 178).

Captain Every disappeared from the seas shortly after this proclamation, yet more damage to English imperial policy followed. His whereabouts were rumored to be somewhere in Ireland, but were not known until ten years ago, when an Arabic coin, printed in modern day Yemen, and determined to be part of the loot of the Gang-I-Sawai that Every plundered, was found in Middletown, Rhode Island. Archaeologists have found twenty-three similar coins in New England, and not even one can be dated after the ship was sacked in 1695 (Coins Found). This meant that Every had made it back to the American colonies, and was able to avoid arrest, unlike some of his crew. John Dann and Philip Middleton, as well as four other members of Every’s crew, were caught in Ireland. The trial was to have large political and economic consequences, for if the pirates were acquitted, the wrath of
the Mughal would stifle trade relations with England. But the men were extremely smart and spent their time further incriminating their former captain and Nicholas Trott, the governor of Providence who, known to be pirate friendly, allegedly was paid off by Every and his men in return for safe haven. After the jury heard the evidence, they decided to acquit the men on all counts. This decision was a crippling blow to the British, who were attempting to bring closure to the issue, as well as a blow to the EIC, whose trade with India would continue to suffer (Burgess). To save face, the pirates were again tried on different charges related to mutiny, found guilty, and hanged on November 25, 1696.

This trial had a primary goal of removing England’s label as a “nation of pirates,” but it did not quite achieve this goal. The testimony of Dann and Middleton raised more questions than answers, specifically bringing to light the friendliness of the colonies towards pirates, possibly foreshadowing the alliances between pirates and revolutionists that would occur half a century later. The Ballad that was created in 1693 that might have predicted the voyage of Every’s career, A Copy of Verses, Composed by Henry Every, *Lately Gone to Sea to Seek His Fortune*, (which may have not been written by Every himself) claimed that his crew would not harm the British or their goals, as they were Brits themselves. But this verse was updated by one of the crew members during the trial, who said, “No nation did we spare” (Hanna 242). This was true due to the massive intergovernmental impact that their actions had, especially against the English. Every’s legacy would live on, with only one pirate that would reach his level of infamy.
Captain William Kidd

Captain William Kidd met the fate that awaited most pirates in May of 1701. The noose hung at the edge of the River Thames at the Execution Dock in London, in the district now known as Wapping. Prior to his hanging, he could sense the looming end of Golden Age of piracy, as before he hung, he issued a warning to all captains. Kidd’s last words condemned piracy, claiming that he was reaching his own demise due to disregarding the Bible and ignoring God. “Take warning now by me, and shun bad company,” Kid said on that day, “lest you come to hell with me” (Bonner 372). His journey ends this way, yet his story as a pirate was legendary, which is evident as a ballad was made and popularized in his name. Printed in 1701 in Britain shortly following his death, the ballad made its way to the colonies swiftly, and would go on to outlive Kidd through oral tradition. Kidd himself died at the age of forty-seven, but only spent a short stint of that as a pirate.

Captain Kidd was a little-known Scotsman, straddling the line between pirating and privateering. This situation was extremely common, as with the frequent warring of European nations over expansion and territory, privateers became extremely useful, and Kidd profited from this opportunity. The commencement of King William’s War in 1689 between the newly established North American colonies of New France and New England was a major catalyst in the development of Kidd’s spell as a pirate. Kidd traveled to New York City on a ship sponsored by Leeward Islands’ Governor Christopher Codrington, where Kidd would go on to live and play a major
part in stifling rebellion in New York City until 1696. Kidd worked as a politician in the colonies. But the common theme about politicians in the Americas (at the time) was that they were only as powerful as their British backers. So, when members of the Whig political party approached him, he left this life behind (Hanna 230).

The Whigs rose to power in 1693, and desired to reshape the political economy of England, prioritizing trade and manufacturing. They believed that to positively restructure the industry, the monopoly that was the East India Trading Company (EIC) needed to be reformed. One major roadblock to their goals was the existence of an outpost on St. Mary’s Island, Madagascar that harbored illegal trade and was especially pirate friendly, so much so that Thomas Tew and a French pirate James Misson were able to create an anarchist pirate Utopia named Libertatia on the island (Wilson 3, Pringle 136). This friendliness towards pirates and unregulated trade within the Indian Ocean frustrated the Whigs, and they determined that the pirates in the area must be eradicated. A group of five powerful Whig politicians devised a plan in 1696 to dispatch Kidd to take care of these pirates.

Kidd was trusted and respected by the people of England, and his hand-picked crew set out after notorious pirates that originated from the colonies, such as Thomas Tew, John Ireland, Thomas Wake, William Mayes, and of course, Henry Every (Hanna 230). Despite the trust that the Whigs had in Kidd, he would leave these pirates alone and, whether by the peer pressure of his crew or his own desire, turn to piracy himself. Rather than prey on these pirates, he would instead prey on other privateers bringing riches back to England. Directly violating his instruction by the London
Whigs, Kidd would end up costing them substantial amounts of money, as his estimated value of contraband and booty reached over £100,000 (over £10.5 million today) (Bonner 363). In so doing, Kidd became a major figure in the disagreement about British economic policy between two major British political parties: the Whigs and the Tories.

Kidd captured at least four major ships along the coast of Africa, the most impactful being the *Quedagh Merchant*, a large ship en route to the English factory in Surat, India. The taking of this heavily loaded ship and its escort codified Kidd as an enemy and an infamous figure, as the taking of this ship followed in Henry Every’s footsteps. After this event, the Mughals once again suspended trade with the British (Wilson 8). This was because the *Quedagh Merchant* was heavily invested in by powerful men in England and especially desired by the Mughal. Kidd’s voyage was devastating to the Whigs. A new attempt by the English Crown was made to limit piracy on December 8, 1698, claiming that all pirates would be permitted a pardon if they gave themselves up, save for two: Henry Every and William Kidd. This notion made Kidd fully aware that he had been declared a pirate, even one as notorious as “The King of Pirates” himself (Wilson 8).

Kidd eventually did turn himself in. After stashing some of his riches away in Boston, he cautiously wrote the first Earl of Bellemont, Richard Coote, a Whig who had been a member of the original committee that authorized Kidd’s voyage. Kidd believed that this letter, as well as the French passes that he obtained from the *Quedagh Merchant* and another ship he took called the *Maiden*, would help him prove his innocence. Regardless, he was arrested and shipped back to England in chains in 1699 (Pringle
When he returned, the political climate was in a completely different shape than when he left. The Whigs were rapidly losing power to the Tories, who knew that the issue of William Kidd’s failed voyage would destroy the limited power the Whigs had left (Wilson 9). The topic of Kidd came up in December 1699, when the Tories, supported by the EIC, attacked the Whigs with two main arguments, the first being that Kidd plundered with a commission of the Broad Seal of the Whigs in his pocket, and that Kidd was even encouraged to commit piracies by the Whigs. (Kidd’s initial trial and documents turned out to be something of a disappointment for the Tories, as rather than incriminating the Whigs, he persisted in claiming his innocence, not providing the Tories with any extra evidence against the Whigs [Pringle 153]). Kidd was sent to Newgate Prison until his next trial two years later, where he pleaded guilty to four charges, including murder and piracy, and was condemned to death. And it was at this point where the final blow against the Whigs was dealt, as the Tories then claimed complete control of the Parliament shortly following this trial. Kidd fell victim to being on the forefront of a political economic catastrophe, and his personal decisions ultimately diminished the power of an entire political party. While he was unable to disappear like Henry Every, his impact on the political world was similar to the King of the Pirates’.

Captain Edward Teach, also known as Blackbeard

While both pirates mentioned came to be extremely infamous, they did so through their actions on the sea. Those who told their story tell of true events, while stretching the truth slightly based on their attitude, opin-
Blackbeard suffered a different fate, for his biographer, Captain Johnson, altered Blackbeard’s legacy in a manner that completely misrepresented his entire contribution to the Golden Age of Piracy.

Johnson claims that Blackbeard, also know as Edward Teach, transitioned from privateering to outright piracy during the War of the Spanish Succession, but not even that can be proven due to a three-year gap between Blackbeard’s first voyage as a part of Benjamin Hornigold’s crew in 1716 and the end of the war in 1713 (Pringle 190). It is certain that Blackbeard was in command of his own ship by 1717, when Hornigold intercepted and captured the French slave ship La Concorde on its way to the Caribbean Island of Martinique. Blackbeard would rename this vessel the Queen Anne’s Revenge and begin his reign over the British, French, and Spanish colonies in the Caribbean and North America (Cartwright). The Queen Anne’s Revenge sported three masts, over forty cannons, and three to four hundred crew members. However, this is where Johnson’s depiction of Blackbeard undermined his character and story as a captain. Blackbeard was not a brutal man. He hardly ever used violence; in fact, it is not clear he ever killed anyone (Pringle 192). Nevertheless, his reign as a Captain is highlighted by the fear factor of his name. Using the strength of his crew and the growing number of vessels he overtook to build his own fleet, he often prevailed in capturing ships with minimal resistance. Blackbeard conquered and recruited pirates such as Stede Bonnet, a successful small-scale pirate in his own right. But Blackbeard’s major claim to fame was his interactions with local governments in the colonies, specifically the Carolinas.
Blackbeard’s economic and political power allowed him to keep headquarters in two different places, the Bahamas and North Carolina. North Carolina had become a sort of hub for pirates, as many colonial governors were not above collusion with pirate crews and their captains. This was usually either due to their personal involvement with piracy, or their willingness to exploit illicit trade, as pirates would sell their stolen wares under the market value (Fox 165). Nearly all pirates engaged in these practices. One colonial governor, Nicholas Trott, mainly known for trying Stede Bonnet, saw his authority in the Bahamas collapse due to accusations that he had permitted Henry Every and his men to live and trade in the islands in exchange for a substantial bribe. Trott’s defense was based on the facts that he was unable to confirm the men’s status as pirates and, moreover, lacked the resources necessary to stop the pirates from landing (164).

By January 1718, Blackbeard had amassed many riches in his voyages and was able to trade some of his plunder for a pardon by the North Carolina governor Charles Eden, with the condition that he give up piracy. Blackbeard distributed his riches among his followers and invested in the town of Bath, North Carolina. He lived in the countryside, married, but did not follow through on the condition; the attractiveness of merchant ships that continued to show up off the coast of the Carolinas led Blackbeard back to sea. In May 1718, Blackbeard sailed The Queen Anne’s Revenge to the mouth of the Charles Town harbor (modern day Charleston, South Carolina) with two small sloops and a larger vessel, the Adventure. Blackbeard’s ships paced the mouth of the harbor, capturing eight ships, the last heading for England, in which Blackbeard obtained over £6000 of coin (£700,000
today) (Pringle 194). Among the notable Charlestonians on board one of the vessels that Blackbeard took in the harbor entrance was Samuel Wragg, member of the Governor’s council. Wragg and other crew members were held captive by Blackbeard, who demanded an unusual item as ransom. Rather than a large sum of money, Blackbeard requested a chest of medicines. To negotiate this deal, he dispatched an envoy ashore. After a while, the medications were delivered, and Blackbeard freed the captives, still uninjured, but without any clothes (Ullian).

After an accidental running aground that resulted in the wreck of The Queen Anne’s Revenge, Blackbeard took refuge back in North Carolina, hoping for a pardon. The governor obliged, but Blackbeard and his followers again gave into piracy and hijacked a French sloop near Ocracoke, an island off the North Carolina coast (Woodard 2014). The Lieutenant Governor of Virginia, who had been monitoring the situation, set out to finish the issue of Blackbeard. He sent a land and sea force to take Blackbeard, wherever he resided. This encounter would lead to the beheading of Blackbeard by Lieutenant Robert Maynard, who returned with Blackbeard’s head as a trophy. While this event ended Blackbeard’s adventures, his political influence was felt during his time as captain. He was able to strike fear into colonial and European governments, organize his fleet as a military force capable of handcuffing an entire state, and invest his spoils into the economies of the colonies through illicit trade. Blackbeard’s voyages were among the last of the Golden Age of Piracy.
Captain George Cusack

Cusack’s story was told in three main publications, the first being a pamphlet entitled *News from Sea or, The Taking of the Cruel Pirate*, which appeared shortly after Cusack’s arrest in the spring of 1674. The second was the trial report, *An Exact Narrative of the Tryals of the Pirates*, which detailed his trial and charges. The last, more impartial, is *The Grand Pyrate: or, the Life and Death of Capt. George Cusack the Great Sea-Robber* (Baer 67).

As these works were released, the narrative around Cusack changed multiple times. The first author describes Cusack as a wicked man, “the barbarous pirate” (*News from Sea* 1) and takes pride in the idea that the high admirals were able to remove such a force of evil from the seas. This article was designed for the British people, which is clear with the author’s emphasis that “his Sacred Majesties foreseeing in his princely wisdome” (*News From Sea* 7) would not respect a traitor who committed the crimes that Cusack would be charged with. This portrayal of Cusack was influential, but only in terms of demonizing piracy, as was the duty of all those who printed in coalition with the Crown or the East India Trading Company. This was easy to do, as it can be easy to paint a devilish image of a pirate who committed numerous land and sea crimes such as robbery and murder. It was not until the publication of Cusack’s biography that the European and colonial world was able to fully understand his story. The biographer records Cusack’s actions at sea but includes pivotal events in Cusack’s development as an orator, quoting his words from major historical events at sea, such as when he seizes his first ship and when he is captured by the governor of Anguilla (Frohock 264). The author describes Cusack in a fashion that iden-
tifies him as different from the “organized marauders,” or privateers at the time. While most pirates of Cusack’s generation began their journey with a note of sponsorship from a government and would pirate against other nations (eventually turning on their own country), Cusack fit better into the category of an anarchist marauder, who did favor the English, but did not rely on the sponsor of any particular government to begin his journey (Frohock 266).

Cusack was a known troublemaker in his early years, which would continue to evolve into a life filled with thievery as a pirate. When he was a teenager, Cusack robbed his neighbor, Mr. Benedict Arthur, of sixty British pounds. Arthur caught him and struck a deal that he would serve on Arthur’s merchant ship as punishment. The author of *The Grand Pyrate* provides the context that Cusack went through with this crime because of his attitude of “not agreeing with Religious Life” (4). This concept would continue into his years as a captain, yet before he was able to be a captain, he was forced to spend time serving under merchants as a deckhand. Throughout the years at sea as a part of different crews, Cusack attempted mutiny four times on four different ships. He managed to escape after three failed attempts but was eventually sent to the notorious prison known as Marshalsea, just south of the Thames River in London (Frohock 268). This prison time did not have the intended effect. Once freed, the radicalized Cusack, now further inspired to escape the constraints of current society on land, again left for the sea. It was at this time that he finally succeeded in a mutiny. With help from the crew, he overthrew Captain Lambert and the leaders of the *Hopewell*, renaming the vessel *The Valient Prince* (*The Grand*
Though the process of commandeering the ship was violent, Cusack was merciful and kept Sir Thomas Power, a merchant, and the supercargo (the representative of the ship’s owner on board a merchant ship, responsible for overseeing the cargo and its sale) of the vessel. The merchant offered to help Cusack by creating an account of all cargo on board for Cusack’s benefit, which he accepted. Shortly after this ordeal, Cusack divided Captain Lambert’s goods and money in equal proportion to everyone on board the vessel, excluding Power, and declared the crew’s intent of “running away with the Ships and Cargo, and of taking or sinking all Ships or Vessels they should meet with belonging to any Nation, English only excepted” (*The Grand Pyrate* 6).

With this declaration, Cusack made a promise to all who joined him that all cargo from ships they would take would be equally divided between the crew in a similar fashion, with a slight extra portion for himself. This concept would be followed by other captains like William Kidd, who took forty pieces of eight of the booty compared to his crew’s twenty pieces each (Pringle 158). This “law” that Cusack swore to abide by was the first example of the way Cusack would organize his men. He abandoned all previous policies and went as far as throwing the ship's logs and documents (save for a couple documents that Power was hiding and would later use to try and incriminate Cusack in England) including a large bible over the side of the boat shortly after the mutiny. *The Grand Pyrate* recounts this action as a major point of contention. Many of the crew began to protest and attempt to persuade Cusack to save the bible, to which Cusack famously said: “You Cowards, what do you think to go to Heaven and do such Actions
as these? No, I will make you Officers in Hell under me! Go thou thy way
Divinity, what have we to do with thee” (*The Grand Pyrate* 8). Discount-
ing religion was a foreign concept in the mid-1600s, as it was still the main
reason behind countless wars being fought between European states. Cusack
showed no regret for the crimes he had committed up to this point, and by
tossing away such an important text, decided that piracy and Christianity
were incompatible. Since all government at the time was still validated by
monarchs who professed divine sanction, this action further enforced the
idea of Cusack being an anarchist, waging war on society.

Establishing a new hierarchy required that Cusack implement a
new set of rules to fill the void of the former civil and biblical order (Fro-
hock 268). Pirate articles of law were not common during this time, and
most were oral obligations between a captain and his crew. George Cusack
was the first pirate to record his pirate articles, which he likely drew up
with his lieutenant, and were subscribed to by the rest of the crew (Fox 57).
Some of the men turned pirate without acknowledging the consequences
and ramifications of this process, but Cusack’s biographer recorded the
“daily song” that the drunken sailors would sing, which exemplifies most
crew members’ acceptance of the spiritual path their souls were set to follow:

HANG sorrow, let’s cast away care,
the World is bound to find us:
Thou and I, and all must die,
And leave this World behind us.
The Bell shall ring, the Clark shall sing,
The Good old Wife shall wind us.
The Sexton shall lay our Bodies in Clay
Where the Devil in Hell shall find us.
(*The Grand Pyrate* 8-9)
According to the biographer, the “Merry Crew” sang this song without “any apprehension” of the actual damnation of their souls that followed their adoption of a pirate’s way of life.

In addition to the radical idea of rejecting Christianity, Cusack challenged convention in other ways. His ‘laws’ were based on maritime tradition, and drawn up by pirates, not another, “more civilized,” body (Fox 62). Cusack’s *Obligation* was based on the “Laws of Oleron,” (as referenced in *The Grand Pyrate* as the Lawes of Pleron) a conduct policy from the late 1400s that established various rights and responsibilities for mariners and masters, including the division of spoil (Fox 307). Cusack’s *Obligation* was no doubt what he became most famous for, as his document was the first of many codes that pirates would implement to encourage respectable treatment and governance on sovereign pirate vessels.

However, Captain Cusack would eventually break his own set of laws. After most of his crew decided to take a short shore leave with their share of the plunder, the greedy Captain decided to throw out the rules and abandon most of his crew. He took with him seven of his crew and unleashed a new phase of lawlessness on the high seas, committing more robberies until he was finally arrested off the coast of New England with his small crew for engaging in illicit trade of illegally obtained goods (Frohock 274). Sentenced to death by hanging with his accomplices, Cusack even argued against the legitimacy of the trial, claiming that the jury was unfit to make decisions as citizens, and that a fair trial would involve “being tried by men of our own trade” (Hanna 122). Though futile, this attempt may have
had some validity to it, as many coastal men may have been more friendly to a pirate compared to a citizen, which has been a constant in the stories of the pirates discussed in this article.

Conclusion

After his execution, George Cusack’s story began to fade. A life spent fighting authority with his actions and his rhetoric ended in disgrace in execution by hanging. While a political impact was felt in the short term by piracy, constituted government is bound to outlast the rebels. And though they may not have respected the government they ran from, it would catch up to them in the end, through either death in the case of Kidd, Blackbeard, and Cusack, or forced disappearance like Henry Every.
Works Cited


Several of Wilfred Owen’s poems focus on shell shock and dramatize the suffering of fellow soldiers. His poems “The Dead-Beat,” “Dulce et Decorum Est,” and “Mental Cases” are prime indicators of shell shock’s impact on Owen’s identity and his transformed views on the First World War. In addition, Owen’s references to shell shock added to the contemporary discourse surrounding the first diagnoses and offer an empathetic, complementary insight to the scientific arguments such as Dr. Charles Myers’s “A Contribution to the Study of Shell Shock” and Dr. W. H. R. Rivers’s “The Repression of War Experience.” Lastly, for modern readers, his poems also serve as a historical commentary on the precedent to the Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) diagnosis as well as the stigma surrounding it.

Owen and World War I

Dominic Hibberd’s biography attributes the first hints of Owen’s literary potential to his livelihood as an English teacher in Bordeaux, France, where he lived and wrote poetry for two years. Despite his early talent, his literary career appeared to be halted when Owen volunteered for the Artists’ Rifles in October 1915 to circumvent the British draft (Hibberd 206). However, his experiences in the war eventually refined his poetry into its characteristically sympathetic, realistic, and gruesome style. Vastly different
from his early naiveté, his later work would eventually enjoy an unprec-
edented appreciation to the point where his contemporaries called him “the
poet of the war” (305). As both a poet and a shell-shocked veteran, Owen’s
identity was forever changed by the war, much like the speakers of his
poems.

Owen’s insight into World War I is a direct result of his officer
rank and experience with shell shock. He suffered his first personal injury
soon after he began serving on the front lines near Beaumont Hamel as a
lieutenant in the Manchester Regiment (Hibberd 284). His unit captured a
German dugout in No Man’s Land, risking severe frostbite. Owen endured
military hospitalization and nearly lost his life twice, not only from enemy
fire but also from a fall into a cellar in March 1917. The consequences of
this fall may have been more devastating and enduring for Owen than either
he or his army doctors initially thought. After being stuck in the cellar for
at least 24 hours before climbing out concussed and disoriented, Owen was
diagnosed with a simple headache and declared fit to serve. Unfortunately,
Owen’s symptoms would intensify over time, leading to uncontrollable
tremors and confusion; furthermore, his mental health would devolve into a
state of flux, with his nerves worsening the longer he endured active duty.

After a shell exploded next to Owen’s head a month after that
untreated concussion, his already gradually diminishing mental fortitude
shattered. He “struggled to behave normally, trying to forget that he was
still dizzy from the shell blast” (Hibberd 302). This behavior was likely in
response to a stigma around shell shock symptoms, and his efforts were
understandably flawed. During the weeks after the blast, one military offi-
cial described Owen as “shaky and tremulous, and his conduct and manner were peculiar, and his memory was confused” (303). Although Owen was able to fake normalcy for nearly a month, his symptoms were becoming too intense to hide. Owen was transported to a hospital in Gailly where he was treated for war neurosis, a more clinical term for shell shock. Although Owen’s physical symptoms improved, he still possessed a “highly strung temperament,” a testament to his fragile mental state (314). Soon after, Owen was transferred to Craiglockhart War Hospital to prevent relapse. There, he met Siegfried Sassoon. Sassoon encouraged Owen to write more directly about the war. After several months of treatment, stateside duty, poetry writing, and reevaluating his opinion of the war, Owen returned to his regiment and was killed in combat one week before the end of the war. Such a tragic end speaks to an ironic, complex relationship between Owen and the war; in a sense, his poetic career’s termination parallels the war’s conclusion, which enhances his role as the poet of the war and implies the importance of implementing psychological treatments—whether it be medicine, therapy, or simple understanding—promptly enough to help those who need it most.

Shell Shock and World War I

Shell shock was a controversial topic, especially in the early 20th century. The military needed their men to continue fighting, while medical staff found that wartime conditions were damaging soldiers in many more ways than one. Although shell shock symptoms were not necessarily life-threatening, this new medical phenomenon was debilitating enough to hos-
pitalize soldiers and leave them a husk of their former selves. Initially, shell shock was understood as a purely physical ailment because soldiers would be blown back by blasts from artillery shells and become concussed. However, as seen by the cognitive and behavioral symptoms, the injury would affect the victim in a myriad of subtle, difficult-to-treat ways that began to suggest internal, mental wounds.

This ideological shift in treatment from the physical to the mental began with cases like those in “A Contribution to the Study of Shell Shock.” In this article, Dr. Charles Myers coined the term shell shock and discusses the similarity in the symptoms found among three wounded soldiers. The soldiers all suffered the same symptoms: memory loss after an explosion; reduced vision, taste, and smell (but not hearing); and insomnia (Myers 316). Each was treated with rest and hypnosis for a few months at The Duchess of Westminster’s War Hospital (317); hypnosis encouraged patients to recall memories and mentally process the traumatic catalyst of their shell shock. Despite the idea of shell shock as a physical ailment being prevalent at the time, Myers did not prescribe physical rehabilitation or medicines. Yet, with this treatment plan, soldiers’ conditions slowly improved to the point where one man was discharged and another was transferred to outpatient treatment. Despite their improvement, the reason behind these symptoms was still unclear. For example, while treating one soldier with hypnosis, Myers records, “suggestions made evoked a description of how the ground fell in on [the patient] at the trenches” (318). This detail reveals two key aspects of the patient’s shell shock trauma: physical, as he likely sustained a head injury, and mental, as he repressed this upsetting event. Myers
continues, “While under hypnosis the patient is told that he will remember this when he awakes. He does so, but cannot explain why he had not been able to recall it before” (318). Furthermore, Myers noticed that the soldiers’ hearing was virtually normal while their smell was much impaired, despite the explosions that injured them being loud as well as odorless. Myers writes that “it is therefore difficult to understand why hearing should be (practically) unaffected, and the dissociated ‘complex’ be confined to the senses of sight, smell, and taste (and to memory)” (320). Symptoms like these, without physical explanations, helped introduce the notion that shell shock was primarily a mental illness.

Despite Myers’ findings, the legitimacy of shell shock was under contention. This was due to how most military authorities (and many doctors) still regarded shell shock: as a symptom of cowardice and an excuse to shirk duty. The bias against soldiers suffering from shell shock built up a stigma against presenting symptoms and fed the tendency to ignore an illness in need of treatment. For instance, the symptoms of one of Myers’ patients were dismissed by military doctors; Myers writes, “the doctors at the barn considered [the patient] ‘off his head’” when he sought treatment after a shell exploded inside his trench (319).

Though many military authorities clung to the notion of cowardice, research like Myers’ studies convinced most doctors to examine and treat the psychological symptoms of shell shock. Most notable among these doctors were W. H. R. Rivers and Arthur Brock. Rivers was a military psychiatrist at Craiglockhart. In Rivers’ essay, “The Repression of War Experience,” he advocates for the consideration of shell shock as a genuine mental disorder
and compassionately presents the inhumane, horrific conditions of active military service as the perpetrator. At the time, the popular treatment for shell shock encouraged soldiers to repress their distressing thoughts or memories about the war, but this approach showed detrimental results in Rivers’ patients by fracturing their mental states further. Concerning one shell-shock patient who had previously been treated with repression, Rivers reported how “at the end of his period of leave he appeared before a medical board and the president asked a question about the trenches; he broke down completely and wept.” The patient was then transferred to Craiglockhart, where Rivers succeeded in improving his physical and mental fortitude, but the soldier was too far gone. Rivers concluded, “it soon became obvious that the patient would be of no further service in the Army, and he relinquished his commission.”

As an alternative to repression, Rivers achieved a more promising prognosis by exposing his patients to stimuli concerning the war such as newspaper articles and open discussions of their wartime recollections. Rivers found promising results with his exposure technique: “several of the officers I have described or mentioned in this paper were able to return to some form of military duty, with a degree of success very unlikely if they had persisted in the process of repression.” Rivers was a defender of the suffering soldier. His expertise and open-mindedness greatly aided his patients’ outcomes and reputations. Rather than blame soldiers for alleged cowardice, Rivers acknowledged that “those thus incompletely trained have had to face strains such as have never previously been known in the history of mankind.” For Rivers, soldiers’ mental breakdowns were understandable
and validated by the horrors of war. He still held fast to his responsibility to examine his patients from the perspective of military usefulness, but he did so with the intent of ensuring his patients’ well-being as much as possible.

Arthur Brock’s technique of ergotherapy to treat war neurosis set him apart from Rivers. According to Daniel Hipp’s article on WWI recovery therapy, Brock’s ergotherapy hinged on encouraging patients to engage in work or activities that would resume their relationships with the outside world that the war interrupted (30). Brock theorized that if soldiers addressed their feelings of helplessness by staying active, it would renew the patient’s sense of purpose, agency, and value. This method of healing allowed the patients to actively contribute to their recovery while Rivers’ hypnosis relied on doctoral expertise (32). However, ergotherapy left many concerns unaddressed as it simply busied the patients, which could have been unsatisfying considering their nervous mental state.

Finally, the British War Office’s (BWO) Official Enquiry into Shell Shock was a collaboration between government officials, doctors, and military officers published after the war ended. Many voices in the Enquiry exemplified a lower level of sympathy for those intangibly handicapped by the war as they challenged the legitimacy of shell shock as a mental disorder. The most prominent critics of shell shock were the military officials; in a section titled “Cowardice and Shell-Shock,” authorities on the disorder spurned the notion of shell shock being anything but a ploy for time off-duty or a display of cowardice. One officer, Colonel Campbell, wrote that shell shock is “a favourite method which malingerers employed to get away from the battle front” that often “becomes contagious” (BWO). However,
the doctors and psychiatrists consulted for the enquiry testified to the extremely low rates of those faking the symptoms of shell shock. Dr. William Brown recorded that “in 1,000 cases he had found 28 cases of serious malingering, all of whom had confessed to him” (BWO). Although military officers refused to concede that the war mentally wounded soldiers through trauma and extreme psychological distress, soldiers and, by extension, their doctors, only saw shell shock as a debilitating condition caused by pain, violence, and loss. Ultimately, the general consensus of the Enquiry emphasized the medical officers’ familiarity with their patients’ characters and recognized that shell shock was a complex and unavoidable defense mechanism, caused at least partially by the war.

Owen’s Shell Shock and Poetry

Owen fought to reveal the true nature of war to his readers and revive the human conscience with truth in his poems based on what he had learned during his service and treatment. At Craiglockhart, he was treated directly by Brock and partook in ergotherapeutic activities such as writing poems, tutoring English, and editing the hospital’s magazine, The Hydra (Hipp 31). Owen’s experiences with war and shell shock became inseparable, and as such his poems are a living example of both shell shock treatment (i.e., ergotherapy) and advocacy. Whether this theme was a deliberate effort or not is unclear; regardless, Owen’s works are an enquiry into the personal experience of shell shock and aid in setting a precedent for sympathetic, objective care for what modern audiences understand as PTSD. Perhaps the most outright examples of Owen’s changed identity and perspectives are
Owen’s “The Dead-Beat,” “Dulce et Decorum Est,” and “Mental Cases.”

Shortly after meeting Sassoon at Craiglockhart, Owen drafted “The Dead-Beat” in August 1917. It describes a soldier being overtaken by shell shock symptoms and dying on the same night, with the discourse of military discipline overruling compassion as the primary focus of the poem. While shell shock is never mentioned outright, the reader is slowly introduced to how the trauma-induced disorder presents: hallucinations, delusions, and impaired physical functioning. For instance, the soldier who suffers from presumed shell shock “dropped” and “Lay stupid” as his body failed under fatigue and mental distress (Owen ll.1, 2). He is described as “Dreaming” with hallucinations and, in a deluded state, declares that he will “do ‘em in, [. . .] If this hand’s spared,” even though the speaker later reports that the soldier was unwounded (ll.11, 7). The simple, natural diction and observant tone of the speaker may allude to a civilian understanding of shell shock, as civilians were more likely to hear about it offhand from relatives or friends than from a scientific report. In this, Owen aims to relate what could have been his personal experience and convince the everyday man of the realities of shell shock without relying on medical jargon.

“The Dead-Beat” displays an interaction between the military and medical opinion on shell shock that predicts the contentious conversations in the BWO Enquiry. Owen introduces the debate over shell shock by having a fellow soldier theorize, “‘It’s Blighty, p’raps’” (1.10). Here, British military slang is used to question whether the sufferer had a legitimate injury meriting being sent home. Following that, the views of each side are expressed, with the military men finally showing more sympathy than the
doctor, who jeered at the soldier’s death, in an ironic twist on the arguments in “Cowardice and Shell-Shock.” The speaker reiterates the initial theme of doubt by questioning if the symptoms reflect “Malingering,” a topic that the British War Office would investigate in depth (Owen l.18). However, the stretcher-bearers flippantly reject that proposal by telling the speaker “Not half!” and thereby confirm that the patient’s symptoms are legitimate (l.18). In his studies, Rivers references the same symptoms as Owen did in “The Dead-Beat”; he records that one shell shock victim “had lost power and sensation in his legs,” as well as noting the presence of nightmares and impaired hearing and vision. Owen writing the soldier’s shell shock symptoms realistically emphasizes the legitimacy of the poem’s message: the soldier’s condition was not well understood or recognized, and his death meant nothing because he no longer contributed to the war effort. This echoes Rivers’ assessment of his patients’ capabilities for service in his essay, albeit in a harsher tone, and points to the goal of winning the war being commonly prioritized over protecting the soldiers’ and citizens’ lives.

“The Dead-Beat” also addresses stigma, again like Rivers’ essay. While the subject of this poem is a soldier suffering from shell shock, the speaker does not display sympathy or compassion; this alludes to how most military officials and many civilians viewed the disorder as cowardice or a disgrace to their patriotic duty. If the speaker of these poems presents symptoms like those Owen himself experienced, one may argue that Owen’s poems were less credible and more like biased retellings. The distancing of self and speaker with Owen’s work could be interpreted as a variation of repressing his own wartime experiences, much like the patients discussed
in Rivers’ “The Repression of War Experience.” On the other hand, most critics consider Owen’s authorial voice as a reliable glimpse into WWI. By advocating for and informing the public opinion of shell shock victims, Owen’s work earns more credence by using shell shock as an insightful keystone rather than as label of cowardice or mental instability undercutting his poetic voice (Hibberd 305). A central theme in “The Dead-Beat” is the soldier’s silence contrasted with the surrounding voices labeling his suffering; military leaders, whether officers or doctors, have the privilege of raising their voice above the common soldiers to either condemn or help their condition. Although his officer role grants him some of this same authority, Owen’s personal experience with shell shock and considerate, observant poetic tone present an opportunity for his audience to hear a simple, direct description of shell shock that urges the reader’s compassion and sympathy. Unfortunately, other authoritative voices above Owen’s emphasized pro-war propaganda and furthered the stigma around shell shock.

Misleading images of the war and shell shock were fed to the public through some authoritative voices, and Owen rallied against that propaganda in “Dulce Et Decorum Est.” This poem was drafted in October 1917 and expands Owen’s disapproval of propaganda by condemning “The old lie” (l.27). The poem is much less approachable for civilians than Owen’s other works because it focuses on war propaganda, and by extension those who subscribe to it, with ferocity and indignation. The poem’s Latin title alludes to the common belief that it is honorable and proper to die for one’s country, and Owen juxtaposes the set precedent of glory and honor in the title with inglorious, vivid descriptions of soldiers trudging through
trenches, “bent double” and “coughing like hags” (ll.1, 2). “Dulce” is set in the trenches, where there is nothing proud or patriotic about soldiers “limp[ing] on” while “All went lame; all blind; / Drunk with fatigue” (ll.6-7). Owen wrote the first two stanzas of “Dulce” in the collective first-person perspective; however, his verbs are in the past tense, which distances the reader from the speaker as civilians did not share those experiences with Owen. For instance, the speaker states, “we cursed through sludge, / Till on the haunting flares we turned our back / And towards our distant rest began to trudge” (ll.2-4). In quotes like this one, “Dulce” expresses obscenities that the general population has no understanding of, and, as Owen argued in this poem, no one ever should.

In “Dulce,” Owen does not rely on civilian concepts for metaphors; rather, he describes the war exactly as it felt. The few similes he uses are explicit and unusual, as he wrote soldiers “coughing like hags” and drowning in poison gas, “flound’ring like a man in fire or lime” (ll.2, 12). These concepts are completely alien to civilians and, much like the real-world transition from traumatic experiences to shell shock symptoms, the second half of “Dulce” shifts from gritty realistic imagery to appalling psychological descriptions. Owen’s collective first-person perspective changes to singular once he describes a man dying of poison gas, a memory that haunts the speaker “In all my dreams, before my helpless sight” (l.15); it is as if witnessing this traumatic event, with life-long ramifications, set his psyche apart from the others. In this distinction lies Owen’s subtle explanation of the ostracization of shell shock victims. In the fourth stanza, Owen addresses the reader, which implies the importance of civilian understanding and
communication in order to fight against stigma and propaganda: “if in some smothering dreams you too could pace / Behind the wagon that we flung him in” and “if you could hear, at every jolt, the blood / Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs” (ll.17-18, 21-22). Owen answers these conditional statements with the following conclusion, indicating the role a greater understanding would play in reducing false beliefs: “My friend, you would not tell [. . .] / The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est / Pro patria mori” (ll.25, 27-28). The heart of Owen’s message in “Dulce” addresses the disconnect between soldiers who experienced war—especially shell shock victims—and the civilians who did not and attributes the lack of civilians’ understanding as both a consequence and enabler for the dangerous false-hoods of war propaganda. However, Owen’s inclusion of the audience in the first place reveals the importance of third-party understanding of shell shock and advocates lessening the divide between soldiers and civilians.

The understanding Owen seeks in “Dulce” amidst his confliction towards the civilians—anger that they perpetrated it, and gratitude that they were spared from it—is reciprocated by Sassoon’s “Repression of War Experience.” Sassoon wrote that poem during his time at Craiglockhart and named it after his psychiatrist River’s essay. Both Sassoon and Owen served on active duty for significant lengths of time, and Sassoon suffered from nightmares and hallucinations from his service; however, as his psychiatrist Rivers concluded, it was just a reaction to prolonged stress and not the type of trauma-induced neurosis Owen suffered from (Hibberd 334). Regardless, the men connected on a level few could understand due to their shared experiences with war, mental unrest, and poetry. Just like their lived
experiences, Sassoon’s poem was closely related to Owen’s in the imagery of haunted, withering soldiers and multiple point of view transitions. Sassoon’s “Repression of War Experience” begins with an image of broken soldiers that “go mad” with uncontrolled “ugly thoughts” and the significance of burning, blinded moths (ll.6, 7, 1). His poem addresses the act of repression more explicitly than “Dulce,” perhaps due to a more objective perspective, having not personally suffered from shell shock. Sassoon concludes his poem with a contrast between the noncombatant reader and the speaker as the former is “quiet and peaceful, summering safe at home” and the latter is “going stark, staring mad because of the guns” (ll.33, 39). The evolution of Sassoon’s point of view from third person to first person in the poem suggests a more personal conclusion and a failure to fully repress as the point of view ultimately turns inward; this mirrors British society’s development from only considering seeing shell shock physically, like a simple head injury or case of malingering, to viewing it through the lens of mental illness.

Sassoon’s voice speaks to those with lived experience of the war, those who see it in the true light that Owen’s “Dulce” seeks to paint it in. However, Owen’s lived experience with shell shock allows his poetry to address the inexplicable, subtler aspects of wartime trauma and deliver a more haunting, compelling argument on behalf of suffering soldiers.

Another point of comparison with Owen’s writing to analyze his use of shell shock is Dr. William Brown’s scientific reports; Brown treated WWI war neurosis and served as an authority in “Cowardice and Shell-Shock.” Paul Peppis compared Brown’s and Owen’s writings by analyzing their reported causes and impacts of shell shock and argued that Owen’s
poems still showed signs of lingering, unresolved trauma. For instance, Owen’s “Dulce” ends with a stern accusation towards noncombatants, but the preceding lines of anguish and guilt undercut his conclusion (Peppis 269). Peppis argues that the speaker of the poem, and by extension Owen as its poet, attempts to work through the traumatic memories he has and assign blame where he must in order to gain closure. However, as a once willing soldier in battle, objectivity in his report is impossible and his contradicting feelings of being both a victim and a perpetrator of war go unacknowledged (270). To augment Peppis’ stance, the heavy imagery of dreams and unreal scenery in “Dulce” hints at Owen’s shell shock symptoms, possibly including recurring nightmares or intrusive thoughts. The transition from first person plural to first person singular in the poem is uncanny, considering how Owen fought with his regiment and was then isolated from them at Craiglockhart. The subtle complexities between Owen’s rejection of war and its permanent influence on his poetry through shell shock continue to set Owen’s voice apart from Sassoon’s, dry medical reports, and virtually every other war artist speaking against propaganda and trench warfare.

In “Mental Cases,” Owen details several symptoms of shell shock as well as clues to how victims of shell shock were perceived during the war years. “Mental Cases” was written after Owen left Craiglockhart and just before he reentered service in June 1918. The poem presents the perspective of an enlightened observer describing mentally tortured veterans. These veterans were based on the physically and mentally destroyed soldiers he saw at a hospital in Gailly (Hibberd 307). The terrible details in the poems juxtapose the caregiving hospital background, and suggest that the harsh,
unforgiving reality of the war bled over into the hospitals and treatment; arguably, this also may have been perpetrated by an early misunderstanding of shell shock in medical communities. Owen wrote “Mental Cases” even though he was regarded to have healed well; this may imply that for Owen, his stay at Craiglockhart—or even his onset of shell shock on its own—was debilitating despite his recovery and artistic growth. For Owen, perhaps not all wounds could be treated. Perhaps Owen recognized the lingering impacts of his shell shock, and the consequences of such a perspective, whether conscious or not, is replicated in “Mental Cases.”

“Mental Cases” also includes several symptoms of shell shock that align with “Cowardice and Shell-Shock,” aiding the visibility and perceived legitimacy of shell shock. In a description of a patient, “Cowardice and Shell-Shock” recorded the following: “the presence of fine tremors, quick pulse and sweating, if persistent or readily excited by slight emotional stress, may [. . .] be accepted as indicative of psycho-neurosis” (BWO). This relates to the lines from “Mental Cases” that describe similar symptoms: tremors and shaking in “Wherefore rock they”; excessive sweating in “Ever from their hair and through their hand palms / Misery swelters”; and persistent mental distress in “Memory fingers in their hair of murders” (Owen ll.2, 7-8, 11). The BWO also identifies “fine tremor of face and tongue” as well as “insomnia and evidence of nightmares” as symptoms. Owen included the same details in lines such as “Drooping tongues from jaws that slob their relish” and “Surely we have perished / Sleeping” (ll.3, 8-9). While these parallels evidence the influence from and advocacy for shell shock in “Mental Cases,” Owen departs from “Cowardice and Shell-Shock” by plac-
ing a specific emphasis on the mental symptoms of these men. For instance, Owen describes those suffering from shell shock as “men whose minds the Dead have ravished” (l.10). By addressing the psychological nature of their symptoms, Owen promotes an intimate and sympathetic understanding of shell shock rather than derogatorily labelling it cowardice. Furthermore, the speaker of “Mental Cases” asks and answers his own questions, which supports his mental fortitude and hearkens back to the experimental treatments of Rivers that granted his patients autonomy. Other than the “Batter of guns and shatter of flying muscles,” Owen refrains from explicit mentions of the war or details of military service (1.16). Not only is this similar to how Rivers advised subtle exposures to the war rather than repression or overexposure, it also highlights the enduring nature of these symptoms, even when removed from the war. While not directly treated by Rivers, Owen’s treatment at Craiglockhart was likely impacted by Rivers’ innovative approach. Furthermore, in light of Rivers’ research, Owen’s war poems may have aided his recovery by addressing his memories and thoughts about his experiences and trauma.

Owen concludes “Mental Cases” by blaming those who sent the suffering soldiers to battle in the first place, who are identified as “us” (ll.27, 28). This either guiltily references Owen’s officer rank or joins the speaker with the civilian perspective (a stark departure from the previous two poems, but possibly rooted in his time away from the battlefield at Craiglockhart) to confront civilians’ failure to recognize the true nature of war and shell shock. Either way, the use of “these” in opposition with “us” dictates a strict grouping in the speaker’s perspective. Because the speaker
presumedly understands shell shock and the war, the speaker likely repre-
resents a soldier who suffered—“Surely we have perished / Sleeping, and
walk hell” (Owen 1.8-9)—but received effective treatment, so as not to end
up like “these hellish” that the speaker does not identify with (1.9). While
the exact aim of “Mental Cases” is unclear, the lack of relation between the
speaker and other men implies different treatment outcomes and stigma
applied to the latter. This contributes to the theme of stigmatization in
Owen’s poetry and the blame at the end of the poem is partly because of the
speaker’s stigmatic approach. This piece further distinguishes Owen’s voice
as an advocating, cathartic force offering readers a personal yet truthful
understanding of the war’s consequences.

“The Dead-Beat,” “Dulce,” and “Mental Cases” each uniquely con-
tributed to understanding and representing shell shock and set a precedent
for the modern diagnosis of PTSD. The frequent symbolism and ambiguity
within his poetry mirror Owen’s inability to completely process the ramifi-
cations of his shell shock; this is again reflected by his domestic audience’s
inability to understand the experiences of war and shell shock. Owen’s
works and WWI poetry as a whole strike a balance between explicit address
and repressed avoidance through implicit meanings and evoked emotions
that the civilian reader cannot fully relate to; in this manner, Owen’s poetry
reflects both his experiences with treatment for and stigmatization due to
shell shock. Arguably, Owen’s poetry is his prescribed treatment to the civil-
ian society for their chronic misunderstanding of shell shock, from WWI to
the present as we strive towards a compassionate and inclusive approach to
PTSD.
Works Cited


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