To acknowledge the generosity of James and Mary Oswald, whose love of the written word has inspired innumerable others to a deeper appreciation of the complexity and richness of the English language and its literatures, The Oswald Review is named in their honor.
THE OSMALD Review

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

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According to William Harmon and C. Hugh Holman's reference book A Handbook to Literature (2000), a leitmotif is "a recurrent repetition of some word, phrase, situation, or idea, such as tends to unify a work through its power to recall earlier occurrences" (288). Margaret Atwood's novel The Handmaid's Tale (1985) contains many such leitmotifs; one of the most subtle of these is the recurrence of flowers throughout the course of the novel. Atwood's narrator, Offred, notices and describes the flora she sees all around her. These flowers simultaneously hold both little meaning and great meaning for Offred. She connects the images of different kinds of
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flowers with the different facets of her shattered life: normality, childhood, sexuality, and sterility. At the same time, Offred refuses to combine the meaning of these images with her life in Gilead, for fear of losing her sanity.

One of the few glimpses of normality that Offred has left in her controlled, exploitative society comes in the form of summer flowers, usually blue: "[o]n the wall above the chair, a picture, framed but with no glass: a print of flowers, blue irises, water-color. Flowers are still allowed" (10). Blue flowers mark brief moments of normality and reality in the insane, surrealistic world of Gilead, but their nostalgic comfort is quickly overshadowed by the grim reality of Offred’s anti-utopian society. These blue flowers represent a world that has disappeared—a world of freedom and familiarity that has been perverted in Gilead. Offred’s comfort with the flowers is jarred by the lack of glass in the frame; this absence reminds her that the world she recognizes has been perverted into a nightmare. Offred also knows that the innocent flowers she observes all around her—her last concrete connections to the world she knew before Gilead became her reality—have no reality in her existence as a handmaiden: “[i]t [the bathroom]’s papered in small blue flowers, forget-me-nots, with curtains to match...all this bathroom lacks from the time before is a doll whose skirt conceals the extra roll of toilet paper” (Atwood 81). The blue embroidered posies on Serena Joy’s veil are also outdated, merely memories of an earlier time: “No use for you, I think at her, my face unmoving, you can’t use them anymore” (Atwood 105). The narrator must force herself to separate the inconsequential summer flowers from the insanity around her. This separation is necessary because Offred knows that her sanity will snap if she tries to make meaning out of the insignificant.

Just as the blue blossoms connect to Offred’s nostalgic longing for the normality of the past, so yellow flowers bring her back to her childhood. “I long for one, just one, rubbishy and insolently random and hard to get rid of and perennially yellow as the sun” (Atwood 275). Yellow blooms send Offred back to the innocence of her childhood and her daughter’s infanthood. For the narrator who has lost her identity amid the fractals of post-post-modem society, her reminiscence of youth and innocence can only be reflected and refracted in the yellow petals of the daffodils, the daisies, the buttercups, and the dandelions, “[c]heerful and plebeian, shining for all alike. Rings we would make from them, and crowns and necklaces...Smelling them, she’d get pollen on her nose. Or was that buttercups?...It was daisies for love though, and we did that too” (Atwood 275-6). The yellow flowers Offred sees—or, more often, she does not see: “Not a
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dandelion in sight here, the lawns are picked clean—hold the last essence of childhood innocence for Offred, capturing and holding it as long as the flowers last (Atwood 275).

The red and orange blossoms are to Offred the encapsulation of sexuality gone horribly wrong. Of course, the flowers are never really separate from Offred's nightmarish existence in Gilead because they are also what she is, “[t]hey’re the genital organs of plants” (Atwood 105). These vivid, nearly noxiously brilliant blooms contain hints of blood, corruption, and decay even in their brightest blooms—whether these blooms are in the garden, the hotel room, or the faces of lusty young men. When Offred leaves on her journey to the market, she passes through Serena Joy's garden, particularly “the flower borders, in which the daffodils are now fading and the tulips are opening their cups, spilling out color. The tulips are red, a darker crimson towards the stem” (Atwood 16). Offred identifies herself with the garden; both she and the tulips are covered in the red of blood from the top to the bottom; she has been forced to abandon the second childhood (note the fading yellow daffodils) that she had found in the Red Center, and now Offred exists strictly as an open vessel for sexual intercourse. Also, like the narrator’s over-emphasized womb, the tulips are described in holy terms. They are both round vessels, but quite empty, and, like Offred, when their open fertility ceases, so will their existence, “[t]he tulips along the border are redder than ever, opening, no longer wine cups but chalices; thrusting themselves up, to what end? They are, after all, empty. When they are old, they turn themselves inside out, then explode slowly, the petals thrown out like shards” (Atwood 59-60). Offred sees herself as temporary and self-destructive as the tulips, and the garden as a whole. Just before “Mayday” comes for her, Offred remarks, “There’s nobody in the garden” (Atwood 373, 376).

Fittingly, Offred's final category of flowers includes those that have gone to seed or have been dried. To her, they are both the same, although on the surface they appear very different. In Gilead, the dried-up, the infertile, and the old are all treated the same; thus, all the dried buds, weeds, and seedy flowers are one and the same, producing a sense of sorrow: “I’m sad now, the way we’re talking is infinitely sad: faded music, faded paper flowers, worn satin, an echo of an echo” (Atwood 339). These blooms become Offred's future once she loses her flow of blood, and with it her fertility and her place in society: “Today there are different flowers, drier, more defined, the flowers of high summer: daisies, black-eyed Susans, starting us on the long downward slope to fall” (Atwood 347). These dried-up blossoms—a faked fertility—also
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appear in the parlor, a place for formalized, sterile encounters. Pollen and seeds, usually considered fertility symbols, are perverted, as is everything in Gilead, into metaphors for sterilization, “[t]here’s something dead about it, something deserted. I am like a room where things once happened and now nothing does, except the pollen of the weeds that grow up outside the window, blowing in as dust across the floor” (Atwood 132).

Despite the power and poignancy that blooms clearly hold for Offred, they are simultaneously insignificant in her Gileadian existence. In their operetta The Mikado (1885), Sir William S. Gilbert and Sir Arthur Sullivan wrote lyrics for the main character, Koko, that correspond very closely to the treatment of flowers in Atwood’s novel: “The flowers that bloom in the spring, / Tra la, / Have nothing to do with the case. / I’ve got to take under my wing, / Tra la, / A most unattractive old thing, / Tra la, / With a caricature of a face/And that’s what I mean when I say, or I sing, / ‘Oh, bother the flowers that bloom in the spring’” (337). In Atwood’s novel, Offred’s world is as topsy-turvy as Koko’s, and she has had to face a fate even more hideous than Koko’s marriage to Katisha. Consequently, the posies she loves, cherishes, and fears really cannot have any strength of meaning for her—and Offred knows it:

I look at one red smile. The red of the

smile is the same as the red of the tulips in Serena Joy’s garden, towards the base of the flowers where they are beginning to heal. The red is the same but there is no connection. The tulips are not tulips of blood, the red smiles are not flowers, neither thing makes a comment on the other. The tulip is not a reason for disbelief in the hanged man, or vice versa. Each thing is valid and really there. It is through a field of such valid objects that I must pick my way, every day and in every way. I put a lot of effort into making such distinctions. I need to make them. I need to be very clear, in my own mind. (Atwood 44-5)
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Offred must make her own meaning because everything she once knew is gone. All that remains are shadows of the past, like the yellow daffodils and the blue forget-me-nots, which Offred does not dare forget: “I decide I’m only having an attack of sentimentality, my brain going pastel Technicolor...The danger is grayout” (Atwood 258). Offred is very deliberate in her storytelling, although she hates it, and the inclusion of flowers is her tiny gift of kindness and meaning in an otherwise uncaring and meaningless void of existence: “I’ve tried to put some of the
good things in as well. Flowers, for instance, because where would we be without them?” (Atwood 343-4).

In order to maintain her tenuous grasp on her sanity and reality, Offred must see everything and think about everything, particularly the blossoms that surround her; however, she must not draw connections between “in the time before” and “now” because her sanity depends on not really recognizing all that she has lost. For Offred, flowers are the only familiarity she has left, and she clings to them all the harder for it.

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Cukor’s *Little Women* and the Great Depression: 
Sacrifice, Morality, and Familial Bliss

Katherine Kellett 
_Framingham State College_ 
_Framingham, MA_

In his Inaugural Address to the nation on March 4, 1933, Franklin Delano Roosevelt said: “We face the arduous days that lie before us in the warm courage of the national unity; with the clear consciousness of seeking old and precious moral values; with the clean satisfaction that comes from the stern performance of duty by old and young alike. We aim at the assurance of a rounded and permanent national life.” Speaking to a nation in crisis, Roosevelt urged social mobilization, both at the national and at the individual levels, and a steadfast grip on morality and principle. Interestingly, George Cukor’s enormously popular and successful film adaptation of Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women*, released in this same year, evokes a clear, if subtle, consciousness of this national emergency. Although set during the American Civil War, the
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film has profound resonance of the overbearing reality of the time: the Great Depression. The film invokes an emphasis on food, frugality, and conservation, embodies a spirit of activism and social reform, and imbues a nostalgic longing for hearth, home, and familial responsibility and morality. As a result, Cukor’s *Little Women* becomes a kind of allegory for the ideal set forth in the nineteen thirties to allay the prevailing fear and poverty: an activist spirit grounded in unbreakable ties to family and community.

The movie opens with a drop shot of the exterior of the March house, but quickly cuts to a scene of a bustling town: horses and carriages, people with baskets, and a shot of a sign above a building reading “U.S. Christian Commission,” presumably where Mrs. March, or Marmee (Spring Byington), devotes her time during the day. The U.S. Christian Commission, founded in 1861, "was the nation’s first large-scale civilian volunteer service corps" (“YMCA History”). The organization was comprised of over 5,000 volunteers who served as surgeons, nurses, and chaplains, who distributed supplies and educated soldiers. In the film, the building is swarming with women and soldiers, including a soldier with an amputated leg. We see Marmee, who is clearly in a position of authority as she is asked for her signature, generously give money and clothing to a decrepit, patriotic old man who has lost his sons to the war. She says: “When I see things like that poor old man, it makes me ashamed to think of how little I do,” immediately invoking a sense of charity and duty.¹ This scene is entirely an invention and does not occur in Alcott’s book, which begins with the four girls in the house discussing the dismal prospects of Christmas. The addition of this scene in Cukor’s film functions in an interesting way to bridge the March home with the outside world: it serves to make a connection between the events and aspirations of the girls’ lives with a sense of a larger, more charitable, and nobler purpose.²

Patriotic elements, in fact, weave their way through many facets of the 1933 version of *Little Women*. After Marmee reads to her daughters a letter from her husband, who is fighting for the Union troops, there is a close-up on each of the girl’s faces, revealing and intensifying their guilt of “not doing enough” at home for their country. Although in both of the other two versions of *Little Women* (1949 and 1994) Jo (June Allyson and Wynona Ryder respectively) has the tomboyish impulse to want to fight with her father, the pervading sense of guilt and duty is most intense in Cukor’s film. Here, Jo (Katharine Hepburn) says she wishes to rid herself of her “tomboyish qualities” and become more like the little woman her father describes. There is also an interesting distinction between Mervyn LeRoy’s 1949 version and Cukor’s version in the scene when Aunt March gives the girls each a dollar to spend on themselves for Christmas. In the former, the girls gleefully
film has profound resonance of the overbearing reality of the time: the Great Depression. The film invokes an emphasis on food, frugality, and conservation, embodies a spirit of activism and social reform, and imbues a nostalgic longing for hearth, home, and familial responsibility and morality. As a result, Cukor’s *Little Women* becomes a kind of allegory for the ideal set forth in the nineteen thirties to allay the prevailing fear and poverty: an activist spirit grounded in unbreakable ties to family and community.

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Patriotic elements, in fact, weave their way through many facets of the 1933 version of *Little Women*. After Marmee reads to her daughters a letter from her husband, who is fighting for the Union troops, there is a close-up on each of the girl’s faces, revealing and intensifying their guilt of “not doing enough” at home for their country. Although in both of the other two versions of *Little Women* (1949 and 1994) Jo (June Allyson and Wynona Ryder respectively) has the tomboyish impulse to want to fight with her father, the pervading sense of guilt and duty is most intense in Cukor’s film. Here, Jo (Katharine Hepburn) says she wishes to rid herself of her “tomboyish qualities” and become more like the little woman her father describes. There is also an interesting distinction between Mervyn LeRoy’s 1949 version and Cukor’s version in the scene when Aunt March gives the girls each a dollar to spend on themselves for Christmas. In the former, the girls gleefully
rush out and buy themselves little trinkets (a new hat, some perfume, etc.), reflecting the post World War II consumer confidence, while in the latter, they agonizingly debate as to whether it would be right to spend the money on themselves. Beth (Jean Parker) softly says as she is handed her money from Jo, “Marmee said we shouldn’t spend money for pleasure when our men are fighting in the war.” In the end, they buy surprise gifts for their mother instead of themselves, reflecting the emphasis on self-sacrifice in the Depression era.

A sense of thrift and a heightened appreciation for food and material things is noticeable in many aspects of the film. For example, in all three versions, the girls are excited to see the bountiful Christmas breakfast when they arrive at the table that morning; however, in Cukor’s film, they shriek with delight. Ecstatic, shrill reactions are seen at the sight of other material things, such as when Beth receives the piano from Mr. Laurence (Henry Stephenson). Whereas in Gillian Armstrong’s 1994 version, for instance, the reaction about the piano is much more subdued, and Beth (Claire Danes) and her family tenderly weep with joy, the March sisters in the 1933 film seem to go ecstatically wild over food, clothing, and other material goods. As Cukor comments, “Walter Plunkett designed the clothes with a great sense of the family—the girls were poor but high-minded, and it was arranged that one of them would wear a certain dress at a certain time, and then another would borrow a skirt and jacket, and so on. The frugality was very real” (Lambert 76). The emphasis on clothing can be seen most poignantly in the party scene, when the four girls go to a dance with Laurie (Douglas Montgomery). In Alcott’s novel, Meg sprains her ankle and Laurie generously offers to take her and Jo home in his carriage, a proposition that Jo reluctantly accepts. In Cukor’s film, Meg (Frances Dee) does not hurt herself and the focus is shifted to Jo: after she spills food all over herself on the stairs, all the girls are whisked away from the party. Therefore, an “emergency” of a sprained ankle is transformed into an “emergency” of spoilt clothes and wasted food, reflecting a cultural obsession with the preservation of material things.

At the time of the movie’s release, the nation was undergoing a tide of revolutionary social changes. The New Deal, a concept born in Roosevelt’s 1932 campaign for the presidency and put into action early in 1933, brought many changes and reforms into American life, such as the governmental regulation of banks with the Glass-Steagall act of June, 1933, and the creation of the Federal Deposit Insurance Committee (Schlesinger 66). During the following years, Americans saw the advent of the Works Progress Administration, which provided job relief to thousands of the unemployed, and the Social Security Act, which promised long-term financial security after retirement. “What was the New Deal?” It was of a piece with the oldest aspirations of the Republic, beginning with ‘life, liberty, and the pursuit of
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happiness, 'an experiment in promoting the greatest good of the greatest number' (Schlesinger 57). Although it did have its strong dissenters, the general public, who received regular reassurance from Roosevelt's fireside chats, supported the New Deal and its socialist policies. And despite Americans' tenacious belief in individualism, this worldwide drift toward socialization had not failed to register its effect upon American life. In January, 1929, for example, the Commission on the Social Studies on the American Historical Association, representing various points of view, set to work upon a sweeping inquiry under the conviction that trends of deep import were stirring in the nation's social and educational system, the majority holding that the American people were moving toward greater democracy and collectivism. (58)

Cukor's film strongly exemplifies the nation's attitudes and the general esprit of social reform of the early 1930s. For instance, when Marmee walks into the house on Christmas morning, she tells her daughters of a starving family in the community. Albeit reluctant at first, the girls willingly decide to give up their breakfast over which a few moments before they had squealed with delight. The film shows them administering their generosity at the rundown home of this family, including a prolonged shot of Beth cradling one of the infants, signifying the profound effect that the March family's act of "mothering" is having on the community at large.

Their act of benevolence is reciprocated, as later in the day they find themselves presented with even more delicious food than they had given out that morning, given to them by the Laurence family who heard of their kind act. And interestingly, Cukor's film is the only version of the three that shows the actual performance (and not just the bantering rehearsal) of Jo's play to the little girls of their town, again emphasizing the importance of community service and neighborliness. In an age when the "family as an institution took a fearful beating" and desertions, alcoholism, and fruitless migration were on the rise (Bernstein 20), Little Women gave a hopeful picture of family bonds and communal creative energy that lead to stability.

Despite the film's progressive qualities and its continual embodiment of social outreach, it has the perpetual tendency to bring inward everything that is done and to center all of the important action around the hearth and home. Cukor, who read the novel only shortly before he began working on the film, said:

When I came to read it, I was startled. It's not sentimental or saccharine, but very
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(Lambert 75) 

In this statement, Cukor reveals that his interpretation of the novel rests on the juxtaposition of “sacrifice” and “family life,” that the two are somehow inextricably intertwined and dependent on each other. Images of the tightly-knit family are abundant in the film: the huddling together as one mass when Marmee reads her husband’s letter; the sewing circle in which the March women reminisce about the olden days when they used to play Pilgrim’s Progress; the framing of the girls in an unbroken row as they walk the wintry streets of Concord. As Pat Kirkham and Sarah Warren notice, “[t]he emphasis on a happy Christmas in 1933, even a Christmas with less abundance than usual, works as a nostalgic device and offers a respite from the hardships of contemporary life. Family solidarity also can be interpreted as representing a desirable bulwark against the tough times of the 1930s” (84). The emphasis in Cukor’s film is not only on personal sacrifice but also on sacrifice to preserve family unity.

The film (which is shot almost entirely in natural daylight or under the warm glow of the lamp, candle, or flickering fire, relaying its almost incandescent optimism) unsurprisingly downplays family conflict present in Alcott’s novel and in the 1994 film version. Cukor’s film omits, for instance, Amy’s burning of Jo’s book and minimizes the two sisters’ frequent clashes in the novel to a couple of instances of absurd bickering toward the beginning of the movie. There is no hint in the film of the March family’s capacity for betrayal or of Jo’s capacity for passionate anger as when she icily vociferates in the novel, “I shall never forgive you” (Alcott 69). In Armstrong’s version, we watch Amy’s pain from being intentionally excluded by her sisters from the ball; we then watch in horror Jo’s beloved story, which Amy has thrown into the fire, burn to ashes. This action is a powerful symbol of destruction and vengeance, and is followed by a scene of intense anger as Jo violently shakes Amy in her bed. Cukor’s film omits this conflict altogether and, instead, chooses to focus on the family’s deep and unbreakable bonds, always framing sisters within close proximity of each other, usually in one grouping or in a tight circle.

Interestingly, Jo, with her independent-mindedness and “hoydenish” qualities, as one critic put it (Dickens 51), seems to stretch and bend the tight fabric of the March family unit, particularly in the early part of the film. She is frequently framed at the top of the screen, as in the letter reading scene (it is interesting that in the 1994 version, her dominance is not so central, as Jo is placed towards the bottom of this arrangement). Stairs are used repeatedly throughout the film, and Jo is almost without fail in the dominant position, such as in the
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repartee between Jo and Aunt March, when she is trying to escape doing more housework. And in a scene when the March women huddle around the piano, singing a Christian hymn, Jo stands at the right of the screen, markedly apart from the rest of her family. Of the four sisters, Jo is the only one who leaves the home to pursue a career: Amy (Joan Bennett), although she goes to Europe, travels with Aunt March (Edna Mae Oliver) with the unsaid mission to find a rich husband; Meg marries John (John Davis Lodge) and moves no more than a mile or two from her house; and Beth, on her deathbed, likens herself to a “cricket, chirping contentedly on the hearth, never able to bear the thought of leaving home.” And Beth, of course, never leaves the home.

Yet, that said, there is a swooping return to the home at the end of the film. Amy comes back from Europe with a rich husband, Laurie (Douglas Montgomery), Meg gives birth to twins, and Jo, when she learns of Beth’s illness, immediately departs from New York and tends to her dying sister. The scene of Beth’s death marks a significant shift for Jo’s character: kneeling beside Beth at her bed, nestled in her breast, Jo is framed pronouncedly lower than her sister, perhaps suggesting a grounding of her lofty ideals and individual ambitions back to her home and family. Although Beth says of Jo, “You’ve always reminded me of a seagull—strong and wild, and fond of the wind and storm, dreaming of flying far out to sea,” after this point in the film, there is no more taking flight for Jo. When Laurie returns a married man and finds Jo sleeping in the attic, they are clearly made to appear adult-like and tamed, Laurie with his débonair moustache and Jo with her hair primly turned up. Jo says:

We can never be boy and girl again, Laurie. Those happy old times can’t come back. And we shouldn’t expect them to. We are man and woman now. We can’t be playmates any longer. But we can be brother and sister—to love and help one another all the rest of our lives, can’t we now.

Jo, as Beth suggests has flown away, but has perched back on the March home. She solemnly dedicates herself to her family, new members and old, in this scene. And in the last scene of the movie, when Professor Bhaer returns and shyly proposes to Jo, Cukor clearly demonstrates the end of her independence and the restoration of family unity. Huddled under an umbrella, standing on the doorstep of the March home, Jo fills what Bhaer calls his “empty hands” (a dialogue and gesture not in Alcott’s novel, but a powerful one that is imitated almost exactly in both the 1949 and 1994 versions. Marmee then opens the door, warm light and soft chatter radiating from the inside where the entire March family is present, including Jo’s father, and welcomes the couple.

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Many critics have argued that the vast majority of
films produced during the Depression were of an “escapist” nature; that is, they denied that the overbearing hardships of the times even existed. Charles R. Hearn, for example, notes: 

It is worth adding in passing that the desire for escape...is nowhere better illustrated than in the typical movies of the decade. Frederick Lewis Allen has said that “the America which the movies portrayed—like the America of popular magazine fiction and especially of the magazine advertisement—was devoid of real poverty or discontent, of any real conflict between owners and workers, of any real ferment of ideas...” Others who have commented on the movies of the thirties have found few exceptions to Allen’s generalization that most films so successfully dodged the unpleasant realities of the day that they would not convey to later viewers the faintest indication that the nation experienced a crisis in the thirties. (78)

In the case of Cukor’s Little Women, at least, Allen’s statement would seem incorrect. It is true that initially, elements of the 1933 Little Women seem to contradict each other. As many scholars have noticed, although the Marches claim to live in poverty, they seem to live in splendor—a large house that is gorgeously furnished inside with crystal vases, spacious rooms, fine china, paintings, and plush sofas. Shirley Marchalonis notes that “the March family’s unity and homemade pleasures do indeed contrast favorably with the harsh modern horrors of grim bread lines and Hooversville” (260). Also, although Cukor makes a point to shuffle the girls’ clothes between each other, Kirkham and Warren observe that “Walter Plunkett’s costumes serve to prettify both the wearers and the poverty they were supposed to be enduring...there is little sense from the dress, particularly that of Amy and Meg, that being poor is even irksome to the process of looking attractive” (85). And although the March family is seen giving to the poor, as on Christmas morning, they frequently have access to the pleasures of high society: the girls attend a glamorous ball, Amy travels to Europe, and Jo enjoys an elegant trip to the opera in New York.

At times, Cukor even gives us images of a pastoral life of leisure. For instance, before Marmee receives the telegram with the news of her husband’s injury, the March family lounges outside on the lawn, drinking tea and laughing. The scene opens with a shot of Amy’s painting and then cuts to the March family, suggesting that they are somehow living in a dream world. Yet, all that said, the audience, even a contemporary one, is starkly aware of the “unpleasant realities of the day,” even though Hearn asserts that the movies “would not convey to later viewers the faintest indication that
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Despite the “realism,” little of the biting poverty of the 1860s or the 1930s is depicted. The ways the film deals with poverty and longing for better times suggest there is no simple relationship between the film and the Depression; the relationship between the two also needs to be understood in terms of the ‘escapism’ of romance, humour, and visual pleasures offered by this costume drama… (84)

However, although Kirkham and Warren term the film’s general ambiance “escapism,” it seems more appropriate to label these elements of the film “nostalgic.” Rather than being an unresolvable contradiction, the oscillation between poverty and luxury represents a key dialectical pull in the 1930s. Little Women is not, as Allen generalizes, “devoid of any real poverty or discontent.” The movie is not a fanciful retreat into the sugary desires of a bereft American public but a representation of both the very real hardships that arose from the Depression and the power that people perceived could come out of the “unity,” the “old and precious moral values,” and the “stern performance of duty” that Roosevelt so persuasively called for at the advent of his social programs. Cukor’s Little Women arises not out of a wish to escape the pressing realities of the day but out of the tenacious belief that, with unity and family, America could become again what it once was: secure and plentiful.

This is the paradox of Cukor’s film. It not only displays the economic sufferings of the people of the thirties but also embodies the unflinching desire for social change and action as well. The synthesis of these two themes—hardship and relief—coupled with an unfailing adherence to family ties, results in a picture (however nostalgic or sentimental) of supreme happiness, human betterment, and social progression. Aunt March, as she naggingly criticizes Jo’s father, says: “It isn’t preachers that are going to win this war; it’s fighters.” The March family continually imbues this spirit of action rather than passivity; by fighting to preserve what they deem most sacred—family, community, and unity—the characters of Cukor’s Little Women come alive as representatives of the hope and determination of the era in which the film was produced.
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This is the paradox of Cukor’s film. It not only displays the economic sufferings of the people of the thirties but also embodies the unflinching desire for social change and action as well. The synthesis of these two themes—hardship and relief—coupled with an unflinching adherence to family ties, results in a picture (however nostalgic or sentimental) of supreme happiness, human betterment, and social progression. Aunt March, as she naggingly criticizes Jo’s father, says: “It isn’t preachers that are going to win this war; it’s fighters.” The March family continually imbues this spirit of action rather than passivity; by fighting to preserve what they deem most sacred—family, community, and unity—the characters of Cukor’s Little Women come alive as representatives of the hope and determination of the era in which the film was produced.
Notes

1. This observation, as with several of my subsequent observations, parallels much of the thinking of Pat Kirkham and Sarah Warren in "Four Little Women: Three films and a novel" (see Works Cited page for full bibliographical reference). Unfortunately, I discovered the essay late in my research and so could not incorporate it into the analysis of the first part of my paper.

2. All film quotations are taken from Cukor's 1933 version of Little Women.

3. The domestication of Jo at the end of the movie has many more far-reaching feministic implications than the nature of this paper can allow me to discuss at length. Jo, for instance, who toward the beginning of the film downplays the importance of gloves, insisting to Meg that wearing crumpled, lemonade-stained ones to Laurie's party is perfectly fine, is seen later in the movie at the opera, sporting two crisp, white gloves on hands that now so delicately embrace opera glasses. Also, while at the onset Jo is staunchly enthusiastic about adventure and action stories, she absolutely melts at the sound of Prof. Bhaer's melancholy, sentimental voice as he sings in German at the piano. In addition, when she returns from New York to tend to Beth, she is framed behind an ironing board, wearing a white apron and cap, and busily engaged in her work. She is domesticated and tamed here, and clearly happy to be so. All these matters, however compelling, demand a separate or longer paper to do them justice.
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Lesbian Feminism, by its nature highly militant, views assimilation with the larger society not only as self-defeating but also highly dangerous. By internalizing negative beliefs from a heterosexist and patriarchal society, the assimilationist invites herself to believe the negative stereotypes that an oppressive hegemony presents to her. In fact, she becomes an agent that perpetuates these beliefs herself. Adrienne Rich’s “Twenty-One Love Poems,” Minnie Bruce Pratt’s “Down the Little Cahaba,” and Lisa Springer’s “Between Girls” all exemplify this distain for assimilationism in two ways. First, they demonstrate, through either example or counter-example, how an assimilationist position ultimately makes a lesbian an agent of her oppression. Second, all three works are by
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Lesbian authors for a lesbian readership. They embody Lesbian Separatism, an extreme militant position highly integrated with Lesbian Feminism that advocates political and social empowerment through separating from both the homophobic heterosexual community and the sexist homosexual male community. Straights and gay men are invited to listen, but they are not the intended audience.

At the heart of every minority response to power inequities, the issue of whether to gain power through assimilationism or through a militant separatism has always been an issue. From the militant camps within the Gay Liberation and Women’s Rights movements of the 1970’s, Lesbian Feminism was born. Steve Hogan and Lee Hudson, editors of *Completely Queer: The Gay & Lesbian Encyclopedia*, explain:

> [A]n increasing number of lesbians came to view themselves as marginalized by both heterosexual-dominated feminist groups...and the male-dominated GAY LIBERATION movement. In response, many lesbians confronted heterosexual feminists with protests...and distanced themselves from male-chauvinist gay men to devote themselves to lesbian SEPARTISM [sic]. (361)

Lesbian Feminism is sufficiently militant that it is not entirely a part of Gay Liberation, but a reaction to it. As Hogan and Hudson note, Lesbian Separatism is one of the most basic aspects of Lesbian Feminism:

> Lesbian SEPARTISM [sic]...advocates physical, social, emotional, political, economic, and psychological separation from men and institutions operating for the perpetuation of male privilege...Proponents argue that separatism is a positive goal necessary to examine the nature of oppression apart from the oppressor. (Hogan and Hudson 499)

Separation from groups that support and sustain a patriarchal society includes Gay Liberation.

Compulsory Heterosexuality, Rich’s belief that society forces a lesbian to try to “pass” as a heterosexual woman, is a clear example of Lesbian Separatism as identity politics. Marilyn Kallet and Patricia Clark, editors of *Worlds In Our Words: Contemporary American Women Writers*, note in the introduction preceding Rich’s work: “[T]wo women loving each other in a world that offers violence instead of support...makes loving on a day-to-day basis ‘heroic’” (573). The lesbian couple is a vibrant, empowered example of lesbians resisting an oppressive society. For Rich, simply to acknowledge one’s innate lesbianism is a militant stance. In this view, a lesbian who
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tries to assimilate into the overall culture is a lesbian who has yet to make the break from the heterosexist hegemony that weans lesbians away from their natural sexual desires. The couple in "Twenty-One Love Poems" is victorious over heterosexist misogyny explicitly by claiming their natural attraction despite society's programming. "[T]wo women together is a work / nothing in civilization has made simple / two people together is a work heroic in its ordinariness...look at the faces of those who have chosen it" (Rich 573). The choice of the word "chosen" (Rich 573) is primary to an understanding of Rich's poem. Not only does it demonstrate that a conscious, brave choice must be made to be in a lesbian relationship; it also demonstrates that being "out" is more than just telling your mother. Being a lesbian means choosing to be honest with one's self about who a lesbian really is. Lesbian identity is paramount to Lesbian Feminism and a correct reading of "Twenty-One Love Poems." Bonnie Zimmerman, in her work *The Safe Sea of Women: Lesbian Fiction 1969-1989*, asserts that liberation and claiming sexual identity go hand-in-hand:

Why do some women "choose" women and others men? Is sexual orientation a choice at all—or are women subtly coerced into heterosexuality...Given the right circumstances—the right women or the women's liberation movement—the heterosexual fog lifts and a woman makes the choice to love women (53).

Zimmerman's belief in this natural attraction and that a heterosexist patriarchal society weans all women away from a primary lesbian attraction is still consistent with Rich's militant, Lesbian Separatist argument in "Twenty-One Love Poems." According to Rich, a lesbian must be brave to be honest about the most natural and innate aspect of her personality: her lesbianism. Zimmerman, a stronger Separatist, would concur, although for her all women readers would be innate lesbians in hiding. For both, to accept one's lesbianism is to free the self. To engage in a relationship is to have enough faith in the self to fight misogyny among both heterosexuals and gay men. As Hogan and Hudson note, Rich views an acceptance of innate sexuality as fundamental to the fight for freedom and for achieving equality with patriarchal and sexist groups:

Asserting that the very existence of lesbianism had most often been denied, ignored, obscured, or subsumed under the category of male homosexuality, she [Rich] envisaged...a political analysis of Compulsory Heterosexuality. (Hogan & Hudson 361)
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For Rich, simply acknowledging the existence of lesbian relationships is a politically and intellectually liberating act. “Twenty-One Love Poems,” by dealing with the difficulties lesbian couples have in establishing and maintaining relationships in a heterosexist and misogynist society, defies an oppressive hegemony. Heterosexist hegemony unfairly makes meaningful lesbian relationships more difficult because it corrupts natural lesbian desire. Although Zimmerman feels that all heterosexual women are women who have yet to find the right woman to straighten them out, both she and Rich feel that an internalization of negative beliefs about normal sexuality is the greatest obstacle to lesbian liberation. The couple in “Twenty-One Love Poems” requires true bravery to free their minds to their natural sexual relationship and to fight the system that warps such natural desire.

Minnie Bruce Pratt’s “Down the Little Cahaba,” like Rich’s work, is strongly influenced by its author’s political ideologies. As Kallet and Clark note, “Pratt began to write when her ten-year marriage ended in a fight to retain custody of her two sons. She is the founding member of LIPS, a lesbian-feminist action group” (151). Pratt wrote “Down the Little Cahaba” as an examination of the loss of her children. The work examines a specific example from the author’s life that embodies how heterosexist prejudice harms lesbians and their families. The hegemony states that a lesbian cannot be a good mother so Pratt lost custody of her children. In the poem, Pratt and her children float in inner tubes down the Little Cahaba. An extended metaphor between birth imagery and floating down the river is employed in the work: “[T]he standing water at the lip, hover, hover, / the moment before orgasm, before the head emerges...the youngest caught in the rapids: half-grown, he hasn’t lived with me in years” (Pratt 152).

Birth imagery, much like in the visual art of Judy Chicago, is an empowering tool personifying femininity. Pratt’s use of the river/birthing-womb metaphor enables her to create the mournful, grieving tone in “Down the Little Cahaba:” “How do we know you won’t forget us? / I told them how they had moved in my womb...I can never forget. You moved inside me...[t]he sound of your blood crossed into mine” (Pratt 152). Pratt claims her femininity and her motherhood, which had been transgressed by the larger heterosexist society when she and her children were denied one another.

Pratt’s poem focuses on her natural right to her children as a woman and a lesbian. The use of the river/birthing-womb metaphor is a perfect example of Pratt fighting for her freedom by claiming her motherhood. This approach to her experience is highly relevant to an understanding of her militant, pro-motherhood stance; many
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Lesbian Feminists, such as Rita Mae Brown, describe motherhood and children in far more repellent tones than Pratt. Stressing the right of lesbians not to have children, Brown creates the following passage between a closeted lesbian mother (Leota) and the liberated lesbian protagonist (Molly) in her groundbreaking novel *Rubyfruit Jungle*:

Leota—same cat eyes, same languid body, but oh god, she looked forty-five years old and she had two brats hanging on to her like possums. I looked twenty-four. She saw herself in my reflection and there was a pain in her eyes...“They drive me crazy sometimes but I love them.” “Sure,” I said. What else could I say? Every mother says the same thing. (216-217)

Both Brown and Pratt are militant. The distinction between their two depictions of lesbian motherhood can be explained by an understanding of changes in the issues Lesbian Feminists faced from the 1970's to today. Brown militantly protests an oppressive hegemony forcing lesbians into a closeted/mother/wife role that prevents their lives from being fulfilling. Pratt militantly protests heterosexism denying lesbians the rights of motherhood. As chosen and not forced motherhood is now more common, Lesbian Feminists increasingly focus upon lesbians fighting for their motherhood more frequently than in the past.

An understanding of this change is necessary for an understanding of “Down the Little Cahaba” because, in light of theories such as Rich's Compulsory Heterosexuality, the poem could be misread as assimilationist. Rich was, in many respects, like Brown’s Leota: a married lesbian with children. Rich’s theory could be misapplied to show Pratt under a false light as a woman who participates in her own oppression and envisions herself as a helpless victim. Pratt is most certainly not taking such a disempowering, assimilationist stance with “Down the Little Cahaba.” Exemplifying Rich’s theory of Compulsory Heterosexuality, Pratt, like Brown’s Leota, was a participant in her oppression. Believing heterosexist hegemony, she was an agent of her own oppression; however, Pratt is a now-liberated woman simply by being honest about her lesbianism. If nothing else, her stance may be seen as militant because she claims her femininity and her motherhood as a lesbian. Her children were stolen. Her motherhood was transgressed. Pratt does not appeal to her motherhood because it is a trait that most straight women have; Pratt simply says that she was wronged. Straights and gay men may learn from her poem, but she is writing to liberate herself and people like her. Judy Grahn, in her critical work on lesbian poets entitled
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Judy Grahn, in her critical work on lesbian poets entitled
The Highest Apple, notes the importance of claiming Lesbian Femininity within Lesbian Separatist groups in the 1970's.

The organizations we proceeded to define and develop were Lesbian separatists, with feminist and radical underbase. From the meeting grew all-women's households... that gave rise to... newspapers... to the first all-women's bookstore... to the first all-women's press... Meetings of all kinds took place in the house, such as the first meeting of the Lesbian Mother's Union... Once we had our concerns going we found that plenty of people wanted to listen to us. We had a voice. (xviii)

Grahn's association of the Lesbian Mother's Union with women's literature and media exemplifies motherhood and femininity as belonging to lesbians and not just being on loan from straight women. Validation of the choice to not have children by authors such as Brown should not cause Pratt to be misread.

In a similar fashion, Lisa Springer's "Between Girls" strongly promotes the claiming of a woman-oriented approach to life as a way to claim power. Just as Pratt was an agent of her own oppression by marrying a man, Springer, writing of her childhood, demonstrates how an oppressive hegemony can warp a woman's consciousness. In this case, Springer includes a heterosexual character (Miriam) that Springer (as a young woman) loved without knowing that her affection was lesbian in nature. As is evidenced in “Between Girls,” Springer did not understand what her feelings for Miriam were:

I didn’t know I was [a lesbian]. Now, with the knowledge of who I am, I can go back to those sharp memories and make sense of the emotional confusion that colored our interactions, and I can understand the detours our relationship took—like the time I had an affair with her father. (523)

Springer not only did not understand how she felt for Miriam but also did not even know what those emotions were.

Acting hand in hand with Compulsory Heterosexuality is Heterosexual Privilege, which Hogan and Hudson define as “a seemingly beneficial but ultimately restrictive socialization that...[leads] heterosexual women to perpetuate their own oppression” (Hogan and Hudson 361). Instead of a cooperative friendship, Springer and Miriam are parasitic “friends” trying to control each other the way men try to control women. Springer feels like the favorite pet of her far richer friend. She notes: “I am not
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Miriam’s possession...I am not the friend of the year” (Springer 525). In return, she sleeps with both Miriam’s boyfriend and father. Because of an oppressive hegemony, Springer’s attraction for Miriam is warped into a desire to possess, if not her directly, at least what she possesses. Miriam in turn discovers the betrayal and allows Springer just enough rope (in this case, letting Springer brag about her sexual worldliness) with which to hang herself. Springer is justly shamed. The section of the essay that displays the greatest warmth is also one of the most warped: “‘I’m glad to know I have power over you,’ Miriam said. I smiled then. This was as close as Miriam would come to admitting that I mattered to her” (Springer 530).

Their dysfunctional relationship evolves from women substituting affection for mutual attempts to dominate the other, as misogynist men do to women. With maturity and a claiming of her lesbian-identity, Springer looks back upon a time in her life when an oppressive heterosexist and misogynist hegemony dehumanized both her and a friend. Although Springer grants attention to her heterosexual friend, she is really secondary to her examination of the oppression lesbians face. As Springer explains in a letter used as a preface to “Between Girls,” she writes primarily to liberate lesbians:

During my own adolescence I wish that I had been able to read about girls’ sexual feeling for each other. But this is a subject hardly ever written about…Like all of my work, this essay [“Between Girls”] deals with the difficulties for lesbians of understanding our private lives in a world that offers little discussion, no rituals, and minimal acceptance of same gender sexual love. I feel there is an urgent need for more writing about women loving women. (Springer 522)

Springer is writing to offer fellow lesbians a context for their feelings so that they may not suffer as she did from a total misunderstanding of self. Although Springer may be seen as offering more attention to heterosexual women’s issues than Rich or Pratt do, her focus on Lesbian Separatism is not diluted by her sympathies for oppressed straight women.

The political goals of Rich, Pratt, and Springer are to achieve intellectual, emotional, and political equality for lesbians: to free them from thinking themselves unworthy and thus perpetuating their own oppression. Lesbians who believe in the myths projected onto them by heterosexism along with those who are personally liberated and want to continue the fight are the intended audience of these works. Others may sit in on the discussion
Miriam’s possession... I am not the friend of the year” (Springer 525). In return, she sleeps with both Miriam’s boyfriend and father. Because of an oppressive hegemony, Springer’s attraction for Miriam is warped into a desire to possess, if not her directly, at least what she possesses. Miriam in turn discovers the betrayal and allows Springer just enough rope (in this case, letting Springer brag about her sexual worldliness) with which to hang herself. Springer is justly shamed. The section of the essay that displays the greatest warmth is also one of the most warped: “I’m glad to know I have power over you,” Miriam said. I smiled then. This was as close as Miriam would come to admitting that I mattered to her” (Springer 530).

Their dysfunctional relationship evolves from women substituting affection for mutual attempts to dominate the other, as misogynist men do to women. With maturity and a claiming of her lesbian-identity, Springer looks back upon a time in her life when an oppressive heterosexist and misogynist hegemony dehumanized both her and a friend. Although Springer grants attention to her heterosexual friend, she is really secondary to her examination of the oppression lesbians face. As Springer explains in a letter used as a preface to “Between Girls,” she writes primarily to liberate lesbians:

During my own adolescence I wish that I had been able to read about girls’ sexual feeling for each other. But this is a subject hardly ever written about....Like all of my work, this essay [“Between Girls”] deals with the difficulties for lesbians of understanding our private lives in a world that offers little discussion, no rituals, and minimal acceptance of same gender sexual love. I feel there is an urgent need for more writing about women loving women. (Springer 522)

Springer is writing to offer fellow lesbians a context for their feelings so that they may not suffer as she did from a total misunderstanding of self. Although Springer may be seen as offering more attention to heterosexual women’s issues than Rich or Pratt do, her focus on Lesbian Separatism is not diluted by her sympathies for oppressed straight women.

The political goals of Rich, Pratt, and Springer are to achieve intellectual, emotional, and political equality for lesbians: to free them from thinking themselves unworthy and thus perpetuating their own oppression. Lesbians who believe in the myths projected onto them by heterosexism along with those who are personally liberated and want to continue the fight are the intended audience of these works. Others may sit in on the discussion.
and become more aware; however, the purpose of these works is the freedom of lesbians. Any other goal would undermine the works' Lesbian Separatist message and their effectiveness fighting heterosexist misogyny.

Works Cited


Pratt, Minnie Bruce. “Down the Little Cahaba.” Kallet and Clark 151-152.


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Spectacle is an integral part of Shakespeare’s plays, and contributes a visual dimension to the thematic development. Whether described verbally when physical constraints prevent it from being shown or actually present on stage in the form of props, costumes or scenery, the visual icon provides an Eliot-like “objective correlative” for particular motifs and emotions. At times it may embody the attitude of a character, as with the contemptuous implications of the gift of tennis balls in *The Life of Henry the Fifth* (H5), or symbolize his inner nature, as with the outward appearance of the villainous protagonist in *The Tragedy of Richard the Third* (R3), or it may serve as a physical metaphor of an abstract search for justice, like the arrows in *The Tragedy of Titus*
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Andronicus (Tit.). While verbal depiction is a tool shared by all literary modes, physical representation is peculiar to the dramatic form. But the two act in concert to create an additional referential level in the play. This correspondence between an idea and its material incarnation (seen either literally or as an imagined object) is at times more complex than the straightforward transmutation of prop into symbol that Alan Downer explains in his essay “The Life of Our Design.” Metaphoric language in general operates by concrete objects rather than by abstract concepts or categories, so the actual presence of visual referents allows the characters to speak, as it were, in “things.” The Dolphin expresses his scorn for Henry’s claims and his estimation of the latter’s immaturity by means of tennis balls, which embody the “barbarous license” of his youth (H5 I.i.271). The physical object is the insult. A similar dynamic is also at work in the visual-thematic relations of the other plays.

Henry V is notable for immediately calling attention to the importance of verbal spectacle, and the Prologue is the instrument par excellence to fill a bare stage (“this unworthy scaffold” (H5 Pro.10), “this wooden O” (H5 Pro.13)) with “imaginary” people and scenery (H5 Pro.18). This figure sometimes appears in visually striking guise. The Rumor in The Second Part of Henry the Fourth (2H4), for example, is “painted full of tongues” to represent the traditional conception of Virgil’s Fama as a monster that spreads lies and slanders (2H4 Ind. o.s.d.). Although the outward appearance of the Chorus in Henry V is not specified, its function is to paint for the audience the grandiose settings of Henry’s exploits. It is a formal, distancing device (absent for the most part from the other sections of the tetralogy), which creates a visual and structural equivalent for the epic thrust of the play. The play’s purpose in portraying the emergence of a national hero, the grand scale of his victories, and his status as the ideal monarch is seconded by the physical detailing of the introductory descriptive passages. The common metonymic trope of designating kingship by the crown, already employed by Shakespeare in the scene of Henry’s premature attempt to take it from his father in The Second Part of Henry the Fourth, is developed to an even higher degree by the symbolic operation of the multiple elements of the choric pictures.

In the Prologue’s first speech, the spectacle of “vasty fields of France” (H5 Pro.12), “two mighty monarchies, / Whose high, upreared, and abutting fronts / The perilous narrow ocean parts asunder” (H5 Pro.20-22), and armies on horseback is offered as the backdrop against which the “warlike Harry” shall make his appearance (H5 Pro.5). The Choruses for the subsequent acts build up the grandeur of the setting through which “the mirror of
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all Christian kings” will move (H5 II.Cho.6). He sails to France on a “fleet majestical” (H5 III.Cho.16), whose “silken streamers” flutter against the rising sun (H5 III.Cho.6). The vocabulary soars with the “lofty surge” of the sea (H5 III.Cho.13), and as the cannons fire on besieged Harflew, “down goes all before them” (H5 III.Cho.34). The visual build-up reaches a crescendo in Act V, where all of London pours out in exultant celebration to greet “their conqu’ring Caesar” (H5 V.Cho.28).

These larger-than-life displays, too large at any rate for the “little room” and “small time” of the theater, are the objectified equivalents of the epic grandeur of Henry V: the person and his accomplishments. His kingly nature, his “largess universal, like the sun” (H5 IV.Cho.43), and his “port of Mars” (H5 Pro.6.) are provided with a visual counterpart in the “swelling scene” (H5 Pro.4). Similar aggregations of people and shifts of setting occur in Shakespeare’s other plays, but here they are foregrounded structurally by the independence of the choric sections, whose constant appeals to the audience to “imagine,” “sup­pose,” “think,” and “see” specifically call attention to these elements of spectacle. The huge fleets, the crowd scenes, the vast distances that the audience is transported: all such instances of verbal visualizing present in physical form King Henry’s “inward greatness” and the “mighty heart” of England (H5 II.Cho.16-7).

By no means are all the correspondences in the play so complex or extended. There are a number of straightforward and localized symbols. Burgundy’s detailed description of the French landscape as a wild and untended garden, where nothing grows but ugly weeds, is not only a literal depiction of the ravages the war has inflicted on the country’s agriculture but also an epic simile in reverse order: “Even so our houses, and ourselves, and children […] grow like savages […] to everything that seems unnatural” (H5 V.ii.56-62). This fits in perfectly with Downer’s definition: the devastated landscape symbolizes the absence of “gentle Peace” (H5 V.ii.65), without at the same time losing its “thingness.” This is also the case with Henry’s disguise and exchange of gloves with Michael Williams in Act IV.i. Both the cloak that allows Henry to go among his soldiers unrecognized and the gage that signifies a quarrel between its bearers are simultaneously physical props and thematic emblems. The first is the embodiment of the “common man” within the king (H5 IV.viii.51), the second an objectified pledge of the truth of Henry’s word.

Perhaps the single most important visual aspect of Richard III is the central character’s deformed appearance. The plot of the play hinges on Richard’s decision “to prove a villain / And hate the idle pleasures of these days” (R3 I.i.30-1) because he “cannot prove a lover” (R3
all Christian kings” will move (H5 II. Cho.6). He sails to France on a “fleet majestical” (H5 III. Cho.16), whose “silken streamers” flutter against the rising sun (H5 III. Cho.6). The vocabulary soars with the “lofty surge” of the sea (H5 III. Cho.13), and as the cannons fire on besieged Harflew, “down goes all before them” (H5 III. Cho.34). The visual build-up reaches a crescendo in Act V, where all of London pours out in exultant celebration to greet “their conqu’ring Caesar” (H5 V. Cho.28). These larger-than-life displays, too large at any rate for the “little room” and “small time” of the theater, are the objectified equivalents of the epic grandeur of Henry V: the person and his accomplishments. His kingly nature, his “largess universal, like the sun” (H5 IV. Cho.43), and his “port of Mars” (H5 Pro. 6.) are provided with a visual counterpart in the “swelling scene” (H5 Pro. 4). Similar aggregations of people and shifts of setting occur in Shakespeare’s other plays, but here they are foregrounded structurally by the independence of the choric sections, whose constant appeals to the audience to “imagine,” “sup­pose,” “think,” and “see” specifically call attention to these elements of spectacle. The huge fleets, the crowd scenes, the vast distances that the audience is transported: all such instances of verbal visualizing present in physical form King Henry’s “inward greatness” and the “mighty heart” of England (H5 II. Cho.16-7).

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His atrophied conscience and monstrous crimes, he proclaims in his soliloquies, are the result of his ugliness, over which he has no control: “since the heavens have shap’d my body so, / Let hell make crook’d my mind to answer it” (3H6 V.vi.78-9). Because of his shriveled arm, his hunchback and lame leg, Richard can neither feel nor evoke love. He is isolated, and “since this earth affords no joy to me / But to command,” he will pass by no crime to attain the English crown (3H6 III.ii.165-6).

Richard’s looks are the major motivation for his deeds, and this fact with such significant thematic implications is naturally allotted a great deal of verbal description. He is “an unlick’d bear-whelp” (3H6 III.ii.161), a “misshap’d trunk” (3H6 III.ii.170), “an indigested and deformed lump” (3H6 V.vi.51), “rudely stamp’d” (R3 I.i.16), “[c]heated of feature by dissembling nature” (R3 I.i.19), “unfinish’d” (R3 I.i.20), “scarcely half made up” (R3 I.i.21) and a plethora of other unflattering epithets. Presumably, his appearance would also be portrayed physically by the actor with the use of costume and makeup.

In few of the other plays is such an emphasis placed on the outward aspect of the hero. Richard’s enemies, like Henry VI, Lady Anne, and Queen Margaret, never forego the chance to bring it to the spectator’s attention, and the villain himself often remarks bitterly on his deformities. Whatever may be the historical basis for this portrait, the concentration on Richard’s ugliness is also an extreme expression of the old convention whereby a character’s evil nature manifests itself visibly. The hideousness of his soul, which knows “neither pity, love, nor fear,” is made incarnate in his repulsive body (3H6 V.vi.68). His lack of conscience is perceptible to sight. The horror of Richard’s actions: the murder of Clarence and the young princes, the execution of Hastings and Buckingham, and the methodical elimination of everyone who stands in his way to the throne, is literally personified in his horrible form. His sins sit in his face; he is a walking ‘picture of Dorian Gray,’ and when the other characters abuse his looks they are implicitly commenting on his corrupted nature.

Richard himself sees the connection between visual attributes and personality. The spectacle of a baby with teeth “plainly signified / That I should snarl, and bite, and play the dog” (3H6 V.vi.76-7). In this he merely agrees with Henry VI, who observes, just before Richard kills him: “Teeth hadst thou in thy head when thou was born, / To signify thou cam’st to bite the world” (3H6 V.vi.53-4). Both understand the symbolic implications of appearance, as well as of natural phenomena. Henry VI speaks of the omens that presaged Richard’s birth: birds cried, “dogs howl’d, and hideous tempest shook down trees” (3H6 V.vi.46). Just like the circumstances which
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attend Owen Glendower’s nativity in *The First Part of Henry the Fourth*, these natural spectacles are meant to embody the protagonist’s human essence. Richard is a curse to the world, he brings discord and pain, the very earth groans at his arrival in a kind of cosmic pathetic fallacy. Not merely his personal looks, but the physical world itself reflect Richard’s depravity.

There are a number of other visual elements that reinforce particular ideas in the play. The tableau arranged by Buckingham in Act III.vii for the scene of Richard’s ‘reluctant’ acceptance of the kingship is deliberately emblematic. Richard stands aloft between two bishops, “a book of prayer in his hand,” while the Mayor, the Aldermen, and the citizens are below, in a supplicating position (*R3* III.vii.98). Buckingham himself points out the symbolic significance of the arrangement. The clergymen are “[t]wo props of virtue for a Christian prince, / To stay him from the fall of vanity” (*R3* III.vii.96-7), the prayer book, “true ornaments to know a holy man” (*R3* III.vii.99). The whole is like a set piece from some religious painting, carefully calculated to impress the credulous with Richard’s metaphorically elevated righteousness. Buckingham, like Richard with his looks, is aware of the symbolic import of physical relationships, and successfully employs the effects of staging to win Richard his crown. Later on, in his piteous description of the two sleeping princes, “girdling one another / Within their alabaster innocent arms,” with yet another prayer book on their pillow, Tyrrel also seems to be conscious of the emotional impact of visible tableaux (*R3* IV.iii.10-1). The princes’ pose is indicative of their innocence, as Richard’s high placement and companions are of his ‘virtue.’ And finally, the dream of the ghosts before the battle of Bosworth Field is perhaps the most straightforward occurrence of the correspondence. They are the embodied apparitions of Richard’s guilty conscience, awake at last before the end. In this case actual actors serve as the physical representations of mental torment. The guilty thoughts assume the corporeal form of Richard’s victims: “the souls of all that I had murther’d / Came to my tent” (*R3* V.iii.204-5). They are the symbols of his defeat and despair.

Although there are a variety of murders, on and off stage, in *Richard III* and the other plays here considered, the bloody spectacle acquires a new significance in *Titus Andronicus*. Its violence is graphically visual; the mounting atrocities assault the spectator’s sight. The play opens with the bearing in of a coffin, a common evocation of death, set next to its other emblem, the tomb of the Andronici. Several minutes later the sacrifice of Alarbus is ordered, and Titus’s sons return “with their swords bloody” (*Tit* I.i.s.d.). Before the viewers have a chance...
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to catch their breath, Titus kills Mutius before their very eyes, and he too is put in the tomb. By the time the first scene closes, the audience has already witnessed a massacre on a scale usually reserved for final acts. But the visual overload only intensifies. Bassianus is stabbed, Lavinia is raped, and her hands and tongue cut off, Aaron chops off Titus’s hand, the heads of the executed Quintus and Martius are brought in, and the Nurse and Clown are murdered. In the horrific fifth act, Titus cuts the throats of Chiron and Demetrius and serves them as dishes to their mother. He then kills Lavinia and Tamora and dies himself at the hand of Saturninus, who is instantly dispatched by Lucius. The play is a veritable bloodbath, and the physical portrayal of the brutality is intensified by the verbal descriptions. For every sight like that of the mutilated Lavinia there is a word-picture to match: “Alas, a crimson river of warm blood, / Like to a bubbling fountain stirr’d with wind, / Doth rise and fall between thy rosed lips” (Tit. II.iv.22-4). At times, the cumulative effect becomes unbearable.

Though it may seem so in parts, the visual violence is not gratuitous. Just like Richard’s appearance, it corresponds to an inner reality. “Rome is but a wilderness of tigers,” Titus tells Lucius, “Tigers must prey, and Rome affords no prey / But me and mine” (Tit. III.i.54-6). Lucius calls Aaron (Tit. V.iii.5), and later Tamora, a “ravenous tiger” (Tit. V.iii.195), “her life was beastly” (Tit. V.iii.199); Lavinia, before she is ravished, uses the same words of the Queen of the Goths. In fact, animal imagery predominates in the depiction of character: Aaron calls himself a “black dog” (Tit. V.i.122); Tamora and her two sons are “[a] pair of cursed hell-hounds and their dame” (Tit. V.ii.144). Everything conspires, therefore, to emphasize the predatory nature of those involved, the inhumanity of Roman, Goth and Moor. All fall victim to their own unnatural cruelty. The culmination of the spiritual and physical atrocities is achieved in the final feast scene, where Tamora feeds upon her own flesh and blood. By this point the spectator has surfeited on both verbal and visual representations of moral depravity.

The play is unusual not only in its accumulation of corpses but also in its high level of saturation with physical elements of all kinds. In direct contrast to the sparse and self-consciously bare Henry V, Titus is filled with people (e.g. the stage directions in the first Act call for “others as many as can be” (Tit. I.i.s.d.), and hounds, props like horns, arrows, a basket with pigeons, Marcus’s staff, Aaron’s bag of gold, and uncommon scenery like the pit in the forest. Each of these objects has a second level of significance. Titus’s arrows to the gods are the physical embodiment of the rhetorical search for justice. The hounds at the hunt are the objective manifestation of the
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animal imagery that characterizes the humans in the play. The pit is reminiscent of the mouth of hell; in fact, the editor’s note points out that on stage it would be represented by a hell-mouth prop. Whoever falls into it, like Bassianus and Titus’s sons, is doomed. It is located in a dreadful vale, full of ravens, snakes and toads, where “never shines the sun” (Tit. II.iii.96). The description paints a loathsome, abhorred and “very fatal place” (Tit. II.iii.202), “this unhallow’d and blood-stained hole” (Tit. II.iii.210), “this detested, dark, blood-drinking pit” (Tit. II.iii.224), “this fell devouring receptacle, / As hateful as Cocytus’ misty mouth” (Tit. II.iii.235-6). The landscape, like the shockingly violent behavior, is symbolic of the wildness and bloodthirstiness of the society portrayed in Titus Andronicus. Other visual elements, like Aaron’s blackness, also function as physical counterparts to a moral quality: “his soul black like his face” (Tit. III.i.205). The cliché of black as evil is given a material reality; like his soul and his skin, Aaron’s “[a]cts [are] of black night” (Tit. V.i.64).

Alan Downer’s requirement that spectacle be symbolic “without losing its reality” is certainly fulfilled in Shakespeare’s plays. On the one hand, the visual elements are literal components of the plot. Henry’s voyages and battles, for example, are chronicled events with no any inherent secondary meaning. Richard’s caricatured looks (whether or not they have some basis in historical fact) function sufficiently well at the level of mere physical description, with no necessary metaphorical implications. Similarly, the atrocities in Titus are the logical outcome of two phases of revenge. And yet, all of these visual frameworks, constituted of verbal and material components, also take on a symbolic dimension. In each drama, the emblematic weight of the spectacle provides an “objective correlative” for the main thematic focus. In the case of Henry’s crusade against the French, the grandeur of the poetic tableaux portraying his fleet, his camp, the encounters in the field, and the glorious homecoming, is the physical equivalent or “model [of the] inward greatness” of the English sovereign and his realm. The very opposite of such patriotic celebration of the nation in the person of the heroic monarch is Richard III. The profundity of this character surpasses a merely formulaic (self)-identification with the allegorical Vice figure of morality plays (“Thus, like the formal Vice, Iniquity, / I moralize two meanings in one word” (R3 III.i.79-83)). As Alan Dessen points out, “Richard is an epitome of what is wrong with England”; there is a direct link between the king and the health of his kingdom, only Richard III is the reverse of Henry V (Shakespeare 43). The murderer’s distorted appearance is the hideous incarnation of his sinful spirit, a testament to the evil within that deforms the outer shell,
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which in turn prompts the criminal to further monstrous deeds in a vicious circle spiraling finally out of control. Dessen, in *Elizabethan Stage Conventions and Modern Interpreters*, warns against considering “Elizabethan stage violence” in too realistic terms (129). It is “metaphoric or symbolic” (130), and even the relentless bloodletting of *Titus Andronicus* carries a symbolic meaning for an audience that has been thrust into an awareness of the moral depravity and predatory bestiality of the social world of the play.

Shakespeare’s spectacle is at once concretely itself and an embodiment of abstract ideas. As Alan Dessen demonstrates at length in *Elizabethan Drama and the Viewer’s Eye*, the playwright uses “visual analogues,” stage directions, and the “language of actions” as “dramatic shorthand” (73) for the creation of “a special emphasis, a theatrical *italics*, that singles out a [particular] moment for the eye (and mind) of the viewer” (76). “The dramatist is not limited solely to verbal display of a major image at climactic points in the action but can resort as well to stage business, costumes, groupings, sound effects, and other nonverbal devices to underscore a developing pattern for the viewer” (87).

This “symbolic or imagistic (or emblematic or iconographic) potential in [...] stage properties or costumes (or tableaux or gestures)” is by no means confined to the three plays here discussed (71). The iteration of physical images is the hallmark of Elizabethan drama, but it is not often that the verbal spectacle of the poetry and the concrete reality of the stage work in concert to produce a visual parallel or symbol for the overall thematic design.

Notes

1 Quotations also taken from *The Third Part of Henry the Sixth* (3H6).
2 Cf. Queen Margaret’s description of Richard as a “dog [...] when he bites, / His venom tooth will rankle to the death” (*R3* I.iii.288-90).
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 Works Cited


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The Transforming Power of Breeches: 
the Merging of Rosalind's Two Selves 
in As You Like It

Stephanie Eddleman
Delta State University
Cleveland, MS

One cannot be bored in the world of Shakespeare. Whatever is soon becomes transformed into something new and different. His worlds are never static, and neither are his characters. The varying points of view that Shakespeare presents to his audience cause us to examine what we think we know, what we simply assume, what we’ve always been taught. Shakespeare delights in juxtaposing passion with reason, law with compassion, might with divine right, societal rules with individual freedom. But these conflicts are all abstractions. In As You Like It, Shakespeare sets up a juxtaposition with which we are all unavoidably and most concretely connected—our masculine with feminine identities. The character
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Rosalind, because of her double identity and her journey from powerlessness to self-determination, causes us to examine the roles, along with their benefits and limitations, that society forces us into because of our gender. And, although Rosalind ultimately re-enters society in a role deemed “proper” for a woman, a portion of the liberty she experienced while playing the role of a man remains with her.

Rosalind, as we first meet her, is in a totally powerless position. Her precarious situation in society is regulated solely by her relationship to men and their status in that society. Because her father is “banish’d” (1.2.5), she is totally dependent upon the mercies of “her usurping uncle” (1.2.274), the new Duke. Rosalind recognizes her loss of prestige and position in society, and this is evidenced by how she gives in, defers to, and beseeches those around her. Celia’s father, rather than Rosalind’s, is now the one in a position of authority, and this places Rosalind below Celia on the social scale. Because of this, Rosalind tries to “forget the condition of [her] estate” (1.2.15) as Celia requests. When Rosalind suggests “falling in love” as a choice of “sport” (1.2.26), Celia limits her with “I prithee thee do ... but” (1.2.26-27, emphasis mine) and goes on to suggest a new form of sport, “mock[ing] the good huswife” (1.2.31), which Rosalind defers to. Duke Frederick, though a usurper, is addressed by Rosalind as “my liege” (1.2.157), “dear uncle” (1.3.50), and “your Highness” (1.3.52). She asks him “leave” (1.2.157) and says she will make Orlando’s safety her “suit to the Duke” (1.2.181-82). Speaking to Orlando before the wrestling match, Rosalind sums up the state of her might: “The little strength that I have, I would it were with you” (1.2.194-95). At this point, her strength is limited to well-wishes only.

Even though Rosalind is physically and politically powerless at the beginning of *As You Like It*, we see early evidence of her inner, mental strength. An interesting example of this combination of outer physical weakness and inner mental strength can be seen in Roberta Maxwell’s portrayal of Rosalind in John Hirsch’s 1983 production of *As You Like It*. When Duke Frederick banishes Rosalind, she physically crumples to the ground, weeping (a stage direction not found in the text, of course). Yet, even as she is prostrate and weeping, she verbally defends herself against the new Duke’s charge of treason, which he supports by the statement: “Thou art thy father’s daughter” (1.3.58). Rosalind boldly replies: “So was I when your Highness took his dukedom, / So was I when your Highness banish’d him” (1.3.59-60), certainly a brave but risky act on Rosalind’s part. Her anger in response to his accusations seems to awaken a hidden inner strength that we, and perhaps even Rosalind herself, have
Rosalind, because of her *double* identity and her journey from powerlessness to self-determination, causes us to examine the roles, along with their benefits and limitations, that society forces us into because of our gender. And, although Rosalind ultimately re-enters society in a role deemed “proper” for a woman, a portion of the liberty she experienced while playing the role of a man remains with her.

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Another clue to the extent of Rosalind’s inner resources is the wonderful power of her imagination. After deciding that she and Celia will go into the woods of Arden together, Rosalind worries about their safety: “Alas, what danger will it be to us, / Maids as we are, to travel forth so far! / Beauty provoketh thieves sooner than gold” (1.3.108-10). They decide to disguise themselves, but Celia’s imagination goes only so far as “poor and mean attire” and “smirch[ed] face” (1.3.111-12). Rosalind, however, lets her imagination soar:

Were it not better,
Because that I am more than common tall,
That I did suit me all points like a man?
A gallant curtle-axe upon my thigh,
A boar-spear in my hand . . .
We’ll have a swashing and a martial outside.
(1.3.114-20)

Rosalind is not limited by thoughts of gender, and her imagination even goes so far as to transform her, not into just any man, but a “swashing” and “martial” one.

Rosalind’s subsequent change of attire transforms more than just her outer physical appearance; her decision to become a man also transforms her from one who is acted upon to one who acts. Even before donning “doublet and hose” (2.4.6), she performs her first act of self-determination, renaming herself: “I’ll have no worse a name than Jove’s own page, / And therefore look you call me Ganymed” (1.3.124-25). She goes on to suggest to Celia that they “steal/The clownish fool out of [Celia’s] father’s court” (1.3.129-30); thus we see her gradually stepping into the role of the decision maker and leader of the pair. This leadership role continues as, entering the woods of Arden, we see Rosalind attempting to be brave and comfort Celia, “the weaker vessel” (2.4.6), and purchasing a “cottage, pasture, and . . . flock” (2.4.92) without consulting her traveling companions.

It is interesting to note that, although Rosalind becomes more assertive and self-determined after taking on the role of a man, the extent to which she exhibits that power is dependent upon her audience. Even though she becomes a leader and a decision maker, she still reveals her weaker side to those who know she is a woman masquerading as a man. When Celia withholds from Rosalind the identity of a certain young man she has spotted in Arden, Rosalind vehemently asks, “[D]ost thou think, though I am caparison’d like a man, I have a doublet and hose in my disposition?” (3.2.194-96). In her excitement her banter grows almost frantic, and she makes a response that stereotypes women: “Do you not know I am a woman? when I think I must speak” (3.2.249-50). Rosalind, for a moment, seems to forget her newfound
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sense of confidence and strength.

This seeming return to her earlier feminine weakness, though, is balanced by the change in her body language while wearing men’s clothing. Roberta Maxwell, as Rosalind, once more provides an interesting illustration. In the excitement of hearing about Orlando’s arrival in Arden, Rosalind again falls to the ground. But instead of her fall suggesting physical weakness, this time she falls backwards from a sitting position with arms spread and legs askew—a position that, besides suggesting a sexual confidence usually limited to males, also shows her to be at home in her body, comfortable, and sure of herself. Actress Sophie Thompson, who played Rosalind in John Caird’s production of *As You Like It* at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre in 1989, sums up Rosalind’s newfound sense of liberty: “I was in a dress at the beginning, then I found a new kind of freedom—if there had been a tree on the set I could have climbed it” (83). Rosalind’s male attire gives her a physical freedom unknown in the earlier restrictive dress of the female at court.

When we see Rosalind with those who are not aware of her masquerade, we observe her at the peak of her self-confidence and assertiveness. After Jacques informs her that he loves being melancholy “better than laughing” (4.1.4), Rosalind sets him straight, saying “Those that are in extremity of either are abominable fellows, and betray themselves to every modern censure worse than drunkards” (4.1.5-7). Rosalind is extremely harsh with the “proud and pitiless” (3.5.40) Phebe: “Sell when you can, you are not for all markets” (3.5.60). “You foolish shepherd” (3.5.49), Rosalind chides the love-struck, but blinded, Silvius, “’Tis such fools as you / that makes the world full of ill-favor’d children” (3.5.52-53).

But Rosalind’s emancipation and dual nature are most evidenced in her encounters as Ganymed with Orlando. On one hand, she decides to “play the knave” (3.2.296), “give him some good counsel” (3.2.364), and “cure” (3.2.426) him. She leaves behind the feelings of inferiority and submission that being female entailed in the world of the court and becomes his teacher, his inquisitor. Rosalind lectures Orlando on the nature of Time and “how to know a man in love” (3.2.370), which she asserts he is not. She teaches him the true nature of love when she mockingly counsels Orlando to “die by attorney” (4.1.94), reprimanding him for his extravagant words and reminding him that “men have died from time to time ... but not for love” (4.1.106-08). She characterizes women as “changeable, longing and liking, proud, fantastical, apish, shallow, inconstant, full of tears, full of smiles; for every passion something, and for no passions truly anything” (3.2.411-14), testing Orlando’s conception of
sense of confidence and strength.

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women. But on the other hand, Rosalind also becomes Orlando’s playmate and lover. We must not forget that she is not really Ganymed, but Rosalind playing at being Ganymed playing at being Rosalind. Rosalind’s disguise gives her, as Ganymed playing at being Rosalind, the liberty to request of Orlando what society would never allow her to utter as Rosalind: “Come, woo me, woo me” (4.1.68). Not only does she command Orlando’s romantic attentions, she also, though mockingly, gives to Celia the role of priest and proposes to Orlando: “Give me your hand, Orlando” (4.1.125).

Later Rosalind, like Theseus in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, is the authority figure who pairs off the couples correctly, consenting to the unions of Oliver with Celia and Touchstone with Audrey, tricking Phebe into a union with Silvius, and revealing her identity and presenting herself to Orlando. Although she defers to her father’s position, according to their society’s rules of feminine submission, and states to him “To you I give myself, for I am yours” (5.4.116), her submissive words are undermined by her declaration to Orlando: “I’ll have no husband, if you be not he” (5.4.123). Here we see that, although Rosalind verbally assents to the role of women in society, she is actually rebelling against it in practice.

When Rosalind decides to reveal herself to Orlando and become his wife, she sheds her identity as Ganymed along with her men’s apparel, and she also gives up some of the freedoms she enjoyed as a man. The physical and mental liberties of Arden are cast off for restrictive female garments and the submissive role of wife. Upon Rosalind’s revelation of herself as a woman to Phebe, Hymen comments: “You to his [Silvius'] love must accord, / Or have a woman for your lord” (5.4.133-34). This comment, coupled with Rosalind’s earlier “I would love you if I could” (5.2.111-12) illustrates that, although Rosalind has gained some freedom and advancement of thought, she has not completely thrown off the constraints of society, if she still, even half seriously, sees the idea of a woman as lord as an unnatural thing. Indeed, once Rosalind presents herself to Orlando as bride, she does not speak another word in the last act of the play!

In the epilogue we see the final result of the merging of Rosalind’s two selves. As Rosalind submits to the role of wife, her hard-won freedoms are challenged and seem to be slipping away. She again reacts with an inner strength. She no longer blindly follows the rules that society sets forth for women; now she exhibits a knowledge of what those rules are and then challenges them. “[i]t is not the fashion to see the lady the epilogue: but it is no more unhandsome than to see the lord the prologue” (1-3). Her dual role has prepared her to identify with both the women and the men of the audience. She charges the
women. But on the other hand, Rosalind also becomes Orlando’s playmate and lover. We must not forget that she is not really Ganymed, but Rosalind playing at being Ganymed playing at being Rosalind. Rosalind’s disguise gives her, as Ganymed playing at being Rosalind, the liberty to request of Orlando what society would never allow her to utter as Rosalind: “Come, woo me, woo me” (4.1.68). Not only does she command Orlando’s romantic attentions, she also, though mockingly, gives to Celia the role of priest and proposes to Orlando: “Give me your hand, Orlando” (4.1.125).

Later Rosalind, like Theseus in A Midsummer Night’s Dream, is the authority figure who pairs off the couples correctly, consenting to the unions of Oliver with Celia and Touchstone with Audrey, tricking Phebe into a union with Silvius, and revealing her identity and presenting herself to Orlando. Although she defers to her father’s position, according to their society’s rules of feminine submission, and states to him “To you I give myself, for I am yours” (5.4.116), her submissive words are undermined by her declaration to Orlando: “I’ll have no husband, if you be not he” (5.4.123). Here we see that, although Rosalind verbally assents to the role of women in society, she is actually rebelling against it in practice.

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women, "for the love you bear to men, to like as much of this play as please you" (13-14); and then charges the men, "for the love you bear to women (as I perceive by your simp'ring, none of you hates them), that between you and the women the play may please" (15-17). Rosalind's charges to the men and the women are essentially the same. This suggestion of equality underscores her earlier assessment of the suitability of a woman performing the epilogue and puts women and men on equal ground—at least in Rosalind's eyes. It is also interesting to note that although Rosalind earlier was limited by her audience's awareness of her gender, while delivering the epilogue to an audience even more intimately aware of who she is than her previous audiences, she is able confidently to overstep accepted boundaries, challenge them verbally, and then act according to her personal inclinations—regardless of gender. Rosalind even seems to draw energy from the audience and interacts with them, as we can see from Roberta Maxwell's performance, in a playful and confident manner.

By allowing Rosalind's transformation from powerlessness to self-determination and freedom to be triggered by her assuming a male identity, Shakespeare causes us, if we are not careful, to assume that it is the male identity—the breeches—that empowers Rosalind. Yet, as we have seen, her transformation begins even before she dons doublet and hose. Her strength was there all along, but it was constrained by the role society forced her to play. The unusual and precarious circumstance Rosalind finds herself in, her own banishment, causes her to reach down deep into her inner resources and become what she already had the potential to be. Thus, we see Shakespeare blurring gender lines to make us question how much of the roles we play are natural or biological and how much of them are self- or society-imposed. As Rosalind earlier commented to Celia, "now thou goest from Fortune's office to Nature's" (1.2.40-41). Through Rosalind's growth, Shakespeare illustrates that the potential for self-determination is in us all, waiting to be unleashed—if we like it.
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Works Cited


Flight of the Imagination

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Thomas Bewick, an ornithological illustrator and nature writer, provided artistic inspiration for the imagination of the Victorian writer, Charlotte Brontë. Bewick captured the essence of nature in art and poetry. In his poem titled “Newcastle Upon Tyne,” Bewick wrote:

O Nature! How in every charm supreme;
Thy votaries feast on raptures ever new!
O for the voice and fire of seraphim
To sing thy glories with devotion due!
Blest be the day I 'scap'd the wrangling crew,
From Pyrrho's maze, and Epicurus' sty;
And held high converse with the godlike few,
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Bewick’s book *The History of British Birds* was of such particular interest to Charlotte Brontë that she incorporated references to the book in her 1847 novel *Jane Eyre*. Charlotte Brontë and her siblings were fascinated with this book in their youth. Perhaps the aforementioned poem is an indication of their reasons. The children used their imaginations, fueled by the artists and poets of their time, to create stories. The authors William Harmon and C. Hugh Holman note in *A Handbook to Literature* that “in the romantic mood,” there is “a psychological desire to escape from unpleasant realities” (452). Author Rebecca Fraser, in her 1988 book *The Brontes: Charlotte Bronte and Her Family*, also states that “there was little to interrupt the children from the reveries induced by their reading, which provided the consolation for the unhappiness that they were so much in need of” (51). Fraser explains that, at seventeen, Brontë wrote the poem “Lines on Bewick” in which the verses illustrate her own childhood love for Bewick’s book:

... again we turn
With fresh delight to the enchanted page
Where pictured thoughts that breathe and speak and burn
Still please alike our youth and riper age
We turn the page: before the expectant eye
A traveller stands lone on some desert heath;
I cannot speak the rapture that I feel
When on the work of such a mind I gaze.

(51)

Brontë interweaves her own personal experience with Romantic nature imagery; she spins this thread of imagination influenced by the art of Thomas Bewick within the context of *Jane Eyre*, and this is evident in her frequent use of bird imagery. Not only is Brontë successful in creating Romantic images as she refers to nature, but she poignantly uses birds as creatures who, when unrestrained, take freedom in flight—an important symbolism in the context of the story of *Jane Eyre*. In the 1895 article “Charlotte Brontë’s Place in Literature,” Frederic Harrison suggests the following:

Charlotte Brontë told us her own life, her own feelings, sufferings, pride, joy, and ambition. She bared for us her own inner soul, and all that it had known and desired, and this she did with a noble, pure, simple, but intense truth ... coloured with native
Who to th'enraptur'd heart, and ear, and eye,
Teach beauty, virtue, truth, and love, and melody!  (20)

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imagination and a sense of true art. (4479)

At the onset of the novel, the child Jane Eyre spends countless hours immersed in her solitary world of books. Because of the emphasis that is placed on Bewick's *A History of British Birds* at the beginning of the story, the reader can ascertain that the placement of this particular book within the context of the novel by Brontë is not without purpose. Brontë places this book in the hands of her protagonist because this book has the "power to remove the unhappy child Jane Eyre from her hateful surroundings" (Fraser 51). Brontë's character is a clever and observant child who views the world around her as an artist would; she studies human nature in great detail. At the beginning of the novel, Jane spends a significant amount of time describing the scenes she is reading about in Bewick's book. As Jane notes, "each picture told a story; mysterious often to my underdeveloped understanding and imperfect feelings, yet ever profoundly interesting" (Brontë 6-7). Just as Charlotte was in her youth, Jane is deeply affected by the pictorial images she sees in Bewick's work. When writing *Jane Eyre*, Brontë used the imagery from *A History of British Birds* to symbolically delineate Jane Eyre's emotions, surroundings, perceptions, and interpersonal relationships. As the oppressed character of Jane Eyre develops in the novel, so does the use of bird imagery to describe human emotions and Jane's surroundings. As each bird has a particular set of behaviors, so does Jane and many of the characters with whom she comes in contact. Just as Brontë viewed the artful displays in Bewick's book as a child, so too can the readers of *Jane Eyre* imagine these pictures as they see Brontë's characterizations in terms of bird imagery. By using Bewick's *A History of British Birds* within the context of the novel, Brontë provides the canvas to symbolically paint, for the reader, a profound, artistic character study that colors the entire novel.

Literary critic Felicia Gordon, in a 1989 article titled "Jane's Five Homes," notes that "it is significant that, at Gateshead, Jane effects her first escape from an oppressive reality through the medium of Romantic art, in her reading of Bewick's *British Birds*" (44). Jane delineates her own situation when she describes what she is seeing in the book: "[t]hey were those which treat of the haunts of sea-fowl; of 'the solitary rocks and promontories' by them only inhabited" (Brontë 6). She further describes the coldness she experiences when she speaks of Bewick's descriptions of "'forlorn regions of dreary space—that reservoir of frost and snow, where the firm fields of ice, the accumulation of centuries of winters, glazed in Alpine heights above heights, surround the pole, and centre the multiplied rigors of extreme cold'" (Brontë 6). Robert Keefe, discussing Jane's character in
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“Death and Survival in Jane Eyre,” explains that “throughout the novel, she will return again and again to an awed consideration of what it must be like to be dead, to be a spirit in a frozen world” (98). Although the character of Jane Eyre continually acknowledges her series of desperate situations, she refuses to be trapped, like a caged bird, within them. Jane keeps her eye always on the “hilly horizon” and notes that she “longed to surmount; all within their boundary of rock and heath seemed prison-ground, exile limits” (Bronte 72). In Jane Eyre, the reader can see evidence of the Romantic tradition, in which Bronte uses nature to describe Jane’s emotions.

As a child, Jane Eyre’s choices are limited; after leaving Gateshead, she remains desolate in the cold surroundings of the Lowood School. After eight years at the school, Jane takes the position as a governess for the ward of the wealthy Edward Rochester. She eventually falls in love with him, but when Jane first meets her employer, she is still looking to the horizon. The perceptive Rochester notes that he sees in her “the glance of a curious sort of bird through the close-set bars of a cage; a vivid restless, resolute captive is there; were it but free, it would soar cloud-high” (Bronte 118-19). Jane soon begins to characterize Rochester as a “falcon” and compares him to others as such; she notes, upon seeing the character Richard Mason, that “the contrast could not be much greater between a sleek gander and a fierce falcon” (Bronte 162). Richard Chase, in a 1947 essay titled “The Brontës: A Centennial Observance,” explains that Rochester is a “Gothical-Byronic character” and “he draws her to him with a strange fascination; yet she is repelled by his animalism and his demonism” (58). In a contrasting view, perhaps Jane is not so much repelled by Rochester’s appearance as she is with his tainted past and the secret he is hiding. Jane understands that Rochester is keeping a secret at Thornfield, and this frightens her. Bronte once again uses nature and bird imagery to describe Jane’s fear of the mysterious Bertha: “[w]hat creature was it, that, masked in an ordinary woman’s face and shape, uttered the voice, now of a mocking demon, and anon of a carrion-seeking bird of prey?” (179). This image helps Bronte create, for the reader, a startling gothic picture of Jane’s terror of the unknown.

Despite the knowledge that Rochester is hiding something, Jane’s love for him blossoms. She begins to see him, not for his monetary wealth, but for his “wealth of the power of communicating happiness, that to taste but of the crumbs he scattered to stray and stranger birds like me was to feast genially” (Bronte 209). This moment in the novel strikes an interesting parallel to the beginning of the story when Jane is feeding birds from her windowsill. She “wanted the bird to be secure of its
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bread," and she "scattered the crumbs, some on the stone sill, some on the cherry-tree bough" (Brontë 25). These moments in the novel illustrate the role of the provider in the story. As a child, Jane lacks the love and happiness she needs; she, therefore, extends her care to "a little hungry robin" (Brontë 25). Later, it is Jane who is the needy bird when Rochester supplies her with morsels of happiness. Comparing the presentation of Jane as a needy bird to the way in which Bewick describes robins provides an understanding of his work as an influence on Brontë's writing. Bewick's robin is a creature who "taps at the window with his bill, as if to entreat an asylum, which is always cheerfully granted, and with a simplicity the most delightful, hops round the house, picks up the crumbs, and seems to make himself one of the family" (131). In her 1977 essay "The Brontës," Winifred Gerin notes that "normal human relationships based on mutual trust and humanity take a disproportionate place in Jane's affection, because of the traumatic experiences of her childhood" (161). Rochester's affections for Jane grow and he is everintrigued by her curious mind. Rochester's emotions are illustrated when he explains, "[W]hen you are inquisitive, Jane, you always make me smile. You open your eyes like an eager bird" (Brontë 265). This also indicates that the level of equality within this mutually satisfying relationship is growing. Rochester has begun to need Jane as much as she needs him.

Brontë further weaves nature into the story by not only using bird imagery within her descriptive narrative but also through her placement of birds as active participants within the story's scenery. In one conversation between Jane and Rochester, Brontë shows Jane imagining birds acting as a captive audience to her dialogue with Rochester:

He paused: the birds went on carolling, the leaves lightly rustling. I almost wondered they did not check their songs and whispers to catch the suspended revelation: but they would have to wait many minutes—so long was the silence protracted. (186-87).

The birds are silent listeners to the songs of a budding courtship.

Rochester eventually falls in love with Jane and intends to ask for her hand in marriage although he continues to let Jane believe he plans to marry Blanche Ingram, a woman who, according to Jane, moves among the aristocratic "flock of white plumy birds" (Brontë 146). Rochester teases Jane when he explains to her that he has secured a position for her in Ireland. Rochester sees Jane's discomfort and says, "Jane, be still; don't struggle so, like a wild, frantic bird that is rendering its own plumage in
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its desperation" (Brontë 216). Jane responds with one of the strongest displays of her character’s determination:

“I am no bird; and no net ensnares me: I am a free human being with an independent will; which I now exert to leave you” (Brontë 216). Additionally, Jane is shocked at Rochester’s proposal and still believes that Blanche “stands between” them (Brontë 217). As the story unfolds, the reader finds that it is Bertha, not Blanche who is the bride that separates Jane from Rochester. When this is discovered, Jane compares the natural habitat of birds to her own behavior as she notes that “birds were faithful to their mates; birds were emblems of love” and asks herself the following question: “What was I?” (Brontë 274). Jane knows that because Rochester is still married to the insane being in his attic, she must leave him despite her painful inner struggle and temptation to stay. Jane’s emotional state is weakened when she departs Thornfield, but she remains strong and steadfast in her principles. Through the use of bird imagery, Bronte continually illustrates the beauty, as well as the strain of Jane’s relationship with Rochester. Lewis Gates notes, in his 1900 essay “Charlotte Bronte,” that Bronte’s characters are “knit by ‘organic filaments’ to the nature they inhabit, and they can be thoroughly and persuasively realized only as their sensitive union with this nature-world which is their home is continually suggested” (4495). He adds that for “the romantic poet, the individual is far more closely dependent on the vast instinctive world of nature for comfort and help and even for the life of the spirit, than on the conventional world of society” (Gates 4495).

The young Charlotte Brontë looked to the Romantic images in Bewick’s book for comfort in her childhood and retains their images to use in describing the life of her character Jane Eyre. Gates explains that “for Charlotte Brontë, the struggle for life is the struggle for affection” (4494). He adds that Bronte’s stories always seem to contain “some creature striving for happiness,” and the beginning of the story of Jane Eyre emphasizes this “tragically isolated little figure . . . symbolically busy over a woodcut of the lonely and frigid arctic regions” (Gates 4494). After Jane leaves Thornfield, she is once again cold and isolated. Jane exercised her right to freedom through her principles but at the cost of her own physical well-being. It is now up to Mary, Diana, and their brother Mr. St. John to extend help to Jane’s weakened character. Mary and Diana take “pleasure in keeping and cherishing a half-frozen bird,” explains St. John Rivers in the novel (Brontë 297). Once Jane’s health is restored, she learns that she has inherited not only a substantial fortune, but a family as well. Unfortunately, even this situation is not without struggle. Jane must once again exert her determination, this time by refusing to marry St. John.
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As the novel progresses, the reader sees the shift in the character of Jane Eyre from a weak and helpless bird to a strong being whose freedom and independence now allow her to return to Thornfield “like a messenger-pigeon flying home” to a duty of her own choosing (Brontë 360). Jane returns to Rochester and finds that he too has changed. His appearance “looked desperate and brooding... a caged eagle, whose gold-ringed eyes cruelty has extinguished” (Brontë 367). It is not Jane that is the caged and helpless bird, but Rochester. Their roles have been reversed, “just as if a royal eagle, chained to a perch, should be forced to entreat a sparrow to become its purveyor” (Brontë 374). Jane is no longer the subservient being she once was and, without the boundary of Rochester’s marriage to Bertha, can now fully give her heart to Rochester. Jane explains to Rochester: “I love you better now, when I can really be useful to you, than I did in your state of proud independence, when you disdained every part but that of the giver and protector” (Brontë 379). Jane is not only free from her restrictive role as a dependent, but she can also feel as though she is performing her duty in life.

Charlotte Brontë paints, for the reader, a picturesque view of the struggles of one woman for freedom and happiness. Jane Eyre breaks free of the cage created by Victorian society with grace and principle. Brontë’s masterpiece illustrates a character unyielding, flying off to meet her horizon with strength and independence. Jane does marry Rochester in the end, but she does so as a woman who desires and attains happiness on her own terms.
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Works Cited


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Both Thomas Hardy's poem "The Man He Killed" and Wilfred Owen's "Dulce et Decorum Est" approach war as a general theme. While the poems pertain to World War I specifically, Owen's poem refers to World War I in its language, while Hardy's does not. Each poem reflects the sensibility of a poet confronted with his own war experience and both affect the reader strongly. This effect is achieved through differences in sensibility and technique on the part of the poets. Both poems approach war as a negative quality, but there are explicit differences in the pieces: although both relate instances of combat, Owen's "Dulce et Decorum Est" positions the reader directly within this combat, thus inducing an intuitive,
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incendiary response. In "The Man He Killed," Hardy evokes emotion by avoiding allusion to emotion itself and suggesting less about combat than Owen does. Instead, Hardy focuses on the moral dilemma of the narrator. Also, the narrator in Hardy’s "The Man He Killed" never alludes specifically to World War I; Hardy teaches a general lesson about war. However, putting the poem in context, the astute reader realizes that the poem was written during World War I, and ultimately the impetus for the poem’s creation. An examination and explication of the differences in form and language of the two poems reveals both to be emotionally evocative and lucidly wrought.

In "The Man He Killed," Hardy employs informal diction to situate the reader with the narrator: one observes a normal soldier reflecting on having to kill a man who was once (or who could just as well have been) a friend. The informal diction augments both the connotative and denotative weight of the poem. Idiom, colloquial words, and rhyming are all combined to form the unique diction of “The Man He Killed,” which enhance the impact and focus of the ideas and emotions. While, like "Dulce et Decorum Est," the poem asserts that war is tragic and afflicts one’s morale and conscience, it more specifically claims that war has the frightening potential to alter a friend into foe. To create this effect, the poem begins in medias res: we get the sense that the soldier is in the middle of his conversation:

‘Had he and I but met
By some old ancient inn,
We should have sat us down to wet
Right many a nipperkin! (5)

Note the quotation mark, indicating dialogue being relayed to a listener. Since this context is understood, one discovers that the language is conversational, and that idiom is in effect. The phrase “right many a nipperkin,” in the first stanza, is the first notable example of this usage. Note, also, diction used in the third and fourth stanzas:

‘I shot him dead because—
because he was my foe,
Just so: my foe of course he was;
That’s clear enough; although

‘He thought he’d ‘list, perhaps,
Off-hand like—just as I—
Was out of work—had sold his traps—
No other reason why. (5)

One senses that the recounting narrator is discovering through telling his tale the great contradiction at the heart of his act. While the narrator ruminates upon his actions, there is the sense through the diction and conversational...
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idiosyncrasy that he begins to understand the irony of this contradiction: the fact that he is associating with someone (the reader) just as he might have associated with the soldier in any other context besides war-combat. Again, this sense of climaxing realization is observed in the diction, specifically in the repetition of “because” in the second line of the third stanza, signifying a paused thought before the narrator deduces that the man he killed was indeed his foe. He solidifies his claim by adding, “[j]ust so: my foe of course he was / That’s clear enough” (5).

However, Hardy’s use of diction, rhyme, and conversational idiosyncrasies might persuade one to perceive this to be a rationalization on the part of the narrator; directly proportionate to the narrator’s realization that his actions are contradictory are the feelings of increasing self-consciousness. Consequently, the narrator wavers between his perceptions of whether the man he killed was indeed a potential friend, or that war itself warranted the victim to the status of “foe.” The poem takes a conversationally transitional turn when the word “although” is used in the fourth line of the third stanza. This word suggests that the narrator is going to contradict his claim, to some degree, and that “the man he killed” was not a foe.

Moving into the fourth stanza, we discover this is indeed the case. The first line does not reveal this, however: “He thought he’d ‘list, perhaps.” The line contains a distinct, regionalized, British vernacular usage of “‘list” as opposed to “enlist” to aid in constructing the conversational language of the narrator. The phrase “off-hand like” is another example of Hardy’s use of stylistic idiom. The narrator then associates his “foe” with himself when he uses the words “just as I” (between two dashes, as though the phrase is a recursive aside); then, the narrator goes on to further humanize the soldier he killed by remarking on his (the opposing soldier’s) being “out of work” and the selling of “his traps.” Ominously, the stanza ends by revealing that there was “no other reason why” the soldier decided to join the war. Hardy has successfully equated the narrator to his foe and vice versa.

The last stanza confirms the narrator’s sentiment; making a blanket statement about his war-created predicament:

‘Yes; quaint and curious war is!
You shoot a fellow down
You’d treat if met where any bar is,
Or help to half-a-crown!’ (5).

This series of lines deems war “quaint and curious” because of its effect on a human being in particular and humanity in general. Hardy is asserting through his narrator that war renders human relationships impossible. Hardy’s measured injection of casualness into these phrases magnifies the contrast between war and peace by
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creating a comparison between the seemingly simple lines and the intensity of the definitions behind the words. In other words, the textual simplicity, the pleasing iambic trimeter, and the ending rhyme in "The Man He Killed" create a beguilingly easy, sedate atmosphere. This atmosphere serves as a fluid conduit through which the reader is transported to the rattled conscience of the war-torn narrator. Therefore, the general meaning of the poem—that war makes the human unfeasible—is revealed more clearly with a parallel relationship between the denotations and informal idiom.

Rhymes are also used to an important degree in "The Man He Killed." The poem follows an ABAB CDCD EFEF GHGH IIJI rhyming scheme. Also, rhyme in Hardy's poem creates particular expectations for the reader, which may be misleading. It is difficult to imagine such a human, conversationally toned implication successfully delivered with such a formal rhyme pattern. In this way, though, the rhyming scheme helps to create the language-theme paradox in the poem: while the rhyme lightens the mood, it assists in the movement of the language, thus helping to more seamlessly impart Hardy's message concerning war, regret, and humanity's fragility. For example, the lines:

But ranged as infantry,
And staring face to face,

I shot at him as he at me,
And killed him in his place (5)

are easy to read; however, the message within the rhythmic language is hardened and unpleasant.

By using a rhyme pattern in the poem, Hardy creates an additional contrast that is parallel to the differences of war and peace. He establishes a peaceful positioning and harmony in the words, but the ideas based upon them are dissonant and grim. The rhyming, informal diction contributes to the general meaning of the poem, for it clarifies the change from a friend to a foe. The poem successfully evokes emotion by keeping with this formality; by maintaining its informal diction even though it is written in a formal style. The diction displaces this fact and humanizes the narrator.

Too, the poem evokes an emotional response from the reader due to its lack of allusive elements to emotional constructs. For example, the narrator never delineates into expository sadness, external loathing or obvious self-hatred, but is mentally balanced on the edge of dialogical or monological rumination, and what is apparently a gradual illumination and acknowledgment of the ironies of war. Thus, by the last stanza, the crescendo reaches an apex of sagely sarcasm:

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‘Yes; quaint and curious war is!
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You’d treat if met where any bar is,  
Or help to half-a-crown! ’ (5)
The poem is simply one soldier relaying his tale of meeting another soldier, fighting and killing him, and remarking on how easily this foe might have been a chum in a pub in a context other than war. The subtly chilling realization is that the listener (or reader), given the informal diction of the narrator, could be a person in a pub, listening.

Though Wilfred Owen’s “Dulce et Decorum Est” has a few aspects in common with Hardy’s “The Man He Killed,” the two poems are distinctly different. While both poems use rhyme to a significant degree, for example, Owen’s “Dulce” emphasizes a more formal diction, along with use of metaphor and graphic imagery. Also, the narrator’s purpose in “Dulce et Decorum Est” is to recount a memory of his witnessing a fellow comrade dying in a gas raid and then to inject emotion into the reader by changing from first person to second person in the fourth stanza, targeting the reader more directly. The result is an instinctive, perhaps even numbed response on the part of the reader: we are displaced into the narrator’s nightmarish predicament and then cornered by the message at the end of the poem.

The soldiers in “Dulce et Decorum Est” are presented through a blur of dark verbal forms—coughing, haunting, fumbling, yelling, stumbling, guttering, choking, drowning (twice), smothering, writhing, hanging, and gurgling. These words aid in constructing the sense of the war’s horrific consequences. They are examples of Owen’s facility with descriptive diction, and are uses in language that create the poet’s intention of delivering a warning. In other words, Owen is suggesting that war causes us to “writhe,” “drown,” “choke,” “stumble,” “yell,” “fumble,” etc. He warns us with his words. This portentous tone is consistent throughout the poem. Consider the first stanza:

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,  
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,  
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs  
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.  
Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots  
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;  
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots  
Of tired, outstripped Five-Nines that dropped behind.  
(117)

The soldiers are not only “bent double,” but they are also “like old beggars”; they are so “drunk with fatigue” that their humanity has been debased. In addition to the simile “like old beggars,” the soldiers are compared to “hags” in
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The soldiers are not only “bent double,” but they are also “like old beggars”; they are so “drunk with fatigue” that their humanity has been debased. In addition to the simile “like old beggars,” the soldiers are compared to “hags” in
the second line. This comparison aids the first stanza in presenting a tone of somnolent, painful restlessness, as the soldiers must “march asleep” and “limp on” despite being “blood-shod.” The reader, distant from this war-torn struggle, is alive and infused with the sensory struggle of the soldiers’ suffering, but the soldiers themselves are “blind” to the struggles around them and “deaf even to the hoots of tired, out-/ stripped Five-Nines that dropped behind.”

A stark tonal shift takes place in the second stanza, and we are pulled harshly out of our hazy, fatigue created by the first stanza and “flung” into a frightening realization:

Gas! GAS! Quick boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling, Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time; But someone still was yelling out and stumbling, And flound’ring like a man in fire or lime… Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light, As under a green sea, I saw him drowning. (117)

This contrasts so starkly to the first stanza, in fact, that it is enough to induce a visceral response in the reader. Suddenly, we are thrown into an “ecstasy of fumbling”—a prime example of Owen’s figurative language—in which panicked soldiers, in the midst (and “mist”) of a poisonous gas raid, are all dashing to put on their “helmets,” or gas-masks. However, the narrator realizes with horror (and we, too) that “someone still was yelling out and stumbling / And flound’ring like a man in fire or lime…” Interesting that “fire” is used here as it suggests hell: we will discover parallel metaphorical suggestion in the fourth stanza.

The next few portions of the poem are those that are most painful to focus on, and are, too, the most important. For it is in this dying soldier that the narrator sees the crime and futility of war. The narrator witnesses the soldier “drowning” under a “green sea” of poison gas—this bleak, frightening image is another example of Owen’s craft with figurative language and graphic imagery.

In the third stanza, which is but a couplet, we bear witness to the way the dying soldier imprints the narrator’s thought, so much so that this dying plagues the narrator’s subconscious: “In all my dreams, before my helpless sight, / He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning” (117). The fourth stanza conditionally invites the reader to join the nightmare, and relentlessly imparts graphic images of the soldier’s poisoned face; we feel as though we too have been “flung” into the wagon, intimately sharing the narrator’s struggle with death:

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace Behind the wagon we flung him in, And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
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Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light,
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning. (117)

This contrasts so starkly to the first stanza, in fact, that it is enough to induce a visceral response in the reader. Suddenly, we are thrown into an “ecstasy of fumbling”—a prime example of Owen’s figurative language—in which panicked soldiers, in the midst (and “mist”) of a poisonous gas raid, are all dashing to put on their “helmets,” or gas-masks. However, the narrator realizes with horror (and we, too) that “someone still was yelling out and stumbling / And flound’ring like a man in fire or lime…” Interesting that “fire” is used here as it suggests hell: we will discover parallel metaphorical suggestion in the fourth stanza.

The next few portions of the poem are those that are most painful to focus on, and are, too, the most important. For it is in this dying soldier that the narrator sees the crime and futility of war. The narrator witnesses the soldier “drowning” under a “green sea” of poison gas—this bleak, frightening image is another example of Owen’s craft with figurative language and graphic imagery.

In the third stanza, which is but a couplet, we bear witness to the way the dying soldier imprints the narrator’s thought, so much so that this dying plagues the narrator’s subconscious: “In all my dreams, before my helpless sight, / He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning” (117). The fourth stanza conditionally invites the reader to join the nightmare, and relentlessly imparts graphic images of the soldier’s poisoned face; we feel as though we too have been “flung” into the wagon, intimately sharing the narrator’s struggle with death:

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
Behind the wagon we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori. (117)

In lines three through eight of this stanza, a cascade of graphic imagery falls upon the reader. The "white eyes" contrast starkly with the soldier's dark, bloodied face, which is "like a devil's sick of sin." This simile is especially notable, for it parallels with the mention of fire in line four of stanza two. Keeping with this thought, the narrator uses the words "corrupted", "obscene", and "vile" in the last stanza, all signifying that the soldier is tainted and baneful as a result of his circumstances. Not only has he lost his innocence, but he can never regain it. The graphic imagery used in "Dulce et Decorum Est," especially in the last stanza, instills in the reader such vivid mental pictures that, as with the narrator, the experience becomes part of our "smothering dreams."

The last four lines effectively draw the poem to a close, asserting that were we to have witnessed all of these dreadful things (which, in a sense, we have, especially given the quality of the imagery and the response it induces), then we would not be prone to an over-zelalous sense of patriotism; we would not be for war, but indeed, would oppose it fiercely. Were we to have witnessed the agony of death on the soldier's face, just as the narrator did, then we would know the terror of combat and its associated horrors.

The rhyme scheme in "Dulce et Decorum Est" is similar to that of Hardy's "The Man He Killed": ABABCCDD EFEEFGH IIJJKLKLMMMN. However, the rhyming in this poem plays a different role from that of Hardy's "The Man He Killed." While the rhyming in Hardy's poem makes reading easier, and creates a language-theme paradox in the poem, the same technique employed in Owen's poem creates a sense of prodding tension and movement. Thus, the rhymes are more subtle in Owen's lengthier lines, save perhaps for the rhythmical repetition of the word "drowning" in the fourteenth and sixteenth lines.

Both "The Man He Killed" and "Dulce et Decorum Est" are effective in their anti-war messages, and their means at getting to that effect are highly distinctive. While Hardy's poem relies on stylistic idiom and informal diction—and a more prevalent sense of rhyme to contrast the language and its message—Owen tends to rely more on a prodding urgency in his poem; it evokes emotion
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and a more intuitive response by using a stream of graphic images and a more formal diction to place us in the setting.

Despite their differences, both poems communicate with great success the tragedy that is war. Their message aids us in realizing, specifically, how terrible World War I was to Hardy, who watched it as an objective observer, and to Owen, who was an actual soldier (and who, in a darkly ironic twist of fate, was killed in the line of duty). These poems are important pieces of literature that carry a powerful message about the problems, hardships, and predicaments posed by times of struggle.

Note

1 The reference to the Five-Nines (or 5.9-inch caliber shells) dates the poem and places it within the context of World War I specifically.

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