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Catalyst and Inhibitor: The Song of Keats’s Nightingale

Jonathan Krol

John Carroll University
University Heights, Ohio

In his poem “Ode to a Nightingale,” John Keats demonstrates a desire to leave the earthly world behind in hopes of unifying with the elusive bird in a fleeting, fantastical world. The poetical imagination acts as a conduit through which the poet can access the nightingale; yet he must grapple with the reality that, despite his desire, he is not, in fact, able to sustain contact with the “immortal” creature. The same empirical world which allows for the poet to access the nightingale (through its song) also draws him back from the celestial encounter. Though brief, the experience proves profound: the poet becomes more fully
aware of his shortcomings within the terrestrial world and thus scorns his inability to reunite with the songbird in the fantastical world it represents.

For Keats, even before connecting with the nightingale, the real world is painful and gloomy. He dedicates the third stanza of his ode to describing “[t]he weariness, the fever, and the fret” of the mortal realm (line 23); the poet yearns for escape from this dreary existence (even if by way of death). Because Keats does not view the mind as actively transformative (unlike other Romantic poets such as Wordsworth and Coleridge), the imagination alone cannot provide such an escape: “the fancy cannot cheat so well / As she is fam’d to do” (73-4). For Keats, the mind is transformed by the surrounding world. However, this does not at all suggest that the imagination plays an insignificant role for the poet. Helen Vendler, for one, implies that the poet’s imagination does assume creative faculties in the ode and insists that Keats attempts to demonstrate the “compulsive image-making of the entranced imagination” (86). But this “image-making” takes place only when the mind is “entranced” by an external facilitator such as the bird’s song.

Although the poem illustrates the mortal limitations of the brain, which “perplexes and retards” (34), it also provides the mind with a unique ability to connect – when stimulated – with the idealized realm of the nightingale. So while the poet’s sensory perceptions of his surroundings are certainly prevalent from stanza to stanza, it is the mind which must hear and interpret the nightingale’s melody and other such externalities. In fact, to further stress the imagination’s significance, Keats routinely blends sensory experiences. Examples of this poetic device, called synaesthesia, can be found in the fifth stanza: as darkness closes in, the poet can no longer see that which lingers at his feet, “[n]or what soft incense hangs upon the boughs” (my italics) (42). Because the eyes fail to perceive, the imagination assumes this capacity. In this way, Keats asserts “the power of the imagination to see more than the sensory eye can see” (Perkins 107) – though this “power” is proved to be short-lived.

In the fourth stanza, the prominence of the imagination is reinforced as “[p]oesy” – or the poetical imagination – aids in bringing the poet to the nightingale (33). This poetical imagination does not shape or form the perceived world, but rather is informed by the guiding music of the bird’s song. From this view, as discussed previously, the imagination is crucial even though it is not actively projecting itself. Newell F. Ford notes that Keats must appeal to “[p]oesy” because only the imagination can “preserve and prolong the splendid ecstasy” generated by the song of the nightingale (209) – even if only for a brief moment.

While essential to contacting the realm of fantasy, the imagination relies upon stimuli from the empirical world. Indeed, “[t]he continuing vehicle of escape is the song of the nightingale” (Perkins 107) – a song which exists within the poet’s empirical realm. Especially considering Keats’ idea of the imagination as reactive, the mind can see differently (and,
at times, more) but not altogether separately from the senses which capture the physical world. The resulting perception becomes a hybrid of sorts: a combination of the world in which the poet exists and the one in which the poet attempts to enter.

As the poet moves closer to entering into the fantastical world, remnants of the empirical world fade. Darkness begins to surround the poet when terrestrial light can no longer penetrate the mystical world: “But here there is no light, / Save what from heaven is with the breezes blown” (38-9); “[In] Dark[ness] I listen” (51). As the onus shifts from an empirical perception to an imaginative one, even the physical surroundings grow fainter: “I cannot see what flowers are at my feet” (41). While this may imply the almost-literal “flight” of the poet toward the nightingale – and thus away from the flowers on the ground – it can also suggest a literal (though temporary) desertion of the optical world, i.e., the visual surroundings of the poet.

Yet, the poet cannot fully relinquish reality since the “flight” taking place within the poet’s imagination merely excludes the scenic periphery which remains, as the poet himself realizes, at his feet. Mentally (and spiritually), the poet can leave the empirical world, yet, physically, he cannot. Still hearing the very real song of the nightingale, the poet recognizes that the terrestrial world (i.e., the “real” world) is necessary to contact the ideal world. Because the song is his connection to the mystical world while he remains a part of the empirical realm, the poet can never actually attain the world symbolized in the nightingale.

Doing so would mean losing the one connection the poet has to it. David Perkins notes a similar paradox: “the same sympathetic grip that makes the experience vivid to the point one would wish to prolong it also forces the recognition that it must be short-lived” (103-4). Regardless of the cause, by the sixth stanza, “the human and nightingale worlds have been entirely sundered” (Perkins 110).

At the beginning of the next stanza, the poet, now separated from the nightingale’s domain, hears the bird’s “voice” (63), thus reinforcing the existence of the song within the poet’s mortal world. At once, his brief encounter with the world of inspired perception becomes both consolation and tragedy – consoling because the poet loosens the constraints of his own depressing surroundings and tragic because such constraints are impossible to elude completely.

The ending of the poem seems to act as its crux: “Was it a vision, or a waking dream?” (79). Does the poet actually contact the mystical world of the nightingale or merely daydream the encounter? Ford suggests the poet must admit “that the ineffable beauty seized by his imagination was not truth” and “that fancy had cheated for a moment” (133). While left unanswered in the poem, the question is not as crucial to the ode as it may first seem. The issue is not that the poet’s imagination deceived him; instead, the issue becomes the inability of the poet to sustain contact with the nightingale.

Toward the end of the poem, as Perkins suggests, “the nightingale stands revealed for what it is, or rather what the poet, using it as a symbol, has made it. No longer
a part of the natural world, it is an ‘immortal Bird’ living in a visionary realm” (105). It is this very characteristic which prevents the “mortal” poet from maintaining contact. The poet, in fact, curses “fancy” (i.e., the imagination) as a “deceiving elf” because of the mind’s inability to sustain a merger with the nightingale (73, 74). The poet’s resulting hostility is a product of his desperate desire to exist indefinitely within the world of the nightingale and not necessarily a degradation of the imagination itself, which, after all, provided a means whereby the poet had become “happy in thine [i.e., the bird’s] happiness” (6).

Real or not, the songbird’s domain is indeed “experienced” by the poet. Even if only a dream, the fantastical world which the bird symbolizes becomes more desirable than what is “real.” In this way, it matters less what something is (or if it exists at all) than what it is perceived to be. This same sentiment is echoed in another famous ode by Keats: “‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty,’—that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know” (“Urn” 49-50). Emphasis is placed upon subjectivity and personal perspective. Thus, the objective reality of the poet’s union (or non-union) with the nightingale becomes secondary to the poet’s perception of the “experience.” In other words, the poet can touch the world of the nightingale, even if only through his imagination.

When the poet questions the authenticity of his encounter at the end of the poem – “Do I wake or sleep?” (80) – he does so because of the implications, not the inadequacies, of an “imagined” encounter. The poet recognizes that an experience which relies primarily upon the imagination is fleeting and often impossible to revisit. He wishes the realm of the nightingale would exist – and thus remain accessible – within his own world. However, the poet knows that this is not the case. (This realization may also help to explain the poet’s apparent bitterness towards fancy in the final stanza.) Alas, the ideal world which the nightingale represents becomes as remote as the bird’s song by the end of the poem:

Adieu! Adieu! thy plaintive anthem fades
Past the near meadows, over the still stream,
Up the hill-side; and now ‘tis buried deep
In the next valley-glades. (75-8)

The poet, now alone, can merely recollect the world of the nightingale without any ability to exist within it.

Regardless, the poet is changed due to his “encounter” with the bird. He recognizes the immortal quality which the bird has come to symbolize: “Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!” (61). Describing himself as a lowly “sod” (60), the poet understands his position, both literally and figuratively, in relation to the bird. This new-found insight further bolsters the argument that the relevance of the experience lies not within its “truth-value” (i.e., whether or not it actually took place) but within its “perceived-value” (i.e., the poet’s understanding and interpretation of the experience). Although the poet, reminiscent of homesick Ruth (66), longs to exist with the nightingale, his shortcomings of mind and mortality prevent such a reunion.
After the poet has connected, however briefly, with the nightingale, he views his surroundings with even more disdain. Before his union with the bird, the poet was “half in love with easeful death” (52); having returned to his misery after contacting the nightingale, the poet laments, “Now more than ever seems it rich to die” (55). If nothing else, this alteration in the poet suggests the profound impact of the experience. Jack Stillinger’s eloquent explanation of the structure of many Keatsian odes applies:

[T]he speaker in a Romantic lyric begins in the real world, takes off in mental flight to visit the ideal, and then—...being a native of the real world, he discovers that he does not or cannot belong permanently in the ideal—returns home to the real. But he has not simply arrived back where he began, for he has acquired something...from the experience of the flight, and he is never again quite the same person who spoke at the beginning of the poem. (3)

The poem contends that mortals can contact the ideal world while remaining tied to reality, even if only for a moment. Thus, Allen Tate’s view of the ode seems extreme when he says, “The poem is an emblem of one limit of our experience: the impossibility of synthesizing...the antimony of the ideal and the real” (177, my italics). The limit of our experience is not that such synthesizing cannot take place at all but, instead, that it cannot be sustained for any satisfactory length of time. Because of this dilemma, the poet is forced to exist – with a heightened perspective – within a lowly reality. Desire for perpetual union with the nightingale can carry the poet only so close to the realm of fancy while an inspired mind can endure only for so long within that realm.
Works Cited


Aristotle and Howells: Old and New Rules of Storytelling

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In *Criticism and Fiction*, William Dean Howells quotes the assertion by Armando Palacio Valdérz that “[i]t is entirely false that the great romantic, symbolic, or classic poets modified nature; such as they expressed her they felt her; and in this view they are as much realists as ourselves” (34). In echoing this statement, Howells expanded the tradition of Realism outside its usual academic chronological constraint. This paper will demonstrate that he was correct in doing so. Realism may have begun as a negative reaction to the preceding Sentimentalist period, but in that reaction there were old ideas rejuvenated as well as new ideologies created. Howells’ polite political and social pragmatism may be unique, but his favorite method of conveying them,
through fiction, hardly strays from a set of guidelines more than two millennia old: Aristotle’s Poetics. The Poetics was also a somewhat reactionary work; it was, in part, a response to those who placed the epic storytelling form above that of the tragedy. The epic was the domain of the great hero, the outlandish adventure, and the episodic plotline. These same characteristics are the hallmark of Sentimental literature. Howells and Aristotle reacted negatively to the same literary characteristics, and in doing so, they created amazingly similar philosophies of storytelling.

To examine the relationship between Howells and Aristotle, the critic is provided some convenient tools. Not only did Howells write fiction but also editorialized at length about the state of the literary community, his thoughts on Realism and Romanticism, and what makes a piece of writing good in general. The Rise of Silas Lapham and Criticism and Fiction, his most representative novel and his most comprehensive critical work, will both be used in this study. Taking Criticism and Fiction as Howells’ Realism Manifesto, The Rise of Silas Lapham as a demonstration of his principles, and comparing those generally with the Poetics, I will demonstrate the similarity between Howells’ rules of writing (both explicit and implicit) and Aristotle’s ancient rules. Bringing to light the similarities in their philosophies of writing will also lend credence to Edwin Cady’s suggestion that, given a definition of Realism based on literary characteristics rather than time period, “we could justify the nineteenth century realists outside and beyond the conventions of their time and thought—forward into the present and backward as far as we know art” (The Light 22)², and also to the broader idea that the development of writing in general is not a direct evolution from Greek stage plays to narrative poetry to novels, but rather a cyclical progression that is based, not on the changes of tekhnê (medium), but on the changing opinion concerning the universal laws of good storytelling.

A Tragic Novel

Before examining the specific ideas concerning storytelling common to both Aristotle and Howells, the more abstract idea of quality must be analyzed. How do Aristotle’s ideas of the basic form and usefulness of storytelling compare to those of Howells? Aristotle explains that the tragedy, comedy, epic, and often music are pleasurable because of mimêsis (3). Mimêsis, as translated by Malcolm Heath, is imitation of an object or emotion. It has also been translated as ‘representation’ (Heath xiii). A prose description of a flower is an imitation/representation of that flower; a painted portrait is an imitation/representation of the subject. Mimêsis is inherently pleasurable, and therefore the creation and recognition of a piece of artwork is pleasurable and an end unto itself. Howells examines mimêsis in Criticism and Fiction, in an imagined statement from a layman to a scientist:

I see that you are looking at a grasshopper there which you have found in the grass, and I suppose you intend to describe it. Now don’t waste your time and sin against culture that way. I’ve got a grasshopper here, which has been evolved at considerable pains and expense out of the grasshopper in general;
in fact, it’s a type. It is made up of wire and cardboard, very prettily painted in a conventional tint, and it’s perfectly indestructible. It isn’t very much like a real grasshopper, but it’s a great deal nicer, and it’s served to represent the notion of a grasshopper ever since man emerged from barbarism. (13)

Based on this sardonic passage, we can draw our first connection between Aristotle and Howells. Aristotle calls the pleasure of the creation and recognition of mimêsis a trait that is rooted in humanity’s basic instincts (Heath xiv). Howells says that it is “illusion in which the truth of art resides” (Criticism 39). However, Howells is strict in defining what ought to be imitated. This is a key difference between Aristotle and Howells. Aristotle was open to the idea of outlandish objects in stories as long as they made sense in the context of the fictional world of the narrative:

For example, Aristotle did not believe that the theology built into traditional Greek myths was true; but (unlike some earlier philosophers, including Plato) he had no objection to poetic plots based on them. (Heath xiv-xv)

In contrast, Howells’ fictional worlds were always built in such a way that they were directly and literally referential to universal experience. Howells placed great importance on revealing the familiar in his stories, which is a rule that applies to his symbols as well as his plots. This is not to say that none of Howells’ symbols was referential to the narrative, but only that the fictional world revealed in the narrative always imitated the universally experienced real world (Carter 132-6). For example, in The Rise of Silas Lapham, the new house is both a part of Silas’ wealth and good standing as well as a symbol for all of it. Its destruction is simultaneously the symbol of and one of the largest causes of his fall to financial ruin.

Then there is the largest symbol of the novel, the paint. Silas establishes early the link between his family and his paint; in the first chapter, he reveals his Persis brand, named after his wife. The paint is described as “his heart’s blood” (92) and his god (42). Silas also says:

I never saw anything so very sacred about a big rock, along a river or in a pasture that it wouldn’t do to put mineral paint on it in three colors […] I aint going to stand up for every big ugly rock I come across, as if we were all a set of dumn Druids. I say the landscape was made for man, and not man for the landscape. (13-4)

Sämi Ludwig cites that passage in explaining:

For Lapham, there is no spiritual essence (‘dumn Druids’) in nature as such that precedes human culture, but the two are functionally intertwined […]. The paint and its representation are not primarily mimetic, but much rather exteriorized prosthetic devices of human cognition and thus parts of parts of nature. (106)
The idea of painting over the landscape is less of a symbol in the Romantic sense of the word—an object or action that stands for another—than an action that is an obvious manifestation of an otherwise unobservable trait. The trait revealed is Silas’ earthiness and farmer’s sense of naturalistic belonging that excludes him from a society which considers those ideas uncouth and backwards. Because painting over the landscape is a vulgar idea, and Silas is his paint (and his move to upper society is his version of ‘painting over the landscape’), he is rejected by society with the same disgust that they have for his paint-illustrated philosophy.

With the connection between Howells and his paint made explicit (over and over again), it is now part of the universal experience of any reader. A Romantic would have left the connection between the paint and its owner implicit, and Howells would have called any symbolism built on that relationship distasteful. It is only because of that strong, explicit connection that Howells allows himself more latitude in his paint symbolism than with his other symbols. For example, Silas’ comment that he wants to “live to see at least three generations of his descendants gilded with mineral paint” (80) implies, according to Jeff Todd, that “he does not think the wealth from his paint will make him better, only that it will appear so” (21). Also, Todd points out, “[a]s paint must be tested by fire to gain strength, Lapham becomes stronger after his financial ruin, culminated by the house fire” (22).

Thus, symbols are either commonly found objects or objects that are self-referential in the novel; in either case, for anyone reading the novel, they are universally experienced. This mimêsis of the universal is another way of defining Edwin Cady’s term “common vision,” which he uses to define Realism. Common vision is based on the following idea:

There is some, presently obscure, relationship between the experience a reader gets (or can make) from “non-art,” what we call “life,” and the experience he derives from art[...]. It might therefore be possible to propose a positive and general definition of realism as representing the art-variety of a “real” order of non-art experience—an order, that is, which even those who held to deeply opposed temperamental and metaphysical notions of ultimate reality might agree to accept as “real” in some useful and common, even though minimal, sense.

(The Light 18-9)

This common vision of shared experience is Aristotle’s concept of mimêsis limited to generally experienced objects and emotions.

Mimêsis is a universal concept in art, but the specific storytelling rules of the Poetics apply only to tragedy. To continue in comparing the Poetics to Howells’ rules, it must first be demonstrated that Howells was a tragic novelist. Aristotle states in the Poetics that tragedy is the best form of storytelling and lists as his evidence the fact that tragedy is best-loved by those people with the best taste. However, some of Howells’ readers have used different classifications.
Before entering into a more detailed examination, Howells’ oft-quoted statement that “[o]ur novelists, therefore, concern themselves with the more smiling aspects of life” (Criticism 62) must be analyzed. After all, a tragedy certainly cannot be made up entirely of smiling aspects. Cady offers an explanation. He notes that the phrase “the smiling aspects of life” is often taken out of context. Within context, Howells is saying that it is impossible to write a Realist Russian novel in America because the standard of living is so much higher (Cady “A note” 160-1). Howells writes: “Whatever their deserts, very few American novelists have been led out to be shot, or finally exiled to the rigors of a winter at Duluth […]” (Criticism 62). He continues:

Our novelists, therefore, concern themselves with the more smiling aspects of life, which are the more American, and seek the universal in the individual rather than the social interests. It is worth while, even at the risk of being called commonplace, to be true to our well-to-do actualities. (Criticism 62).

Howells was not claiming that there was no tragedy in America or that American novelists must not portray tragedy but only that Americans must not portray tragedy that they were not actually experiencing. It is also worth noting, as James Woodress did, that Howells wrote the “smiling aspects passage” before the Haymarket affair and before discovering the writings of Tolstoy, which were both likely to affect his outlook greatly (242).
The Rise of Silas Lapham portrays realistic American tragedy. There is no wailing in the streets, but there is emotional damage, disgust, and a broken heart. The moral rise of Silas Lapham is accompanied by a concurrent financial downfall that leaves the Lapham family in bankruptcy and forces them back to the farm that they had left years ago. It ends well enough for the characters, but it would be something of a stretch to say that the novel ends happily. Indeed, the events leading up to the subtle but unsettling denouement certainly invoke fear and pity: pity for Silas at the Corey dinner, fear that Irene will find out what she inevitably must, fear for the marriage of Silas and Persis when suspicions concerning Zerrilla begin to surface, and finally pity for Silas once again when he forces himself to make the ethically correct choice when the only possible result is his and his family’s social collapse. Aristotle contends that stories are most tragic when talent is squelched (Heath xxi); in this case, Silas squelches his shrewd business sense and his financial security with his conscience—his Realistic tragic flaw. The actions leading up to the Laphams’ final downfall are brought on by the difficult ethical decisions that Silas has to make. Whether or not he makes the right decisions is a question left unanswered, but the fact that Silas’ conscience prompts him to choose the difficult solution makes his actions admirable. The ending is kathartic by virtue of the stasis of the Laphams’ final situation, and can be described as no more than bittersweet.

It is established that The Rise of Silas Lapham meets the criteria of mimēsis of admirable action and the provocation of fear and pity. The criterion of “language made pleasurable” is too subjective to prove, but it can be argued that the witty repartee of the Coreys combined with the colloquialism of the Laphams provides a rich combination of dialogue. Aristotle expands on his criterion of pleasurable speech with the phrase “each of its species separated in different parts” (10). This is parenthetically clarified as meaning “that some parts are composed in verse alone; others by contrast make use of song” (10). It would be easy to ignore this criterion based on the fact that we are examining a medium that would be completely foreign to Aristotle. However, it is simple and appropriate to draw another parallel here and say that the separation of verse and song is like the separation of dialogue and narration. This is accomplished mainly through the form of the novel—there are quotation marks around direct discourse and not around narration. However, other than the use of this convention, this is one aspect of Aristotle’s philosophy with which Howells does not completely agree. Janet Holmgren McKay notes that the ownership of opinions in the novel is not always clear:

When the Laphams show up at the Corey dinner party without Penelope, the narrator tells us that “Robert Chase, the painter, had not come, and Mrs. James Bellingham was not there, so that the table really balanced better without Penelope; but Mrs. Lapham could not know this, and did not deserve to know it” [167]. The final critical evaluation
McKay also makes note of the fact that Twain admired this style of writing and, in considering the objective narrator, likened the description to “stage directions” (35). With an objective narrator who provides only “stage directions” and a plot that unfolds almost entirely through directly related discourse, *Silas* is as close to the theater as a novel can be. The reader cannot see Silas pacing the room as one could with a more standard third-person narrator; the only communication comes directly (though inadvertently) from Silas: “[…] by and by his wife heard him begin walking up and down, and the rest of the night she lay awake and listened to him walking up and down” (291). The reader does not know of Tom’s love for Penelope until he confesses it. When Irene finds out about the mistake, rather than plunging into a dramatic, introspective fit of anger and sorrow, Howells has her physically respond by dropping her wood shaving in Penelope’s lap (215). The effect of this limited narration is a viewpoint so objective, yet so immediate and tactile, that the reader feels as if he is watching the story unfold on a stage. Howells’ story may be comic at times, but that does not make it a comedy. Using the criteria of the *Poetics*, it is arguable that *The Rise of Silas Lapham* is an Aristotelian tragedy.

**Plot**

It is now time to return to a previous assumption: the length of the story is correct. Aristotle defines the correct magnitude as being small enough that the audience will remain interested but large enough to demonstrate the causality of a change from good to bad fortune (Heath xxv). Aristotle
said that if a work were to grow too large, it would become episodic. He wrote:

> [O]ne should not compose a tragedy out of a body of material which would serve for an epic—by which I mean one that contains a multiplicity of stories (for example, if one were to use the whole plot of *The Iliad*). In epic, because of its length, every part is given the appropriate magnitude; but in plays the result is quite contrary to one’s expectation. (30)

Howells also found this to be true, and proposed that plays were not the only potential victims of poorly crafted magnitude:

> A big book is necessarily a group of episodes more or less loosely connected by a thread of narrative, and there seems no reason why this thread must always be supplied. Each episode may be quite distinct, or it may be one of a connected group; the final effect will be the truth of each episode, not from the size of the group. (*Criticism* 68)

Aristotle contended that the best form for narrative writing is the three-act structure—beginning, middle, and end:

> A beginning is that which itself does not follow necessarily from anything else, but some second thing naturally exists or occurs after it. Conversely, an end is that which does itself naturally follow from something else, either necessarily or in general, but there is nothing else after it. A middle is that which itself comes after something else, and some other thing comes after it. Well-constructed plots should therefore not begin or end at any arbitrary point, but should employ the stated forms. (13-4)

The first chapter of *The Rise of Silas Lapham* depicts, through Silas’ own dialogue, his finding the mineral ore on the farm. The act of giving an interview illustrates the beginning of what one would expect to be his social rise; this is an opening chapter that needs no prelude. The end is undeniably the end; the Laphams are back on the farm, and although they are no longer in debt, the reader is quite sure that they will stay where they are. The fact that the middle comes between the beginning and the end does not need to be argued. The placement of the constituent parts is correct. However, the more complex issue of a plot composed of events that follow each other “either necessarily or in general” needs to be studied. This phrase indicates that events need to be linked by causality; either an event usually follows the previous event in the real world or an event must follow the previous event by its very nature. Aristotle expands on this idea later in the *Poetics*:

> Just as in other imitative arts the imitation is unified if it imitates a single object, so too the plot, as imitation of an action, should imitate a single unified, action, and one
that is also a whole. So the structure of the various sections of the events must be such that the transpositions or removal of any one section dislocates and changes the whole. If the presence or absence of something has no discernible effect, it is not a part of the whole. It is also clear from what has been said that the function of the poet is not to say what has happened, but to say the kind of thing that would happen, i.e. what is possible in accordance with probability or necessity. (15-6)

The probability of one event following another depends on Cady’s concept of literature according to common vision, or the mimêsis of universal experience. Aristotle is saying exactly what Howells demonstrates in his novel: art must emulate real life; specifically, the consequences of everyday actions must be mirrored by the same consequences in art when similar actions are performed. The other causal link, necessity, is a one-hundred-percent probability— one event forces another to happen. Howells was explicit about the needs for these causal links between events:

[All I have to say is that the ‘power’ to dazzle with strange incidents, to entertain with complicated plots and impossible characters, now belongs to some hundreds of writers in Europe; while there are not much above a dozen who know how to interest with the ordinary events of life, and with the portrayal of characters truly human.

If the former is talent, it must be owned that it is much commoner than the latter[…]. If we are to rate novelists according to their fecundity, or the riches of their invention, we must put Alexander Dumas above Cervantes. Cervantes wrote a novel with the simplest plot, without belying much or little the natural and logical course of events. This novel, which was called Don Quixote, is perhaps the greatest work of human wit. (Criticism and Fiction 35-6)

The belief in preserving “the natural and logical course of events” is demonstrated in The Rise of Silas Lapham. Frances Albert Berces notes that the sequence of events in the novel “achieve[s] a realistic cause and effect continuity […]” (201). The wide-ranging causal fabric is further examined by Wai-Chee Dimock, who describes Silas as caught in a causal universe that expands and contracts as social problems such as the love triangle become more complicated and then are alleviated. The comprehensive subplots, such as those involving Roger and Zerrilla, serve to further expand the causal universe (Dimock 70-7). William Wasserstrom observes that Silas recognizes this: “For Silas himself says that his first wrong act of business, the Rogers affair, is best conceived as the first brick in a row of bricks which tumble one after another. ‘It wasn’t in the nature of things that they could be stopped till the last brick went’” (84).
The Rise of Silas Lapham satisfies all of Aristotle’s basic rules, as those rules have been translated to apply to the novel. However, there are rules beyond these basic ones. Necessary and probable events, unity, universality, and correct magnitude form only a simple plot. Aristotle contends that a complex plot is preferable and defines a complex plot as one that incorporates reversal, recognition, or suffering. The Rise of Silas Lapham also meets Aristotle’s criteria of complex plot structure.

Aristotle defines a reversal as “a change to the opposite in the actions being performed as stated—and this, as we have been saying, in accordance with probability or necessity” (18). Heath explains that this is not just a tragic change in fortune, which is also a characteristic of simple tragedies, but “an astonishing inversion of the expected outcome of some action” (xxx). For example, Tom’s love for Penelope and Silas’ relationship with Zerrilla are both inversions of expectation. Reversal goes hand in hand with recognition, which is the following:

[a] change from ignorance to knowledge, disclosing either a close relationship or enmity, on the part of people marked out for good or bad fortune. Recognition is best when it occurs simultaneously with a reversal, like the one in Oedipus. (18-9)

Aristotle lists several different types of recognition: the least artistic is recognition of objects, the inartistic recognition by unmotivated confession, recognition by memory, recognition by inference, recognition by false inference, and the best sort of recognition, recognition “which arises out of the actual course of events, where the emotional impact is achieved through events that are probable” (26-7). An example of the best sort of recognition can be found in and after the Corey dinner party. Berces notes:

Lapham’s decision to attend the dinner is the logical outgrowth of his mounting aspirations. At the dinner he is challenged time and again by circumstances to realize that his demeanor and dinner habits are inadequate. His ability to be honest with himself thereafter develops out of his recognition that while drunk he was indeed himself, stripped of pretense, his untutored social qualities exaggerated by drink, and he was not valued. (201)

This recognition comes the next day, when Silas can once again control himself. This time, reversal follows recognition; Silas, rather than maintaining his embarrassment-fed bombast, grovels to Tom, which leads to another reversal of expectation: Tom’s proposition to Penelope.

The third complex plot trait is suffering, which is “an action that involves destruction or pain” (19). The examples that Aristotle gives are all physical, such as “deaths in full view, extreme agony, woundings and so on” (19), so it must be assumed that the obvious emotional pain that the majority of the characters suffer does not apply. However, because only one of the three complex plot traits is needed to classify the work as complex, by virtue of reversal and recognition
The Rise of Silas Lapham can be called the “best” (20) sort of tragedy.

**Character**

Aristotle defines plot as the most important part of tragedy, and a survey of Howells’ titles shows that he agrees. With the exception of *Mrs. Johnson, Annie Kilburn,* and *Mrs. Farrell,* Howells’ fiction eschews the titling convention of naming a work after the main character in favor of something related to plot. Silas Lapham is important to Howells because of his moral rise and the actions that form the plot that constitute that rise—hence, *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (Barton 163). However, there can be no argument that the vehicle of the actions—the character—is deeply entwined with the plot and the second most important characteristic of storytelling.

Aristotle held that if a character were depicted with an inappropriate morality, the audience would be either bored or disgusted. He describes the ideal protagonist as “the sort of person who is not outstanding in moral excellence or justice; on the other hand, the change to bad fortune which he undergoes is not due to any moral defect or depravity, but to an error of some kind” (21). This error, Heath explains, is called *hamartia* in the original text. “It includes errors made in ignorance or through misjudgment; but it will also include moral errors of a kind which do not imply wickedness” (xxxiii). Silas meets all the criteria: he is morally decent, but with an immoral decision in his past (buying out Rogers) that, by Silas’ own admission, was the first “brick” in a row of thereafter necessary events.

But had Silas really treated Rogers unfairly? A modern reader will ask that question, and Patrick Dooley claims that a nineteenth century reader would have almost certainly asked it as well. Dooley states that ‘business ethics’ was something of a contradictory term in the nineteenth century, and *caveat emptor* was the motto of those involved in speculative enterprise (“Nineteenth Century” 80). So, in making things “right” with Rogers, is Silas doing what is morally required or are his actions supererogatory?

This question is the key to an important concept of Aristotelian character creation. Aristotle presents the reader of the *Poetics* with a conundrum: “Since tragedy is an imitation of people better than we are, one should imitate good portrait-painters. In rendering the individual form, they paint people as they are, but make them better-looking” (25). The character cannot be too good; his fall to ruin would disgust the audience, and yet the audience must look up to him. He must be both aligned with and above regular morality. Howells accomplishes this through two different means: by having Silas travel through different stages of morality and by making the moral questions difficult enough that most readers, even from an objective viewpoint, will second-guess themselves about the correct decision. There is more than the question as to whether or not Silas’ original sin against Rogers was actually wrong; indeed, that single question spurs a multitude of others, involving Silas’ new obligation to Rogers and his duty to his family versus his duty to the business world, and by extension, society at large.
It is important to note Dooley’s observation that further calls into question Silas’ moral standing. A bit of arithmetic shows that, even if he were to accept the deal offered by Rogers and the English party, it would still not be enough money to settle his debts. It may have been that the decision not to accept was a purely a moral one. Or, if there was temptation to be weathered, it is likely that the fact that the immoral decision would not save Silas gave him an easy way out (“Ethical Exegesis” 382-5). The reader is then left with a qualified admiration for Silas— no doubt the decision was hard, and he did the right thing, but how hard was it for him? Yet, Dooley observes again, Rogers is not the last temptation that Silas has to suffer. He has the chance to make a deal with the West Virginians, but he chases them away by disclosing his financial situation (“Ethical Exegesis” 385-6). Depending on which moralist one asked, this action might have been either necessary or supererogatory.

There is further evidence to dispel the theory that Silas’ actions were externally controlled. He has control of Rogers every single time they meet, no matter how much pressure Silas is under and no matter what Rogers says (as evidenced by his contradicting Rogers’ wishes at every step). He could easily bail himself out with help from the West Virginians by exercising the morality of the typical nineteenth-century businessman. However, he cannot. Silas reflects Howells’ vision of the American hero. Howells wrote of America as a country “which likes a good conscience so much that it prefers unconsciousness to a bad one,” and that belief is reflected in his writing (qtd. in Jones 99). Because “a variety of qualifiers, especially ethical theories, renders the same action moral (and required) or supererogatory (and optional)” (Dooley “Ethical Exegesis” 387), Howells, in creating these complicated ethical questions, found a way to create a character that was, by the end of the novel, both aligned with and above the moral standard.

The question of “goodness” is only one of Aristotle’s four aspects of a well-invented character; the other three are appropriateness, likeness, and consistency. The quality of goodness having been previously examined, the last three now demand attention. The second trait is “appropriateness.” It was Aristotle’s belief that a character should not behave in a way that was out of keeping for the general social group to which he or she belongs. Heath explains that Aristotle applied this rule only to persons of low status (xliv-xlv). During Aristotle’s time, this would have meant that a woman or a servant should not be depicted as clever or courageous. In the case of *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, the Laphams are kept in their place; although they have money, they do not belong in the wealthy caste of society. In social terms, it is known that they belong on a farm. The Laphams combine Aristotle’s rules successfully in a way that he probably never imagined: they are a family of low status and, appropriately, they end up where they belong; but they are also the focus and the heroes of the story.

With the aspect of “likeness,” we must examine once again the dual nature of character that Aristotle demands. All Aristotle says about likeness is that “this is not the same as making character good and appropriate, as had already been
He has not distinguished between genuine and false self-reliant pride. (201)
This is an easy mistake, as “every situation has encouraged him to believe that by climbing the social ladder he is just being his own man” (Berces 201), so although the flaw is obvious, it is also understandable and easily forgivable.

The fourth and last necessary character trait is “consistency.” Aristotle says that “even if the subject of the imitation is inconsistent, and that is the kind of character that is presupposed, it should nevertheless be consistently inconsistent” (24). Heath observes:

This obviously follows from the requirement of necessary or probable connection. If someone in a tragedy acts inconsistently and unpredictably, then one cannot say that what they do follows necessarily or probably on what has gone before. (xlv)

Although Silas’ moral condition improves by the end of the novel, the character was consistent in the way that he responded to plot events. His proud nature propelled him to build a new house, to attend the Corey dinner party, and to react the way he did to the realization that he did not belong where he wanted to be. He may be a changed man by the end of the novel, but not without necessity. Throughout his rise and fall, he is always Silas Lapham.

The Poetics was written, in part, as a rebuttal against those who said that the epic was the greatest of storytelling forms (Heath liv-lxi). More than two millennia later, Howells began a career as an author and editor by fighting the trends
of Sentimentalism, which share the epic traits of outlandish heroes, otherworldly romances, and episodic plots containing events that are neither necessary nor probable (Aristotle 17). As Aristotle fought the authors of epics, so Howells fought the Sentimentalists by applying Aristotle’s tenets to the novel. ¹ Many of Aristotle’s rules sound like the Realist rules which Howells used in his fiction and championed in his editorials: depicting characters whose actions are appropriate to their social position, creating a complicated and almost dualistic morality that is both at and above the level of the audience, maintaining logical consequence in plot events, and maintaining correct magnitude to avoid episodic structure. Howells wrote that “fiction is now a finer art than it has ever been hitherto, and more nearly meets the requirements of the infallible standard. I have hopes of real usefulness in it, because it is at last building on the only sure foundation” (Howells Criticism 86). Howells may have changed the face of literature, but his foundation was not wholly new; his criticism and his fiction invoke classical standards. The new rules of writing that Howells championed are, in fact, some of the oldest.

Notes

1 Though many would regard Sentimentalism as an aspect of Romanticism, Howells is more forgiving of the Romantic than he is of the Sentimental. This excerpt from his review “A She Hamlet” hints at the distinction he draws: “The Hamlet of Fechter, which rose ghostlike out of the gulf of the past, and cloudily possessed the stage where the Hamlet of Mme. Bernhardt was figuring, was called a romantic Hamlet thirty years ago; and so it was in being a break from the classic Hamlets of the Anglo-American theatre. It was romantic as Shakespeare himself was romantic, in an elder sense of the word, and not romanticistic as Dumas was romanticistic. It was, therefore, the most realistic Hamlet ever yet seen, because the most naturally poetic” (Literature 134).

2 Specifically, the definition Cady refers to is his own, based on the idea of “common vision.”

3 Heath explains katharsis as the process that “gets rid of an emotional excess and thus leaves the emotion in a more balanced state, mitigating the tendency to feel it inappropriately.” It is pleasurable because “[f]rom an Aristotelian point of view any process that restores one to a natural or healthy state is pleasurable” (Heath xxxix-xl).

4 It should be noted that the complex plot is not the same as the complicated plot that Howells derides in Criticism and Fiction. The plots he describes as
complicated “dazzle with strangle incidents” (35), which implies that they have no logical causality.

For another look at how *The Rise of Silas Lapham* was a criticism of the Sentimental mindset, read Brenda Murphy’s essay “Howells and the Popular Story Paradigm: Reading Silas Lapham’s Proairetic Code” in *American Literary Realism* 21.2.

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**Works Cited**


Dooley, Patrick K. “Ethical Exegesis in Howells’s *The Rise


Donald Kartiganer writes that *As I Lay Dying* (1930) “moves closer to [...] that quality of a fiction coming apart in the spaces between well-made lines” (24) as if the true meaning of Faulkner’s work lies not in what is written but what is omitted. This concept of validation by means of omission or negation is prevalent throughout the novel. In fact, the language of the novel suggests this very concept. Faulkner explores the Bundren family’s inability to communicate their grief over the loss of Addie Bundren, the matriarch, to one another and to themselves in *As I Lay Dying* by illuminating the inadequacies of language. In allowing the language of his novel to shift towards a priori representations, Faulkner ultimately shows that the
individual is inherently alone and the barriers that words instill will prevent his characters from making significant relationships.

If Faulkner explores the inadequacy of language among his characters to demonstrate his own frustration with meaning and intended message, then Chris Ware explores the disparity between words and action in *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* (2000). The basic structure of the graphic novel lends itself to the idea that words alone are inadequate, requiring drawings to help form a more complete picture. In fact, there are moments when Ware uses only pictures to describe memories, emotions, or a train of thought in ways which are not permitted to William Faulkner based on his medium. However, there are instances where both Ware and Faulkner make it apparent that a life of action is far better than a life based on words given the potential for deception that is inherent in language. Chris Ware’s semi-autobiographical character, Jimmy Corrigan, confirms this deception in his inability to act decisively, suggesting that inertia simply results from language’s inadequacy to describe an intended meaning.

Because the characters’ need to find a balance between reality and the lexicon of language that they use to represent their reality remains largely unsolved in *As I Lay Dying* and *Jimmy Corrigan*, William Faulkner and Chris Ware find ways of illuminating their characters’ fractured identities through an intricate interpretation of the Oedipus complex. Both texts deal with the consequences of failing fathers who are absent and neglectful to their children.

Combined with the insufficiency of language to bridge the gap between human relationships, the male characters in *As I Lay Dying* and *Jimmy Corrigan* undergo a skewed Oedipal recognition. Although Faulkner never explicitly depicts any of his male characters as having an Oedipus complex, it is evident that Addie Bundren’s sons, Jewel and Darl, express the fundamental need to destroy their mother’s sexuality. Ware, on the other hand, is more graphic. In many of Jimmy Reed’s fantasies, the young boy is shown killing his father and then immediately transitioning to a sexual encounter with a woman who closely resembles his mother. By exhibiting the shortcomings of parental influence, Faulkner and Ware raise important questions about the irreversibility of identity as a result of parental absence and presence.

In order to understand the rejection of Addie Bundren as a sexual character, it is important to understand her sexuality and the effects it has on her family. Because of Addie’s abstract conception of language, she refuses to believe in the “love” that Anse says he has for her. Addie believes that words are empty “vessels” (Faulkner 173); they are a hollow representation of the act they symbolize linguistically. Without the act of love to fill in the vessel, Addie cannot accept Anse’s word. Thus, Anse is a man of words, and like his words, his love is a shapeless reference to nothingness. In fact, it is not so much the difference in language that separates Addie from her husband as much as it is Anse’s inability to act. He refuses to define the word “love” with the ineffable passion of love itself. She feels fooled by Anse’s deception, and to counteract this betrayal,
she commits adultery with a minister named Whitfield. Addie’s love affair with Whitfield is far more profound than anything shared with Anse, and she admits that the part of her body which was physically violated by the consummation of her marriage “is in the shape of a ____” (Faulkner 165).

Faulkner represents the female form as a blank slate in the same manner that he attributes emptiness to words: Addie’s body is simply a shape to fill a lacking and that which fills the lack will fulfill the woman. If Addie’s words are like jars which contain the essence of what the word describes (Faulkner 165), then her vagina is similarly an empty receptacle until it is full. However, Anse is an empty representation, and Addie cannot find fulfillment in him. In fact, she is more autonomous by her very commitment to action than Faulkner’s description of her sexuality permits. She may be a blank receptacle, but she fills that emotional and physical emptiness by replacing the vague lexicon of words with concise and definitive action. Addie Bundren describes her reasons for committing adultery when she explains:

I gave Anse the children. I did not ask for them [...]. That was my duty to him, to not ask that, and that duty I fulfilled. I would be I; I would let him be the shape and echo of his word. That was more than he asked because he could not have asked for that and been Anse, using himself so with a word [...] I would lie by him in the dark [...] hearing the dark voicelessness in which the words are the deeds, and the other words that are not deeds, that are just the gaps in peoples’ lacks, coming down like the cries of geese. (166)

Addie describes her sexuality in relation to Anse as perfunctory. Sex serves one purpose, one duty, which belongs exclusively to her husband. Though he physically fills in her empty space, the act itself cannot violate the isolation she feels in the same way that words serve to separate her from what she truly feels. Yet, when she is full of passion and acts out of love by sleeping with Reverend Whitfield, Addie finds fulfillment. Therefore, action is the only way by which Addie can be fulfilled sexually. Addie must act against Anse and with Whitfield, using her body not as a representational abstraction but as an engaging part of reality. In choosing a minister to manifest the sin of adultery, Addie remains true to her personal philosophy and physically acts out her love of Whitfield and hatred for Anse simultaneously.

Though Addie is committed to a life of action, the physical fulfillment she finds in Reverend Whitfield is an active contradiction. Addie believes that she has found a connection in Whitfield that eludes words because of his role in the community as a minister and the nature of their sin. Addie confesses her true feelings, she admits:

I would think of sin as I would think of the clothes we both wore in the world’s face, of the circumspection necessary because he was he and I was I; the sin more utter and terrible since he was the instrument ordained
by God who created the sin, to sanctify that sin He had created [...]. I would think of the sin as garments which we would remove in order to shape and coerce the terrible blood to the forlorn echo of the dead word high in the air. (Faulkner 174-75)

Somehow Addie’s affair is exactly how she would have it; the sin she commits is no longer an abstract word defined by social values but a mark of profound love rooted in the essence of sin. As T. H. Adamowski writes, “the dialectic of aloneness and violation [in Addie’s conception of words and action] is repeated, but at a higher and theological level” because Reverend Whitfield is not just a man but also “the necessary link between Addie and the deity” (211). Whitfield replaces Addie’s “God,” who in turn blesses her with a child before ending the affair. In contrast to Anse who reflects only the emptiness of words, Whitfield fills the spiritual and physical void in Addie. Thus, it is out of this profound love for Whitfield and intentional act of defiance that Jewel is born, his name alone resounding with the significance he will have in her life.

Unfortunately, Jewel does not share the same love for his mother that she shares for him, and herein lies the complication. Because he was born out of what Addie would consider a true form of love, she dotes on him, catering to him above all of her other children. According to Adamowski, the Bundren children are divided into a kind of hierarchy; he explains:

Jewel will remain close to her all her life and will save her from ‘fire and flood.’ Her bond with Cash is also maintained—and confirmed every time he holds up for her inspection the boards of the coffin he builds under her eyes. Two children—Dewey Dell and Vardaman—are merely the contingent results of a necessary act of atonement, and even here Anse seems to play no part in their conceptions. One child, Darl, is a reflection of fatherly ‘chapping’ and is thus denied all intimacy with Addie. He seems to have happened to her. These children appear not to have two parents. (212)

Addie’s conception of love lies heavily on her belief in action. Because Jewel violated the isolation between Anse’s word “love” and Addie’s desire for an active love, and Cash violated the isolation of womanhood before motherhood, Addie loves these children as her own. The others she does not consider a part of her own family because they have a more direct connection to Anse, and therefore meaningless words, than they do to her. Darl came to be as a result of Anse’s false “love” while Dewey Dell and Vardaman are an act of reconciliation for her adultery. Addie’s love for Jewel over the other children is apparent to the whole family, so it should follow that Jewel loves his mother more than any of his siblings. Yet, Jewel rejects Addie’s love once he discovers his origins, while his siblings vie for her attention. Thus, Addie’s sexual transgressions ultimately manifest themselves
in her children’s disjointed sense of self, precluding any escape from her influence after her death.

Darl and Jewel especially represent the dichotomy that exists in the Bundren children as they find themselves separated from one another based on two groups: those who are loved by Addie Bundren and those who are not. While Darl yearns to be looked upon favorably by his mother, Jewel scorns the attention he receives from Addie, and oddly enough, the event which acts as a catalyst for their opposing feelings is a shared one, involving several layers of deception. It was the summer of Jewel’s fifteenth birthday, the summer that “he took a spell of sleeping” (Faulkner 121) as Darl calls it. Jewel had been falling asleep in the midst of his chores because he was secretly spending his nights awake, clearing forty acres for Mr. Quick to raise money to purchase a horse. The Bundren family suspected Jewel of having an affair with a married woman after spotting him coming home with the lantern at dawn, but they kept their suspicions from Addie who, in the meantime, recruited Dewey Dell and Vardaman to do the jobs around the house that Jewel left incomplete (Faulkner 121-129). It is during this course of events that Darl discovers Addie’s secret, he declares:

And that may have been when I first found it out, that Addie Bundren should be hiding anything she did, who had tried to teach us that deceit was such that, in a world where it was, nothing else could be very bad or very important, not even poverty. And at times when I went in to go to bed she would be sitting in the dark by Jewel where he was asleep. And I knew that she was hating herself for that deceit and hating Jewel because she had to love him so that she had to act the deceit. (Faulkner 123)

The summer of Jewel’s sleeping spell proves to be one of the most traumatic for Addie, Jewel, and Darl. Evident in the nights spent watching Jewel as he sleeps, Addie’s affectionate behavior attracts Darl’s attention, as he is unaccustomed to such luxuries from his mother. Hence, it is in peeling back the layers of deception that Darl understands the awful truth: Jewel is not his brother and Addie will never love him like she loves Jewel. He knows that she “hates the deceit” of keeping Jewel’s father’s identity away from her son and hates pretending that Anse is his father even more because it violates her strict dedication to action. Thus, Addie stays awake at night loving Jewel to compensate for her pretense. Darl understands Addie’s battle to reconcile action with words and silently acknowledges the deception running through the Bundren family, an act that places him outside of his family. Kenneth E. Richardson suggests that “Darl does not fit into her [Addie’s] life at all” and he is “forced to live in a family where his existence does not count” (75) because Addie’s notion of family lies outside of Anse and consequently outside of Anse’s progeny. Darl explains that the potential for Addie to accept him as her own son depends upon a tacit understanding of Addie’s betrayal and “so long as the deceit ran along quiet and monotonous, all of us [the Bundren’s] let ourselves be deceived” (Faulkner
127). Although Darl might have suspected his brother to be a stranger in his own family, his mother’s quiet secret prevents him from considering himself as an outsider. Compounded by Addie’s death and the lost chance to reconcile with his mother, Darl finds it difficult to define himself in any terms at all. Darl admits, “I don’t know that I am. I don’t know if I am or not. Jewel knows he is, because he does not know that he does not know whether he is or not” (Faulkner 80). Unloved by his mother, Darl does not find validation in his place among the Bundren family. Unlike Jewel who thinks he knows where he originates, Darl perceives himself to be an isolated branch fallen from his family tree. Darl’s identity crisis “validates the woman’s importance in the development of the child’s identity,” but at the same time it also “relies on the same old negative stereotypes of women as sexually inconstant and morally dangerous” (Blaine 101). Addie’s sexuality proves to be a catalyst of deception around which the Bundren family revolves and simultaneously reinforces Faulkner’s women as neither fit mothers nor autonomous sexual beings.

Furthermore, the cycle of deception extends beyond Darl, Jewel and Addie and circulates in the family until Jewel rides up to the house atop his horse after completing the work for Mr. Quick. While Addie apparently deceives Jewel into thinking he is a Bundren, his attention to Mr. Quick’s farm and subsequent purchase of the horse signifies a conscious separation from the Bundren family. Ironically, it is Addie’s dishonest sexual behavior that connects the Bundren family in a web of lies, but it is Jewel’s perceived sexuality that disrupts the delicate web. Once Addie sees Jewel riding on his horse, a mutual recognition occurs.

Jewel calls Addie’s attention to the fact that her sin has been made public while Addie recognizes the increased isolation that Jewel feels as a result of her meaningful “actions.” Therefore, Jewel’s relationship with Addie is parallel to Darl’s relationship with their mother, and as he realizes that he is not a part of the Bundren family, Jewel feels violated by Addie’s deception, mirroring Addie’s feelings of deception about Anse’s “love.” In essence, his heredity separates him from the ones to whom he should feel the closest, and Jewel hates his mother for isolating him from his family. Diana York Blaine sees Jewel’s recognition of his mother’s sexuality as the intricate way Faulkner understands the Oedipus complex in the Bundren family; she explains:

Inscribing Addie as pre-Oedipal force, Faulkner shows her suspicious of language, interested in the corporeal over the intellectual, and consumed with and by the process of mothering [...]. But in her function as a fallen epic hero, she also inhabits the position of the symbolic paternal signifier and this complicates her role as the representative of materiality-maternity-morality. (93)

Having realized Addie’s sexuality extends beyond Anse’s bed, Jewel sees Addie as a dominant maternal and paternal force in his life. However, her sexual expression, that is to say, the affair that she has with Reverend Whitfield, embodies the pretext under which Jewel’s conception of family
develops a more conflicting sense of sexuality in adolescent boys than a family rooted in matriarchy? Perhaps the difference results not from the biologically based notion of gender but the conception of the gender roles to which individuals subscribe and to which we are bound.

Ware’s and Faulkner’s sexual interpretation of their characters relies primarily on the effects of an absent, neglectful father and an overbearing, overwhelming maternal presence on male children. In both circumstances the neglectful father has too little an influence on the sexual development of the male figure whereas the mother has too demanding an influence, as is the case with Jimmy Corrigan and Darl Bundren. To some extent, the maternal influence overcompensates for the absent father, allowing the child to develop some semblance of familial continuity, which would explain Jimmy and Darl’s stunted interaction with their environment.

Ware complicates this conjecture by his introduction of Jimmy Reed Corrigan because, in his case, the reverse is true. Jimmy Reed’s absent mother and indifferent father results in greater gender/Oedipal confusion. During his Oedipal fantasies, Jimmy Reed aggressively desires to kill his father yet remains awkwardly inept when it comes to his sexual desire for women. Having never seen his mother in life, his focus is often on women’s bodies. In one scene, Ware illustrates Jimmy’s fantasy as a moment of subcon-scious Oedipal recognition and blossoming sexuality. After arguing with his father, Jimmy imagines killing him and running away to rescue a woman in distress along the way.

has formed; consequently, Jewel displaces his love for his mother onto his horse because he knows it hurts her deeply. Thus, Addie’s love becomes a simple word to Jewel, not the intended meaning that she tries to demonstrate by loving him more than any of her other children. Therefore, Jewel’s decisive action to purchase a horse ironically mimics Addie’s actions of taking a lover, paralleling his mother’s displacement of love outside of the family.

Although Faulkner raises interesting questions about Addie’s role as mother/woman and father/man in her family, there is not enough evidence to suggest that the women in his work are anything other than a product of their environmental and prescribed social roles. While Faulkner focuses on Addie’s sexuality as a warped, pre-Oedipal catalyst for her children, Ware’s graphic novel, which carefully distinguishes gender roles, explores the relationship between a child’s identity and his mother’s sexuality through the lens of paternal absence. Ware exhibits the male recognition of his mother’s sexuality via the Corrigan lineage, specifically in the connection between Jimmy Reed Corrigan (b. 1883) and his grandson Jimmy Corrigan (b. 1941). Yet, what exactly does this generation gap between a grandfather and his grandson imply? In many ways Ware suggests that Oedipal recognition is universal in the lives of young men. Nevertheless, Jimmy Reed Corrigan appears to be more affected by his mother’s sexuality than most. He grows up under the shadow of his mother’s death while his modern-day doppelganger, Jimmy Corrigan, grows up in the shadow of his father’s absence. So why is it that a primarily paternal family
As he takes her to safety, he nervously unbuttons her blouse as beads of sweat form on his brow. This image hangs in the air when Jimmy reawakens to reality as the maid interrupts him masturbating.

Although Chris Ware’s work is more explicit in his exhibition of the natural recognition of maternal sexuality in adolescent males than Faulkner’s novel, neither author provides an alternative means of solidifying a fragmented (sexual) identity in a broken family that adequately answers the questions raised by the conception of gender in society. Jimmy Corrigan, Jimmy Reed Corrigan, Jewel Bundren, and Darl Bundren remain detached from both parents at the conclusion of each novel. Jimmy Corrigan’s father dies before they can establish any kind of bond while his mother finds a new man with whom she eats Thanksgiving dinner. Jimmy Reed Corrigan’s mother dies during childbirth and his father, overwhelmed by a responsibility he does not want, abandons his son at the World’s Fair. As for the Bundren brothers, Anse replaces Addie with a “duck-shaped woman” (Faulkner 260)—the new Mrs. Bundren—only a few days after Addie’s body is laid in the ground. The sense of isolation is overwhelming in both novels, indicating that those who are abandoned in one sense or another are influenced more by the absence of maternal and paternal structures than by their presence.

Thus, Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth opens with a scene in which young Jimmy Corrigan is exposed to his mother’s sexuality, placing him in an awkward position of son and suitor. Ms. Corrigan takes her son to a car show, insisting that he meet her at three o’clock so that they can leave together. When he does not show up, she finds him waiting in line to receive Superman’s autograph. Superman, the guest speaker at the car show, sees Jimmy’s mother, and he asks the two of them to dinner while staring at her breasts, a subtle indication of what is to come later that night. They sleep together, and Jimmy watches Superman leave his mother’s bedroom early in the morning. He gives Jimmy his mask, and asks the young boy to tell his mother that he had “a real good time” (Ware). Moments later, his mother emerges from her bedroom, buttoning up her shirt only to see Jimmy sitting at the kitchen table with her lover’s mask over his eyes. Excitedly, Jimmy shouts, “Mom! He said to tell you he had a real good time!” (Ware).

It is important to note that during this opening sequence, the reader never sees Jimmy’s mother’s face, focusing the attention to her body rather than her identity outside of her gender. Also, the symbolism inherent in the superhero mask suggests that Jimmy’s feelings are restrained behind an outside veneer. Because he is wearing the mask of his mother’s lover, the feelings that Jimmy represses are those that vie for his mother’s sexual attention. Having been the only significant male figure in her life, Jimmy must find ways of maintaining his status as the alpha male in his household. By putting on the superhero mask, Jimmy maintains the dominant male role by associating himself with the sexual male force he has not yet developed. In fact, Brad Prager agrees:

Ware uses superhero tropes to depict a gap between the ideal and the real—between
he looks in on his parents. Jimmy then imagines smashing a glass beer mug in his father’s face after which he continues to stab him to death with a stray shard of glass. The scene ends with Jimmy poised over his wailing father as if he were going to slit his throat, clearly exhibiting the requirements for an explicit Oedipal recognition.

Because the reader assumes Jimmy’s point of view, Ms. Corrigan is invariably facing away from the reader as well. In fact, the reader never obtains a clear view of Ms. Corrigan’s face throughout the entire work. Ware uses the motif of Ms. Corrigan’s veiled face to display the pivotal Oedipal recognition that occurs in Jimmy. Brad Prager explains the possible meaning of concealing Ms. Corrigan:

“The ban on representing her [Ms. Corrigan] stems from an acknowledgement of Jimmy’s repression of his incestuous desires. Any depiction of her is taken to be profane, because it calls attention to the fact that she is indeed an object of desire. The wisps of hair [blocking her face] resemble a veil, which if it were pulled away, would reveal a face upon which Jimmy cannot gaze directly. In encountering her face he would be forced to confront his Oedipal wishes.” (Prager 200)

Chris Ware uses Ms. Corrigan’s veiled face as a mechanism through which he critiques the image of the superhero in comics. Just as Ms. Corrigan’s hair acts as a barrier between Jimmy’s sexual conception of his mother and his maternal conception, the “super” man’s mask acts as a barrier between
the reality of Jimmy’s absent father and the fantasy of what his father could be. Ware draws (both literally and figuratively) the parallel between the superhero and Jimmy Corrigan’s intrusive visions of his mother as a sexual entity, indicating that both mechanisms, the superhero and the visions, are a form of escapism. But, as Prager points out, *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* “alludes to the fact that [...] even the most private paths of escape are barred” (202) as Jimmy continually wrestles with the intrusion of his Oedipal recognition in his thoughts.

Daydreams in which a sexual recognition of maternity manifested under the presence of an absent parent occur in Jimmy Reed Corrigan’s childhood as well. Though Jimmy Reed was raised without a mother, he still wrestles with his budding sexuality and the need to supplant his unwelcoming father. After listening to his father tell stories about the carnage of the Civil War, Jimmy Reed goes back to his room and imagines that he is a soldier in the war. Turning his fist into a gun, Jimmy Reed shoots the enemy who is depicted as his father, at which point he fantasizes about running away on his horse to build a new life and a home for himself. While out on horseback, Jimmy Reed rescues an abandoned girl, who serves only as an extension of his sexual drive. The fantasy ends as his maid enters the room, interrupting Jimmy Reed as he is masturbating. The fact that Jimmy Reed’s daydream emerges from a desire to kill his father and evolves into one which focuses on sexual exploration creates a kind of Oedipal message skewed by his detached involvement with his parents. His desire to be loved by his parents is the only kind of affection he knows; thus, his sexual drive confuses the physical need with a deeper emotional imbalance in which the love he yearns for from his parents is superimposed onto his physical desires.

The boy dreams of becoming a man first by supplanting his father and then by finding a woman who will be able to carry his seed, which is made possible by his horse, Minnie. Jimmy’s fondness for Minnie embodies the idealized family unit about which he daydreams; thus, the horse becomes an instrument of his fantasy and replaces the idea of mother and father. Just as Jewel’s horse serves to make Addie’s death more manageable, Minnie also serves to displace Jimmy’s perceived inadequacies into a fantasy in which those inadequacies dissolve. The horse allows him to deal with the missing matriarch on his own terms, having never learned behaviors like compassion or gentleness (two characteristics which are generally associated with the maternal) from his callous father. Women have been merely a function of William Corrigan’s sexual drive, and having witnessed his father’s sexual indiscretions, it is no surprise that Jimmy’s fantasy is mixed with a fierce sexual drive and a slight, hesitating moment of guilt. He pauses before he undresses the girl in his fantasy, demonstrating the reluctance embedded in his Oedipal recognition.

Interestingly enough, Jimmy Reed Corrigan looks strikingly similar to the grown Jimmy Corrigan of the present time though one is clearly a small child and the other a grown man. One explanation for this depiction of Jimmy Corrigan as both a man and a child is evident in the author’s
use of the Corrigan lineage to illustrate the constant presence of sexual anxiety in the protagonists’ lives. The anxiety that Jimmy Corrigan and his grandfather feel stems from their inability to cope with the looming and overwhelming absence of parents. Prager asserts that Chris Ware “depicts how the experiences of the boy and the man are of one piece” (203) and that the “weight of childhood on Jimmy’s psychic life renders the boy and the man virtually identical” (204). Ware manages to bridge the gap between generations of Corrigans by demonstrating the social limitations one acquires under the care of only one parent. Both Jimmys feel profound love for their absent parents and simultaneously hate them for their absence. Jimmy Reed Corrigan admits that he knows nothing about his mother and that he has no idea what he is missing (Ware). Jimmy Reed discusses his mother:

Whatever maternal notion I harbored was mostly a murky mishmash of multiple maids and typical sentimental mush. My imagination had even fabricated the most particular details of her death, although I had no idea what “childbirth” really entailed other than doctors and pans of water. But what cruel irony for a child to suffer—that my beginning was the cause of her end! I suppose I could’ve developed some sympathy for my father. After all, his solitude was clearly my fault. (Ware)

Jimmy Reed experiences the same feelings towards his mother as Darl Bundren expresses for Addie. Both want to be in her favor but have been denied her love. As a result, Darl and Jimmy Reed see themselves in the world in relation to their mothers. Because they cannot deal with the immense weight her absence brings, they are incapable of forming a secure identity rooted in autonomy. Hence, each suffers a cruel irony: the love that they have for an idealized maternal force will never be reciprocated, not even in the substitution (i.e. the new Mrs. Bundren or Jimmy Reed’s father, William Corrigan).

In fact, some critics view William Faulkner as a modernist writer who focuses on “epistemological loss in which the experience of loss affects the construction of the self and the self’s relation to others” (Raschke 100). If loss is the core sentiment behind this interpretation of modernist literature, we must ask ourselves the following question: what experience of loss affected the writer’s sense of authorship during the modernist movement? Debrah Raschke cites the “cultural, political, and economic shifts in the late nineteenth century [which] threatened the very core on which many constituted their identities and their heritage” (102-3) as one explanation for modernist writers’ existential crisis. Armed with the knowledge that the intended meaning in their works is limited to a lexicon of language which serves only as a barrier between the author and the reader, writers like William Faulkner responded to their changing environment and nebulous conception of self by creating works which reflected the uncertainty of a society.
on the brink of change. The Bundren family’s journey proves to be emblematic of the move towards fragmented individualism foreshadowed in Faulkner’s era. Faulkner’s generation could not visualize the future of America without seeing it in irrevocable fragments, leaving future generations of writers with the responsibility of finding a solution to the disintegration of family. And, if Faulkner’s work is a prediction of what was to come for modern industrialist American society, Ware’s graphic novel can be seen as a post-modern response to Faulkner’s modernist text. However, the problems that Faulkner depicts in the Bundren family recur in the Corrigan lineage, indicating that the isolation of the individual persists. In fact, Ware is “committed to depicting the unhappy armor of everyday life and telling the impossible story of individual origins in the age of mechanical reproduction” (Prager 211).

Representing the dissolution of the family inherent in modern times, the Bundrens are constantly bound by their socio-economic status. As a rural Southern family during the Great Depression, the members of the Bundren family lack the potential for social mobility because they are chained by their financial limitations. The family unit will not adapt to the changing economy in America as seen by their fruitless journey to bury Addie. Instead, the family self-destructs. To Donald Kartiganer, the journey of the Bundren family is “about a break in expression, some failure of the imagination to reconcile form and vision, to create a shape that is not a stasis, change that is not chaos” (33). Each member’s dissatisfaction and frustration with Addie’s death exacerbates his or her feelings of being completely isolated from the family unit and the environment, leading each to focus on immediate needs that can be satisfied. Thus, Anse takes a new wife, Jewel finds his horse, Dewey Dell seeks an abortion, and Vardaman displaces his grief on a fish. Each object that the family members associate with Addie represents a distancing away from the communal and an emphasis on the self. In turning inwards, the family fragments, thus abandoning the possibility of relying on each other to deal with grief and echoing the sense of epistemological loss defined in Raschke’s conception of modernism. Darl articulates his descent into individualism when he asks:

How do our lives ravel out into the no-wind, no-sound, the weary gestures warily recapitulant: echoes of old compulsions with no-hand on no-strings: in sunset we fall into furious attitudes, dead gestures of dolls.

(Faulkner 207)

Darl’s construction of self is defined by negation, especially by his parents’ emotional absence. Addie’s death proves that “man escapes from existence momentarily, only to have it echo back to him in his own obsessions, to recapitulate his furious and weary desires” (Pettey 33-4), illustrating that Darl’s fragmented identity is a dead gesture of its surroundings. Darl thinks in abstractions and, thus, thinks of himself in abstract terms. As a result, his identity is influenced by the absence of things, like his mother, rather than their presence. His mother’s death, the love he never
receives, and Anse’s apathy towards fatherhood—all of these absences have defined Darl. Combined with the changes in America during the Great Depression, Darl has nowhere to turn for validation, and, instead, he falls apart. His family places him in an institution by the time Addie is buried, suggesting that those who are unwilling to adapt to the changing American culture will ultimately self-destruct.

Additionally, the journey to bury Addie “builds a ceremony in the presence of nothingness” (Kartiganer 31), but it is not open to all members of the family. Notice that Darl, the main character to whom the reader relates, is not mentioned as having an object upon which he can displace his grief. This is because Darl “has no concrete sense of self that can become the bridge for his participation in it, no vein of self-interest for which he can find the appropriate physical formula” (Kartiganer 31). Never having connected emotionally to his parents, Darl does not know how to connect himself to anything at all. Neither his environment nor his relationships bridge his sense of isolation. In this sense, Faulkner may be using Darl to express the isolation involved in modernity. Faulkner’s combined use of stream of consciousness and internal monologue allows the author to recreate the natural rhythm of thought and memory without explicitly using the voice of the narrator. Faulkner grants the reader access into Darl’s mind, which allows him to understand the character better by identifying with Darl’s isolated state. Faulkner creates “a consciousness that, in effect, makes one a solitary prisoner in a private dream world” (Raschke 111), accentuating elements of individualism and isolation among the characters in the book but also between the reader and author. At this point, the modernist tone transcends the language in the novel and defines the relationship between reader and author. Richard Moreland sees Faulkner’s writing style as one that “dramatizes the strain and repeated failure by received reason, nature and common sense to repress or at least grammatically to subordinate persistently outrageous horrors, stubborn doubts, endless qualifications” (21).

As mentioned previously, these horrors and doubts stem from a changing modern society in which the idea of technological progress led to the slaughter of thousands in World War I, and like all modernist writers, Faulkner fell subject to an ineffable sense of “the depressive, uncommunicative, atomized tendency of much modernist thought, as if that ‘something’ cannot be named or thought without the most wrenching dislocations and fragmentations” (Moreland 21). Essentially, Faulkner’s writing stems from the belief that the state of flux under which the early twentieth century was shrouded becomes permanent in modernity, and he, like many others, must capitulate to uncertainty.

Chris Ware’s graphic novel explores how his characters respond to the problems of modernity addressed by writers like Faulkner. How does a society function in an age of “mechanical reproduction” (Prager 195), and what happens when human interaction begins to mirror this mass-produced, industrialized society? Ware goes so far as to depict Jimmy Corrigan as a mechanical extension of modern society, drawing him as a robot with the head of a late nineteenth-century camera, which then can be cut out and
assembled by the reader, breaking all boundaries between the audience and the text. Brad Prager explains this metaphor best when he writes:

[Ware is] highly attuned to the fact that what one actually risks in the age of mechanical reproduction is that the self is itself merely a mechanical reproduction, like the photographic machines introduced in the nineteenth century. Jimmy, because of the mechanistic world of which he is a part, is fundamentally a steely assemblage—a claim to which Ware calls the reader’s attention through providing cut-out kits with which readers can themselves construct the robot-Jimmy. (210)

Ware uses the past to emphasize the technological progression of the future, and in cutting out models of the robot Jimmy Corrigan, the reader participates in the mechanical reproduction that defines post-modern texts like Ware’s comic. The use of both archaic machinery and modern technology allows Ware to blend the past and the present, reminding us that in our isolation we are intrinsically interconnected through technological evolution. Hence, it is in the past that Ware discovers the mechanical reproduction that will define the future.

Represented by the Chicago World’s Fair, new technologies are imposed on the community in Jimmy Corrigan. Just as the larger-than-life statues on display are fettered to the ground by the pound of a mallet, the people crowded in the buildings at the World’s Fair are chained to the technological and economic changes that occur in their society. In fact, Ware links the promise of new technology to the disintegration of human relationships in the scene where William Corrigan abandons his son, Jimmy Reed, on top of the ornate World’s Fair Building, foreshadowing the communal breakdown that accompanies technological progress. As the reader eventually realizes, this particular cell where Jimmy Reed imagines his father casting him off the roof of the building is only one in a series of images that chronicle a continuing nightmare in which Jimmy Reed’s fear of abandonment is equated with the act of murder.

Furthermore, the overwhelming sense of isolation that Jimmy Reed feels in the shadow of his father’s (and mother’s) absence is reflected in the next panel in which the World’s Fair Building dwarfs the people below it. The immensity of the fair itself eclipses those who helped to build it, suggesting that the new technologies people create will similarly minimize our sense of community until all of us are, like Jimmy Reed, abandoned and isolated, waiting to be loved.
Notes

1 Anse chides Addie for not wanting to have any more children when they discuss plans to make a bigger family, saying “Nonsense [...] you and me aint nigh done chapping yet, with just two” (Faulkner 173).

Works Cited


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To those writers from the American South, the differences between scene and place are monumental. According to Frederick J. Hoffman, “[p]lace is indispensable to scene in any literature that is more than merely abstract” (13). He goes on to say that “[i]t is really a question of types of knowledge and kinds of emotional commitment” (14). Scene is simply setting and props: the sun setting, trees lining the driveway, yellow curtains in the window, a broom or bucket in the girl’s hand. On the other hand, place is about cultural implication and the significance of people living in a certain area. With place, the audience builds an emotional tie to the land, the people of the land, the history it holds, and the future it leans toward. For the Southern writer, then,
place acts as a concrete foundation to the world of stories and characters, creating believability and a sense of depth. The question the writer must wrestle with is how deeply he or she is willing to go. For Tim Gautreaux, a writer from Southern Louisiana, the commitment to place is comparable to the strength of a marital promise. This commitment is evident in many of his published works, which include two story collections, *Same Place, Same Things* (1996) and *Welding with Children* (1999), as well as two novels, *The Next Step in the Dance* (1998) and *The Clearing* (2003). Specifically in *The Clearing*, Gautreaux creates a world that reveals and influences specific behavior patterns of characters, a world that flows naturally with the rhythm of Southern living but a world that holds a unique place for each character. Gautreaux’s place, characters, and events are so intertwined that they cannot stand independently - each consumes the other.

Tim Gautreaux acknowledges the significant role “place” plays in his own life and how that shapes his literature:

I consider myself a writer first who happens to live in the South. If I had been born in North Dakota I would still be a writer. I would probably have had a similar life. But my people and my settings, my moods, my skies, my waterways would be from North Dakota or South Canada [...] Wherever you are born and raised tends to have profound effect on your fictional world.” (Birnbaum Interview 4)

Here Gautreaux points to the importance of place in daily living, the importance of place in details that naturally spill out and flood other areas of life so that, in some ways, place creates a person. This idea carries over into his fiction wherein Gautreaux intends that place have a similar impact on his characters. For Gautreaux, creating the world where characters live is as important as creating the characters themselves; “I [Gautreaux] spent so much time placing the reader in this world […] it’s something that I worked very hard to achieve” (Birnbaum Interview 15). After such a statement from Gautreaux, his readers must understand that every detail relating to place is intentional and significant. A variety of influences in Gautreaux’s life led him to valuing such details, the details that are intended to create a place as influential as everyday reality.

Three specific factors have influenced Gautreaux’s commitment to develop place in his writings. The first influence is that of his own Southern upbringing where “this metaphor of a place inhabited, worked, and loved, dominates” (Hoffman 20). In this literature, place may present the particulars to a scene, act as a record of tradition, or stand as a moral which establishes meaning to a story’s overall message (Hoffman 28). The second influence comes from Gautreaux’s own Catholic faith. According to L. Lamar Nisly, the Protestant faith generally emphasizes the separation between God and the world while for Catholics, God presents divinity in and through nature (Nisly Class Lecture).
In other words, nature and place point individuals directly toward God, which is an important aspect of Gautreaux’s writing (Nisly 117). Finally, the third influence comes from Gautreaux’s love of machinery. Gautreaux claims that what he loves about machinery is that every piece plays a part: “The thing about a properly designed mechanism is that there are no non-functioning parts. Everything has a purpose, every bit and tag, screw and eyelet” (Kingsbury Interview 51). For him, “[g]ood fiction’s the same way” (Kingsbury Interview 51). Every part and parcel to a story works together to create a greater whole. The same may be said of Gautreaux’s commitment to place. Each smaller part of his own life, his Southern upbringing, Catholic faith, and love of machinery, work together to create a whole, stories of depth developed by a strong sense of place. This commitment to place is markedly evident in *The Clearing*.

Set in the 1920’s, *The Clearing* is a story of two brothers living in a mill-town in Louisiana. Randolph, the younger of the two brothers, is sent to Louisiana by his father to run a broken-down and worn-out lumber mill. His father hopes to see the mill restored and successful but, more than that, he wants Randolph to bring his brother Byron back home to Pennsylvania. Byron, the older of the two brothers, is a World War I veteran working as the lawman in Nimbus, the mill-town to which Randolph is sent. His memories of war throw him into silence or fits of rage, and what he needs most is the love of his family. Together these brothers grapple with the challenges posed by their relationship, the mill-town and of their mutual enemy, mob boss Buzetti.

In the end, the mill-town becomes as much a part of these brothers as their own skin.

Gautreaux appears to agree with Frederick J. Hoffman and Elizabeth Madox Roberts that in the South, “there is a different rhythm of life” (Birnbaum 13). This assertion is most evident in the adjustments made by Lillian, Randolph’s wife, to her new life in the South. At first, Randolph moved to the mill alone and Lillian remained in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, as both hoped Randolph would return home within a few months. However, as time moved forward and Randolph continued working at the mill, Lillian decides to move to the South to be with her husband. Somewhat surprisingly, she gradually adjusts to her new surroundings. As an interim step, she moves to New Orleans and, over time, grows used to the heat and the bugs: “Lillian began to fit in with the New Orleans culture, learning to cope with the hot afternoons and palate-tingling food” (131). Once accustomed to this lifestyle, she takes a new and natural next step in moving from New Orleans to the isolated settlement of Nimbus, where once again she adjusts to her physical surroundings:

Lillian moved into the logging camp and learned to deal with the captured heat of the place, mosquitoes always floating in her vision, stinkbugs haunting her collar, love bugs flying drunk and sticking to her dress […]. She learned the necessity of keeping a shovel on the front porch, which she used to cut the heads of snakes […]. (161)
For example, one day Randolph joins Byron on the porch of his house and both sit watching the “veils of rain” falling from the sky (116). Because of the dark, heavy rain, no one is surprised when Byron stomps angrily into the house in response to a question posed by Randolph (116). Another time, just after Randolph kills a man for the first time, an unusual wave of heat permeates the mill: “The weather turned unseasonably warm and Randolph began to have trouble sleeping. The nights steamed like a cow’s breath, and he would wake up with the sheets sticking to his legs like wet paper” (183). This torturous weather emphasizes the heaviness and agony of Randolph’s thoughts and feelings. Killing a person was an act he always considered evil and barbaric, certainly something he never imagined doing. Like the stuffy weather, the emotional weight of the situation is suffocating. A third example occurs on the day Randolph’s son, Walter, is born. The paragraph about his birth begins: “On a warm spring afternoon […].” This kind of refreshing spring weather is so infrequent at the mill that what follows can only be a rare gift of goodness. That is exactly what Walter becomes to Randolph.

In *The Clearing*, weather also works as a metaphor regarding the kind of atmosphere and type of people to expect in Nimbus. In the beginning of the story, Jules, an investment appraiser, travels to Nimbus to evaluate the mill for potential purchase. Within minutes of his stepping onto the property, a fight breaks out on the porch of the saloon—a fight described as “a small, unexpected rain cloud” (6). As a new arrival, Jules did not get involved in the
“Here [Nimbus] is not a happy place. I sweat and my clothes stay wet all day. The waterways stink and look like dark beer” (72). The immense suffering and discouragement that Randolph observes in the South and in his men, in particular, leads them to violent acts:

As the heat gathered throughout summer, the saloon fights seemed to generate out of the humid air. Byron had to go into the quarters at night to break up husbands and wives, or husbands and their wives’ boyfriends, answering the wink of straight razors in the dark with the ring of his shovel on bone. (152)

The fights grow louder and more violent during those summer months of heat and humidity, but in the winter the aggression cools, again reflecting the weather (143). Towards the end of the story, as the woods grow thinner, Randolph acknowledges that soon the factory will “steam away” (297). One wonders if this thought was a familiar one to Randolph – especially during the summer months of intense heat and intense fighting when violence prevailed and led to destruction.

The destructive acts of Randolph and the mill workers emphasize the wickedness of humanity – another role of place for Gautreaux. Hoffman claims that when place is destroyed in a novel, so are the human characters with all their faults, weaknesses, and sinfulness (20). Nimbus is somewhat unusual in that the men of the mill already cut and destroyed a large part of the forest before Randolph arrives:

squabble, but when he turned to find the mill manager, he “walked off toward the grinding thunder that was the mill” (7). These “thunder-storm” images help to create a place that is tense, rough, ready to break open with the gusto of uncontrollable weather. These images continue throughout the story: “Saturdays spawned fights the way a hot afternoon brewed thunderstorms” and “[there was] a storm of voices coming from the white side of the saloon […]” (107, 122). Gautreaux’s weather images are effective in creating a place that is violent, apprehensive, and tense, but his use of humidity takes the violence a little further.

The intense humidity drives violent behavior. In Nimbus, as in the South in general, everything sweats: the people, material things, and the mill (33, 84, 274). Randolph immediately notices the effect of heat on the people. When first traveling from his home in Pittsburgh down to Nimbus, he observes the worn-out men working in the fields: “The next day further south he changed trains again and saw gaunt men standing in the fields as if sun-struck, their clothes a sagging second skin of denim and copper rivets, their tobacco crops bug-bitten and jaundiced in the heat” (12). The effects of the sun on the people of the South do not escape his notice. He is also quick to observe how his own workers droop from the intense heat. In a letter to his father, Randolph writes, “The men suffer more than our northern lumbermen because of the heat, which even now is bad, and from the dampness, which sometimes makes it hard for me to draw a breath” (44). Furthermore, Randolph expresses no surprise at the honest words of one of his employees:
Randolph experiences a growing curiosity on the effects of light as he walks around the mill and observes the sunshine:

[Randolph] came out of his front door late one morning and started to walk the edge of the muddy lane toward the mill when something unusual in the air arrested his motion, a new quality he couldn’t quite put his finger on. He looked around at the houses in the white section, at the mill itself, and decided it was the light. (297)

As light gleams upon the houses of the mill, Randolph wonders if the light changes people by shining upon them and revealing “a new quality” - the goodness of mankind. He begins entertaining the idea that perhaps the small battles and bloodshed of the mill could have been avoided had he cut down the trees from the inside-out instead of the outside-in so that the mill and the men might have basked in sunlight instead of in deep shadows:

The mill manager now felt under constant scrutiny, and he wondered if all the savagery would still have happened if he’d cut outward from the mill, if the light and a wider view would have stymied the bloodshed. (298)

Between these two sorrowful descriptions, the mill workers cut and destroyed the land. From beginning to end, the worn-out Nimbus did not escape Randolph’s notice, even if it did leave him somewhat surprised.

Often towards the end of the narrative, Randolph takes the time to reflect on how Nimbus had changed and how he changed as a result of Nimbus. For example, he considers light and darkness. The lumber mill sat in the middle of a vast cypress forest. In cutting down the trees, the men started from the outermost part of the forest and worked their way inward to the mill so that during the last few weeks of work, the forest begins to thin, allowing for more sun to shine on the buildings of the mill and surrounding property.

Byron offers a different solution. At one point, Randolph is busily estimating the size of trees and the
amount of possible profit to be derived from cutting them down. Byron asks, “You want every tree that walks?” When Randolph nods, Byron goes on, “A forest is good for more things than shutters and weather-board.” Then he suggests it’s good “just to look at, maybe” (244). During this brief conversation between the brothers, Byron suggests that instead of calculating which pattern of cutting the forest will create less violence among the workers, Randolph might consider not cutting it at all. Literally speaking, Byron is correct. Had Randolph not cut down the forest, the mill would not be nestled in the clearing, and the men would not be there to fight one another. Furthermore, had the mill workers not been surrounded by daily scenes of destruction, perhaps they would not be bent on destruction themselves. To go one step further, Byron may also be suggesting that if men cut one another down as Randolph cuts the trees, then men create war against one another and, in this way, destroy each other. As a World War I veteran, Byron knows this to be the truth all too well. The power of Nimbus – a land destroyed – emphasizes the violence, not only of the mill workers but also of humanity in general. Still, this message about the world does not alter the uniqueness of Nimbus.

At one time, nature played a vital role in the well-being of humanity. We relied on the earth to provide food, shelter, and even profits as we worked the land and harvested crops. We were familiar with the cycles of the earth and the blessings and curses that result. Today, with new technological and scientific advancements in society, humans no longer rely on the earth in the same way. In other words, nature, which once gave mankind identity, is no longer important in today’s world and the disconnect leaves man alienated. Perhaps Gautreaux recognizes this dilemma as well for he deliberately creates a plot in which the place gives purpose.

Nimbus is a prime example of how place creates a distinctive “niche” for Randolph. First of all, Nimbus sits in an isolated area of the world, an area to which not many people are willing to travel. The place is hardly noticeable on a map:

Below this Louisiana mill was a spongy green area, a cypress swamp that had been explored mostly by snakes, and below that a thin picket of marsh above the pale blue waters of the Gulf. Twenty-five miles to the west of Nimbus, the map showed a town […] called Tiger Island […]. Some twenty miles to the east of the mill tract was Shirmer […]. Directly north by five miles was a particle on the Southern Pacific main line named Poachum, and north of that was seventy miles of uninhabited land visited only by survey crews […]. (10) Still, Nimbus – the little town in a big world - seems to be just the right spot for Randolph, for there lies a mill that previous owners could not handle but which Randolph runs successfully until every last tree falls. More than running the mill, part of Randolph’s unique purpose is to love and care for his older brother as he heals from his memories of war. In fact, that was their father’s original intention for
to town on a borrowed hand-pumped track car, Randolph glimpses the mill one last time and sees his brother pumping the handle up and down, up and down, moving them away from the desolate but beloved land. Randolph’s final view of the mill encompasses both the place and the man that once gave him purpose and meaning, the place and man that once grounded him.

This leads to the final reason for the role of place in Gautreaux’s *The Clearing*, the idea that people and place sometimes become so intertwined that one cannot stand independent from the other. To test the validity of this assertion, we need only compare Randolph’s life in Pittsburgh to his life in Nimbus. In Pittsburgh, Randolph lived a plush life. He was rich, comfortable, and successful. However, Pittsburgh never quite “got in his bones” and changed him as much as those few years in Nimbus. On one of their first trips back home, Randolph and Lillian are surprised at the change that has occurred in them – Pittsburgh no longer feels like home:

Randolph and Lillian returned to Pennsylvania for Christmas, understanding with a mild shock that they were no longer fond of snow and bland food […]. For a week they endured [Noah’s] complaints and offers of positions in New England mills, then traveled back South to ignorance and good food, poverty and independence, and Nimbus […]. (168)
Another trip back to Pennsylvania confirms the reality that Nimbus is now home. As he stands in his father’s yard with Lillian, Randolph considers all the “adventures” Nimbus has provided him – adventures that could not have happened in Pittsburgh. And Randolph realizes just how much the land has changed him and just how much he has become united with the land:

He was quiet. Looking from hill to hill, then back to the green copper gutters of his father’s house, he suddenly felt idle, that everything he belonged to was somewhere else. In Pennsylvania, he had never run a mill completely by himself, had not gone out in the dark to look for a man taken off by a reptile, had not shot a man dead, and no one here had ever carried his child. “Oh, my,” he said aloud. (209)

Randolph’s understanding of the effects of Nimbus on his own life is clear while on his trips to Pennsylvania. However, complete understanding comes as he is ready to leave Nimbus and is watching the blind horse. He knows the horse’s thoughts: “that the human world was a temporary thing, a piece of junk that used up the earth and then was consumed itself by the world it tried to destroy” (303). Yes, Randolph “consumed” Nimbus with every fall of a tree, but by the end he knows that Nimbus, in turn, “consumed” him.

In some ways, place in The Clearing nearly takes on life-like characteristics, since the land changes people. Randolph wonders about the connection:

[...] if the many-fanged geography rubbed off on people, made them primal, predatory [...]. What had affected him if not the land itself that sickened and drowned his workers, land that would eat him alive, too, if given half a chance? (256).

This “many-fanged geography,” as the land around Nimbus is described, is brutal, honest, and all-consuming. Still, Nimbus carries with it enough softness around the rough edges that Randolph and most readers cannot help but grow attached to it. Nimbus teaches forgiveness and allows for deep questions regarding violence and love. It might be argued that the art of creating a vivid world is fading in literature today and that, like the last tree, “beating its wings to stay aloft” (300), place is searching for its own dwelling to live and breathe and move. This, then, is a call, a call to put away our saws and, instead, climb up into the strong, leafy limbs of place and allow it to consume us.
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In the conclusion of the Metamorphoses, Ovid speaks of achieving immortality—figuratively, if not literally (441). This literary immortality is owed in large part to his sophisticated exploration of psychology and his colorful and moving representations and embellishments of Homeric Greek mythology. His retellings, now classics themselves, have been passed down for centuries; and it can be argued that the Metamorphoses is as sophisticated and multifaceted as any postmodern work of literature. For example, interwoven with the well-known mythological/etiological reading of his fantastic tales, one can find a philosophical reading in which the poet considers such universalities as love and the due rewards of right behavior. There is,
praise of those who gladly took on a functional kingship over Rome rings hollow and verges on the sarcastic.

The theme of Caesarean deification itself becomes a weapon in the poet’s hands. Following Virgil’s lead in presenting the Julian line as linear descendants of the goddess Venus through Aeneas of Troy, one finds that it is Venus who ultimately incites the rape of Proserpina by Pluto, all because she finds the idea of wielding power over merely two-thirds of the world intolerable (Ovid 150). The allegorical implication of imperial avarice for conquest and a lack of interest in the resulting collateral damage—a quality common to Caesar and Augustus both—is clear. Augustus’ kinship to Venus has a more amusing side, as well—in Ovid’s own *Metamorphoses*, the goddess is made famous for her betrayal of her husband (116). Venus, often appearing to be more a deity of lust than of love, seems to be by nature a being of promiscuity, and there are indications that Augustus was as well. Despite his extensive “family values” campaign, for example, it was known “[t]hat the emperor was not a continent man,” and rumors circulated that he had “seduced the wife of his closest friend” (Thibault 72) and he had a “taste for young boys and young virgins” (Mack 37).

Peering through numerous curious omissions and connections between the text and his historical and literary context, one finds a pattern of sociopolitical commentary that often supports Ovid’s description of himself as having a certain “disregard for normal limits” (Tarrant 17).

Perhaps most striking is the audacity of Ovid’s allegorical commentary on Augustus, the first true emperor of Rome, who had already banished the poet from the city he loved so dearly. Even something as innocuous as the arrangement of stories relative to one another can serve to transform their overall meaning and reveal their hidden political implications. Perhaps the best example is the story of Cipus, in which a Roman praetor of the Republic receives a fateful decree that, should he enter the city, he would surely become its ruler. In response, Cipus warns the Senate of the danger he poses, saying to himself, “I’d rather be an exiled prince of men than ruler of the city where I lived” (Ovid 432). Indeed, Cipus, who indirectly advises the Senate to kill him if he should threaten Roman liberty, seems to be cast as the quintessential Republican. Harmless and even romantically patriotic as this seems in itself, one must note that the tale of Cipus is located very near to that of Caesar, in which Gaius Julius and Augustus are both adulated literally to the point of deification (437-41). This seems typical of Ovid’s “strategy [...] to take the heroism out of the heroic while professing to write in the heroic mode” (Mack 126) since in contrast to the loyally Republic-loving Cipus, such
Aescapulus (Ovid 433)—and he had a sincere interest in cleansing the plague of decades of civil war (Earl 21). This represents one of many examples of the serpent as an analogy for the emperor in the *Metamorphoses*: a serpent adorned, in this case, “with a gold crown that glittered round his head” (Ovid 434). He arrives, of course, just between the end of the fiercely anti-tyrannical Republican ideals of “Cipus” and their replacement with the Roman imperial monarchy of “Caesar.” That which immediately announces the arrival of the serpent/emperor in the city of Rome is a “sacrifice in sparkling blood” (437). Although a cunning politician who knew well the value of properly applied lenience, Augustus was by no means afraid of employing outright bloodshed when it suited his purposes, and he was eager to destroy his posthumously adoptive father’s murderers. Even the mention that “the ship had nearly floundered with [Aescapulus’] weight” (435), which appears at first to be a “throwaway” line, may actually be a tongue-in-cheek reference to Augustus’ repeated naval failures during conflicts with Marcus Antonius and Sextus Pompeius (Earl 40; 49).

The use of the serpent as an emblem of the emperor is also evident in the tale of Cadmus, who sows the teeth of a serpent in the ground, from which brethren-soldiers grow and kill one another in a clear suggestion of how monarchical ambition can be the fundamental cause of, in Ovid’s own words, “civil war” (Ovid 88). The city created by Cadmus with the aid of that war’s survivors is Pentheus’ Thebes, won away from him by Bacchus. The lowly serpent that strikes at the entirely defenseless, disembodied head of Orpheus seems once again to represent Augustus—and yet, it also does more than this. Recalling the Python, the Sun-god’s great traditional enemy slain at the beginning of “Apollo and Daphne,” as well as the parallels between Augustus and the serpentine Aescapulus, Ovid may implicate the emperor—and perhaps monarchs in general—as the ultimate nemesis, so to speak, of all poets.

However, there is a more personal aspect to this last connection, as the story of “The Death of Orpheus” may well relate to Ovid’s own exile—or “relegatio,” technically, for he was not deprived of his possessions (Thibault 11). In that story, a great poet’s words are drowned out by the mad clamor of a jealous, barbaric crowd, and he is brought low. Finally, cast out to sea and deprived of the faculties of action but retaining those of speech and song, the poet is washed up on a foreign shore, where he is protected by the divine patron of the arts from a dastardly attempt (by a serpent) to silence him. Given the text’s propensity to use serpents as symbols of the emperor, this summary describes both “The Death of Orpheus” and Ovid’s own banishment. Hermann Fränkel notices the same connection in relation to “Hippolytus”—the story of a youth wrongly exiled but saved by the god of medicine and allowed to rest in Italy in the form of an old man—and cites Ovid’s banishment from Rome as a kind of dismemberment (Fränkel 227). Whereas Orpheus is severed from his body, his means of physical agency, yet remains vocal on a foreign shore, Ovid is “detached […] physically by exile from the centres of political and cultural life”
(Hardie 34) and banished to the Black Sea where he remains vocal nonetheless, writing a number of volumes while under “relegatio.”

Ovid may also have laid hints within his stories as to the cause of his exile although there is too little concrete information to do more than speculate. In the tale of innocent Actaeon (Thibault 26; 131), the protagonist quite accidentally witnesses the virginal goddess Diana in a state of indecency, and is transformed into a deer. The patently non-virginal behavior of the emperor’s granddaughter Julia “with Junius Silanus in the same year” as Ovid’s exile (Fränkel 113) lends some support to Ovid’s claim that his “error” (Thibault 29), in his words, was merely that of witnessing another’s misdeed (Fränkel 112). Although the comparison of the emperor’s saucy granddaughter with the virginal Diana seems rather fitting in light of the poet’s habitual sarcasm, it is notable that elsewhere, Julia may instead be represented by Circe, the sorceress he calls “ready to make love at any hour” (Ovid 383) and who wields—as Julia seems to have wielded, if only figuratively—the power to turn men into pigs. Further, after his transformation, the ill-fated Actaeon is devoured by his own prized hounds. What makes this interesting is that Ovid had commented on his shock at learning that, while he was banished from Rome, a number “of his servants and friends” made attempts to despoil him (Thibault 13). Perhaps Ovid, like Actaeon, after his punishment for seeing what he was not meant to see, was faced with the fact that those he had prized as allies turned on him and sought, if only metaphorically, to devour him.

Ovid’s somewhat unorthodox telling of the story of Jason and Medea conceals fascinating political commentary, as well. As he often does, Ovid begins with a lengthy, touching, and psychologically penetrating exploration of the process of struggling to retain a reasonable state of mind in the face of falling suddenly and irrationally in love (Ovid 187-190). Cupid’s final victory, in this case, results in Medea’s aiding Jason in completing the deadly ordeals assigned by her father in order to win the Golden Fleece; but after her last “good deed” upon returning to Greece, the rejuvenation of Jason’s father Aeson (195), Medea becomes a completely flat villainess over the course of a half dozen lines (196). Ovid’s earlier touching details are jarringly absent as she tricks an unnamed old man’s daughters into murdering him (197), kills Jason’s new wife, and attempts to assassinate the Greek hero Theseus (199), all allegedly “[t]o keep her evil wits sharp” (196). However, the astute reader, -- one acquainted with the traditional version of the story, Ovid’s past explorations of Medea’s character in the Heroides (Mack 18), and a well-received tragedy (21) -- will recognize that he was plainly omitting crucial details of motivation. Pelias, the old man whose death Medea arranges, is the very uncle who had sent Jason in search of the Golden Fleece with the hope that the youth would be killed, leaving Pelias to inherit the country. Medea’s plan to make his daughters kill him, then, is not simple wickedness but poetic justice for his attempt to murder his own nephew.
Although it must be obvious why she wished to destroy the woman for whom Jason betrayed her devotion, Ovid only hints at her reason for trying to poison Theseus: by his description of Jason’s house in Corinth as looking out on “two seas” even a reader with the barest knowledge of Greek geography can identify that it must sit upon the Peloponnesian isthmus, and within a few lines, the poet speaks of how Theseus “had forced peace on that strip of land” (Ovid 199). Clearly, then, Medea’s attempted murder is not a random act of evil perpetrated “[t]o keep her evil wits as sharp as ever” (196) as Ovid facetiously suggests but an effort to destroy the man who had brought military strength to bear against Jason, whom she seeks to protect even after his great betrayal.

Even after one acknowledges that Ovid makes many striking omissions in this version of the Medea story, the question remains why he did so. The most obvious connection between Medea’s legend and the events of Ovid’s day seems to be Cleopatra. Like Medea, Cleopatra was a dauntingly powerful woman from the mysterious Near East, who falls madly in love with a bold hero from across the sea and who takes measures to protect him from the dangers he faces. Further, Ovid’s reshaping of Medea into a flat, wholly unsympathetic villainess may be a play upon the Augustinian policy of vilifying Cleopatra, whom the emperor used as an excuse for his war against Marcus Antonius (Earl 51-3). In this reading, Marcus Antonius must be the analog to Jason. Antonius’ struggles with Augustus were supported by Cleopatra—just as Medea aided Jason in defeating, notably, yet another deadly serpent (Ovid 191)—and he could be said to have betrayed her in a sense by his refusal to strengthen Egypt and weaken Rome by granting her authority over Herod’s Judea (Earl 52). Similarly, through the renewal of Jason’s father, Ovid may be suggesting that the Roman-Egyptian partnership brought about a rejuvenation of Roman culture by injecting new, foreign elements such as the Mystery Cults. The wicked uncle Pelias can only be Pompeius Magnus, the great benefactor-turned-rival of Julius Caesar. As Caesar’s colleague as consul and protégé in the public eye (Earl 20), Marcus Antonius seems indeed to be something akin to Pompeius Magnus’ nephew in politics, and that ‘uncle’ was eventually captured and killed by Egyptian magistrates. Finally, the man who took Caesar’s city and claimed it from its rightful heir (in Cleopatra’s eyes, at least) must have been Augustus himself. The new emperor of Rome was surely concerned as well by the fact that Caesar—to whom he was only an adopted son—had a true blood-heir by the Ptolemaic queen. With this final point in mind, it becomes especially interesting that the Metamorphoses completely omits what may be Medea’s most famous act: the murder of her own children.

It is not only Augustus’ propaganda, however, that Ovid targets. By no means was the poet shy of questioning the legitimacy of the emperor’s cultivated (and false) image as an inoffensive protector of the Republic. The tales of Bacchus, for example, seem, on the surface, to clearly present a rightful young god appearing and facing the challenge of punishing those who are too blasphemous
The purpose of this Augustus-Bacchus comparison, although it may imply something about just how closely held the emperor’s famed morals were, serves mainly to discreetly peel away the façade of that harmless-yet-dignified image. Consider, for example, the story “Pomona and Vertumnus,” in which Vertumnus, a variant of Bacchus, approaches the maiden Pomona much as Augustus approaches the maiden Pomona much as Augustus approaches Rome: he begins with gentle diplomacy, the disguise of a beneficent grandparent figure (Ovid 403-4), followed by seemingly wise advice by way of a parable. However, when such cunning and finesse fail him, he reverts to violent, crass methods without hesitation. Pomona herself is “dazzled by his godlike figure” and she “[takes] mutual warmth [...] in his arms.” When the god finds that “advice [is] not the kind of speech that [moves]” her, he plans to have his way “with or without consent” (407). In the same way, Rome—likewise courted by the entire world but possessed by none before—ultimately receives Augustus willingly.

This agrees with Tacitus’ assertion that to achieve peace, Rome willingly accepted the “princeps” and surrendered its long tradition of Republican freedom. As another example, shortly after Bacchus comes to power, Pentheus—son of a founder of Thebes, a city incidentally created in the blood of civil war waged by men grown from the teeth of a serpent—flatly denies the young god’s divinity, and is even so brash as to march himself to the bacchanal, where Pentheus’ own mother tears off his head under Bacchus’ influence. Indeed, by reading Pentheus as Marcus...
Antonius, Bacchus as Augustus, and the unfortunate man’s mother as Marcus Antonius’ figurative mother—that is to say, Rome—one reveals a striking parallel as the powerful citizen challenges the would-be god and suffers destruction at the hands of his homeland in one of the last great Roman civil wars. Further, upon the young god’s first appearance, Pentheus objects vociferously that “Thebe’s [sic] taken by a child, a boy who does not care to know the arts of war” (Ovid 102). This presents another clear reference to Augustus’ naval failures—especially from the perspective of Marcus Antonius—and to certain rumors that the son of Caesar was incompetent as a leader and even lacking in the appropriate valor (Earl 50).

Of course, it is ultimately not only Bacchus to whom this critical perspective may be applied. Perhaps the most outstanding and ubiquitous aspect of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* is the recurring abuse of mortals by the gods—abuse which appears variously throughout the whole book, in more than half the stories, from Arachne to Niobe to Actaeon, as well as anything involving Jove’s characteristic terrestrial affairs. Most obviously, when taken together as a group, these outline one essential moral for the entire work: do not trifle with the gods.

Yet, just as Ovid portrays the gods as being capable of staggering acts of arbitrariness, vindictiveness, and even sheer heartlessness, his deification of Caesar and Augustus loses its flattering quality and brings with it the implication of an almost inhuman capacity for pettiness and self-interest, just like the existing gods—gods who run the gamut from adulterers to rapists and murderers. The message “do not trifle with the gods” does indeed ring true; but the dangerous, petty, criminal “gods” of whom he warns represent those entities on whose elimination Rome was first founded and whom the Roman Republicans of old, such as Cipus, hated above all others: kings.
Works Cited

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