THE OSWALD Review Undergraduate Research and Criticism In the Discipline of English: Volume 10 Fall 2008

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THE
OSWALD Review
An International Journal
of Undergraduate Research and Criticism
in the Discipline of English

Editor:
Tom Mack, Ph.D.
Department of English
University of South Carolina Aiken
Aiken, South Carolina 29801
tomm@usca.edu

Editorial Intern:
Julie Long
Senior, English
University of South Carolina Aiken

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THE

OSWALD Review

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of Undergraduate Research and Criticism
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Address correspondence and inquiries to Dr. Tom Mack, Editor, The Oswald Review, Department of English, University of South Carolina Aiken, 471 University Parkway, Aiken, SC 29801.

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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


In Search of America: Nature, Spirituality, and the Self in American Transcendentalism and Beat Generation Literature

Caitlin Cater

University of Pittsburgh

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Introduction

In their intellectual history of post-war America, Jamison and Eyerman identify the Beat movement as one of several instrumental forces behind the societal transformations of the 1960s. Specifically, the authors credit Allen Ginsberg and his colleagues with helping to “shift the meaning of culture from its rationalizing and civilizing connotations to the more communal notion of collective experience” (Seeds of the Sixties 158-9). Indeed, such aims are clearly manifest in the literature of the Beat generation. Their works are ripe with
observations regarding the deleterious effects of society on the individual, as well as ideas about the proper relationship between man and his society. Jack Kerouac’s novels, for example, point to the irony in achieving middle-class status in America. The writer notes the following:

Americans consume production and therefore have to work for the privilege of consuming, all that crap they didn’t really want anyway such as refrigerators, TV sets, cars, at least new fancy cars, certain hair oils and deodorants and general junk you finally always see a week later in the garbage anyway, all of them imprisoned in a system of work, produce, consume, work, produce, consume….

( *Dharma Bums* 73)

For Kerouac, this obsessive consumption – ostensibly a sign of success and a conduit for happiness – merely provides an empty distraction, which ultimately exacerbates the feelings of loneliness and desire that are supposedly relieved through the acquisition of material goods.

Similarly, Ginsberg’s poem, “Howl,” describes how society, with its narrowly defined standards of acceptable behavior and relentless preoccupation with conformity and consistency, is actually harmful to its individual members:

What sphinx of cement and aluminum bashed open their skulls and ate up their brains and imagination? Moloch whose mind is pure machinery!
Moloch whose blood is running money! Moloch whose fingers are ten armies!

They broke their backs lifting Moloch to Heaven! Pavements, trees, radios, tons! lifting the city to Heaven which exists and is everywhere about us!

Visions! omens! hallucinations! miracles! ecstasies! gone down the American river!

Real holy laughter in the river! They saw it all! the wild eyes! the holy yells! They bade farewell! They jumped off the roof! to solitude! waving! carrying flowers! Down to the river! into the street! (l.79-93)

By likening society to a malevolent deity who is the object of sacrificed children, Ginsberg emphasizes both his antipathy towards the increasingly pervasive mass culture and his fear of its deleterious impact on mankind. In effect, the poet suggests that, whether trying to meet the demands of society or to cope with its pressures, man is driven towards extreme means of escape and, ultimately, to self-destruction.

The Beats confront these forces by reinterpreting conventional ideas about the relationship between man and his society. The writers show little concern for reforming society so as to live comfortably within its confines; rather, their works reveal a perpetual interest in means of eluding
society, so as to strengthen one’s awareness of his inner self. Ginsberg, Kerouac, and their peers systematically reject cultural standards and institutions, while promoting self-reliance, a personally relevant beliefs system, and first-hand experience as vital alternatives. With such messages, the Beats established a new context for social criticism – one that emphasized the authority of the self, rather than society, in determining one’s needs, interests, and desires. This proved particularly resonant with and useful to a generation of Americans searching for meaningful existence amid the rigid, impersonal social structures of their era. The civil rights and women’s movements, for example, were aimed at reforming society; but they were also fundamentally driven by a burgeoning attentiveness to the authority of the self and the arbitrary nature of societal power structures – notions that were in part popularized by the literature of the Beat Generation.¹ Thus, the Beat movement inspired and reaffirmed new ways of thinking about the individual and his place in society.

While these ideas motivated unprecedented change in American culture, the Beat movement is not the first instance of such views in the American literary tradition. A century earlier, the American Transcendentalists established a similar framework for thinking about the relationship between man and society. In his essay, “Self-Reliance,” Ralph Waldo Emerson asserts, “These are the voices which we hear in solitude, but they grow faint and inaudible as we enter into the world. Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members” (21).
Henry David Thoreau’s works likewise urge readers not to support the government “machine” or succumb to the “civilizing” demands of society. The writer asserts, “We are provincial, because we do not find at home our standards, – because we do not worship truth, but the reflection of truth, – because we are warped and narrowed by an exclusive devotion to trade and commerce and manufactures and agriculture and the like, which are but means, and not the end” (“Life without Principle” 87). Underlying these claims is the writer’s belief that, by engaging in the trivialities of a system obsessed with progress and prosperity, man loses sight of his most valuable resource – his self.

Throughout *Leaves of Grass*, Walt Whitman corroborates and further develops the ideas of his fellow Transcendentalists – particularly those concerning the value of self-knowledge, first-hand experience, and a universal spiritual community. He dismisses external influences, including such venerated figures as priests and professors, as superfluous diversions, and demands that the reader assume primary responsibility in his pursuit of knowledge. At the beginning of his poem, he declares, “You shall no longer take things at second or third hand….nor look through the eyes of the dead….nor feed on the spectres in books, / You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me, / You shall listen to all sides and filter them from yourself” (“Song of Myself” 1.27-9). These lines confirm the poet’s disdain for secondary sources of knowledge and fortify his understanding of the self as the central authority. Like the Beats, the Transcendentalists recognize the
potentially corrosive effects of society on the individual and look to evade such effects through greater self-reliance.

In light of these parallels, I propose that Jamison and Eyerman’s assessment of the Beats is equally well-applied to the American Transcendentalists. Although separated by a century of political, economic, and technological change, the members of these movements express similar discontent with their respective societies’ increasing materialism at the expense of more sustainable values. Despite their disillusionment with society, however, neither the Beats nor the Transcendentalists advocate widespread civic reform as a solution to its ills. On the contrary, one finds throughout their works a rejection of mass culture and the attendant desire to live independently of its beliefs and customs. The writers hope to elude the obfuscating tendencies and arbitrary limitations of societal norms by looking within the self to determine one’s true needs and desires.

Furthermore, the two movements propose comparable, unconventional solutions to the crisis they perceive; each writer maintains a seemingly paradoxical relationship between man and society, in which the individual exists as an independent, self-reliant entity that is simultaneously aware of and deferent to his status as one part of a spiritual, universal whole. The aim, in all cases, is to motivate personal, fundamental changes in the way that man relates to his self and his surroundings. Accordingly, both movements emphasize the importance of making internal changes to the individual – through self-reliance, a personally relevant beliefs system, and first-hand experience
– before pursuing external reforms to society. Thus, both the Beats and the Transcendentalists express confidence that change from within radiates outward, thereby creating a society grounded in solid, sustainable values.

The result, for both the Transcendentalists and the Beats, is a body of literature that explores new ideas about religion, sexuality, scholarship, and even writing itself. These, in turn, demand reconsideration of conventional American values and practices. The effects of this are eventually manifest in the contemporaneous social critiques and – particularly with the Beat Generation – countercultural movements, which denounce the established social and political orders, while calling for a more “authentic” approach to society and the self. Thus, both movements embrace the mission that Jamison and Eyerman assigned to the Beats and advance it through their literary endeavors.

The writers’ oft-considered ideas about the self, spirituality, and nature provide further evidence for the essential literary and cultural relationship between American Transcendentalism and the Beat movement. Studying this connection provides a way of understanding how American society is interpreted and presented in a literary context. Moreover, it provides a framework for thinking about the long-term legacy of the artist’s perception of American society and his role in shaping that environment. I maintain throughout this paper that the Beats are not simply an extension of American Transcendentalism. However, similarities between the two movements’ worldviews suggest a continuity between two seemingly disparate periods in
American culture, which perhaps extends throughout the American literary tradition. Although their discourses converge at numerous points, I am particularly concerned with representations of the aforementioned concepts in American Transcendentalism and Beat Generation literature because, taken together, the writers’ ideas about nature, spirituality, and the self comprise the primary aspects of a broader philosophical system around which the members of each movement cohere.  

Cultural Impetus

The American Transcendentalists’ concepts of the self and self-knowledge run contrary to the prevailing epistemological theories of their era. Although by the mid-1800s more than a century old, John Locke’s materialist-empiricist views, along with David Hume’s skepticism, still dominated mainstream intellectual currents. In particular, Locke’s understanding of the mind as a “tabula rasa” and his consequent claim that all we can know is that which we glean from sense experiences after birth, as well as Hume’s assertion that “the most lively thought is still inferior to the dullest sensation” (Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, II.1), confirmed the primacy of external phenomena in acquiring information about one’s self and one’s surroundings, while undermining the value (and very existence) of intuition.

American Transcendentalism developed out of an opposing school, known as Idealism, which recognizes that there exists “a very important class of ideas, or imperative forms, which did not come by experience, but through
which experience was acquired; that there were intuitions of the mind itself…” (Emerson, “The Transcendentalist”). This philosophy, which undermines the empiricist’s concern with the material world, particularly influenced the Transcendentalists, who lament that society’s increasing obsessions with progress and prosperity have displaced more genuine values, such as self-reliance and meaningful spirituality. Throughout their works, Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman demonstrate that their variations of Idealism extend beyond the realm of abstract ideas to provide a practical model for how best to live in such an environment.

Ultimately, the members of this movement revere the self as the moral, spiritual, and intellectual center of the universe and, accordingly, elevate intuitive faculties above any capacity for reason or sensation. Distinguishing between externally-imposed sense information and internally-derived awareness, Thoreau asserts, “My desire for knowledge is intermittent; but my desire to bathe my head in atmospheres unknown to my feet is perennial and constant” (“Walking” 113). While they recognize that experiences in the material world – specifically nature – can be instructive, the Transcendentalists also maintain that we can only have direct, immediate knowledge of the contents of our own minds: “Mind is the only reality, of which men and all other natures are better or worse reflectors. Nature, literature, history are only subjective phenomena” (Emerson, “The Transcendentalist”). In the Transcendentalist system, therefore, reality is defined by internal thoughts, feelings,
and perceptions. As a result, one cannot hope to find truth or self-awareness in external objects.

Consequently, the Transcendentalists hold that all meaningful knowledge stems from self-knowledge. Emerson writes, “Nothing at last is sacred but the integrity of your own mind. Absolve you to yourself and you shall have the suffrage of the world” (“Self-Reliance” 21). This attests to the writer’s belief that all one needs to understand the world is contained within the self. One need not turn to books or scholars; rather, he must rely on his intuition and draw from self-reflection. Whitman inspires his readers with like encouragement:

My right hand points to landscapes of continents, and a plain public road.
Not I, not any one else can travel that road for you,
You must travel it for yourself.
It is not far….it is within reach,
You are also asking me questions, and I hear you; I answer that I cannot answer...
you must find out for yourself. (“Song of Myself” l.1206-20)

Whitman suggests that, even if he has the answers, it is useless for him to share them – the information is meaningful only when it is obtained for oneself, first-hand. As with the preceding passage, this one reminds the reader that his own self is his greatest source of knowledge and understanding.
One hundred years later, the Beats propagate corresponding notions of the self as the supreme moral, spiritual, and intellectual authority. In a 1963 interview, Ginsberg averred, “Knowledge comes from doing what comes naturally” (*Spontaneous Mind* 12). He also expresses this idea in his poetry, by celebrating the individual who is “rejected yet confessing out the soul to conform to the rhythm of thought in his naked and endless head” (“Howl” 1.75) Similarly, the primary character in Kerouac’s *Dharma Bums* scorns any attempts to obtain truth through external stimuli. He insists, “[I]t’s with your six senses that you’re fooled into believing not only that you have six senses, but that you contact an actual outside world with them” (24). The Beats also exalt the “man of solitude who could take off by himself and live purely and true to himself” (*Dharma Bums* 16). In these passages, and at numerous other points throughout their works, the members of this movement further substantiate the Transcendentalists’ view that an individual need not rely on society for a meaningful existence; instead, one must focus on spirituality and first-hand experience in nature as the means of fostering and supporting a life centered on the self.

But the Beats’ views do not descend directly from American Transcendentalism, or even Idealism. Rather, Ginsberg, Kerouac, and their peers formulated their ideas in response to a burgeoning awareness that their society, reacting to the frightening and contradictory realities of modern life, was gripped by “psychic and moral rigidity”
(Tytell 6). According to John Tytell, the atmosphere was marked by “coercion and conspiracy”:

The nation’s legacy of individuality had been changed to a more standardized expectation of what constituted ‘Americanism.’ Traditional tolerance of ideological difference had been subverted to a passion for organization and political similitude. It was a bitter and ironic distortion of our history: the character of the country had always been as various as its topography, and the lack of homogeneity meant that Americans had to work to develop a national consciousness resilient enough to embrace the aspirations of multitudes…Some vital ingredient of the ‘American Dream’ was warped and out of control. (7)

As this passage indicates, the dynamics of post-WWII America, defined in part by a fervent interest in social and political unity, gave rise to conservative cultural values, which severely limited the range of acceptable thoughts and behaviors in society. The Beats reject such values as hollow, impersonal, and destructive. Their writings highlight the inconsistencies between the idealized notion of a “consensus” society and the daily realities of oppression and ignorance in America. Ginsberg opens his poem, “America,” in defeat: “America I’ve given you all and now I’m nothing” (l.1), attesting to the parasitic effects of society on the
individual. And in Kerouac’s *On the Road*, Sal relates, “Bull had a sentimental streak about the old days in America…the country was wild and brawling and free, with abundance and any kind of freedom for everyone. His chief hate was Washington bureaucracy…” (144), thus suggesting that society’s attempt to streamline and regulate its beliefs and practices curtails individual freedom and creativity. Such observations inform the Beat generation’s counter-culture attitudes and inspire their reverence for the self.

The Beats are also concerned with the lack of authenticity present in the ideas and institutions that fuel contemporary society. According to Ginsberg, “[e]verybody in America [is] a thief living off thievery from man or nature, thus secretive & shamed of inner thought” (qtd. in Charters 333). This, the writer fears, effectively fosters the attitudes of complacency and dependency that the members of this movement so despise. In addition, William S. Burroughs observes that society has become so homogenized and individuals so deeply indoctrinated with its beliefs that “the study of thinking machines teaches us more about the brain than we can learn by introspective methods. Western man is externalizing himself in the form of gadgets” (*Naked Lunch* 22). His assertion further emphasizes the Beats’ scorn for the vacuous, robotic nature of a materialistic culture obsessed with consistency and conformity.

The Transcendentalists share this discontent. Among other topics, their essays lament society’s lack of earnest scholarship, weak social conscience, and institutionalization of religious faith. Regarding his society’s apathetic response
to slavery, Thoreau observes, “There are thousands who are in opinion opposed to slavery and to the war, who yet in effect do nothing to put an end to them; who, esteeming themselves children of Washington and Franklin, sit down with their hands in their pockets, and say that they know not what to do, and do nothing…” (“Civil Disobedience” 5). This dynamic illuminates Thoreau’s claim that the pressures of an authoritative mass ultimately serve to justify hypocrisy and complacency in individuals. The result is a culture in which “our life is not so much threatened as our perception” (Emerson, “Experience” 83). That is, while societal pressures do not put individuals in mortal danger, they do demand a livelihood that inevitably obscures man’s genuine understanding of his self and his position in the world. Even more egregiously, society’s impersonal demands – attempts to maintain order and achieve consensus, while fostering progress and prosperity – create a dynamic in which conformity and consistency are virtues. Furthermore, these circumstances make it difficult for individuals to not partake of the group mentality and collective practices while still functioning inside society.

**Inherent Authority of the Self**

These circumstances lead both the Beats and the Transcendentalists to conclude that one must live outside of society if he is to live rightly; that is, if he is to live in accordance with his self. As John Clellon Holmes notes, “the absence of personal and social values is to [the Beats], not a revelation shaking the ground beneath them, but a problem demanding a day-to-day solution. *How to live*
seems to them much more crucial than why” (“This is the Beat Generation”). That is, the Beats are not content simply to lament the ills of society; they are also seeking viable alternatives to its corrupted, obfuscating environment. For these individuals, this means locating a set of meaningful, authentic principles by which to live – the Beats feel that one may elude the “valueless abyss” of society by finding something to believe in. In the end, they realize that, in a society which offers nothing authentic to believe in, the only thing one can believe in is oneself.

The Beats indicate that one may establish a meaningful existence by living in accordance with his intuitive needs and desires – by regarding the self as the moral, spiritual, and intellectual center of the universe – rather than the external pressures of society. Ginsberg implores, “America how can I write a holy litany in your silly mood” (“America” l.54), underscoring the lack of substance behind American values. Further, the artists urge readers to trespass against society’s norms. The heroes of Ginsberg’s poem, “Howl,” are those who “studied Plotinus Poe St. John of the Cross telepathy and bop kabala because the cosmos instinctively vibrated at their feet in Kansas” (l.24), as well as those “who copulated ecstatic and insatiate with a bottle of beer and a sweetheart a package of cigarettes a candle and fell off the bed, and continued along the floor and down the hall and ended fainting on the wall with a vision of ultimate cunt and come eluding the last gyzym of consciousness” (l.41). That is, they are those individuals who pursue their instinctive needs and desires, without regard to
how closely those requirements align with those outlined by society.

The Transcendentalists convey analogous views: Emerson declares, “It is only as a man puts off all foreign support, and stands alone, that I see him to be strong and to prevail” (“Self-Reliance” 37), and Thoreau writes, “I might pursue some path, however solitary and narrow and crooked, in which I could walk with love and reverence” (“Life without Principle” 81). Like the Beats, the Transcendentalists are wary of any forces that might undermine the authority of the self and thus interfere with one’s ability to live according to his internal dictates. Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman identify contemporary society as one such influence, as it inherently pursues an amalgamated agenda of many people’s needs, desires, and interests and thus cannot accurately reflect or serve those of any particular individual. As Emerson describes it, society renders man unable to live by or for himself; he easily becomes dependent upon, and eventually incapacitated by, its superficial structures: “The civilized man has built a coach, but has lost the use of his feet. He is supported on crutches, but lacks so much support of muscle. He has a fine Geneva watch, but he fails of the skill to tell the hour by the sun” (“Self-Reliance” 36). The Transcendentalists assert that this situation ultimately impedes an individual’s access to the true moral, spiritual, and intellectual authority – his self. In addition, Thoreau insists, “Let your life be a counter friction to stop the machine. What I have to do is to see, at any rate, that I do not lend myself to the wrong which I condemn”
(“Civil Disobedience” 8). In effect, this passage urges the individual to ignore the dicta of society, on the grounds that they obscures man’s access to genuine truth and self-awareness, thereby hindering his understanding of his self and his position in the world.

Members of both movements further emphasize the importance of the self through their approaches to writing itself. Many of the major works produced by the Beats and the Transcendentalists begin with “I,” and nearly all of them are written in the first person. Use of such perspective further underscores the central role of the self in these writers’ works. Additionally, it illuminates their understanding of the fundamental connection among all things. Perhaps the most notorious example is Whitman’s opening to “Song of Myself”: “I celebrate myself, / And what I assume you shall assume, / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you (l.1-3).

Furthermore, Kerouac scorns the practice of revision and details his methods for eliciting raw, authentic expression in “The Essentials of Spontaneous Prose.” His notion that “language is undisturbed flow from the mind of personal secret idea-words” (57) articulates the Beats’ desire to access and convey, unadulterated, the contents of one’s inner consciousness. Thoreau advocates a similar approach throughout his journals. In an entry dated March 7, 1838, he emphasizes the value of spontaneous expression: “We should not endeavor coolly to analyze our thoughts, but, keeping the pen even and parallel with the current, make an accurate transcript of them. Impulse is, after all, the best
linguist, and for his logic, if not conformable to Aristotle, it cannot fail to be most convincing” (A Writer’s Journal 1). While his essays are obviously revised and polished, Thoreau demonstrates awareness that the most genuine – and revealing – sentences are actually those that flow uncensored from the consciousness, as opposed to those that are parsed and reworked so as to fit some institutionally-defined prose structure.

Thus, the Beats and the Transcendentalists arrive at parallel conceptions of the self as the supreme authority and consequently conclude that an individual need not rely on society for a meaningful existence. In fact, the members of these movements indicate that one cannot expect to sustain a life guided by principles of self-reliance and independent inquiry while still within the confines of society. Despite their temporal and cultural distance, the members of these movements also propose comparable means of reconciling this disconnect. Above all, they focus on spirituality and first-hand experiences in nature as means of fostering and supporting a life centered on the self.

**Parts of a Spiritual Whole**

Consequent to their understanding of the self as the moral, spiritual, and intellectual center of the universe, the Beats and the Transcendentalists reject organized religious worship and eschew the notion of God as a superior being. In “Song of Myself,” Whitman summons his readers:

And I call to mankind, Be not curious about God,
For I who am curious about each am not
curious about God
I hear and behold God in every object, yet I understand God not in the least,
Nor do I understand who there can be more wonderful than myself. (1.1271-5)

Kerouac reiterates these sentiments throughout *Dharma Bums*; at one point, the main character exclaims, “But you’re getting these silly convictions and conceptions out of nowhere, don’t you realize all this life is just a dream? Why don’t you just relax and enjoy God? God is you, you fool!” (84). Both passages highlight the Beats’ and the Transcendentalists’ shared belief that the wisdom and serenity for which one typically turns to religion reside within the self. In addition, the writers recognize that one cannot ascertain higher truths about the world and his position in it through external sources.

Such views, however, do not prevent the members of these movements from embracing spiritual beliefs or even from acknowledging the existence of God. On the contrary, as Stephen Prothero observes, the Beats and their Transcendentalist predecessors “aimed to make contact with the sacred on the nonverbal, trans-conceptual level of intuition and feeling” (“On the Holy Road” 220). The writers conceive of a spiritual system in which the individual accesses higher truths through deeper awareness of his self. In this way, he arrives at his own, personally relevant beliefs, rather than those expounded by the “dead faiths” of institutionalized religion. Whitman asserts, “Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy whatever I touch or am
touched from;/ The scent of these arm-pits is aroma finer
than prayer,/ This head is more than churches or bibles or
creeds” (“Song of Myself” 1.526-8).

This approach also provides an individual insight
into man’s proper relationship with the world. Although the
Beats and the Transcendentalists denounce society and even
rebuff certain members, they do not deny their connection
to these entities. In fact, the writers share an understanding
of – and reverence for – the fundamental equality and
inextricable unity of all things. Emerson speaks of “that
Unity, that Over-soul, within which every man’s particular
being is contained and made one with all other; that common
heart…Meantime within man is the soul of the whole; the
wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and
particle is equally related; the eternal ONE” (“The Over-
soul” 52). This conception relegates the ethereal to the
same status as the material; in effect, no thing is greater or
lesser than any other thing. By extension, the Beats and the
Transcendentalists conclude that “we are all one Self with
one being, one consciousness” (Allen Verbatim 5). Thus,
despite their self-centered, highly individualistic portrayals
of man in relation to society, none of the writers conceives of
the individual as truly independent of his surroundings, nor
isolated from the spiritual realm.

Western religious traditions conventionally present
the soul as an eternal, immaterial link between the mortal
and the divine. As such, this entity eclipses the ephemeral,
sinful body. However, consistent with their egalitarian
sentiments, the Beats and the Transcendentalists refuse
the traditional dichotomy between physical and spiritual and deny the inherent inferiority of the former to the latter. Ginsberg’s “Footnote to ‘Howl’” affirms this by elevating the physical world – even its stereotypically depraved elements – into the spiritual realm:

Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy!
Holy! Holy!
Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy!
The world is holy! The soul is holy! The skin is holy!
The nose is holy! The tongue and cock and hand and asshole holy!
Everything is holy! everybody’s holy!
everywhere is holy! everyday is in eternity!
Everyman’s an angel!
The bum’s as holy as the seraphim! the madman is holy as you my soul are holy!
(l.1-6)

Moreover, the writers maintain that one must understand both the body and soul in order to understand the self. To a society disgusted by the corporeal and accustomed to delicate euphemisms, Whitman relates, “Knowing the perfect fitness and equanimity of things, while they discuss I am silent, and go bathe and admire myself. / Welcome is every organ and attribute of me, and of any man hearty and clean, / Not an inch or particle of an inch is vile, and none shall be less familiar than the rest” (l.47-9). Such revelations demonstrate that the poet embraces physical experience as an essential part of spirituality. This, in turn, implies that one
must literally know his body in order to achieve spiritual communion with his soul, a condition that the Beats and the Transcendentalists confirm throughout their works.

For the members of these movements, the body and the soul ultimately represent complementary parts of a single unit: the self. While each manifests itself in a distinct way – one physical and ephemeral; the other ethereal and eternal – these entities concomitantly enhance an individual’s spiritual context for understanding his self and his position in the world. As a consequence, one recognizes the inherent equality and interconnectivity among the body, the soul, and the self. In *Dharma Bums*, for example, the writer asserts that “the substance of my bones and their bones and the bones of dead men in the earth of rain at night is the common individual substance that is everlastingly tranquil and blissful” (105). By extension, an individual discerns more general, yet analogous, relationships between the physical and the spiritual realms. In *On the Road*, the same writer predicts, “Mankind will someday realize that we are actually in contact with the dead and with the other world, whatever it is” (153). Thus, the body-soul-self triad, described throughout the Beats’ and the Transcendentalists’ works, serves as a metaphor for explaining their spiritual systems on the whole and, in doing so, underscores the principles of unity and equality central to those systems.

The traditional concepts of God and religion are incompatible with this form of spirituality because their hierarchical structures separate, irreconcilably, the source of spiritual awareness from its beholders, thereby undermining
the egalitarian relationship among all beings that the Beats and the Transcendentalists maintain. Therefore, while members of both movements incorporate God into their spiritual systems, they refuse to acknowledge him as superior to any mortal. Emerson illuminates this point in *Nature*, when he claims, “I am part or particle of God… master or servant, is then a trifle and a disturbance” (8). In addition, Whitman declares, “I know that the hand of God is the elderhand of my own, / And I know that the spirit of God is the eldest brother of my own, / And that all the men ever born are also my brothers….and the women my sisters and lovers” (l.83-5), and he goes so far as to describe God as his “loving bedfellow” (l.52).

Another important component to the Beats’ and the Transcendentalists’ spiritual philosophies is their assertion that there is no systematic approach to the uncertainties of life. In light of their belief that we cannot base claims to authority on evidence external to human consciousness, the writers are content to acknowledge that some fundamental questions must remain unanswered. They feel that it is better to lack an explanation than to rely on dogma and empty rhetoric and thus find additional reason to reject the teachings of conventional religious authorities. According to Whitman, “[l]ogic and sermons never convince, / The damp of the night drives deeper into my soul” (“Song of Myself” l. 652-3). For these artists, insights into spiritual matters are only useful if they are obtained first-hand.

Here again, deviation from cultural norms attests to the Beats’ and the Transcendentalists’ distrust of society
and its ability to support a meaningful existence. By rejecting institutionalized religion in favor of a personally-constructed spirituality, the members of this movement reinforce the authority of the self. The writers’ philosophies further undermine the claims to power of any external social structure. At the same time, the reader is reminded that contempt for society does not imply a disdain for humanity. Thus, although they condemn dependence upon the past and other external resources as trifling distractions from self-awareness, the Beats and the Transcendentalists simultaneously speak for a spiritual system that recognizes the eternal, transcendental connection among all things.

**Truths in Nature**

In his essay, “Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” Lynn White, Jr. describes the evolution of mankind’s functional and symbolic uses of nature throughout the world under the premise that “what we do about ecology depends on our ideas of the man-nature relationship” (12). He notably observes that traditional Western views developed concomitantly with the rise of Christianity, and thus he considers contemporary Western approaches to nature to be outgrowths of beliefs derived from their long-standing religious traditions. In White’s opinion, these values have ultimately served to initiate and justify much of the environmental degradation that increasingly plagues the consciousnesses of many citizens. Specifically, he highlights the Judeo-Christian tradition’s anthropocentric attitude towards nature, which he feels generated the concept of man as master of nature as well as the accompanying notion
that nature exists solely for the purpose of serving man. For White, such perspectives became especially influential around the Transcendentalists’ era, when industrialization and rapidly-advancing technology reinforced systematic exploitation of the natural environment as a means to progress and prosperity. This led to the “emergence in widespread practice of the Baconian creed that scientific knowledge means technological power over nature…its acceptance as a normal pattern of action may mark the greatest event in human history since the invention of agriculture, and perhaps in nonhuman terrestrial history as well” (4-5). That is, the Industrial Revolution afforded, on a practicable level, broad implementation of this concept of man as master of nature, thus providing society with a tangible – albeit destructive – model for the relationship between man and nature. Thus, he declares, “We shall continue to have a worsening ecologic crisis until we reject the Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve man” (14).

The Beats and the Transcendentalists depart from the conventional treatment of nature that White criticizes, and, in so doing, they provide alternative interpretations of the functional and symbolic uses of nature, which ultimately represent solutions to the problem White discusses in his essay. Of all the members of these movements, Emerson strays least from the traditional conception of nature. A minister by training, the writer affirms the servile role of nature with the fervency of one delivering a sermon to his congregation. He declares, “Nature is thoroughly
mediate. It is made to serve. It receives the dominion of man as meekly as the ass on which the Saviour rode. It offers all its kingdoms to man as the raw material which he may mould into what is useful” (*Nature* 35). Comparable examples permeate the text. Between such passages, however, one identifies a distinct reverence for nature on the part of the author. In one instance, Emerson pronounces himself a “lover of uncontained and immortal beauty. In the wilderness, I find something more dear and connate than in streets or villages” (8). This apparent contradiction illuminates the point of Emerson’s departure from the conventional Western view of man as master over nature. While the writer portrays nature as a tool for understanding the self and its surroundings and, in that sense, renders nature subservient, he also insists that we are to respect nature in virtue of its servitude. Contrary to societal convention, Emerson does not identify in this relationship license to exploit our natural resources; for him, to do so would be to efface a crucial means of self-awareness and spiritual understanding.

Thoreau, Whitman, and the Beats build upon Emerson’s slight departure from convention to reject entirely the notion of man as master of nature. They instead pursue an egalitarian relationship with the natural world, similar to the one that the members of these movements seek to maintain with all living things. In “Song of Myself,” Whitman intones:

This is the common air that bathes the globe.
This is the breath of laws and songs and
behaviour,
This is the tasteless water of souls….this is the true sustenance,
It is for the illiterate….it is for the judges of the supreme court….it is for the federal capitol and the state capitols. (L.359-62)

Whitman draws the “true sustenance” of life from a shared resource – nature – and then divides it among all types of people. In doing so, the poet demonstrates the egalitarian bonds uniting man with nature. Additionally, these writers emphasize that, in order to live independently of an imperfect, obfuscating society, individuals must be conscious of their consumption and conservative in their use of resources; nature, therefore, is not to be treated as an endlessly abundant reserve. With *Walden*, Thoreau endeavors to demonstrate that one may live a fulfilling life without material goods. He writes:

> I was more independent than any farmer in Concord, for I was not anchored to a house or farm, but could follow the bent of my genius, which is a very crooked one, every moment. Beside being better off than they already, if my house had been burned or my crops had failed, I should have been nearly as well off as before. (37)

Together, these writers’ ideas are most closely aligned with those White believes will ameliorate the world’s current ecological crisis, as they impart a practical approach to a healthy relationship with nature: namely, economy, anti-
materialism, and an egalitarian relationship with one’s natural environment.

Regardless of particular differences among the individual authors, the Beats and the Transcendentalists nonetheless agree on several points which, taken together, depart from the traditional conceptions of nature. As such, they offer a potentially effective alternative to the destructive dynamic that White considers in his essay. First, “nature” refers to a physical entity, which includes “essences unchanged by man; space, the air, the river, the leaf” (Nature 5). In this sense, nature encompasses those elements and locations that exist outside of human culture. Thus, to be in nature is to effectively be outside of society. This is fundamentally important to the members of both movements, who are continually exploring means of eluding the trappings of society. Ginsberg recognized this with his response to the question, “What would you consider an ideal existence for yourself as a poet?”: “Retiring from the world, living in a mountain hut, practicing certain special meditation exercises half the day, and composing epics as the sun sets” (qtd. in Diggory, “Allen Ginsberg’s Urban Pastoral” 201).

Nature also affords a deeper understanding of the self as well as an individual’s relationship with his surroundings. Emerson explains that “the greatest delight which the fields and woods minister, is the suggestion of an occult relation between man and the vegetable” (Nature 9). Accordingly, the works of the Beats and the Transcendentalists reflect an understanding of nature as a
powerful anodyne to society’s deleterious effects. Kerouac, for example, exalts his experiences in nature throughout *On the Road*: “We bent down and began picking cotton. It was beautiful…it was beautiful kneeling and hiding in that earth. If I felt like resting I did, with my face on the pillow of brown moist earth. Birds sang an accompaniment. I thought I had found my life’s work…I was a man of the earth” (96-7). This passage highlights the beauty of the character’s natural surroundings as well as the self-authority and self-awareness that such an environment affords: if he is tired, he may rest without feeling pressure to meet a quota or keep up with fellow workers; similarly, his comment that he “was a man of the earth” illustrates recognition of his fundamental connection to nature. Nature, therefore, functions practically as an alternative to society and a means of achieving deeper self-awareness.

According to the Beats and the Transcendentalists, nature is a symbol of the self. Thus, knowing nature is an essential component to knowing the self. As Emerson describes, “every appearance in nature corresponds to some state of mind” (*Nature* 23). Therefore, “a life in harmony with nature, the love of truth and of virtue, will purge the eyes to understand her text. By degrees we may come to know the primitive sense of the permanent objects of nature, so that the world shall be to us an open book…” (31). In their views, just as one achieves a deeper understanding of the individual self through physical intimacy with his own body, so one can also access higher truths about the universal
self by cultivating an intimate familiarity with the physical world at large.

The concept of nature is also used symbolically throughout the Beats’ and the Transcendentalists’ writings to signify that which is unbounded and unadulterated, as opposed to that which is regulated and rationalized. Thoreau takes nature to represent “absolute freedom and wildness, as contrasted with a freedom and culture merely civil” (“Walking” 71). The Beats corroborate Thoreau’s distinction at many points throughout their writings. Particularly notable is their concept of the road and its use as a tool for escaping the confines of society. As such, the road acquires many of the rejuvenating and liberating qualities of nature. At the end of his poem denigrating American society, for example, Ginsberg declares, “America, I’m putting my queer shoulder to the wheel” (“America” l.73). Kerouac invokes these connotations when referencing the “streets of life” and “innocent road-eyes” (On the Road 107). In another example, one of his characters relates, “Our battered suitcases were piled on the sidewalk again; we had longer ways to go. But no matter, the road is life” (On the Road 212). In the same book, Sal Paradise prepares for a cross-country journey by studying maps and travel guides. As a result, his first attempts at hitch-hiking fail; he is so preoccupied with following the “best” route, as outlined by the maps, that he subverts the inherent wisdom of his internal authority. It is only when he realizes that “it was [his] dream that screwed up, the stupid hearthside idea that it would be wonderful to follow one great red line across
America instead of trying various roads and routes” (11), and thus develops a respect for the free and unsystematic qualities of nature that he embarks on a meaningful journey.

For the Beats and the Transcendentalists, nature serves, in both practical and figurative capacities, as the means of eluding society while developing a deeper understanding of the essential relationship between man and the universe. As such, experiences in nature facilitate the awareness required for a life guided by self-reliance and independent inquiry.

**Conclusions**

Ideas about nature, spirituality, and the self are prominently represented in American Transcendentalism and Beat literature. These broad concepts are used both literally and symbolically to express the writers’ thoughts on identity and conformity, as the means of exploring the relationship between man and his society. Concomitant analysis of works from both movements reveals significant parallels between the Beats’ and the Transcendentalists’ impressions of society, as well as their conceptions of the individual. In particular, the members of these movements reveal a profound discontent with American culture and scorn their respective societies’ increasing emphasis on conformity and material prosperity at the expense of the self-governing individual. Despite such bitter disillusionment, however, one finds little concern with reforming society in Beat and Transcendentalist literature. Rather, the authors continually explore means of eluding society, promoting self-reliance, a personally relevant beliefs system, and first-hand
experience as means of doing so. Thus, the members of these movements view reforming one’s self and one’s relationship to his surroundings as more important than changing the prevailing social structures.

Such similarities raise questions about the relationship between American Transcendentalism and the Beat movement. In particular, they inspire curiosity as to whether the writers behind these movements are highlighting perpetual flaws in American society or whether the perceived ills are localized, exacerbated by transient cultural dynamics. This, in turn, raises broader questions about the role of the artist in society. Full investigations of these inquiries are beyond the scope of my current research, but I hope that my consideration of related questions – specifically the Beats’ and the Transcendentalists’ understanding of the relationship between the individual and his society, as revealed through their concepts of nature, spirituality, and the self – will contribute to that effort.

Finally, I would like to note that, despite the inwardly-directed nature of these movements, the Beats and the Transcendentalists still managed to effect change in their society. Their unconventional ideas and, in some cases, their original writing styles, helped to expand the realm of critical discourse concerned with the effects of society on the individual. Moreover, in their attempts to escape society, the Beats and the Transcendentalists emphasized the role of the self as the moral, spiritual, and intellectual center of the universe. To accommodate this notion, the writers demanded alternative approaches to religion, education, and sexuality,
among many other topics. In doing so, both movements created impetus for change by validating the authority of the self in determining one’s own needs, desires, and interests.
Notes

1 For additional discussion of the Beat Generation’s impact on American culture, see David Castronovo, Beyond the Gray Flannel Suit: Books from the 1950s that Made American Culture (New York: Continuum, 2004) as well as Jamison and Eyerman, Seeds of the Sixties.

2 It is important to note that American Transcendentalism and the Beat Movement are both inwardly focused movements that emphasize the impregnable authority of the self and one’s first-hand experiences with nature and spirituality. As a consequence, the ideas expounded by each author are not always consistent with those of the other authors in question. Each movement, therefore, amounts to a gathering of many distinct voices around a set of common ideas, which are uniquely expressed by the individual writers. I am more concerned with the ideas espoused by the broader movements than with the idiosyncratic positions of the individuals who represent them.


4 See, among others, Emerson’s essays: “The American Scholar” (1837); “The Over-Soul” (1841); and “Experience” (1844). See also Thoreau’s essays, “Slavery in Massachusetts” (1854); “A Plea for Captain John Brown”
(1860); and “Life without Principle” (1863); and Whitman’s Democratic Vistas (1871).

5 Harold Fromm, similarly, describes how the Industrial Revolution affected humanity’s conception of its relationship to nature. Specifically, he notes that technology has afforded the illusion that man can control nature, and thus allows us to forget that our minds and bodies are fundamentally dependent upon natural support systems. See his essay, “From Transcendence to Obsolescence: A Route Map,” in Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, eds. The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 30-39.
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Although Kate Chopin published *The Awakening* in 1899, her text did not gain acceptance in the American literary canon until the late twentieth century, corresponding with the rise of feminist criticism as a mode of literary discourse. As a result, *The Awakening* is often labeled as an early feminist novel. Although Chopin’s eventual canonization provides a commentary on and illustration of the evolution of the literary feminist movement, the complex themes and motifs of *The Awakening* restrain the text from wholly conforming to feminist dogma. *The Awakening* may focus on a female character’s self-discovery,
but such a narrative is not exclusively a feminist critique, especially considering the historical context in which Chopin was writing. Any text written by a female author and focusing on a female character cannot avoid feminist trends, but Chopin’s *The Awakening* is not a feminist novel in the modern sense. In fact, Edna Pontellier never moves beyond the patriarchal constraints of the society depicted in the novel, a vital component to the modern feminist mode of discourse. Investigation of gendered associations, naturalism, and imagery suggests that the novel is a study of identity, regardless of sex, and that it illustrates naturalistic motifs that more accurately place the novel within the American literary canon.

Many literary critics label Edna Pontellier as a radical feminist whose journey of awakening is one of woman reaching beyond the boundaries of masculine subjugation; however, analysis of the gender relations and social constructs at Grand Isle and in New Orleans reveal that, as an anomaly of both gender and society, Chopin’s heroine makes no such leaps of feminist grandeur. In “Edna’s Wisdom: A Transitional Numinous Merging,” Cristina Giorcelli notes that “it is the tendency of her nature to escape structured categories…” (113). As such, Edna displays equivalent masculine and feminine qualities that neutralize her gender, save for the sexual transformation that lies at the heart of her awakening.

Edna’s femininity is best illustrated by her interaction with her husband, which establishes the objectification of the heroine through the male gaze. While
watching Edna return from the shore, Leonce “fixed his gaze” on his wife and regards her “as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage” (Chopin 4). The emphasis on his perception of her establishes a male gaze that objectifies Edna as a woman, and preliminary discussion of this phenomenon establishes the oppression of the feminine sex. In addition to Leonce, other male characters reinforce the male gaze; Victor Lebrun purposefully seats himself “where he commanded a view of Edna’s face,” (58) and Chopin’s linguistic choices clearly indicate the masculine dominance.

Even after her awakening, Edna never moves beyond the control of masculine characters. Once she leaves her husband’s subjugation and relocates to the pigeon house, she is dominated by her desires for Lebrun and Alcee Arobin, both of which direct her sexual awakening. Her desires suggest an awareness of her identity rather than a revolt of social and gender constructs. She also remains within social feminine precepts as illustrated by the significance of her wedding ring. Upon meeting Leonce after swimming, “she silently reached out to him, and he, understanding, took the rings from his vest pocket and dropped them into her open palm” (4). The silent exchange suggests her acceptance of her place in the social construct of marriage, and even when she later attempts to discard the ring, she again “held out her hand, and taking the ring, slipped it upon her finger” (51). The parallelism of this gendered symbolism suggests no change in her acceptance of her existence within feminine constructs.
In contrast to the effect of her male counterparts’ objectification, Edna herself objectifies the men in her life with the same reliance on visual perception, demonstrating her own masculinity. Indeed, sight and perception are recurring themes throughout the novel, as Victor Lebrun teases Edna with a French song, “‘Ah! If you knew / What your eyes are saying to me’” (86). One of the first descriptions of the heroine focuses on her eyes and establishes her ability to utilize the male gaze in the same way as her husband: “Mrs. Pontellier’s eyes were quick and bright….She had a way of turning them swiftly upon an object and holding them there…” (5). The specimen under her gaze is typically Robert Lebrun, and this situation creates a gender construct that objectifies the masculine to the feminine subject. At Madame Antoine’s, she “peeped out at him two or three times” (36) and “turned deliberately and observed him” (93); like Victor, she positions herself “where she commanded a view of all…” (25). The specific repetition of “commanded” from Victor’s male gaze illustrates a linguistic similarity of dominance connecting his masculinity to Edna’s own identity.

Chopin further establishes Edna as a gender anomaly by contrasting her undiscovered individualism with feminine stereotypes. In “Adele Ratignolle: Kate Chopin’s Feminist at Home in The Awakening,” for example, Kathleen M. Streater discusses Adele as the archetypal mother figure, observing that Adele is glorified as the “angel in the house” archetype and that “the tone is almost silly in its over-the-top admiration” (407). Indeed, Chopin repeatedly associates
Adele with biblical imagery of motherhood, as Edna compares her friend to “a faultless Madonna” (Chopin 11). In contrast to the lofty characterization of Adele, the narrator notes that “in short, Mrs. Pontellier was not a mother-woman” (9), and her fickle attentiveness to her own children succinctly illustrates the point and further alienates her from the mother archetype. Additionally, Adele’s marriage establishes Edna’s relationship with Leonce as anomalous. Chopin writes, “The Ratignolles understood each other perfectly. If ever the fusion of two human beings into one has been accomplished on this sphere it was surely in their union” (54). Edna and Leonce, in contrast, do not appear to function together in any capacity, further establishing Edna as a being already beyond social constructs.

The domesticity of Madame Lebrun also creates a contrast to Edna’s abandonment of her own housewife duties, further alienating her from femininity. After Robert leaves for Mexico, “she [goes] up in the morning to Madame Lebrun’s room, braving the clatter of the old sewing machine” (44). Chopin’s language illustrates the discomfort Edna suffers in Mrs. Lebrun’s presence, and the uneasiness stems from the sewing machine, a symbol of feminine domesticity that is noted for its particularly loud rattling that makes its presence unavoidable. Additionally, the general tendency of the Farival twins to please those around them stands in contrast to Edna’s relationship with her father and husband, further setting her apart from the typical feminine stereotypes Chopin presents in the novel. That Edna sells her artwork and makes money from her own labor further
masculinizes her character. Edna’s characterization as both a masculine and feminine being makes it difficult to place her in either realm, and her masculine equivocation discredits attempts to make the novel a journey of feminist revolution.

At the outset of the novel, when Edna is first introduced, the reader is already aware that she is not really confined by her sex. This characterization is due in large part to the cultural setting of the novel. Indeed, comparing her supposed radicalism to the Creole culture that surrounds her dissuades feminist considerations in favor of a more individualistic approach less concerned with the woman question. In this regard, Nancy Walker denies the feminism other critics imagine. According to Walker, “there is, in Chopin’s novel, no stance about women’s liberation or equality; indeed, the other married women in the novel are presented as happy in condition” (256). In fact, Edna has no association with feminist groups in the novel; Leonce denies any such association when Dr. Mandelet asks if she “has been associating of late with a circle of pseudo-intellectual women—super-spiritual superior beings?” (Chopin 63). The Creole lifestyle of liberality across the sexes, shown by the participation of women in risqué conversations, rouses Edna’s sexual awakening. Rather than the struggle of sexes, Walker argues that “Edna is not behaving in a shocking, inexplicable manner in the novel….Rather, by succumbing to the sensuality of the Creoles, she is denying what she has been raised to believe, so that in some ways the novel deals with the clash of two cultures” (Walker 254). Edna’s journey appears to be a transformation into the sensual
Creole woman, which opposes the Protestant farm life of her childhood.

Edna’s passivity in her awakening attests to a naturalist structure of the novel, making the text difficult to label as feminist. Her ignorance of her awakening until its pinnacle is due largely to her lack of will in the transformation, suggesting the authority of natural forces in her journey to self-consciousness. If she is unaware and inactive in her awakening, a feminist agenda has little place in the novel because Edna’s transformation is merely the consequence of nature and not of her own desire to usurp patriarchal constructs of society. The fact that men frame her sexual awakening shows that Edna makes no attempt to move beyond patriarchal constructs; Robert spurs the desire for and curiosity about sensuality, Arobin consummates the desire, and Robert then rejects her proposal of an affair. In *Kate Chopin: a Critical Biography*, Per Seyersted argues that “what dominates her imagination during this period is not so much a feminist revolt as the idea of transcendent passion for Robert” (141). In her relationships with men, Edna evidently remains in a dream world of passivity, guided by men, as her awakening is one of self-identity as an individual, regardless of gender. According to Seyersted, Edna is captured by the romanticism of Robert’s fairytales and ghost stories (141). Edna moves from her own slumber and denial of her dissatisfaction with her marriage to a dream world based on Robert’s imagination.

Edna’s attachment to Arobin also centers on her slumber. In “Language and Ambiguity,” Paula Treichler
points out that “the deliciousness of the dream is at the root of its deceptive power. The ‘cup of life’ that sexual passion holds out is nature’s narcotic, which both intoxicates and drugs” (270). Comparatively, Arobin’s ministrations have a narcotic effect on Edna, as “she could have fallen quietly asleep there if he continued to pass his hand over her hair” (Chopin 88). The dreamlike deception of the men guiding her awakening merely reflects the illusory nature of her environment, as Chopin depicts the Creole culture as one of exaggeration and insincerity. Dr. Mandelet espouses this indifference of nature to Edna’s own values and temperament: “And nature takes no account of moral consequences, of arbitrary conditions which we create, and which we feel obliged to maintain at any cost” (105). Edna, therefore, cannot help but react to her environment in kind. In “Narrative Stance in Kate Chopin’s The Awakening,” Sullivan and Smith argue that Edna’s characterization reflects the richness of the culture through which she must navigate to her own self-awareness. Like the extravagant Creole culture, “temperance, sanity, and rationality are not for Edna, who wants to explore the unknown and forbidden” (156). Her passivity is still unavoidable, as she is ignorant to the changes that lead to her eventual move from her husband and toward self-reflection. She is so unaware and inactive in her transformation that she herself is unable to verbalize the change. Patricia Yaeger observes, in “Language and Female Emancipation,” that after Edna’s awakening to the power of sensuality during her night swim, “it is Robert Lebrun who speaks for her, who frames and articulates the
meaning of her adventure” (286). Edna also has difficulty explaining her reason for moving into the pigeon house to Mademoiselle Reisz and is frustrated by her inability to understand the emotions music often evokes in her. Clearly, her transformation is not entirely within her control, and this naturalistic element disallows a strong feminist reading of *The Awakening*.

The importance of imagery also reveals a novel centered less on feminism and more on the discovery of sensuality and the self beyond gender constructs. The overriding ocean metaphor, for example, illustrates Edna’s awakening as one of sensual self-discovery and not of women’s social liberation. In a rare moment of action, Edna “walks for the first time alone, boldly, and with over-confidence…. A feeling of exultation overtook her, as if some power of significant import had been given her soul” (Chopin 27). Paula Treichler addresses Edna’s success in swimming as evidence of “real changes in her behavior and understanding. Her shout fuses body and consciousness” (265). The characterization of the sea through repeated images of physical sensuality defines Edna’s awakening. The narrator explains that “the voice of the sea is seductive…the touch of the sea is sensuous,” and Edna’s first inklings of individual awareness occur as she realizes “her position in the universe as a human being [and] …her relations as an individual to the world within and about her” (Chopin 14). The sensual and self-reflective aspects of the sea directly link Edna’s sexuality to her understanding of herself, and the repeated imagery reinforces the connection,
suggesting an inner-reflection of individualism beyond
gender and a more meaningful interpretation of the novel
beyond a purely feminist reading.

Edna’s strides to achieve clarity of self-consciousness are further related to her sensuality because they are tied to her interaction with the sea. Her progression from dreams to reality is marked by her relationship to the ocean. The emotional arousal caused by Mademoiselle Reisz’s music, for example, conjures a vision of “the figure of a man standing beside a desolate rock on the seashore. He was naked. His attitude was one of hopeless resignation” (26). The final scenes of the book mimic this image, bringing Edna’s dream into reality and self-consciousness. She revisits Grand Isle, and “when she was there beside the sea, absolutely alone…she stood naked in the open air” (108), consummating her achievement of self individuation by mirroring a masculine image. According to Michael Gilmore in “Revolt Against Nature: The Problematic Modernism of The Awakening,” this circular structure shows that “by the end of the narrative, Edna has become one with the inner life that is her real identity. She commits suicide rather than continue what she now recognizes to have been a shame of an existence” (82). Furthermore, the awakening of the individual is stressed over the awakening of female independence by the fact that “Chopin’s novel ends…with Edna’s attention turned neither toward Robert nor her husband and children, but toward her own past” (Yaegar 289). This interaction between sensuality and individuation
in the context of sea imagery, therefore, casts the novel as a general journey toward self-identity rather than a struggle for one woman’s liberation from societal constraints.

Although feminist threads cannot be completely ignored in reading Chopin’s *The Awakening*, investigation into Edna’s journey reveals an emphasis on self-individuation rather than feminine liberation. Consideration of the cultural and gender constructs created by the author indicates the focus is on the expression of the inner-self, regardless of gender. Rather than posing the woman question, Chopin is perhaps posing a challenge to consider the humanity question in illustrating the journey an individual must take to recognize the self in a society in which he or she does not fit. Without an understanding of Edna as a person, rather than simply a woman, Chopin’s novel would lack the depth and meaning that its symbolism and naturalistic imagery create and that ultimately secure *The Awakening* within the American literary canon.
Works Cited


“Suit Me All Points Like a Man”: Gender and Performance in *As You Like It* and *Richard III*

Taylor Burns
*Queen’s University*
*Kingston, Ontario*
*Canada*

The restricted masculinity of public life and the patriarchal dynamic that dominated the Renaissance courts are considered with candor, self-reflexivity, and mild superciliousness in *As You Like It* and *Richard III*. Archetypal ascension to power, operating through the venue of Machiavellian masculinity, is, in its lack of individual honesty and integrity, defined as a performance—political success depending upon the “putting on” of personage. In much of Shakespeare’s work, performance and the creation
of characters is employed for the purposes of reflection and realism ("to hold the mirror up to nature" as Hamlet claimed). In a comparison of the aforementioned works, however, it becomes clear that acting is not a befitting representation of reality; rather, it is a selfish, normalizing performance specific to the realm of the courts.

As the Renaissance court was an intrinsically patriarchal setting, the assumption of "masculine" roles was necessary if there was to be any plausible embrace of power. Thus, the world of politics and government, as presented through the Machiavellian court, was a façade, exuding an evident theatricality in the political sphere, materialized in the deceptive and ambitious members of the public realm. Power-hungry individuals—almost exclusively men due to the patriarchal dominance of the setting—are then characteristically void; the natural state of man is impossible if success (an infectious ambition) is to be achieved. Gender, and more specifically masculinity, is then almost entirely performative.¹

In these two texts, Shakespeare acknowledges the performative nature of "maleness," highlighting its malleable nature by characterizing men as closer to androgynous than fundamentally masculine in their a priori state. He employs an egalitarian form of storytelling where all beings (who are inherently equal and without gender conformity) are then defined by their surroundings or stage: the physical or dramatic space where a gender role is performed. The transferable qualities (or "putting on" capabilities) of masculine engendering are contrasted with the masquerade
of public life—the masquerade necessary for success—through a separation of the patriarchal and feminine. In both examples, the courts are the stage for masculine performance while the moments of isolation and privacy (*Richard III*) and the setting of the Forest of Arden (*As You Like It*) exist indifferently, allowing men to express their natural, rustic, and innocent character. When, to speak figuratively, the performative stage is separated from the private backstage, the male characters are removed from their attempts to enact the archetypal gender expectations of the court (often the antithesis of their true being) and their inherent qualities that lie beneath the veneer of gender are exposed: man in his *apriori* form.

In *As You Like It* the complexities of masculinity (as a gender construct) are appropriated in the geography of the text, which illustrates two contraries through the interplay of the court and forest. The court is the vibrant and surreal stage of patriarchal struggle and ambition, the public realm of Machiavellian ethics; the Forest of Arden is the idyllic garden, the pasture that is associated with the natural male environment, allowing for the expression of intrinsic character—hidden desires and effemination—and the abandon of archetypal performance. Strong gender identity, displayed in the court, is of an entirely performative character. “All the world’s a stage,” (2.7.139) and the male and female, the masculine and feminine, the two gender archetypes, are both projections – insignificant enactments.

The forest, therefore, is fundamentally a world of men—a location that provides sex exclusivity and a
temporary vacation from the masculine identity. Yet it is important to distinguish between gender and sex. The Forest is a location for the male sex; however, it is free from the stereotypical projections of the male gender. Only those who are of the male sex or accompany those who are of the male sex can enter. The performance of masculinity is not required, as we see through the effeminate performance of the young “boy” Ganymede. Instead, the adoption of the sex is necessary, allowing them to freely bear souls, sentiment, and emotion with each other—natural, human interaction that is only achievable in the hidden forest. The forest, as it will be shown, is the natural habitat of men, the setting that unleashes original masculinity or a lack thereof.

The idyllic forest setting is, as previously mentioned, comparable to the geography of original man: the Garden of Eden. As Duke Senior describes, the setting is one that evokes the natural male environment, allowing men to realize their true, atypical character in a non-performative setting despite its unlikely existence in the post-Eden world:

Are not these woods
More free from peril than the envious court?
Here feel we not the penalty of Adam;
The seasons’ difference, as the icy fang
And churlish chiding of the winter’s wind,
Which, when it bites and blows upon my body
Even till I shrink with cold, I smile and say
‘This is no flattery; these are counselors
That feelingly persuade me what I am.’  
(2.1.3-17)
The forest is not ideal, but it is real: an inartificial, although flawed, locality for men that counsels through its natural elements and persuades its populace into uninhibited self-realization. It is closer to the ideal (a culture without archetypal convention) than the courts as a result of its gender deconstruction and, thus, is the final, paradisiacal destination for the male characters.³ Moreover, the character of Oliver, the stereotypical Machiavellian courtier, is described by Celia, before his conversion to the forest, as “the most unnatural / That lived amongst men” (4.3.122, 123). Subsequently, Oliver describes Orlando’s rescue of him as an act of “kindness, nobler ever than revenge, / And nature, stronger than his just occasion” (4.3.129, 130). Oliver, the representation of the courts, is the most unnatural of men, and Orlando, an enthusiast of the forest, is moved by “nature” to aid his treacherous male sibling, enacting an inherent altruism. Hence, the forest is where intrinsic male benevolence is exercised, and true, “natural” characters function free from the ambitious, Machiavellian, and ‘unnatural’ impulses of Oliver and the courts.

An essential conversation that exposes the candidness and sincerity of the forest is the comparison of geographical comforts between Touchstone and Corin. When the shepherd inquires about Touchstone’s satisfaction with his change of scenery, the response is lackluster:

Truly, shepherd, in respect of itself it is a good life; but in respect that it is a
shepherd’s life, it is naught. In respect that it is solitary, I like it very well; but in respect that it is private, it is a very vile life. Now, in respect it is in the fields, it pleaseth me well; but in respect it is not in the court, it is tedious. (3.2.13-19)

Being a masculine character whose role is that of a fool (an actor and performer) in the Machiavellian courts, Touchstone finds himself bored by the lack of performance in the forest, expressing an obvious nostalgia for the fictive comforts of the court. The forest is “tedious” and “private,” potentially allowing for the articulation of intimate character traits in a remote environment as opposed to one that is “solitary,” implying unaccompanied moments in a defined setting. Furthermore, their discussion of “good” manners highlights the unacceptable nature of the country’s honest maleness in the courts where they performatively “mock” the integrity of the pastoral: “Those that are good manners at the court are as ridiculous in the country as the behavior of the country is the most mockable at the court” (3.2.45-48).

As a location, the forest is a male haven; as an entity, the forest is entirely female—hence, the negation of masculinity in its inhabitants. Physically, it has female attributes, described by Rosalind as bearing “skirts,” like “fringe upon a petticoat” (3.2.331, 332). These female characteristics are imbued in the male inhabitants, altering their behavior accordingly. Rosalind further describes the disposition of “women” as “effeminate, changeable, longing and liking, proud, fantastical, apish, shallow, inconstant, full
or tears, full of smiles” (3.2.401-403). Though these qualities are associated with “women” in the text and are, to a certain degree, performed by them, they are, more abrasively and more ironically, manifested in the actions and behavior of the male characters in the female forest. The bipolar Jacques and the love blind, irrational Orlando embody this principle as they oscillate from amorous and affectionate monologues to distressed, morbid soliloquies.

Because the environment is homo-social, there is an evident freedom from the strict gender (and therefore, sexual) definitions of the court. Sexuality, as a necessary aspect of human nature, exists in all environments, and, as a result of the change in gender convention, must be suitably replaced in this self-defining locale. For Orlando, his conventional, female-oriented love is unattainable in the forest, and is subsequently replaced by male “counsel” through the character of Ganymede. Due to the gender reversal involved in this counsel and the underlying love Rosalind has for Orlando, the mentoring is an obvious example of homoerotic role-playing. More significantly, it illustrates the juxtaposition of homoeroticism and archetypal romanticism: a natural substitution for Orlando in this genuine, homo-social environment. Furthermore, archetypal, heterosexual romanticism is trivialized by Rosalind prior to her perusal of the young Orlando: “From henceforth I will, coz, and devise sports. Let me see, what think you of falling in love?” (1.2.23, 24). The hetero-eroticism that will become vital to her character—and more broadly, the play as a whole—is trivialized before it begins. In this regard, the
foundation of the play, the pursuit of hetero-erotic fulfillment (however unconventionally it presents itself), is defined for Rosalind, Orlando, and the remainder of the characters as a “game”—a trivial pursuit. Hence, the distinction between homosexual and heterosexual activity is blurred in this non-gendered space of natural man, illustrating the prevalence of masculine homosexual activity despite the pseudo-reality presented by the rigid behavioral confines of the court.

*Richard III* presents a similar dichotomy by replacing the geographic appropriation of gender with binaries of public and private. The “stage” is Richard’s court, and his incessant attempts to seize the throne are the public performances of the necessary patriarchal archetypes, while the private, backstage moments are instances of solidarity and isolation (when Richard confronts the audience with his desires, fears, and inner thoughts). The courts of *Richard III* are dependent on the façade of masculinity for the succession of power. To work his way through the performative society, Richard publicly subscribes to a masculine identity of violence, aggressiveness, and sexual dominance: the necessary facets of male gender construction in this patrilineal court. However, his frequent asides and soliloquies expose the epicene nature of his patriarchal character.

In this light, the opening soliloquy may be seen to function in the same fashion as a thesis—defining the “true,” ambiguous Richard before the dramatics of his ascension to power ensue. These solitary asides, the quintessential articulations of private character, prominently feature the
use of puns and demonstrate a considerable diminishment in the sexual rapaciousness of Richard’s public speech -- the loss of a definitive characteristic of patriarchal masculinity. With clever language play, such as the iconic “Now is the winter of our discontent / Made glorious summer by this sun of York” (1.2.1, 2), Richard is ostensibly performing in the manner of a Shakespearean fool: witty in poetic language, effeminate, and asexual. Though also a fool, Touchstone in *As You Like It*, is, as previously discussed, portrayed as categorically masculine through his pursuit of Audrey. Richard, however, considers these sexual pursuits to be banal and repulsive (save for when they are deemed useful for political purposes): “I cannot prove a lover […] And hate the idle pleasures of these days” (1.1.28, 31).

Furthermore, he, like Rosalind, views hetero-eroticism as a game in which he will not participate: “He capers nimbly in a lady’s chamber […] But I, that am not shap’d for sportive tricks […] I, that am rudely stamp’d” (1.1.12-16). There is a fundamental duality in Richard’s presentation as a male: a meek, effeminate, asexual, and cunning characterization in his moments of solitude that is contrasted with an ambitious, heteronormative, violent, and sexually driven public persona. The former operates as a dramatic placebo, not furthering the plot but providing internal exposition, while the latter is the plot-driving force, the theatric catalyst. The performance of the masculine persona is necessary for the plot and the play’s patrilineal dynamic to be furthered.

Furthermore, in his wooing of Anne, Richard utilizes the vocabulary of sexual desire, masculine affection, and
heterosexual obsession (a diction he so adamantly rejects in his opening soliloquy) for the purposes of obtaining power. His sword, the perpetually phallic symbol of dominant masculinity, is offered to Anne, reversing the masculine power dynamic in the scene and rendering its performance as fundamentally interchangeable. This is a succinct example of the transferrable (and therefore, artificial) nature of masculine idealism: the fundamental physical representation of patriarchy carelessly discarded. Through her potential possession of the sword, Anne partakes in the role playing “game” of Rosalind in *As You Like It*—the juxtaposition of masculine power and the feminine form.

In the fourth scene of Act 4, we see, for the first time, Richard’s public acknowledgement of the flaws of the masculine persona—a moment where, speaking figuratively, he steps “out of character” in a reversal of archetypical gender power, articulating a weakness that has, thus far, been illustrated only through moments of solitude. He interacts with Queen Elizabeth in a seemingly self-deprecating fashion, relying on reason (though ultimately outwitted by his female counterpart) in an attempt to ensure power—a strategy that was successfully repeated in the plot through the employment of masculine audacity, not honest discussion:

Look, what is done cannot be now amended:
Men shall deal unadvisedly sometimes,
Which after-hours gives leisure to repent.
(4.4.291-293)
I cannot make you what amends I would, Therefore accept such kindness as I can. (4.4.310, 311)

Richard’s fatal flaw is assuming the infallibility of gender archetypes, leading him to presume that Queen Elizabeth will act in a subordinate manner and subsequently to let down his façade. He ascends to the throne through the performance of the masculine archetype and ultimately falls through his failure to continue this enactment.

Idealized masculinity is a façade in both Richard III and As You Like It, replaced by an original ‘maleness’ that is closer to the androgynous. In both plays, gender is performative, put on as an instrument to grasp Machiavellian power. Nevertheless, this reading does not imply that men are naturally effeminate; there is a balance, a more evident androgyny in the male sex. What this reading attempts to demonstrate is the way in which the public sphere of the Renaissance world (or any world where these conventions exist) demanded the suppression of the effeminate, self-defining, or androgynous side of men, forcing a choice of identity that was and is, if public success ranks as an ambition, limited to the quintessentially masculine.
Notes

1 The word performative, when used in the context of gender, is a concept most frequently attributed to Judith Butler and its influence must be acknowledged. Butler’s criticism, although not resourced for this article, does provide a very general grounding.

2 In the framing of this discussion, through its consideration of the Forest of Arden as akin to the inner, original being of man, the parallels with the Garden of Eden become evident. This concept will not be pursued due to the broad nature of its claims (with a pre-requisite for close biblical reading if it is to be correctly explained). However, the idea that the Forest, like the Garden, is an abode of innocence analogous to a time before the corruption of man is essential. This corruption is broadly defined as original sin. Therefore, in this specific argument, this sin is the thirst for ambition and power (shown in the courts or the post-garden world) that transforms man from his natural, original being.

3 The conclusion of the play is an embrace of the forest, with Duke Frederick and Oliver succumbing to the wisdom and philosophy of this pastoral realm (although only one physically enters the forest). The courts combine with the forest as the imagined ideal: where politics and conventional behavior interact with the abolishment of gender archetypes.

4 Although Shakespeare often creates his fools as ostensibly effeminate and asexual, Touchstone is an anomaly. Through his occasionally vulgar seduction of Audrey, he presents
himself as a quintessential display of the “foul weather” (5.4.136) of the masculine character, always caught in the performance of gender due to his occupation and therefore uncomfortable in the more androgynous (or feminine) setting of the Forest.

A Place for Originality within Intertextuality: The Texts and Intertexsts of Dorothy Gale and the Wizard of Oz

Savannah Ganster
Penn State University, Berks
Reading, Pennsylvania

Stephen King’s *Wizard and Glass* and Gregory Maguire’s *Wicked: the Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West* have many borrowed texts and commonalities with L. Frank Baum’s *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. These exchanges raise a prime question of intertextuality: is it still possible to create an original work or are all works simply a collection of borrowed phrases and ideas? Intertextuality suggests that all works borrow, whether consciously or unconsciously, from the works before them. All text is cluttered with intertexts, those intertexts creating new texts. The primary
question for intertextuality is whether or not these newly created texts are original. Some theorists argue that there is no room for originality within intertextuality. However, I appreciate the concept of intertextuality and agree with those theorists who argue that there is a place for originality within intertextuality, especially in light of the texts that I have examined for this essay. King’s *Wizard and Glass* and Maguire’s *Wicked: the Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West* are works that borrow heavily from Baum’s *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* in addition to borrowing from other works¹; however, each of these works is original despite and because of the intertexts found within them.

**Understanding Originality within Intertextuality**

James E. Porter defined intertextuality and intertexts in his essay, “Intertextuality and the Discourse Community.” According to Porter, “[e]xamining texts ‘intertextually’ means looking for ‘traces,’ the bits and pieces of Text which writers or speakers borrow and sew together to create new discourse. . . . Intertext is Text – a great seamless textual fabric. And, as they like to intone solemnly, no text escapes intertext” (34). Porter’s definition of intertextuality is the concept of smaller texts or intertexts belonging to one collective Text, whereby this Text is borrowed from by writers and speakers to create their own works, which contribute, in turn, to this Text and subsequently help to enlarge it. Moreover, in the further breaking down of this definition, it is easy to understand that all texts become intertexts and all intertexts are a part of the one collective
Text. Intertexts are the small scraps of texts taken and attached to other intertexts to form Text.

Even before “Julia Kristeva coined the term intertextuality to designate a special form of textual interrelations” (Machacek 523), people were aware of the connectivity of texts to one another. As Matthew Arnold said in his Oxford Inaugural Lecture in 1857, “[e]verywhere there is connection, everywhere there is illustration, no single event, no single literature is adequately comprehended except in relation to other events, to other literatures.” He was correct. Intertextuality links texts together through intertexts, thus continuing to reinforce the connectivity of texts to each other and to the discourses around them.

There are many opponents and proponents of intertextuality. Among the critics, for example, is Alexander Zholkovsky, who asserts that “the ‘intertextualists’ claim that every word in [literature] is generated intertextually (just as every word in a language comes from its dictionary) can be conceded in a trivial sense” (728). Detractors of intertextuality might also argue that these connections are non-existent, that they are merely fabrications of an over-zealous reader. Gregory Machacek’s article, “Allusion,” considers the various terms that critics use when dealing with intertextuality and what each term might suggest. Machacek writes that intertextuality “suggests a relation between equals and may on that basis be preferred over traditional terms by critics who wish to stress that the later author’s creativity in adapting an echoed phrase to a new context is no less remarkable than the creativity manifested by the earlier
author in composing the line” (525). Ultimately, Machacek argues that critics latch onto a specific ideal of intertextuality in order to make their arguments.

Proponents may argue that intertextuality is inevitable and affects our creative operations. According to Perry Share, “[i]ntertextuality refers to how our contemporary cultural environment is marked by duplication, interpenetration of texts and the circulation and recirculation of images, sounds and words in multiple forms and formats. Intertextuality is ubiquitous and inevitable” (1). Intertextuality, by this definition, is not confined merely to texts; it can be applied to many aspects of our discourse communities. Share goes on to write, “It is almost as if everything and anything that can be said, has been said. The only remaining creative option is to rejigger and manipulate existing narratives, images and texts” (4). In other words, creativity exists in the option of reworking intertexts to create new texts.

With creativity being limited only to changing and adapting intertexts within this model, one could be left with the idea that there is no room for originality, but how can this be possible? A creative writer is a writer who makes a new adaptation out of something old, but could a creative writer also be a writer who creates something completely original from something old? Porter answers this question when he writes, “Genuine originality is difficult within the confines of a well-regulated system” (40). The system to which he refers is the discourse community, which requires intertextuality. While Porter argues that originality
is difficult within discourse communities that require intertextuality, there are some theorists who would argue for a complete lack of originality in regards to intertextuality. However, I disagree with such theorists. I believe fully that there is a place within intertextuality for originality and that by using intertexts to create new texts, originality can thrive.

**The Reinvention and Originality of Dorothy Gale**

There are many intertexts from *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* found in both *Wizard and Glass* and *Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West*. However, the most interesting of these intertexts are the characters Dorothy Gale and the Wizard of Oz. Both King’s *Wizard and Glass* and Maguire’s *Wicked* include these named intertexts from Baum’s *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* within their texts, though each of these novels uses each of these intertexts in a way that supports innovation and originality.

Although it is certainly possible that further inquiry will find earlier sources for the character, my research indicates that Baum created Dorothy Gale in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. She is introduced to the reader as an orphaned Kansas farm girl who was adopted by her Aunt Em and her Uncle Henry and who set on a journey in the Land of Oz. Baum describes Dorothy as “a well-grown child for her age” (22). He paints Dorothy as an innocent, seemingly helpless young girl who must survive many trials and tribulations to reach her goal. This original Dorothy is a well-developed character who experiences the fear of being lost in a strange place but summons the will to pursue her passage home.
Upon meeting the Wizard of Oz, she is told that she will not be sent home until she has killed the Wicked Witch of the West, to which she cries to her friends, “There is no hope for me . . . for Oz will not send me home until I have killed the Wicked Witch of the West; and that I can never do” (109). Accidentally, Dorothy kills the Wicked Witch of the West by throwing water on her when the witch steals her silver slipper. Eventually, after a few more tests of her will, Dorothy is sent back to Kansas by Glinda, the Good Witch of the South.

In Stephen King’s *Wizard and Glass*, we see an original and completely unique Dorothy, despite and because of King’s borrowing from Baum’s Dorothy. King allows the characters of his story -- the Gunslinger, Roland, and his band of friends -- to tell the story of *The Wizard of Oz*, the film adaptation of Baum’s *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, as they roam a strange and desolate Topeka, Kansas on their way to their own Emerald City. King wrote of how Roland’s friends told him the story with which they were so familiar:

They told him . . . about a Kansas farm girl named Dorothy Gale who was carried away by a cyclone and deposited, along with her dog, in the Land of Oz…. [Dorothy and her friends] each had… a fondest wish, and it was with Dorothy’s that Roland’s new friends (and Roland himself, for that matter) identified with the most strongly: she wanted to find her way home again…. ‘The Munchkins told her that she had to follow
the yellow brick road to Oz,’ Jake said, ‘and so she went. She met the others along the way, sort of like you met us, Roland.’ (653-54)

This passage is King’s way of showing that Roland is Dorothy. The story of Baum’s Dorothy parallels the story of the Gunslinger and his friends. Dorothy’s ka-tet, or her group, is the equivalent to his group. Both Dorothy and her band of fellow travelers and Roland and his ka-tet are on a mission to find their own respective Emerald Cities. Moreover, Dorothy has three friends and a dog, and Roland has three friends and a dog-like creature called a Billy-bumbler.

It is important for King to recall the images of Dorothy as Baum had invented her since this reference allows the reader to make a strong comparison between Baum’s Dorothy and King’s Roland. Baum’s innocent and helpless Dorothy only serves to make King’s Roland an even more dangerous and able-bodied character in comparison, despite the fact that they have been drawn from a common root. In essence, the intertexts of Dorothy as applied to *Wizard and Glass* turn Dorothy into Roland, the Gunslinger, wandering a strange world on a quest to find what he wants the most, the Dark Tower. Moreover, the intertexts of Dorothy as applied to Roland, the Gunslinger, create an original text in which Dorothy is reinvented as a dangerous gunslinging man on his way to see the Wizard of Oz.

Gregory Maguire’s *Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West* also borrows intertexts of the
character Dorothy to create yet another original Dorothy. In fact, Maguire includes this description of Dorothy in the prologue of his novel, “[Dorothy] was sitting with her feet tucked underneath her and her arms wrapped around her knees. She was not a dainty thing, but a good-size farm girl, dressed in blue-and-white checks and a pinafore. In her lap, a vile little dog cowered and whined” (3). Dorothy does not play a major role in Wicked until the end of the novel, but she becomes a character that readers have not before encountered. Beyond the point of physical description, the intertexts that Maguire borrows from Baum in regards to Dorothy create an entirely new and original character that is easily identified. Within Wicked, Dorothy is described as a charming child who is filled with remorse over the death of the Wicked Witch of the East, if for no other reason than the undue pain that it is causing Elphaba, the Wicked Witch of the West. Moreover, Dorothy defends Elphaba to the Cowardly Lion, the Scarecrow, and the Tin Woodsman, and she does so with sympathy and great sincerity. As in Baum’s work, the Wizard of Oz sends Dorothy to murder Elphaba before he will consider sending her home to Kansas. However, Dorothy decides that she will not murder Elphaba but that she will beg her forgiveness regarding the death of The Wicked Witch of the East and then return to Oz and pretend to have murdered her. It is at this point that Dorothy sobs to Elphaba, “I would say to you: Would you ever forgive me for that accident, for the death of your sister; would you ever, ever forgive me, for I could never forgive myself!” (Maguire 513). Maguire’s Dorothy has
no interest in harming Elphaba, and it is only when some of the flaming broom catches Elphaba’s dress alight that Dorothy throws water on the Wicked Witch of the West in an attempt to save her life. His Dorothy is a sincere and caring Dorothy in need of forgiveness and the parallel of Elphaba herself, who sought forgiveness from a dead lover’s wife, only to be thwarted in her desire by her lover’s wife’s death. While the original Dorothy does not want to kill the Wicked Witch of the West, it is because she fears the witch for her wickedness and does not understand how she could possibly kill her. However, in *Wicked*, Dorothy has no intention of ever murdering the Wicked Witch of the West because of her essential humanity, her remorse, and her need for forgiveness. Maguire succeeds in creating the ultimately pure and naïve Dorothy by using the intertexts taken from *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. His Dorothy is individual and original despite and because of the intertexts he borrowed.

**The Wizard of Oz, Himself, Rewritten**

In *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, the Wizard is a complex and original character. In the beginning, when she arrives in Munchkinland via the cyclone, Dorothy is instructed to go to the City of Emeralds. She is given directions by an old woman who says, “‘It is exactly in the center of the country, and is ruled by Oz, the Great Wizard I told you of. . . . He is a good Wizard. Whether he is a man or not I cannot tell, for I have never seen him’” (Baum 26). Throughout Baum’s novel, the Wizard is depicted as a great being who is very powerful and who does great deeds for the people he presides over. At the Wizard’s request,
Dorothy goes to kill the Wicked Witch of the West, but when she succeeds and returns to the Emerald City looking to be rewarded by being sent back to Kansas, she and her friends learn that the Wizard of Oz is merely himself an old man from Omaha, Kansas, with no magical powers at all: “‘I am Oz, the Great and the Terrible,’ said the little man, in a trembling voice, ‘but don’t strike me – please don’t! – and I’ll do anything you want me to…. My dear friends… I pray you not to speak of these little things. Think of me, and the terrible trouble I’m in at being found out’” (Baum 150). The man who was thought to be the Great and Terrible Wizard of Oz is no more than a “humbug” (150).

In King’s *Wizard and Glass*, intertexts borrowed from *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* serve to create a new and inventive Wizard of Oz, independent from but also linked to Baum’s original model. King’s characters, Roland and his ka-tet, eventually reach their own Emerald City, which stands along the Beam of the Bear and the Turtle, thus placing it in their way on their quest to find the Dark Tower. Upon reaching the Emerald City, Roland and his ka-tet enter the greenish glowing palace to find that it seems to be alive with machinery and magic. As they walk forward, they are addressed by a voice, “‘I... AM... OZ!’ the voice [thunders]. The glass columns [flash], so [do] the pipes behind the thrown, ‘OZ THE GREAT! OZ THE POWERFUL! WHO ARE YOU?’” (King 668). King begins by creating a Wizard of Oz who seems to be identical to the original; however, only a few pages later, his true identity is revealed: “‘Pay no attention to the man behind
the curtain,’ [says] a voice behind them, and then [titters]. . . . Jake [swings] around and [sees] that there [is] now a man sitting in the middle of the great throne, with his legs casually crossed in front of him” (671). This man is not quite human; in fact, he is Marten Broadcloak, also known as Maerlyn the Wizard and as Randall Flagg. He is an actual wizard who is centuries old and one of Roland’s greatest enemies, for both he and Roland have outlived time itself. As Roland attempts to kill him, Flagg disappears. Moreover, going along with the idea that Roland, the Gunslinger, is the original character representation of Dorothy in *Wizard and Glass*, the fact that Roland attempts to murder the Wizard, Randall Flagg, represents a very large deviation from the original story of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, in which Dorothy makes no attempt on the Wizard’s life. This wizard is an actual, evil adversary from Roland’s past. Again, King uses direct references and intertexts to remind the reader of Baum’s original Wizard of Oz if only to heighten the contrast to Randall Flagg. Baum’s Wizard was a selfish fraud with absolutely no power, but King’s Randall Flagg is a very evil and very powerful wizard who would love the opportunity to destroy Roland. By setting Randall Flagg against Baum’s original Wizard of Oz, King is able to depict the absolute evil and danger of Flagg, while still maintaining about him a level of enchantment.

In *Wicked*, Maguire offers his own variation on the Wizard of Oz. Maguire writes that the Wizard of Oz “was without disguise, a plain-looking older man wearing a high-collared shirt and a greatcoat, with a watch and fob hanging
from the waistcoat pocket. His head was pink and mottled, and tufts of hair stuck out above his ears. He mopped his brow with the handkerchief and sat down, motioning the Witch to sit, too” (447). Beneath his manufactured facade, like that of the original Wizard, Maguire’s Wizard is ordinary in appearance. However, Maguire’s Wizard differs from Baum’s in the matter of behavior since he is a political tyrant. For example, he is likened to Hitler when he discriminates against a segment of the population, the Animals:

Then the Goat turned and in a milder voice than they expected he told them that the Wizard of Oz had proclaimed Banns on Animal Mobility, effective several weeks ago. This meant not only that Animals were restricted in their access to travel conveyances, lodgings, and public services. This Mobility it referred to was also professional. Any Animal coming of age was prohibited from working in the professions or the public sector. (114)

In Wicked, Animals, which are animal creatures with spirits and the ability to master logic and reasoning and speech, are persecuted like the Jews of Europe just before and during World War II. This helps to add to the political unrest and instability of Oz and its surrounding lands.

Moreover, to add to the complexity of Maguire’s characterization, the Wizard is actually able to perform some magic. It is discovered near the end of the book that
the Wizard of Oz drugged or “magicked” Melena, Elphaba’s mother, with a potion from a green glass bottle labeled “MIRACLE ELIXER” and then raped her, which resulted in the conception of Elphaba, the Wicked Witch of the West (38). Elphaba is, therefore, a direct descendant of the royal line of Munchkinland and is expected to take her place as a rightful ruler of that land, while, at the same time, she is also the illegitimate daughter of the tyrannical Wizard of Oz, whom the rulers of Munchkinland oppose by wishing to secede from Oz to create a separate, sovereign state. Moreover, she despises both parts of her lineage. While Elphaba finds out that she is the illegitimate daughter of the Wizard some time before her death, the Wizard does not learn of his ties to the Wicked Witch of the West until Dorothy brings him a relic from Elphaba’s house upon her return to Oz. Maguire writes:

[S]o she brought the green glass bottle that said MIRACLE ELI- on the paper glued to the front. It may merely be apocryphal that when the Wizard saw the glass bottle he gasped, and clutched his heart. . . . It is a matter of history, however, that shortly thereafter, the Wizard absconded from the Palace. He left in the way he had first arrived – a hot-air balloon – just a few hours before seditious ministers were to lead a Palace revolt and to hold an execution without trial. (518)

Whether out of guilt for his transgressions against Elphaba
and the people of Oz or out of the knowledge that his reign of terror is over, the Wizard leaves Oz and returns to his own world. The tyranny and maliciousness of the Wizard in *Wicked* stand in sharp contrast to the pathetic failures and disappointments of the Wizard in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*.

**Dorothy and the Wizard: Original Reinventions or Intertextual Regurgitations?**

Baum creates Dorothy, the innocent and persistent farm girl, who served as a model for King’s Roland and Maguire’s Dorothy. King creates a dangerous gunslinger; Maguire creates the pinnacle of purity and the absolute voice of naivety. However, each character, though drawn from Baum’s Dorothy, is unique. What would happen if each of these characters were to be meshed into yet another character, my own Dorothy? Who would my Dorothy be? She would be a pistol-toting, chain-smoking, strong farm girl in a blue check dress, with a heart of gold and a burden of guilt over the death of the Wicked Witch of the East. My Dorothy would not take the Yellow Brick Road; rather, she would be an adventurer, cutting her own way to the Emerald City. Upon reaching her destination, she would demand of the Wizard of Oz that she be sent home immediately to Kansas, thus boycotting his plan to murder the Wicked Witch of West. Furthermore, my Dorothy would be granted her demand because my Wizard of Oz, a slimy, elderly, selfish, horrible Wizard with a black heart filled to the brim with evil and a soul stifled by his cowardice, would be too fearful of such a forceful and dangerous Dorothy. Despite all of his
ruthlessness and his terrible deeds, my Wizard of Oz would know that Dorothy is much stronger than he and that she poses a threat to him if she were to remain in Oz; thus, he would use his powers to send her home to Kansas so that he could continue to rule Oz with his iron fist of oppression. My Wizard of Oz would be the amalgamation of Baum’s selfish, cowardly, old fraud, King’s evil and powerful wizard, Randall Flagg, and Maguire’s tyrannical, Hitler-channeling, raping, pillaging, and plundering Wizard of Oz. Yes, I could create revamped, reinvented, reissued contemporary counterparts to these characters and still be original.
Notes

1 Wicked borrows heavily from historical events and people such as World War II, Hitler, the Watergate scandal, the Nixon Administration, and, finally, the first Bush Administration. Wizard and Glass borrows from contemporary music, most notably “Hey Jude” by the Beatles. In addition, Wizard and Glass borrows from cowboy films and from advertisements for Keebler cookies and Coca-Cola; it appropriates the tick-tock creatures from later L. Frank Baum novels.
Works Cited


“But Business is Business, and Business Must Grow”: A Marxist Take on *The Lorax*

Rebecca L. Hahn  
*Elizabethtown College*  
*Elizabethtown, Pennsylvania*

On the surface, children’s books can be entertaining and light-hearted. They are meant to amuse, to teach, to make reading fun, and, occasionally, to promote a moral lesson. Few children’s books are appealing to the adult audience except as an item of curiosity or as a temporary distraction from more “mature” pursuits. However, when a children’s book delivers a particularly powerful message that reaches beyond its simple language, it becomes accessible to young and old alike.

*The Lorax* is such a book; the tale of the Lorax and his truffula trees spans generations and is widely
considered a classic children’s favorite. Pages of detailed, colorful illustrations and playful language make the book appealing to youth, while the timeless message of ecological preservation touches older generations who gradually understand what the Lorax has been trying to tell us all along. With age, we come to realize that the sadness that accompanies the devastation of the Lorax’s habitat and the extinction of the Truffula trees is all the more palpable because it is an allegory of our own declining ecological situation. A brilliant critique of industrial capitalism, *The Lorax* is also a telling example of America’s sometimes misguided attempts at environmentalism (Darling 52). Written in 1971, the book is largely hailed as the beginning of the environmentalist movement (Dobrin 11).

While the ecological warning expounded by Theodore Geisel’s wheezy old Lorax is a potent message indeed, it begs the question as to why it is so effective. Few children’s books make such a resounding statement, a statement that has spanned almost four decades without showing signs of losing effectiveness. In fact, the environmental crisis has never felt as real as it does right now, making the message of *The Lorax* hit that much closer to home. Anyone who lives in a heavily polluted city or fears for the fate of the rainforests can attest to that. Just how, exactly, did our situation get so bad? There is no easy answer because it is a complicated question. One way to delve into the deeper meaning behind *The Lorax* is to use Marx’s theories to help us understand how a seemingly innocent children’s story, through rhyme and nonsense, can both
expose and refute the evils of modern society.

**Historical and Socio-economic Influence**

There is no doubt that decades of human history have influenced the societal criticisms found in *The Lorax*, beginning with the Industrial Revolution and extending to modern times and current values. After all, would we even be facing global warming, pollution, and polar bear extinction if humans had never opened factories, mass-produced commercial goods, or consumed products at such an alarming rate? Would the Truffula trees and the wildlife have disappeared if people weren’t so crazy for Thneeds? Probably not; but it has happened nonetheless, both literally and figuratively. Dr. Suess’s book traces the development of our increasingly capitalistic global society.

Marxist criticism is concerned with examining the history that produced a text (Hart 322). Furthermore, it is important to look at everything about a text that serves to make it unique. The fact that a renowned children’s author incorporated a serious social message into a children’s book, full of colorful illustrations and nonsense words, serves to make the text unique and enhance its message. Indeed, Dr. Seuss is no stranger; he is someone with whom many of us grew up, and the fact that we were encouraged to read his books as children adds to his credibility. If an unknown author had written *The Lorax*, would we have paid its message the same heed?

Marxist critique makes the form of *The Lorax* impossible to ignore. Using child-like language and fanciful illustrations makes the book appealing to children and
to adults who wish to revisit an old favorite or examine its message a little more thoroughly. In other words, incorporating his message into a children’s book is a brilliant way of making *The Lorax* as versatile as possible. Even if children do not understand that the book is a criticism of our rampant disregard for the environment or the potential evils of capitalism, they still empathize with the Lorax and his friends and understand that the Once-ler’s greed brought about the demise of an ecosystem.

**Paradise Lost: Utopian Ideals**

No detail is too small for a Marxist critique, and *The Lorax* is no exception. The illustrations in the book are particularly important for making the meaning of the story explicit to young readers. Rather than beginning with a depiction of the Lorax and his Truffula forest in all its glory, for instance, the first few pages of the book open upon a desolate wasteland under darkened skies:

At the far end of town
where the Grickle-grass grows
and the wind smells slow-and-sour when it blows
and no birds ever sing excepting old crows...
is the Street of the Lifted Lorax. (Seuss 1)

The young boy who visits the Once-ler in his old Lerkim comes from the town visible in the corner of the landscape, and although Dr. Seuss does not explicitly talk about urbanization in the text, the town makes an appearance at the beginning of the story, and it did not exist in the paradise recounted by the Once-ler (Darling 55). It seems
that the boy is familiar with this world and the fact that “the far end of town” with its dead grass-lined roads and tree stumps is nothing out of the ordinary. The language is simple, and the meaning of the illustrations is unmistakable; things are ugly, but they were once beautiful. It is only when the Once-ler recounts the land’s former glory that we are greeted by pages awash with bright colors under blue skies, and “the feeling evoked by the colors, postures, and expressions is rapturous, harmonious, and innocent” (Darling 54). Multicolored Truffula trees are plentiful and the animals are happy. He acknowledges the pristine land:

Way back in the days when the grass was still green
and the pond was still wet
and the clouds were still clean,
and the song of the Swomee-Swans rang out in space…
one morning, I came to this glorious place.
(Seuss 12)

Compared to the introductory scene of the book, what the Once-ler describes to the young boy is an Eden-like utopia. While the visual images make this clear to children, older readers can understand a more implicit message. The Truffula forest reflects a world where “orderliness reigns supreme and one knows one’s place” (Hart 326). In the forest he describes, there are no social classes, no people, no worries: an ideal community for its occupants. For several reasons, Marxist criticism often focuses on the use of utopian strategies in a text. The first is that utopias often serve the
interests of the exploiter, rather than the exploited (Hart 362). We might wonder how this can be so, since the Truffula forest in its unspoiled state is a prosperous habitat. However, the very untouched, idyllic quality of the land is what attracts the Once-ler, particularly the Truffla trees, which first catch his eye. The Once-ler describes the vegetation in admiring tones, “But those trees! Those trees! Those Truffula trees! All my life I’d been searching for trees such as these” (Seuss 16).

The Once-ler’s initial awe of the forest could be mistaken for true appreciation of its natural beauty. Yet, after gushing over the Truffula trees, he pulls out an axe and chops one to the ground. The Once-ler’s intentions are quickly realized, even by the youngest readers, who are not familiar with Marxist criticism but can understand the motives of the Once-ler. He does not appreciate the forest or the trees for their unspoiled beauty; instead, he sees an opportunity to profit from the land and seizes it. Therefore, the utopia of the Truffula forest turns out to serve the interests of the Once-ler, who becomes rich, rather than the original occupants, who are gradually forced from their homes.

Another reason Marxist criticism concerns itself with utopias is that they are so malleable that they “can be used to sanctify the unsanctifiable” (Hart 327). Therefore, when the Lorax expresses his disapproval of the Once-ler’s actions, the latter claims, “I chopped just one tree. I am doing no harm” (Seuss 24). The Once-ler uses the abundance of trees in the forest to justify harvesting Truffula trees because he implies that because there are so many trees, the
loss of one is not devastating. By using Marx to examine the implications of utopian strategies, we find that in the end, the utopian nature of the Truffula forest does the land more harm than good.

**Exploitation and Oppression**

As he begins to plunder the forest, the Once-ler is admonished by a strange and unexpected adversary:

> Mister! he said with a sawdusty sneeze,
> I am the Lorax. I speak for the trees.
> I speak for the trees, for the trees have no tongues.
> And I’m asking you, sir, at the top of my lungs—
> he was very upset as he shouted and puffed—
> What’s that THING you’ve made out of my Truffula tuft? (Seuss 15)

The heart of a Marxist critique is the story of exploitation (Hart 320), and one of the most obvious themes in Dr. Seuss’s thinly veiled allegory is the notion of the exploiter versus the exploited, represented by the contention between the Once-ler and the Lorax. For Marx, the term “exploitation” becomes almost synonymous with injustice (Van de Veer 370). The young Once-ler, as soon as he realizes that he is able to reap the benefits of the Lorax’s paradisiacal habitat to his own advantage, becomes the epitome of the reviled exploiter. As each Truffula tree is chopped down and the “Gluppity-Glup” and the “Schloppity-Schlopp” pollute the once pristine forest, the Brown Bar-ba-
loots, the Swomee-Swans, and the Humming-Fish are forced to retreat to greener pastures. The injustice of this scenario is apparent, even to the youngest readers. The fact that it is so easy to empathize with Seuss’s fictional creatures as they are driven out of their Technicolor habitat is a testament to the book’s effectiveness, even with regard to children. It is one of the reasons the tale of the Lorax has withstood the test of time and is still an effective commentary on exploitation; we do not have to dig deep to see the injustice of the situation, it is right there on the surface, to be felt by young and old alike.

The Lorax, who “speaks for the trees” and, subsequently, for all the occupants of the woodland community, cries out for the exploited and amplifies the voice of the oppressed. The trees have no tongues, and, apparently, neither do the Brown Bar-ba-loots, the Swomee-Swans, or the Humming-Fish. They have only the Lorax to appeal to the Once-ler, who pays no heed to the repeated warnings. Indeed, the Lorax appears like a modern-day Jeremiah, predicting disaster and growing frustrated as his warnings fall on the Once-ler’s deaf ears: “What’s that THING you’ve made out of my Truffula tuft?” The fact that the Lorax considers it *his* truffula tuft is significant; it shows both the extent to which the Lorax identifies with the environment and, in contrast, the extreme lack of concern displayed by the Once-ler. The Lorax uses “my” to denote his sense of oneness with the forest. However, the Once-ler is now even less considerate of the environment because it is not his to worry about; it is the responsibility of the Lorax
Through literary personification, Dr. Seuss gives life to two elements: the environment and industrialism. While the Lorax advocates for the environment, the small, dwarfish creature cannot stop the Once-ler with force; he can only plead with the Once-ler on behalf of the land. At the same time, the mysterious Once-ler represents industry at large. Throughout the book’s detailed illustrations, the Once-ler is never shown—he remains faceless, leaving readers to foster their own impressions about him.

The depictions of the Lorax and the Once-ler are important to a Marxist critique. The Lorax, who represents the exploited, is, on the surface, a poor excuse for an environmental advocate. He is small, funny-looking, and has an annoying manner (yet, Marxists would have us keep in mind that this view is colored by the Once-ler, who is the story’s narrator). An apparently ineffective environmental spokesperson, the Lorax is the epitome of the oppressed; he represents the “little guy,” who is ignored, overlooked, and ridiculed by those in power.

In contrast, the faceless Once-ler is confident and convincing; he embodies the role of the exploiter. Yet, it is sometimes difficult to understand who is exploiting or oppressing a particular group or why. Most people are familiar with the phrase “the man is keeping us down,” but who is exactly is “the man”? This could be a reference to authority figures like parents or police or something as vague and general as the economy or the government. It is hard to put a face on some metaphorical oppressors, and, therefore,
the Once-ler is the epitome of faceless bureaucracy and capitalism (Lebduska 173).

Marxist critique calls for us to look at strategies of omission because the unsaid often speaks the unspeakable (Hart 327). Sometimes a point may not be argued explicitly because it simply cannot be argued. Omitting details makes rhetoric work harder because we now have to examine what isn’t there and why. For example, we must ask why the Once-ler remains hidden; we are left to presume that the oppression and exploitation associated with Marxist views on capitalism are too complex to be depicted accurately in this children’s story. Perhaps omitting any visual representation of the story’s disillusioned narrator is a commentary on the impersonal, abstract entity of industry itself, personified in the Once-ler.

**What’s in a Name?**

Marxist criticism would not let us ignore something as significant as Dr. Seuss’s seemingly nonsensical names for characters and objects. His unusual, fictional terms for characters and objects have a childlike appeal and, below the surface, have significant implications for his stories.

The Once-ler, harvesting Truffula tufts, succeeds in creating the universal, generic need: the ever-enticing Thneed, or “TH[E]need” (Lebduska 174). While he contends that “there is no one on earth who would buy that fool Thneed” (Seuss 16), the Lorax is quickly proven wrong; the urge to obtain goods is strong enough to override common sense.

As a variation on the word “lore,” the Lorax’s name
suggests a didactic element. It might also imply that, in our current consumer society, teaching about trees necessitates teaching about their decimation as well. In this story, axes bring about the destruction of the trees and, eventually, the whole landscape (Lebduska 174).

The Once-ler’s name may be the most peculiar. His very name implies a sense of terminableness; the Once-ler was once rich, once successful, once glorified, once upon a time—but not anymore. The idea of his brief but intense brush with success leads us to wonder just where he went wrong. Also, the sense of perpetuity absent in the Once-ler’s name helps understand his thought process; he is concerned only with making gains in the short term, not about what implications his actions will have in the future.

**Challenging Capitalism and the “Standard” Culture**

Capitalism is introduced fairly early on in *The Lorax*; in fact, it is one of the first ideas the reader confronts. The Once-ler is described as being willing to tell his story for the price of “fifteen cents and a nail and the shell of a great-great-great-father snail” (Seuss 6). He also makes a “most careful count” of the payment given him, implying that others better not try to cheat him.

Marx was a pioneer in the analysis of capitalism in society. His criticisms of the bourgeois and the inequality of the social classes are still popular and relevant to modern society, where capitalism still thrives. Interestingly, the longevity of Marx’s theories parallels the messages of *The Lorax*; both are timeless, and some may argue that they become even more relevant as we move toward the future.
One of Marx’s guiding theories behind the *Communist Manifesto* is that all history is essentially the history of class struggles (Gilbert 522)—something absent in the pre-capitalist, utopian Truffula forest. Indeed, it is the rise of industry that forms new class conflicts and paves the way for capitalism:

A Thneed’s a Fine-Something-That-All-People-Need!
It’s a shirt. It’s a sock. It’s a glove. It’s a hat.
But it has other uses. Yes, far beyond that.
You can use it for carpets. For pillows! For sheets!
Or curtains! Or covers for bicycle seats!
(Seuss 16)

Here is a classic example of exploiters “using rhetoric to justify their exalted position” (Hart 321). In a very salesman-like fashion, the Once-ler downplays the Lorax’s concerns and rationalizes his own beliefs and opinions. The Once-ler makes Thneeds attractive; therefore, the purchase of Thneeds becomes popular, the Thneed industry grows, and the environmental impact of this expanding industry becomes an afterthought. This is the story everywhere although we rarely like to think about it because it implicates us as well.

Does anyone really need a Thneed? The Once-ler would have us believe that we do. New and better possessions seem practically necessities today, and constantly acquiring them is deemed a worthwhile pursuit. Americans, especially children, are socialized into their roles
as consumers (Lebduska 172). After an apparently superior product is developed, everything that has come before seems obsolete. Why record a show on an ancient VCR when one can get TiVo? As the Once-ler says, “[Y]ou never can tell what some people will buy.” When a fellow comes along and purchases a Thneed for $3.98, the reader is forced to admit that he is right.

Hart and Daughton best summarize Marx’s opinion of this marketing phenomenon: “People’s most unique thoughts are little more than the thoughts ‘granted’ them by the larger social system” (322). When people make the decision to buy a Thneed, they think they are acting independently when, in fact, they are succumbing to the rhetoric of the Once-ler’s sales techniques. It was not the people’s choice, but the Once-ler’s choice that they buy a Thneed. People are buying Thneeds because they are cheap, costing only $3.98; however, Thneeds may be sold so cheaply because there is no competition in the Thneed market. We can also assume, but cannot verify, that the Once-ler is paying his factory workers relatively low wages for their labor. Lastly, people think they are acting prudently by buying a Thneed because of its myriad uses as touted by the Once-ler. It is necessary that the consumer remain under this delusion because if the truth were exposed, the entire economic and social system would collapse (Hart 322).

When the Once-ler’s Thneed business begins to thrive, he sees an opportunity for “the whole Once-ler family to get mighty rich” (Seuss 21), and why not? He sees a chance to create a veritable monopoly from his Thneed-
making business, with no competition in sight. However, the relocation of the Once-ler family to the Thneed factory echoes one of Marx’s most longstanding criticisms of the capitalist system: the dehumanization of the workers (Van de Veer 378). The Once-ler entices his family with the prospect of wealth as long as they work full-time in his Thneed-making factory. As long as Truffula trees are plentiful and Thneeds are in demand, the family is guaranteed a living. While the story does not go into detail about working conditions in his factory, one can imagine the exhaustion and monotony that accompanies most, if not all, factory jobs. The fact that the Once-ler’s workers are members of his family makes no difference; if anything, it makes the injustice of their employment seem even greater. Rather than the Once-ler generously sharing the wealth, the family is forced to work to enjoy any of the Thneed profits, knitting Thneeds “just as busy as bees” (Seuss 22). In this manner, the Once-ler becomes the capitalist boss to whom the family must answer. From Marx’s perspective, those whose lives are dependent upon another person are, in effect, slaves (Van de Veer 379). This theory serves to strengthen the idea of the development of class struggle with the rise of capitalism. Hence, when the last Truffula tree is chopped and the factory shuts down, the whole Once-ler family must disband and scatter, presumably to find work elsewhere.

**Subverting the Superstructure**

Marxist criticism is interested in the concept of *hegemony*—the dominance of one group over another. Hegemony is so broadly based in society that it usually goes
unseen by both rhetor and audience (Hart 322). We know that there are social groups who are dominant over other social groups, but we do not realize the pervasiveness of this situation.

Consider the average Joe buying whatever the latest particular Thneed happens to be because he has subversively, or even overtly, been told to do so. The ruling classes, the capitalists, are asserting dominance over the consumer classes. However, consumers do not think of this as dominance because they refuse to believe they are being made to do anything. The ruling classes do not forcibly assert their dominance. They do not have to because submissive social groups are actually allowing themselves to be dominated. Consumers rarely put up resistance when a product is hyped; rather, they are more inclined to line up around the block before it flies off the shelves and they are left high and dry, without their Furby or copy of “Halo 3.”

Lebduska best summarizes the concept of “cultural hegemony,” stating that the superstructure is not static but constantly in flux—sometimes there is no Once-ler, “who conspires to make Thneed-dependent customers”—but capitalism is an unavoidable fact of American life (172). From an early age, children respond to the lure of capitalism by taking up consumer attitudes that are not only socially acceptable but also encouraged from all sides. Furthermore, capitalism is something that dominates every social class, and the poorest to the most affluent feel its pull (Lebduska 172).

How does The Lorax delineate the superstructure?
The Once-ler is practicing the theory of hegemony by keeping submissive groups (consumers) in place by economic means—creating the need for Thneeds and providing jobs with his factory. He is also asserting dominance over the Lorax and his friends, who don’t have the power to initiate a rebellion. This situation appears to be a loss for everyone but the Once-ler and, possibly, the ignorant consumers who are not concerned about who is ruling who as long as they get their Thneeds.

All the Lorax can do is admonish the Once-ler: “Sir! You are crazy with greed” (Seuss 16). Thus, he verbalizes the ultimate motive behind the Once-ler’s self-centered rise to power—plain old greed. And who wants to be characterized as greedy? Furthermore, any consumer reading this book is bound to feel at least a tinge of guilt after realizing the large part consumer greed plays in the downfall of the Lorax and the demolition of his home. The Once-ler’s greed and his uncontrollable urge for business “biggering” bring about his sharp plummet from capitalist glory. The fact that he is characterized as being at least partially repentant says only so much; his credibility is still destroyed in the eyes of the reader. Thus, the Lorax, the book’s eco-antihero, is exalted, and consumers hang their heads in shame at their complicity in wreaking environmental havoc.

**Environmentalism: Friend or Foe?**

An offhand interpretation of *The Lorax* would be to say it is a book about environmentalism. This is both true and false. It is true in that it certainly advocates concern for the environment, but how the concept of “environmentalism”
is often applied in our current culture may actually undermine the preservation of the Earth and our natural resources.

This paper has already pointed out the pervasiveness of consumerism in modern society; indeed, the consumer ethic is so strongly and subversively encouraged that it has even pervaded attempts to counteract its effects. Marx’s theory of inherent dialectical strategies tells us to look for any opposition to the creator of a text and the culture in general (Hart 327). In Dr. Seuss’s case, readers may interpret *The Lorax* as advocating for environmentalism, without questioning how environmentalism has become misconstrued. In a Marxist analysis, we find that environmentalism may actually favor capitalism in ways we do not even realize.

Although *The Lorax* attacks the mindless greed and spending associated with our consumerist culture, the very heart of environmentalism today is, ironically, consumption. According to Lebduska, “[c]hildren’s environmental culture, for instance, frequently promotes checkbook activism such as bake sales, car washes, and other fund-raising events to save whales or rain forests” (172). In other words, children are being taught that to save the Earth, people must buy more products that promote recycling and donate more money to worthy eco-friendly causes. For example, at the grocery store, individuals can buy a small, two-dollar fruit drink that claims to “save one rainforest tree with every purchase.”

It is no wonder that we are sending the message that, in order to save the Earth, we must acquiesce to
the consumer ethic that *The Lorax* warns us about. “Environmentalism [today] consists of choosing the right brand or finding sufficient pocket change, while buying itself remains un-scrutinized” (Lebduska 172). Children, in particular, are being slowly divorced from nature as it becomes less a part of life than a circus sideshow we can watch and learn about on the Nature Channel. Indeed, environmentalism is now thought about almost solely in monetary terms. However, Dr. Seuss’s grouchy, mustachioed Lorax works to refute this unfortunate misconception by presenting us with far simpler, hands-on solutions, like planting trees and flowers. Yet, even the devastation that lays waste to the Lorax’s home has little effect on changing the consumer ethic that has permeated society and remains the biggest threat to our environment.

**“Unless”—Can We Change the Status Quo?**

As a revolutionary activist, Marx studied historical situations in order to advocate for proletariat revolution (Gilbert 521). Social revolution, however, is not feasible in the context of *The Lorax*; none of the characters in the book suffering from oppression and exploitation could lead an effective crusade against the Once-ler in his prime. However, the Lorax presents us with a dilemma as well as hope for the possibility of a better future through what he leaves behind—“a small pile of rocks, with one word…‘Unless’” (Seuss 48).

When the last Truffula tree is chopped and the Once-ler’s factory is closed, the once-Edenic woodland community is no more. The Lorax resigns himself to the destruction
and disappears “through a hole in the smog, without leaving a trace” (Seuss 47). However, there is hope in the form of the young boy who listens to the Once-ler’s sad tale of his own greed-induced downfall; he is undoubtedly meant to represent the reader, turning the pages of Seuss’s text:

\[
\text{UNLESS someone like you}
\]
\[
\text{cares a whole awful lot,}
\]
\[
\text{nothing is going to get better.}
\]
\[
\text{It’s not. (Seuss 50)}
\]

Therefore, while environmental alienation is being practiced by most of society, Dr. Seuss’s *The Lorax* attempts to instill the seed of responsibility in the book’s readers, who will take the cue, it is hoped, to do their part in salvaging the earth.

A central tenet of Marxist criticism is that ideology operates most powerfully when an audience is relaxed (Hart 328). In this manner, *The Lorax* is tricky; it doesn’t leave us in despair, but it does not give us a steadfast solution either. It leaves us with an “unless,” not a guarantee. Even after the Once-ler grants the young boy the last Truffula tree seed, the boy must still “plant it, treat it with care, give it clean water, and feed it fresh air” (Seuss 61). Only when the environment is restored and new trees are planted—assuming that they are protected from “axes that hack”—the Lorax and his friends might return.

While it may have been deemed far more appropriate, especially for a children’s book, to employ a more cheerful ending, this would have undermined Dr. Seuss’s intentions. Indeed, *The Lorax* would no longer be the satire it was intended to be. The book does not
describe the young boy going off and planting Truffula trees enthusiastically; it calls for the reader to take these actions. Rather than creating an entire hypothetical situation that resolves in a happy return to normalcy, the book becomes more interactive as the responsibility is shifted to us. We do not get the same notion of environmental alienation when someone suggests that we can physically change something about the world by going out and doing it, rather than mailing someone a check. It is no wonder the Lorax has become the mascot for Earth Day and environmental advocacy. He is telling us to recycle, to plant trees, to care about pollution, not to be greedy, to be aware of the detrimental effects of capitalism. However, the story does not tell us that things will be okay; it’s saying that they might be—that it is a possibility, but by no means a certainty.

While The Lorax leaves us with tentative hope for the future, what can be done about the cause of the environmental devastation detailed in the book? The Once-ler’s greed brought about his downfall, but what about modern society, where capitalism is still thriving? The Lorax doesn’t give us a solution to the problem of capitalism because there more than likely isn’t one. Other than the elimination of industry and a return to living off the land in the manner of the American Indian, the Street of the Lifted Lorax will never truly be what it once was, just as rainforests will never again cover the Earth and extinct species will never re-exist. “The Lorax’s criticism of materialism and pollution need not be interpreted as insisting on a choice between economic and environmental health,
though extending its logic would lead to a reexamination of American lifestyles” (Leb duska 170). Hence, the book most effectively operates as a wake-up call to society, telling us to think about what effects our actions have in the long run, unlike the Once-ler, whose very name suggests his short-lived, momentary rise to power. Rather than thinking in terms of “right-now,” Seuss is telling us to think of our actions in a linear way, the effect our actions will have indefinitely, the way the Once-ler did not.

One of the deep controversies of The Lorax is that it can be interpreted to suggest that our current economic and cultural system depends on pitting people against nature (Leb duska 170). Although this is a harsh reading, it cannot be refuted that our nation is treating the earth like an inexhaustible source of consumable resources. The Once-ler certainly thought this way, ignoring the outcry of the Lorax, who, in speaking for the trees, ultimately knew better. The question is, do we? The Truffula seed is in our hands.


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Submit three paper copies of each manuscript and a 3 ½ inch computer floppy disk or CD containing the finished version of the submission in Microsoft Word.

All text should be provided in current MLA format, justified left only.

Two title pages:
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Professor’s note (on official college stationary) that work is original with the student for a specific course.

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Tom Mack, Ph. D.
Department of English
University of South Carolina Aiken
471 University Parkway
Aiken, SC 29801

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ENDORSING PROFESSORS

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