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THE

OSWALD Review

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

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THE
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CONTENTS:

Semantics, Structural Linguistics, and Self-Sacrifice: Re-imagining “The Dream of the Rood”

Jeff Everhart
Longwood University
Farmville, Virginia

“The Secret Heart” of Gray’s “Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College”

Lucy Geake
University of Edinburgh
Edinburgh, United Kingdom

Domestic Soldier: Kitty’s Secondary Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in West’s The Return of the Soldier

Christina L. Huber and Heidi Potratz
University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire
The “Eternal Loop” of Guilt and the Attempt to Atone in McEwan’s *Atonement* and Hosseini’s *The Kite Runner*

Ananya Mishra
*English and Foreign Languages University*  
*Hyderabad, India*

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The Monster in the Moor

Andrew Stesienko
*College of Charleston*  
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Semantics, Structural Linguistics, and Self-Sacrifice: 
Re-imagining “The Dream of the Rood”

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In Anglo-Saxon Britain, the clear boundary between Paganism and Christianity that exists today was far more obscure. The conflation of secular Anglo-Saxon beliefs and Christian ideals exemplified in the Old English poem “The Dream of the Rood” represents the growing liquidity of British cultural thought that occurred during the period of the poem’s genesis. While significant critical attention focuses on Christian ideology and its impact on Anglo-Saxon popular thought, little attention is paid to conversion tools and their function within the realms of Anglo-Saxon
secular society. In terms of Christian doctrine, the tale of Jesus’ crucifixion is characterized by selfless suffering and martyrdom. However, “The Dream of the Rood” transfigures Jesus’ execution into an act of heroism by combining aspects of Christian myth and the Anglo-Saxon warrior ethos, thus producing two distinct and contrasting results. Primarily, the goal of the Church and its logic behind ideological synthesis as exemplified in “The Dream of the Rood” was the eventual assimilation of the Anglo-Saxon pagan culture into Christianity. However, semantic and structural linguistic evidence suggests that the Anglo-Saxons similarly exploited the syncretism in “The Dream of the Rood” to further strengthen their political hold on Britain through the dramatization of the comitatus.

“The Dream of the Rood” achieves this tentative synthesis by portraying Jesus as a warrior with whom Anglo-Saxon culture could sympathize. In Germania, Tacitus describes the nature of the Germanic military ideology in terms that frame the various functions of lord and retainer in “The Dream of the Rood”:

When the battlefield is reached it is reproach for a chief to be surpassed in prowess; a reproach for his retinue not to equal the prowess of its chief: but to have left the field and survived one’s chief, this means lifelong infamy and shame: to defend and protect him, to devote one’s own feats even to his glorification, this is the gist of their allegiance: the chief fights for victory, but the retainers for the chief. (153)
Tacitus’ statement describes the complexity of the relationships between lords and their retainers, a complexity that presents itself several times within the poem both in the paradoxical relationship between Jesus and the cross and the devoted relationship between Jesus and his followers. The strength and loyalty of the members of the comitatus, a Germanic military group or band of warriors led by a secular lord or chieftain, is absolute and beyond question for members of this Germanic heroic tradition. Thus, “The Dream of the Rood” frames the portrayal of Jesus Christ within this heroic tradition to make central figures of the Church more accessible to a culture based on strict military relationships. The work itself refers to Jesus as a geong hæleð or “young hero” (line 38), while further characterizing him as strang ond stiðmod or “strong and resolute” (line 39). The adjectives strong and resolute supplement Jesus’ depiction as a warrior-hero by commending his physical fortitude and his unchanging will in the face of death, both of which are cornerstones of the Anglo-Saxon warrior ethos. In Anglo-Saxon Spirituality, Robert Boenig notes that “Christ is no sacrificial victim in this poem; he is a hero with whom a Germanic warrior could readily identify” (42). Boenig’s commentary confirms the relative success of the Church’s goal of eventual assimilation through the representation of Jesus Christ as a figure that Anglo-Saxon culture could accept as a model of behavior while still retaining tenets of their warrior culture. However, while the reconfiguration of Jesus as a hero achieves a tentative synthesis of ideologies, the complex linguistic ambiguity of the Old English text
results in a dramatization of the *comitatus* that reflects pre-existing Anglo-Saxon political bonds.

While the plot structure of the dream vision attempts to preserve the Christian archetype, the “Rood” poet offers a recount of the crucifixion that characterizes Jesus’ motivations in a manner that contradicts Christian ideology. In effect, Jesus’ portrayal in “The Dream of the Rood” operates as a means of strengthening the bond between lord and retainer through the characterization of Jesus’ death. Self-sacrifice and martyrdom, traditional terms used to describe Jesus’ execution, are not terms applicable to Jesus’ death as portrayed in the “Rood.” The crucifixion within the dream vision is more aptly characterized as something required of Jesus by Anglo-Saxon culture and desired by Jesus himself so that he can fulfill certain Anglo-Saxon cultural dictums regarding bravery in battle. Barbara Yorke writes that the “Anglo-Saxons came to use the […] practices of the British church as an instrument for extending their political domination over British provinces” (136). The poem transfigures Jesus’ death and resurrection into a portrait avowing Anglo-Saxon *comitatus* relationships, therefore further solidifying the Anglo-Saxon political system through the exultation of death in combat. Specifically, the poem portrays the crucifixion as a *miclan gewinne* or “mighty battle” (line 64) and the speaker notes that Jesus “hasten[ed] eagerly when he wanted to ascend onto the [cross]” (line 33). Jesus’ willingness to hasten to battle echoes the ideals of Anglo-Saxon warrior culture, yet the same eagerness contradicts many Christian ideals by promoting violent
and bloody conflict, effectively propelling the values of the Anglo-Saxon political system to a state of higher importance. The use of *eagerly* and *wanted* in line thirty-three implies that Jesus is pleased with and desires his own execution, which suggests that his motivations are selfish and therefore unaligned with traditional Christian doctrine.

The entirety of faith and Christian piety rests solely on the idea of willing sacrifice to absolve mankind of its sins. However, Jesus’ selfish motivations in “The Dream of the Rood” represent the willingness of man to sacrifice his life for veneration and honor from his culture. Adelheid L.J. Thieme notes that “the `Rood’ poet […] refers to moral principles prevalent in Anglo-Saxon culture” (109) to highlight the distinctions between the belief systems of pre-Christian societies. The characterization of Jesus’ motivation as self-serving contradicts Christian doctrine, ignoring the ideals of sacrifice and piety that Christianity is founded on, choosing instead a restructured archetype modeled after Anglo-Saxon warrior ideology. Effectively, “The Dream of the Rood” combines Christian tradition with Anglo-Saxon ideology to produce a depiction of Jesus Christ that conforms to a warrior ethos, thus strengthening Anglo-Saxon *comitatus* bonds while simultaneously making aspects of Christianity more appealing to members of this heroic tradition.

The Old English poetic language of “The Dream of the Rood” creates points of ambiguity in translation that often obscure a secular reading of the text. Upon the second coming of Jesus, the text states that “[Jesus] will ask before the multitudes where the man/ might be/ who for the lord’s
name would taste/ bitter death” (lines 111-114). Arguably, this statement represents Jesus’ judgment of the faithful, absolving those who value and practice the same piety and sacrifice as he did in life. Anthony R. Grasso concurs with this interpretation and claims that “[j]udgment will be made solely on the basis of the individual’s willingness to follow the Lord and to be an active witness to faith” (32). While this interpretation is valid, it focuses entirely on the text in a religious context, ignoring the complex social and political implications of the lines as well as the complex ambiguities and structural properties of the Old English language.

The term lord in Grasso’s interpretation is taken to signify Jesus as Christian archetype; however, the possibility exists that the term implied something different and far less Christian. Regarding the same passage, Robert Boenig states that “[Jesus] is also a ‘powerful king’ and ‘lord’ (= dryhten in Old English, originally the designation of a warlord in charge of a band of warriors)” (42). The portrayal of Jesus as ‘lord’ in a comitatus sense is far more in keeping with his portrayal as a warrior throughout the poem, as well as the characterization of his followers as hilderincas or “warriors” who rush “to build a tomb for him” (line 66). Yet, many scholars disagree with Boenig’s interpretation of the lexical item dryhten. For example, Andrew Galloway states that dryhten “appears over fifteen thousand times in extant Old English writings and refers only twenty-eight times to secular lords; fifteen of these rare occurrences—over half—are in Beowulf” (202-3). Initially, it appears that the sheer repetition of the lexeme dryhten in religious contexts would
render the interpretation of Boenig implausible. However, Galloway does not fully apply the semantic and lexical properties of Old English to their full and logical conclusions and furthermore ignores the various contexts in which the written usages of dryhten are recorded.

Old English nouns are not dissociative lexemes as they appear in Modern English. Rather, they are lexical items with deeply rooted structural relationships to other nouns within the same word families. Dieter Kastovsky notes in “Semantics and Vocabulary,” a section of The Cambridge History of the English Language: Vol. I, that “the vocabulary of a language is as much a reflection of deep-seated cultural, intellectual and emotional interests […] as [are] the texts that have been produced by its members” (291). Thus, it is imperative to consider the structural relationship of dryhten as it relates to other nouns in its word family before dismissing the possibility that the lexical item may have had other, more culturally relevant semantic properties to the Anglo-Saxon speech communities that used this term regularly. When the Old English lexicon is examined, it becomes immediately clear that the structural relationships between dryhten and related nouns primarily exemplify relations of military or political importance. Based on the root lexeme dryht, meaning “multitude, army, company, body of retainers, nation, people” (Hall 89), dryhten and the large majority of other related nouns follow the general pattern of signifying relationships of special importance to the comitatus ideology that dominated Anglo-Saxon society before conversion. When examined synchronically, it is
easy to dismiss the term *lord* as an approximation of Jesus’
title, given the relative Judeo-Christian hegemony that exists
in Western culture at present. However, when the work is
examined diachronically, these structural ambiguities and
blatant ideological contradictions become apparent. In many
ways, as the “Rood” poet re-imagines the mode of Jesus’
sacrifice, the literal language of Old English betrays the
military and political functions of Jesus in the poem and thus
a probable interpretation of an audience of Anglo-Saxon
laypersons.

It is improbable to suggest that the semantic shift
of the term *dryhten* from a military, secular meaning
to a religious meaning happened immediately or even
completely. Kastovkesy admits the tenuous reception of
*dryhten* in Old English linguistic research. The lexeme
is neither an “analogical semantic borrowing” nor a
“substitutive semantic borrowing” completely; instead,
the lexeme resembles more closely a mixture of the two, a
phenomenon that lends to its ambiguity (310). However, the
dating of the “Rood” text itself in the Vercelli Manuscript
(ca.1000 A.D.) and the fragments of the poem discovered
on the Ruthwell Cross, which date to roughly the late
seventh or early eighth century, provide at least some basis
to substantiate a claim that the lexeme *dryhten* would have
retained its native *comitatus* functions despite the growing
conversion of the British isles. The interpretation of Jesus as
secular chieftain has several distinct implications. Primarily,
Jesus’ judgment and veneration of those willing to die
becomes a measure of a man’s fortitude in battle and the
willingness to die for a military leader, thus producing honor for the deceased and the culture through death. However, the distinct Anglo-Saxon cultural dictum of sacrifice in battle effectively disavows the Christian tenets of piety and devotion by venerating those willing to die gloriously in battle in the name of a chieftain and not those who suffer and repent for their sins and the sins of others. Importantly, the rhetorical implications of Jesus’ characterization as warrior instead of martyr result in a degradation of the Christian archetype, while the synthesis of cultural ideologies and myth produces a depiction that further codifies the Anglo-Saxon political system through the dramatization of the *comitatus*.

The focus of “The Dream of the Rood” ignores the aspect of Christ’s suffering for and as man, instead focusing on Jesus as a god who is able to cheat death through his valor in battle. Robert B. Burlin notes that “nothing was more glorious to emergent Christianity than the union of man and God” (40). This “union,” however, is not a symbolic reunion in heaven in “The Dream of the Rood” but the promotion of a man to god-like status through consistent veneration for sacrifice in battle. Mitchell and Robinson suggest that this type of immortality is inherently tied into the *comitatus* ideology outlined by Tacitus in *Germania* and exemplified by Jesus’ heroic portrayal in “The Dream of the Rood”: “a different kind of immortality […] is stressed in [Anglo-Saxon] literature. This was *lof*, which was won by bravery in battle and consisted of glory among men, the praise of those still living” (135). This *lof*, this idea of earthly immortality,
stands in stark contrast to the Christian notions of an ethereal afterlife. Valiant death becomes the point of transformation in which Christ is able to gain honor and god-like status just as other sections of the poem suggest that man is able to gain this status through valiant service and death in the name of his lord:

Lo, the King of glory, guardian of heaven’s kingdom
honored me over all the trees of the forest,
just as he has also, almighty God,
honored his mother, Mary herself. (lines 89-92)

However, this path to eternal life contradicts typical Christian doctrine by suggesting that through veneration one may achieve a god-like status and live forever in the esteem of those still living, instead of focusing on the tribulations that Christ experienced suffering for and at the hands of man. Indeed, the poem’s ignorance of Christ as man implies also an ignorance of his teachings and actions while alive, especially the ideological tenets resulting from the narrative of his suffering and crucifixion. Therefore, the characterization of Christ as exultant warrior in “The Dream of the Rood” usurps his position as the Christian model for behavior. In *The Web of Words*, Bernard F. Huppe notes that the poem’s emphasis “is entirely on Christ as God triumphant, not on Christ as suffering man” (75). Importantly, the speaker of the poem discusses being transported to the afterlife and feeling “joy in heaven” where he can “dwell in glory” (lines 139, 142). The idea of a pleasing afterlife is similar in both cultures; however, the
continual Anglo-Saxon stress on veneration becomes present in the phrase “dwell in glory,” which again suggests the idea of *lof* and its connections to *comitatus* bonds. Christ’s portrayal as celebrated warrior effectively disavows the validity of the Christian archetype while simultaneously promoting and strengthening the bonds of the lord-retainer relationship through the suggestion of venerated immortality as a result of sacrifice in battle. However, despite the deep structural connection between Jesus’ function in the “Rood” and the military ideology of the Anglo-Saxons, the Church was not unaware of the ideological drawbacks with these types of conversion tools. Rather, this type of ideological syncretism, despite the often conflicting messages, became an accepted tool of religious officials actively engaged in the practices of conversion.

Conversion of the Anglo-Saxon people remained the primary goal of the Church in medieval England for much of the period leading up to the poem’s appearance in the Vercelli MS. In an excerpt from Bede’s *History of the English Church and People*, Pope Gregory’s statement to Saint Augustine communicates the degree to which religious officials were aware of the need for tools that combined these two competing ideologies: “[S]elect from each of the churches whatever things are devout, religious, and right; and when you have bound them […] let the minds of the English grow accustomed to them” (73). The content of Pope Gregory’s correspondence with Augustine highlights the Church’s official policy of syncretism in Britain, stating that ideological amalgamation, time, and exposure are
the means through which conversion will be successfully accomplished. Effectively, “The Dream of the Rood” is the product of the papacy’s decree. The poem binds together threads from Anglo-Saxon warrior culture with those of Christian doctrine to produce what is effectively a fabric of Church rhetoric, meant to create a cultural environment in which, over time, Anglo-Saxons could readily accept and participate in traditional Christian behavior.

Effectively, “The Dream of the Rood” represents a synthesis of Christian mythology and the virtues of Anglo-Saxon warrior culture. While much care is taken in the combination of Christian and Anglo-Saxon mythological elements, the characterization of Jesus Christ ignores ideals central to Christian belief and replaces them with virtues of Anglo-Saxon culture in an attempt to further solidify cornerstones of the Anglo-Saxon political system. Similarly, linguistic evidence contained in the poem suggests the existence of two competing interpretations that hinge on the semantic properties of the lexeme dryhten. Given the ambiguous and convoluted nature of the linguistic evidence in the poem, it is difficult to disregard either interpretation entirely. However, it is necessary to admit that the religious climate of England during the period in which this poem appeared on the Ruthwell Cross and in the Vercelli MS. was nowhere near as clearly demarcated as the religious climate at present. Therefore, it is necessary to separate with some degree of discretion the interaction between competing ideologies in “The Dream of the Rood” and the beliefs and religious structures of a Judeo-Christian hegemony.
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Boenig, Robert. *Anglo-Saxon Spirituality.* USA: Paulist
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Rood’ and the Vita Contemplativa.” *Studies in
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“The Dream of the Rood.” *The Broadview Anthology of
British Literature: The Medieval
“The Secret Heart” of Gray’s “Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College”

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Whilst Thomas Gray’s “Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College” addresses the changes and constraints encountered in the shift between childhood and adulthood, the ode also confronts the constraints of language and expression itself. The poem focuses on the apparent inadequacy of language, which “skulks behind” (line 64) its more visible themes, such as memory. Language, as a material substance, is inadequate for communication of meaning, and it is this inadequacy that “skulks behind” the physicality of the poem’s words, which show concern
primarily for their own poetic form. Just as the poem superficially conveys how “Shame [...] skulks behind” the youths, who are unaware of the way in which it hovers, waiting for adulthood to make itself known, the inadequacy of language “skulks” beneath the exterior of the poem. Language’s inadequacy is the “the secret heart” (line 67) of Gray’s ode, which “shall tempt to rise” (line 71), until it is revealed. Allusions to the futility of language construct this “secret heart,” as well as an occupation with the meta-linguistic and an interest in the materiality and power of language.

Joseph C. Silterson believes that Gray’s ode “remains without a plot and offers instead only a static contrast, however learned and ironic, between happy ignorant youth and the unhappy wise speaker” (32). However, the ode is not merely “a static contrast” between youth and the speaker but rather a commentary on language itself. It has a self-conscious preoccupation with its own substance. The poem’s language is not “static,” as Silterson suggests. Instead, language is active and “wanders” like “the hoary Thames along/ His silver winding way” (lines 9-10). Language has a purposeful route, and yet digresses and wanders on its journey through the poem. These meanders refer the reader back to the art of writing, prompting a concern for both the inadequacy and the power of language. This “expanse below” (line 6) the thematic surface makes up the self-conscious “secret heart” of the poem. “Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College” is a hyper-material piece of literature which draws attention to itself as language,
thus becoming a meta-linguistic piece of art. The poem’s materiality is “sufficient” as a form of plot and journey. This idea of sufficiency is introduced in the Greek epigraph, which pronounces the importance of adequacy and sufficiency in Gray’s examination of language.

The ode’s materiality and use of meta-language is therefore the “secret heart,” whose pulse can be felt, and yet – like the human heart – it cannot be cut away from the body of the text without removing the pulse of life which beats through it. “If words are made of breath,/ And breath of life” (*Hamlet. 3.4.195–6*), then words are life to the “secret heart” of literature. Poets are able to use language to “breathe a second spring” (line 20) into objects, by recreating the familiar and giving it a new life, by doing what Shklovsky described as seeking to “make the stone stony” and to “make objects `unfamiliar’” (qtd. in Samberger 132).

Indeed, Gray’s poems are also “more or less disguised discussions” of language and of the literary. While Meyer Spacks explores the argument that “Gray’s poems, public and private, are all more or less disguised discussions of his own sensibility” (“Artful Strife” 67), this statement is insufficient in responding to the concept of language as material and as a form of meta-language. Gray weaves his “sensibility” into his poetry, yet language restricts the extent to which that sensibility can be expressed. The very identity of language therefore limits even the “disguised discussions” of Gray’s sensibility, prompting the identification of meta-language as the vital component of his work; meta-language thus becomes “the secret heart” which pulses through “Ode
on a Distant Prospect of Eton College,” giving life to the body of the poem.

Even the title of Gray’s ode exemplifies this material preoccupation with language and its apparent futility: the poetic voice cannot address an ode “to” a distant prospect of the college, instead addressing an ode “on” the prospect. The title becomes a form of apostrophe, suggesting that language does not permit direct communication with its subject: instead it is merely a piece of passive commentary. That the prospect is “distant” reveals the incapacity of poetry to reconstruct an object as near and immediate. Language does not have the power to summon the speaker’s experiences of childhood into the present, and so both the poetic voice and the reader must view childhood, and Eton College, from the physical and temporal distance from which the narrative voice looks. The noun prospect also indicates that the poetic voice contemplates his subject from only one viewpoint, suggesting that the poem, as a piece of literature, is open to and perhaps dependant on interpretation, as language can be viewed from many prospects.

It is the concern for the meta-linguistic and the futility of language “that inly gnaws the secret heart” (line 67) of the poem. The word gnaws gives a reluctance to the phrase, due to the way in which its continuant consonants frame the vowel sound, which forces a pause in the rhythm and pace of the phrase as the reader struggles to pronounce the awkward verb. The phrase’s reluctance reflects the strain required to disclose the “hidden heart” of the ode, drawing the reader’s attention to the way in which the poem’s materiality and
the use of meta-language erodes “inly” and “shall tempt to rise” (line 71). The poetic voice strains to convey his reservations and frustrations at the role and capability of language to communicate. The final stanza proclaims: “To each his sufferings: all are men, / Condemned alike to groan” (lines 91-2), implying that man was created to communicate through language. Therefore, all men must “groan”; they must attempt to communicate through language, as Gray does by writing his “Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College,” in which he constructs a poetic voice. The word groan describes the process of communicating through poetry, as a medium of language, demonstrating that poetry is a futile process of attempted expression and is constructed of pain and focused on the self. Poetry is therefore a “murmuring” (line 32) as opposed to a clear articulation, whilst even the distinction between language, poetry and literature is also “murmured” and blurred by language itself. The long vowels ensure that the word groan lingers in the palate, producing an onomatopoeic effect. The colon in this phrase is used to cut across the iambic tetrameter used in the first line of each verse, forcing a pause before the phrase “all are men.” The simple monosyllabic structure reduces the pace of the poem and refuses to fit into the chiselled structure of iambs that the reader expects. The way two syllables constrain the word suffering before the feminine caesura reflects the way in which the innate desire to “groan” using the medium of language restricts man’s expression. The poetic voice also enhances the stubborn quality of this phrase, which refuses to comply entirely with the verse form.
The word *men* parallels the word *pain*, which substitutes for a rhyming word, indicating that man and pain are synonymous. This absence of rhyme ensures that the poetry, like mankind, “groans” and is not able to harmonise where the similar phonetics of rhyming words would have.

The poetic voice of “Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College” is fixated on the structure and form of poetry. The “graver hours, that bring constraint / To sweeten liberty” (lines 33-4) exhibit the way in which a schoolboy’s hours of “constraint” in a classroom provide a contrast against which his hours of play are all the sweeter. The enjambement allows for an element of “liberty” in the phrase, which breaks the “constraint” of end-stopping. The poem itself continues to echo this concept of contrasting “constraint” against “liberty,” both thematically—the poetic voice concludes that his memories of childhood are made sweeter by the “constraint” and misery of adulthood—and structurally. The form of a poem brings “constraint/ To sweeten liberty” by condensing thoughts and patterns of rhetoric into the “constraint” of a verse form; the “liberty” of thought that flows through the act of reading is sweetened. This almost suggests a pre-Blakean need for paradox, where “without Contraries is no progression” (Blake 207). This is reflected in the form of “Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College,” where although Gray keeps a constant verse form and rhyme scheme, he manipulates it to match the contrasts in his subjects. Meyer Spacks states that “Gray’s shifts of rhetoric deepen and complicate the meaning of his poem; the ode’s form directly illuminates its content”
(“Statement and Artifice” 527). However, Gray’s ode does not have such gradual shifts as the critic suggests, instead Gray demonstrates bold adjustments in rhetoric. For example, in the cluster of three stanzas that precede the final verse, as he describes the misery of adulthood, Gray uses a violence of rhythm which reflects the content of the lines. He achieves this by using series of shorter words to stress the iambic structure and by using words with plosive or hard consonants, forcing the reader to spit out fragments of the poetry with a tempestuous zeal, such as “tear it forced to flow” (line 77). Sibilance is also used to haunt the content of these verses, which can be seen in “Shame that skulks behind” (line 64). Here Gray mirrors the content of the line in its form. This is due to the lingering phonetics of “skulks,” which stretches itself over the palate in a brooding, foreboding way, whilst “behind” refuses to comply with the pattern of masculine rhyme, and so it lingers passively, producing a sense of incompletion which generates an effect of unresolved dread. Therefore, the very structure of the poem itself exhibits the brooding “secret heart” of the poem: a fixation with the concept of meta-language and the poem’s materiality, which “skulks behind” the immediate themes.

A concern for the form and shape of poetry “racks the joints and fires the veins” (line 85) of the poem. The poem’s materiality occupies the poetic voice, which is acutely aware of the ode’s “joints”: he is captivated by the structure of the poetry and the different parts which make up the ode’s body of words as a whole as well as the way in which they interact with one another, fitting together
like “joints” to facilitate movement of thought, cadence, and rhythm. He is also intrigued by the different “veins” of thought, which require an active reader in order to provide a pulse to circulate the different threads of ideas around the body of the poem, uniting each “vein” into a wider form of unity. Allusions to structure are scattered throughout the ode. The opening stanza describes the “antique towers” (line 1) of Eton that “crown the watery glade” (line 2). This could represent language, where words are used like “antique” monuments to ideas: although the poet is architect, he is constrained by a need to use the “antique” building blocks of words which have been formulated over centuries, and so he cannot escape inducing exterior connotations due to the inevitable tangle of intertextuality. Words, perhaps, merely “crown” the “watery glade” of thought, which is too shifting and liquid a substance to communicate itself, and so a reliance has developed on language, as the medium of poetry, for communication. This demonstrates a concern for the capacity of language to communicate the vast depths of “watery” thought or sentiment.

“Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College” also engages with the power of language: the substance which provides the heartbeat of the ode. As the poetic voice considers his prospect of Eton, he feels “gales, that from ye blow” (line 15). A physical breeze blows from the direction of the college, but memories and new perceptions are also being blown like “gales.” Hidden beneath this is the idea that poetry blows “gales” as it induces a sensory response. It also “bestow[s]” (line 16), indicating that literature prompts
creativity in the act of reading. However, these “gales” are only “momentary” (line 16), which undermines the “bliss [they] bestow” (line 16), as the apparent solidity implied through the plosive alliteration is shown to be subject to time. The “weary soul they seem to soothe” (line 18), and yet this line of poetry is governed by the word seem, which draws attention to the temporality of both emotion and the effect poetry has upon emotion and thought. As the poetic voice now perceives that children must “snatch a fearful joy” (line 40) before they are exposed to elements such as “Jealousy” (line 66), “Death” (line 83), or “Despair” (line 69), he also perceives that poetry is a violent attempt to “snatch” an essence of the eternal, by creating a literary fragment that will endure beyond his death. The oxymoron of “fearful joy” gently mocks the absurdity of life’s paradoxes between adulthood and youth, experience and memory, and also the futility of language. The power of the language found in Gray’s ode creates “gales that from ye blow”: “gales” that are so forceful that the poem’s “secret heart” ceases to be secret, and instead the poetic voice’s fascination in the substance of language is made explicit.

Whilst considering youth, the poetic voice states that children “hear a voice in every wind” (line 39). Unlike adults, they have the power to hear poetry in all. This suggests that childhood is the climax of creativity, where one is unbound by the reason and experience which seems to restrain adulthood. Nature, in contrast, seems to have not only the capacity to hear, but to speak. The poetic voice entreats “Father Thames” to “[...] for thou has seen”
(line 21), reasoning that nature, having observed, has the authority to speak. A poet must be an observer in order to gain the insight required to “say” and to have power to his words. Nature’s form of speech, which is unhindered by words, has greater power to communicate and express than the poet’s, which is of language.

The “secret heart” of Gray’s “Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College” is therefore bound up in meta-language. Chris Baldrick states that “criticism is a meta-language about literature” (152). Criticism is thus a medium of language in which language itself is examined, and it is this broader literary viewpoint that is relevant to the “heart” of Gray’s ode. Whilst terms such as meta-drama are common to literary criticism, the narrow reach of such terms allows only a description of, for example, drama about drama. The “secret heart” of Gray’s ode demands a broader definition of meta-language to describe literature about literature, being concerned with its own literariness. The material nature of language thus becomes a form of meta-language.

Baldrick goes on to say that “there is in principle no absolute distinction between criticism and literature” (152): “Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College,” as a piece of literature, is itself a piece of criticism, in which it critiques its own language and the art of writing poetry. However, this “heart” of meta-language and materiality is “secret.” This may be explained by Jacques Derrida, who suggests that “a text is not a text unless it hides from the first comma, from the first glance, the law of its composition and the rules of its game” (1830). Gray’s ode presents the façade of being
unaware of its own construction, of its own literariness. “Its law and its rules are not, however, harboured in the inaccessibility of a secret,” continues Derrida, “it is simply that they can never be booked” (1830). The “secret heart” of Gray’s poem is, then, accessible, and yet ironically, due to the inadequacy of language to communicate fully, it “can never be booked.”

The way in which “Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College” continually alludes to its own literariness leads to an irony which is woven throughout the poem. Gray’s ode comments on language and on poetry, and it explores the power of language and literary form. Yet, the inadequacies that the poetic voice sees in language, which “groan” and “murmur” throughout, haunt the poem. Gray is acutely aware of the ode’s materiality, conscious that by using words as a medium to communicate, he encounters “the limits of their little reign” (line 36). Yet, paradoxically, despite this inadequacy, language is used to obscure things to a hyper-material level, allowing subjects to be better understood due to language’s power to become more than itself. The physicality of language both restricts the art of communication and transcends it. Language is seen, in “Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College,” to become more than mere words “beloved in vain” (line 12), instead becoming a powerful force which beats life throughout and beyond the poem’s structure, as its “secret heart.”


Domestic Soldier: 
Kitty’s Secondary Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in *The Return of the Soldier*

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British writer Rebecca West is ordinarily anything but sympathetic to upper-class women, whom she labels as “parasites” who “do not create sufficient use-value to justify their support by the community” (Marcus 115). Yet, when read in light of the trauma of war, West’s treatment of the aristocratic Kitty Baldry allows for a surprisingly compassionate reading. When her husband, Chris, returns from World War I with a severe case of shell-shock in West’s novel *The Return of the Soldier* (1918), Kitty’s life is thrown into disarray. With Chris suffering from amnesia and having
no recollection of his marriage, everything from Kitty’s most intimate relationships to the way society views her role in the world begins to change.

Yet, while Chris is given the best medical care available and is even allowed to spend copious amounts of time luxuriating with his ex-lover, Margaret, in the hopes of finding a cure for his shell-shock, Kitty is left to endure the painful situation in silence and solitude. Though Kitty suffers greatly as an apparent bystander to Chris’s ordeal and, like a besieged soldier, exhibits many classic signs of trauma, she is largely ignored by the patriarchal, war-driven society in which she lives. The same lack of interest is true of recent critics, even feminist scholars who might be most sympathetic to her cause. While Chris’ psychological distress is acknowledged and deemed worthy of treatment, Kitty’s trauma is overlooked, as even the novel’s other female characters refuse to acknowledge her pain as legitimate. This is due, in large part, to the fact that Kitty’s trauma is highly feminine in nature and, therefore, unlikely to be recognized by a male-dominated society that views women’s distress not as a medical concern but as the mark of the weaker sex. Thus, Kitty suffers her own private, domestic war in solitude, and this isolated conflict leads her to experience her own socially unacknowledged version of what we today would term Secondary Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

It is not unreasonable to conclude that West, as an early feminist and longtime suffragette, would have conceptualized such a forward-thinking, feminist narrative, even early in her literary career. Joining the feminist cause in
1909, nearly a decade before the publication of *The Return of the Soldier*, West distributed fliers, attended meetings, and used her writing skills to document and critique the movement. Eventually, writing under her given name, Cecily Fairfield, West joined the staff of the *Freewoman*, a feminist newspaper which advocated free love and urged women to remain unmarried. West not only promoted these ideas in her professional life but also championed the rights of women in her personal diaries.

She was particularly passionate about women remaining unmarried because, upon marriage, women gave up their property rights and monetary earnings. Additionally, as legal and social systems favored men, women had little recourse if their husbands treated them unfairly. In a 1928 article published in the *New York Times*, West simply writes, “Men are cruel to women” (“Women’s Lot as a Woman Sees It” 4). In fact, in his early biography of West, Motley F. Deakin argues that she believed “man was woman’s most persistent […] enemy” (19).

These ideas about marriage were drawn directly from West’s views on patriarchal society as a whole. During the early twentieth century, Deakin asserts that “[w]omen were expected to exemplify virtue. They were forced to practice an aestheticism of thought, of conduct, of clothes, of food not required by men [….] Wherever she turned West found women hemmed in, restricted, sacrificed to men’s expectations” (19-20). West despised the widely acknowledged idea of a separate domestic sphere, which barred women access to the public world and turned
feminine problems into petty household issues. In 1915, after her long-time lover H.G. Wells installed her and their son in a house in a London suburb, West, feeling confined, emphatically wrote, “I hate domesticity” (qtd. in Rollyson 62). It is counterintuitive, then, that West, who was writing *The Return of the Soldier* at this time, would ignore Kitty’s plight as a married woman with little power beyond the home.

Additionally, West’s own articles from this time period prove that she was very aware of the particular sacrifices women were forced to make during war, an engine driven by patriarchy. In her article “The Cordite Makers,” West writes, “Surely, never before in modern history can women have lived a life so completely parallel to that of the regular army. The girls who take up this work sacrifice almost as much as the men do who enlist” (14). West continues by detailing how difficult it is for these women, trained in domesticity, to work for twelve hours per day, earning a wage of only thirty shillings. They ate and slept in barracks, and even when the women did get time off, they were often too tired or too poor to travel home to see their families (13-14). Undoubtedly, West understood that women on the home front were deeply affected, and perhaps even damaged, by the war that was devastating Britain. This understanding, coupled with her firm feminist stance, may have led Rebecca West to write a novel that focuses not only on Chris’ but also on Kitty’s wartime trauma.

Though neglected for much of its history, *The Return of the Soldier* has received significantly more scholarly
attention in the last two decades. Recent critics, such as Esther McCallum-Stewart and Marina McKay, place the novel within the context of the larger phenomenon of World War I literature, comparing it to other contemporary works. Only in the last five years, however, has there been a noticeable increase in scholarship focused exclusively upon *The Return of the Soldier*. Nevertheless, these authors tend to spotlight Chris’ psychology and trauma. Surprisingly, even feminist scholars like Angela K. Smith and Claire M. Tylee rarely mention Kitty as little more than a footnote in an otherwise complex narrative.

In his 2008 article, “Trauma and Cure in West’s *The Return of the Soldier*,” Steve Pinkerton attempts to correct this oversight by spending several paragraphs discussing Kitty’s reaction to the love affair taking place in her own home. Still, the bulk of Pinkerton’s argument focuses not on Kitty but rather on Margaret’s healing power and camaraderie with Chris. In addition, while her essay entitled “Complicating Kitty: A Textual Variant in Rebecca West’s *The Return of the Soldier*” does focus explicitly on the role Kitty plays in the novel, Melissa Edmundson paints Kitty as a calculating woman who rules her household with severe authoritarianism. Thus, Pinkerton and Edmundson bring Kitty into the critical conversation only to interpret her role as little more than that of a domineering, arrogant housewife.

A closer analysis of Kitty’s role in the text reveals not only her trauma but also the war-like battle she must fight. As with any war, Kitty’s private battle begins with an invasion. Just as the German invasion of the neutral country
of Belgium sparked World War I, the beginning of Kitty’s own conflict is signaled when Margaret appears at Baldry Court in order to help Chris through his amnesia. Though Kitty, by means of her sex and her class, is barred (either legally or by convention) from voting, owning her own business, and holding a political office, she does have the ability to run her own home. Indeed, Baldry Court is the only domain where Kitty has any substantial influence. Thus, Margaret’s appearance there is not just out of the ordinary—it is a tangible threat to Kitty’s only place of power.

Almost immediately, Jenny and Kitty begin to “other” Margaret, much as World War I soldiers “othered” the enemy. To Kitty, who has spent her entire life in the upper echelons of English society, Margaret’s working-class persona is both foreign and frightening. Though Jenny narrates the scene in which Margaret first appears at Baldry Court, the reader can assume by the descriptions of Kitty’s disdain that she shares Jenny’s disgust. Jenny first describes Margaret’s clothing as strange and somehow grotesque. She notes that “[s]he [Margaret] was repulsively furred with neglect and poverty” (10). The use of the word *furred* reinforces the fact that Kitty and Jenny see Margaret as animalistic and even subhuman. Inadequacy seems to emanate from Margaret just as fur grows from an animal. Only a few lines later, the women, seeing Margaret’s discomfort at having to deliver news of Chris’ accident, “smile triumphantly at the spectacle of a fellow-creature [Margaret] occupied in baseness” (11). While an aristocratic woman is assumed to have honor and the admiration of
others, someone like Margaret is considered by those above her to be mangy, immoral, and ignoble.

In fact, Kitty views Margaret, her culture, and her customs as so debased that she cannot believe Margaret’s story about Chris without being shown tangible evidence. When Margaret first tells her story, Kitty accuses her of being greedy and cruel. She says, “You come to tell this story because you think that you will get some money. I’ve read of such cases in the papers” (14). Margaret has effectively been labeled as one of dozens of scorned women who make a living preying on respectable people. Just as Chris would have been trained to view the Germans as coldblooded killers and rapists, the aristocratic culture in which she lives has taught Kitty to believe that Margaret is nothing more than a crude stereotype of a working-class woman.

Yet, Chris, who ought to have understood Kitty’s aversion to Margaret, abandons Kitty and forces her to accept Margaret. On his first evening back at Baldry Court, Chris tells his wife, “If I do not see Margaret Allington I shall die.” Kitty replies, “You shall see her as much as you like” (30). To be forced to entertain an enemy in your own home in order to save the life of your comrade is truly an act of courage, and something not even the British soldiers were asked to do. Instead, these men were told to loathe the Germans, to kill them, and to do it proudly. Society as a whole ordained this process and even praised World War I veterans for their bravery and skill. In short, there was, for most soldiers, a clear-cut distinction between comrades and enemies. To kill an enemy was not only a necessary feat but
also a noble one.

Kitty, on the other hand, suffers a severe blurring of the lines between friend and foe. Not only is Chris, who is supposed to be Kitty’s ally and protector, begging to spend time with a known adversary, but Kitty is also left to confront this deeply confusing situation on her own. Since her plight is in the private and not public sphere, there is no one to whom she can turn for help. Indeed, as an aristocratic woman, Kitty has been trained to run her household, to care for her family, and to do it with a quiet, accepting nature. Even if Chris were to begin a sexual relationship with Margaret—arguably the ultimate act of betrayal—Kitty would be expected to shoulder this burden silently.

Of course, Margaret’s invasion into Kitty’s world is followed almost immediately by a searing sense of loss. After Margaret’s first visit to Baldry Court, while Chris is still in the hospital, Kitty quickly learns that Chris is indeed suffering from shell-shock and will be returning home. Yet, even before his arrival, Kitty understands that she has lost her husband. After Margaret leaves, Kitty tells Jenny that the true meaning of Margaret’s story is not merely Chris’ injury. More importantly, according to Kitty, “[i]t shows that there are bits of him [Chris] [that they] don’t know…It’s all such a breach of trust” (17). However, in spite of this sudden feeling of betrayal and disenchantment, Kitty has no choice but to fight for the continuation of her marriage. While, on one hand, a marriage leaves Kitty completely vulnerable to the whims of her husband, it also allows her to maintain her status as an aristocratic woman and her power over Baldry
Court.

Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, marital arrangements usually had more to do with necessity than love. As Jenni Calder writes in her book *Women and Marriage in Victorian Fiction*, women like Kitty “have no reality except in terms of the marriages they are to make, or fail to make, or make and then ruin” (18). In other words, Kitty’s sense of selfhood as well as her place within the larger society is entirely dependent upon her marriage to Chris. Margaret’s presence in Kitty’s home represents a new obstacle to this socioeconomic arrangement. Whether or not Kitty loves Chris or even values the intimacy of their marriage is irrelevant because their relationship is not a love match. Indeed, Kitty’s entire identity is based upon her role as Chris’ wife; if Chris chooses Margaret over Kitty, then Kitty’s psychological and socioeconomic identity is almost completely jeopardized.

This is, more than likely, the first time Kitty has been so starkly presented with such a reality. After a lifetime of living in the upper echelons of society and more than a decade of secure, if not happy, union with Chris, the harsh realization that her world is a social construct has deep and long-standing implications for Kitty’s mental well-being. Though she may very well see the limitations of such a world, Kitty has no choice but to fight for the reinstatement of class boundaries between Chris and Margaret as well as the patriarchy that will leave her protected through the system of marriage.

Interestingly, Kitty’s disillusionment with her real
social status parallels the feelings of many World War I soldiers. These men entered the war with high hopes of attaining glory and respect, only to realize that the idea of war as honor was a fallacy constructed by a society that needed men to willingly enter into battle. Instead of reaching hero status, these young men were irreversibly maimed, not only physically but also psychologically, by the horrors of trench warfare. As Paul Fussell writes in *The Great War and Modern Memory*, “[t]he Great War took place in what was, compared with ours, a static world where values appeared to be stable” (21). So, for these young men who had grown up in a time of constancy where morality was fairly black and white and everyone’s role in society was clearly defined, the shock of the truth of war was truly damaging. Indeed, World War I was “perhaps the last to be conceived as taking place within a seamless, purposeful ‘history’ involving a coherent stream of time running from past through present to future” (21). For these young Britons, the values and norms they had grown up with were rapidly being shattered by the shrapnel of all-encompassing war.

Likewise, Kitty’s world is disintegrating. When Chris returns from the military hospital where he has been recuperating, Kitty is still wobbling between safety and peril as Chris has no recollection of the woman he married. This breeds deep fear in Kitty, and she fights to make her husband remember her. In fact, their first meeting after Chris returns from the trenches is much like a battle scene:

‘I am your wife.’ There was a weak, wailing anger behind the words. ‘Kitty,’ he said, softly
and kindly. He looked round for some sense of graciousness to make the scene less wounding, and stooped to kiss her. But he could not. The thought of another woman made him unable to breathe, sent the blood running under his skin. With a toss, like a child saying, ‘Well, if you don’t want to, I’m sure I wouldn’t for the world!’ Kitty withdrew from the suspended caress. He watched her retreat into the shadows, as if she were a symbol of his new life by which he was baffled and oppressed [….](24)

As Jenny narrates the exchange, she uses words like *wailing, wounding, retreat, and withdrew* to show that Kitty is losing the battle to make her husband remember their life together (24). In the end, Kitty is forced to concede a temporary loss when she tries to lead her husband upstairs. Jenny notes that as they moved toward the bedroom, a place where they should have been most united, “a sense of separateness beat her [Kitty] back; she lifted her arms as though she struggled through a fog and finally fell behind” (25). Though there are no guns or poisoned gas alerts, Jenny’s description invokes obvious wartime imagery. Not only is Kitty fighting her own fog, much like the fog that descended on the trenches, but she is, finally, forced to fall back, losing ground in this domestic battle. While Debra Rae Cohen argues that, because Kitty has been shielded from the “reality of war” she is “secure in her separate, ornamental role” (71), the truth is that Kitty’s entire world has been turned into a combat zone. Everything she does,
from choosing which clothes to wear to speaking with her husband, is part of a daily battle Kitty must fight in order to maintain her lifestyle.

Of course, her initial meeting with Chris is not Kitty’s only attempt to stave off the loss of her partner. Later that same night, Kitty adorns herself in jewels and “the gown she wore on her wedding-day…her right hand [is] stiff with rings and her left hand bare save for her wedding ring” (26). Kitty attempts to position herself in the most flattering light the room has to offer, hoping to make herself appear virgin-like and youthful. In his article “Trauma and Cure in Rebecca West’s *The Return of the Soldier*,” Steve Pinkerton briefly mentions this scene and Kitty’s role in it: “Kitty’s dress befits her self-presentation as the ghost of her former, ‘virginal’ self, dead these ten years” (8). Pinkerton goes on to argue that in writing Kitty as a ghostlike figure, West is setting the reader up for the appearance of the most important “ghost” of all: Chris and Kitty’s deceased son, Oliver, since it is Chris’ memory of Oliver that finally awakens him from his amnesia and restores a dubious order to Baldry Court.

While Pinkerton’s reading of Kitty as a ghost is, in many ways, accurate, it does not portray the depth of Kitty’s trauma. Instead, Pinkerton establishes Kitty’s character as a means to a pre-conceived, or perhaps contrived, end to the novel. Yet, West is using Kitty to do much more; as a feminist writer, West is using this scene to examine the confines of patriarchy and the toll they take on women. In having Kitty don a white dress and wear her wedding ring, the very symbols of marriage, the reader is once again
reminded of how dependent Kitty is on the patriarchal system. In fact, the only tools Kitty has by which to lure Chris back to Baldry Court and the life they once shared are the very symbols of Kitty’s enslavement to domesticity. So, while Kitty can exert some measure of control over her life, she must do so within the socially constructed boundaries of patriarchy, which only adds to her growing trauma and internal conflict.

While the loss of Chris is devastating to Kitty on many levels, Jenny’s ultimate betrayal of Kitty may be even more disturbing. United by familial history and socioeconomic status, the two women ought to have been unified in their battle for Chris’ memory. Yet, while Kitty fights both Chris and Margaret for the right to reclaim the life she built, Jenny has sided with Kitty’s “enemy,” Margaret. Margaret D. Stetz argues that, as the novel progresses, Jenny not only sympathizes with Chris and Margaret but also “becomes a part of their idealized ménage a trois” (168). When the couple is in the garden and Chris has fallen asleep on Margaret’s lap, Jenny inserts herself into this private, romantic moment by watching the lovers from afar. She even calls them “my dear Chris and my dear Margaret” and marvels at all of the gifts Margaret has given to the traumatized Chris (70). By the end of the novel, Margaret has even become a sort of deity in Jenny’s eyes. Instead of the revolting intruder she first appeared to be, Margaret has transformed for Jenny into “an intercessory being whose kindliness could be daunted only by some special and incredibly malicious decision of the Supreme Force” (77).
Jenny even goes so far as to pray to Margaret and the power she holds over the whole of Baldry Court, saying, “I was standing with my eyes closed and my hands abstractedly stroking the hat which was the symbol of her martyrdom, and I was thinking of her in a way that was a prayer to her” (77). In seeing Margaret as both an intercessory being and a martyr, Jenny has effectively turned her into a Christ-like figure, someone who can intervene to save Jenny from her damning status as a superfluous woman in Kitty’s household. If Margaret, a working-class woman who should have held no power at Baldry Court, can usurp Kitty’s role as lady of the house, then perhaps she can save Jenny from a place of submission.

It is not until the last chapter of the novel, however, that Jenny’s betrayal of Kitty is complete. After Dr. Anderson arrives, Jenny moves from worshipping Margaret from afar to actively siding with her against Kitty. When the doctor asks her about Chris’ life with Kitty, Jenny replies, “Nothing and everything was wrong […] I’ve always felt it” (80-81). For Kitty, who has long had power over Jenny because the unmarried Jenny is absolutely dependent upon Chris and Kitty for her economic welfare, this is a shocking blow. In a time when unmarried women were considered superfluous, living only by the kindness of male relatives, the fact that Jenny can hurt Kitty at all is telling of just how much Kitty needs Chris and the patriarchal order he represents if she is going to recover any semblance of normalcy.

Jenny’s ultimate betrayal happens in Oliver’s nursery when she convinces Margaret not to tell Chris the truth
about his dead son. Such a revelation about a cherished child surely would awaken Chris from his amnesia and give Kitty her life back. However, when Margaret asks her whether or not she should shock Chris from his amnesia, Jenny cries, “Of course not! Of course not!” (87). Both Jenny and Margaret are content to leave Kitty’s life in a state of upheaval until Kitty appears in the doorway, distraught and obviously traumatized by the entire situation. Just like the worst kind of military betrayal—when trusted comrades are discovered to be traitors—Jenny’s betrayal very nearly ruins the rest of Kitty’s life: if Jenny had her way, Chris would never remember Kitty.

Through the initial shock of Margaret’s invasion of Baldry Court, Kitty’s fierce battle for Chris’ memory and attention, and, finally, Jenny’s betrayal, it becomes clear that the events of *The Return of the Soldier* cause Kitty great suffering, leading to what we now term Secondary Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Indeed, recent psychological studies suggest that the spouses of traumatized soldiers can be so deeply impacted by the upheaval of such a return that they, too, begin to display symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Though the term *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder* is fairly recent, not having officially been used until after the Vietnam War, soldiers have been experiencing its effects for centuries. Indeed, Edgar Jones argues that there is evidence of soldiers struggling with the disorder as early as the Napoleonic Wars (1799-1815), when men who had not suffered physical wounds in combat but still exhibited
symptoms of “tingling, twitching and even partial paralysis” were diagnosed as having “cerebro-spinal shock” (535). During the American Civil War (1861-1865), soldiers suffered from a similar psychological disorder then known as “soldier’s heart.” However, World War I was the first time the disorder, then called “shell-shock,” began to affect large portions of society. In 1920, the Southborough Committee was appointed to study the phenomenon. Many of the symptoms they identified, including “fatigue, headache, difficulty sleeping, nightmares, memory loss, [and] poor concentration” are still considered by modern physicians to be indicators of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (Jones 537).

The sudden interest of British doctors and the government in such disorders is not entirely surprising, given the fact that the Great War required hundreds of thousands of soldiers to fight in inhuman conditions, watching as new weaponry killed men in ways previously unheard of. Paul Fussell describes the soldier’s living conditions in great detail: “The stench of rotten flesh was over everything […] dead horses and dead men—and parts of both—were sometimes not buried for months and often simply became an element of parapets and trench walls” (49). Soldiers also contended with rats, near-constant rain, cold, injuries, lack of food, and homesickness. These brutal conditions made many soldiers feel helpless.

In The Female Malady, Elaine Showalter argues that, in addition to the subhuman conditions experienced by many soldiers during the Great War, impossible expectations also led to increased instances of shell-shock. She writes that
“[w]hen all signs of physical fear were judged as weaknesses and where alternatives to combat—pacifism, conscientious objection, desertion, even suicide—were viewed as unmanly, men were silenced and immobilized and forced, like women, to express their conflicts through the body” (169). If World War I was a test of Victorian masculinity, many soldiers were succumbing to the intense psychological pressure to be the perfect, heroic man.

Showalter calls shell shock during this period an “epidemic”: “By 1914 there were indications of a high percentage of mental breakdown among hospitalized men and officers […] and by the end of the war, 80,000 cases had passed through army medical facilities” (169). The British government was completely unprepared for such a phenomenon. Not only was there a shortage of treatment facilities, but the idea that men could, and did, become “hysterical” was deeply disturbing to a society that valued honor, strength, and manliness. Men were expected to show great valor before, during, and after battle. Yet, as Showalter explains, “[p]laced in intolerable circumstances of stress and expected to act with unnatural ‘courage,’ thousands of men reacted with symptoms of hysteria” (172). These hysterical symptoms included nervousness, flashbacks, and sleep disorders.

In the decades following the war, further research around the shell-shock phenomenon was conducted. In 1980- the American Psychiatric Association finally added Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder to its Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. At that time, PTSD was
diagnosed if a patient met all four of these criteria:

(1) The existence of a recognizable stressor that would evoke significant symptoms of distress in almost everyone; (2) re-experiencing of the trauma with intrusive recollections, recurrent dreams, or suddenly feeling the event was reoccurring; (3) a sense of isolation from others characterized by diminished responsiveness or interest in activities, a feeling of detachment or constricted affect; and (4) two or more of the following symptoms: hyper-alertness, sleep disturbance, survivor guilt, concentration or memory impairment, avoidance of activities that stimulate recollections of the event. (Spiegel 21)

In the 1990’s, these strict criteria began to be questioned. In his article “Dissociation and Hypnosis in Posttraumatic Stress Disorders,” Eric Spiegel notes that “[t]rauma can be understood as the experience of being made an object […] the traumatic event is a situation which wrests from patients control over their own states of mind” (18). This broader definition of the trauma that can lead to PTSD recognizes more victims, including women like Kitty, allowing them to receive the treatment that is necessary for recovery.

Diagnostic attitudes toward PTSD continue to change in the twenty-first century. According to Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: Issues and Controversies, PTSD today is diagnosed when an event involves “actual or threatened death or serious injury to self or others” and when “the
person’s response involve[s] intense fear, helplessness, or horror” (Rosen 64). Clearly, Chris’ experiences in World War I meet these criteria. In any sort of battle situation, death or serious injury is a possible, even likely, reality, and having to witness the deaths of comrades in arms would undoubtedly lead to terror and a feeling of extreme vulnerability.

More relevant to Kitty’s position in *The Return of the Soldier*, modern research suggests that women whose husbands suffer from PTSD are also at risk of developing their own version of PTSD, known as Secondary Stress Disorder. According to a recently published article in the *Croatian Medical Journal*, Secondary Stress Disorder “is almost identical to PTSD except that indirect exposure to the traumatic event through close contact with the primary victim becomes the criterion” (Franciskovic 178). The same study found that “[m]ore than a third of war veterans’ wives [Croatian veterans of the Croatian War of Independence, 1991-95] met the criteria for secondary traumatic stress [and that] half the wives of war veterans with PTSD had six or more symptoms of secondary traumatic stress. Only three [of fifty-six women] did not have any of the symptoms” (177, 181). Many of the women in the study had difficulty sleeping, avoided thinking about the traumatic experience suffered by their spouse, and/or became irritable, depressed, or withdrawn. This parallels Kitty’s experience in a domestic war as she fights to win back her husband, her marriage, and the self-identity that she inherits with their status.

While the arrival of Margaret and her earth-shattering news of Chris’ illness does not terrorize Kitty in the same
physical sense as the bombardments faced by soldiers in the battle zone, Margaret’s occupation of Kitty’s home is a real and significant danger to Kitty’s life as an aristocratic wife and mother. As Debra Ray Cohen notes, Margaret is the “walking symbol of the instability of the Baldry Court ‘empire’” (74). In a time when aristocratic women could not survive without a man, if Chris cannot remember his marriage to Kitty, she has the potential to lose everything. Not only will her marriage crumble, but so too will her social status and the small amount of power she has managed to garner as the head of Baldry Court. This knowledge, and her inability to make Chris remember her, leads Kitty to a desperate, overwhelming feeling of helplessness. By the end of the novel, Jenny notes that Kitty has begun to “drift like her dog about the corridors” (87). Instead of the regal woman of the novel’s opening, Kitty is now as vulnerable and inconsequential as a lapdog.

With this in mind, it becomes clear that Kitty, too, meets the initial criteria for a PTSD diagnosis. The symptoms she displays throughout the novel only reinforce this idea. One of the most prominent symptoms of PTSD is a disruption in sleep patterns (Rosen 65). Jenny notices that after his return to Baldry Court, Chris “[has] bad nights” and cannot sleep without nightmares (70). While Kitty’s sleep disturbances are not described in such detail, “the darkening under [her] eyes” is mentioned multiple times throughout the narrative, suggesting the haggard effects of sleepless nights (74). Both Chris and Kitty also face self-imposed “social isolation” (Rosen 65). Aside from his doctors, Chris
does not see anyone but Margaret. He even stops confiding in Jenny, who was once a dear friend. Kitty is also absent from most of Jenny’s narrative, appearing only briefly during mealtimes. She does not receive visits from family or friends and never once leaves the house. In fact, Kitty spends much of the narrative tucked away upstairs.

When she does enter a room, Kitty is often angry. Even with Dr. Anderson, Kitty does not cry or beg for help; instead, she displays a “rising temper” and makes “sharp movement[s]” (81). She has withdrawn so much so that she has become unlikeable. In the last scene of the novel when Margaret is going out to tell Chris the truth about Oliver, Jenny is offended when Kitty says, “I wish she [Margaret] would hurry up. She’s got to do it sooner or later” (89). While this may at first seem like the comment of a heartless woman, in view of a PTSD diagnosis, Kitty’s anger and “emotional numbing” are actually symptoms of psychological trauma and not a lack of compassion (Rosen 65). The Encyclopedia of Fears, Phobias and Anxieties details this phenomenon: “Some individuals who have PTSD say they cannot feel emotions, especially toward those to whom they are closest; or if they can feel emotions, often they cannot express them” (“Posttraumatic Stress Disorder” 392). Kitty’s abrasive attitude, then, becomes a psychological symptom and not merely a cause for upset.

Additionally, erratic behavior is a hallmark of PTSD, and Kitty experiences several shifts in mood after learning of Chris’ amnesia. When Chris and Kitty first meet after his homecoming and discuss Margaret’s presence at Baldry
Court, Kitty is initially depicted as “sweet and obedient and alert” (30). Yet, just one page later, Jenny says that Kitty is, once again, “manufacturing malice” (31). Even when Dr. Anderson visits at the end of the novel, Kitty greets him almost seductively. Jenny says, “[S]he had reduced her grief to no more than a slight darkening under the eyes […] I knew it was because she was going to meet a new man and anticipated the kindling of admiration around his eyes” (74). However, as soon as the conversation turns to Chris, Kitty’s movements become sharp and she “quite ceased to glow” (80). Jenny’s description of Kitty’s behavior reinforces the conventional views of Kitty as unfeeling and manipulative, if not exhibiting the characteristics of an outright \textit{femme fatale}. And yet, these rapid transitions in Kitty’s behavior suggest from a psychological perspective that Kitty is fighting to understand and control her reeling emotions. She is sometimes quiet, withdrawn, and very much in need of Jenny’s companionship. At other moments, however, Kitty seems to blame Jenny for everything that has happened at Baldry Court, becoming harsh and unreasonable.

Nevertheless, the society in which she lives largely ignores Kitty’s pain. The doctors who come to treat Chris never once ask Kitty how she is coping with the strain of her husband’s amnesia, and even Jenny spends most of her time merely observing Kitty’s trauma. Even when Jenny does make a point to recognize the extent of Kitty’s suffering, it is generally as a way to compare Kitty to Margaret, whom Jenny is increasingly drawn to throughout the novel. In fact, as the narrative progresses, the reader finds Jenny becoming
more and more hostile in her descriptions of Kitty, even as Kitty’s trauma becomes increasingly prominent.

No one else outside of Baldry Court seems to note or care about Kitty’s situation. This is due, at least in part, to the fact that Kitty’s war takes place in the home. In a time when men and women operated in separate spheres and the public, male sphere was considered central to the continuation of civilized society, Kitty’s domestic trauma is easily labeled as a relatively unimportant conflict between women.

Linda Kerber details this phenomenon in her article “Separate Spheres, Female World, Woman’s Place: The Rhetoric of Women’s History.” Though Kerber’s research focuses mainly on women in the United States, she writes that both American and European women were confined to the home through the rhetoric of gender-segregated spheres. “Women were said to live in a distinct ‘world,’” Kerber argues, “engaged in nurturant activities, focused on children, husbands and family dependents” (11). This female world was, theoretically, entirely disconnected from the domains of business, politics, and war. It was this “socially constructed difference between public and private” that allowed men to continue to keep women in the home, protected and preserved as doll-like figurines (14).

Thus, Kitty’s trauma, which is viewed as a part of her private world, is seen to affect only Kitty, her family, and her home. According to Edwardian British society, what happens in the home, particularly things that happen to women in the home, have little relevance to the larger issues of the day. With total war encompassing most of Europe and thousands
of young British soldiers returning home with symptoms of shell-shock, the plight of women’s suffering was virtually invisible.

To complicate matters further, Kitty’s symptoms strikingly parallel those of the psychological condition widely known in the nineteenth century as *hysteria*. The belief in a woman’s vulnerability to hysteria allowed Kitty’s contemporaries to ignore her shell-shock symptoms, writing them off as the emotional upsets of the “weaker sex.” Hysteria, thought to be caused by a disturbance of the uterus, was given as a diagnosis throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to women who suffered from extreme nervousness, paralysis, unexplained pain, convulsions, amnesia, or loss of speech. In the article “Hysteria in Four Acts,” Paul R. McHugh argues that, even today, “*hysteria* is used loosely to describe a state of being overly emotional, wildly dramatic, or out of control” (18). Victims of hysterical spells, who are almost always women, are generally considered to be suffering from some sort of imagined trauma rather than a real psychological disorder, such as PTSD.

The idea of hysterical women allowed British society to ignore female trauma as something entirely separate, and somehow less important, than male trauma, even though many shell-shock cases paralleled symptoms of hysteria (Showalter 170). West sheds light on this phenomenon toward the end of *The Return of the Soldier* when Jenny describes herself and Kitty as living inside of a crystal ball, with Chris looking down on them. As Chris reaches for
Margaret, Jenny and Kitty’s ball crashes to the floor, and Jenny notes, “No one weeps for the shattering of our world” (67). Indeed, Chris himself does not even notice that their crystal ball has rolled away.

In spite of the fact that Kitty’s world has been shattered by Chris’ amnesia, no relatives, friends, clergymen, or medical professionals come to her aid. In fact, Jenny seems to be the only other person who notices Kitty’s trauma until the very last pages of the novel when Margaret also sees the broken, haunted shell Kitty has become. When Kitty wanders the halls of Baldry Court, almost completely incapacitated by grief, Jenny writes that Kitty’s suffering is what “reminded us [Jenny and Margaret] of reality” (87). Indeed, Margaret is awakened to the true nature of her decision to keep Chris in a state of amnesia only by Kitty’s suffering.

None of the men in the novel ever awaken to Kitty’s altered appearance or demeanor. Chris is focused entirely on Margaret, and Dr. Anderson, who appears at the height of Kitty’s worry over Chris’ amnesia, not only ignores Kitty’s pain but also behaves rather harshly to her. At one point, the doctor even tells Kitty, “One forgets only those things that one wants to forget,” thus implying that Kitty’s husband, quite simply, would rather suffer a mental breakdown than return to the life they once shared (80). Given the fact that Kitty is described as “the expression of grief” only a few pages later, Dr. Anderson’s words seem unnecessarily cruel (87). Yet, somehow, even this trained professional seems to miss the depth of Kitty’s trauma during his lengthy
conversation with her.

This tendency of male-dominated societies to ignore female pain continues into the present day, as supported by recent data about the United States’ treatment of military personnel. Perhaps not surprisingly given the historical understanding of PTSD, hysteria, and gender stereotypes in general, the trauma of female Iraqi war veterans is often overlooked by the military’s mental health community. In “Forever Changed: Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in Female Military Veterans, A Case Report,” Diana Feczer and Pamela Bjorkland write that “[o]f 225 male and 232 female military veterans receiving treatment at a VA Medical Center, only 19.8% of the 40.1% of women who met criteria for PTSD were actually diagnosed, while 59.1% of the 62.7% of men who met the criteria for PTSD received the diagnosis” (280). It seems likely that the trauma these women experience in Iraq, while very real, is often seen as somehow less important than male trauma simply because women in the military have not experienced direct combat. Furthermore, keeping male and female trauma separate allows patriarchal societies to attach more significance to injuries, physical or mental, gained during combat.

Similarly, Kitty’s mental injuries are viewed as less significant than Chris’ because she did not participate in combat. However, Kitty’s trauma may be even more devastating than that of the modern women who participated in the Feczer/Bjorkland study. Since Kitty’s entire identity is wrapped up in Chris, it can be argued that when her husband is in pain, she is in pain. Unlike most Western women living
in the twenty-first century who have jobs, driver’s licenses, the ability to vote, and a social circle that is not dependent upon their husband’s status, Kitty is, quite literally, nobody without Chris. Therefore, when Chris reenters Baldry Court, this time with amnesia and yearnings for an old lover, Kitty experiences her own traumatization that is even more intense than the symptoms experienced by most modern women. “Unemployed wives spend more time at home, are more financially dependent on their husbands, have smaller social network[s] and feel less useful, which additionally aggravates their psychological problems” (Franciskovic 183). For Kitty, who is not merely unemployed, but has never held a job and has even been trained to scorn working women like Margaret, this traumatization is far worse.

While modern society is beginning to take note of PTSD in females, Rebecca West wrote her novel in a time when traumatized women were, by and large, regarded as hysterical. There were no large-scale studies being done on how women handled the stress and disruption of total war. In fact, Britain was only just beginning to understand how such conflicts affected men. Yet, West, who was ahead of her time by nearly a century, wrote *The Return of the Soldier* from a distinctly female perspective. Indeed, Kitty Baldry, perceived by her fellow characters and literary critics alike as domineering and wrathful, deserves our sympathy in like measure to her wounded veteran husband as she suffers through the trauma of an invasion on her home, the loss of Chris, and Jenny’s ultimate betrayal.

In the end, even though both Jenny and Margaret had
previously decided that Chris is safer remaining in his shell-shocked state, the sight of Kitty’s gaunt figure finally moves them to action. Indeed, for the first time in the entirety of West’s work, Kitty’s trauma is acknowledged when Jenny sees her in the hall and knows immediately that Chris cannot stay in his “magic circle” forever (88). Indeed, even as she and Margaret recognize that they must awaken Chris, Jenny asks, “Now, why did Kitty, who was the falsest thing on earth, who was in tune to every kind of falsity, by merely suffering remind us of reality?” (87). This reality, which forces Margaret to leave Chris and Baldry Court and restores Jenny to the role of an outsider is not, for Jenny at least, a pleasant one. However, within the context of a patriarchal society, it is a necessary restoration. It will bring about the continuation of the systems which have allowed Kitty to prosper at the expense of her personal freedom. Much as Chris’ awakening, which will send him back to the throes of war, seems unfortunate and somehow incomplete, so too does Kitty’s.

For both Chris and Kitty, the ending of the novel signifies a shift but not a healing. These characters are moving onward with their lives, but their marriage has proven to be a sham, as have the gender roles they embody. In spite of everything, Chris is still expected to present himself as a pillar of English manhood; even Jenny recognizes that he will soon be shipped back to war, saying that “he [Chris] would go back to that flooded trench in Flanders under that sky more full of death than clouds” (90). Kitty is also left to simply reclaim her place in society
without so much as a legitimate acknowledgement of the trauma she suffered. As Debra Rae Cohen writes, “[t]he very echoing, undetermined emptiness of Baldry Court—at novel’s end a lingering tang of sterility—serves to emphasize the claustrophobia of the conclusion” (83). Indeed, neither character is treated for PTSD symptoms. Instead, in the end, the trauma is swept under the proverbial rug to be dealt with later—or perhaps never.
Works Cited


The “Eternal Loop” of Guilt and the Attempt to Atone in McEwan’s *Atonement* and Hosseini’s *The Kite Runner*

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The great tragedies carry in them an overwhelming sense of guilt: the unbearable guilt of incest in Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* and the guilt of murder in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*. The sense of guilt the protagonists felt owing to a crime committed at some point in their adulthood changes the course of their lives. It either brings about their downfall or they spend the rest of their lifetime trying to find redemption. What if a person suffers a sense of guilt from a crime committed in childhood? Is the effect on one’s life greater than if he/she had committed the same crime at a later point in
life? Will one be able to atone when the chain of events cannot be reversed and it is too late to fix the past? The novels *Atonement* by Ian McEwan and *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini study this childhood sense of guilt felt by the protagonists Briony and Amir, both of whom experience lifelong remorse and engage in lifelong attempts to atone for past crimes.

**Characterizing Guilt:**

To fully understand the characters of Briony and Amir, we must examine their childhood selves, their states of mind at that point in their lives, the factors that consciously or unconsciously contributed to their crimes, and the thoughts for which they feel guilt later in their lives. Thirteen-year-old Briony Tallis stands in the decisive transition point between childhood and adolescence. Like most children her age, she desperately wants recognition from elders to find a place in the adult world. She imagines and fantasizes instances where her elder brother Leon would see her play performed and proudly exclaim to his friends, “Yes my younger sister, Briony Tallis the writer, you must surely have heard of her” (4). Her extreme seriousness in her literary pursuits is sometimes amusing to her parents. She uses her literary talent to win approval and recognition. In this domain, she does not tolerate interference. For example, she suspects a “destructive intent” (34) when Lola tries to take the lead while practicing for their play. She views Lola as someone trying to usurp her position as the important child in the
family and, more significantly, the center of attention as the creator of the play. Her desire for recognition is so great that she imagines winning a contest in flaying nettles.

In his book *Childhood and Society*, Erik Erikson says, “The superego of the child is primitive, cruel and uncompromising as may be observed in instances where children over-control and over-constrict themselves” (231). Briony is an example of such a child. We find her “uncompromising” in the extreme sense of order and discipline she imposes on herself and her surroundings: “In fact Briony’s was the only tidy upstairs room in the house. Her straight-backed dolls in their many-roomed mansion appeared to be under strict instructions not to touch the walls […]” (5).

This sense of order dictates her budding moral notions. We find her adapted to certain standard ideas existing in the society: “A love of order also shaped the principles of justice, with death and marriage the main engines of housekeeping […]” (7). At thirteen, she has a strong conviction that marriage was an example of “virtue rewarded” (9) and for her the as yet unthinkable notion of “sexual bliss” (9) was justified within it. Anything outside it, for example a divorce or a romantic relationship, existed in a “realm of disorder” (9). It is owing to the fact that she has not been introduced to the adult world of sexuality, that the scene before the fountain between Cecilia and Robbie disturbs her and fires her childish imagination. She is not able to envision anything outside her closed ideas of a prince seeking the hand of a princess. It goes beyond her level of
comprehension that Cecilia should strip in front of Robbie, and Briony’s mind starts making moral deductions; when she finally encounters them making love in the library, she thinks it as an assault on Cecilia. It is not that she is unfamiliar with the notion of sexuality and its terminology. She sees the word *cunt* in Robbie’s letter and has an idea to what it refers. She is disgusted by its obscenity and at the same time fascinated by its straightforward eroticism. She senses a certain barbarism in the word because of the general prohibition regarding its usage and is convinced that Robbie is nothing but a sex maniac who could assault anybody.

As is stressed time and again in the novel, Briony has an unusually active imagination, one that cannot distinguish clearly between the real and the fanciful. This kind of imagination is dangerous as Briony makes assumptions to suit her creative appetite. While watching the scene in front of the fountain, for example, she is thrilled with the prospect of recounting the scene on paper. Her experiences of that day reveal to her that the childhood world of fairytales has come to an end: “The very complexity of her feelings confirmed Briony in her view that she was entering an arena of adult emotion and dissembling from which her writing was bound to benefit” (113). As a writer constantly searches for experiences, Briony realizes she should put her first experience as being part of an adult world into creative use. Her views are clearly disconnected from the reality of the situation, but she believes them to be true with all conviction.

Her excitement at recent discoveries and her sense
of resentment for the failure to enact her play make her impulsive and self-destructive. She destroys the easel she prepared for her performance. In pure childhood curiosity and impulse, she tears open Robbie’s letter and reads it when she is not supposed to. It is also her impulse that makes her go headlong with her preconceived notion that Robbie raped Lola. She accuses him, sticks to this claim throughout the interrogation, and is successful in putting Robbie in prison. It is an interesting question whether Briony is innately cruel or just ignorant. Years later, on the battlefield, Robbie is disturbed by the fact of how a child could steadfastly hold on to a false accusation: “But not every child sends a man to prison with a lie. Not every child is so purposeful and malign, so consistent over time, never wavering, never doubted” (229). Briony realizes later in life that she used Robbie as a sacrificial lamb to get the recognition she desperately craved. Accusing Robbie was the means by which she could come to the notice of the adult world since her words were listened to and she was able to secure a place for herself.

Like Briony, twelve-year-old Amir is in a transition between childhood and the coming of adolescence. His father is an important and rich man in the Kabul of the 70s, and the family lives in a beautiful mansion in one of the more exclusive districts of the city. Amir is well provided for, and being from a family of native Pashtuns, he has a certain class superiority. However, social and economic security is not what Amir needs. By nature sensitive, he suffers from deep emotional insecurity and he craves his
father’s love. Having lost his mother while she gave birth to him, he carries a sense of guilt of being responsible for her death and believes that his father hated him for this reason: “Because the truth of it was, I always felt like Baba hated me a little. And why not? After all I had killed his beloved wife […]” (17). His sense of insecurity stems from the fact that he is not the kind of son his father wants. He knows that in his youth his father had been a strong, athletic man, “a force of nature […] with hands that looked capable of uprooting a willow tree” (11). Amir is, however, neither sporty nor athletic. However hard his father tries to spark in him an interest towards sports, Amir fails. He fails in his attempt to play football. He fails in watching the popular Afghan sport Buzkashi: he cries seeing a severely injured player. He lets the other kids push and shove him. His father is not able to accept his sensitive nature and his inability to fight back, and he confides his disappointment to Rahim Khan: “A boy who won’t stand up for himself becomes a man who can’t stand up to anything” (20).

Amir’s close friend is Hassan, their servant Ali’s son. They grew up together like brothers. Though they are together most of the time, Amir is aware of their differences, most importantly in terms of class. He admits stepping into Hassan’s hut only a few times. He is aware that they are his servants, that they are Hazaras. Though he loves Hassan, Amir is jealous of Hassan’s natural physical prowess and the fact that he can stand up to the neighborhood boys on his behalf. Amir is never grateful for Hassan’s help. For example, if his father asks how Hassan got scraped, Amir
lies that Hassan fell down. He is never ready to admit before his father that it is Hassan who defends him. He is extremely jealous of his father’s regard for Hassan:

He asked me to fetch Hassan too, but I lied and told him Hassan had the runs. I wanted Baba all to myself. And besides, one time at Ghargha Lake, Hassan and I were skimming stones and Hassan made his stone skip eight times. The most I managed was five. Baba was there, watching and he patted Hassan on the back. Even put his arm around his shoulder. (12)

Though his father fails to notice it, Amir has a mean streak that he vents out on Ali and Hassan. In this case, his sense of social superiority informs his meanness. Like children who could be clannish and cruelly exclude or insult anyone from a different racial or cultural background, Amir constantly derides Ali and Hassan. For example, he makes fun of Ali’s way of walking and regularly teases Hassan for being illiterate: “There was something fascinating—albeit in a rich way—about teasing Hassan. Kind of like when we used to play insect torture” (47). He knows Ali and Hassan would not defend themselves because they are not only simple hearted but, most importantly, also of an inferior status to him. He takes his cruelty out on them because there is no danger of retaliation.

Amir has a talent for literary pursuits. He makes this discovery in 1973, when, wanting to trick Hassan, he digresses from the original story that he had been telling in order to make fun of him. Contrary to his expectations,
however, Hassan loves what he hears and asserts that Amir’s modifications improve the tale. Thus, Amir ends up writing his first story. Yet, when he tries to win Baba’s favor by showing him the tale, his father is uninterested, and it is Rahim Khan and Hassan who encourage his literary pursuit. He is a star reciting poetic verses from memory in the game Sherjangi played at school. His father is unimpressed and feels that he has no use of a son who loves poems rather than hunting or football. Amir tries to win his love in the only other thing he is good at—kite-fighting. He makes up his mind to win the kite-fighting tournament that year, to run the kite and bring it home to show his father.

However, the thing that makes him commit a crime and for which he has to bear a lifelong sense of guilt is his inherent cowardice. It is Amir’s cowardice that his father is concerned about when he confides in Rahim Khan that it is strength of will that is “missing” in Amir. He is unable to defend not only himself but also his friend, fearing he would get hurt instead. The day in 1975, after winning the kite-fighting tournament, when he sees Hassan being raped by Assef in the alley, he is scared not for Hassan but for himself. He cannot muster the courage to step into the alley and save Hassan because he fears they would hurt him. He knows that this final act of cowardice would determine his later life:

I had one last chance to make a decision. One final opportunity to decide who I was going to be. I could step into the alley, stand up for Hassan—the way he had stood up for me all
those times in the past—and accept whatever would happen to me. Or I could run. In the end I ran. I ran because I was a coward. (68)

Later, he is unable to face his guilt as this inability to defend Hassan makes him a liar and a thief. He takes out his guilt on Hassan, using him as an effigy, pelting him with pomegranates on the hill shouting, “You’re a coward” (81). He is unable to look at either Ali or Hassan without remembering his failure. Thus, he frames Hassan as a thief to make his father send them out of the house. He realizes later in life that on that day in the alley he used Hassan as a scapegoat to win his father’s affection.

Every society has the outsider or consciously constructs the outsider. This proverbial outsider becomes the scapegoat who is sacrificed as a means to gain the unity of the group. The theme of sacrifice is an offshoot of the Judeo-Christian tradition, whether it is Cain sacrificing his brother out of jealousy or the sacrifice of Christ in the New Testament. Both Briony and Amir are aware in their later lives that they used their victims as scapegoats. They sacrificed them as means to an end: Briony to secure a position in the adult world and Amir to gain his father’s love. They were able to use their victims as scapegoats, aware of the class and racial disparities.

**Guilt as a Form of Self-Torture:**

In his book *Civilization and its Discontents*, Sigmund Freud notes: “To begin with, if we ask how a person comes
to have a sense of guilt, we arrive at an answer which cannot be disputed: a person feels guilty (devout people would say sinful) when he does something he knows to be ‘bad’” (71). We feel guilty because we have a conscience, a conscience dictated by a set of moral values set before us. In a child, this conscience or, as Freud says, superego, is in the developing stage when he/she is gradually internalizing certain controls upon him/herself. It is because of the inability to morally gauge their actions that both Briony and Amir’s reaction to their crimes is initially confused and extreme.

Deep inside, Briony feels a sense of unease, suspecting a difference between what she “thought” and what she actually saw that night:

As early as the week that followed, the glazed surface of conviction was not without its blemishes and hairline cracks. Whenever she was conscious of them, which was not often, she was driven back, with a little swooping sensation in her stomach, to the understanding that what she knew was not literally, or not only, based on the visible. (168)

Her guilt is slow in manifesting itself; it is initially overpowered by her acute determination to defend her accusation.

Amir’s reaction to his crime is aggressive. He knows he is guilty of being a coward in not trying to save Hassan. He is not able to look at Hassan without confronting his guilty conscience. He is also unable to accept Hassan’s patient surrender to his betrayal. Like Briony, he grapples
for a way to deal with his guilt, and it comes out in the form of unwarranted anger. The day he takes Hassan to the hill and pelts him with pomegranates, Amir cries in exasperation at Hassan’s deep loyalty, which he knows he is clearly unworthy of and wishes “he’d give [him] the punishment [he] craved, so maybe [he]’d finally sleep at night”(81). He imagines himself in Hassan’s position, identifies with Hassan’s misery, and, out of a somewhat narrow sense of empathy, vents his anger towards him. It is an anger that he feels because of his heinous betrayal. Once he identifies himself as the victim of his own crime, he is no more at peace. As P.S. Greenspan points out in his book *Practical Guilt*, “the guilty agent is assumed to be emotionally at odds with himself as a result of the kind of identification with others” (142).

**Crime as a “labyrinth of construction”:**

R.G. Swinburne describes the four elements of atonement, which include reparation—doing what is necessary to repair the harm already done (82). It is to make things right again before it is too late or to achieve, in more informal terms, “damage control.” Not many are provided with a chance to repent for the crime they committed. In many instances, the crime has already resulted in lasting damage. However, Briony and Amir are presented with an opportunity to repair their crimes, but they fail to take the right action a second time as well. Once Briony makes the initial accusation, things get out of hand and she is
embroiled in the confusing judicial process of inquiries and interrogation. She finds that her words “summon awful powers” (169). Yet, when she realizes the truth that it was Paul Marshall and not Robbie who raped Lola, Briony is unable to make the changes. She feels a certain obligation to stick to her statement and not “cancel the whole arrangement” (170) because she is pressed by the court and society to be consistent in her accusation. “She was not endowed with or old enough to possess such independence of spirit” (170). She finds herself “trapped” in “the labyrinth of her own construction” (170), and it is too late for her to retrace her steps, take back her statement, and redeem herself.

Amir is also presented with an opportunity to redress his crime when Hassan, out of his deep sense of loyalty for Amir and to save him again, owns up to the theft that he never committed. To cope with his sense of guilt, Amir had decided to frame Hassan as a thief so that Baba would get rid of Hassan and Ali. He expected at least some resistance from Hassan. Nevertheless, Hassan knew that if he told the truth, Baba would never forgive Amir. Amir is shocked and moved to shame by this gesture: “I wanted to tell them all that I was the snake in the grass, the monster in the lake. I wasn’t worthy of this sacrifice; I was a liar, a cheat and a thief. And I would have told, except that part of me was glad” (92). Amir does not take advantage of this second chance given to him as he feels he would rid himself of his guilt if he got rid of Hassan from his sight. He does not realize then that he would feel even guiltier later for letting go of this
opportunity to compensate for his wrong.

Crime upon Crime:

Briony is not just guilty of accusing Robbie for rape, and Amir is not just guilty of running away without helping Hassan. They are responsible for other crimes committed simultaneously as a result of these acts. When they look back into their past, it is not a singular act that haunts them but all of the crimes they committed against the victims. Once Briony watches the scene before the fountain, she hastily forms an idea about Robbie being dangerous. This makes her open his letter and read it. She also shows the letter to Lola and confides all that she thinks. In an attempt to “save” her sister from this “sex-maniac,” she barges into Robbie and Cecília in the library. After accusing Robbie of raping Lola, in her desperate attempt to gain attention, Briony brings the letter and hands it over to her mother and the police.

In the case of Amir, he not only stands by while Hassan is being raped but also runs away to save his own skin. He later feigns ignorance before Hassan and coolly takes the kite from Hassan to show it to his father. He snaps at Ali when the latter asks whether anything happened to Hassan on the day of the tournament. Amir feels he would be unable to bear his guilt as long as Hassan is present in the house. In his attempt to oust both Ali and Hassan from the house, he places his watch, his birthday present, and some money in Hassan’s bed to frame him as a thief. Though Baba forgives Hassan, Ali and Hassan leave the house.
Encountering the Sexual Act as “Violence”:

In childhood, sex or sexuality is something that seems confined to the adult world, often discussed in hushed voices and usually thought of as something alien and therefore “bad.” The prepubescent Briony, for example, had some idea as to what the word cunt meant in Robbie’s letter, but “no one, not even her mother, had ever referred to the existence of that part of her to which—Briony was certain—the word referred” (114). The frankness of its usage in the letter disturbed her childhood sense of order and convinced her that Robbie was a sex maniac who could “attack anyone” (120). Once she witnesses the sex act in the library, her disturbed mind tells her that it is an assault on her sister and that she must save her family from this dangerous man.

Given the fact that both Briony and Amir first encounter the sex act in the form of rape, there is little wonder that they associate sex with violence and that their initial response is one of fear, disgust, and shame. The only sexual initiation that Amir experienced might very well take the shape of the lewd comments the Russian soldiers made to Hassan while they were on the road. As a twelve-year-old, he has no idea of what a sexual assault means. While Briony erroneously imagines what she witnesses is a rape, Amir bears witness to actual sexual assault. He feels guilty for doing nothing to protect Hassan and because he encountered something so shameful. Even looking at Hassan disturbs him, knowing that they both share the same shame as a result of that singular act of sexual violence, one as the victim and
the other as a passive onlooker: “I was grateful for the early-evening shadows that fell on Hassan’s face and concealed mine. I was glad that I didn’t have to return his gaze. Did he know I knew?” (69).

The Outsider as the Scapegoat:

Either as a result of pervasive social constructs or parental influence, children are easily susceptible to the forces of prejudice. It is doubtful whether Briony would have stood against Paul Marshall, had she encountered him with Cecilia in the library, instead of Robbie. It is also doubtful whether Amir would have been so casual in his dismissal and accusation had Hassan been a fellow Pashtun and not a Hazara. The truth is that even as children, they are aware of class differences. As adults, this awareness of their narrow outlook in childhood shames them.

Briony had the audacity to make such a serious accusation against Robbie because she was aware of his social status. She had already absorbed the upper-class snobbery of the time and knew her statement would be privileged over Robbie’s, owing to his inferiority in class. Though Robbie had grown up with Cecilia and her siblings, Briony knew he was merely a “hobby” that her father liked to fund, a charitable act to serve the family’s upper-class egos, nothing more intimate than that. Cecilia leaves home and rejects any contact with her family as she is able to see through “the snobbery that lay behind their stupidity” (209) in believing Briony’s evidence.
In *The Kite Runner*, the matter of class is a significant factor. Amir belonged to a wealthy Pashtun family living in one of the wealthiest districts in Kabul while Ali and Hassan were Hazaras. As Amir comes to read in books, Hazaras were Mogul descendants and were considered ethnically inferior in Afghanistan where the natives were Pashtuns. The tension between both groups was exacerbated by the fact that Pashtuns were Sunni Muslims while the Hazaras were Shi’as. He also knew that Hazaras were more often referred to as “mice-eating, flat-nosed, load carrying donkeys” (8). He observed the fact that though his father and Ali had grown up together, his father never called Ali a “friend.” He himself had a similar relation with Hassan. When both of them are threatened by Assef and his friends, Amir nearly tells Assef in defense, “But he’s [Hassan] not my friend! He’s my servant!” (36). He is aware that he is powerless before the forces of religion and ethnicity: “In the end, I was a Pashtun and he was a Hazara, I was Sunni and he was Shi’a, and nothing was ever going to change that. Nothing” (22). For this reason, it seems to him that Hassan is the one who should be making the sacrifices and not he. Perhaps the same thought runs through his mind while watching Hassan in the alley. What use would come of defending Hassan? “He was just a Hazara, wasn’t he?” (68).

**A Subconscious Grudge:**

Briony and Amir might have had in them a subconscious grudge against their victims, which could have
affected their actions. For example, Robbie remembers an instance in the past around the time that Briony was ten: she jumped into the pool to see whether Robbie would save her and later confessed to Robbie that she loved him. He wonders whether this was the reason that she turned against him that day in 1935 because she had seen him favor her sister over her. An older Briony remembers the same incident but in a different light, saying she had forgotten all about her love three days after telling Robbie. However, her version could be challenged given the fact that the reader is given so many reasons to distrust Briony and her alternative versions of her story. It might be argued that the thwarted childhood love she harbored for Robbie subconsciously turned her against him when she saw the scene at the fountain and when she read the letter.

Amir had always been jealous when Baba favored Hassan. When he overhears his father telling Rahim Khan how Hassan always rescued Amir in street fights, he immediately turns caustic and antagonistic towards Hassan. To win the approval of his father, he decides to win the kite-fighting tournament. While witnessing the rape, he is unable to decide whether to step in and defend Hassan or to get the kite to take home to his father. The subconscious jealousy within him makes him frame Hassan as a thief so that Baba would hate Hassan and he, Amir, would be the only one loved by him.

The crimes that they commit end up breaking their homes. Robbie is imprisoned, and so he and Cecilia are separated. Unable to forgive Briony’s crime or tolerate her
family’s conduct, Cecilia leaves home and works in London, refusing to keep in touch with anyone. Amir destroys the only family that he and his father had in Kabul. His crime separates his father from Ali, both of whom grew up together. It also separates his father, as Amir later comes to know, from his second son, Hassan.

Fate and Time:

War and national unrest play a significant role in the lives of Briony and Amir by making their crimes irreparable. Unprecedented sets of events that are clearly out of their control aggravate their sense of guilt. Four years after Briony sent Robbie to jail with her accusation, he is drafted as a soldier in the Second World War. She is already responsible for separating Cecilia and Robbie, but the matter gets out of her hands as she contemplates the fact that Robbie could be killed in the war: “[…]but now she understood how the war might compound her crime”(288). And it does. Robbie dies of septicemia while on the battlefield in France, and four months later Cecilia is killed in a blast. The war deepens her childhood sense of guilt, and she is helpless before it.

In 1981, six years after Amir witnesses Hassan’s rape and later removes him out of his life, Afghanistan is invaded by the Russians and Amir and his father have to flee their homeland. The post-Russian rule of the Taliban worsens the situation. Under the Taliban regime, Hazaras are openly executed. In one such incident in 1998, when Hassan and his family are living alone in Amir’s house in Kabul, the Taliban
officials execute Hassan and his wife, and Hassan’s son is sent to an orphanage. When Amir comes to know of this from Rahim Khan and also the fact that Hassan had been his half-brother, he is unable to bear how fate has aggravated his sense of guilt.

**An Attempt at Atonement:**

The word *atonement* obviously has religious connotations, meaning reparation or expiation for sin and reconciliation with oneself and with God. In the Old Testament, Moses is told that Aaron can make an atonement through sacrifice and offering: “For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it to you upon the altar to make an atonement for your souls: for it is the blood that maketh an atonement for the soul” (Leviticus 17:11). The word appears again in the New Testament: “we also joy in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we have now received the atonement” (Romans 5:11). While examining the notion of why atonement is as necessary as guilt itself, Chaya Halberstam says, in connection with her analysis of Biblical stories, that “internal, moral guilt is viewed as an [end in itself], an almost self-catalyzing act that brings about its own judgment”(128). To atone, the person who has sinned must repent for his sins, must be willing to take responsibility for the consequences of his crime, and must take action to transform himself. “Those who believe, and do righteous deeds, we shall surely acquit them of their evil deeds, and shall recompense them the best of what they were
“doing” (The Koran 29:7). Atonement can be achieved only if the person repents and the victim forgives (Swinburne 85).

In both novels, we can say that there is only an attempt to atone. The victims who need to forgive are not present. Cecilia dies long before Briony musters the courage to atone for her crime. Hassan is already executed before Amir returns to Kabul to repair his past. As Amir says, “My hands are stained with Hassan’s blood” (302). Both characters are indirectly responsible for the death of the victims. They cannot push back the clock; they can only try to make amends to ease a guilty conscience.

While the word *atonement* has strong religious connotations, neither Briony nor Amir is a follower of religion as such. In a way, they cannot even beg forgiveness from God. There is a general absence of religious belief in the Tallis family. There is a reference to the temple in their compound which is said to have been built “to enhance the pastoral ideal and had […] no religious purpose at all” (72). The one time that Briony is said to have visited a church is when she goes to see Lola and Paul Marshall’s wedding. Though Amir claims to be a practicing Muslim, he remembers not having said his prayers for a long time. Could he really overcome his guilt and atone for it while being so detached from his faith? Only when Sohrab attempts suicide does Amir recite his prayers after fifteen years sitting in the hospital corridors:

“I throw my makeshift jai-namaz, my prayer rug, on the floor and I get on my knees, lower my forehead to the ground, my tears soaking
through the sheet. I bow to the west. Then I remember I haven’t prayed for over fifteen years. I have long forgotten the words.” (301)

When, as a teenager, Briony begins to understand the gravity of her crime and feels the pangs of guilt, she decides to leave home and instead of going to a college, enlists as a nurse in the hospital. Cecilia writes to Robbie, “I get the impression that she’s taken on nursing as a sort of penance” (212). It is a “penance” for a girl used to comfort, attention, and praise. Not only does she go through the humiliating discomfort of cleaning bedpans everyday but also being reprimanded by the ward sister if she does not perform her duties properly: “She was abandoning herself to a life of strictures, rules, obedience, housework and a constant fear of disapproval” (276). This helps Briony forget temporarily her sense of guilt. Helping and taking care of the injured soldiers is an indirect way to implore Robbie for forgiveness.

Briony also attempts to atone for her crime by writing. She had decided back in 1935 to write the scene at the fountain from three different points of view. Her final novel, one that she is able to write after fifty-nine years of continuous rewriting, has Cecilia and Robbie together, alive and happy. She does this as she no longer had “the courage of (her) pessimism” to face the facts and tell the “pitiless” truth of their death. She is aware that she cannot achieve her atonement because, as a writer having “absolute powers of deciding outcomes, she is also God” (371). Just as guilt makes Lady Macbeth wash her hands again and again to get rid of the blood she imagines, for Briony, the “attempt” of
writing this novel again and again is a form of atonement: only while nearing the end of her life, when she has started to lose her memory, is she finally able to reconcile the two lovers in a fictional world. Even on her seventy-seventh birthday, she still has the guilt of what she had done as a thirteen year old, and she says she was not so “self serving as to let the lovers forgive [her]” (372); her writing was just “a final act of kindness, a stand against oblivion and despair” (372).

At the beginning of *The Kite Runner*, when Amir receives a call from Rahim Khan asking him to come to Pakistan, Amir knows it is his “past of un-atoned sins” (1) that is calling him again to give him a second chance, “a way to be good again”(2). Once in Pakistan, he comes to know from Rahim Khan that his childhood friend and the victim of his crime, Hassan, is dead, executed by the Taliban and that Hassan’s son, Sohrab, is in an orphanage in war-torn Kabul. Rahim Khan wants Amir to go to Kabul and bring Sohrab home. What shatters him is Rahim Khan’s revelation that Hassan had been Amir’s half-brother. He realizes “that Rahim Khan had summoned [him] here to atone not just for [his] sins but for Baba’s too” (198). Ultimately, his attempt to atone is his journey back to Kabul to rescue Sohrab from the hands of the abusing Talib official, Assef. He knows he would not be able to leave Sohrab alone after knowing the fact that he is his half-brother Hassan’s son. He decides to take Sohrab to America. Amir himself has no children with his wife, a fact he considers a punishment for what he had done in his childhood. He decides to raise Sohrab as his
child. Perhaps that would be the way to ask forgiveness from Hassan and atone for his crime. Sohrab’s bubble of quietness after his suicide attempt is Amir’s penance. Amir must make the patient effort to break this bubble and love Sohrab in an attempt to overcome his childhood sense of guilt.

Thus, we see how the passage of time, fate, and memory have a hand in making a childhood sense of guilt greater and deeper while ironically the characters have no choice but to consciously deal with it. Jacques Derrida writes that “forgiveness forgives only the unforgivable” (32). The reason why Briony and Amir are not able to get over their childhood sense of guilt is not just because of that singular act. The guilt is stronger and more prolonged because of various reasons. As adults, they have come to study the individuals they were in the past—their childhood selves—and are not able to identify with their grave faults and accommodate their heinous actions.

Their crimes had far reaching consequences, provoked by them but aided by fate and the time they lived in. Their guilt was also a form of narcissistic self-pity. Briony nurtures this form of self-pity through her writing, reminding herself again and again of her crime. Amir chooses to stay away from war-torn Kabul to play safe, even if guilt haunts him at every moment. Finally, their guilt is greater because they can be successful only in attaining partial atonement. Complete redemption will always elude them.
Works Cited


something can be disguised, but a disguise implies an immutable essentiality. The two main characters of Shakespeare’s *The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice* test the validity of this statement. Throughout the course of the play, Othello and Iago reveal a shared characteristic: monstrous identities which dominate and pervert their other traits. However, Shakespeare initially occludes his characters’ deviation with extraneous social and contextual factors, such as Othello’s military prowess or Iago’s façade of honesty, and audience members must watch and wait as Othello and Iago unravel their disguises through their
own actions. This essay will begin by explaining how these differentiated social factors initially converge to temporarily mask the immutable essentiality which assures Othello and Iago’s exclusion from Venetian society and conclude by explaining the means and methods by which these masks are shed. Because this unmasking proves Othello and Iago incompatible with their social context, their eventual removal from Venetian society is an inevitable conclusion—a conclusion luridly unveiling the monstrous essentiality which they share.

Nuanced definitions of the word *monster* are crucial tools in understanding the relationship that monsters like Othello and Iago have to society at large. Scholars who study monstrosity broadly agree that a monster is something existing near or outside the farthest outlier of acceptable human behavior. Something monstrous identifies the limits of inclusion by providing an example of something (perhaps a living being, action, or concept) which must be excluded from society based on its deviation from a set of communally agreed upon standards. Laura Knoppers and Joan Landes specify monstrosity’s ability to construct category when they write, “The monstrous Other served to define (European, white, male, Christian) selves and nations. But that Other both marked and violated boundaries, threatening the identities it served to define” (21). Knoppers and Landes’ assertion that monsters both mark and violate boundaries indicates that monstrosity is a condition which can exist as a hybridization of human and non-human qualities. In addition to their function in defining limits, monsters offer an outlet
for repressed desires, yet prove dangerous in close proximity. In *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, Jeffery Cohen argues the following:

> [T]hrough the body of the monster, fantasies of aggression, domination, and inversion are allowed safe expression in a clearly delimited and permanently liminal space. Escapist delight gives way to horror only when the monster threatens to overstep these boundaries, to deconstruct the thin walls of category and culture. (17)

Cohen’s definition shows that, though society is entertained by monitoring monsters, close proximity to a monster quickly changes entertainment to terror at the prospect of being contaminated by monstrosity. Cynthia Lowenthal explicates the consequences suggested by Cohen’s definition when she tells us that “the monster always infects with monstrosity everything that it touches [...]. Sometimes monsters become monsters because they’ve been preyed upon by other monsters” (145, 144). In addition to clarifying the subversive and poisonous capabilities possessed by the monster, Lowenthal’s definition also reveals that because “difference most often functions to exclude” (145), fear of monstrosity can be analogous to fear of exclusion.

These three academic explications all focus on different aspects of the term *monster* because of the broad implications of the word. Monstrosity’s many connotations result from its position as the opposite of social norms,
where the criterion defining monstrosity is capable of changing as social norms change. The implications of changing social norms are explored in *Othello*. Initially, the idea that “sometimes monsters become monsters because they are preyed upon by other monsters” (Lowenthal 144) seems to indicate that Iago initiates Othello’s “conversion” into monstrosity. Though Iago’s corrosive influence is important, it must be understood that both men are incapable of conforming to Venetian conventions from the start. However, the deviance shared by Othello and Iago has been hidden by participation in the military, where normative behavior greatly contrasts standards in the larger social sphere. Though Othello and Iago are overtly characterized by aesthetic and cultural differences, their shared inability to exist peacefully inside a new social system proves to be a strong commonality between the two; each man is eventually and inexorably discovered to be “a beast in a populous city […] a civil monster” (4.1.63-4).

Capitalizing on the unique properties of theater, Shakespeare encourages interaction between the audience and the characters to show that Othello and Iago share a similarly monstrous identity. Through the eloquence and intensity of Iago’s soliloquies, Shakespeare succeeds in intimately bonding the audience to the play’s antagonist. This shift in dramatic focus produces a skewed sense of perception, one that ultimately leads the audience toward a dual, competing opinion of each main character. The audience can admire Iago for his charisma and efficaciousness, while simultaneously despising him for
his amorality. Despite the separation between the stage and the seats, the members of the audience are manipulated by Iago simply because they are privy to his thoughts and his powerful speech craft. His influence engenders empathy for Othello because audience members pity the victim of an adept charlatan, a sentiment complicating the natural disgust at the general’s gullibility and distrust in his wife. The contrasting emotions felt toward both characters are indicative of the hybridity characterizing the monster itself, a status Cohen explains when he states that “the monster resists any classification built on hierarchy or merely binary opposition, demanding instead a ‘system’ allowing polyphony, mixed response (difference in sameness, repulsion in attraction) and resistance to integration” (7). Through this “mixed response” to Othello and Iago, Shakespeare forces his audience to both identify with and against his hybrid characters, allowing viewers insight to the complexity of the monstrous condition. The audience’s confused and contradictory feelings also imitate the social disorder created when a monstrous entity enters a system unequipped to contain and classify the hybridity which defines monstrosity. Cohen’s explication of hybridity as a “difference in sameness” also applies to Othello and Iago on another level, as both characters are broadly identical in their monstrous essentiality but are perceived as radically different from one another because of tangential factors like skin color or personal mannerisms. Iago, who will be discussed next, accepts and revels in his monstrous identity, as he actively seeks to corrupt his surroundings and exhibits
remorselessness even after seeing the violent consequences of his machinations.

Iago’s monstrous identity is immediately evident to audience members. In the very first scene, Iago reveals his intent to abuse Othello’s trust when he tells Roderigo: “I follow him to serve my turn upon him. We cannot all be masters, nor all masters cannot be truly followed (1.1.44-46). Because Iago consistently uses dialogue, soliloquies, and asides to explain his erratic, hateful, and manipulative conduct, it is easy for audience members to place him outside not only the moral boundaries of early modern Venice but also the limits of universal human decency. However, Iago’s ability to hide his fiendish motives from the play’s other characters makes it difficult for anyone else to identify his monstrosity, despite its undeniable presence. Because monsters are characterized by an essential deviation from social norms, they are expected to mirror this deviation in their physical appearance. By contrast, the “visibly invisible” Iago, who goes about his business unsuspected because of his outward compatibility with Venetian appearance and mannerisms, proves that an inward anomaly is not always marked by an outward signifier. However, when presented with the essential Iago’s wickedness, many of the characters in the play recognize his disaffection and subsequently address him using language fit to describe a monster. After Iago informs him of his daughter’s elopement using coarse, unnatural imagery, for example, Brabantio reacts to this grotesquely communicated revelation by questioning the source: “What profane wretch art thou?”
Instead of providing his identity, Iago continues to spout profanity and derision, which prompts Brabantio to confirm Iago’s separation from conventional society by retorting, “[T]hou art a villain” (1.1.120). More than just scatological humor, the importance of this exchange actually stems from the fact that Iago expresses his true identity only when invisible to his peers, be it through anonymity or soliloquy.

Because Iago understands that he is essentially monstrous, it is out of necessity that he uses trickery and manipulation to divert focus from his essentiality. Mastery in concealing the most odious aspects of his personality renders Iago an especially effective and destructive monster. Cohen’s assertion that “escapist delight gives way to horror only when the monster threatens to overstep these boundaries” (17) is only partially applicable in Iago’s situation. Because Iago displays external congruency with the moral, cultural, and physical standards held by the citizens of Venice, masking his essential deviance allows Iago to operate undetected inside Venetian custom. Because Iago possesses a human body containing monstrous capacity, the ease with which he can overstep boundaries deprives his peers of the “escapist delight” which Cohen asserts is evoked by watching monstrosity from a safe distance. As a result of the disparity between Iago’s appearance and actuality, Othello, Cassio, and Emilia are brought directly to horror when “honest, honest Iago” (5.2.163) suddenly reveals himself to be a “Spartan dog, more fell than anguish, hunger, or the sea” (5.2. 372-373). His manipulation of Othello and his
varying levels of involvement in the deaths of Roderigo, Desdemona, and Emilia confirm Iago as the “civil monster” whose presence destabilizes the social sphere.

Fred West explains how Iago would be perceived in modern society when he writes that “the play itself shows clearly enough that Iago goes off as he comes on, devoid of conscience, with no remorse. ‘This guiltlessness,’ according to [William] McCord and [Joan] McCord, ‘is one of the central features of psychopathy’” (27). West’s psychiatric diagnosis is important because it shows that, even across boundaries of time and place, whether villain or psychopath, Iago is still essentially monstrous. Through assertions of the differences between Iago’s character and the characters of his Venetian contemporaries, from both those who interact with him and the scholars who study him, it is clear that Iago’s monstrous essentiality assures his exclusion from society.

Though both Othello and Iago are definitively monstrous, the manner in which audience members become aware of Othello’s essentiality is more complicated than Iago’s blatant admissions in his dialogue. Othello’s monstrosity is more gradually revealed by a series of actions and events which indicate his inability to conform to changing social circumstances. However, many recent critics underplay the effects of Othello’s failure in adjusting to change and instead analyze Othello using postcolonial tropes, which claim that his integration into European society is doomed to failure because of his racial status. Arthur Little is a good example. He writes that “no amount of rhyming or coupling (or punning) will leave unseen the black Othello
whom the audience suspects is within Othello” (304). This statement implies that qualities stereotypical of blackness are the primary determinants of the general’s fall. However, the qualities which contribute to the Moor’s monstrosity are less the result of Othello’s physical blackness. Indeed, Othello’s status as an outsider, his militaristic mindset which ignores the secondary implications of his actions, and his cultural identity exert stronger influence than his racial identity. Daniel Vitkus observes:

> By 1604, when Othello was first performed, there had been extensive and direct contact with Muslim pirates—both in the British Isles and in the Mediterranean, where English merchant ships sailed with greater frequency after trade pacts with the both the Barbary principalities and the Ottoman sultanate were signed. (151)

Because the English had already felt the fighting prowess of Turkish renegades on the seas, they created “demonizing representations of ‘the Turk,’ […] from fear of being conquered, captured, and converted” (Vitkus 147). Because of this unique viewpoint, the Venetians respect and honor Othello due to his proven status as a successful general and the already established reputation of fierce Turkish warriors.

However, under Iago’s destructive directions, Roderigo and Brabantio attempt to, in typically monstrous fashion, mutate the fear commanded by Othello’s presence into racially based discontent. Iago’s contemptuous claims: “an old black ram is tupping your white ewe” (1.1.90),
“you’ll have your daughter covered with a Barbary horse; you’ll have your nephews neigh to you” (1.1.113-115), and “your daughter and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs” (1.1.118-120), all contort Othello’s attributes which indicate his separation from Venetian society—namely his strength, origin, and appearance—and channel these attributes into negative animal imagery to create an early, crude version of racial stereotyping. In contrast to Iago’s gleefully pernicious insults, the verbal attacks of Brabantio and Roderigo are more unwitting propagations of the same ignorant stereotyping. Roderigo’s “By heaven, I would have rather been his hangman” (1.1.35) and Brabantio’s elitist “sooty bosom” (1.1.71) emulate the snide and scathing hatred of Othello initially introduced by Iago, thus reifying that “the monster always infects with monstrosity everything that it touches” (Lowenthal 145). However, it is because each man is goaded by Iago and because both have personal motives against Othello—Roderigo wants Desdemona for himself and Brabantio is offended because Othello circumvented social norms and eloped with his daughter—that these disgruntled gentlemen employ a stock set of insults equating blackness and monstrosity. Though blackness is central to the slurs directed at him, it is important to remember that Othello is not being castigated simply because he is black. Rather, the Moor’s own actions in disregarding social norms and eloping with Desdemona are the catalyst allowing Roderigo and Brabantio an opportunity to use racial insults.

The problem complicated by Othello’s race, social
transgression, and value to the state is temporarily resolved during the trial scene. Here, the general is judged using two sets of competing stereotypes, where Brabantio’s opinion represents the stigma conferred by Othello’s race and externality and the Duke’s opinion is more informed by Othello’s military success. Othello calmly foreshadows the eventual outcome of the council’s decision in the line, “my services which I have done the seigniory shall out tongue his [Brabantio’s] complaints” (1.2.18), but for Brabantio, the hearing is a frenetic and emotional affair. In the presence of the Duke, Brabantio expresses his disgust toward Othello and Desdemona’s elopement using language which subtly insults Othello’s ethnicity, specifically in the lines, “to fall in love with what she feared to look on! It is a judgment maimed and most imperfect […] against all rules of nature” (1.3.100-103). Brabantio, using the phrase “rules of nature,” equates his own Venetian cultural views with the natural order and specifically laments that his daughter is marrying an African adventurer, instead of Venetian noble. Also, Brabantio’s revelation that Desdemona both loves and fears Othello adds credence to Cohen’s claim that observers are both fascinated and terrified by narrowing the boundaries between themselves and the Other. However, Othello’s earlier prediction comes true, and the Duke brushes aside Brabantio’s accusations in favor of weightier matters pertaining to Venetian state affairs. Mitigating the effects of the earlier ethnic slurs, the Duke passes official judgment on Othello by chastising Brabantio with a second opinion of the Moor’s character: “[Y]our son-in-law is far more
fair than black” (1.3.393). Though facilitated by Othello and Desdemona’s seemingly sincere profession of love, the Duke’s decision to immediately enlist Othello’s service in defeating the Turkish threat in Cyprus prioritizes Othello’s value to the state over his cultural otherness and dubious elopement. Through these events, it is obvious that each character, whether they be aligned with or against Othello, is more informed by Othello’s individual actions than his skin color or the stereotypes that characterize blackness.

Othello’s race is also not a crucial component of process by which he is manipulated by Iago. In exerting his monstrous influence over Othello, Iago only occasionally directs focus on Othello’s appearance. One such instance occurs when Iago subtly states, “She did deceive her father once, marrying you; and when she seemed to shake and fear your looks, she loved them most” (1.3.218-220). Just as Brabantio alluded to it in the trial scene, Iago uses Othello’s appearance to pinpoint the strange combination of attraction and fear created by close contact with the Other. However, the conniving demi-devil emphasizes Desdemona’s behavior more than Othello’s appearance. This is because Othello’s body already indicates separation from the physical and visual qualities of a typical Venetian; observers need not be reminded that Othello is potentially an “embodiment of difference, a breaker of category, and a resistant Other” (Cohen x). Though the Moor’s essentiality has not yet been revealed to be completely congruent with the deviance exuded by his externality, Othello’s outward appearance still generates questions about his internal identity, unlike the
armor that is Iago’s native Venetian countenance.

Overemphasizing Othello’s race also mitigates the importance of Iago’s influence over his former commander. Because Othello’s appearance lends itself to suspicion, the “visibly invisible” Iago becomes Othello’s main source of social guidance, and can concentrate on abusing Othello’s trust to the point of corruption. Unfortunately for the oblivious Othello, the former general is so used to receiving the benefit of his lieutenants’ advice in the context of battle that he cannot imagine the possibility of deception. Iago cunningly keeps Othello fixated on the possibility of Desdemona’s untrustworthiness, rather than his own, by pointing out her previous deception to Brabantio. This tactic works because together, Othello and Iago have seen “proof at Rhodes, at Cyprus, and on other grounds” (1.1 29-30) and now at Cyprus again. For Othello, who has mentally never left the army, his camaraderie with Iago is a stronger relationship than the relationship he has with a woman whom he has only recently met and with whom he may or may not be truly in love. Othello’s relationship with Iago, during the context of battle, may be a pivotal factor separating the two soldiers from life and death whereas Othello’s relationship with Desdemona is a means of occupying the commander while he is domestically grounded. This trust in Iago helps illustrate that Othello’s tendencies and identity as a soldier, rather than his blackness, are most crucial in revealing his innate monstrosity to the audience.

In order to fully understand how Othello’s soldierly identity dooms his social excursion, the general’s past must
be compared to his present. As a former warlord, Othello’s strengths and experiences are built upon “battles, sieges, fortunes that I have passed” (1.3.132-133), as opposed to any type of familiarity with intricate Venetian social customs. C.F. Burgess illustrates the vast differences between these two realms when he writes:

> The military world is, perforce, regimented, disciplined, and above all, equivocal […]
> But unlike the warrior’s world, the social world allows for all manner of qualifications, conditions, and compromises […] Society deals, so very often (as does with Shakespeare), with the appearance which is not reality, with the shadows and not the substance, with what seems and is not; with such duality, Othello has no experience. (211)

Burgess explains how Othello lacks the ability to solve social problems that require flexibility of thought because his military experience has conditioned him to think only in absolutes. In the military, Othello was required to singularly complete executive orders to achieve the intended and most outwardly visible result of a specific action. Othello’s militaristic mindset, conditioned to achieve a static goal, renders him ill-equipped to deal with challenges in the public domain, which requires successful socialites to make decisions with broadly affecting secondary consequences. Othello displays his occupationally conditioned intransigency when he begins to suspect an affair between Cassio and Desdemona. Though Iago, playing the
compassionate confidant, requests “patience, I say, your mind may yet change;” Othello responds with “Never, Iago […] Like the Pontic Sea, whose icy current and compulsive course, ne’er feels retiring ebb […] so my bloody thoughts with violent pace shall ne’er look back, ne’er ebb to humble love” (3.3. 468-474). Interestingly enough, the adjectives that Othello chooses to characterize the sea—“icy” and “compulsive”—are also applicable to his own actions: “icy” characterizes Othello’s deliberate emotional detachment as he smothers Desdemona while “compulsive” embodies his impetuous decision-making. This inability (or refusal) to exchange combative logic for civilian logic shows the audience that Othello, always imbued with militaristic “bloody thoughts” and “violent pace,” is essentially different from the Venetian citizens with whom he interacts. Vitkus describes the differentiation between Othello and his Venetian counterparts when he writes, “He is, in the words of Iago, ’an erring barbarian’ who has strayed from his natural course into the civilized, super subtle environment of Venice” (161). Vitkus’ decision to differentiate Othello’s “natural course” from the “civilized, super subtle environment of Venice” further demonstrates the differences between military and social mannerisms. Edward Berry further illuminates the chasm of separation between Othello and his homogenous Venetian constituents: “Shakespeare’s protagonist is not only richly complicated, but individualized and set apart from Venetian society in almost every respect—in his blackness, his past, his bearing, and, above all, his language, with its unusual rhythms, grandeur, and exoticism”
Therefore, due to the stark contrast between his soldierly identity and the norms of the society in which he seeks to assimilate, Othello’s arrival on the Venetian social scene does not signify the coming of a competent citizen but rather the entrance of an alien governed by principles existing outside social conventions: an alien who is later revealed to be a monster.

Two specific soldierly traits, encompassed by the lack of social reasoning illustrated by Burgess, contribute to Othello’s failure as a citizen: the aforementioned trust in a certain military subordinate and his desire for adventure. Though Othello’s blind faith in his lieutenants is appropriate in the previous context of his wartime experience, where intense bonds of loyalty are generated between men through rank and shared experience, this trust betrays him through the choosing of Iago as a personal advisor. Burgess explains that “in Othello’s view, Iago is admirably qualified as a confidant and confederate. Iago is both a soldier and a Venetian, and therefore, both an honest man and a savant of the customs of the country” (212). The general’s decision to fully trust Iago’s indictment of Cassio and Desdemona shows how Othello believes that Iago has retained the honor and trustworthiness found in a valuable military adjutant. While arguing with Emilia near the play’s conclusion, Othello cites his lieutenant’s perceived integrity as justification for smothering Desdemona, saying: “[A]n honest man he is, and hates the slime that sticks on filthy deeds” (5.2.154-155). It does not matter that Emilia is Iago’s wife and that she has correctly identified her husband’s lies because Othello
believes the military bond created by shared experience is more credible than a matrimonial bond. Therefore, Othello, accustomed to receiving absolute loyalty and honesty from his military subordinates, identifies Iago’s charlatanism only after passing the point of redemption.

In addition to his misplaced trust, Othello’s desire for the excitement which characterized his previous exploits further mars the Moor’s judgment. As a military adventurer, Othello has been routinely privilege to extraordinary feats, experiences, and exotic imagery. Because Othello the general was so fulfilled through sensational instances of “hairbreadth scapes i’ th’ imminent deadly breach […] the Cannibals that each other eat, the Anthropophagi, and men whose heads do grow beneath their shoulders” (1.3.138-147), Othello the civilian is also fascinated with the wondrous and sublime. Othello himself has not changed, but his social circumstances have. Unable to partake in exoticism and adventure through a stable life in Venetian high society, the former commander extracts from his relationship with Desdemona the quixotic emotion characteristic of his previous occupation. In his two most important speeches, Othello’s imagery illustrates how his courtship of Desdemona is a continuation of the torrid emotion which was so commonplace during his adventuring years. While standing in front of the Senate council, Othello states, “I do confess the vices of my blood, So justly to your grave ears I’ll present how I did thrive in this fair lady’s love, and she in mine” (1.3.125-128). By employing such dramatic language, Othello indicates that he is infatuated with action.
As a result, Othello has completely immersed himself in Desdemona as he would have completely immersed himself in a campaign, and audience members begin to see the complicated nature of Othello’s “love” for Desdemona. Because Desdemona is the vehicle allowing Othello to re-immerses himself in dramatic narrative, the maiden’s value to the Moor is not singularly based on their romantic relationship.

Regardless of circumstance or juncture in the play, Othello’s speech and actions continually indicate his preference for adventure (and narrative of adventure) over affection, and audience members learn that Othello is concerned more with his reputation as an epic, adventurous figure than the actuality of his criminal actions. For example, after Desdemona’s murder, audience members might expect Othello to offer a contrite apology or forlorn lament. Instead, spectators are treated to a superfluous, ornamental metaphor “of one whose hand, like the base Indian, threw a pearl away richer than all his tribe” (5.2.357-358). There are shades of contrition and sadness in Othello’s speech, but exotic imagery and hyperbole—the elements engendered by Othello’s love for narrative—supersede what should be the emotional substance of his final monologue. The Moor’s pleasure in delivering this dramatic language indicates that he never fully realizes how his preference for adventure over affection is part of the immutable essentially that excludes him from Venetian society. Indeed, just as Othello reveled in the opportunity to present an account of his relationship with Desdemona to the council’s “grave ears” at the beginning
of the play, he exits the play still captivated by adventure narratives, and specifically, his centrality in such tales. By prefacing his last words with “and say that in Aleppo once” (5.2.362), Othello requests that the story of his relationship be preserved and disseminated, ultimately revealing that his “love” for Desdemona is secondary to, yet intertwined with and inseparable from, his love of all things dramatic.

By connecting Othello’s ill-fated choice to bond himself absolutely to Iago with his pursuit of drama and excitement, it is obvious that the former commander is, knowingly or not, reliving the circumstances of his adventuring days. Perhaps Othello has the necessary attributes to persevere through the duress and turmoil of a battlefield, but these characteristics which ensured his success in battle now contribute to his mistakes in social situations. Instances such as Othello’s dark directive to “put thee [Iago] to ‘t, within these three days let me hear thee say that Cassio’s not alive” (3.3.447-489) or his refusal in acquiescing to Desdemona’s pleas of “kill me tomorrow, let me live tonight […] but while I say one prayer” (5.2.83-87) provide additional examples of Othello’s inability to implement anything other than military methodology. Therefore, because “monsters deviate from agreed-upon social norms” (Lowenthal 144), Othello’s failure to eschew military modes and methods brings to light the monstrous essentiality previously occluded at the beginning of the play.

Just as his actions confirm his monstrous essentiality, Othello’s speech also helps unveil the monster in the Moor. After his contemporaries see that he has murdered
Desdemona, Othello declares, “And say besides that in Aleppo once, where a malignant and turbaned Turk beat a Venetian and traduced the state, I took by the throat the circumcised dog and smote him, thus” (5.2.362-363) just before goring himself with his own blade. This statement and subsequent action show that Othello recognizes himself as the source of genuinely monstrous behavior and that he places himself in a category different from the other Venetians who function within the law. To separate himself from these men, Othello uses self-deprecating language implying estrangement from the society which he has just “traduced.” Phrases such as “a malignant and turbaned Turk” and “circumcised dog” place Othello definitively into the monstrous realm. Ironically, though Othello verbally recognizes and condemns himself for the violence he has wrought, he still resorts to violence as a viable method of “correcting” the situation, thus reinforcing that the general is inexorably bound to military “logic.”

Because monstrosity is always accompanied by hybridity, Othello’s actions defy easy categorization. The phrase “where a malignant and turbaned Turk beat a Venetian” refers to Othello’s internal battle with the socially incongruous aspects of his personality and his goal to become an obedient and ordinary citizen. This hybridity asserts Knoppers and Landes’ claim that the monstrous other “both marked and violated boundaries, threatening the identities it served to define” (21). In what is perhaps an attempt to finally assume an identity unadulterated by hybridity, one aspect of Othello’s dualistic personality
is prompted to stab the other. Through his suicide, any remaining humanity harbored in Othello’s body is forever lost, thus ending his internal struggle but ultimately opening new questions for the audience, allowing viewers to further analyze the hybridity of the monstrous condition. Is the general’s suicide a final victory for the monster within the Moor or a virtuous attempt at redemption? How does Othello’s hybridity complicate interpretations of his death? Regardless of how spectators interpret Othello, these conflicting interpretations indicate that Othello is indeed hybrid and monstrous.

In addition to Othello’s own identification of his immutable essentiality, those observing the death and chaos of the final act also recognize his monstrous identity. Aghast at the carnage resulting from the monstrous interplay between Othello and Iago, Lodovico bemoans the once venerated commander’s fall from grace in the line, “O thou Othello, that was once so good, fall’n in the practice of a cursed slave, what shall be said to thee?” (5.2.299-301). Othello, who “was once so good” as a military leader, has been visibly debased to criminal status because of his inability to adjust to changing social norms. Though Iago certainly senses and amplifies Othello’s monstrosity, Othello’s actions as a physical instrument of death, destruction, and disorder reveal that the Moor has always possessed monstrous capacity, a trait less visible in the blithely self-placating alien the audience sees at the beginning of the play. Through the severity of the repercussions following Othello’s failure to execute proper
social reasoning, Shakespeare shows his protagonist to be every bit as monstrous as the most obvious monster in the play: Iago. If Iago’s personality traits are typical of the stock villain character that uses intelligence and mind craft to control others for his own gain, then Othello also conforms to another monstrous stereotype: one who is incredibly strong and impulsive, but lacks finesse and foresight, and prioritizes his emotional fulfillment. Because “monsters become monsters because they’ve been preyed upon by other monsters” (Lowenthal 144), audience members may resonate with Lodovico’s piteous lamentations at the victimization of his commander. However, due to his inevitable failure to readjust to a new social structure, Othello the Moor was lost to Othello the monster long before the final act, and his death represents not the loss of a proper citizen but of a violently conflicted, hybrid creature incompatible with Venetian society from the onset.

Whether it is Othello who is revealed to be a monster because of changing social circumstance or Iago who is always monstrous because he exists so far outside moral boundaries, the play shows its audience the relationship between a monster and the system which the monster violates. Despite all their aesthetic and cultural dissimilarities, Othello and Iago both defile Venetian society through the violence resulting from their interaction. Because Othello provides an example of this dynamic interplay between multiple monsters, it validates the assertion that “the monster always infects with monstrosity everything that it touches” (Lowenthal 144). However,
Shakespeare’s most pertinent explication of the monstrous condition comes from his use of Othello and Iago to demonstrate the immutable incompatibly that broadly defines a monster. Because “difference most often functions to exclude” (Lowenthal 144), the monster’s essential deviance will eventually be discovered regardless of extraneous social or cultural factors that may, intentionally or not, disguise that deviance. Ultimately, Othello and Iago prove that the masquerading monster is always incapable of integrating into the society from which he deviates.
Works Cited


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