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Of Undergraduate Research and Criticism
In the Discipline of English

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

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

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A New Perspective on Dante’s Dream of the Siren

Tomás Antonio Valle
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The Dream of the Siren in Purgatorio 19 raises an interesting problem for Dante as a poet. Dante’s image of Beatrice draws him on to the beatific vision, yet the Dream points out the danger of trusting in images and man’s tendency to construct Sirens, false images, out of his desires. How, then, can Dante know that Beatrice is a true image and not a Siren? A comparison of the Dream to other portions of the Comedy reveals Dante’s answer: a true image drives
the Lover to investigate his desires, since these desires bias the imagination and construct false and destructive images. Moreover, such an answer springs from seeing a special relationship between the Dream and the *Comedy* as a whole: namely, that they tell the same story of ensnarement and escape, simply in two different ways—one psychologically and the other poetically.

To reach this insight, the reader must first understand the question which the Dream raises about the image of Beatrice and Dante’s answer to that question. Through the Dream, Dante the poet explains how man can project his desires onto an external object, thereby becoming ensnared by a false image. Eventually, though, he is freed through realizing that his desires are at the heart of the image. The Dream carries great importance for three reasons: first, Dante places it in a very important position in the poem. Second, it fills a significant gap in Virgil’s Second Discourse on Love. Third and most importantly, with the Dream of the Siren, Dante attempts to resolve the problems latent in his image of Beatrice. Dante must explain how he (and his readers) can trust that the image of Beatrice is not a construction of his own desires. Before understanding Dante’s explanation, the reader must examine two souls in Hell trapped by false images: Francesca and Ulysses. Beatrice’s rebuke of Dante in Canto 30 of *Purgatorio* shows how different Beatrice’s effect on Dante is from the effects of those false images on their creators—that is, she compels him to understand his own desires. This understanding of desire is precisely the protection against projected loves that Dante depicts in his
Dream of the Siren. This, then, is Dante’s proof that Beatrice is a true image: she leads him to discover his desires.

In the Dream of the Siren, Dante the poet shows the dangers of projected love but also how the recognition of desires allows one to escape them. When the woman who becomes the Siren first appears, Dante describes her as “stuttering, cross-eyed, and crooked on her feet, with stunted hands, and pallid in color” (*Purgatorio* 19.7-9). She represents something which in itself ought not to be loved. In spite of her hideousness, or perhaps because of it, Dante the pilgrim allows his gaze to linger on her. Dante’s gaze then begins to transform the woman: “my gaze loosed her tongue . . . straightened her entirely and gave color to her wan face” (19.11-15). Moreover, Dante’s gaze changes her in a specific way so that she looks “just as love desires” (19.15). Dante’s gaze has given to an unfit object of love the appearance of a fit object of love and done so according to Dante’s own desires. This can be called “projected love,” since by it Dante loves only himself and his own desires, which he has projected onto the woman, rather than the woman herself.

However, once Dante has formed this woman to fit his own desires, he cannot tear himself away from her. As soon as his gaze has changed her, “she began to sing in such a way that [he] could hardly have turned [his] attention from her” (19.16-18). By creating this ideal illusion, Dante ends up deceiving himself and now cannot escape—his love has been bound to this object of desire. That the woman, having been so shaped by Dante, describes herself as “a sweet
siren” (19.19) fits well: sirens change their songs to fit the desires of the hearer, just as Dante has shaped the woman to appeal to his desires, and no one can resist a siren’s song once he hears it. The Siren’s speech also brings out the danger of Dante’s position: “whoever becomes used to me rarely leaves me, so wholly do I satisfy him” (19.23-24).

The Siren tempts Dante to remain, fixated by this projection of his desires, and not to continue in his quest for God. She also tempted Ulysses, leading him on a restless journey to his own destruction—thus she also tempts to unrest. Then, in the midst of the Siren’s song, a Lady appears and spurs Virgil, representing Reason, to reveal the belly of the Siren (representing Dante’s desires) and break the illusion. By making Dante recognize that his own desires are at the heart of the Siren and forcing him to investigate those desires, the Lady has saved Dante from the Siren’s snare.

In light of Virgil’s Discourse on Love and the Free Will, this Lady must be Dante’s power of free choice, implanted by God for the purpose of freeing Dante from the danger of projected love. In that Discourse, Virgil explains that every soul naturally possesses an “innate . . . power that gives counsel and must guard the threshold of assent” (18.62-63), which well describes the role of the Lady in the Dream. This power of discernment either “accepts or winnows good or evil loves” (18.65-66)—exactly what the Lady does by spurring Virgil to unmask the Siren. Therefore, says Virgil, no matter what love arises in you, “in you is the power to restrain it. This noble power Beatrice understands as free choice” (18.72-74). So, then, the Lady represents
the soul’s power of free choice. More importantly than the identities of its characters, though, the Dream resolves into two inverse actions—the projection of desire that ensnares and the recognition of desire that frees.

This interpretation of the Dream of the Siren reveals its critical significance to understanding the *Divine Comedy* as a whole, both by its placement in the poem and by its effects on the preceding Discourses, but even more by the way it relates to Dante’s poetic use of Beatrice. The Dream of the Siren occurs immediately after five cantos dealing primarily with love and free will, cantos central to the *Divine Comedy* both in the sense that they form its middle and in the sense that understanding their content sheds light on all the rest of the *Divine Comedy*.¹² Simply by its placement, then, Dante makes the Dream of the Siren stand out to his readers. However, the substance of the Dream, being about love, aids in understanding the Discourses in the five central cantos, especially Virgil’s Second Discourse on Love. A critical part of Virgil’s explanation of love involves sense apprehension, the first operation of the intellect. According to Virgil, sense apprehension acts by taking an image of something and “unfold[ing] it within you, so that it causes the mind to turn toward it” (18.23-24). This leads to love. However, Virgil does not explain what happens when the unfolding sense perception is somehow corrupted and changed, biased by previous desires, although he admits that this may happen by saying “[love’s] matter seems always to be good, but not every seal is good, although the wax be good” (18.37-39). The seal represents the unfolding sense perception,¹³ which
makes its impression on the mind’s passive potential for love, represented by the wax. Virgil, while acknowledging that something can go wrong in this process, does not explain how this happens or how to avoid it. The Dream of the Siren fills this gap in the reader’s understanding of love by depicting the corruption of perception through self-projection and the power to escape by recognizing one’s desires.

Most crucially, however, the Dream also represents the danger implicit in Dante’s imagination of Beatrice. Through the entire *Comedy*, Beatrice is an image drawing him up to God. In this way he develops a Christian version of Courtly Love, which would traditionally place the woman in an exalted position so that the lover had to strive to attain her lofty state through a life of service. Dante makes Beatrice a similar figure but changes the goal of a man’s striving from an adulterous liaison to nearness to God; he also shifts the focus of his servitude from the woman to God although the service is still because of the woman. However, both versions of Courtly Love, the Dantian and the traditional, share a common weakness: the question of whether or not the woman actually holds the lofty station that Courtly Love gives her. Dante runs the risk of ending his life only to learn that he spent it chasing a false image, that what he thought was Beatrice in fact was only his own construction, based on what he wanted a woman to be. To put it in a different fashion, how can Dante know that he is seeking Beatrice and not simply delaying his search for God, trapped in the arms of a Siren he himself has made? The Dream of the
Siren portrays the very danger lurking in Dante’s version of Courtly Love. Thus the problem of projected love presents a real danger to Dante as an author and poet. If he does not want his method of salvation to crumble around him, he must somehow show that Beatrice truly is an image leading him to God or at least that he sees the danger of using Beatrice this way and knows how to avoid it. The Dream of the Siren, then, must play some part in Dante’s answer to this.

To understand Dante’s answer, one must first understand his depictions of those ensnared by false images. The episode of Francesca and Paolo exemplifies how Courtly Love can influence one to construct a false image that leads to indolence and lust. Reading about Lancelot’s Courtly Love relationship with Guinevere, they conceive the desire to have such a relationship themselves. Just as, in the Courtly Love tradition, Lancelot is beset by love (Inferno 5.128), so Francesca insists that Love is the actor in her sin. Moreover, at the critical moment when Paulo kisses Francesca in imitation of Lancelot,\(^\text{16}\) they take for themselves the roles of the characters, projecting their desire for a Courtly Lover onto the other person—Francesca imagining Paulo to be another Lancelot and Paulo imagining Francesca to be another Guinevere. Reinforcing this, they even project the traditional role of “go-between” onto the book they read.\(^\text{17}\) This false image they have created leads them to dally in acedia, slothful languor, and indolent lust—“that day we read there no further” (5.138).

Dante’s Ulysses represents another victim of the Siren—that is, another projector of his desires onto the
outside world, leading him on an epic, yet deadly, journey. He is driven (and drives his men) by “ardor . . . to gain experience of the world and of human vices and worth” out onto the “deep, open sea alone” (Inferno 26.97-99, 100). The Siren identifies herself as the one who enchants “sailors on the deep sea” and who “turned Ulysses from his course, desirous of [her] song” (Purgatorio 19.20, 22-3). For that reason Ulysses also has trapped himself in a projected image. This false image compels Ulysses to go on a quest seeking it, which eventually brings him to Purgatory, where he is destroyed. Ulysses, in contrast to the indolent Francesca, exemplifies the opposite manifestation of acedia, that of restless activity.18

Comparing Francesca and Ulysses’ responses to their false images with Dante’s response to Beatrice shows Dante’s distinction between false and true images: the lover responds to true images by understanding his own desires. In Purgatorio 30, Beatrice explains her function as an image in Dante’s life: “For a time I sustained him with my countenance: showing him my youthful eyes, I led him with me, turned in the right direction” (30.121). However, after Beatrice’s death, Dante “turned his steps along a way not true, following false images of good, which keep no promise fully” (130-132). To save him from these, Beatrice had to “show him the lost people” (138). Here she references the beginning of Inferno, when she begged Virgil to lead Dante through Hell. Unlike Francesca’s image, which impels her to indolence, and Ulysses’ image, which impels him on a restless wandering towards Purgatory, Dante’s image of
Beatrice sends him down to Hell. Moreover, this journey to Hell represents an introspective understanding of Dante’s own desires. All the sins in Hell are generated by desire, since “love must be the seed in you of every virtue and of every action that deserves punishment” (Purgatorio 17.104-5). As Dante learns by example the natures of the sins punished in Hell, so he learns the natures of the desires which lead to them, desires which also live in him (this is one possible reason why Dante often reflects the sin he is observing). This is the distinction between false and true images, between the Siren and Beatrice: the one provokes acedia, the other an epic quest to understand the nature of desire.

The second action in the Dream of the Siren, the revelation of desire, represents this quest into Hell to understand the desires. The simple fact that Virgil plays a leading role in both actions shows the correlation. Moreover, as said above, the revealing of the belly as the source of desire shows that revelation of desire destroys the false image. In addition, the focus on the body of the Siren relates to the image of Hell as a body with Satan at the belly. Dante’s awakening after the Dream represents the sort of moral awakening that follows from Dante’s emerging above ground at the end of the Inferno. The invocation at the beginning of Purgatorio also relates: “But here let dead poetry rise up again, O holy muses” (1.7-8). This transition between cantica represents Dante’s awakening from his false imaginations through understanding his desires and his rebirth with new strength to affirm true images and to love
Dante’s proof of his image’s truth, then, is that it has sent him on this quest to understand his desires, rather than leaving him in *acedia*. This knowledge of the desires, which are the bias of the imagination, cannot deceive Dante, and therefore his quest purifies his mind of false images and allows him to love Beatrice aright. And yet this line of thought can develop even more: indeed, just as Dante’s descent into Hell represents his investigation of his own desires, so the entire Dream is the psychological microcosm of the *Comedy*, and the *Comedy* is the poetic and autobiographical macrocosm of the Dream. All the features of the Dream are present in the *Comedy*: the soul ensnared by the false image, the female guardian who alerts the rational element, and the ensuing examination of the very blackest desires of the soul. The Dream deals with all these in a much quicker, simpler way, while the *Comedy* deals with them in a thorough and richly allegorical manner. The *Comedy*, unlike the Dream, begins in medias res, only revealing how Dante fell into the moral quagmire of *Inferno* 1 through later discussions such as Beatrice’s reproof in *Purgatorio* 30. The Dream, while explaining how Dante became ensnared, does not depict the education in love and the ascent to beatitude in *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*, rather ending with Dante’s rebirth upon exiting Hell. Once this relationship between the Dream and the *Comedy* is understood, the question of whether the mysterious Lady is free will or Beatrice becomes clear—understood at a purely psychological level she represents free will, but at
any poetic level the inspiring force of free will must take on the character of the Beloved. Free will acts, and only love creates action: free will (understood as the faculty that distinguishes good and evil loves) is the Beloved acting upon the Lover.

From this microcosm-macrocosm relationship, I would draw two other conclusions related to Dante as an author. First, and more daringly, I propose that the Dream of the Siren is in fact the origin or seed of the Comedy as a whole, an original idea that Dante then expanded. The Dream contains all of Inferno in reduced form, as well as events before the Comedy’s in medias res beginning. What it lacks from the entire Comedy is Purgatorio and Paradiso, which makes perfect sense if the Dream were Dante’s starting point, his first imaginative experiment with some of the dominant themes of the poem. Moreover, the fact that the Comedy begins in the style of a dream-narrative also ties it to the Dream. As a second and more likely conclusion, I suggest that the Comedy be considered as Dante’s systematic purification of his own imagination and desires. If we take seriously what Dante the poet reveals about his life and accept that at some point he became trapped by his own imaginings—the false images of good mentioned by Beatrice in Purgatorio 30—but realized his own ensnarement, we can then read the entire Comedy as an honest attempt by Dante as a person to understand the nature of his desires and to learn to love in truth and purity, unbiased by desire.
Notes

1 I believe that we should distinguish between the woman who becomes the Siren and the Siren herself. Robert Durling’s comment that the “Siren, then, does not correspond to any external object of desire . . . but rather to a particular attitude toward external goods” (Purgatorio 317) misses this point and, for that reason, confuses the person of the Siren with the first action of the Dream, the projection.

2 All quotations from and references to the text of the Comedy itself refer to the Durling translation. In the footnotes, that and the other editions of the Comedy are cited for the editors’ commentary.

3 This may be either an evil or a lesser good. For this reason, the Dream of the Siren can be seen as describing the origin of all the vices in Purgatory. Virgil’s statement in lines 58-60 does not contradict this, only implying that more is repented of below. Moreover, see Durling (320) on why Virgil should not be trusted here.

4 More important than what color this actually is—a blend of rose and white, according to Charles Singleton (449)—is the significance of the word “desires.” As Durling (318) says, “what the dreamer desires is what he sees”—Dante’s own desires determine the form of the Siren.

5 See Dorothy Sayers’ excellent discussion of this action on pages 220-1.

6 For why the Pilgrim cannot pull himself away, see Virgil’s explanation of love at 18.25-31. Also relevant is the parallel between the Siren and the medieval succubus, “intercourse with which saps the strength and
destroys the life” (Sayers 220).

In the *Odyssey* and other extant accounts of the travels of Odysseus, he resists the temptation of the Siren and eventually makes his way home, so most Dante scholars have tried to find an alternative source for Dante’s version of the myth. No one, in my research, seems to believe that Dante intentionally changed the Ulysses myth here to make a point. However, if we take the words of the Siren to be true, then Dante’s Ulysses was destroyed by the same type of projected desire that now threatens the Pilgrim, a conclusion much more intriguing than simply that the Siren is a liar. See Durling (324), who comes so close to, yet strays so far from, realizing this when he says that the Siren may be part of what led Ulysses on his fatal voyage, but then interprets her as “fascination with the sensual surface of things.”

The significance of this double-temptation (Dante’s immobility and Ulysses’s frantic questing) relates to the double-nature of *acedia*, or sloth. Idle suspension and restless activity are, at heart, the same thing. See the restlessness of desire at 18.31-33.

See Sayers (221). In Dreams, where the characters are normally allegorical, characters (such as Virgil) who should be read with a more complex approach to their identity in the rest of the poem can be read in a more purely allegorical way.

The common reading that makes this a sexual reference (Durling 319) stops at the obvious. Since the belly is the seat of the desires and the Siren is a construct based on Dante’s desires, Virgil reveals to Dante that the Siren is composed (under her deceptive
exterior) of his own desires. The stench, while a sexual reference, is also the odor of falsity or, perhaps, as Giuseppe Mazzotta argues, “the unmistakable stench of death forever lurking at the heart of the suspended, self-enclosed circle of romance” (145)—recalling the succubus parallel combining sexual temptation and death.

11 Mazzotta (145) and others take the Lady to be Beatrice, with powerfully significant results. However, the Dream of the Siren is a psychological drama, and Beatrice herself does not exist in Dante’s mind. One could argue that it is the image itself of Beatrice, but since the Dream calls into question the veracity of man’s formation of images, this would be counter-productive for Dante. Moreover, I cannot believe that Dante artistically would be willing to bring Beatrice substantially into the poem so close to the much anticipated coming of Beatrice in Canto 30. Considering the wealth of parallels, however, I will not say for certain that the Lady and Beatrice are not the same: it depends on how closely you are willing to unify the Dream and the Comedy itself, as will be discussed later. However, the primary reading in the context of the psychology of love must identify her as divinely-given free will.

12 For an astonishing discussion of Dante’s artistic perfection in these cantos, see Durling (610).

13 Here I disagree with Singleton, if I understand him rightly. He takes the seal to represent the object of love itself (420). However, again assuming that I understand Singleton’s explanation of the Thomistic view of love correctly, it is the intention (or image) which is received
by the mind and makes an impression on it (412-14).

14 “Imagination” here means the creation of an image out of something in the world.

15 An expansive, though by no means daring judgment: see, for instance, Sayers 311.

16 For a fuller explanation of who kisses whom, see Durling (Inferno 99). However, whether or not Francesca is avoiding responsibility for her action by lying, the two lovers still play the roles of Lancelot and Guinevere.

17 See 5.137 and Durling’s note (Inferno 99).

18 See footnote 8 above.

19 Acedia represents a refusal to accept reality as God has made it—it is the sin most allied with—and hence follows from, the affirmation of false images. This is why (as well as for structural reasons—see footnote 12) Dante places the Dream of the Siren on the Terrace of Sloth (acedia).

20 The textual ambiguity (see Mark Musa 210) of whether the Lady or Virgil reveals the Siren’s belly fits the correlation to the larger action of the poem—Virgil leads Dante through Hell, but actually it is not Virgil but Beatrice, Lucia, Mary, and ultimately God who do so.

21 See Durling (Inferno 552-5 and 576-7) for the evidence behind this image.

22 See footnote 11.

23 See Durling (Inferno 34).
Works Cited


William Faulkner’s work, along with most literature concerning the post-Civil War American South, is ceaselessly examined on matters of racial discourse. Despite some diverging opinions, some critics claim that “more than any white writer of his time, he invented fully realized and sympathetic black characters” (Fargnoli 83). Ralph Ellison stated that “Faulkner began with a stereotype of the Negro and ended with human beings” (qtd. in Denniston...
In this essay, I will attempt to delineate the beginning and end referenced by Ellison. Confined to the same “beginnings,” Faulkner’s black characters show different ways to disengage these stereotypes, representing different paths between Ellison’s “beginning” and “end.” This essay will examine Dilsey Gibson in *The Sound and the Fury*, and Lucas Beauchamp in *Go Down, Moses* in order to reveal how these characters represent two ways that Faulkner can create black characters that transcend stereotypes.

Written in 1930, Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* identifies and confronts the inconsistencies between words and actions, a concept presented, but not fully elucidated, in Faulkner’s novel *The Sound and the Fury* written one year prior. Addie’s sole monologue in *AILD* identifies this discrepancy, and keeping Addie’s thoughts in mind is crucial to a proper understanding of the Compson family’s black servant, Dilsey Gibson, in *The Sound and the Fury*. Addie Bundren is married to a physical representation of the phenomenon of the difference between words and actions, and in her last thoughts, she presents the recognition of this difference between saying and doing, between words and actions. In response to Cora Tull’s remark that she is not a real mother, Addie thinks:

> How words go straight up in a thin line, quick and harmless, and how terribly doing goes along the earth, clinging to it, so that after a while the two lines are too
far apart for the same person
to straddle from one to the
other. (AILD 173)

Addie recognizes that “words are no good; that words
don’t ever fit what they are trying to say at” (171). Addie
applies this idea to motherhood, a role also examined in The
Sound and the Fury, saying, “Motherhood was invented by
someone who had to have a word for it because the ones that
had children didn’t care if there was a word for it or now”
(171-172). Addie believes that people can attempt to apply
a word but that the word will never be able to adequately
describe true action. This concept provides an illuminated
reading of Dilsey. It shows that an analysis that confines her
to the “black mammy” stereotype attaches her to a word that
provides a more restricted and inadequate reading than one
that carefully examines her actions.

As an author intensely concerned with the
deterioration of the classic southern patriarchy, Faulkner
frames The Sound and the Fury in a way that places
his characters superficially into some of the recurring
stereotypes of Southern Reconstruction novels. This is
apparent specifically in Mrs. Compson as the “delicate
alabaster lady” and Dilsey as the “black mammy” (Christian
8). In her book Black Women Novelists, Barbara Christian
identifies the mammy through several repeated traits. She
is “black in color as well as race and fat…she is strong…
but this strength is used in the service of her white master”
(11-12). Christian also explains the function of these two
roles within the traditional family in Southern literature.
While the father served as the head of the house, handling the economic and financial burdens, the Southern lady was expected to handle the home, serving as “wife, mother, and manager” (8). Yet with the employment of servants as a signifier of wealth in the post-Civil War South, the duties associated with these roles, although “necessary,” became “demeaning,” and a family’s true success came to be “measured by the extent to which the wife does or does not work” (10). From this mentality emerged the “mammy” among the stock characters of Southern literature, whose job it was to fulfill these duties in place of the white mother. With Mrs. Compson mostly confined to a sickly state of isolation in her quarters and Dilsey always working in the kitchen and around the house, it is easy for some readers to confine or reduce them, Dilsey primarily, to these all-encompassing stereotypes. This story’s brilliance lies in Faulkner’s ability to create a setting in which this stereotype is present and also create a character that through action is able to, as John T. Matthews puts, “subvert its authority even as she works within it” and transcend the restricting limitations of this stereotype (85).

Dilsey’s humanity is apparent throughout the novel, but can often be overlooked in the first three monologues of the Compson boys, whose fragmented thoughts and frequently shifting time periods of focus can often be hard to interpret. This is why multiple readings of the novel are beneficial, and a concentration on the final section of the book is paramount. The book’s four sections, titled by the dates they occur, are usually referred to by the name of the
character whose monologue inhabits that section. The last section, titled “April Eighth, 1928,” is sometimes referred to as “Faulkner,” because it is the only chapter told through the third-person, omniscient narrator and therefore represents Faulkner’s point of view. However, for the purposes of this essay, I am going to refer to this final chapter as “Dilsey’s section” because she is the central focus of the action and also because the narration, although omniscient, most closely represents Dilsey’s point of view. Until this section, the reader witnesses the Compson family internally, through the consciousness of the three sons. In Dilsey’s section, the reader finally receives a perspective from the outside, as an observer rather than an occupant, a point of view that Dilsey has inhabited for the entirety of the novel.

Dilsey is the only character who has a clear and total view of the Compson family. Unlike the other narrators, whose mental capacities or subconscious desires and feelings alter the narrative in some way, Dilsey states, “I seed de beginning, en now I sees de endin” (*TSATF* 297), and the reader is finally granted this point of view as well. She transcends the role of “mammy” when she transcends typical human perception. Dilsey possesses the abilities of an omniscient presence in that she is seemingly aware of all wrongdoing throughout the novel. When Caddy climbs the tree to get a better look at Damuddy’s funeral, it is Dilsey who comes around the corner of the house and discovers her children as well as the Compson’s, saying, “Whyn’t you all go on up the stairs like your paw said, stead of slipping out behind my back” (45). When Jason attempts secretly
to chastise Miss Quentin without his Mother’s or Dilsey’s awareness, it is again Dilsey who asks, “What you up to now, Jason?” (183).

She also possesses an understanding beyond knowledge of the mischief of those around her. She has knowledge of the inner-sensory processes of Benjy’s mind, the closest any character gets, with the exception of Caddy, to understanding how he thinks. Benjy’s section reflects his use of “smell” to process the world around him, saying, “I could smell the cold,” and “I could smell the clothes flapping” (6, 14). In Quentin’s section, he recalls Dilsey remarking about Benjy, “He smell what you tell him when he want to. Don’t have to listen nor talk” (89). One could debate over Benjy’s use of “smell” as his actual process or mode of understanding, or his own confusion regarding the word’s meaning, but Dilsey’s knowledge of this way of thinking regardless of its meaning shows a unique understanding of Benjy’s mind that she alone possesses. She is not reduced to “a few simple, vivid, memorable, easily grasped and widely recognized characteristics” (Hall 258). Instead, she serves as an all-knowing, omniscient presence that gives the reader a view of the world in its clearest form.

The creation of stereotypes relies somewhat on establishment of what Stuart Hall calls a set of “binary oppositions” between whites and blacks (243). This is exemplified in the differences between the mammy and the Southern white mistress. Faulkner attempts to reverse this binary that is typically used to subordinate blacks and reinforce the status of whites. In her book *Faulkner’s*
Negro, Thadious Davis refers to Faulkner’s technique as a “contrapuntal design by framing the disintegration of a white [S]outhern family with the survival of a black family” (Davis 72). This is seen through Dilsey’s ability to manage her own family effectively and simultaneously keep the Compson family from total destruction, contrasting the helplessness of Mrs. Compson. When Quentin is brought to the house as a baby, Dilsey remarks, “Who else gwne raise her cep me? Aint I rased ev’y one of ya’ll?” (TSATF 198).

Thadious Davis goes on to state that “Faulkner utilizes blacks to illuminate or magnify aspects of his white characters and afterwards confines them to the background” (Davis 102). Faulkner actually reverses this profile in The Sound and the Fury, where his white characters are used to emphasize certain traits about Dilsey. Jason’s desperation to receive respect and validation from the community helps illuminate Dilsey in her own community and her lifestyle or actions which warrant this respect. Jason struggles internally in dealing with how others perceive him. When he is seen in his car at the end of the novel while chasing after Quentin, Faulkner states that “his invisible life raveled about him like a worn out sock” (TSATF 313). Jason tells Quentin, “I’ve got a position in this town, and I’m not going to have any member of my family going on like a nigger wench” (189). He also wants to better his family’s image by sending Benjy to Jackson, thinking that “it don’t take much pride to not like to see a thirty year old man playing around the yard with a nigger boy, running up and down the fence lowing like a cow” (222). Jason chases Miss Quentin
through the streets, but he does not do so out of concern for her well being. Instead, he chases her to prevent the defamation of his family’s image, thinking to himself, “I’d hate to have my business advertised all over this town” (251). The respect he seeks is never given to him because rather than acting in a way that would garner respect, he blames Quentin, Benjy, Caddy, and the Gibsons as inhibitors. Dilsey, on the other hand, receives the recognition that Jason desires. On her walk to church with Benjy and her family, she is recognized by the Negro community not because she actively seeks it but because she lives her life how she thinks is right, ignoring other opinions and dismissing any negative perceptions received from “trash white folks” on the way (290). They make their way to the church, “steadily the older people speaking to Dilsey,” addressing her formally, saying, “Sis Gibson! How you dis mawnin? (291). There is an excitement surrounding her journey to the church, as if the whole community is aware she is on her way. She is an authoritative presence not just to the Compson children but to the young children of the negro community as well, who refrain from touching Benjy “[c]ase Miss Dilsey lookin” (291). In this short walk, Dilsey shows that she contains more depth than a reductive mammy stereotype who exists merely to accentuate aspects of the white world. She possesses a complexity of character and a morality that receives recognition from her own community, a group of people whose vision of her actions is unclouded by racial prejudice.

Dilsey undoubtedly shows a certain level of devotion
to the Compson family. One could argue that this creates a stereotype because she is displaying a “kind and loyal” servitude which Christian lists as a signature trait of the black mammy (12). This being acknowledged, it is essential to realize that Dilsey’s loyalty to the Compson family exists only in her dedication to fulfilling her employment obligations. Her morality and beliefs are never compromised in any way. The mammy’s loyalty has another subordinating component, which is defined by Hall as “happiness only when under the tutelage of the white master” (243) and by Christian as looking to the white Southern mistress as “supervisor, teacher, doctor, and minister” (12). Dilsey possesses none of these qualities, holding onto a unique morality and belief system which marks her as an individual. Furthermore, she does not hold these attitudes privately but acts on them throughout the novel.

In Jason’s section, Caddy returns home in an attempt to see her daughter. Still filled with hatred for Caddy because of the job she supposedly cost him, Jason tries to prevent the reunion by keeping her out of the house. He reads to Dilsey from the Bible about leprosy, saying that Caddy has been infected and the disease will be passed on to anyone she lays eyes on (TSATF 207). Not only does Dilsey see through this lie, again reflecting her omniscient knowledge, but she also deliberately flouts Jason’s desires, saying, “I like to know whut’s de hurt in letting dat po chile see her baby” (207). Dilsey goes on to say, “yous a cold man, Jason. If a man you is” (207), directly confronting Jason with her opinion of him and also questioning his manhood. Dilsey
acts in a similar fashion in relation to Mrs. Compson as well. In Quentin’s section, he recalls having to play underneath the wisteria frame when Mrs. Compson was feeling well enough to be able to watch them from the windows. But on days when she was confined to her bed, Quentin recalls, “When Mother stayed in bed Dilsey would put old clothes on us and let us go out in the rain because she said rain never hurt young folks” (169). Dilsey opposes Mrs. Compson by letting the children play outside, doing what she thinks is right despite what Mrs. Compson decides. Thus, Dilsey not only dismisses any kind of mental or ideological loyalty to her white mistress but also positions her knowledge of motherhood above Mrs. Compson’s, reversing the teacher-student binary and placing herself in direct opposition to the black mammy stereotype. Dilsey acts entirely of her own accord. She is not a vessel through which Mrs. Compson exerts her power. The mammy is an instrument or tool used for the benefit of her white superiors, lacking the individuality that Dilsey possesses. By granting her worldly knowledge, overwhelming respect in her community, and the strong attachment to a unique set of morals and beliefs, Faulkner creates a fully human character that cannot be defined by a single label.

In addition to Dilsey Gibson, Faulkner creates another black character that transcends stereotypes in Lucas Beauchamp, a central figure in Faulkner’s novel *Go Down, Moses*. In order to understand Lucas fully, we must first look at another character in the novel. At the center of *Go Down Moses*, Faulkner places “Pantaloon in Black,” the story of
a young black man named Rider and his response to the sudden death of his wife Mannie. The story’s only explicit connection with the rest of the book is that Rider lives in a house rented from Roth Edmonds, which may lead some to question the tale’s inclusion. After originally being titled *Go Down, Moses, and Other Stories*, Faulkner wrote the editor, asking him to drop the second part of the title, insisting that *Go Down, Moses* was “indeed a novel” (qtd. Vanderwerken 149). If a novel was Faulkner’s intention, it is essential to position “Pantaloon in Black” within the context of the rest of the narrative. Celeste Lempke defines “Pantaloon in Black” as a “[f]ringe story,” saying it should be focused on due to what [it] can reveal about the author’s “underlying themes” (56). If the reader is to understand Lucas Beauchamp, the reader must make an attempt to understand Rider as well.

The story begins in a Negro cemetery during the burial of Rider’s wife and goes on to follow his ensuing emotional journey, ending with the violent murder of a white man and Rider’s subsequent lynching. In a similar fashion to his treatment of Dilsey, Faulkner positions Rider within a common black stereotype: the “Bad Buck.” Donald Bogle defines the Bad Buck as a “physically big, strong, no-good, violent, renegade… violent and frenzied as he lusts for white flesh” (10). Rider fits this stereotype not only in appearance but also in action. Through Rider, Faulkner shows that “actions” may not always serve as a means to transcend stereotypes as they do with Dilsey Gibson.

“Pantaloon in Black” is divided into two sections.
The first part is told through a third-person omniscient narrator, while the second part is a retelling of the events by the sheriff’s deputy. The first section shows the universal human traits of Rider as he goes through the stages of grief, displaying denial as he quickly buries his wife and returns to work the next day, and depression, saying “Ah’m snakebit now and pizen can’t hawm me” (GDM 141). In part two, the sheriff’s deputy tells his wife about Rider, a story solely predicated upon his observation of Rider’s actions. Faulkner here shows that although others’ judgment of a person’s action helps display Dilsey’s humanity, it can also create a more limited reading. The sheriff’s deputy represents this type of cognitive failure. He states,

They look like a man and they walk on their hind legs like a man, and they can talk and you can understand them and you think they are understanding you, at least now and then. But when it comes to the normal human feelings and sentiments of human beings, they might just as well be a damn herd of wild buffaloes. (147)

The deputy fails to take the time to interpret Rider’s actions and instead restricts him to a stereotype. Some critics express a similar reduced reading in their interpretation of Lucas Beauchamp. Reginald Martin, in his essay “Faulkner’s Southern Reflections,” states that “to persons of color in Faulkner’s world, power and autonomy are merely soothing
illusions” and that “[s]trength (Faulkner’s “endurance”) earned through ceaseless suffering is their sole powerful province” (56). Craig Werner takes a similar stance, believing that Faulkner confines his black characters to the “long-suffering-but-enduring-black archetype” and, furthermore, defining the “narrative of endurance” as “static” (qtd. Clark 69). These interpretations, like the story of the sheriff, create a restricted view of Lucas and fail to recognize as humanizing characteristics his refusal to be subordinated and his ability to change.

Throughout the novel, Lucas Beauchamp is repeatedly described as “absolutely expressionless, impenetrable” (GDM 67). In accordance with this description, Lucas is also one of Faulkner’s more difficult characters to interpret. Irving Howe believes that “toward no other character does Faulkner show quite the same uncomfortable difference” (215). One could argue that Lucas represents a “tragic mulatto” “caught between two worlds,” who “suffers from a melancholy of the blood that inevitably leads to tragedy” (Christian 16). Yet, Richard H. King writes that “Lucas is perhaps the one black character created by Faulkner who escapes traditional stereotyping” (234). Because of these uncertainties, Martin and Werner have confined him to the “narrative of endurance” rather than a specific stock characterization. They view Lucas as a static Negro who has no capacity for change or development, who is reduced to bearing quietly and submissively the burdens of the world around him. “The Fire and the Hearth” does contain some language that could lead to this limited
reading of Lucas. First, Lucas’s “status as not only the oldest man but the oldest living person on the Edmonds plantation” (GDM 36) suggests his ability to endure and survive, having lived through three generations of plantation owners. His longevity is seen as almost supernatural: he “would not only outlive the present Edmonds as he had outlived the two preceding him, but would probably outlast the very ledgers which held the account” (113). A focus on this kind of language presents Lucas not as a person but as a symbol that will persist through generation after generation of white rule. Yet when critics take this evidence and label Lucas as an “enduring-black,” they draw erroneous conclusions. In order to fit this stereotype, Werner himself says that Lucas must be “static” or unchanging. Stuart Hall calls this “naturalization,” which “reduces the culture of black people to nature” thereby securing racial difference by placing blacks in a “permanent and fixed” state (245). When the black man is static or “natural” as Hall suggests, the stereotype can continue to be applied over time. Martin and Werner mistake Lucas for being unchanging because physically, superficially, he remains the same. “Fifty years ago,” Lucas’s face “was not sober and not grave but wore no expression at all” (GDM 94). At the end of the story, when Lucas is sixty-seven, “still, the face beneath the hat was impassive, impenetrable” (117). A reliance on these types of descriptions alone would cause Lucas to appear as unchanging. But, as made visible through his actions, Lucas undergoes transformations in “The Fire and the Hearth” which demand his recognition as a fully developed character capable of self-reflection and change.
Lucas’s first transformation happens during his flashback to the birth of Roth Edmonds. While his wife Molly helped deliver the baby, Lucas was sent across the flooded river to retrieve the doctor. Upon his return, Zack’s wife has already passed and Molly is “established in the white man’s house” (45). Here Lucas is confronted with a conflict between the Negro past and his own present, not as a Negro but as a man. During slavery, a black man would have no choice in giving up his wife as a wet nurse, or something more, if his master required it. Zack, still suffering from “the old curse of his fathers, the old haught ancestral price” (107), expected this same kind of compliance from Lucas. Like Martin and Werner, Zack expected Lucas to fit the stereotype of the “enduring-black” and submit to the recruitment of his wife. Lucas undergoes an internal struggle at this point, which resonates in his final question at the end of the chapter, “‘How to god,’ he said, ‘can a black man ask a white man to please not lay down with his black wife?’” (58). But after six months, something changes inside of Lucas. It isn’t a conscious decision, but something undefined, buried in his subconscious, when he “discovered suddenly that he was going now…to the commissary or the house or wherever the white man would be,” to “confront him” (47). Once inside, Lucas shows that he is going to resist the traditional treatment of the Negro in this regard when he tells Zack “I’m a nigger, but I’m a man too… I’m going to take her back” (46). Lucas comes back the next night with a razor and states he will not be able to stand by idly while he is disgraced, saying, “I tell you! Don’t ask too much of me!” (54). Zack
then thinks to himself, “I was wrong... I have gone too far” (54), finally realizing that Lucas is not the “long-suffering-black man” but a man who will take action.

Although there was some internal struggle, this first change that Lucas undergoes is largely prompted by outside factors. At the end of “The Fire and the Hearth,” Lucas goes through another change, but this time it is in response to a problem of his own creation. During the first chapter, while burying his whisky still, Lucas uncovers a golden coin in accordance with tales of buried treasure on the lands of the plantation. This single coin set “his brain boiling with all the images of buried money he had ever listened to or heard of,” and he “crawled on hands and knees among the loose earth” for the next five hours looking for more (38). This coin unlocks Lucas’s greedy lust for wealth. The obsession gets worse when he buys a divining machine from a traveling salesman and begins hunting for gold in the forest every night. Molly recognizes this change in Lucas and goes to Roth Edmond to ask for a divorce. She says, “Ever since he got that machine he done went crazy” (99). She can no longer be with him:

When a man that old takes up money-hunting, it’s like when he takes up gambling or whiskey or women. He ain’t going to have time to quit. And then he’s gonter be lost…. (99-100)

Molly recognizes the sickness of addiction not as it applies to blacks or whites but to “old men.” Lucas is not a poor
man. Roth Edmonds even tells him, “You may even have more money than I’ve got, which I think you have” (115). It is difficult to argue that Lucas’s greed is a product of his environment because he is not in desperate need of money. Instead, the sight of gold and the prospect of more triggered something in Lucas which is inherently human, not just confined to blacks in the South. Driven mad by this greed, Lucas comes very close to accepting his fate as a representative of the stereotype of the enduring black. Lucas is ready to accept a life ruled by money-hunting, along with the consequence of losing his wife, saying, “She wants a voice…all right…she can have it” (115). His willingness to accept his wife’s divorce without challenge or argument is the same unchanging passivity that the enduring black would display. But in the story’s last chapter, Lucas changes his ways. After the near-death of his wife, Lucas brings the machine to Roth’s house and says, “There it is…. Get rid of it” (125). Lucas truly believes that there is gold on that land, but Molly’s near-death causes him to change his manner of thinking and make certain realizations about himself. Originally ruled by selfishness and greed, Lucas says, “I done waited too late to start…I reckon that money ain’t for me” (126). By turning in the machine, Lucas realizes his foolishness and the error of his ways and saves his marriage. Lucas shows that he is not just representative of the enduring black because he makes human mistakes and also possesses the power and awareness to fix them.

Keith Clark, like Martin and Werner, makes several problematic statements in his article “Man on the Margin:
Lucas Beauchamp and the Limitations of Space.” Clark’s central thesis states that “strength” and “humanity” can be achieved in Faulkner’s black characters in only two ways: first, “by defining themselves in terms of the terms of the white community,” and second, by “distancing themselves from the black community or severing their ties with it completely” (68). I believe that there is evidence within “The Fire and the Hearth” which disproves both foundations of this statement.

Clark’s first argument, which calls Lucas an “imitation white man” (68), stems from the misjudgment that if Lucas is not acting “black,” he must be acting “white.” Because Lucas does not fit traditional black stereotyping, Clark concludes that Lucas then must be considered as trying to act “white.” This type of reading replicates a mindset that perpetuates the oppositional binary of blacks and whites, by assuming that if Lucas is not one he must be the other. Stereotyping Lucas as a white man is just as problematic as defining him as a stereotypical black man, and this type of limited reading ignores the possibility that Lucas fits neither and instead exists as a unique individual. King provides a more accurate depiction of Lucas, saying that “he is in but not of any community, not a human projection but a superhuman projection of himself” (236). There is evidence throughout the story that supports this claim for Lucas as an individual. When Roth speaks to his father, Zack Edmonds, about Lucas’s refusal to address Zack by name or by “mister,” he gains insight into the nature of the conflict between Lucas and his father. Roth tries to view the conflict
in terms of race, as his “father and a nigger, over a woman” (*GDM* 111). He fails to see that it was “something more than difference in race could account for” and that this was “because they were themselves, men, not stemming from any difference of race” (110-111). This shows that it is possible for a man to be defined outside of his race and that action and conflict cannot always be viewed in terms of being white or black. Roth, like Clark, struggles with this concept, which is why he is struck with “amazement and something very like horror” when he finally realizes that Lucas cannot be defined by race because he is “nameless now except for himself who fathered himself…contemptuous…of all blood black white yellow or red, including his own” (114).

The second part of Clark’s argument comprises the belief that Lucas is a “cultural orphan” (69), severed from the black community as well as his own family, whom he bears no connection with on a “deeper, psychological level” (70). Again, I believe that this is a misreading of the text, and there is evidence in *Go Down, Moses* that disproves this viewpoint. First, Lucas’s life, which has become a sort of legend, holds a place in the black community. In “Pantaloons in Black,” Rider and Mannie “built a fire on the hearth as the tale told Uncle Lucas Beauchamp…had done forty-five years ago, and which had burned ever since” (*GDM* 132). This shows that Lucas holds a position of respect in his community because his practice of lighting the hearth develops into a tradition followed by his fellow African Americans. Clark himself defines members of the same community as “linked more closely by psychological
affinities resulting from a shared history” (70), and the creation of a marriage ritual to be passed down to his following generations shows that Lucas is deserving of this definition.

In the story “Go Down, Moses,” Lucas’s actions certainly reflect that he holds his family on some “deeper, psychological level.” I have already highlighted that Lucas goes through two transformations in the novel, first, in confronting Zack in his house, and second, in turning in the divining machine. These changes, both psychological in nature, were prompted by Molly in some way, showing her influence over Lucas. Furthermore, Lucas is protective of his daughter, as fathers often are. When attempting to frame George Wilkins for possession of the still, Lucas thinks to himself, “Maybe when they lets him out it will be a lesson to him about whose daughter to fool with next time” (61). Although sometimes hard to see because of his expressionless, emotionless nature, Lucas’s actions are driven by Molly and his daughter, which shows a “deeper” connection with his family that Clark believes he lacks.

Through Dilsey Gibson and Lucas Beauchamp, Faulkner employs two different methods of creating non-stereotypical black characters. The two relate by both operating within the stereotypes that they transcend. Faulkner, being a product of the post-Civil War South, created characters in situations that he witnessed during his life. Perhaps these repeated stereotypes in literature occur because of the limited number of positions that blacks were able to inhabit during that time. As stated by
Ellison, Faulkner is able to take black characters of similar stereotypical “beginnings” and lead them along different paths to individual and unique “ends.” Faulkner’s true gift is the ability to take a black man and woman and show their innate human characteristics within the positions to which they were confined by the American South. This creates a more realistic and meaningful portrayal than if he were to create a black character totally outside a point of reference for his Southern audience.
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A Single Day: Isolation and Connection in Virginia Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway and Christopher Isherwood’s A Single Man

Hannah Williams
Shepherd University
Shepherdstown, West Virginia

Through both mundane and extraordinary events, Virginia Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway (1925) and Christopher Isherwood’s A Single Man (1964) present the tension that exists between private reflection and public existence. Although written nearly forty years apart, each novel explores a single day in the lives of the respective protagonists. Clarissa Dalloway from Woolf’s Mrs.
Dalloway and George from Isherwood’s *A Single Man* provide the focus for each novel. Although Woolf’s and Isherwood’s portrayals differ in gender, setting, and narrative styles, the foundations of both texts are achingly accurate portrayals of human connection and isolation. Ultimately, however, Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* emphasizes Clarissa’s isolation, while George in Isherwood’s *A Single Man* suggests a greater human connection.

Woolf’s and Isherwood’s texts immediately introduce their protagonists at early moments of their respective days with a focus on their internalized voices. Even though Clarissa is out among the public in order to prepare for a social event, the “private mental world” of Clarissa is the “novel’s key event” (Littleton 36). Woolf’s text opens with the indication of a simple errand: “Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself” (3). Clarissa Dalloway is a fifty-two-year-old woman living in bustling post-World War I London. Woolf combines the private and public life of the protagonist by seamlessly switching from Clarissa’s private thoughts to her mundane activity in a single sentence: “Such fools we are, she thought, crossing Victoria Street” (4). A simple action like crossing the street is imbricated with Clarissa’s deeper thoughts about life’s unpredictability, through which she deems people “fools.” Furthermore, as she performs errands around the city, she contemplates the “indescribable pause” that occurs before Big Ben strikes, which launches her into additional musings about human existence (Woolf 4). According to Clarissa, life is simply people “making it up, building it
round one, tumbling it, creating it every moment afresh” (Woolf 4). Still, Clarissa experiences moments of stillness before the clock chimes and she is brought back into public existence. Then, she feels the energy from the city streets and the sense of renewal that comes with not only each day but also each moment.

Similarly, *A Single Man* opens by introducing George, the novel’s fifty-eight-year-old protagonist, but in a more abstract manner. The opening simply states, “Waking up begins with saying am and now” (Isherwood 9). George is first referred to as “that which has awoken” and “has recognized I, and therefrom deduced I am, I am now” (Isherwood 9). It is not until George performs the ordinary tasks of getting ready that we “know its name” and that “it is called George” (Isherwood 11). He slowly wakes and realizes new moments of the day just as Clarissa Dalloway is aware of new moments forming when Big Ben chimes. Kay Ferres describes the “first scenes of the novel” as a way for Isherwood to “establish [George’s] singleness and separateness” (110). Unlike Mrs. Dalloway’s London setting, *A Single Man* places George, who is actually British, in suburban southern California in the early 1960s. While Clarissa notes the “bellow and the uproar” and the people “shuffling and swinging” in lively London (Woolf 4), George interprets his California setting much differently. In one of his many exposed private thoughts, George thinks “I am afraid of being rushed” as he prepares to face the day (Isherwood 11). George lives a lonely existence after the sudden loss of his partner, Jim, and he’s aware of the
disappearing days of his own life. Although Clarissa’s introduction notes how she thrives within the public environment of post-World War I London, George wakes up alone and now wishes to exist at a solitary pace. However, both characters combine commonplace public events with deeper private reflections.

Before I proceed with further analysis of the texts, it is worth noting that the correlation between Woolf and Isherwood extends beyond these two particular novels. Indeed, the authors were quite familiar with one another’s work. For example, Hogarth Press, created by Leonard and Virginia Woolf, published Isherwood’s second novel entitled *The Memorial* (1932) after reading his debut novel *All the Conspirators* (1938) (Lehmann 8-9). The couple published even more of Isherwood’s work, including *Lions and Shadows* (1938) and *Goodbye to Berlin* (1939) (Lehmann 33). Furthermore, Woolf and Isherwood would meet over the course of their professional dealings. According to John Lehmann, Isherwood was “utterly fascinated by [Woolf]” (33) and very familiar with her writings. Notably, in his foreword to *All the Conspirators*, Isherwood acknowledges that his literary approach was to demonstrate “quaint echoes” of techniques by Virginia Woolf and James Joyce (9). Also, Isherwood mentions in a 1973 interview that he had Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* and Michelangelo Antonioni’s 1961 film *La Notte* in mind while writing *A Single Man* (Kaplan 272). This biographical connection assists in establishing the parallels between Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* and Isherwood’s *A Single Man*. 
Indeed, the parallels continue within the world of these novels. For example, mortality and the aging process are topics that pervade Woolf’s and Isherwood’s texts through the inner dialogues of the protagonists. For example, Clarissa claims that she feels “very young; at the same time unspeakably aged” (Woolf 8). Her status as a middle-aged woman places her in between youthful moments and her physical age as represented by the “body she [wears]” (Woolf 11). Clarissa continues to think about how her “body, with all its capacities,” seems like “nothing at all,” and she has the “oddest sense of being herself invisible, unseen; [and] unknown” (Woolf 11). Clarissa’s conflicting thoughts demonstrate her emotional complexity despite a seemingly superficial lifestyle as a wife and mother in aristocratic London. She cannot help but ponder death within the same moments; Clarissa asks herself if it mattered “that she must inevitably cease completely” or if it were a consolation “to believe that death ended absolutely” (Woolf 8). Furthermore, Clarissa reacts physically to darker thoughts of death as she feels a “spasm, as if death’s “icy claws” were able “to fix in her” for a moment (Woolf 36). However, the thought passes, and her day must move forward, but her internal questions demonstrate her “vivid awareness and fear of the termination” of life (Littleton 38). Clarissa is keenly aware of her mortality even as she peruses the flower selections or engages in other simple tasks. However, much later in the novel, Clarissa attempts to answer her initial question about death. At her party, she hears about the suicide of World War I veteran Septimus Smith, which “strikes a chord that
reverberates with her mood” (Littleton 40). Clarissa, when thinking about Septimus, decides that “[d]eath [is] defiance” and an “attempt to communicate” (Woolf 184). Even though she does not know Septimus personally, she “clearly understands him, as her thoughts mirror his” (Littleton 40). Moreover, his suicide represents the “shocking immediacy of death” that Clarissa has already fearfully considered (Guth 37). Most importantly, the news of the suicide at Clarissa’s party is the “brutality that underlies civilized appearances” and represents the mixture of Clarissa’s darker thoughts and her public self (Guth 37).

In *A Single Man*, George is equally concerned with his own mortality. George’s contemplation of death is far more intimate than Clarissa’s reflections on Septimus, since George is mourning the loss of his partner Jim who has been killed in a car accident. George thinks of his physical being in terms of this loss as he refers to his body as “the body that has outlived Jim” (Isherwood 104). Like Clarissa’s physical response to thinking about her mortality, George’s body responds to his grief: each morning with a “sick newness” he remembers Jim is gone, which he describes as “waiting for a spasm to pass” (Isherwood 13). However, George’s self-perception differs from Clarissa’s feelings of invisibility. George reassures himself: “I am alive, he says to himself, I am alive!” (Isherwood 104). While Clarissa feels invisible in her own body, she still admits she manages through the “ebb and flow of things, here, there, she survived” (Woolf 9). Like George, she reassures herself of her own survivor status despite the precariousness of mortality. Similarly,
George describes his body as “the tough triumphant old body of a survivor” (Isherwood 104). The respective protagonists are survivors in their own right: George survives his monotonous daily routine while grief-stricken over Jim, and Clarissa survives her loneliness by maintaining social appearances as she grows older and feels herself slipping away from her relationships. For them, each day is a battle between their external responsibilities—jobs, errands, social events—and their internal voices. Clarissa’s and George’s social responsibilities demand connections among their peers, even as the internal dialogue of both characters exposes their isolation and anxieties. Therefore, withstanding the discrepancy between connection and isolation day after day is a remarkable event that they recognize even down to their physical beings. Both characters have a heightened sensation of being alive, even when it physically aches.

Furthermore, like Clarissa, George considers the quickness of death and how everything can change in a moment, which echoes Clarissa’s “feeling that it [is] very, very dangerous to live even one day” (Woolf 8). George thinks about his partner’s accident; Jim died quickly and “never felt it” (Isherwood 128). He realizes the random quality of death, too, as he thinks if he had “been the one the truck hit,” Jim would still be here, and “things are as simple as that” (Isherwood 128). Even through his grief, George can understand that death can happen in a quick, unsentimental moment; it could just as easily have happened to him. As a result, he both mourns and appreciates the sudden way in which Jim passed. George’s connection with
death is made immediate and personal through the loss of Jim, while Clarissa’s relation to Septimus Smith is more remote and theoretical. She uses Septimus Smith’s suicide to pontificate on the nature of death rather than intimately mourn the victim. Still, death is not wholly negative. For Clarissa, death is a way to “communicate,” as well as an “embrace” in a world in which she often feels alone (Woolf 184). Still, her feelings about Septimus are simultaneously authentic and impersonal—she does not know him but ultimately seems to understand the dark human impulse to give up. Septimus Smith becomes a canvas on which she can produce her own image of death in that very moment. For George, the loss of Jim was “lucky” in the sense of its relatively painless immediacy (Isherwood 128). Moreover, Clarissa’s thoughts are inevitably fleeting. She hears of the suicide at her party but is unable to dwell on the idea of death for too long since she must maintain appearances and perform her duties as hostess. George must grapple with the death of his loved one daily and attempt to move on without Jim in an unpredictable world. Overall, both Clarissa and George consider their own existence and the respective direct and indirect losses they experience in each novel. Death is presented as both tragically immediate, as when George loses Jim, and as a word-of-mouth event, as Clarissa is told of Septimus’s suicide. Still, rather than give in to imprudent grief and exhibit their struggle with mortality to others, Clarissa and George attempt to be dispassionate about the idea of death so they may reestablish some semblance of order in their daily lives.
Additionally, George and Clarissa are performers in their respective lives; they each possess a public self that differs from their private thought processes. Woolf’s description of Clarissa at her party focuses largely on the socialite version of Clarissa. For example, Clarissa is “sparkling” with the “stateliness of her grey hair,” wearing a “silver-green mermaid’s dress” (Woolf 174). Despite the fact that “age [has] brushed her,” Clarissa is described as “having that gift still; to be; to exist” (Woolf 174). In the social setting, Clarissa is at “the most perfect ease and [has an] air of a creature floating in its element” (Woolf 174). However, Clarissa realizes the fleeting nature of the “intoxication of the moment,” and even though her friends are admiring her, she internally notes that the “semblances” of social “triumphs” possess “hollowness” (Woolf 174). Externally, Clarissa is happy—she is surrounded by her friends and people of high social status, and she moves through the crowd with grace. However, Jacob Littleton argues that if “communal experience is the focal point of Clarissa’s universe,” then “awareness of individual isolation” is “key to her awareness of herself” (46). The awareness of her isolation, as Littleton puts it, is something that she can attempt to suppress during her party. Clarissa is also aware that she is judged for her desire to throw parties by the very people she invites to them. Despite “how superficial, how fragmentary” these conjectures are, they make her question her existence: “what [does] it mean to her, this thing called life?” (Woolf 122). Her gestures of affection, expressed through her performance as hostess, lack a sense of direction; her social gatherings
are “an offering” to “combine, to create; but to whom?” (Woolf 122). She understands that her parties may simply be “an offering for the sake of offering” but they are still “her gift” because “nothing else had she of the slightest importance” (Woolf 122). As an individual, Clarissa finds herself to be rather ordinary. Her main obligations are to be a mother and a politician’s wife. Both are roles with which she struggles, leading her to tap into affectations so as to conceal her complicated feelings that may not be socially permissible. For example, as she contemplates her relationship with Richard, she admits to lacking “something central” in their marriage: the feelings of attraction that are “a sudden revelation, a tinge like a blush” like “an inner meaning almost expressed” (Woolf 31-32). However, she does apply these more passionate feelings to Sally Seton, a friend from her past, with whom she shared a kiss, which Clarissa remembers as “the most exquisite moment of her whole life” (Woolf 35). Clarissa distinguishes between her romantic notions for men and women; she recalls the “purity, the integrity of her feeling for Sally” which was “not like one’s feeling for a man,” as evidenced in her more equivocal feelings for her husband (Woolf 34). In the present day, however, Clarissa has difficulty recalling the intensity she felt with Sally as a young woman, especially after years of being married to Richard. Clarissa’s relationships are often so strained that her recollection of Sally provides insight into a more romantic version of Woolf’s protagonist who perhaps, for a brief, passionate moment, did not feel quite so isolated. Therefore, she must contend with the fact that
her purest feelings of love were for Sally, although their relationship would have had to remain private, which would undoubtedly breed more isolation.

Furthermore, Clarissa’s isolation can also be traced to her rejection of religion. During one of her internal dialogues, she thinks about how “not for a moment did she believe in God” (Woolf 29). Her frustration with religious faith is evident in her feelings about Miss Kilman, her daughter’s teacher. Clarissa resents Miss Kilman for not only being deeply religious but also for including Elizabeth in her activities, like Communion and prayer. As a result, Clarissa refuses to attach herself to concepts that are often inclusive and bonding experiences: “Love and religion! How detestable, how detestable they are!” (Woolf 126). Clarissa believes neither religious people like Miss Kilman nor romantics like Peter Walsh, who is “always in love,” are able to “[have] the ghost of an idea of solving” anything about life (Woolf 121, 127). What others deem frivolous, like fancy parties, Clarissa deems her only contribution to her family and social circle. In contrast, what others deem to be of paramount importance—like love and religion—Clarissa understands as distractions that are “the cruelest things in the world” (Woolf 126). Therein lies a major discrepancy that further creates Clarissa’s isolation from those around her. Internally, then, she is aware that she is performing for her guests, her family, and even at times herself, so that she may receive moments of adoration, however fleeting they may be.

Like Clarissa, George deals with a public and a private self. George’s public self is most explicitly presented
in his role as a professor versus his private identity as a middle-aged homosexual male. George’s sexuality and the consequential social disapproval essentially force George to maintain privacy. Moreover, his status as a professor creates social boundaries with his students, and “with the skill of a veteran he rapidly puts on the psychological make-up for this role he must play” (Isherwood 41). Just as Clarissa is juxtaposed with the crowd at her party in *Mrs. Dalloway*, George faces his classroom full of students and must also act as host. For example, George takes his time before speaking as he enters the classroom full of the chattering students. He stands quietly at the front of the room until finally his prolonged silence “has conquered them,” and George claims he has “triumphed” (Isherwood 61). However, George’s “triumph lasts only a moment,” and he must “break his own spell” and “cast off his mysteriousness” to begin class and become “that dime-a-dozen teacher” (Isherwood 61). Furthermore, George also views social success in terms of a triumph, as does Clarissa, but their respective public successes are similarly short-lived. With Clarissa’s parties and George’s classroom, each protagonist is acutely conscious of his or her performance. Any given day provides blocks of time in which they must be who the public wants them to be, and the narration in both novels provides almost moment-by-moment analysis of how they transform themselves in these social or professional situations.

The multifaceted identities of Clarissa and George are further constructed by the various names applied to the characters. Woolf’s protagonist goes by several names, both formal and informal, such as Clarissa, Clarissa Dalloway,
and Mrs. Dalloway. Clarissa even thinks of herself in her assorted identities as she looks at her reflection in the mirror and “[sees] the delicate pink face of a woman who was that very night to give a party; of Clarissa Dalloway; of herself” (Woolf 37). The multiplicity of Clarissa’s reflection is more than just her physical being—she even thinks of herself as “a woman,” her legal identity, and “herself” all at once. Moreover, Clarissa’s name varies with her social interactions throughout the day. For example, while walking around London, Clarissa runs into an old friend named Hugh Whitbread, who greets her by saying “Good-morning to you, Clarissa!” (Woolf 5). Soon thereafter, the narrative voice creates formality for the protagonist in these moments as she speaks to Hugh: “‘I love walking in London,’ said Mrs. Dalloway” (Woolf 6). The narrative voice reveals Hugh’s thoughts as well, and he considers her “an old friend, Clarissa Dalloway” (Woolf 6). When Clarissa contemplates her own identity, she thinks of “no more marrying, no more having of children now, but only this astonishing and rather solemn progress” (Woolf 11). At this point in her life, she is “Mrs. Dalloway; not even Clarissa anymore; this [body] being Mrs. Richard Dalloway” (Woolf 11). Within a single day, Clarissa’s identity is as fluid as the names she goes by, each seeming to have its own level of formality or informality as well as implications about her relationship with both herself and others.

In the same way, Isherwood’s protagonist goes by several different names and consequently several different identities. Significantly, George is not given a last name, which emphasizes his singular status. Also, unlike Woolf’s
protagonist first introduced formally as Mrs. Dalloway, George’s introduction is abstracted as simply “the body” or even “it” (Isherwood 9). However, just like Clarissa’s mirror image, George’s reflection presents many different versions of his character, and these various identities are equally adaptable. George looks into the mirror and sees “many faces within its face—the face of a child, the boy, the young man—all present still” (Isherwood 10). Furthermore, the narrator presents an outsider’s perspective of George through Mrs. Strunk, his neighbor who pities him: “Poor man, she thinks, living there all alone. He has a kind face” (Isherwood 32). In fact, *Mrs. Dalloway* and *A Single Man* each feature scenes in which the protagonist looks into a mirror and contemplates his or her own reflection. The respective mirror scenes echo several of Jacques Lacan’s ideas from “the mirror stage” of human development. Although Lacan’s mirror stage theory pertains to the development of young children, his description of the “identification” and the “transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image” relates to Clarissa’s and George’s multiple reflections (1124). Moreover, it is worth noting that both novels begin in the morning hours, which establishes a sense of starting anew for significant change and development in a single day. For example, upon waking, one of the first actions George performs is to look at himself in the mirror. The narrator states, “It stares and stares,” as if we are looking in on a child pondering his own reflection (Isherwood 11). He begins his day contemplating what his own image means at that particular time, since
his own image—and own identity—is no longer in relation to living, breathing Jim. Furthermore, for all of Clarissa’s musings about growing older, she wakes up in the morning and greets a typical day with childlike vulnerability and awe: “What a lark! What a plunge!” (Woolf 3). Although she ruminates how it is “dangerous to live even one day,” at the very next moment, during a social interaction, she stands “beside Hugh [Whitbread]” feeling “schoolgirlish” and “skimpy” (Woolf 8, 6). Clarissa, too, feels like she is many things at once: she is a woman who realizes the risks present in everyday life, who thrives on the revelry and distractions of throwing parties, but moments later reverts back to feeling like a self-conscious, much younger version of herself. She becomes “oddly conscious” (Woolf 6) of her behavior and outer appearance around others. Isherwood’s George and Woolf’s Clarissa demonstrate childlike behaviors; they are clearly trying to figure out who they are in relation to the world around them.

Additionally, a significant part of the “the mirror stage” is when the child will perform a “series of gestures” in “play” to comprehend the “relation between the movements assumed in the image and the reflected environment” including the “child’s own body and the persons and things around [him or her]” (Lacan 1123). Both Isherwood’s and Woolf’s protagonists perform actions that represent their own version of the “play” that Lacan addresses: George’s daily routine and Clarissa’s social agenda, all of which bring about perceptions and impressions of those around them. Though each protagonist participates in scenarios
that could potentially succeed in achieving understanding and connections, George and Clarissa largely experience an “ambiguous relation” to “the world of his [or her] own making” (Lacan 1124). There is no cohesive, assuring sense of self for either character; their reflections bring about more uncertainty. Lacan’s “mirror stage” also employs the German phrases “Innenwelt” and “Umwelt,” which translate to “inner world” and “outer world,” respectively, to explore the attempt of “establish[ing] a relation between the organism and its reality” (1125). I would argue that Isherwood’s *A Single Man* and Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* operate on similar principles with their protagonists. Clarissa and George are continually negotiating their inner world with their outer world, hence their inability to fully connect with their own image in the mirror scenes presented in each novel. Both protagonists see numerous versions of themselves in their reflection; George sees himself in different ages, and Clarissa sees herself in different roles through her changing names. The “discordance with [his or her] own reality” (Lacan 1124) thus is evident in George’s and Clarissa’s inability to maintain a steady identity. Therefore, the mirror scenes in each novel explicitly present the “fragmented body image” (Lacan 1126) of the protagonists.

As a consequence of their internal conflicts, Woolf’s and Isherwood’s protagonists experience isolation from those around them. For example, Clarissa describes herself as “[slicing] like a knife through everything” while having the “perpetual sense” of “being out, out far to sea and alone” (Woolf 8). Even though Clarissa describes the
way she goes through life in aggressive terms—like “a knife”—she still feels the isolation and stillness of being out at sea. The imagery of the “knife” and the “sea” is telling of Clarissa’s inner tension and outer behavior; she is someone who is internally dark but outwardly serene. Additionally, other characters describe Clarissa’s disconnection. Peter Walsh, a friend of Clarissa’s, describes her as having a “coldness” and “woodenness” about her that creates an overall “impenetrability” (Woolf 60). Few people feel close to Clarissa, and her description of her own detachment confirms the descriptions provided by those around her. Notably, her own family does not feel particularly close to her. Clarissa admits that even her own daughter, Elizabeth, seems to most admire her teacher Miss Killman, whom Clarissa mocks as a “poor embittered unfortunate creature” (Woolf 12). Moreover, like Clarissa, George experiences separation. For instance, George describes his home, which he previously shared with Jim, “as good as being [their] own island” (Isherwood 20). Their sexuality largely separates them from their community, which is highlighted by their house that is only accessible by crossing a bridge. Now that he lives in the house alone, George thinks about how Jim would see him now if the dead could visit the living. George describes himself from the outside looking in as a “figure who sits solitary at a table in the narrow room,” going about his day “humbly and dully, a prisoner for life” in the house (Isherwood 15). George has difficulty connecting, and the more he stays in the house, the more he is reminded that he is a “prisoner” to his grief.
Despite the isolation both characters experience, Clarissa and George have moments of social connection. For Clarissa, her connection to others is mostly evident in her private thoughts. She believes she is part of “the trees at home; part of the house” and “part of the people she had never met” (Woolf 9). However, the connection she feels is still flawed as she describes herself as only being “laid out like a mist between the people she knew best” who comprise the “branches as she had seen the trees lift the mist” (Woolf 9). Her connections are separated like branches on a tree, and “her life, herself” are spread “ever so far” (Woolf 9). Her connections are described as occurring mostly with objects, like trees and her home, rather than her family and friends. Moreover, for George, his most profound connection is one that he now mourns. No matter what, George realizes “what is left out of the picture is Jim” (Isherwood 115). He remembers moments of their unspoken bond when they were together. For example, George and Jim could be “absorbed in their books yet so completely aware of each other’s presence” (Isherwood 115). Another connection for George contains greater risk—he establishes a bond with one of his students, Kenny. George “finds himself almost continuously aware of Kenny’s presence in the room” but is quick to mention that it “doesn’t mean that he regards Kenny as an ally” (Isherwood 60). Additionally, he is careful to balance moments of connection with caution. Even though George “suspects Kenny of understanding the innermost meaning of life—of being, in fact, some sort of genius,” he quickly decides that perhaps Kenny is just “misleadingly charming
and silly” (Isherwood 60). Still, Kenny allows George to free himself from the constraints of his grief and public performance in a moment of connection as they swim in the ocean late at night. Despite the risky situation, George maintains caution and uses the opportunity for personal reflection. He uses the night swim to “[wash] away thought, speech, mood, desire, whole selves, [and] entire lifetimes” in order to become “cleaner [and] freer” (Isherwood 163). Although he is bonding with Kenny, he is also bonding with the ocean, allowing the swim to function as a cleansing experience. While Clarissa uses sea imagery to express feelings of loneliness, George uses the ocean to obtain a sense of purity. Although nothing entirely physical occurs between Kenny and George, the night swim is a crucial moment for George as it allows him to reconnect with himself and his own existence.

Furthermore, human connection is established even more toward the conclusion of *A Single Man*. The narrative voice leaves George, informing the reader of a new outside perspective: “here we have this body known as George’s body, asleep on this bed” (Isherwood 183). The image of sleeping George is juxtaposed with the image of “rock pools” located “in a lava reef under the cliffs” nearby (Isherwood 183). The narrator establishes connections between the pools and the characters by stating that “each pool is separate and different, and you can, if you are fanciful, give them names such as George” (Isherwood 183). Just as Clarissa describes her web of connections as branches on a tree, George is connected to the people in his life
through the tide pools. The narrator believes that the “variety of creatures” can “coexist” because “they have to,” and “the rocks of the pool hold their world together” (Isherwood 184). Despite the grief and loneliness George experiences, he is still a part of the world and is universally connected to other human beings. The literal ocean soon becomes what the narrator describes as “that other ocean” of “consciousness,” containing George and everything “past, present, and future” (Isherwood 184). The tide pool imagery allows George, a seemingly lonely and ordinary man, to become an essential part of the universe by the end of the novel.

The endings of Woolf’s and Isherwood’s novels are ambiguous and reflect timelessness and possibility. Moreover, both novels end by finally shifting from the inner thoughts of Clarissa and George to outside perspectives. By the end of Clarissa’s day, she is finally hosting her party. Peter Walsh, who previously describes his detachment in the novel, considers Clarissa from a distance in a brief, final moment of the novel. He asks himself what fills him with both “terror” and “ecstasy,” and he soon realizes that “it is Clarissa . . . for there she was” (Woolf 194). The novel ends not with Clarissa’s internal thoughts, but Peter’s—a secondary character. At the end of this particular day, the narration fades away from Clarissa, symbolizing that life goes on no matter how she feels about it; her party is still happening, and she will still feel strangely detached and attempt to fill the void in her life through social events and largely superficial relationships. In the final scene, she goes about her party not realizing how people feel about her,
and it is possible that she will continue to live without deep connections. The novel ends with Peter Walsh’s thoughts about Clarissa rather than the frequent musing she has about herself, illustrating that Clarissa is largely defined by the perspectives of the company she keeps and has little control over the world around her. Her isolation is further exposed in the beginning and ending events: *Mrs. Dalloway* begins with the immediacy of Clarissa on the street and ends with the immediacy of her walking into a room. Clarissa is continually depicted as an isolated individual standing out against the backdrop of many. Additionally, *A Single Man* creates a similar cyclical sense. The novel begins with George in the slow process of waking up and ends with George going to sleep. The narrator then asks readers “to suppose this, merely” that “there is no time at all” left for George as he lies on the bed (Isherwood 186). George’s ending is ambiguous but maintains a sense of timelessness and possibility through hypothetical language such as “suppose” and “perhaps” (Isherwood 186). Significantly, the novel’s conclusion comes directly after George’s evening of reconnection. Like Clarissa’s abrupt final moments presented through the eyes of Peter, an outsider, George’s final moments are given by an outside voice that labors over the internal workings of his body as he goes to sleep. Therefore, the conclusion of each novel takes the control of narrative perspective from the protagonists and the final moments are given to a voice other than their own. *Mrs. Dalloway* and *A Single Man* are novels that are clearly invested in the deep inner workings of the mind to illustrate the anxieties
of daily life and human experience. However, Clarissa’s and George’s voices lose center stage, indicating that life goes on as they dissolve into the larger human experience in varying levels of connection and alienation.

Ultimately, no matter what exactly happens to George as he goes to sleep, he has obtained a sense of inner peace after this one seemingly ordinary day in his life. George drifts into sleep with a somewhat redeemed sense of human connection after he spends a large portion of the day mourning the loss of Jim. Although he will more than likely continue to grieve over Jim, the remarkable instances during this particular day—like George’s late night swim—seem to suggest the beginning of a positive change within George. After a day of internal struggle, both his body and his mind are able to rest. However, at the end of Mrs. Dalloway, Clarissa steps into the room of the party she has spent the entire day planning—a day filled with inner thoughts which reveal the discrepancy between how she truly feels about people and how she behaves around them. At the end of the novel, she may be in a room full of people, but Clarissa is still alone. The last images of Clarissa that the novel provides are seen through the perceptions and judgments of her party guests. Woolf avoids depicting Clarissa after the party, after all the guests have gone home and she is alone again. Her obligations are over, and her role as hostess is now irrelevant. Clarissa is just as alone in a room of people as George is alone in his bedroom as he falls asleep. Although she has exceptionally similar musings
about her own existence, multiple identities, and imperfect connections, Clarissa in Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* is not given the same gradual ending and message of greater human connection that George achieves by the end of Isherwood’s *A Single Man*. The novels, although published forty years apart with ostensibly different protagonists, both depict the complex inner turmoil as well as flickering moments of triumph within a single day of the human experience.


A Multifarious Approach to Understanding Rhetorical Fragmentation in Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*

*William S. Tucker*
*Concordia University*
*Irvine, California*

A primary challenge for authors aiming to persuade readers into conforming to a particular mode of thought is the process of subtly winning the empathy of the reader without appearing to be purposely trying to achieve that goal. Once the reader is aware of being manipulated, empathy can often be replaced by doubt and skepticism. Subterfuge is not required for achieving empathy; however, it is necessary for the author to employ a form of rhetoric that emerges organically in the text. The implementation of this notion is clearly evident in Vladimir Nabokov’s controversial novel, *Lolita*. Lauded as one of the greatest metafictional wordsmiths, Nabokov uses rhetoric
as a way to mitigate his seemingly brash disregard for the social taboos encompassed in the work’s pedophilic subject matter. Scholars such as Wayne Booth note that in order to better promote his rhetoric, Nabokov removes himself from the text by surrendering textual authority to Humbert Humbert: an unreliable narrator who attempts to defend his pedophilic endeavors by persuading the reader into empathizing with him. By giving Humbert free reign over the epistolary text, Nabokov is able to ensure that there is a narrative level in between him and his rhetoric. The level is important in preventing Nabokov’s rhetorical strategy from appearing to be too obvious. The aim of this essay will be to take the authorial separation a step further by arguing for the existence of another, more unconventional manifestation of Nabokov’s rhetoric that further disguises Nabokov’s process of persuasion.

The epistolary novel is conventionally accepted to be a creation of the narrator, thereby providing the character with absolute authority over the text. While this concept applies to most epistolary novels, *Lolita* proves to be an anomaly. Although the text is supposed to serve as a manifestation of Humbert’s unadulterated discourse, his work is subverted by the influence of various textual (in-text) publications. The different types of publications represented within *Lolita* are exceptionally wide-ranging: books, newspapers, magazines, comics, play scripts, roadmaps, letters, and manuals. Their omnipresence creates a linguistic power struggle for autonomy and authority in the narrative. This struggle ultimately enhances Nabokov’s rhetoric
because by obscuring the source of persuasion, the conflict
distracts the reader from the fact that the reader is being
influenced. In order to fully comprehend the significance
and rhetorical power of the textual publications in the novel,
this essay will adopt multiple literary perspectives. By
demonstrating the powerful use of the in-text publication
as a literary tool, the importance in the novel of rhetorical
fragmentation—the dissemination of authorial, rhetorical
discourse into different literary voices—will be revealed.

Vindictive Voices: A Bakhtinian Discourse Analysis

Mikhail Bakhtin posited theories regarding the
diverse relationships between various voices within a
text. Bakhtin argues for the unfinalizability of the Self:
the complete Self can never be fully realized because it
is constantly evolving and being influenced (Problems
Dostoevsky 53). He acknowledges that polyphony, the
simultaneous existence of multiple voices in relationship
to the unfinalizability of the Self, plays a major role in the
development of the individual identity (17). The occurrence
of polyphony within a linguistic code or literary work
fosters heteroglossia: “…the base condition governing the
operation of meaning in an utterance” (“Discourse in the
Novel” 580). Furthermore, the utterance is a result of the
hybridity and dialogic nature of language, and “to make an
utterance” is defined as to “…appropriate the words of others
and populate them with one’s own intention” (582). The
manifestation of different voices within a single work can
both enhance and hinder meaning.
When different voices are opposed to one another, the voices will compete to try to usurp power over one another. In *The Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin defines the relationship between heteroglossia and literary authority: “It serves two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions: the direct intentions of the character…and the refracted intentions of the author” (324). The often conflicting interaction among voices is known as the *carnivalesque*. The interaction is often a challenge against any monologic hegemony exerted on the text. Bakhtin argues that the authoritative discourse “demands our unconditional allegiance,” but he also acknowledges the role of internally persuasive discourse in subverting the authoritative discourse. Internally persuasive discourse recognizes the necessity of dialogue, as well as the impossibility of any word ever having a permanent meaning (345).

The presence of in-text publications throughout *Lolita* creates voices that distort the meaning intended by Humbert. The cohabitation of opposing voices and the authorial fragmentation of Humbert’s influence over the text signify that the epistolary novel is composed entirely out of hybrid utterances. Consequently, textual publications become manifestations of internally persuasive discourse that challenges Humbert’s literary hegemony and shape the novel’s rhetoric in the process.

The emergence of the opposing forms of discourse becomes evident during the first road trip taken by Humbert
and his underage love-interest Dolores. During this trip, Humbert realizes Dolores’ infatuation with billboards—an infatuation that comes to control Humbert’s life. He notes, “She it was to whom ads were dedicated: the ideal consumer, the subject and object of every foul poster” (Nabokov 148). The opposing voices in the posters not only influence literary characters, they also influence the reader. Humbert’s remark echoes the insecurities of a speaker using a would-be authoritative discourse. Intertextual manifestations are geared towards the “ideal consumer,” or in this case, the ideal reader. Such manifestations allow for Dolores to remain independent of Humbert’s influence and for the reader to embrace a narrative that is free from an authoritative discourse.

Humbert’s discourse is dialogic and susceptible to hybrid utterances. For example, a narrative clash ensues after the literary work produced by Humbert is assaulted by his wife, Charlotte Haze. When Charlotte breaks into Humbert’s chest and raids his letters and diary, she is shocked to find out about his obsession over her daughter. As a result of the shock, Haze vehemently attacks Humbert’s literary voice. She berates Humbert and, at the same time, defends her own voice when saying, “I ignore the particular…I cannot ignore the general…I have a small but distinct voice” (91). The fallout caused by a marginalized voice challenging the authoritative discourse results in narrative dissonance. After Haze dies from being hit by a car, Humbert goes through a variety of narrative modes: “He staggered a bit, that he did;
but he opened his mouth only to impart such information or issue such directions as were strictly necessary…the sun was still blinding red when he was put to bed…for all I know…” (98). Humbert proves he is self-aware of his multiple narrative points-of-view when he later admits, “Of course, such announcements made in the first person may sound ridiculous” (104). Humbert wants to transcend the role of narrator to become author, but these quotes expose the instability of Humbert’s voice and thereby demonstrate the chaos caused by competing voices.

Other characters benefit from the juxtaposition caused by rhetorical fragmentation. For example, Dolores is so manipulative in the text that she is able to pit Humbert’s discourse against the textual publications for her own gain. In the text Dolores is able to escape Humbert by running off with Humbert’s doppelganger, Clare Quilty, a somewhat successful playwright whose actions against Humbert are also attempts at subverting Humbert’s authoritative discourse. It is fitting that Quilty is a playwright because he is able to use his command of linguistics to take over Humbert’s narrative. Quilty steals Dolores just as his play steals meaning and importance from Humbert’s text.

Quilty’s form of textual discourse, *The Enchanted Hunter*, makes its first appearance as a school production that captures the interest of Dolores. The play then begins to manifest itself throughout the text, slowly influencing Humbert’s internally persuasive discourse. For example, one of the inns where Humbert and Dolores stay is called
The Enchanted Hunter. On another occasion Humbert sees a painting in a hotel depicting the opening scene of the play. Such allusions are significant because by forcing Humbert to acknowledge their existence within his own narrative, the opposing voices demonstrate how even a conventionally authoritative discourse can be weakened and subverted by competing forms of dialogue.

The existence of other literary voices within the text weakens Humbert’s voice and causes him to break the fourth wall in order to plead with the reader to acknowledge his voice as being the sole form of discourse. He begs, “Imagine me; I shall not exist if you do not imagine me” (129). The concurrent existence of Humbert’s pedophilically motivated discourse and the orderly, pragmatic discourse of the textual publication creates a carnivalesque reaction in the novel as a whole. Due to this carnivalesque nature, the issue of authorship arises.

The only way to resolve the dissonance created by heteroglossia is to acknowledge that the authoritative discourse, if it does exist, is constantly being subverted dialogically. Unification of the text results from a stalemate between pedophilic and textual discourse, and accordingly neither are able to dominate within the text. More importantly from a rhetorical aspect, the competing voices distract the reader from any potential manifestation of polemic rhetoric that may be imposed upon the reader. Nabokov’s ideology is disguised by dividing his rhetoric into separate voices that dialogically engage the reader. Dialogic
rhetoric affects the reader more strongly as it creates the façade that any rhetorical revelation fostered by the reader is the reader’s own doing, as opposed to being the product of Nabokov’s subtle puppeteering.

**Worthless, Wordless Words: Rhetorical Deconstruction**

While Humbert’s voice may be subverted and marginalized, he is still conventionally understood as the author of the epistolary narrative. Additionally, through Humbert’s writing, Dolores is conventionally objectified as a passive entity. Her discourse is present in the text only at Humbert’s discretion. Therefore, Dolores’s literary existence is contingent on how Humbert consciously chooses to manipulate and present her through his writing. However, Dolores also proves she is able to infiltrate and manipulate Humbert’s discourse, thereby allowing Dolores to become the true narrator of the epistolary narrative. The power shift deconstructs the presence of a hegemonic, polemic voice within the novel while forcing the reader to possess a level of “methodological quizzicality” toward the language expressed. Allowing a work to be susceptible to deconstruction can actually benefit the author’s rhetoric by forcing the reader to invest more time than usual in the text in order to reconstruct meaning.

Dolores’s conventional objectification as a commodity to Humbert in his solipsistic narrative diminishes her literary sovereignty and discourse. At the beginning of the epistolary narrative, Humbert defends his portrayal of Dolores: “Did she have a precursor? She did, indeed she
did. In point of fact, there might have been no Lolita at all had I not loved, one summer, a certain initial girl-child” (9). Humbert fails to view her as an autonomous being. Instead, Humbert sees her in relation to Annabel Leigh: his original nymphet.

This association influences how Humbert treats Dolores in his writing. He removes her from her past and constructs her into an objectified entity. She is no longer Dolores; she is now “Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul…She was Dolly at school. She was Dolores on the dotted line. But in my arms she was always Lolita” (9). Lolita is dependent on Humbert’s authoritative portrayal of her in the text. She is born and cultivated through Humbert’s writing. He further states, “What I had madly possessed as not she, but my own creation…having no consciousness—indeed, no life of her own” (62). Humbert’s adoption of Dolores after Charlotte’s death would thus be seen as Humbert becoming Lolita’s literal patriarch to complement his role as her literary patriarch.

Nevertheless, Lolita proves time and again that she is not Lolita. She is Dolores Haze. An insurrection occurs within the text as Dolores frees herself from Humbert’s objectification by infiltrating the source of Humbert’s power: his discourse. Dolores is so manipulative in the text that Humbert’s actions are as much hers as they are his own. For example, Dolores uses textual publications to dictate the movement for both of them on their road trips as Humbert claims, “We had dug out our tour books and maps. She had
traced our route with immense zest” (208). Also, Humbert subconsciously expresses Dolores’ manipulation of him early on in the text when he claims, “You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style” (9). Humbert believes that his role in the murder of Quilty is the main influence on his prose.

However, Dolores is just as much to blame for the playwright’s death. After years of isolating herself from Humbert, Dolores one day reveals her whereabouts in a letter. She lets herself be found in order to manipulate Humbert into providing her and her new husband with money. During a heated confrontation, the now visibly distraught Humbert demands to know the name of Dolores’s other pedophilic lover. After some hesitation Dolores “…softly, confidentially, arching her thin eyebrows and puckering her parched lips, … emitted, a little mockingly, somewhat fastidiously, not untenderly, in a kind of muted whistle, the name that the astute reader had guessed long ago” (271). She demonstrates her proficiency at influencing Humbert’s actions through the employment of all three major facets that govern rhetoric: ethos, logos, and pathos. She knew she was sentencing Quilty to death when she revealed his name to Humbert, and thus Dolores serves as the influential precursor to Humbert’s “murderous prose style.”

Dolores exhibits her literary autonomy by circumventing the literary bondage that Humbert and the teachers at Beardsley School for Girls attempted to impose on her. Headmistress Pratt described the school’s ideology
thusly, “We are not so much concerned…with having our students become bookworms…We are more interested in communication than in composition…rather than plunge into musty old books” (177). The school attempts to silence her textual influence on Humbert, but she is able to liberate herself from such dialogic paralysis. Ironically, Humbert’s attempt to silence her through the school actually allows her to achieve literary freedom. It is at this school that Dolores first meets the playwright, Quilty. His play becomes so influential that it bleeds into Humbert’s discourse, signifying Dolores’s liberation from his authoritative voice.

It bears mentioning that because he is the fictional editor of the epistolary narrative, Ray Jr. is therefore conventionally viewed as having significant literary power over the text. He alone decides how the final product of the narrative is related to the reader. However, Dolores proves that she can subvert the editor’s power as well. During the editing process, Ray admits that “…a few tenacious details…still subsisted in his text as signposts and tombstones” (3). These “tenacious details” are the result of the literary dissonance resulting from Dolores’s attempts to destabilize Humbert’s narrative. Ray cannot completely remove these manifestations without disrupting the meaning of the text. He goes on to state that “…her name is too closely interwound with the inmost fiber of the book to allow one to alter it” (4). Dolores cannot be removed from the text because she is the text. The battle for rhetorical supremacy is waged between the competing voices of Humbert and Dolores, causing
Ray to note that “[the text] is a tempest in a test tube” (5). However, Dolores proves to possess untamable discourse that takes over the narrative. She may not be the literary precursor to Humbert’s work, but her voice overwhelms and manipulates any of Humbert’s attempts to break away into his own free discourse.

Dolores’s influence over Humbert’s discourse through the textual publication, in addition to the editor’s role in its construction, effectively cripples Humbert’s work to the extent of making Humbert voiceless at times. By demonstrating that there is a simultaneous coexistence of Dolores and Humbert’s dialogue in the narrative, the text is no longer reliable. The unreliability present in the text means that any meaning conveyed is not absolute, and thus the narrative is contaminated by a hybrid fusion of discourse with rhetoric open to interpretation by the reader.\footnote{11}

Sex, Script, and Self-Realization: Jungian Psychoanalysis Related to Rhetoric

Book III of Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* focuses on the relationship of writing style with rhetoric. Notably, Aristotle asserts the metaphor is a psychological tool that enhances rhetoric by allowing fresh and different ideas to be more graspable by enabling visualization in the reader.\footnote{12} When used properly, the metaphor can be paramount to the employment of discursive rhetoric. The textual publication not only subverts Humbert’s authority but also comes to metaphorically signify the culmination of his very existence. Humbert is a pristine example of Carl Jung’s
theory regarding the analytic, psychological process of the individual unconscious towards self-realization (7). Humbert’s process of individuation requires him to go through a series of psychological stages—persona, ego, anima, shadow, self, transcendence—on his way towards garnering textual autonomy. He encounters various manifestations of the textual publication serving as a metaphor for each level of his consciousness towards self-realization.

The first stage in the process of total self-realization is the individual’s recognition of the persona: a pseudo-form of the Self resulting from the individual compromising the personal view of one’s Self with the social expectations that the community imposes on the individual (591). Humbert’s true pedophilic nature is consciously hidden by Humbert away from the societies he inhabits. In order to properly conceal his identity, he often rejects his true nature and repeatedly attempts to rationalize his character. For example, Humbert tries to manipulate his persona so that it is perceived by others as respectable and intelligent: “My studies were meticulous and intense…I discussed Soviet movies with expatriates. I sat with uranists in the Deux Magots. I published tortuous essays in obscure journals” (Nabokov 16). Humbert wishes to appear to be refined and acculturated so as to better conceal any pedophilic tendencies that may be visible to others around him. He manipulates publications—“tortuous essays in obscure journals”—into tools used to shape his identity.
Humbert also exemplifies his persona through the written medium. Throughout the novel he conveys a sense of self-awareness towards the fact that he is writing as a patient in a psychiatric hospital. He often has to craft his words in a way that is agreeable to the asylum staff members who read his work. In one instance Humbert writes, “…if you can still stand my style (I am writing under observation), the sun of my infancy had set…” (10). He is incapable of writing truthfully for fear of being punished by his captors and must therefore engage in his persona even when writing. Society’s perception of Humbert is dependent on how he manipulates his persona through the use of texts.

Humbert embraces his ego\textsuperscript{14} as well in the text. While his writing at times exemplifies his persona, the textual publication also serves as a manifestation of his true being. At the beginning of the work, Humbert demonstrates an awareness of his murderous, pedophilic nature when he attempts to persuade the reader into looking past his ego. Humbert pleads, “Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, exhibit number one is what the seraphs, the misinformed, simple, noble-winged seraphs, envied. Look at this tangle of thorns” (9). The juxtaposition between Humbert’s persona and ego—his “tangle of thorns”—is presented accordingly in his writing.

Furthermore, this tension can have drastic consequences on the novel when the persona and ego noticeably clash. For example, the textual publication is also used as a point of convergence for Humbert’s persona and ego. Charlotte, in wholeheartedly accepting Humbert’s
persona, at one point provides him with a love letter. Charlotte acknowledges the power of text in her letter: “Now, my dearest…you have read this; now you know… if after reading my ‘confession’ you decided…to take advantage of my letter…you would be a criminal” (67). Her message conveys how the textual publication can be “take[n] advantage of” and used as a weapon. Charlotte also demonstrates her acceptance of Humbert’s persona: “I know how reserved you are, how ‘British.’ Your old-world reticence, your sense of decorum may be shocked by the boldness of an American girl!” (68). The letter defends the idea that Charlotte is completely unaware of Humbert’s pedophilic ego because she has accepted his English scholar persona.

However, while the textual publication can strengthen Humbert’s persona, it can also weaken it. The journal entries Humbert stores in his trunk, referred by him as his “locked up love letters,” eventually reveal his true character to Charlotte (92). When Charlotte reads Humbert’s most protected secrets, she addresses his ego by stating, “You’re a monster. You’re a detestable, abominable, criminal fraud” (96). Humbert further empowers the textual publication by linking it to Charlotte’s death when he later notes, “…that journal…blinded Charlotte in her dash to the mailbox…to her fate” (103). The textual publication both enhances and reduces his identity.

Another way the textual publication plays a significant role in shaping Humbert’s existence is through
the publication’s relationship with his anima: Dolores. She serves as a manifestation of the female consciousness in Humbert’s writing (Jung 524). Dolores is treated by Humbert as more of a muse than a physical entity. In an instance of awareness towards the audience of his work, Humbert reaffirms this textual objectification by claiming, “The reader knows what importance I attached to having a bevy of page girls” (Nabokov 190). The phrase “page girls” expresses Humbert’s desire to objectify women through the textual medium. Consequently, his anima is therefore also present in the text. The conflict between Humbert’s masculine voice and his anima forces him to acknowledge the finiteness of his own existence, as illustrated in his plea, “Oh, my Lolita, I have only words to play with!” (32).

The in-text publication also gives Quilty, Humbert’s shadow, a major role within *Lolita*. Quilty, also being a writer with pedophilic urges, is the perfect example of a shadow because Humbert bitterly hates Quilty despite sharing similar characteristics with him. Through his play, Quilty is able to challenge Humbert’s authority in the novel. Humbert describes the play: “…I did not bother to read the complete text of *The Enchanted Hunters*…it seemed to be a pretty dismal kind of fancy work” (200-201). Despite his criticism of the play, *The Enchanted Hunters* continues to usurp Humbert’s authority throughout the text. The love triangle between Dolores, Humbert, and Quilty is a parody of the love conflict between the group of hunters and Dolly Dell in *The Enchanted Hunters*. The in-text publication
allows Humbert’s shadow to be able to challenge Humbert’s authority.

The psychological relationship between Humbert and the textual publication ultimately reveals how Humbert’s existence is contingent on texts; it is only through these publications that he is able to experience self-realization. Through his diary entries, Humbert is able to fuse the different voices into a cohesive discourse that exemplifies his fully realized Self. Additionally, the textual publications afford Humbert transcendence. If the diary entries represent Humbert’s Self, then the entries as a published work within *Lolita* allow Humbert to exceed the confines of his Self. Publishing the diary entries allows Humbert to experience having a readership, affording him the opportunity to have his ideas be embraced by others. This transcendence serves as a metaphor for the reader’s embrace of Nabokov’s rhetoric. While Humbert reaches individuation by unifying the different voices within him, Nabokov’s rhetorical individuation is the result of the reader and author unifying the authoritative fragmentation created within the text in order for Nabokov’s rhetoric to be better accepted by the reader.

**Might of the Pen: A Rhetorical Feminist Analysis**

The novel poses gender implications as well. The competing voices within *Lolita* are also subjected to the patriarchal hegemony dominant in Humbert’s phallocentric narrative. The phallic symbol of Humbert’s writing pen
becomes a surrogate for his masculine authority. In adopting a gynocritic approach, rhetorical fragmentation also results from the conflict created between the female voices encompassed under the textual publication attempting to usurp the dominance of Humbert’s masculine discourse.

As a writer, Humbert is able to penetrate and manipulate the textual publication with his pen. If the pen is phallic, then the textual publication is a yonic symbol as it is on the receiving end and impregnated with the rhetoric of the pen. The textual publication is the womb to the textual knowledge nurtured within, and accordingly the physical binding of the textual publication would be the legs protecting the textual publication from penetration. Humbert can open the legs and penetrate the womb of his own diary entries, but his inability to impregnate the textual publications around him forces him to succumb to a state of literary flaccidness. Humbert possesses the phallic symbol of male generative power, but his incapability in using it prevents him from becoming the “ultimate man” (Lacan 1151).

While Humbert is able to gratify his masculine desire for dominance by penetrating the legs of women, he cannot penetrate the legs protecting the literary womb of rhetoric he so desperately desires. For example, Humbert describes one of his first sexual explorations of Dolores: “My hand swept over her agile giggling legs, and the book like a sleigh left my lap…Mrs. Haze strolled by and said, ‘Just slap her if she interferes with your scholarly meditations’”
(Nabokov 55). As is depicted in this scene wherein the book falls off his lap, Humbert is able to feel Dolores’ legs at the expense of rejecting the knowledge of the textual publication. The publication’s ability to remain autonomous and un-penetrated subverts Humbert’s masculine authority.

Another incident of Humbert’s literary flaccidness occurs during his failed seduction of Dolores in a hotel room. Humbert describes the incident: “…Lolita would be haphazardly preparing her homework, sucking a pencil… in an easy chair with both legs over its arm, I would shed all pedagogic restraint…forget all my masculine pride—and literally crawl on my knees to your chair…’Pulease, leave me alone, will you,’ you would say…And I would get up from the floor…I am only a brute” (192-193). Humbert not only rejects the womb of knowledge by “shed[ing] all pedagogic restraint” but also sexually objectifies knowledge through his perception of Dolores “sucking a pencil.” He relates the pencil to a phallus and attempts to penetrate Dolores in order to compensate for his inability to penetrate the textual publication. But just as a closed book can stop the penetration of a pen, Dolores prevents herself from being penetrated by closing her legs. Her defiance allows her to possess her own rhetorical phallus.

Dolores’ rejection of Humbert and Quilty not only embodies her feminine sovereignty but also represents the textual publication remaining pure from the writers’ penetration. For example, Humbert loses Dolores due to his capitulation to the texts: “…I signed the very symbolic receipt, thus surrendering my Lolita to all those apes”
Similarly, Quilty loses Dolores due to his inability to penetrate and impregnate her with his rhetoric. He describes losing Dolores: “I am a playwright. I have written tragedies, comedies, fantasies… I know all the ropes…I made a mistake [with Dolores]… I am practically impotent” (298). Despite Humbert and Quilty’s literary power in the novel, they are unable to keep Dolores due to their literary flaccidness caused by their inability to rhetorically penetrate the in-text publications she uses as safeguards against them.

**Conclusion**

Rhetorical fragmentation, while unconventional, can be a powerful technique in persuading the reader into accepting the author’s ideology. While opposing voices can at times harm the clarity of a work’s rhetoric, they can also entice the reader if done properly. Nabokov’s subtle, yet powerful manipulation of in-text publications allows characters such as Dolores and Quilty to defy what is conventionally recognized as the unchallenged polemic of Humbert’s narration. Nabokov may surrender his text to Humbert, but rhetorical fragmentation is Nabokov’s way of assuring the reader to invest faith in a text governed by unreliable narration. An element of subjectivity will always exist in rhetorical fragmentation, yet this is not necessarily a bad thing.

Bakhtin argues that subjective consciousness is inevitable in literature and must therefore be embraced: “consciousness finds itself inevitably facing the necessity of having to choose a language. With each literary-
verbal performance, consciousness must actively orient itself amidst heteroglossia, it must move in and occupy a position for itself within…a language” (295). Heteroglossia within the text is the product of society’s “socio-linguistic consciousness” (360). In building off this theory, Joe Bray argues in *The Epistolary Novel: Representations of Consciousness* that instead of attempting to resolve the narrative dissonance, the competing voices should be treasured because “[t]he loss of epic authority produces, in the hands of the great novelists, a dazzlingly open-ended variety of languages and voices” (4).

The voices fostered within a text when authority is fragmented are instrumental toward alleviating skepticism and garnering a higher level of intellectual investment from the reader where a single voice falls short. Despite the lack of narrative harmony caused by rhetorical fragmentation, the textual publications that Nabokov speaks through affect the reader more than a single authoritative voice ever could. As Roland Barthes would argue, “[t]o give a text an author is to impose a limit on that text” (Barthes 876). Rhetorical fragmentation is infringing, messy, and rebellious—a surefire device for preventing an author’s rhetoric from being perceived as prosaic banality to the savvy, self-aware reader of the twenty-first century.
Notes

1 Italicized for emphasis.
2 Italicized to emphasize third-person perspective.
3 Italicized to emphasize first-person perspective.
4 A satisfying experience for any reader, one that makes the reader much more receptive to embracing the author’s rhetoric.
5 A concept that is akin to Bakhtin’s theory of hidden dialogicality: marginalized subtle discourse can leave deep traces that influence the meaning of the present and visible words of the primary voice (Problems Dostoevsky 197).
6 A term coined by Kenneth Burke in his work A Grammar of Motives to signify the dubiety a reader feels when conscious of being subjected to persuasion (441). Methodological quizzicality can influence the reader into ceasing focus on rhetoric’s practical agenda, allowing the reader better to appreciate the resourcefulness of language.
7 If the author sets up the text properly, the meaning reconstructed by the reader will retain elements of the author’s intended rhetoric. This notion functions similarly to hidden dialogicality incorporated into dialogic rhetoric.
8 “not untenderly.”
9 “fastidiously.”
10 “mockingly.”
11 Recall the concept of hidden dialogicality.
12 William Jordan elaborates on this by suggesting that the metaphor possesses “semantic and structural characteristics
which affect reader and listener” (237).

13The process by which differentiated components of the psyche become integrated into a stable whole (Jung 1).

14The second stage towards individuation, which is the individual’s self-perceived identity (Jung 540).

15The shadow encompasses components of the individual’s personality that are not consciously recognized as being part of the ego. The shadow must be integrated into the ego in order for individuation to be successful (Jung 205).

16Recall how the textual publication was shown earlier to be wielded by Dolores in order to promote her own discourse.

17Diane Miller laid out a similar notion; she argues that a rereading of traditional discourse is necessary in order to tease out “structures of gender that relegate some meanings to marginal status while elevating others to high visibility and positions of importance” (368).


Destroy or Be Destroyed: Contending with Toxic Social Structures in Naguib Mahfouz’s *Midaq Alley*

*Stephanie Hasenfus  
The United States Military Academy  
West Point, New York*

**B**arely a year after overthrowing Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, activists returned to Tahrir Square to oust the recently elected Mohamed Morsi. President Morsi’s failure to address revolutionary demands and his decree placing him above judicial review ultimately undermined the fledgling democracy. Furthermore, the Muslim Brotherhood’s maneuvering to implement Shari’a law
into the nation’s constitution endangered feminist calls for equality, allowing for discriminatory, potentially extremist interpretations of vital legislations concerning marriage and employment. Increasingly, in Cairo and Egypt’s other overpopulated urban regions, a sharp rise in sexual assaults and prostitution demonstrates the desperate circumstances young women face as they struggle to overcome cultural oppression through political and social reconstruction. Their fight to uproot endemic misogyny leads to vehement battles against sexual objectification and, for entirely too many women, tragic self-degradation. Political reform in Egypt—whether considering the Revolution of 2011 (aimed at democratization) or the Revolution of 1919 (aimed at toppling British colonizers)—has done woefully little to change the circumstances of the oppressed. Thus, if Egyptians hope to transcend the nation’s distressing pattern of superficial reform, they must actively resist Egypt’s counterproductive legacy of inequitable practices that have resulted in lingering inequality and gender-based oppression.

Such resistance is not new, of course. In fact, prominent Egyptian literature over the last century has canonized anguished cries of injustice echoed by today’s revolutionaries. Perhaps most notably, Naguib Mahfouz’s *Midaq Alley* (1947) speaks specifically to the plight of the oppressed, critically examining a mid-twentieth century Egyptian society fallen
victim to moral, economic, and social stagnation. The residents of Mahfouz’s alley find their lives entangled and horribly routine—their existence reduced to little more than sin, vice, and rumor. Throughout the novel, Mahfouz emphasizes dark, claustrophobic, and segregated settings in an effort to reflect widespread feelings of oppression perpetuated by the alley’s apparent rejection of modern values and social norms. Modernity does not easily break through the walls of the alley, resulting in an inherent lack of progress in vital areas like education, technology, and gender equality. Accordingly, its residents suffer from apathetic modes of thinking which eventually turn toxic. The absence of diversity in thought leads to unchallenged beliefs that result in recurring cycles of violence and corruption. These unchallenged traditions and beliefs, in turn, lead to a kind of self-perpetuated ignorance. In essence, the alley’s isolation from the outside world fosters a culture of pernicious and misogynistic traditions, ideas, and oppressive gender roles from which its ostensible protagonist, Hamida, fights to escape. As Mahfouz illustrates, the Egyptian social structure of the 1940s obstructed social progress for the lower class while simultaneously thwarting equality for women. Those who try to escape the alley ultimately fail, thus reinforcing the destructively cyclic nature of mid-twentieth century Egyptian society.

Cyclic things, by nature, cannot be escaped. The
physical geography of the alley illustrates this point. The “alley lives in near isolation,” writes Mahfouz, “its insubstantiality increased by the alley’s enclosure within three walls, like a trap” (1). This physical manifestation of entrapment mirrors the nation’s social entrapment. The residents of Midaq Alley find themselves shackled to gender roles, bound by the pre-constructed identities of a noxious society. For instance, the majority of the alley’s men, from Boss Kersha to Salim Elwan to Radwan el-Husseini, subscribe to the “traditions of the time and the place,” deal with women “as though they were small children,” and seem to believe that this treatment best serves “the woman’s own happiness” (49). Egyptian patriarchal privilege and firmly entrenched gender roles foster this perspective, resulting in a deleterious and prejudicial social environment that reduces women to little more than children. The alley’s isolation from the outside world fosters these corrosive traditions by reducing the potential for new ideas that might upset the status quo; in so many ways, Midaq Alley is a dead end, an inert pool of long-established and outdated beliefs. Both the geography and the traditions of the alley invoke a stifling, claustrophobic atmosphere.

It is, therefore, little wonder that Midaq’s young want to escape. Hamida certainly rejects the alley’s pervasive confinement. Her independent personality and unbridled ambition motivate her desire to escape. Unfortunately, few viable prospects beyond marriage
exist for her. As an uneducated woman with no technical skills, Hamida must depend upon others for support. She acknowledges her situation, noting “if she’d acquired a skill, she could wait and then marry as she wished, or not marry at all” (Mahfouz 133). For Hamida, remaining single inevitably means letting old age steal her beauty while she remains stranded in the alley. She recognizes that her beauty is her only advantage, her only source of power. Her beauty allows her to seduce men, and thereby, to control them. In fact, because her “love of control was secondary to her love of combat,” she possesses a fierce, almost masculine quality, interesting primarily because it derives from her feminine beauty (40). Accordingly, she focuses her efforts on seducing the alley’s social “elite,” thereby shirking problematic candidates for marriage in hopes of landing even better prospects. In this forward-thinking fashion, she transforms marriage into a tactical endeavor from which she hopes to maximize potential luxury in her life.

Abbas el-Helw and Salim Elwan each offer hope of a new life far away from the alley. Their appeal to Hamida stems from the economic opportunities they afford. She recognizes economic advantage is power and consequently gravitates towards men of relatively substantial monetary value. Accordingly, El-Helw’s ambitions to work for the British Army and expand his own business pique Hamida’s interest. For his part, Elwan, despite his age, affords even greater appeal due
to his well-established reputation as the wealthy owner of a prosperous warehouse. Indeed, perceived wealth proves an alluring bartering tool for those seeking to win Hamida’s hand, as “[m]oney will always tame and domesticate a soul such as hers” (80). Thus, it seems that her self-commodification, which leads her to a warehouse owner (who stores and trades in commodity goods) and a pimp (who sells her as a commodity), evolves quite naturally from extant Egyptian marital traditions that mirror the structure of a trade economy.

Hamida’s understanding of her own intrinsic bargaining power affords her the chance to secure access to a world beyond the alley. El-Helw also recognizes a similar need for bargaining power. When he notes that Hamida “despises the alley,” it dawns on him that, without a business and a house that she can “choose on [her] own,” he risks losing his potential influence over her (82). Subsequently, he agrees to work for the hated British only “for the sake of that house”—an unnerving decision considering that he contracts himself out to a foreign army without any higher calling of patriotism or duty (82). In this sense, he, like Hamida, sells himself to the British; his employment—in the form of physical labor—fundamentally boils down to the same self-commodification tactics employed by his erstwhile fiancée.

Based on the notion of such an economic-trade model, it follows that an appropriate transaction must occur for the relationship to succeed. One party must
buy what the other sells or otherwise engage in an appropriate trade; this said, because both parties sell themselves, no such transaction could occur. In this context—unlike El Helw—Elwan fits the bill perfectly. As a warehouse owner who specializes in the keeping and trading of goods, his wealth serves him well as an enticement for Hamida to marry him. So, when Elwan, the “possessor of wealth enough to fill the ocean,” expresses a desire to claim Hamida, she abandons her commitment to El-Helw with “extraordinary swiftness” (130-1). Unfortunately for her, however, Elwan’s failing health renders the deal null and void, returning Hamida to the free market as human merchandise and thwarting her hope for a richer future.

Despite their forsaken circumstances, both Hamida and El-Helw seem to believe they possess a certain amount of agency, or the ability to control their own fates. In reality, however, their autonomy is sorely limited. Their future depends largely on a pre-existing social structure rather than illusory personal choices. Interpellation, a term coined by Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser, details how a “societal system reproduces itself” and explains how individuals possess less autonomy than they might think (Parker 224). In this process of societal reproduction, groups and individuals unconsciously fall victim to “dominant social assumptions” (224). For Mahfouz, interpellation ultimately causes Midaq’s residents to act against their own self-interest by leading them to false
consciousness, or the false belief that their actions will manifest in a beneficial manner. Take, for instance, El-Helw’s enlistment in the British Army. He seeks financial security only as a means of securing his future with Hamida. However, this enlistment not only leads to his death at the hands of British soldiers but also props up Britain’s pervasive presence in Egypt. His choice contributes both to his own oppression and to the sustainment of a cancerous foreign social structure that oppresses the residents of Midaq Alley. In this manner, Althusser’s theory of interpellation suggests that the Egyptian self-commodification not only fails to serve the nation’s best interests but also perpetuates the very social structures they so desperately seek to escape.

This oppressive social structure, made up of widely disparate hierarchies, depends, of course, upon a number of artificially constructed cultural assumptions. These hierarchies include: the superiority of wealth over poverty, men over women, and British over Egyptian. Contemporary Marxist theory and post-structuralist feminist theory explain well this hierarchical structure. Althusser’s theory of interpellation meshes with Judith Butler’s theory of performative gender. For her part, Butler argues that “the various acts of gender create the idea of ‘gender’” and the “tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain” a “cultural fiction” (331). Performing gender, then, suggests an act, rather than an inherent essence. Consequently, performing the role of woman,
in many ways, means performing a subordinate role. In a sense, it means unwittingly consenting to oppression. When culture naturalizes heterosexuality and gender roles, individuals fall victim to a false consciousness, a “way of thinking that is so interpellated into oppressive ideologies that it leads people to act against their own interest” (Parker 228).

Perhaps more important to Mahfouz, post-structuralist feminist theory asserts gender as non-essentialist; stated another way, outside the current societal construct, “there are many different ways to enact gender, many different ways to be female or male, not one essentialist way” (158). Accordingly, Simone de Beauvoir and Gayle Rubin reject the idea that anatomy determines masculinity or femininity. Beauvoir contends that “[o]ne is not born, but rather becomes, woman” (157). Hamida, as an impoverished Egyptian woman, dwells at the very bottom of her society’s hierarchy. Indeed, though she possesses masculine traits, she performs femininity for multiple suitors, a pimp, and British soldiers. In her initial encounter with El-Helw, for instance, she takes “refuge in silence,” her fierce wit never revealing itself (Mahfouz 100). She also feels “angry and anxious” for failing “to make herself up” upon her initial encounter with the pimp (202). These public behaviors, and their accompanying anxieties, run counter to the opinions and attitudes she expresses at home, where she criticizes the men from her window and lets “her hair go till it gets
nits in it” (25-6). She consciously preps and primps herself for social interactions, at least initially, hiding her combative nature in favor of a more feminine presentation. Her performance of femininity reinforces dominant social assumptions while ensuring her continual oppression. To her mind, however, fulfilling feminine expectations is an indispensable component of her strategy to escape the alley.

Hamida’s escape strategy hangs on finding a husband to rescue her from the “abyss” of the alley (36)—a notion which suggests an infernal pit and triggers conceptions of a Dante-esque hell. Along these lines, Mahfouz’s conscious characterization of the alley suggests that its residents live in hell—a land of the dead—and thus have metaphorically died. Hell further embodies punishment, suffering, imprisonment, and hate; so, too, does the alley. To live in these conditions means living without hope of happiness. Moreover, such a defeated and subdued existence signifies the death of the human spirit, a concept that recurs throughout the novel and validates the abyss as a thematic symbol. For instance, the narrator refers to the alley as “the pit of hardship and poverty,” offering yet another allusion to this notion of an infernal pit (32). Consider also the role of Zeita, a nocturnal alley dweller who revels in darkness and filth. He likens the alley to hell through his work, robbing graves and mutilating people for profit. His work is the devil’s bidding and he thrives as Midaq’s only resident truly
fond of his occupation. Zeita’s contentedness in this “world of shadows” indicates that the alley suits the wicked and the immoral (35). In this sense, the alley symbolically serves as Cairo’s inescapable hell.

Hamida’s plan to escape takes an interesting twist when, instead of finding a husband, she flees Midaq Alley to work for a pimp. Though she gains fine clothing and silk bed sheets, she loses control over her life and subjects herself to male control. Ibrahim, her pimp, renames her “Titi,” teaching her exotic dances and dressing her in fine new clothes. The process of ornamentation increases the sense that she is merely something to be looked at, and her re-naming marks a distinct loss of personal identity. More to the point, Hamida’s transformation results in extreme objectification and orientalization, as her new name “is one of those ancient Egyptian names that the British and Americans find so enchanting and can get their awkward tongues around” (203). In this manner, Ibrahim privileges his Western clients, not Hamida, as he works tirelessly to make her more exotic to suit their expectations. The exotic nature of her name and her dancing transforms Titi into a thoroughly commodified Egyptian seductress, a modern Cleopatra whom Western men will desire. For this reason—and this reason only—Ibrahim seduces her for her looks, recognizing that he can sell her virginity for a small fortune. He thus reduces her to her monetary worth, which lasts only so long as she maintains both her
virginity and her beauty.

In the end, however, men steal her beauty—and thus, her last remnant of power. An enraged Abbas el-Helw, her former beau, flings a beer bottle at her face as she dances for the British soldiers, causing “copious blood [to] burst from her nose and chin” (271). With her beautiful face mutilated by the glass bottle, her value plummets. As Hamida recovers, her mother, a match-maker by trade, reaches out to her, in hopes of “garnering some of the fruit from that cornucopia” (275). Thus, her mother, in spite of Hamida’s diminished beauty, still seeks to make a profitable transaction within the corrupt walls of the alley. In this manner, the alley pulls Hamida back in. Thus, Hamida’s desperate desire to flee her abyss results tragically in her own downfall.

By commodifying herself in a fight to escape the confines of patriarchal privilege, she sentences herself to a metaphorical death marked by the end of Hamida and the beginning of Titi. Men have defiled her beauty, the very foundation of her identity and her only source of power. After Abbas ruins her face, Ibrahim no longer seems interested in exploiting and marketing her to Western men. The Western men in the bar kill Abbas following his stint, “pouncing on him like savage animals” (271). The ruin of Abbas and Hamida indicates that no possible escape exists for the condemned prisoners of the alley. They must either accept the reality into which they were born or risk
destruction in their attempt to break free. Unfortunately, no safe place exists for the young men and women of the alley. Both inside and outside, they must contend with oppressive traditions and attitudes.

This complaint concerning the development and perpetuation of an oppressive social structure echoes beyond Mahfouz’s 1940s novel to resonate in modern Egyptian publications. Take, for instance, Henry Barakat’s 1959 film, *The Nightingale’s Prayer*; Taha Hussein’s autobiography *The Days*; Sakina Fuad’s more recent though no less haunting short story, “Pharaoh Is Drowning Again”; and Mona Eltahawy’s 2012 *Foreign Policy* essay, “Why Do They Hate Us?” In fact, the complaint endures to the present and will continue to endure until political reform is “accompanied by revolutions of thought—social, sexual, and cultural revolutions that topple the Mubaraks in our minds as well as our bedrooms” (Eltahawy 4). Only when Egyptians can achieve empowerment without relying upon the destructive constraints of self-commodification will they reclaim their voice and recover their identity—scars and all.
Works Cited


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Tom Mack, Ph.D.
G. L. Toole Professor of English
Carolina Trustee Professor
Department of English
University of South Carolina Aiken
471 University Parkway
Aiken, SC 29801
Endorsing Professors

Dr. Sean D. Cleveland
Department of English and Philosophy
United States Military Academy
West Point, New York

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