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Amanda Riter  
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Editor’s Note

Aelurus (or Ailuros if you’re being traditional) is Greek for cat. It’s a fitting name when you’re tied to the Weber State Wildcats, but Ailuros’ story is more engaging than that.

You see, Ailuros was a Greek cat-goddess, and given that the Greeks weren’t known for their love of felines, she wasn’t the most popular of deities. Despite that, she was fierce when crossed. When Ailuros’ followers called upon her, she would transform from a lowly cat into a mighty lion.

Aelurus follows after that spirit. This journal is meant for those graduate students who are striving to find their footing in this scholarly world, those who have been pushed down by the process one too many times and are seeking a place to stand. Aelurus is devoted to helping our fellow graduate students find their voice and know that they are worthy of being heard.

Amanda Riter
Editor-in-Chief
When the renowned geographer Yi-Fu Tuan declared that “Americans have a sense of space, not of place” (24), he depicted not only what he felt was America’s social downfall, but also unknowingly defined a fault of the nation’s education system. Through time, America’s education system has removed localistic knowledge from its curriculums in hopes of promoting an array of careers and callings. What remains is a rootless generation. It is this generation that has largely led us unconsciously to the environmental crisis that plights the earth today. A paradigm shift must be provided to the next generation so that we may all find new ways of organizing, renewing, and adapting to our changing world. Through place-based pedagogy, the renewal of America’s sense of place can be initiated, and a generation with an increased environmental consciousness may be
produced. Before the potential reform created by place-based pedagogy may be conceptualized, it is essential for the negative aspects of the Americans’ sense of space to be revealed. Alongside this, the process by which the education system has aided in creating America’s sense of space needs to be understood, while the educationally detrimental results for students to have insufficient senses of place must be reckoned with.

Grasping the distinction between place and space is essential when considering the destructive properties of what Yi-Fu Tuan speculates is the American sense of space. The literary scholar, Cheryll Glotfelty provides an accessible definition of place in an interview: “[a] place is a relationship of land and stories about land. A place is a dynamic concept. Places are always being made” (269). This verbal definition echoes Yi-Fu Tuan’s aged formulation that “[p]lace is a center of meaning constructed by experience” (152). Both of these ideas leave place to be composed of human experiences, memories, desires, and identities. It is through emotional identification and investment that humans are simultaneously constructing both place and space. While place is concrete, space is what is left: empty and dead. Space is defined by the absence of any level of human presence (Barker 396). Lacking a relationship with place leaves only space to connect with. Or, to neglect any relation to place leaves a person transcendentally homeless and deracinated. As Americans, our culture has become essentially rootless, detached from many aspects of our local existence and left without a sense of place (Agnew 316, Engelhardt 88).

To have a sense of place, one must hold an experientially-based intimacy with their local history, community, and natural processes. A sense of place cultivates a rooted connection to one’s local environment and community, yielding an inherent inspiration for environmental and community-based stewardship. The authenticity of this concept is revealed when the opposite is contemplated. Barry Lopez, the esteemed environmental writer states
that “the more superficial a society’s knowledge of the real dimension of the land it occupies, the more vulnerable the land is to exploitation, manipulation for short-term gain” (62). To recultivate a sense of place is to reverse the malign viewpoint that capitulates environmental degradation. While Lopez unwittingly depicts the positive aspects of having a sense of place, he neglects to articulate how Americans have come to their superficial knowledge of local place and how they have drawn conclusions similar to Tuan’s.

Blossoming as a society from years of rapid modernization and industrialization, America has no longer become reliant on local sources in obtaining the necessary use-values for consumerism and survival. Instead, it is accomplished through indirect interactions with the global market. Through our advancements in technology, transportation, and society, we have become a people who are more connected to consumerism than to the natural order. This is exemplified in the knowledge base of America’s youth. Studies reveal that the average child living in America can identify over 1,300 corporate logos, but only ten plants and animals native to their local region (McGinnis 7). This not only illustrates the accurateness of Yi-Fu Tuan’s speculations, but also portrays how far we have become removed from our local natural environments. The nature of these identified corporate logos does not tell a story of place, rather space. These corporate organizations are not recognized because they are rooted in the local area; instead each logo represents a Goliath, which sells a product native to no land. Our consumerist connection to these corporations defines our sense of space. And yet, it is not only these corporations and America’s consumer-based society that has been the catalyst to the Americans’ neglect of their local environments and communities. Our school systems have also guided us away from our seemingly inherent sense of place.

Inspired by the inevitable consequences of the sense of space, various scholars have turned to the education system seeking the root of Americans’ rootlessness. On average, a student will spend over a thousand hours each year in school (Sanger 1), and it is during this time that our society expects students to prepare for either the job
market or college. Yet, it is generally overlooked that the system’s function is also to provide students the proper conventions of thinking, speaking, and relating to their surrounding environment. John Dewey, the American philosopher, psychologist, and educational reformist, provides context to this concept in his novel, *Democracy and Education*. While writing during a time of modernization, Dewey witnessed a vast growth of complexity occurring within American society. From this he philosophized that as American society grew more complex, school systems would become progressively depended upon to instill in our youth the traits necessary to function within society (25). While society has grown even more complex in the ninety years since Dewey’s words were published, its fast progression has created an unbalanced system, which is more economically goal-driven than concerned with creating functioning citizens.

Education systems compelled to produce a generation that is increasingly susceptible to centralized economic institutions have led their students away from a sense of place by replacing authentic means of clarifying “the nature and organization of personnel and knowledge” with explanations leaning more toward the needs of modern society (Meyer 66). Through this replacement of knowledge, Americans have had their loyalty realigned from human associations and locality to impersonal organizations that govern modern society. Thus, a shift from a sense of place to a sense of space. This shift is defined by Gregory Smith, professor at Lewis and Clark University and author of *Education and the Environment* as a non-place based modern/industrial worldview (15). According to Smith, this worldview is invested in students through various features of the education system.

In accordance with Gregory Smith’s research on the topic and several other scholars who have followed his lead, there are three congruent facets defining the American education system’s role in establishing a non-place based modern/industrial worldview. Promulgating individualism, the continuing use of domineering
languages rooted in industrialization/modernization, and utilizing regimentally standardized curriculums with impersonal universal textbooks act as a trifecta in the degradation of a student’s sense of place. Through articulating the process of each of these facet’s roles in the creation of a sense of space, the need for educational reform will be illustrated. Without dismissing the positive roles American teachers play in their students’ development, the faults regarding the American education system will be revealed, starting at the roots of democracy.

It is through individualism that American democracy prospers (Hoover 48). However, when this is stressed to the extent in which the American education system takes it, students become disconnected from the larger picture. Fostering detachment, schools induct students at an early age into the modern world, not by proper use of intellectual curriculums, but through “habituating them to forms of social organization and behavior characteristics of contemporary institutions” (Smith 52). Through the controlled environment of the school system, students are formed into America’s workforce; while students within the institution become a part of the modern market society, there is a continuation of the disregard towards place. Absorbed by the underlying messages propagating the necessary independence and individualism supposedly required to succeed in our modern market society, a student is no longer reminded of their connection to others and their environment (Sanger 2). Driven by the dogmatic “American Dream,” opportunities to investigate a sense of place through experience-based curriculums are deserted; the language used within the education system prolongs the non-place based modern/industrial worldview.

A system’s language is one of the largest perpetuating forces behind the continuation of the system’s mindset. Language and metaphor affect not only thought but also a person’s construction of knowledge and perception of experience (Lakoff & Johnson 455). The language associated with the modern/industrial worldview is instilled in America’s youth through the school systems, thus
guaranteeing the prolongation of a non-place mindset. C.A. Bowers provides context to this concept, stating that language provides grounds for “important schemata or conceptual frameworks that guide the thought process of the individual” (27). While schools provide the very language that maintains what Gregory Smith defines as the non-place based modern/industrial worldview, they neglect to provide a language that helps students be connected to, or responsible for, their communities and local land. Through language, the American education system has eliminated the potential for a student to cultivate a sense of place, while at the same time instilling in them a sense of space through the continual use of a language associated with the roots that robbed them of their sense of place originally.

Through the reconstruction of our language we can reverse this: “[n]ew languages have the power to create a new reality” (Lakoff & Johnson 145). Through entering the conceptual systems in which existence is based, a language not rooted in the non-place based modern/industrial worldview, will alter the conceptual system and the perceptions and actions that the system gives rise to. Yet, even if the language used could conform to the creation of a sense of place, the physicality of the regimented functioning of the system represses a large majority of opportunities to include the local community and land into curriculums.

Within the walls of a school, the outside world is cut-off, studied at a distance by virtue of textbooks and films. Students are given no opportunity to construct knowledge of and create connections with the world through direct experiences. A multitude of educational philosophers and developmental psychologists have come to the same conclusion, articulating the dominant role of social experience and community in a child’s development (Dewey, Smagorinsky, Vygotsky). The term, “social experience”, consists of interactions on a social, personal, and emotional level with a community and surrounding environment. This mirrors the concept of what creates a place.
While social experiences are an ideal contribution to a student’s development, regimented curriculums do not allow for it. The deeply rooted accountability movement, which was until recently manifested in the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and now lingers in the shadows of the Common Core State Standards, neglects and prevents consciousness of place among teachers, students, and citizens (Gruenewald 642). On top of this, standardized testing moderates any importance given to local knowledge by placing value on general, national, abstract examples and facts; furthermore, both are established by the standardized curriculums and textbooks, which are produced by the authorities enforcing the marginalizing control over the school systems. Lacking locality in textbooks and curriculums, a student’s educational experience becomes rootless and without context. If the education system creates value for a concept that is foreign to a student’s local place, it disconnects them from their community and local environment (Sanger 2). The end result is that a student’s educational experience functions as a reversal of any elements that cultivate a strong and healthy sense of place. Fortunately, through the implementation of place-based pedagogy there is a potential renewal of Americans’ sense of place through the American education system.

The aim of place-based pedagogy is ambitious: nothing short of an educational revolution of re-immersion with the ecological and cultural aspects of both human and nonhuman existence, or what the theologian Thomas Berry defines as a “re-enchantment” with the world (21). In attempt to recreate a student’s sense of place, there have been a multitude of approaches that collectively define place-based pedagogy. In accordance to the many educational philosophers and developmental psychologists including John Dewey, Lev Vygotsky, Peter Smagorinsky, who all agree with the dominant role
that social experience and community plays in a child’s development, the environmentalist David Orr states that “[a]ll education is environmental education” (90). Therefore, place-based pedagogical theorists believe that a student’s education should provide meaning and value to places and embed them into the processes of those places. This can be accomplished through experience-based educational curriculums.

The most obvious approach is to liberate students from the confines of the classroom to experience the most approachable, natural processes whenever possible. Providing a window to view the surrounding environment in an educational manner leaves students feeling connected to their surroundings and inspired to act as environmental and community-based stewards. Through an experiential education of place, students are not only granted knowledge of place, but are also shown that place has worth, that their experience in that place is meaningful, and on top of it all, that knowledge of local place holds value. These attributes are all important in producing a generation who no longer hold the American sense of space.

Skeptical of place-based pedagogical approaches, many pedagogical theorists critique the experiential application, questioning the applicability to intercity education systems. While the city environment might muddle the natural processes of the land, it is still imperative to develop a student’s sense of place. Inspired by the experiential methods utilized by Duncan-Andrade and Yang in Oakland, California in their “Doc Ur Bloc” (DYB) urban sociology class, David Stovall and Daniel Morales-Doyle attempted to bolster their students’ connections to their local community and environment through a similar approach (283). The final product was a class of students in the intercity of Chicago with a grander sense of place.

By means of a critical media inquiry project, teachers David Stovall and Daniel Morales-Doyle, and the Chicago Southwest Side community members, immersed their students into depicting the
worldview of their community. Through a two-and-a-half-hour long class that was offered once a week, students were provided a way to counterbalance the common misperception of Chicago youth by telling their own stories and connections to their neighborhood. Stovall and Morales-Doyle adjusted their students’ readings to accompany their inquiries into the roles of their community. Through both the literature used within the classroom and having their students inquire about the quality of their community, microphone and video camera in hand, Stovall and Morales-Doyle both agreed that while their “Chicago version of the DYB was rife with challenges, the successes are an important factor in creating relevant learning environments for young people” (297). This relevancy provides a means of cultivating a student’s sense of place. While they were teaching within the intercity of Chicago, Stovall and Morales-Doyle were able to succeed in applying what can be considered place-based pedagogy.

As a key example of how the experiential aspects of place-based pedagogy can succeed within intercity environments, Stovall and Morales-Doyle’s methods can also be exemplified in others ways. Through their adjustments in the class’ readings, they were able to make the text personal, providing direct context to their experience-based curriculum. Matt Sanger supplies a framework to this idea in his essay, “Sense of Place and Education,” where he states that “[w]hen educators use themes as organizers and integrators of subject matter, they give the experiential world additional meaning by creating an educational experience that reflects the real world of the students and its inherently connected quality” (3). Allocating localized knowledge through personal textbooks and themes allows for approachable context in lessons. Two major subject matters that lend themselves to be easily reformed in this way are history/geography and literature. In both subjects, place-based pedagogical reformers have assimilated locality into their lesson plans, yielding methods that cultivate a student’s sense of place and local knowledge base.

History and geography, or the marriage of the two, natural-
history, has the potential to bestow context and relevance into a student’s educational experience. Unfortunately, this potential is lost as they are generally “taught as ready-made studies which a person studies simply because he is sent to school” (Dewey 182). While these subjects are purveyed in parcels solely to be retained without relation, they seer n vital experience from subject matter. Utilizing history to provide background to human experiences and crafting geography to articulate the story of the natural setting, natural history can carry a student’s experience into the foreground. David A. Gruenewald reveals the success he has found in teaching a class based around natural history, stating that “[n]atural history can help build a framework of place-conscious education because it is predicated on the kind of learning that schools currently make so difficult: firsthand experience with the living world outside the classroom” (637). Gruenewald’s success illustrates how the place-based pedagogical reform of the subject of history can recreate a student’s sense of place.

To do this, our education system must wean itself from merely teaching a chronological set of dates affixed to an inventory of events and rather, yearn to tell the story of history in a localized fashion. This will generate a way in which our youth can come to see themselves as a part of the story. Visualizing and valuing their part, students will become connected with their surroundings. Simply put, a place-based pedagogical approach draws on a student’s imagination to inspire them to find wonder, appreciation, and connection to their local surroundings. Through literature this very approach is utilized, encouraging students to fabricate their own sense of place.

Stories represent the meeting place of reflection and experience (the inner landscape) and the events, objects, and character of surroundings (the external landscape) (Lopez 63). Through stories, place-based pedagogy is able to depict the necessity of a relationship with both the inner and external landscape. While there are several different approaches in applying this strategy, there
is a general agreement on the power of stories to recreate a person’s sense of place (Bowers, Glofelty, Gruenewald, Oppermann, Sanger, Smith). The education system needs to prompt its students to conceptualize their existence in their local environment as not only crafted and defined by their interconnected relations to their community and surroundings, but also by stories and language. James Cahalan, a professor at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, provided his students a way of reconnecting with their homes in his class on hometown literature.

Although teaching at a university level, the concept of the course can easily be applied to a reformed English class. Within the class structure, Cahalan incorporated not only lessons on the literature that was read but also how the author’s hometown and surround places/communities were rooted in each piece of literature. While taking a more considerable amount of work than his regular lesson plans, it paid off, for he was able to reconnect students with their local surroundings and with the literature that was generally a chore to read (263). Cahalan expands on this idea when he states that his students “learned that literature wasn’t always far from their experience…[s]tudents connect hometown authors to their own home places in ways they never forget, because one never forgets one’s hometown … whether it was bad or good” (263-72). Through exemplifying these connections that blossomed from Cahalan’s alternative methods, the possibility of battling the American sense of space becomes clearer.

By providing context to selected pieces of literature, a student’s experience with the text transcends the confines of the educational system and becomes grounded in a relatable awareness coinciding with the student’s life. For there to be a place-based pedagogical reform, students must be inspired to incorporate their own personal knowledge with their own experiences. While the content of both history/geography and literature, lend themselves at ease to incorporate place-based pedagogical approaches, reformation has occurred in other subject matters.

Attempting to engage students with the mathematics inherent
in the local land, culture, and community, James Lewicki arranged a one-hundred-day trial of place-based learning with a class of twenty-five students in a Wisconsin high school. Incorporating local statistics, researching historical archives, and participating in multiple field studies in local places such as a restored wetland, a river valley, and a senior citizen community center, students were fully immersed into a mathematical place-based experience. He found that his students were fully experiencing the lessons in mathematics, alongside a growth in their personal connection with their community, and an improvement of their standardized math scores by four-letter grade levels in a single year (3). While there is no commonality in the improvement of standardized test scores as a result of place-based mathematics, other attempts have shown a correlation with a student’s improved sense of place and the methods of place-based mathematics (Showalter 2). The improvement of students’ connections to their communities through the alternative methods provides hope of all subjects to be reformed by place-based pedagogical approaches.

The humanities lend themselves to an ease of reformation to place-based pedagogy, and yet, mathematics, which is seemingly more difficult to reform, is able to also have localized lesson plans incorporated into a student’s mathematical experience. Through both experiential lessons, as well as drawing on localized contextual knowledge, place-based pedagogy bolsters a student’s sense of place. Presently, America’s education system bars place from the developing youth. Economically-preoccupied educational systems focus on producing citizens prepared for an array of careers and callings instead of fulfilling their societal role of nurturing a student’s development within their community and natural surroundings. From this, Americans are left without a sense of place: a people blindly charging into the future with environmental degradation in their wake. Yet, through place-based pedagogy, a new generation can be crafted. Through weaving the significance of place into the educational curriculums, America’s youth can cultivate their
senses of place and become a generation more united with their local surroundings, inherently inspired to practice environmental and community-based stewardship.
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Exposition: the working of the actual past + the virtual past may be illustrated by an event well known to collective history, such as the sinking of the Titanic. The disaster as it actually occurred descends into obscurity as its eyewitnesses die off, documents perish + the wreck of the ship dissolves in its Atlantic grave. Yet a virtual sinking of the Titanic, created from reworked memories, papers, hearsay, fiction – in short, belief – grows ever “truer.” (Mitchell 392)

This bit of exposition is provided by the somewhat minor character of Isaac Sachs almost a third of the way through David Mitchell’s postmodern exploration of perception and its influence on reality, the story within a story (within a story…), Cloud Atlas. Mitchell
combines six distinct narratives in an interlaced storyline, nesting each section within the others, with each section directly referencing the one preceding it while also hinting at those which lie ahead. The novel directly references this nesting technique when composer Robert Frobisher discusses the planned arrangement of his musical score *Cloud Atlas Sextet* in the “Letters from Zedelghem” section: “In the first set, each solo is interrupted by its successor: in the second, each interruption is recontinued, in order. Revolutionary or gimmicky?” (445). Either way, it is through this intertwining of *Cloud Atlas*’ six disparate narratives—otherwise told in chronological order and a narrative echo of Frobisher’s musical composition—that Mitchell illustrates how events and, more specifically, their perception, determine human reality, separate from any single event’s actuality or factuality.

By resisting traditional methods of interpretation, *Cloud Atlas* executes what post-modern scholar William Spanos calls “the mockery of the canonical literary forms of ‘official’ culture” to make its point about the relationship between perception and reality (20). By taking what might otherwise be coherent texts and cutting them up and rearranging their remains as he sees fit, Mitchell makes good use of the postmodern format to illustrate the fluidity of reality, what Spanos refers to as the “disorienting mystery, the ominous and threatening uncanniness [sic] of being that resists naming” (24). The nested format provides a vehicle to further inject doubt and allow interpretation as to what is actual reality as opposed to perceived reality within the novel. This brings into question the relationships between the various narrative segments and their characters, along with the events presented. *Cloud Atlas* clearly demonstrates the fragility of reality, which is manipulated both by perception—eyewitnesses—and time. Whether or not Sachs’ musing on actuality and virtuality is accurate becomes pivotal throughout the remainder of the novel.

*Cloud Atlas* opens with “The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing,” in which Mitchell presents the events of a tragic sea voyage
as fact—through the conceit of Ewing’s journal—while simultaneously casting doubt on their veracity when we are told of “Mr. Walker, Ocean Bay’s sole taverner, [who] is also its principal timber merchant & he brags of his years as a master shipbuilder in Liverpool. (I am now versed enough in Antipodese etiquette to let such unlikely truths lie)” (4). Here, Adam Ewing encounters a version of reality that he believes to be untrue, yet he does nothing to unmask it, but instead merely accepts it as true, despite his doubts. This example of an individual not questioning a presented version of reality sets the tone for the entire work. Mitchell then expounds on this idea during the discussion of the Maori and Moriori conflict:

The origins of the Moriori of Rekohu … remain a mystery to this day. Mr. Evans evinces the belief they are descended from Jews expelled from Spain, citing their hooked noses & sneering lips. Mr. D’arnoq’s preferred theorem, that the Moriori were once Maori whose canoes were wrecked upon these remotest of isles, is founded on similarities of tongue & mythology & thereby possesses a higher carat of logic. (11)

When confronted with two possible versions of the founding of the Moriori tribe, Ewing tries to determine the truth, but cannot, aside from acknowledging that the second theory has a more logical base. This selective acceptance of information demonstrates another method of crafting the events of the past to our liking. The abrupt ending of this section—in mid-sentence—provides the link between this storyline and the otherwise unrelated sections of the novel together and allows the reader to begin the process of interpreting the events and ideas shared between the various storylines.

Cloud Atlas picks up this truncated storyline by immediately presenting the reader with the second story arc, “Letters from Zedelghem.” In a letter to his friend Rufus Sixsmith, composer Robert Frobisher mentions finding the first half of a book titled The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing in his bedroom at the Chateau Zedelghem, a book that ends precisely where it ended in the story
segment just completed by the reader. Here, despite the assertion that he is reading a journal, Frobisher begins questioning what is real and what is not: “Something shifty about the journal’s authenticity – seems too structured for a genuine diary, and its language doesn’t ring quite true – but who would bother forging such a journal, and why?” (64). Already we see that even the central figure of this segment of *Cloud Atlas* is unsure of what is true and what is not. The apparent inability of Frobisher to distinguish between truth and fiction is odd considering the many versions of truth he presents in order to earn his lucrative position as scribe to the great composer, Vyvyan Ayrs. In justifying his own flight from England, he considers what forced his hand, writing that it is “[s]obering to think how one accursed night of baccarat can alter a man’s social standing so irrevocably” (44). This passage shows that Frobisher’s point of view has influenced how the gambling incident occurred. He attempts to alter the past with a rationalization that he is somehow blameless for his current situation. While being questioned during his interview for the position with Ayrs, Frobisher acknowledges that he “Answered truthfully, though I veiled my expulsion from Caius behind an obscure malady” (51). Here Frobisher makes another deliberate attempt to adjust history in an effort to affect a more desirable future than the one in which he finds himself. As the section moves along, Mitchell presents another breadcrumb of continuity between segments that will carry through the remainder of the novel: a curiously shaped birthmark. While writing of his affair with Ayrs’ wife, Frobisher notes, “She plays with that birthmark in the hollow of my shoulder, the one you said resembles a comet” (85). This birthmark provides ample opportunity for the reader to link the various storylines together, but as I will demonstrate, this link is tenuous at best.

As Luisa Rey, the central character in “Half-Lives: The First Luisa Rey Mystery,” reads the letters between Rufus Sixsmith and Robert Frobisher, she makes the following discovery:
It is not the unflattering light they shed on a pliable young Rufus Sixsmith that bothers Luisa but the dizzying vividness of the images of places and people that the letters have unlocked. Images so vivid she can only call them memories. The pragmatic journalist’s daughter would, and did, explain these “memories” as the work of an imagination hypersensitized by her father’s recent death, but a detail in one letter will not be dismissed. Robert Frobisher mentions a comet-shaped birthmark between his shoulder blade and collarbone.

_I just don’t believe this crap. I just don’t believe it. I don’t._ (120)

The reader is given to understand that Luisa Rey has a birthmark like Frobisher’s, but she refuses to believe anything that might be inferred from such a coincidence. Though Luisa Rey herself acknowledges the piece of information “will not be dismissed,” she still refuses to believe it. This ability to accept or ignore pieces of information as they relate to individuals is a uniquely human trait, one that shows up throughout the novel. Despite the fact that Luisa Rey comments that she has a birthmark of her own that is “undeniably shaped like a comet,” (122), we also see Luisa deny any perceived connection with Frobisher and Zedelghem, even though she established the link on her own. She denies the connection she alone created, which is perhaps the worst possible act of personal perception overwhelming reality. This is shown when, early on in the section, Luisa becomes trapped in an elevator with Rufus Sixsmith, who asks how her father, once a police officer, became a celebrated journalist. Luisa’s inner monologue is very revealing when she thinks, “You asked for it. The story is polished with each retelling” (92). By “polishing” the tale, rough edges are removed and weaknesses reduced by the perception of the person presenting history. Thus, the presenter reduces the actual history and morphs it into something else: an idealized version of events designed not by fact, but by desire. This is another instance of how reality alters
through the continued retelling of it, which Jean-Paul Sartre asserts in his novel Nausea, when the character of Roquentin states that, “everything changes when you tell about life; it’s a change no one notices: …things happen one way and we tell about them in the opposite sense” (39-40). Later, as Luisa makes her first investigative visit to the Swanekke reactor site, she encounters Isaac Sachs, an engineer who worked with Rufus Sixsmith. Here again Luisa makes a decision to alter reality:

“You must be Megan.”

*Why be contradictory?* “And you are?”

“Isaac Sachs. Engineer.”

[. . . After being identified as Luisa Rey by Fay Li]

“You’re not Sixsmith’s niece?”

“Excuse me, but I never said I was.” (105-106)

By not correcting Sachs’ incorrect belief of her identity, Luisa alters reality, this time to her professional advantage as opposed to simply playing to family pride as in the previous instance.

As her story progresses, Luisa visits with protest leader Hester Van Zandt and learns a powerful lesson about perception and reality as it applies to her investigation:

The world’s Alberto Grimaldis can fight scrutiny by burying truth in committees, dullness, and misinformation, or by intimidating the scrutinizers. They can extinguish awareness by dumbing down education, owning TV stations, paying ‘guest fees’ to leader writers, or just buying the media up. (124)

The idea that an individual’s perception can be made to change by forces outside of themselves, regardless of how much or how little time elapses between the event and the individual perceiving it, is both a powerful and disturbing one. The idea is explicit: what we see, or hear, or read, is always what we *get*, but may not be what actually *was*. When our interpretation of the world is dependent on information not directly our own, we must accept that the resulting perception of reality is not accurate.
In another opportunity to link the novel’s sections with one another, we see Luisa place an order at a rare music store for a copy of Robert Frobisher’s *Cloud Atlas Sextet* (119). She learned of Frobisher the composer through Sixsmith’s letters after his death, but *Cloud Atlas* presents another twist here: Luisa does not receive the “second” batch of letters until well after she orders the *Sextet*; there is no way in which she could have known the name of the work. Frobisher did not give it a name until near the end of the sequence of letters to Sixsmith (460). The fact that Frobisher does not specifically name his work until the second set of letters (although it is clear that he is a composer), is another attempt by Mitchell to force a reevaluation of the perception of these events. Additionally, we receive yet another unexpected twist of perception when Luisa and Joe Napier venture to Sixsmith’s yacht. As they pass by a sign reading: “CAPE YERBAS MARINA ROYALE / PROUD HOME OF THE *PROPHETESS* / BEST-PRESERVED SCHOONER IN THE WORLD!” Luisa:

... is distracted by a strange gravity that makes her pause for a moment and look at its riggings, listen to its wooden bones creaking.

“What’s wrong?” whispers Napier.

*What is wrong?* Luisa’s birthmark throbs. She grasps for the ends of this elastic moment, but they disappear into the past and the future. (430)

The reference to the *Adam Ewing* segment of the novel through the *Prophetess* links us to a reality not directly related to the current one, and thus forces us to look again at how we perceive events. With the additional inference of the birthmark, which Adam Ewing does not have, Mitchell leads us further into the consideration of actual and perceived events. The use of the phrase “elastic moment” reinforces the idea of the fluidity of time and perception, and the idea that the “ends” disappear “into the past and the future” is another method of shifting our perspective. In *Cloud Atlas*, the past and future are the beginning and ending of the novel, both adrift on a ship in more primitive times than those eras related between them. By completing
this circle of time and events, the “ends” of time disappear into one another and forces us to examine the cyclical nature of the realities of the novel.

Continuing forward through the *Cloud Atlas* timeline, “The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish” opens with the title character recounting an attack to his secretary. Instead of admitting the shameful truth – that three teenage girls mugged him – he admits to us that he “had already amplified the truth and told her my muggers were five louts with swastikas shaved onto their skulls” (145-6). Again, we see human willingness to alter a past event in order to protect a present or future, or even something so basic as ego or pride. We see reality, yet again as a malleable aspect of human perception. Cavendish cannot even go back and correct his modification of history: “You can’t go changing what you’ve already set down, not without botching things up even more” (146). Consistency is essential if humanity is to complete the presentation and acceptance of this altered past. It is important to note that even when Cavendish uses an ambiguous phrase like “You probably spotted it pages ago, dear Reader,” it is simply a clue to force the reader to look back and reconsider what was *perceived* to be reality as opposed to what is *actually* reality (175). After a night of drinking, Cavendish describes how “time’s arrow became time’s boomerang,” as his perceptions became unreliable and stretched (147). Later, after his stroke, Cavendish considers that time is now “no arrow, no boomerang, but a concertina” (354). The image of the concertina opening and closing, stretching and condensing, shows the nature of these “elastic” moments, when perception is reduced or eliminated, along with the ability to put together what is perceived. Also, Cavendish finds himself lost between his “real” world and the “virtual” one presented in “Half-Lives,” as he tries to understand his stroke: “A stroke? Two-stroker? Stroke me? Margo Roker had a stroke” (354). Here, Cavendish references a character in “Half-Lives.” However, Margo Roker did not suffer a stroke, but was instead nearly beaten to death and eventually recovered. This is
simply another example of reality flexing and realigning itself due to outside forces: in this case, Cavendish’s altered mental state.

We see more on the transitory nature of human perception further along during Cavendish’s recovery after his stroke. As Cavendish begins to regain his senses, he realizes that his memory is irreparably damaged: “How many days have I lain here? Pass. How old is Tim Cavendish? Fifty? Seventy? A hundred? How can you forget your age?” (354). This loss of even the most basic elements of his identity demonstrates the fragility of perception as it relates to reality. The ongoing struggle for Cavendish to regain himself is a monumental undertaking:

Putting Timothy Cavendish together again was a Tolstoyan editing job, even for the man who once condensed the nine-volume Story of Oral Hygiene on the Isle of Wight to a mere seven hundred pages. Memories refused to fit, or fitted but came unglued. Even months later, how would I know if some major tranche of myself remained lost? (354)

Cavendish presents us with a microcosmic example of Mitchell’s idea of perception and reality. Just as Frobisher expressed his doubts about the authenticity of Adam Ewing’s journal (64), here Timothy Cavendish shows us the doubts about himself and his own identity. If he questions what elements of himself may still be lost, how can we know if the Cavendish represented from before the stroke is true? Even if the events recalled are true, he cannot be sure that he reassembled them in either the proper order or under the proper circumstances as they actually occurred. Clearly, then, the entire Cavendish section is thrown into doubt, as the narrator himself is compromised by circumstances that force a massive “editing job” on his own history.

To make matters even more difficult in deciphering the reality of the novel, Cavendish reveals his discovery that the author of “Half-Lives” is a man who has no link to the events in the story (387). This revelation forces a complete re-examination of that portion of the novel. If “Half-Lives” is indeed a work of fiction, then
“Letters from Zedelghem” and “The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing” must also be fictional, as they exist solely in “Half-Lives.” The conclusion that the birthmark presumably shared by Frobisher and Luisa Rey must also, then, be viewed as fiction. Cavendish remarks that he also has “a birthmark, below my left armpit, but no lover ever compared it to a comet. Georgette nicknamed it Timbo’s Turd” (357). The novel does not claim the birthmark to be identical to the others, and Cavendish explicitly dispenses with the idea that his birthmark is in any way related to Frobisher and Luisa’s. Again, it is left for to us to perceive the connection between these birthmarks, even though Cavendish has just negated the first two individuals that bear it through the revelation of their fictional nature. This revelation also forces us to reevaluate the appearance of a birthmark on Sonmi-451 (198) in the following segment, since its relevance must be questioned, given the revelations of the Cavendish section and only serves to validate the idea that it is the reader that gives it its importance in the first place. It is the perception of the reader, the viewer, the outsider, that gives credence to any aspect of reality, and each reality will be necessarily different depending on the individual, situation, and presentation. We are then given another red herring designed to lead us into the next section of the novel when Cavendish comments on his train ride past Cambridge: “Cambridge outskirts are all science parks now. Ursula and I went punting below that quaint bridge, where those Biotech Space Age cuboids now sit cloning humans for shady Koreans” (168). Here, we are presented with a reference to a future, not past, event in the novel: the clone-occupied Korean society of “An Orison of Sonmi-451.” By cross-referencing the novel’s
storylines in a way differently from what has gone before, we must shift our perception once again in an attempt to make sense of what we are experiencing.

In “An Orison of Sonmi-451,” Mitchell presents a bleak future in which cloned workers called fabricants perform various undesirable tasks for humanity while being kept in a mentally oblivious state designed to keep them from questioning the system in which they serve. Sonmi-451 is one such clone who attains consciousness and is turned into a revolutionary by the system in order that an example can be made of her (347-8). During an interview with an archivist prior to her execution, Sonmi-451 defines perfectly the relationship between memory and reality: “Fabricants have no earliest memories, Archivist. One twenty-four hour cycle in Papa Song’s is indistinguishable from any other” (185). Because the fabricants’ owners control the clones’ memories, they rob them of unique experiences, leaving them with no past and with no hope for a future. That future is solely dependent on what the masters of their society grant to them and is based solely on the information provided by them. When pressed by Sonmi-451 about his role in the charade that is her trial, it is the archivist who ironically makes the most telling declaration yet about the fluidity of perception and history: “A duplicitous archivist wouldn’t be much use to future historians” (189). The young archivist never stops to consider that an archivist could be loyal to something other than the truth of an event. This is the fallacy of recorded history. Since future history is dependent solely on what is recorded in the present and on its recorder, how can we believe anything, much less know it, to be accurate? Sonmi-451 explains the contradiction that the ruling society finds itself in concerning history:

On the one hand, if historical discourse were permitted, the downstrata [lower classes and fabricants] could access a bank of human xperience [sic] that would rival, and sometimes contradict, that taught by Media. On the other hand, corpocracy funds your Ministry of Archivism, dedicated to preserving a
This is a catch-22 by any definition. History must be recorded for future use by the ruling class, but such recording becomes a record that cannot be changed when it becomes inconvenient. Or, to phrase the question more succinctly, what history should the ruling class save accurately, and what should be discarded or changed during the recording process? Timothy Cavendish has already told us: “You can’t go changing what you’ve already set down, not without botching things up even more” (146). We must take special care to ensure that that which is set down is as accurate as possible, even if it works to the detriment of the recorder in the present, or else its value in the future is reduced or eliminated altogether.

Isaac Sachs again expresses this phenomenon in a clearer and more simplistic way when he notes, “The present presses the virtual past into its own service, to lend credence to its mythologies + legitimacy to the imposition of will. Power seeks + is the right to ‘landscape’ the virtual past. (He who pays the historian calls the tune.)” (392-93). The winner of any conflict controls History. The entity that controls History controls Reality, as we see in Cavendish’s revelation concerning his own regained memories. Reality is only as solid as what it is based on. The foundation of the present is based on what has been set down as having gone before. Later in the same journal, Sachs asks “Is there a meaningful distinction between one simulacrum of smoke, mirrors + shadows – the actual past – from another such simulacrum – the actual future?” (393). Both Timothy Cavendish and Sonmi-451 have shown us that there is no difference. If a past is “virtual” but no one knows it to be false, then it is, for all intents and purposes, the “actual” past. Therefore, the present based on this past is as genuine as any other.

Paul de Man postulates in his essay, “Autobiography as Defacement,” that the idea of Sonmi-451 dictating her autobiography as a historical record comes with problems: “By making autobiography into a genre, one elevates it above the literary status of mere reportage, chronicle, or memoir and gives it a place, albeit a modest
one, among the canonical hierarchies of the major literary genres” (919). Here, de Man is saying that there is no way to separate a supposedly fact-based narrative from any other aesthetic-dependent literary genre. And, although Sonmi-451 is dictating rather than committing her story to paper, it nonetheless leaves itself open to modification for purely aesthetic purposes. Here, again, we see an example of perceptual modification, forcing the reader to question the events recounted. If history is, indeed, written by the winner, then the loser’s story must also be taken with some skepticism, as not only will it be altered by the historian, but by the participant as well. Additionally, de Man defines the difference between autobiography and fiction:

Autobiography seems to depend on actual and potentially verifiable events in a less ambivalent way than fiction does. It seems to belong to a simpler mode of referentiality, of representation, and of diegesis. It may contain lots of phantasms and dreams, but these deviations from reality remain rooted in a single subject whose identity is defined by the uncontested readability of his proper name. (920)

The idea that the major difference between a work of fiction and an autobiography is the more limited narrative style in an autobiography is disturbing, especially considering de Man’s assertion that simpler meanings are assigned or assumed to the text. Or, as he put it: “It appears, then, that the distinction between fiction and autobiography is not an either/or polarity but that it is undecidable” (921). Further, he poses the following question:

is it possible to remain, … within an undecidable situation? As anyone who has ever been caught in a revolving door or on a revolving wheel can testify, it is certainly most uncomfortable, and all the more so in this case since this whirligig is capable of infinite acceleration and is, in fact, not successive, but simultaneous. (921)

This “whirligig” of reality and uncertainty is at the heart of Cloud
Atlas. The longer we read and attempt to determine what is real and what is not, we accelerate ever faster around the idea that, as de Man says, we are simultaneously in both a real and an unreal environment. We cannot know with certainty that any of the events are real at any given time, and thus, like Schrödinger’s cat, simultaneously both alive and dead inside its sealed box, the events contained within the cover of Cloud Atlas are at once real and unreal—true and untrue—even to each other.

By the time we reach “Sloosha’s Crossin’ An’ Ev’rythin’ After,” the central and final story of Cloud Atlas, we have reached the absolute end of the timeline Mitchell has constructed for us: not in Zachry’s tale, but in his son’s recounting of it. He reveals the question that Cloud Atlas has put before us since Adam Ewing first scratched away in his journal: what can we believe and what can we discard? “Do I b’lief his yarn ‘bout the Kona an’ his fleein’ from Big I? Most yarnin’s got a bit o’ true, some yarnin’s got some true, an’ a few yarnin’s got a lot o’ true. The stuff ‘bout Meronym the Prescient was mostly true, I reck’n” (309). But even here, at the end, there is doubt, and doubt is what remains. We have already placed doubt on Meronym’s birthmark, as it must necessarily fall into the same category of unlikelihood of the other birthmarks since Cavendish’s revelation.

Again, according to Sachs:

Symmetry demands an actual + virtual future, too. We imagine how next week, next year, or 2225 will shape up — a virtual future, constructed by wishes, prophecies + daydreams. This virtual future may influence the actual future, as in a self-fulfilling prophesy, but the actual future will eclipse our virtual one as surely as tomorrow eclipses today. Like Utopia, the actual future + the actual past exist only in the hazy distance, where they are no good to anyone. (393)
Cloud Atlas presents us with a complete spectrum of possibilities about what is the actual past and what is the virtual past. The actual past is presented to be Adam Ewing’s journal, read later by Robert Frobisher and relayed to Rufus Sixsmith and then to Luisa Rey. Only in Timothy Cavendish’s story do we learn that this virtual past is merely the creation of Hilary V. Hush, and is, indeed, a complete fabrication, for we learn that “the V is for Vincent! And what a lard bucket.” (387). There remains, then, no choice but to realign our suppositions concerning reality. Further muddying the water, Cavendish references forward in time with his “prophesy” of Korean clones (168). While the existence of the “Biotech cuboids” is an indicator of the “virtual” future, the “actual” future that follows does, as Sachs suggests, eclipse the virtual one, as no one could have foreseen the outcome of the creation of cloned humans. The Utopia that all societies hope to achieve exists only as an idea, living among the virtual past and future, but becoming lost among the actual.

Clearly, then, what we see in Cloud Atlas is an interrogation of the accuracy of reality, specifically due to man’s tendency, consciously or unconsciously, to mold it to conform to his current needs or expectations. As a result, no version of reality is able to function as anything but a story which may or may not be accurate to any significant degree. This inherent limitation in any recorded event renders it almost completely useless. How can we know what has gone before us, or even after us? Mitchell asks that question and gives us the answer: we cannot. The question we must ask ourselves is the one Isaac Sachs asks: “Is there a meaningful distinction between one simulacrum of smoke, mirrors + shadows – the actual past – from another such simulacrum – the actual future?” (393). Or put more simply: “does it matter?” That answer can only be: no. Regardless of the reality in which we find ourselves, virtual or actual, it is the reality in which we find ourselves, and is thus the reality in which we must live. Fenced in by perception’s assumptions and assertions, we can only act on what we believe we know. All other action is irrelevant.
Works Cited

Alyx Steensma

Identity and Wandering of Biracial Characters in Love Medicine, In Cold Blood, and Flight

The three novels In Cold Blood by Truman Capote, Love Medicine by Louise Erdrich, and Flight by Sherman Alexie present characters of mixed race—Native American and Caucasian. While the two Native American authors have personal experience as a catalyst for their mixed race characters, Truman Capote relies on gathered evidence to depict the biracial Perry Smith: a character born of true events. Although these hybrid narratives range in their inspired origin, there are underlying similarities in the way the biracial characters are socially perceived, treated, or ignored.
by the Native American communities and dominant white culture within the respective novels. There is an accepted notion throughout the novels that in order to have a whole identity, hybrid characters must obtain a healthy balance of native and dominant cultural ideas. So as to achieve this balance, biracial characters use the act of wandering as a tool to heal their respective identities by reconciling the opposing cultures within themselves. While other scholars may have noticed the act of wandering, the importance and repercussions of such an action have not been critically analyzed. What is perpetuated as important in Native American literatures has been the theme of homecoming. Homecoming is relevant in either the character’s acceptance or denial of the notion of home in the three novels, but the journey taken, the lessons developed and learned, and the resultant growth (or diminution) in character occurs as a direct consequence of wandering. Therefore, the act of wandering must be examined at a higher level of cognition in regards to Native American literature.

Omi and Winant, in their *Racial Formation in the United States*, postulate the theory of race as a social construct. It is their research and development of Racial Formation Theory that began the deconstruction of race as a socially constructed idea rather than a natural designation in the 1960s and on. Omi and Winant’s work is the precursor to more contemporary sociologists such as Paula S. Rothenberg and Cressida Heyes who use Racial Formation Theory to further their research in ethnicity studies and Identity Politics (Heyes). Not only does their theory apply to the reality of race in the U.S., their reflection and analysis generates a bridge between racial formation in reality and the mirroring of reality in literature. Omi and Winant’s racial theory helps reveal how racial formation affects the mixed-race characters in *Love Medicine*, *In Cold Blood*, and *Flight*. A central idea that Omi and Winant discuss is the very definition of racial formation:

The meaning of race is defined and contested throughout society in both collective action and
personal practice. In the process, racial categories themselves are formed, transformed, destroyed, and re-formed. We use the term racial formation to refer to the process by which social, economic, and political forces determine the content and importance of racial categories, and by which they are in turn shaped by racial meanings. (61)

Omi and Winant explain that how the community perceives people provides the definition of race. Identity is fleshed out over time through different avenues such as the political, social, and economic thought patterns of society. Because racial formation is reflected in the way society functions, it is also mirrored in how realistic literature weaves a narrative as the author is subject to cultural norms and ideas.

These social, economic, and political forces that determine racial identity are delineated within the plot of Louise Erdrich’s *Love Medicine*. Through the multi-generational storyline of *Love Medicine*, the Chippewa community’s interrelations and outward relations to the larger dominant society are exposed for further analysis. The biracial characters in the novel are June Kashpaw—a woman that dies in the beginning of the novel by walking in the freezing snow in order to come home, Lipsha—June’s illegitimate son who was raised by his grandmother and initially does not know his mother’s identity, Marie Kashpaw—Lipsha’s grandmother and wife to Nector Kashpaw who rose from the very low social status of her birth family (the poor Lazarres), and King Kashpaw—June’s legitimate son who has anger problems. Through the interactions of these specific biracial characters, the Chippewa community, and the outside world, racial categories are formed. Karla Sanders asserts that psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva’s elements of the “Symbolic Order” includes “cultural and ethnic beliefs and identities, social roles and expectations, family dynamics and the community, and personal fears and desires” which perpetuates the idea that the social force determining racial identity is the central part to the whole indigenous community’s way of life in *Love Medicine*. 
The driving social factors of the “Symbolic Order” within *Love Medicine* are revealed in the way the Kashpaws react to June’s sudden death, as well as Marie Kashpaw’s search for subjectivity, Lulu Lamartine’s societal power through her many sons, the mixed-race characters Lipsha and King’s acceptance or rejection of Chippewa culture, and the interconnected relationships of all the characters. Each chapter focuses on different tribe members, in a non-chronological fashion, within two families and the decisions that they make which affect their society either positively or negatively. How the characters interact with each other shapes the economic and political forces within Erdrich’s novel. After familial ties and social interactions interplay to outline cultural identity, the puzzle of racial formation at the micro-level of social relations can be “transformed” and “re-formed” (Omi & Winant 61).

While the social factors hold the majority of the weight of racial formation, the economic and political are transformative focuses in the novel as well. What occupations and political positions biracial characters achieve radically changes how they are perceived and how they value themselves. The economics of the Chippewa community is explored through the depiction of Albertine’s education and part-time job, Lyman’s entrepreneurship, the destruction and displacement of Lulu’s home, the Tomahawk factory and its debacle, and even Moses Pillager’s salesmanship of cat furs. Omi and Winant describe the economic and political forces of society as the “macro-level” of social relations, thus an extension of the social force of racial formation (Omi & Winant 67). Omi and Winant affirm that “at the macro-level, race is a matter of collectivity” which is reflected in *Love Medicine* as the unity of the tribe (Omi & Winant 67). The political forces that determine the character’s racial identity, or perhaps communal identity, range from Nector Kashpaw’s actions as a tribal member and subsequent dealing with Washington and how that affects Marie’s status as his wife, Lyman’s involvement with the Bureau of Indian Affairs in order to obtain the Tomahawk factory, and the pairing of Lulu and Marie as
tribal leaders enforcing the rights of the people. Lipsha is affected by Lyman’s management position in the factory economically as well.

Reginald Dyck claims that “with traditional work mostly destroyed, characters inevitably must participate in alienating forms of modern labor and the class conflicts they entail” thus the “socioeconomic status impinges on the character’s senses of identity.” For the hybrid characters of Love Medicine, the destruction of traditional work means further separation from their Native American identity. Dyck discusses the character June in her struggle to assimilate in the dominant culture’s workforce as a cosmetologist, Lipsha’s attempt to balance his traditional work as a healer and worker in the factory, and Lyman’s complete absorption of superficial values as he runs the modern factory.

Although June and Lipsha face economic forces shaping their identities, Marie Kashpaw’s struggle for acceptance in the community is the most developed story of economic striving within the novel. First, Marie wants to identify with the whiteness of the Catholic Church so the community will view her as a person of class rather than a poor Lazarre, the poorest family in the community (Erdrich, Chapter Saint Marie, para. four). When this way of raising her status does not work, she marries Nector Kashpaw and pushes him to be influential in tribal politics, all the while wearing “a good dress, manufactured, of a classic material” that is produced by the dominant culture as a factor in gaining cultural and economic capital (Erdrich, Chapter: The Beads, Section 2, para. 5). Rather than identifying with her indigenous ancestry, she chooses the white, dominant culture until she becomes friends with Lulu Lamartine in her old age. For the most part, Marie worries about the perception of the community rather than her own indigenous identity.

Simon J. Ortiz indicates that the dominant English language influences all three forces of social, economic and the political arenas of racial society. Ortiz contends that the Native American people feel “invalid” in claiming their Indigenous identities and “cannot help but feel Americanized” and that this feeling of unease
is due to the forced adoption of or slow exposure to the English language, the language of their colonizers (286). The concept that the English language has stolen the indigenous people’s stability in their ethnic identity is exemplified in *Love Medicine* in the moment that King asks his uncle Eli for a cigarette:

> “Can you give me a cigarette, Eli?” King asked.
> 
> “When you ask for a cigarette around here,” said Gordie, “you don’t say can I have a cigarette. You say ciga swa?”
> 
> “Them Mitchifs ask like that,” Eli said. “You got to ask a real old-time Indian like me for the right words.” (Erdrich 32)

A disconnection with the Ojibwe language is conveyed by the confusion and tension exchanged amongst the characters about what really denotes asking for a cigarette in the native tongue, thus signifying a loss of identity with the indigenous culture. David Treuer asserts that the use of “ciga swa” is

> …not a grammatical or idiomatic mistake that the characters would make unless they sat around reading dictionaries. It would seem that for all their longing, none of the characters really know what to say. But this does not stop them from wanting to say it and from claiming the importance of ‘the old language’ for themselves, which is the most interesting aspect of cultural longing in Erdrich’s writing. (33-34)

In this scene of *Love Medicine* there are three generations present: Eli as an elder, Gordie as representative of middle age, and King as the younger adult generation. Through these generations, a slow degradation of language is symbolized. The younger generation has no knowledge of the native tongue and only uses the dominant white culture’s language (King asking for a cigarette in English). The middle generation knows a diluted version of the native tongue and uses it thinking it is the correct terminology (the fusion of Cree and
French languages to create a hybridity of speech). The elder generation does suggest an understanding of the correct terminology in the native tongue but refuses to teach it by suggesting his knowledge then withholding it from conversation. Both Treuer’s idea of cultural longing and disconnection and Ortiz’s implication that the language shift has made the Indigenous people begin to accept the loss of identity the continued use of the English language has generated are associated with one scene of asking for a cigarette. The fact that disconnection to the Native language and culture is potent in even the smallest moments of the novel indicates a seed to the larger problem of the loss of Native identity throughout the Chippewa community in *Love Medicine*.

The disconnection from the Ojibwe language suggested by Treuer and the text parallels the increasing hybridity of tribal culture implied throughout *Love Medicine*. In the older generations of non-mixed characters such as Eli, Lulu, Rushes Bear, and Moses Pillager, there is a distinct connection with Chippewa culture in their actions and thought processes, but the same is not so for Marie (a mixed-blood woman) and the following generations of characters. As Susan Farrell points out, there is a distinct difference between assimilation and acculturation that pervades the novel. The difference is specifically shown when placing June and her illegitimate son Lipsha’s actions next to each other for analysis. Farrell notes Paula Gunn Allen’s claim that the “sense of balance and spiritual unity” is “essential to Native American identity” which remains elusive for the characters June, Nector, and King Kashpaw (109). The idea of balance being essential to Native American identity translates to the struggles of all biracial characters in not only *Love Medicine*, but in the novels *In Cold Blood*, and *Flight* as well.

The first sign of assimilation and acceptance of white stereotypes for Gordie, June, and Aurelia is the terrifying scene of children’s play where June was almost hanged by the two other children simply because she “stole their horse” (Erdrich, Chapter: The Beads, para. 20). June later tries to assimilate into the dominant culture by attempting a cosmetology degree but is ultimately a
failure (Erdrich, Chapter: The World’s Greatest Fisherman, Section 2, para. 9). In a sense, June only tries to identify with white dominant culture rather than creating a healthy balance of hybrid identity. Marie’s identity survives because she connects herself with Lulu (who symbolizes the natural world) late in life, but the text suggests as Nector gets older, he loses his mental capabilities (Erdrich, Chapter: Love Medicine, para. 5). Sanders asserts that “Nector’s white schooling, his enthusiasm for change, and his acceptance of white customs and mores while ignoring traditional knowledge values have denied him the balance necessary for a successful and healthy life” (143). This theory is expanded further when comparing Nector to his brother Eli in their respective timelines.

Where Nector assimilated early in life, his brother Eli remained a completely native individual. For example, while Nector and his mother were in church, Eli never went inside but spent his time in the natural world outside of the building (Erdrich, Chapter: The World’s Greatest Fisherman, Section 2, para. 22). Eli never learned how to read or write in English but instead asserted his connection to the earth. According to Farrell, he does not acculturate and does not need to in order to find a “sense of balance and spiritual unity” because he is not a character of hybridity but of pure Chippewa blood (109). By assimilating, Nector, on the other hand, made himself into a character of hybridity and rejected his natural self, thus his identity never reached a stage of balance even though he remained in tribal politics. Rather, his position in tribal politics only exists because of Marie’s struggle for social status and her firm guidance of Nector’s actions.

The suggestion that in order to be a complete person, the characters must find a balance between their Native American culture and the dominant culture is what Ortiz calls Syncretism, the meshing of cultures (292). If they do not find a balance, they suffer physically, emotionally, and/or psychologically. In Love Medicine, Lipsha Morrissey symbolizes the balanced identity of a mixed race character. This is shown by his use of “the touch” in healing
community members in balance with his interest in the Bible and dictionary words (Erdrich, The World’s Greatest Fisherman, Section 3, para. 17). It is his bildungsroman and acceptance of heritage that symbolize the hope that traditional values will not be lost, but acculturation is a viable source of progress.

Contrary to Lipsha, Perry Smith in Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood*, indicates the complete degradation of a mixed-race character if there is not balance between individual identity and tribal identity. Perry Smith, of Cherokee and Irish heritage, has never experienced tribal connection, and, therefore, his identity suffers. His Cherokee mother worked in a rodeo, already separated from the tribe, with his Irish father until they became wanderers together (Capote 130-31). The same experience of amorphous identity befalls Zits in Sherman Alexie’s *Flight*, but Zits’ fate is more hopeful because of his hallucinogenic path to healing. Zits never knew his Native American father because he left his mother when she was pregnant. The death of Zits’ mother when he was only six and the subsequent twenty foster homes he endures ruptures Zits’ identity construction and racial formation because of the lack of foundation for him to build upon.

The act of wandering is prevalent in all three novels as an act of exile, either by self or by the community. Wandering could also take an emotional form where the body stays, but the heart and mind try to escape through different means such as alcoholism, adultery, or simply through an emotional distance from family or the events occurring within the novel. Wandering would be a concept of
“personal practice” that shapes the meaning of race for biracial characters (Omi & Winant 61). A concept that has been identified in many Native American texts by scholars such as Treuer and Sanders would be homecoming, the acceptance and healing after wandering has occurred, but the concept of homecoming does not illustrate the journey and struggles the characters endure in their narratives. Homecoming is rather the aftermath of wandering. The act of wandering then becomes a more dynamic force to evaluate how the transformation and change in racial and identity formation has affected the Native American narratives.

The depiction of wandering differs in each novel. In Capote’s *In Cold Blood*, Perry Smith wanders aimlessly through life after his abusive childhood has robbed him of safe formative years in a stable family environment. Rather than searching to balance his identity, Smith wanders the country and thinks of only his fantasies of buried treasure and making it big as a singer (Capote 14-17). He seeks the idea of fame and glory that would contribute to attention that he has never received by his parents. This desire for fame translates to his acceptance of his partner Dick’s assertion that Perry killed the entire Clutter family and that Dick did not kill a single one (Capote 245). He has a connection to his father, but it is so loose and strained that his father does not even visit him in prison before he is executed for murdering the Clutter family.

Perry Smith’s wandering is caused by lack of identity with family, community, and subsequently self. According to Guest, Perry’s abusive childhood makes him the perfect candidate for crime and violence because he has no foundation in any kind of moral culture (Guest). In the novel, Perry Smith is discerned as a psychopath by the psychologist in the trial while his partner Dick is considered fairly normal, a distinction which makes the argument come back to how the foundations of family contributes to the identity of a child. Capote seems to suggest that Dick could not have killed the Clutter family because his childhood was loving and nonviolent. In an interview with John McAleer, Capote states that
“he knows” men like Perry, men that will “do anything without a thought” although Capote consistently portrays Perry as a character to pity (McAleer).

Wandering takes a different form in Sherman Alexie’s *Flight*. The narrator and protagonist of the story, Zits, experiences a journey of the mind. Before this journey, Zits is depicted as an angry, unloved, pyromaniac teenager who runs as soon as he does not feel in control of his environment, especially in his many foster homes (Alexie 5). He is found by Dave, the police officer, who is the only character Zits finds “alright” and submitted to jail because of his previous altercation with his newest foster mother (3). In jail, he meets Justice, a character that initially gives him a respect he does not often get. Through persuasive smooth-talking, Justice shows a respect and “love” that Zits never encounters, except with the law-abiding Dave, and is sucked into his dogma and brainwashing (14). When his life comes to an intensifying crossroad, where he must decide to follow the boy he meets in prison named Justice and kill innocent people in a bank as a statement, Zits’ subconscious is taken on a journey through time to experience different Native American narratives and some white narratives. This journey helps him to better understand himself and the world around him, specifically how love is more powerful even in a world that is saturated with hatred.

Through this subconscious wandering, Zits obtains emotional and social maturity that balances and heals his identity. His healing is indicated throughout the violent and emotional hallucinogenic travel, and his attitude change after his journey is complete. Not only does Zits surrender the guns to Dave the police officer, but for the first time, he allows his life to be out of his own control. He allows Dave to arrest him, he allows a counselor to talk to him openly, and he allows Dave’s sister-in-law to take care of his scars and zits through medicine so that he no longer has to hide behind his deformities (178). Basically, Zits allows hope and healing to enter his life for the first time since his mother died, whereas before, he was guarded and angry because of previous childhood abuse.
Wandering is prevalent in many more characters, especially in *Love Medicine*, when the adulterous Nector Kashpaw wanders to Lulu Lamartine’s window, when Marie journeys from the Catholic church in order to reinforce her whiteness and reject her heritage, and June fatefully wanders into the snow, resulting in her death, and the wandering of the heart and mind of almost all the male characters through alcoholism. The last of those wanderings (the use of alcohol) is present in *Love Medicine* when King Kashpaw smashes all of the pies the women made after June’s death in a drunken rage. It is also present in *Flight* through Zits’ associations with Indian drunkards on the streets in the beginning of the novel and his time travel into his own father’s drunken body at the end of his hallucinogenic journey. Each of those drunkards and Zits’ father are trying to escape from life through the bottle. King is trying to escape the effects of his mother’s death just as much as his father Gordie does through alcohol.

Both Zits from *Flight* and Perry Smith from *In Cold Blood* experience a theme of abuse in their narratives. Perry Smith suffers physical and emotional abuse at his Catholic school, at the children’s shelter operated by the Salvation Army, and through the traumatizing adult scenes of his mother and father’s violence (Capote 132). Zits suffers sexual abuse first from his aunt’s boyfriend, then subsequently has more experiences of sexual abuse from different foster homes as he grows older. In Perry Smith’s case, David Guest insists that:

> The murders are the manifestation of the abuse Smith suffered at the hands of a drunken mother and the final resolution of his love-hate relationship with his shiftless father. …a young Smith watches in horror as his father beats his mother because she was drinking and “entertaining” a group of sailors. (Guest)

Guest goes on to describe the moment of parental violence in Perry’s history as his “primal scene” which indicates the first sign of his murderous nature. The same notion that violence in childhood results
in a violent adult nature is prevalent in the storyline of Zits in *Flight* as well. Zits’ initial abuse from his aunt’s boyfriend is described after he awakens from his hallucinogenic wandering as “the dirtiest secret he owns”:

Some nights, her boyfriend came to see me. He hurt me and whispered to me in the dark. Don’t tell anybody, don’t tell anybody, don’t tell anybody. Everybody knows you’re a liar. Everybody knows you’re a liar. Everybody knows you’re a liar. Nobody loves you anymore. Nobody loves you anymore. Nobody loves you anymore. I learned how to stop crying. I learned how to hide inside of myself. I learned how to be somebody else. I learned how to be cold and numb. (Alexie 160-61)

Through the repeated sentences, “Don’t tell anybody” and “Nobody loves you anymore,” remain the evolution of a character by violence and the loss of identity in motion in order to protect the whole. The speech of his aunt’s boyfriend becomes a mantra in Zits’ head that he begins to believe at such a young age. His identity is still malleable and with no one countering the lies he is told, he begins to believe that the hatred and violence he experiences is the truth. Zits says that he “learned to be somebody else” by this violence inflicted upon him. When he is about to inflict violence on others, he literally becomes somebody else in his mind, wandering in order to find himself and his own racial identity. The violence he experiences at the hands of his foster parents becomes the seed that manifests into Zits’ precipitous decision whether or not to commit an act of terrorism at the bank.

Not only do Perry Smith and Zits share a background of abuse, they experience a disconnection with a tribal community. Perry Smith wanders in search of connection to his world, but without a tribal community to come home to for healing, he is left a psychopathic wanderer with a “changeling’s face” (Capote 15). His later connection to nature with his father in Alaska in their “house-car” as a teenager comes too late after the abuse he has endured in
his childhood and its psychological repercussions take root (Capote 133). He knows who his parents are and has no need to connect to their traditions because their violence has severed his desire for family identity, so he attaches himself to people like Dick and to fantasy adventures in order to survive (Capote 17).

While Perry Smith’s coloring is Cherokee, his nose and chin denote Irish descent, which attributes to Capote’s description of his “changeling’s face.” A comparative quote from Omi and Winant suggests that “without a racial identity, one is in danger of having no identity” (62). They discuss that one of the first things an individual notices about another individual is their race, and that race is utilized to provide clues about who a person is. They further suggest that the physical differences are made “painfully obvious when we encounter someone whom we cannot conveniently racially categorize—someone who is, for example, racially “mixed” or of an ethnic/racial group with which we are not familiar” (Omi & Winant 62). Perry Smith is such a case; his identity cannot be placed physically, which only contributes to his lack of identity.

Zits escapes his externally poisonous surroundings by internally poisoning himself further with alcohol in the streets with other Indian men. In a distorted way, his consumption of alcohol with the older men is his way of trying to connect with his Native American heritage and a communal acceptance. Choosing to drink alcohol and his continuous wandering from his foster homes is his way of controlling his own life. He can poison himself by his own free will. He also consumes media information through the television about his heritage as he searches for his roots. Omi and Winant note that “film and television have been notorious in disseminating images of racial minorities which establish for audiences what people from these groups look like, how they behave, and ‘who they are’” (63). Although Zits seeks images of Native American culture on the television, the images and information does not connect him to his biracial identity. The information offered on the television is filtered through the eyes of dominant culture, and is thus a distorted
reality. What Zits receives is a watered-down version of Native American culture that has no power to moor him to his Native American identity.

The media information Zits consumes compares to the scene in *Love Medicine*, where Nector discovers the white perception in Hollywood that “the only good Indian is a dead Indian” (Erdrich, Chapter: The Plunge of the Brave, para. 3). The reception of cultural understanding through media does not only distort the view of what it is to be Indian, but also forms a hybrid racial understanding for the mixed blood teenager. Zits sees how the white dominant culture views Native Americans through television, reads the history of the two cultures’ interactions through books, listens to the homeless Indian drunkards he hangs out with, but more importantly is exposed to the reality of Syncretism through his time travel. When the ideology that all life is sacred and the effect his choices have on others is unveiled to Zits through his hallucinations, he can finally heal his perception of what it means to be a biracial individual.

*Love Medicine*’s character Lipsha Morrissey journey parallels to Zits’ because his identity is also healed through wandering. Both Zits and Lipsha are unaware of their true heritage (where they belong), so they use wandering as an act to heal their identities. The difference is that Zits was raised in predominantly white foster homes (twenty in all before age fifteen) and has anger problems because of this disconnection with any kind of supportive family, while Lipsha was taken in as a baby by his grandmother, Marie, and brought up with love and support in a tribal community. Lipsha’s crisis is subsequently less encompassing of his whole identity than Zits’ because he has a stable childhood as a foundation. His wandering, therefore, takes a physical route in order to find his father, Gerry Nanapush, and he achieves healing of his identity in a much more realistic way than that of Zits.

Before Lipsha was aware of his mother’s identity, he held a strong connection to his Native American identity with only some moments of assimilated confusion. His adoptive family gave him the strong tribal connection that he needed to have that sense of balance
and spiritual unity that Paula Gunn Allen asserts is essential to Indigenous identity (Farrell 109). Lipsha’s connection to his Native American heritage manifests in his ability to heal or what he calls his “touch.” Karla Sanders claims “Lipsha’s touch is part of himself, of his identity. He loses it when he cuts corners, abandons the faith, and uses it for monetary gain or personal ease” (Sanders 149). He loses and finds his ability to heal or his “Indianness” multiple times before he knows the true identity of his mother. When he does find out that his mother is June, he loses himself in a substantial way because he can no longer hate the mother he never knew. He must wander out of the reservation in order to come to terms with the new understanding of his identity. As Sanders says, “Love Medicine depicts the necessity of retrieving what has been lost in order to feel whole again” (151). Lipsha embodies the search for the whole because he was made whole already by the upbringing of his grandparents. The act of wandering leads to a meeting with his father. The new knowledge of his familial ties allows Lipsha a more concrete foundation to base his racial identity; thus not only does he heal his identity, but he creates a stronger whole.

Through Lipsha’s narrative, Love Medicine indicates that a healthy self comes from tribal connections and relationships. For example, when Lipsha wanders, he meets his father who has the power to escape prisons, and Lipsha connects the dots that his whole family has different valuable powers: Lulu has her insight, Gerry Nanapush has his free spirit, and Marie has her visioning. Lipsha understands these facts and can acculturate whilst his half-brother King cannot. King Kashpaw grew up knowing his parentage: the assimilating June and weak-willed Gordie. King marries a white woman whom he abuses when drunk, leaves the reservation to live and work in an urban non-Native American area, is called an “apple” (Indian on the outside, white on the inside) by Gerry Nanapush because King snitched on Gerry in prison, and has a young son who
rejects him and Native American culture by changing his name to “Howard” as opposed to King, Jr. and offers his father to the police when they actually come for Gerry (Erdrich, Chapter: Resurrection, Section 2).

King removed himself physically and emotionally from the reservation. It becomes evident that he does not have a healthy balance of his biracial identity by his intensified sense of loss when he encounters his great uncle Eli (a true Indigenous man) and by the way King’s child acts out against his Chippewa name and father. Also, his character does not appear to have a pivotal moment in the story where he must come to terms with his identity. King is a seemingly flat character, used to further Lipsha’s narrative as Lipsha finds his father hiding in King’s home. King is used as a tool to further Lipsha’s healing by surrendering June’s car in a card game that enables Lipsha’s journey in the car with his father to the border (Erdrich, Chapter: Resurrection, Section 2, para. 51).

Zits from *Flight* begins his wandering in the body of a white cop outside of the Native American community, becomes a mute Indian child in the upstart of the country, later a white Indian tracker, then a modern pilot who betrayed his country by unknowingly training a terrorist to fly, until he finally becomes his own drunken father. His body-hopping time travel is a continual wandering until Zits can reach a conclusion to what his visions are trying to teach him. The difference between his previous wandering (alcohol and running away from foster homes) and his time travel is the illusion of control. Zits believes that the only way to control his life is by leaving whenever external events are not going his way, but this is changed when he is forcibly taken out of his own consciousness into others. He has to let go of his illusion of control in order to truly wander in search of his biracial identity. Not only does he connect with the Native American consciousness in his travels by inhabiting different Native American times and people, but also he is able to heal his connection with humanity, a connection that was severed by his violent abuse in childhood.

With this newfound connection, Zits is able to see the
oppositional characters, Dave and Justice, for what they truly stand for: love and healing versus hatred and death. In addition, he is able to see others more clearly. When he encounters his new foster mother, Mary, his first observation of her establishes associations with the Native American community:

The wife is wearing a nurse’s uniform. And she’s kind of hot, you know. She’s really tall and has long brown hair and brown eyes. Her cheekbones are big, too, like Indian cheekbones. I wonder if she’s a little bit Indian. She smells pretty great, too. She smells even better than the oatmeal, fruit, and sausage. (Alexie 175)

The description is sensory in details and indicates that Zits is comforted by her presence and looks. He has just been accepted by Dave’s family as a foster child, an acceptance that symbolizes the “tribal connection” or strong stable familial ties he requires to fulfill his identity. The symbolism and strength of a tribal connection as a means of healing is further solidified when Mary asserts her promises to be there for him. Mary affirms those promises by applying healing medication to his many acne scars, an act of love Zits has never encountered before. Another indication that he has found his community and has evolved his wandering into a homecoming is the moment he wakes up to the radio playing “Blood, Sweat & Tears,” the song “I Love You More Than You Will Ever Know” that played when his mother and father conceived him (Alexie 175). This song comforts him because it reminds him that his father loved his mother at one time. He holds onto this knowledge throughout all of his horrible experiences as a weak but present tether to his origins.

*Love Medicine, In Cold Blood,* and *Flight* all show the importance of the presence of the tribal community for the identity of the mixed-race character and how its absence can be destructive. Wandering becomes a social construct used for healing or escape as Lipsha, Marie, King, and June from *Love Medicine,* Perry Smith
from *In Cold Blood*, and *Zits* from *Flight* form the racial meanings necessary in their lives to either assimilate or acculturate. Each novel points out that tribal identity is just as important as individual identity if a mixed-blood character is seeking balance and peace in their lives. The characters cannot deny a part of themselves or they will be defeated, much like June in *Love Medicine* and Perry Smith of *In Cold Blood*.

If tribal identity is just as important as individual identity, one might question why the act of wandering is integral to a character’s evolution. In these three stories, the conclusion is what identifies a successful or failed homecoming (although *Love Medicine* remains resistant to a unified timeline). While the conclusion is relevant to the fate of the biracial characters’ racial identities, one could argue that it is the process that is worthy of attention. Omi and Winant did not call their book *Race Formed* but *Racial Formation*, which lends to the importance of identity creation. The action leading to decisions such as mistakes, conversations, judgments, and the thought process should be the theme of analysis in these novels. Homecoming or the lack of homecoming is simply the end result of stimulating character growth. There needs to be more scholarly effort focused on the act of wandering in Native American literature: what wandering could mean and how a focus on wandering can change the way in which biracial (and other) characters are perceived. Scholars must “wander” away from the theme of homecoming in order to reconcile what it means to be biracial and how to balance a seemingly clashing of cultures. Homecoming does not make as much sense when there is possibly more than one home to be had.
Works Cited


Sara Laskoski
The Surreptitious Supernatural: Uprooting Edmund Burke’s Sublime and Beautiful in the Gothic Novel The Monk

In A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful (1757), Edmund Burke presents the idea that the sublime and the beautiful are perpetually different: “They are indeed ideas of a very different nature, one being founded on pain, the other on pleasure; and however they may vary afterwards from the direct nature of their causes, yet these causes keep up an eternal distinction between them” (113). Yet the contrast between the
sublime and the beautiful loses distinction through the lens of the Gothic sublime, specifically presented in Matthew Lewis’s 1796 Gothic novel *The Monk*. Burke associates masculine virtues with sublimity and feminine virtues with beauty and the domestic sphere (100). While Burke’s ideals remain present in *The Monk*, outside influences of the supernatural impact gender distinctions and distort Burke’s eternal definitions; they are disrupted through the Gothic sublime that blends with the deceptive beauty present in supernatural figures that appear in the forms of ghosts, crafty spirits, and powerful religious figures. This disruption can be seen through the analysis of female supernatural beings that play active roles over prominently male characters in this novel. However, within *The Monk*, the sublime dominance over humans experienced by the bleeding nun, Elvira, and Matilda is nothing compared to the absolute power of their male counterparts, the Wandering Jew and Lucifer. While Lewis’s supernatural patriarchy reflects eighteenth-century society on one level, in *The Monk*, Burke’s ideas of beauty and the sublime are mingled with internal darkness, sexual passions, and the Gothic landscape, transforming the very nature of these terms; this transformation occurs alongside the subversion of gender roles in *The Monk* as the female supernatural characters dominate over human men.

An analysis of Burke’s sublime and beautiful in relation to the Gothic sublime provides insight to the changing nature of the terms as they encounter the Gothic genre. The definitions of the sublime and the beautiful have been analyzed throughout generations. In the eighteenth century, Burke’s definitions, used in this paper to interpret the collapsible distinctions between the sublime and beautiful, were studied and changed by multiple critics, including Immanuel Kant in *Critique of Judgment* (1790). Kant’s later definitions put more emphasis on what was occurring in the mind of the human rather than the object being viewed (Kant 389). The ability to overcome or transcend the fear imposed by the sublime experience could only occur because of the human ability to
reason with the infinite. In this manner, sublimity would not exist without the human mind (Kant 389). Kant also brought to question Burke’s overarching generalizations of his terms by seeing the sublime and beautiful object as subjective rather than universal (Kant 379). The Gothic sublime changes the definition of Kant and Burke’s sublime by making reason intangible through the emphasis on the internal darkness and the supernatural; Vijay Mishra presents this disruption of reason in “The Gothic Sublime”: “Its [the Gothic sublime’s] frightening truth lay in its negation of the transcendental and healing principles of the Romantic sublime” (293). This negation of Burke’s sublime and beautiful creates a depth that cannot be skimmed over. The Gothic sublime adds new dimensions to the sublime that remain present in novels of terror and horror today; when the supernatural and Gothic become involved, social boundaries are crossed and morality becomes unbalanced (Punter 8). In this manner, the Gothic sublime allows a movement from specific definitions into an obscure area where language can be questioned and changed (Mishra 22). No specific definition becomes available; rather a conversation forms that becomes important not just in understanding the Gothic but also the whole concept of the sublime.

Burke’s eighteenth-century definition of sublimity experiences a change when it comes in contact with the Gothic novel like The Monk. The major differences between the sublime and the Gothic sublime, as represented in The Monk, are associated with transcendence and the ability to place distance between the sublime object and the person viewing that object. Burke’s sublime suggests the ability to obtain awe and pleasure from a terrifying experience after it has occurred (Burke 54). A feeling of transcendence and awe can be associated with a divine presence, specifically God: “But whilst we contemplate so vast an object, under the arm, as it were, of almighty power, and invested upon every side with omnipresence, we shrink into the minuteness of our own nature, and are, in a manner, annihilated before him” (Burke 63). The annihilation Burke speaks of is the negative sort of pleasure that can be obtained only through experiencing the terror of the sublime.
In contrast, in *The Supernatural Sublime: The Metaphysics of Terror in Anglo-American Romanticism*, Jack Voller argues how the Gothic sublime prevents any transcendence from occurring: “The end of supernatural suspension does not prompt any character to construe perceived absence or hostility as evidence of an ungraspable transcendent presence; supernatural sublimity uncovers only horror” (28). Because the Gothic sublime produces terror and nothing greater, there is a disconnection between this and transcendent thought. In turn, any pleasure that may be obtained through Burke’s sublime experience is lost. This loss of pleasure and transcendence occurs because the Gothic sublime delves deeper into the hidden depths of human nature rather than rising above it. David Morris presents this internal fall in his article, “Gothic Sublimity.” Morris states: “It [the Gothic sublime] is a vertiginous and plunging—not a soaring—sublime, which takes us deep within rather than far beyond the human sphere” (306). More psychological in nature, the Gothic sublime focuses on the horror and the power of the uncanny, while Burke’s sublime remains firmly set in a physical world where divine presence remains felt but not seen (Morris 306).

The physical dimensions of Burke’s sublime connect to the idea that distance between the sublime object and the person is what turns horror into awe. Burke states that, “When we know the full extent of any danger, when we can accustom our eyes to it, a great deal of the apprehension vanishes” (54). To know the threat, or to take steps back from that threat, rarely occurs in the supernatural sublime. The specter-like figure is outside of the natural sphere, proving that “Gothic sublimity explores a terror of the unspeakable, of the inconceivable, of the unnamable” (Morris 311). Thus, the characters rarely have the ability to distance themselves from the supernatural because it exists outside of the dimensions of the human mind. In this manner, the physical ability of separating oneself is overwhelmed by the psychological intermingling between the person and that uncanny presence; this breaks open deeply hidden qualities of human nature, reflecting the terror of the supernatural, such as
uncontrollable passions. The loss of control to darker perceptions created by the Gothic sublime forms another difference to Burke’s sublime, which typically maintains a sense of control even while experiencing that sublimity (Morris 306). Burke’s sublime provides that escape from the terror—the ability to step back from something unknown in hopes of defining it. The Gothic sublime entraps viewers and forces a psychological terror, providing no solace in awe or pleasure.

*The Monk* exhibits the plunging, psychological characteristics of the Gothic sublime discussed above. While certain details of Burke’s sublime remain present, the Gothic themes of sensual detail, horror, and the supernatural, overwhelm the strict distinctions Burke uses in defining the sublime and the beautiful. Burke sets specific controls over his definitions of the sublime and the beautiful by creating a separation between the masculine and feminine spheres. He defines beauty as “Those [virtues] which engage our hearts, which impress us with a sense of loveliness, are the softer virtues; easiness of temper, compassion, kindness, and liberality; though certainly those latter are of less immediate and momentous concern to society, and of less dignity (100).” This presentation of beauty relates to the feminine sphere existing during the eighteenth century when Lewis wrote *The Monk*. Females were connected with domestic qualities that afforded the experience of positive pleasure and love. In contrast, Burke’s sublime qualities were directly associated with masculinity: “Those virtues which cause admiration, and are of the sublimer kind, produce terror rather than love. Such as fortitude, justice, wisdom, and the like” (100). In *The Monk*, the supernatural beings break through these distinct spheres, providing females with a dominant sublime power and placing human males in passive roles.

Gender Role Disruption by the Feminine Supernatural
In losing the definition of Burke’s sublime, the Gothic sublime twists gender roles, specifically in terms of the uncanny in *The Monk*. Female uncanny figures create horror because they are unnatural in the definable range of the human mind. The supernatural females act outside of the private sphere, causing panic in the masculine entities that view them. Along with this, the power given to supernatural females over human men further degrades Burke’s gender distinctions that separate the beautiful from the sublime. Voller analyzes the power of the uncanny to cause terror, stating: “The supernatural is threatening because it is often explicitly hostile, and even when indifferent or benign it intimates a superior and indeterminate power” (17). Female supernatural beings present in *The Monk* are given this power due to the otherness of their nature. By being outside the realm of humanity, superiority is present even though the specter may still hold feminine qualities. This corrupts Burke’s distinction since females are working outside the private sphere and within the realm of masculinity through their actions and their allotted power as they become the sublime object being viewed. Along with this, the male viewers experiencing the sublime become passive and feminine in nature, as will be presented in the character of Raymond, son of the Marquis. The dominance associated with the female supernatural is expanded in the characters of the bleeding nun and Matilda, giving them power over the masculine viewers of their sublimity.

The bleeding nun is an active ghost in this novel, who haunts Raymond as a ghoulish bride. This activity relates directly to her life prior to death. As Beatrice, she murders a past lover, showing that even in life her role was not one of submissiveness or virtue. When Beatrice herself is murdered, she maintains a similar character in her actions; she haunts the Castle of Lindenberg she lives in by toppling furniture, howling, and scaring her murderer literally to death (Lewis 141). The sublimity associated with the bleeding nun is shown when Raymond, a guest at the castle, finally views her: “I gazed upon the spectre with horror too great to be described. My blood was frozen
in my veins…my nerves were bound up in impotence, and I remained in the same attitude as inanimate as a statue” (Lewis 155-56). This presents an image of the Gothic sublime, with horror being the main cause of the uncontrollable state of unresponsiveness. This experience relates to Voller’s discussion of Burke’s definition of astonishment: “The primary absence with which the sublime is concerned, however, is what might be called an absence of self, the suspension of the most cognitive, emotional, and sensory faculties” (11). Importantly, this absence of identity is not temporary in the Gothic sublime as it is in Burke’s sublime. While Raymond is experiencing this absence of self he cannot separate from the sublime presence and continues to suffer both emotionally and physically. The bleeding nun actively haunts him through her words and actions: “She grasped with her icy fingers my hand, which hung lifeless upon the coverture, and, pressing her cold lips to mine, again repeated, ‘Raymond! Raymond! Thou art mine!’” (Lewis 156). Thus, the bleeding nun obtains the dominant role, holding a masculine power that Burke would not associate with the feminine sphere. Raymond, in turn, becomes passive, weak, and submissive, all characteristics associated with women during this time period. The reverse gender roles present here are further analyzed by Steven Blakemore in “Matthew Lewis’s Black Mass: Sexual, Religious Inversion In The Monk.” Blakemore states: “Assuming the male role, the bleeding nun takes “possession” of the terrified Raymond” (530). This “possession” of Raymond cements the bleeding nun’s ability to hold power outside of the private sphere—her past endeavors and loss of innocence allow this to be so, representing Raymond as the female in this scenario.

Despite the bleeding nun holding masculine dominance over Raymond, certain ties maintain the bleeding nun associated with the feminine sphere. While the bleeding nun holds power over humans, she cannot compete with the Wandering Jew, her masculine counterpart in the Gothic sublime. The Wandering Jew in this novel is a mysterious character loosely associated with the religious figure who is cursed to roam the world for taunting Jesus Christ.
His sublimity impacts both Raymond and the Bleeding Nun. Raymond describes both his own and the nun’s traumatic encounter with the Wandering Jew:

I raised them [eyes], and beheld a burning cross impressed upon his brow. For the horror with which this object inspired I cannot account, but I never felt its equal…I perceived that the burning cross had produced the same effect no less violent upon the spectre. Her countenance expressed reverence and horror, and her visionary limbs were shaken by fear. (Lewis 165)

The impression left by the cross leads the bleeding nun to reveal what she needs—for her bones to be buried in the family vault by Raymond and no one else. This done, she disappears from the story completely. Here, the role of the Wandering Jew shows the submissive quality of the female ghost, and it becomes clear that it is out of her control when she attempts to keep her secret from the Wandering Jew: “I dare not tell! I must not tell! Fain would I repose in my grave, but stern commands force me to prolong my punishment!” (Lewis 164). As a result, the bleeding nun loses some of her dominance through victimization, setting up a supernatural patriarchy that reflects eighteenth-century society. In her article, “Sublime Drag: Supernatural Masculinity in Gothic Fiction,” Kathy Gentile states that, “The terror of the religious sublime, or of the Gothic sublime, which is often arrayed in religious vestments, stems from the fear of an omnipotent, often punitive masculine deity whose presence imbibes every terrific supernatural manifestation” (Gentile 20). This statement proves true with the Wandering Jew’s ability to subdue the bleeding nun; this reflects that while the subversion of gender roles occurs between the supernatural females and human men, a patriarchy within the supernatural still remains in place. Along with this, the Wandering Jew’s role is clearly religious in nature, though this religion leaves no impression on Raymond; this reflects on how Burke’s sublime, which ends in transcendence
largely associated with religious morality, does not occur in the Gothic sublime (Mishra 291). While Raymond shows relief to the ghost’s disappearance and awe to the Wandering Jew’s powers, he gains nothing but fear from his encounter with the bleeding nun; therefore his experience cannot be linked to Burke’s transcendent sublime (Voller 25).

Matilda is the dominant figure of the Gothic sublime presented in this novel. She first appears as Rosario, a young male novice in the monastery, and is later identified as the female Matilda. This masculine disguise allows her to get close enough to seduce Ambrosio, the monk whose purity and devoutness draws the negative attention of the devil. Matilda’s power largely comes from her ability to move across gender lines when the need suits her. William Brewer presents this idea in his article “Transgendering in Matthew Lewis’s The Monk.” Brewer states: “The disruptive power of Matilda, the protagonist’s chief tempter, derives from her unsettling ability to take on both masculine and feminine identities in her relationship with Ambrosio and even to become androgynous” (193). Matilda’s ability to utilize gender to advance establishes a masculine fear of the feminine because the patriarchal society has lost control. Matilda, when she appears as a woman to Ambrosio, is submissive, admiring, and beautiful: “[Ambrosio] saw before him a young and beautiful woman, the preserver of his life, the adorer of his person; and whom affection for him had reduced to the brink of the grave” (Lewis 104). Her demonic cunning is shown as she seduces the virtuous monk first by posing as a boy and then as an innocent young woman desperate for his love. Matilda destroys his vows of celibacy with her body, his first downfall that quickly becomes worse as she later drives him to rape and murder. Blakemore furthers Matilda’s
characterization: “Matilda is literally a demonized woman—her aggressive, voracious female sexuality evoked the mutant masculinity that frightened and fascinated eighteenth century readers” (535-36). This image of Matilda places her in the sphere of the Gothic sublime. She is demonized because of her “masculine” nature, which becomes apparent to Ambrosio after he has satisfied his lust: “Now she assumed a sort of courage and manliness in her manners and discourse, but ill calculated to please him. She spoke no longer to insinuate, but command” (Lewis 210). Ambrosio’s view of Matilda’s beauty is transformed negatively by these masculine virtues. When Matilda’s feminine qualities are lost, Ambrosio defines her as disgusting (Lewis 218). Interestingly, Ambrosio’s revulsion toward Matilda relates to Burke’s definition of beauty: “An air of robustness and strength is very prejudicial to beauty. An appearance of delicacy, and even fragility, is almost essential to it” (105). Matilda’s domineering qualities, so different than her submissive, gentle qualities she presented as Rosario, are the very things that make Ambrosio flinch away. This example shows how pieces of Burke’s distinctions can still be found in The Monk. However, beauty by no means maintains strict boundaries in this novel, which will be addressed later in this paper.

Matilda is the dominant supernatural figure that works upon Ambrosio. She is clearly in control of Ambrosio, who himself is, “situated in a ‘feminine’ position: like a young virgin who is protected and sheltered so she can keep her ‘innocence’ and ‘virtue,’ Ambrosio is similarly ignorant and innocent of the world and its temptations” (Blakemore 522). Ambrosio’s feminine virtues are destroyed through the temptation of Matilda, and yet he still retains submissive qualities towards her, especially after Matilda promises to help him sexually obtain one of his confessors he lusts after, the virtuous Antonia. Matilda herself defines Ambrosio as weak and feminine: “That mind which I esteemed so great and valiant, proves to be feeble, puerile, and groveling, a slave to vulgar errors, and weaker than a woman’s” (Lewis 237). Using these words, she
eventually convinces him to allow her to work witchcraft to help him get to Antonia. She utilizes her own defined gender to insult Ambrosio, driving him to further acts of evil strengthened by the supernatural sublime. Witchcraft pushes Matilda’s role further into the gothic sublime as she casts a spell that brings the devil before her and Ambrosio. Matilda states: “I saw the daemon obedient to my orders: I saw him trembling at my frown; and found that, instead of selling my soul to a master, my courage had purchased for myself a slave” (Lewis 237). This supposed dominance over Lucifer, another character from the bible, proves to be false. It becomes clear that she is under the control of Lucifer and is his minion: “I [Lucifer] bade a subordinate but crafty spirit assume a similar form, and you eagerly yielded to the blandishments of Matilda!” (361). When Matilda becomes distinguished as a crafty spirit, she loses her association with gender, degrading her into an “it.” Brewer furthers this idea: “As far as one can tell this account, this ‘subordinate but crafty spirit’ could have been male, female, or neither” (Brewer 196). This degradation of power is similar to that of the bleeding nun; Matilda is under the control of Lucifer just as the bleeding nun yields to the power of the Wandering Jew. Because Matilda is defined as a “crafty spirit,” her place in the gothic sublime becomes permanent, and gender can no longer be used to define her character.

The characters of the Wandering Jew and Lucifer prevent the female supernatural from being entirely active and separate from the feminine sphere. Along with these masculine beings, the nature of the human female prior to death limits the power of the female ghost. The most passive of supernatural beings in this novel is the ghost of Elvira. She appears only once to her daughter, shrouded in white: “Slowly and gradually the door turned upon its hinges, and standing upon the threshold she beheld a tall thin figure, wrapped in a white shroud which covered it from head to foot” (Lewis 274). Interestingly, white is a color associated with purity and innocence, and Burke associates the color with the feminine: “Those which seem most appropriated to beauty, are the milder of every sort; light greens; soft blues; weak whites; pink reds; and violets” (106). This
connection relates Elvira more to the domestic sphere than to the masculine. Her ghost’s passivity can be seen when she does not act against Ambrosio, remaining submissive in nature when compared to the bleeding nun, who was also brutally murdered. This passivity can be associated with Elvira’s human life, as she was pure and considered beautiful. Elvira’s character before death is one of a protective mother; when she discovers Ambrosio’s true character, she tells him: “I will unmask you, villain, and convince the church what a viper she cherishes in her bosom” (Lewis 263). Elvira knows Ambrosio’s secret, giving her a human dominance over him; it is for this reason that Ambrosio murders her.

While linked to a supernatural sublimity because of her ghostlike form, Elvira lacks the active power presented by the bleeding nun and Matilda. Despite this, Elvira’s ghost still remains outside of Burke’s definition of beauty and nurturing love. This is because when Elvira shows herself to her daughter, Antonia falls ill with terror. This illness and the appearance of a ghost allow Ambrosio to get close to Antonia and drug her (Lewis 281). The hostess of the house where the ghost appears sends for Ambrosio and makes him stay: “Why surely you are not going away, reverend father…Did you not promise to pass the night in the haunted chamber?” (Lewis 286). Antonia is later raped and murdered by Ambrosio. These events caused by Elvira’s ghost go against the maternal qualities that Elvira exhibited in human form, especially when she died to protect her daughter. She by no means retains the nurturing love Burke would define with the beautiful and feminine sphere in her ghost form since her appearance gives Ambrosio the opening he needs to get to Antonia.

Despite the ghostly Elvira’s inactivity, the fear revolving around her still haunts Ambrosio: “In spite of Matilda’s assurances, that the spectre was a mere creation of fancy, his mind was impressed with a certain mysterious horror” (Lewis 287). This example further develops how the idea of the ghost works more powerfully on the psychological mind than over the physical body.
Morris looks into this further, stating that, “In its excessive violations of excess sense, Gothic sublimity demonstrates the possibilities of terror in opening the mind to its own hidden and irrational powers” (306). The rational thought—that ghosts don’t exist—is overwhelmed by the horror Ambrosio’s mind creates from his guilt of killing Elvira. Ambrosio attempts to defeat his terror, but he has difficulty doing so because his fear is part of the supernatural sublime; thus, his horror exists outside the sphere of rationalization. This lack of control is a common occurrence when viewing the uncanny. It reflects how the female supernatural beings stand out from Burke’s defined gender spheres, remaining indistinguishable within the Gothic sublime, creating a horrific psychological control over humans whether they themselves are active or passive in nature.

**The Corruption of Burke’s Defined Beauty in *The Monk***

Just as Burke’s sublimity changes definition when encountering the Gothic, so does his idea of beauty. Virtues of delicacy, submissiveness, and purity all were associated with females of the eighteenth century. Burke reflects this patriarchal distinction through his views on beauty: “The beauty of a woman is considerably owing to their weakness, or delicacy, and is even enhanced by their timidity” (106). In *The Monk*, beauty becomes a deceptive power that produces alienation and destruction rather than the positive qualities of love and nurturing that Burke associates with the feminine sphere. In *The Gothic Sublime*, Vijau Mishra discusses how beauty can be demolishing in nature: “Ordinary light (the beautiful) can also blind if it becomes too intense. The beautiful, then, becomes its very opposite, a false sublime, destructive and terrifying” (15). While Mishra defines this sublimity as false, this statement reflects that beauty is acting outside of the passive female sphere, becoming intermingled with sublimity. This deceptive beauty is a force that becomes utilized by both Matilda and Lucifer.

Matilda’s supernatural sublimity is closely associated with beauty; her character reflects how loveliness blends with the sublime, breaking through Burke’s defined boundaries. Her beauty is
used in two manners: first to seduce Ambrosio, and then to convince him to sign his soul over to Lucifer. Matilda seduces Ambrosio by having his painting of Madonna created to look exactly like her. He admires the painting, and lusts after her image: “Oh! if such a creature existed, and existed but for me! were I permitted to twine my fingers those golden ringlets, and press my lips the treasures of that snowy bosom! gracious God, should I then resist the temptation?” (Lewis 86). His religious affiliation to the painting is also clear, but it is this physical attraction that is used by Matilda to seduce Ambrosio. When Ambrosio sees Matilda’s face in flesh, her beauty becomes related to divinity and affects Ambrosio in a sublime manner:

The same exquisite proportion of features, the same profusion of golden hair, the same rosy lips, heavenly eyes, and majesty of countenance adorned Matilda! Uttering an exclamation of surprise, Ambrosio sank back upon his pillow, and doubted whether the object before him was mortal or divine. (Lewis 96)

This beauty, a reflection of the false sublime considering Matilda’s uncanny nature, is the primary reason Ambrosio falls under Matilda’s power. His sexual passions are awakened and Ambrosio’s virtuous life is ruined. Matilda’s beauty holds a place in Burke’s definition if her supernatural qualities are excused: “It is rather the soft green of the soul on which we rest our eyes, that are fatigued with beholding more glaring objects” (Burke 101). Matilda may be deceptively submissive, but her beauty can be considered “glaring” since it causes Ambrosio to faint.

Matilda again uses deceptive beauty to convince Ambrosio to sign his soul over to the Devil. After enduring torture through the Inquisition, Matilda comes to Ambrosio’s cell in this manner:

She now wore a female dress, at once elegant and splendid; a profusion of diamonds blazed upon her robes, and her hair was confined by a coronet of roses…a lively expression of pleasure beamed upon
her countenance—but still it was mingled with a wild imperious majesty, which inspired the monk with awe, and repressed in some measure his transports at seeing her. (Lewis 352)

This gorgeous image of Matilda again shows the false sublime Mishra defines. Her “blazing” beauty in relation to “wild imperious majesty” creates the image of the sublime that strikes Ambrosio with astonishment. While he notes not just her happiness but also a potential danger, he instantly puts it aside because of his surprise. Upon viewing her so wonderfully adorned and hearing about her freedom, Ambrosio begins to think about doing the same. Matilda gives him the means to summon the Devil, which he does in the end of the novel (Lewis 356). Ambrosio’s decision stems from the sight of a sublime Matilda, and is furthered by the “Despair born of such perception of absence and the fear of punishment, Ambrosio commits himself to the only powers whose efficacy has been demonstrated: those of the devil, of abyss and darkness” (Voller 71). With no sign of God, and Matilda’s statements like “Hell is your lot; you are doomed to eternal perdition” (Lewis 254), Ambrosio becomes a slave to the Devil to escape his entrapment and thus is ultimately doomed.

In this novel, Lucifer also uses beauty to lure and entrap Ambrosio. Lucifer’s beauty is made sublime when he is summoned through the evils of witchcraft. The Devil plays a submissive role when he appears before Matilda and Ambrosio: “What was [Ambrosio’s] surprise when, thunder ceasing to roll, a full strain of melodious music sounded in the air! At the same time the cloud disappeared, and he beheld a figure more beautiful than fancy’s pencil ever drew” (Lewis 243). Like Matilda’s beauty, the Devil’s goes beyond the natural beauty found in humans. His hair literally burns with flames, and he appears as a youth, suggesting innocence and harmlessness. Ambrosio notes, however, that there is something more to this beautiful demon: “He could not but remark a wildness in the daemon’s eyes, and a mysterious melancholy impressed upon his features, betraying the fallen angel, and inspiring the spectators
with secret awe” (Lewis 244). Evil is before him, but Ambrosio is blinded by his own internal needs, and the Devil’s beauty suggests nothing detrimental or dangerous. In this manner, Burke’s idea of beauty being associated with nurture and love is deceptively used against Ambrosio. Like Matilda’s “wild imperious majesty,” the term “wildness” is used again to describe Satan. Thus, this term suggests something relating to the malicious intentions that are coated with beauteous glamour used to seduce Ambrosio.

These evil intentions become clear to Ambrosio soon after Ambrosio signs over his soul. The second appearance of Lucifer presents his true nature: “He appeared in all that ugliness which since his fall from heaven had been his portion. His blasted limbs still bore marks of the Almighty’s thunder. A swarthy darkness spread itself over his gigantic form: his hands and feet were armed with long talons” (Lewis 356). This Gothic image of darkness and destruction goes beyond any definition of Burke’s sublime; rather than the suggestion of a powerful presence, Satan is there in the flesh. It can, however, be associated with Burke’s thoughts on ugliness: “Ugliness I imagine likewise to be consistent enough with an idea of the sublime. But I would by no means insinuate that ugliness of itself is a sublime idea, unless united with such qualities as to excite a strong terror” (109). Horror is sufficiently present, and indeed this distorted image of Satan enters the sublime category. Ambrosio is given a choice, and he chooses to sign his soul over to the Devil to avoid the justice of the Inquisition. The freedom he gains, however, is not what he expects, as the Devil reveals: “Hear, hear, Ambrosio! Had you resisted me one moment longer, you had saved your body and soul. The guards whom you heard at your prison-door, came to signify your pardon” (Lewis 362). His doom, sealed by blood, rests in the grip of a sublime supernatural being, the Devil himself.

Physical and Internal Landscapes of the Gothic Sublime
Ambrosio’s death occurs in a location that can be defined partially through Burke’s sublime. The Devil brings Ambrosio to a wild land: “Gloomy caverns, and steep rocks, rising above each other…the stunning roar of torrents, as swelled by late rains they rushed violently down tremendous precipices” (Lewis 361). This place reflects Burke’s ideas of roughness and infinity being a part of the masculine sublime (Burke 114). In this case, however, Ambrosio has no means of distancing himself from the sublimity around him. Gentile states that “the infinite power that the monk has surrendered to Satan who extracts his sublime vengeance on Ambrosio’s frail male body” (26). This retribution is obtained through Ambrosio’s descent into the wild sublime: “Headlong fell the monk through the airy waste; the sharp point of a rock received him; and he rolled from precipice to precipice, till bruised and mangled, he rested…Life still existed in his miserable frame” (Lewis 362). This image and the one that follows show the horror of Ambrosio’s destruction within this natural sublime landscape. Nature destroys Ambrosio in the form of insects, eagles, the sun, and the river. This suggests that, “[e]ven the physical world of nature renounces all involvement with the monk and the man Ambrosio” (Voller 71). Despite all of these physical pains, Ambrosio’s horror is internalized—he fears the destruction of his soul. This tips the scales in the direction of the Gothic sublime; the pain he is experiencing in this landscape is nothing compared to his internal struggles: “Blind, maimed, helpless, and despairing…execrating his existence, yet dreading the arrival of death destined to yield him up to greater torments” (Lewis 363). While Ambrosio’s physical existence is lost in the vast obscurity of the world, more terrifying is the suggestion that his soul will seemingly experience infinite torture.

It is important to note that through Lucifer’s presence, there is a sense of a religious sublime that sometimes connects to Burke’s ideas of transcendence through a divine presence. This, however, is not the case with Lucifer, since Ambrosio never obtains transcendent thoughts or expansion from seeing him. Rather, he experiences the internal qualities of the Gothic sublime, causing him to sink deeper
into the dangerous passions of his own self. Lucifer is a means to an end, both when Matilda first summons him and later, when Ambrosio calls upon him to escape jail. Voller furthers this point, stating that “Ambrosio’s concerns are far from transcendent; his belief in God has failed him, existing only as an ancillary agent of his self-torment and fear and his desire to evade punishment” (Voller 71). Any transcendent truth is lost on the monk. To the very end, Ambrosio focuses inwardly on his own destroyed soul and damning deeds. The internal landscape is where the darkness of the Gothic sublime exists and what Ambrosio sees there is unforgivable.

Despite the appearance of Burke’s definitions within this novel, *The Monk* mainly disrupts his eternal distinctions between the sublime and the beautiful. Major differences exist between the sublime and the Gothic sublime because of the internal darkness associated with supernatural tropes. The feminine uncanny presented by the bleeding nun, Matilda, and Elvira disrupts the masculine perceptions of awe and pleasure, changing the very context of gender roles that separate Burke’s controlled definitions. Furthermore, the deceptive beauty integrated with the Gothic sublime in the characters of Matilda and Lucifer question any relation to the nurturing domestic sphere. This leads to uncertainty and suspicion of anything that seems innocent, preventing pleasure from being found out of experiences with loveliness. Overall, this novel shines a shadowy light upon Burke’s categorizations. The evil blemishes are deviously covered up with glamour, and the corruption of human nature arises from the obscure depths of Lewis’s Gothic novel. It is important to understand how the ideas of the sublime and beautiful have changed throughout the centuries in order to comprehend how they are being viewed today. Many different forms of the sublime have surfaced that stem from the definitions of Burke and Kant; some of these include the technological sublime, the postmodern sublime, Mike Rozelle’s eco sublime, and Patricia Yaeger’s female sublime (Mishra 22). These branches of the sublime, including the Gothic, all study human nature and the
concepts of awe, terror, and horror at different levels within a changing society and environment. By understanding how the eighteenth century Gothic sublime interacts with the original interpretations of Burke, a further understanding can occur within modern novels that contain the Gothic sublime (Mishra 299). Mishra states: “The Gothic sublime has this tenacity because it is based on a pure negativity which culture dare not encounter in real life, but whose truths has to be acknowledged in art” (Mishra 301). This statement presents the Gothic sublime and the Gothic genre itself as a means of escaping the social order that in reality remains inches from the surface. The deconstruction of Burke’s terms in *The Monk* creates new meanings that question the period it was written. The Gothic novel becomes a study of internalized horror within the human mind, reflects the unthinkable, and presents what is outside the walls of a rigid society (Mishra 22). As the sublime and beautiful are further analyzed, particularly in the Gothic novel, it becomes important to look back upon these past definitions to see how they interact, mingle, and are deconstructed within more modern perspectives.


Many readers might not readily associate modernist literature with nature or environment but rather observe turns toward urban settings, science, and mechanics that depart from romantic literature. However, leading “Eco-Woolf” scholar, Bonnie Kime Scott, posits that “nature has persistent, even adaptive, presence in modernism” (Scott 13). Virginia Woolf’s work is proving to be a rich terrain for ecocritics. Gillian Beer published her important book, *Virginia Woolf: The Common Ground*, in 1996. Since then, momentum has been building for ecocritical attention to Woolf, especially after the 2010 Eco-Woolf conference held at Georgetown University.

In her famous 1929 feminist essay, *A Room of One’s Own,*
Virginia Woolf urges for a new type of writing that would be different from male writing of her time which she thinks tends to be too decisive and too controlling. In contrast to this type of discourse, Woolf calls for writing that is more expansive and more dialogic. From an ecocritical perspective, the discourse that Woolf calls for and uses in her large body of work often is helpful in suggesting the autonomy within non-humans, even though it can be tempting and even automatic for humans to control representation of non-humans in dominating ways through our language and philosophies.

As I will demonstrate, much of Woolf’s work insists on “the thing itself,” which I would define as something real that exists on its own terms. I will contextualize this observation in contrast to some of eighteenth century philosopher David Hume’s work in phenomenology, working closely with Gillian Beer’s explanations of the relevance of Hume’s work in Woolf. Most simply, Woolf rejects Hume’s idea that objective reality cannot be proved. Hume remarks, “That table, which just now appears to me, is only a perception and all its qualities are qualities of a perception…A substance is entirely different from a perception. We have, therefore no idea of substance” (qtd. Beer 37).

Rejecting the idea that substance outside of perception cannot be proved, Woolf insists on the autonomy and actually of “the thing itself.” For Woolf, the thing itself is not always part of the “natural world,” but often it is. Though Woolf is a writer, and surely controls the representation of the natural world within her texts, linguistically and thematically, she suggests that in the real world, the thing itself is something that exists on its own terms rather than a constructed image. In this essay, I will use A Room of One’s Own as a textual framework for these ideas, then use her 1921 short story, “The Mark on the Wall,” and her 1927 novel, To the Lighthouse, to demonstrate how Woolf works through these concepts in her fiction.

Throughout A Room of One’s Own Woolf relates the background research she did for this project. In one instance, she describes reading a new novel: “Indeed, it was delightful to read a
man’s writing again. It was so direct, so straightforward after the writing of women. It indicated such freedom of mind, such liberty of person, such confidence in himself” (ROO 99). Woolf admires this straight-forward style of writing and also observes in it “the presence of this well-nourished, well-educated, free mind, which had never been thwarted or opposed, but had had full liberty from birth to stretch itself in whatever way it liked” (Woolf 99). Woolf argues that there is a difference in the style of writing between men and women. She postulates that this difference is because men are more educated than women, and they are more encouraged to think what they would like to think, unopposed. These claims relate to Woolf’s larger argument in *A Room of One’s Own*, which concerns itself greatly with historical differences between men and women in terms of education.

While Woolf is relieved to read men’s writing, which she views as more straightforward and confident, she begins to see a downfall to men’s expression. Woolf writes, “But after reading a chapter or two a shadow seemed to lie across the page. It was a straight dark bar, a shadow shaped something like the letter ‘I.’ One began dodging this way and that to catch a glimpse of the landscape behind it” (100). Woolf struggles with this adverse reaction to the letter “I.” She says that she admires the letter “I” very much. To her, “I” is “honest and logical; as hard as a nut, and polished for centuries by good teaching” (100). However, Woolf sees a downfall in this type of discourse that involves both a sense of decidedness and of heavy-handed self-assertion. Woolf calls the letter “I” dominant, claiming that, “in the shadow of the letter ‘I’ all is shapeless as mist” (100). In that shadow, Woolf says, “nothing will grow” (100). In other words, while one dominant perspective seems to be clear in male writing, Woolf observes that this perspective limits the possibility for other ideas to emerge. Similarly, she argues that dominant perspective obscures other perspectives or seems to “hide” something else.
Woolf does provide a possible substitution to “I”-centered discourse that she pursues within her fiction. Gillian Beer explains, “Virginia Woolf is seeking a written ‘I’ which can also move out into ‘We’ and include a serenely and laterally shifting population. For that she must do away with the insistent phallic ‘I’ and its blasting properties. She seeks a writing body which will be permeable and expansive” (Beer 52). By writing from multiple perspectives, Woolf decentralizes and omits a dominant or oppressive viewpoint in terms of narrative. For one, this allows the scope of perception to expand and diversify. Secondly, it is permeable, which means that it allows for the possibility that something else might enter into the narrative. I will relate this claim to “the thing itself” emerging in Woolf’s fiction.

One way that Woolf combats “I”-centered language is to show that perception is personal. In other words, Woolf’s fiction there is often more than one “correct” way to view a situation, object, person, or landscape because everyone has a different perspective. Woolf’s use of free, indirect discourse is a principle way she is able to accomplish representing this idea through her writing. Though she relies heavily on the importance of diverse perceptions and viewpoints, Woolf does not suggest that everything is contingent upon human perception. Instead, much of her work insists upon the autonomy of “the thing itself.”

Woolf’s 1921 short story, “The Mark on the Wall,” insists upon the reality of the thing itself (the mark on the wall), while also portraying the ranging and diverse perceptions that humans bring to viewed objects. In this case, we do not get multiple characters’ perspectives, but we do get multiple perspectives of one character—
the narrator. In this story, the narrator’s prominent internal dialogue revolves around a mark she has found on the wall across from her while smoking a cigarette after tea time. “The mark was a small round mark, black upon the white wall, about six or seven inches above the mantelpiece” (MW 79). While the narrator watches the mark on the wall throughout the story, she does not discover what it actually is until the end. Throughout the story the narrator fancies the mark a hole from a nail (79), then something caused “by some round black substance, such as a small rose leaf,” (82), then something that “seems actually to project from the wall” (86) and is not entirely circular, “the head of a gigantic old nail, driven in two hundred years ago” (87), or “a crack in the wood?” (88), before concluding that, “Ah, the mark on the wall! It was a snail” (91).

Looking at the mark on the wall, which is actually a snail, prompts the narrator into a variety of philosophical tangents, many of which revolve around the inability to gain objective knowledge or “prove” something. This story relies on demonstrating the inaccuracy of perception, as well as the influence of perception on an object, all while insisting on the “thing itself.” The narrator posits “The inaccuracy of thought! The ignorance of humanity!” (MW 80) and asks, “what is knowledge?” (87), suggesting the impossibility of defining “reality.” However, the reality of the snail (which I consider to represent “the thing itself” emerging) is crucial to the conclusion of the story. When the narrator is interrupted from her thoughts and enters back into the real world, the reader is prompted to believe that there is some reality out in the world apart from the philosophical workings of her own mind.

The choice of a snail to gesture back toward a sense of objective reality is significant because it is an animal part of “the natural world.” Trees in this story are significant in a similar way serving as the reminder of the enduring and actual presence of the natural world to undermine some of the narrator’s observations that what we perceive as “reality” is socially constructed. Discussing the social construction of reality, the narrator says that “generalizations” (which seems to be defined as something like a “prototype”) recall:
a whole class of things indeed which as a child one thought the thing itself, the standard thing, the real thing...like the habit of sitting all together in one room until a certain hour and nobody liked it … There was a rule for everything. The rule for table cloths at that particular period was that they should be made of tapestry with little yellow compartments marked upon them, such as you may see in photographs…the masculine point of view which governs our life, which sets the standard…has become, I suppose, since the war half a phantom to many men and women. (MW 84-5)

Although the narrator argues that cultural tradition and production are “phantoms” and are not actually real, the narrator insists upon the reality of trees. “The Mark on the Wall” responds specifically to Hume’s question of reality and his example of a table: “That table, which just now appears to me, is only a perception and all its qualities are qualities of a perception…A substance is entirely different from a perception” (qtd Beer 37). Instead of insisting on the realness imbedded in the wood of a table, the narrator uses the example of a chest of drawers; however it is reasonable to imagine how this argument could apply to the realness imbedded in a table. The narrator thinks, “Wood is a pleasant thing to think about. It comes from a tree; and trees grow, and we don’t know how they grow. For years and years they grow, without paying any attention to us” (MW 89-90). While observing that some things perceived (table clothes, Sunday afternoons) are created by and observed under the context of patriarchal society, the narrator insists that a tree grows without paying any attention to human society and perception, which suggests the autonomy of the natural world—in this case, a tree.

Woolf (in a clear gesture toward her own work) writes the narrator thinking, “novelists in the future will realize more and more the importance of these reflections, for of course there is not one reflection but an almost infinite number” (MW 84). Woolf calls for a
more dialogic and representative way to write novels that account for the complexity of perception. Though Woolf does not use the phrase “the letter ‘I’ in her short story, a reader of both A Room of One’s Own and “The Mark on the Wall” can observe how realizing that there is “an infinite number of reflections” could be one way to replace “I”-centered discourse and heavy self-assertion. Yet, there is a challenge in representation of any kind. The narrator warns that “readily our thoughts swarm upon a new object, lifting it a little way, as ants carry a blade of straw so feverishly, and then leave it” (MW 79). In other words, it seems that a writer has a goal to represent their subjects from a variety of perspectives in order to gain a fuller sense of the thing, while ensuring that the writer does not leave the object neglected after “using it” for their devices. Pushing this further, what should be the writer’s duty to represent the natural world? How can a writer write about the natural world within a text without obscuring the possibility that nature in the real world is autonomous? In “The Mark on the Wall,” Woolf suggests that no matter how many philosophical and cultural theories the narrator has in her mind, the snails and the trees exist on their own terms. In her 1927 novel To the Lighthouse, Woolf continues to work through some of these same questions about representations of the natural world.

To the Lighthouse, among many other things, is an elegy for a family, the Ramsays, who include Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay and their several children. The family has friends on the Isle, including Lily Briscoe. Mr. Ramsay is not meant to stand in directly for Woolf’s father, Leslie Stephen, though there are some intentional parallels between the two. Gillian Beer draws out the significance of Hume’s philosophy in the context of To the Lighthouse, explaining that Stephen was a follower of Hume’s work. She writes, “when Hume is named in To the Lighthouse he is strongly identified with Mr. Ramsay’s thoughts” (Beer 32). Additionally, “Hume’s persistence, the fact that his difficulties cannot be disposed of, makes him a necessary part of the book’s exploration of substance and absence, of writing as survival” (Beer 34). Beer’s calling To the Lighthouse an
“exploration of substance and absence” describes my argument that one of the things that is central to this and other works by Woolf is gesturing toward “the thing itself” that emerges; in other words, the substance that Woolf thinks is always in the world and is often autonomous.

In her novel Woolf undermines the idea that there is no proof of substance (or material reality). I will cite two passages that Beer does to demonstrate this. Beer cites:

Hume remarks:
That table, which just now appears to me, is only a perception and all its qualities are qualities of a perception.
(qtd. Beer 37)

In *To the Lighthouse* we read:
‘Think of a kitchen table then,’ he told her, ‘when you’re not there.’

So she always saw, when she thought of Mr. Ramsay’s work, a scrubbed kitchen table. It lodged now in the fork of a pear tree, for they had reached the orchard. And with a painful effort of concentration, she focused her mind, not upon the silver-bossed bark of the tree, or upon its fish-shaped leaves, but upon a phantom kitchen table, one of those scrubbed board tables, grained and knotted, whose virtue seems to have been laid bare by years of muscular integrity, which stuck there, its four legs in the air.
(qtd. Beer 37)

As in “The Mark on the Wall,” wooden furniture is associated with its origin, the tree. In this passage, the connection between the table and the tree is hinted at due to the irony that while Lily is asked to imagine “a phantom kitchen table,” what she can see in front of her is the actuality of the wooden table—the tree and the bark and wood from which a table could be made. What I am
suggesting is that Woolf shows that in his attempt to prove reality, Hume neglected to realize that natural things may have more autonomy (and actuality) than his phenomenology would credit. I think that she uses the natural world (instead of strictly manmade objects) to make this point, namely because she is picking up on what is at stake for the natural world in representing it. It is important for writers and thinkers to allow for “the thing itself” in a gesture toward granting and respecting agency of nature in the real world. Landscape is an important aspect of To the Lighthouse and Woolf’s larger body of work. Various times in To the Lighthouse, Woolf depicts constructed visions of landscape, only to show that what we might initially view as a concrete and finished scene actually is dynamic and multifaceted.

In the second section of To the Lighthouse, “Time Passes,” Woolf presents landscape as a mirror people approach to see the vision they wish confirmed, later to state that the “mirror was broken” during the tumult of World War I. To elaborate, before World War I disrupted people’s vision of reality, Woolf suggests that tranquil beach scenes were able to fill people with some confirmation that the world was harmonious. She writes, “those who had gone down to pace the beach and ask of the sea and sky what message they reported or what vision they affirmed had to consider among the usual tokens of divine beauty…something out of harmony with this jocundity and this serenity” (TTL 133). Woolf suggests that World War I broke the cultural patterns which people viewed a beach landscape. Before the war, she explains, a beach would affirm all of the things that people thought were pure, simple, and beautiful in the world. She writes, “among the usual tokens of divine bounty—the sunset on the sea, the pallor of dawn, the moon rising, fishing boats against the moon, and children making mud pies or pelting each other with handfuls of grass” (TTL 133), offering examples of scenes that would affirm to a optimistic person a sense of harmony.

Woolf presents these scenes as a prototypical “serene beach scene,” demonstrating the cultural myths about beach landscapes we share. In completing this passage, though, she shows that cultural
ideals of a landscape are contextual and can change in the face of a large cultural event like a world war. Although the scene is the same, the symbolism is different. In describing the post-war concept of beach landscape, Woolf writes:

there was a purplish stain upon the bland surface of the sea as if something had boiled and bled, invisibly, beneath…It was difficult blandly to overlook them; to abolish their significance in the landscape; to continue, as one walked by the sea, to marvel how beauty outside mirrored beauty within. (TTL 133-4)

This passage suggests that the way that people viewed the sea as confirming ideas of harmony was a “bland surface” view of looking at the sea. In the confusion that broke down that metaphor, something seemed to be emerging. While one could read this explanation as another manifestation of metaphor (an ugly one that people adopted to reflect the ugliness they felt for the world), I think that Woolf suggests that a break in status-quo helped people see something in the sea that might have always been there (the “purplish stain”), and recognize the complexity and what they may not know of the sea. Showing “something emerge” is Woolf’s way of suggesting the autonomy of the sea, outside of cultural constructions. Although the aftermath of World War I brought much pain, Woolf seems to suggest that in despair, there was also an opportunity to understand things more clearly. Lily thinks, “So coming back from a journey, or after an illness, before habits had spun themselves across the surface, one felt that same unreality, which was so startling; felt something emerge. Life was most vivid then” (TTL 192).

Considering this passage, the “purplish stain” may very well be read as something real and unmediated emerging from the metaphorically controlled seascape.

By saying, “metaphorically controlled landscape,” I am suggesting that landscape is sometimes used by people to frame or confirm their emotions and ideas. In doing this, people have the tendency to misread or simplify what they are looking at. Mr.
Ramsay views a scene as a way to frame or confirm his thoughts multiple times. Mr. Ramsay exemplifies someone who places images in the backdrop of his own “I”-centered vision, thus simplifying and misreading the scenes he perceives. For Mr. Ramsay to achieve his great thoughts, he relies heavily on the scenes he moves through while thinking. In one passage demonstrating Mr. Ramsay’s use of scene, the narrator observes:

He slipped, seeing before him that hedge which had over and over again rounded some pause, signified some conclusion, seeing his wife and child, seeing again the urns with the trailing red geraniums which had so often decorated processes of thought, and bore, written up among their leaves, as if they were scraps of paper …” (TTL 42)

In some ways, this passage may indicate that Mr. Ramsay receives inspiration from natural and domestic scenes. In some sense, I think that this is a meaning of this passage. However, examining phrases like “signified some conclusion” and “decorated processes of thought” [italics mine], indicate that the scenes in which Mr. Ramsay moves through are secondary to his thoughts. In other words, Mr. Ramsay already has his mind set on a certain idea and looks around him for scenes to confirm these thoughts. The narrative voice equates leaves with scraps of paper, which indicates Mr. Ramsay’s manipulation of natural scenes or objects to his own ends. Ramsay’s view of objects and landscape do not seem to allow them their own autonomy and ability to emerge in their own way.

In contrast to how Mr. Ramsay often perceives landscape, Lily recognizes the limitations of her perception as a major part of relationships and representation through her medium, painting. While Lily seeks personal knowledge of Mrs. Ramsay, that knowledge can never be complete because Lily can never know everything about Mrs. Ramsay. Woolf writes:

One wanted some secret sense, fine as air, with which to steal through keyholes and surround her where she sat knitting, talking, sitting silent in the window
alone; which took to itself and treasured up like the air which held the smoke of the steamer, her thoughts, her imaginations, her desires. What did the hedge mean to her, what did the garden mean to her, what did it mean to her when a wave broke? (TTL 198)

Lily cannot achieve full knowledge of Mrs. Ramsay because there are things about Mrs. Ramsay that are outside of her human ability of perception. As a human, Lily does not possess this “secret sense” to infiltrate Mrs. Ramsay’s private mind and life. In this way, Woolf gestures toward the autonomy of perceived objects by acknowledging that there are complexities that are outside of the subjects’ ability to perceive and decide.

While painting, Lily considers her tendency as an artist to want to define or complete a scene. She then confronts the limitations of such a desire. Woolf writes:

with a natural instinct to complete the picture, after this swift movement, both of them looked at the dunes far away, and instead of merriment felt come over them some sadness—because the thing was completed partly, and partly because distant views seem to outlast by a million years (Lily thought) the gazer and to be communing already with a sky which beholds an earth entirely at rest. (TTL 20)

Lily’s attempt to “capture” the scene will never be completed, she thinks, because the “distant views” will outlast Lily, and probably outlast her painting. These “views” do not depend on a conscious perceiving viewer. Moreover, the “views” seem to be “communing already with a sky which beholds an earth entirely at rest.” This opens up a whole world of interaction among things that will continue to manifest after Lily’s life, and perhaps after human civilization. For Woolf, landscape often seems to be the ultimate thing that endures.

Woolf contests viewing landscape and objects as determined and static, and as ways to confirm one’s own thoughts. She also
writes moments in her texts that interrogate ideas like Hume’s and Ramsay’s that there is no way to prove objective reality. One way she does this is to remind us that in time, things change, due to natural laws and natural actors. In *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf writes about the house once the Ramsay’s have been absent from it. During this interlude, the house—representing the human, family, and cultural life—is overtaken by the natural world. Though the house was deserted by the Ramsays:

toads had nosed their way in...the swallows nested in the drawing-room; the floor was strewn with straw...rats carried off this and that to gnaw behind the wainscots. Tortoise-shell butterflies burst from the chrysalis and pattered their life out on the window pane. Poppies sowed themselves among the dahlias; the lawn waved with long grass...while the gentle tapping of a weed at the winder had come, on winters’ nights, a drumming from sturdy trees and thorned briars which made the whole room green in the summer. (TTL 137-8)

Nature may seem docile, tamed, and regulated when the lawn is groomed, pests are shooed out of the house, and weeds are pulled, but give the world outside the house some time, and the controlled human space will be subsumed by the Natural world. Woolf writes, “What power could now prevent the fertility, the insensibility of nature?” (TTL 138). The answer to this question seems to be: “nothing.”

For Woolf, “the thing itself” and the thing that emerges in and from nature seem to be most frequently a sense of comfort. This is not to say that nature is always depicted as sympathetic to humans, but sometimes it is and it is beautiful. Nature seems to be something that has the ability to stand outside of human culture, which can be corrupt. It is something that endures. Take this passage from Woolf’s last novel, *Between the Acts*: “‘that’s what makes a view so sad,’ said Mrs. Swithin, lowering herself into the deck chair which Giles had brought to her. ‘And so beautiful. It’ll be there,’ she nodded at the
strip of gauze laid upon the distant fields, ‘when we’re not’” (BA 53). It seems that one of the biggest difference between Woolf’s world and our own is that much anxiety of our own era is centered around the uncertainty that nature, beauty or systems we have relied on and believed in for so long can endure. While the “thing itself” in nature is a sense of affirmation in Woolf, it may be a source of mourning or anxiety in our own age.

While we may have reason to have anxiety over the state of nature, it is important to think forward and not become paralyzed by despair. Perhaps a lesson we can learn from Woolf is to approach nature with humility and to remember that it does exist on its own terms as well as in relation to us. Woolf describes women in *A Room of One’s Own* writing; “but how interesting it would have been if the relationship between the two women [Cleopatra and Octavia] had been more complicated. All these relationships between women…But almost without exception they are shown in their relation to men…and how small a part of a woman’s life is that” (ROO 82). What I mean to suggest is that, as humans we must not forget that what we see as nature does have a life of its own that is far more complicated than we imagine if we only view it in terms of its relationship with us.
Works Cited


Walt Whitman loved his country. He was passionate about the egalitarian promise of the United States that all people could enjoy equal rights under a democratic government. He loved his country so much that upon his death in 1892, he was disappointed that it had not lived up to his expectations (Brooks 32). Whitman envisioned a democratic country that would surpass all other countries, but his vision, by necessity, had a bloody and imperious side. Amidst the poems of praise, love, and general happiness of Whitman’s America, one can find guns, war, and blood. Just as Whitman was not content to have a country that supported slavery, he was not content to have a country that only extended to the Mississippi river or the Great Plains; he wanted a
country that would stretch from the Atlantic to the Pacific. In “A Promise to California,” he makes such a pronouncement explicit when he writes, “For these States tend inland and toward the Western sea” (8), and instead of a natural tending toward the west, Whitman calls for militaristic marching westward.

As a country expands its territory, unless the land is lying empty (though it rarely is), it must confront people already inhabiting the land. The United States is no different. Over the course of its expansionist history, it has confronted and then taken land from Spain, Mexico, and above all others, the Native Americans. As the people of the United States moved west, they fought and manipulated the native populations, and in several instances, cheated them of their land. This leaves Whitman with a moral dilemma: if he remains committed to the egalitarian ideals of democracy he is known for, how can he advocate for a militaristic expansion into the territory already occupied? In order to explain this moral dilemma, this paper will look at each position Whitman takes as a poet of democracy and as an advocate of expansionism before arguing that Whitman finally resolves his moral dilemma by writing the Native Americans out of existence.

**Poet of Democracy**

Whitman’s reputation as a poet of democracy was affixed to him while he was still alive, a label which he showed no sign of discouraging. In an anonymous review, “Walt Whitman, The American Poet of Democracy,” the author writes:

> The vastness of the territory of America, the grandeur of her natural scenery, the magnitude of her undertaking, and the greatness of her democratic institutions—are themes that, up to the present time, have needed a poet who can enter into the true spirit of the American nation, and think and speak in a way to illustrate such spirit. … The spirit of Democracy
breathes through every line that [Whitman] has set to paper. (1)

By highlighting Whitman as the poet of democracy, the reviewer also implicitly labels Whitman as a poet of the people, for the “spirit of Democracy” can only survive among an enfranchised populace. Many of Whitman’s attitudes towards human beings can be seen through the beliefs of the Quakers. Although not a Quaker himself, Whitman was a product of a Quaker heritage and shared many of their core beliefs. Chief among the Quaker’s beliefs, and what formed Whitman’s moral center, is the concern for “unity and humanitarian equality” (Templin 168). The concern for unity and equality derives from the common Quaker belief of the Inner Light or Christ Within. This belief states that every human being is born with the Inner Light which is “an eternal creative power … a source of religious insight … [and] the criterion by which scripture [is] to be interpreted” (Holifield 320). The implications of this belief are a refusal to go along with the generally recognized power structures of society. The Quakers of Whitman’s day were notorious for “their defiance of polite conventions … [their] refusal to doff their hats and their use of familiar forms of address to people of high rank” (Holifield 320-21). These social habits all stem from the belief of the Christ Within, which teaches that all people have the same power that Christ had within themselves, therefore, the plantation owner is no better or worse than the slave. Each has the same light within him or herself. For this reason, Whitman became a staunch abolitionist. Whitman’s beliefs also lent a religious flavor to his writings about people, for his brand of Quakerism saw “humanitarian equality” as a fundamental right of existence.

Whitman lovingly, robustly sings praises of the common people and goes out of his way to include a vast multitude of people throughout the world into a united brotherhood of understanding and equality—the very essence of democracy. As evidence of his spirit of inclusiveness, he writes in his poem, “I Sing the Body Electric” about the body of a slave up for auction: “In this head the all-baffling brain, / In it and below it the making of heroes / …Exquisite senses,
life-lit eyes, pluck, volition” (7. 9, 10, 14). By highlighting the “all-baffling brain” which has the power to make heroes, Whitman intentionally challenges cultural assumptions about the inferiority of African Americans. But the point of Whitman’s poem is not to simply argue for abolition; he tries to create an argument for the sanctity of all humanity. By pointing to the “life-lit eyes,” Whitman is referring to the Quaker belief of the Inner Light that is in common with all people. This Inner Light proves the sanctity of every individual. Elsewhere in the poem, Whitman broadens his scope to take in the sanctity of all human life:

The man’s body is sacred and the woman’s body is sacred,
No matter who it is, it is sacred – is it the meanest one of the laborers’ gang?
Is it the dull-faced immigrants just landed on the wharf?
Each belongs here or anywhere just as much as the well-off, just as much as you,
Each has his or her place in the procession.
(“I Sing” 6.13-19)

Whitman stresses the sanctity of all – “no matter who it is.” Part of the sanctity that goes with existence is the right that every individual has to belong. By specifically pointing out that each person has the right to belong “here,” Whitman refers to the inclusiveness of democracy. By focusing on the immigrant and pointing out that they belong “here,” Whitman is voicing his desire for an egalitarian country. Every person in the United States has just as much right to be “here” as anyone else – rich or poor – free or slave – immigrant or citizen. Each individual not only has a place “here,” but each has a place “in the procession,” showing that every individual in the democratic society is meant to play a part and not merely be a watcher and observer. The right of all to be in that procession shows what Whitman means as he begins to theorize what a democratic society would really be, namely a place where every individual has a
role to play and is treated with inherent worth. If this poem was the only poem under consideration, it seems as if Whitman would extend the same sanctity to the Native Americans, along with the right to place. However, to get a more complete picture of Whitman’s universalizing, one must look elsewhere.

One poem that is often referred to as evidence of Whitman’s fixation on inclusion and his desire for “right to place” is “Salut au Monde” in which Whitman seemingly calls to all the peoples of the Earth. Whitman acknowledges everyone from the Australians to the Copts, the “Hindoos” to the Arabs, the Mexicans to the Cossacks and widens his gaze even further to acknowledge the Jew, the Chinaman, the Armenian, the Tibetan trader:

All you continentals of Asia, Africa, Europe,
Australia, indifferent of place!
All you numberless islands of the archipelagoes of the sea!

Each of us is inevitable,
Each of us limitless – each of us with his or her right upon the earth
Each of us here as divinely as any is here.
(“Salut” 11.41-42, 47-50)

Although Whitman is trying to be exhaustive in his list to make sure that every race and people are included and have a “right” to a place, there is a significant exclusion from his list: the Native Americans. He labels a vast diversity of people all over the earth and even names every continent except the American continents. By failing to mention the continent of North America, he has failed to give anyone living there the same divine right to inhabit the land as he acknowledged others to have. Even though Whitman stands as one of the imminent poets of inclusion and the sanctity of human life, he does not acknowledge the rights of Native Americans to “be upon the earth.” If he acknowledges the Native Americans’ right to the land they inhabit, that would, by necessity, curtail the United States’ expansionist policies. Whitman cannot accept this, for as much as
Whitman is a poet of democracy and people, he is also a prophet of militant expansionism.

**Prophet of Militant Expansion**

Several individuals focus on Walt Whitman’s imperial themes. Henry Smith, for example, states that Whitman “was an enthusiastic American nationalist and a believer in the confused but exciting doctrines of Manifest Destiny” (373). Smith even highlights Whitman’s flirtation with the thought that America should not only conquer all land to the Pacific Ocean but all of Asia as shown in Whitman’s “Passage to India” where he calls for “the oceans to be cross’d, the distant brought near / The lands to be welded together...Passage to you, your shores, ye aged fierce enigmas! / Passage to you, to mastership of you, ye strangling problems!” (2.21-22, 9.7-8). Most troubling throughout the poem is Whitman’s invocation that the movement by the people of the United States to the rest of the world is “God’s purpose from the first” (“Passage” 2.18). By invoking God’s purposes, Whitman is only tapping into the popular rhetoric of Manifest Destiny.

Manifest Destiny, or the belief that the United States is under a divine calling to extend its borders from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean, is the philosophy that can best show why Whitman was so forceful in calling for a movement westward. But Whitman is not the only one encouraging expansion. Manifest Destiny was rampant in mid-nineteenth-century America.

By the end of the Mexican-American war, the United States had seized over one million acres stretching all the way to the Pacific Ocean. With the newly acquired land, American citizens – predominantly white, protestant males – saw the possibilities open up for even more places to settle, farm, mine, and prosper. Settlers began to flock to the West with the discovery of gold and other precious ore and gems. It was easy for them to see the seemingly felicitous circumstances as God-given. People of the United States felt that it was their obligation and duty as God’s chosen people to
move toward the West, and from 1840 to the early 1850s, over 250,000 individuals moved west along the Oregon Trail (Dary xiii). Upon the completion of the railroad in 1869, the number of people heading west grew at an even faster rate. The population of Oregon alone almost doubled from 175,000 in 1880 to 300,000 in 1890 (Dary 308). The West, for many Americans became the new Promised Land, but this Promised Land came at a dramatic cost for those already living there. The Native Americans of the Great Plains were rounded up and forced to relocate to reservations. The many treaties signed by the United States government and the Lakota of the early 1850s eventually robbed the Lakotas of their land and their culture, eventually leading to the Indian Wars of the 1870s. In California, the white settlers engaged in a culling of the California Native Americans during the 1850s that left at least 50% of the Native American population dead and several tribes extinct (Secrest xi-xii). But these events are not mentioned in Whitman’s poetry. He is too caught up in the grand, romantic vision of moving the United States westward. As Dana Phillips argues, Whitman is a product of his social milieu, which was obsessed with trying to prove the superiority of European-derived races and their right to govern (290).

In the poems, “I hear America Singing,” “To Foreign Lands,” and “On Journeys through The States,” Whitman romanticizes the occupations, places, and inhabitants of the United States as they build their democracy. It is amid the climate of democracy building that Whitman shifts his stance from the poet of democracy who sings the songs of people to the prophet of expansion who calls the people to militaristic action. Whitman sings the song of the pioneer:

Come my tan-faced children,
Follow well in order, get your weapons ready,
Have you your pistols? have you your sharp-edged axes?
Pioneers! O pioneers!
For we cannot tarry here,
We must march my darlings, we must bear the brunt
of danger,
We the youthful sinewy races, all the rest on us depend,
Pioneers! O pioneers! (“Pioneers” 1-8)
In the opening lines of his “Pioneers! O Pioneers!,” Whitman takes upon him the mantle of a spiritual father as he calls all those about to head west his “children.” As he gives the pioneers direction under his leadership, he thoroughly inhabits the mantle of prophet of Manifest Destiny. As he calls them to ready their weapons, “march,” and “bear the brunt of danger,” he is invoking strong militaristic language. His prophecies are akin to those of Joshua and the Old Testament military prophets who give spiritual direction to the people while, at the same time, driving them to conquer lands and peoples. As Joshua commands the people of Israel: “And the Lord your God, he shall expel [the other nations] from before you, and drive them from out of your sight; and ye shall possess their land…For the Lord hath driven out from before you great nations and strong: but as for you, no man hath been able to stand before you” (KJV, Joshua 23.5, 9). There is no doubt that Whitman is joining Joshua’s tradition as he calls for the conquering of people. As Whitman moves forward in the poem, his language becomes even more militant and aggressive:

Raise the mighty mother mistress,
Waiving high the delicate mistress, over all the starry mistress, (bend your heads all,)
Raise the fang’d and warlike mistress, stern, impassive, weapon’d mistress,
Pioneers! O pioneers!

On and on the compact ranks,
With accessions ever waiting, with the places of the dead quickly fill’d,
Through the battle, through defeat, moving yet and never stopping,
Pioneers! O pioneers!
(“Pioneers!” 44-49, 54-58)

Whitman places special emphasis on the American flag – the “starry mistress” that is “waiving high” – in order to unite the people under a cause much like Joshua gathered his people under God. And like Joshua’s God, Whitman’s flag is not peaceful. She is “fang’d and warlike” and “weapon’d.” She leads the pioneers not to settle a desolate land but to conquer. The military nature of the pioneers cannot be overlooked. It should always be remembered that there were indigenous people living in the West. It is likely, based on the various reports of Indian raids and wars in eastern newspapers, that Whitman realized that as pioneers moved west, they would encroach on the lands held by the native people already there. With this in mind, it becomes clear why the stars and stripes should be a “fang’d and warlike” mistress. America in the poem “Pioneers! O Pioneers” is a “stern, impassive” predator moving into the territory held by unnamed and unacknowledged others. As much as he focuses on the land itself, his words of “warlike” and “battle” can and should be taken literally as the expanding United States meets, fights, and conquers the Native Americans.

For this reason, the troubling line “with the places of the dead quickly / fill’d” must be looked at (Whitman, “Pioneers” 56-57). The poem never names who will die as the pioneers move westward, but due to the language of the poem, it is clear that the dead are those that the pioneers must conquer. As the pioneer army kills those it encounters, the army itself (and those that follow the army) will settle the land. It is in this manner that the conquering settlers can make sure that the land is “quickly fill’d.” As they march under their “starry…weapon’d mistress,” Whitman sees in the United States flag a symbol not only of equality but of imperialism.

Whitman elaborates on the theme of the war-like flag and its bloody, imperial tendencies in his poem “Thick-sprinkled Bunting.” There are several clues within the poem to suggest that he is talking about the American flag. He repeatedly alludes to the bunting, or the light-weight wool cloth used to make flags, as “flag of stars” and
labels it as the “flag of man,” or the flag of democracy, as opposed to “flags of kings” (Whitman, “Thick-sprinkled” 1, 8, 9). However, it is the destiny of the bunting that is worth mentioning. Whitman once again takes on his persona as prophet of Manifest Destiny as he begins to see into the American flag’s future:

Long yet your road, fateful flag – long yet your road,
and lined with bloody death,
For the prize I see at issue, at last is the world,
All its ships and shores I see interwoven with your threads greedy banner.

(“Thick-sprinkled” 2-6)

Whitman’s grand ideals of democracy seem to have a destiny in a world order – one of aggressive militaristic conquering, and the first step is a slow and steady march along the road of “bloody death” to remove those people that stand in the way of America’s progress westward, the Native Americans. But Whitman does not name the people that he will be conquered. In fact, Whitman cannot name the Native Americans as those who must be conquered, for if he explicitly called for the “bloody death” of an entire people, he would be violating his very moral core.

Writing Out the Native Americans

It seems that someone who aspires to see the sanctity of all human life should be hesitant to call for military action against anyone. However, Whitman is equally enthusiastic when it comes to human equality as well as militant expansion. Herein lies Whitman’s moral dilemma: how can one support the principle of universal rights to place while at the same time calling for a people to conquer a land and its native populace? Whitman copes with this seeming contradiction the only way he can. He satisfies the part of him that demands fidelity to the cause of America by singing its praises of westward expansion no matter the cost, but also praises the Native Americans by giving honor and nobility to them. He makes sure that the two ideals never come into conflict by writing the Native
Americans out of existence through relegating them to a distant or a mythic past.

Whitman’s poem “Salut au Monde,” is a strong declaration of Whitman’s belief in the rights and sanctity of all people. Formed as a formal salute to humanity, the point of the poem is to acknowledge all people on earth and to declare that all have a “right upon the earth” (11.48). During the acknowledgement of all the people, Whitman fails to mention the Native Americans. This failure of acknowledgment is a noticeable omission.

Even at the end of the poem when he becomes as inclusive as he can by referring to “all you continentals of Asia, Africa, Europe, Australia, indifferent of place!” he is making sure to include any peoples living in those places he might not have mentioned (“Salut” 11.41). But he does not include the Americas in his sweeping inclusion. This would suggest that he is positioning his speaker of the poem on the North American continent looking outward. He solidifies this position when he associates himself with America: “Health to you! Good will to you all, from me and America sent!” (“Salut” 11.46). America becomes in this poem, the lens through which all other countries and peoples should be viewed. Even though everyone has a right to place, it is the benevolent America, via Whitman, that will send out the blessings of health and good will. It is the benevolent America which closes his poem:

    Toward you all, in America’s name,
    I raise high the perpendicular hand, I make the signal,
    To remain after me in sight forever,
    For all the haunts and homes of men.
    (“Salut” 13.18-21)

In this manner, to use Edward Said’s terminology, Whitman is engaging in Orientalism. Whitman is creating a world of America and not-America. All aspects of not-America are Whitman’s version of Oriental. Whitman engages in Orientalism because, as “Salut” shows, “he comes up against the Orient as a European or American first, as an individual second” (Said 1974).

But America is not interested in extending the blessings of
health and good will towards those who inhabit the land that it wishes for itself, so Whitman fails to mention the Native Americans in his poem. The reason for this is clear. In all versions of the poem lies a seemingly innocent line at the beginning of the second section: “Asia, Africa, Europe, are to the east – America is provided for in the west” (Whitman, “Salut” 2.2-3). Whitman’s belief in Manifest Destiny should inform the reading of this line. By using the word “provided,” Whitman alludes to the fact that America’s greatness is destined to be fulfilled in the west amid its resources and land. Whitman surely has in mind expansion westward. However, if America is to expand westward, and if there are peoples already there who have a “right” to live there, then Whitman’s westward expansion is not free from any moral culpability.

This moral problem is an easy fix. All Whitman has to do is deny the fact that there is anyone in the lands of the West. By refusing to name them, he refuses their existence. Couple that with the fact that he refuses including them in any universal rights of belonging, and he is ultimately saying that they have no business being. He not only has successfully written them out of his poem, but through the implications of the poem’s lines, he has written them off of the earth.

But to simply ignore the Native Americans would mean to blatantly disrespect as existing group of people. Whitman still finds a way to pay respect to them by relegating them to a distant past. In his poem “Unnamed Lands,” Whitman engages in a long reflection about the Native Americans by first situating them as “Nations ten thousand years before these States, and many times ten/ thousand years before these States” (“Unnamed” 1-2). By placing the Native Americans tens of thousands of years in the past, Whitman immediately places the Native Americans at a safe distance from himself and his current situation. He is be able to give them respect and reverence, but they also become incapable of standing in the way of westward expansion.
Whitman wonders about the civilizations that existed before white settlers appeared on the shores of the Americas. He pictures the inhabitants as:

...prowling through woods,...living peaceably on
farms, laboring, reaping, filling the barns,
Some traversing paved avenues, amid temples,
palaces, factories,
libraries, shows, courts, theatres, wonderful
monuments.

(“Unnamed” 24-27)

With the inclusion of “factories” and “libraries,” the image that Whitman conjures is remarkably like the America of his time – perhaps the highest compliment he could give. Whitman uses his Orientalizing of the Native Americans to further strengthen America’s superiority. As Said argues, “Orientalism depends for its strategy on this flexible positional superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand” (1871). In this instance, by creating an ancient Native American society that mirrors his current industrialized Eurocentric-American society, Whitman makes sure that the Native Americans are seen only as reflections of Whitman’s industrialized America. They become good only in as much as they reflect the goodness of Whitman’s America.

Although he does give them a distinct animalistic tendency of “prowling,” he continues to lavish praise on them for being people “Who were witty and wise, who beautiful and poetic...with oval countenances learn’d and calm (“Unnamed” 13, 21). His view of Native Americans is blatantly romantic. As critic Edgeley W. Todd argues, Whitman has little experience with actual Native Americans; most of his descriptions of Native Americans are nothing more than poetical interpretations of Alfred Miller’s paintings (Todd 1). If this is indeed the case, Whitman is able to give the Native Americans the respect that his view of humanity demands while emphasizing America’s superiority: he sees in his romantic view of the Native Americans the best that people can be – industrialized Americans.
For all the nobility the Native Americans might have possessed, in Whitman’s poem, “not a mark, not a record remains” (Whitman, “Unnamed” 15). It was hardly his reality in 1860 that “not a mark, not a record” of the indigenous people remained. Native Americans by this time were influencing United States politics, serving in the United States military, and even publishing tracts. Whitman himself even saw a Sioux delegation visit Washington D.C., and he ended up writing an editorial, “Real American Red Men,” to describe his impressions. Even though he saw the men in the flesh, he still romanticized them by calling them “natural kings” (qtd. in Murray 26). Whitman can’t help but romanticize the Native Americans. By his romanticization of them, he deprives them of humanity and transforms them into ideals, and ideals can be easily forgotten. It becomes clear that, in some instances, Whitman’s forgetting is a willful forgetting as he fails to acknowledge the people he read about and saw.

Whitman’s poetry shows a willful forgetting of the Native Americans. He simply takes for granted that the Native Americans are gone when he begins to ask rhetorical questions:

Are the billions of men really gone?
Are those women of the old experience of the earth gone?
Do their lives, cities, arts, rest only with us?
Did they achieve nothing for good for themselves?

(Whitman, “Unnamed” 28-31)

It is convenient for Whitman to see the Native Americans as non-existent because that gives his prejudices room to stretch. The failure to admit that any Native Americans are left, let alone developed anything “good for themselves,” shows a typical step in a colonizer’s attempt to dominate a conquered people. As Frantz Fanon points out, one of the first steps of colonial domination is to produce “cultural obliteration [of the conquered people]...by the negation of national reality” (1440). Whitman denies the Native Americans’ cultures, their legal and political institutions, and anything “good” that they
might have produced. Whitman takes his negation of the Native Americans a step further by then beginning to negate their humanity. In contrast to seeing them as noble, witty, and wise, they are also “brutish and undevelop'd” and “naked and savage, some like huge collections of insects” (Whitman, “Unnamed” 13, 22). By lowering them to the status of animals (brutes and insects), Whitman is better able to explain to himself why there is no trace of them left. Even if there was, they would only be as a “collection of insects” to be studied, catalogued, possibly admired, shelved, and ultimately forgotten.

But Whitman, as the sensitive poet, cannot forget the American Indians. Since he has already written them out, he must remember them in a unique way. Whitman makes the Native Americans purely spiritual beings. He states:

I believe of all those men and women that fill'd the unnamed lands,

every one exists this hour here or elsewhere invisible to us,

In exact proportion to what he or she grew from in life, and out of what he or she did, felt, became, loved, sinn'd, in life.

(“Unnamed” 32-35)

Whitman engages in one of his favorite tropes: the connections between people irrespective of place and time. By doing this, he builds a physical and spiritual bond between his readers such as can be found in “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” and “A Noiseless Patient Spider.” In these well-known poems, Whitman tries to declare the fundamental sameness of all people and a fundamental connection of people despite being separated by lives and time. But in this particular instance, the people he tries to make connections to live in his present time. They are alive and inconveniently, for him, in the way of America’s expansion westward, so he denies their presence. He simply imagines them away as if they are invisible, unseen, and elsewhere.

By writing the Native Americans into a spiritual limbo,
Whitman is able to better give them the respect that his egalitarianism demands while making space for his expansionist argument to take hold. He conveys both his respect for the Native Americans and his conviction that the United States now should inhabit their lands explicitly:

I know that those men and women were not for nothing, any
more than we are for nothing,
I know that they belong to the scheme of the world every bit
as much as we now belong to it.
(“Unnamed” 16-19)

At the same moment Whitman establishes the inevitability of a people, he also establishes an order of succession. As was shown earlier, he already imagines the Native Americans as working in factories, libraries, and in general acting like his contemporary Americans. It would only be natural for white Europeans to proceed in inheriting the land to continue the “legacy” of the Native Americans. And so, Whitman’s Orientalization of the Native Americans ensures that the superiority of his America stays firmly in place. However, events do have a way of disrupting natural prejudices. No matter how much Whitman would like to relegate the Native Americans to the past, they continued to make their presence felt in his America.

No matter how much Whitman wants to simply relegate the Native Americans to a place in the past, the current events of his day made this impractical. The Native Americans were alive and active while Whitman was writing as if they did not exist, and they were, in most instances, indignant about the many encroachments and broken treaties between themselves and the United States government. These grievances came to a head in the Indian wars of the 1870s. In June of 1876, a large confederation of Native Americans met a group of U.S. Army cavalry men at Little Big Horn, Montana, a day that ended in a decided victory for the Native Americans as Colonel
George Armstrong Custer and every man under his command was killed. This made many American citizens agitated about the happenings in the West. Whitman felt that he must respond. Although, in order to respond to the battle, Whitman had to acknowledge the existence of Native Americans living in the West.

“In dealing with his current events, there seemed to be no way that he could evade the conflict between expansionism and the rights that he tried to imbue on all people.”

In dealing with his current events, there seemed to be no way that he could evade the conflict between expansionism and the rights that he tried to imbue on all people.

Nevertheless, in his poem, “From far Dakota's Canons,” which eulogizes Custer and his men, he was still able to write the Native Americans away.

Whitman first had to confront the fact that Native Americans defeated a group of U.S. soldiers. He does this by painting the American Indians as a dark people that inhabit a dark land. He calls the area “lands of wild ravine, the dusky Sioux, the lonesome stretch, the/ silence” (“From far Dakota's Canons” 2-3). By placing the “dusky Sioux” in the middle of the scenery, he emphasizes that it is the land that holds the central importance as it is placed in the prominent first position. Whitman, as a first step, has effectively written the Native Americans into the scenery and out of humanity. By giving the land such a dark tone, he is better able to contrast the light and goodness that is soon to enter his poem with the introduction of Colonel George Custer.

Throughout his “glad triumphal sonnet,” Whitman apotheosizes Custer by placing him within the “old, old legend of our race … the ancient banner perfectly maintain'd” (“From far” 26, 11, 13). Whitman, instead of recalling Custer’s bad military planning, changes Custer into a hero of legend as he strives with “tawny flowing hair in battle, / … with head erect, pressing ever in front, bearing a / bright sword in … hand” (“From far” 22-24). The
mythic imagery is unmistakable. Rather than focusing on the practical equipment of the soldier such as pistol, uniform, or horse, Whitman emphasizes the “legend,” the “flowing hair,” and the “sword” – all emblems of the mythic warrior. But according to myth, the hero – like Achilles, Odin, and Samsung – must die.

For Custer to take his place amid legend, he must die. Whitman makes it clear that the death of Custer is not because of bad planning or equally bad strategy on Custer's part. Whitman does not even acknowledge the superior military might of the gathered Native Americans. Whitman blames Custer’s death on “The Indian ambuscade, the craft, the fatal environment” (“From far” 6). The Native Americans could only prevail against a white man (to be clear – the poem is only about Custer, not the men under his command) because they tricked him, and they had their dark, “fatal environment” to back them up. Just like no one faults Roland in “The Song of Roland” for being killed by an ambush in hostile lands - even if he did refuse to call for help until it was too late – Whitman cannot blame Custer for the defeat. In fact, Whitman does the exact opposite.

It is unthinkable that “the dusky Sioux” should overpower a white demi-god of epic proportions. So, Whitman, in one more effort to write the Native Americans out of the “legend” as much as possible, narrates that Custer only “yieldest up [himself]” (“From far” 30). By placing the emphasis on the “hero” yielding himself, Whitman has made Custer the only agent in the drama. The Native Americans did not kill Custer nor could they. The taking of Custer’s life is beyond their power. By yielding himself, Custer is made to choose his own fate; he died exactly as a mythic hero should, and the Native Americans become simply another part of the myth.

Whitman remains divided and ambiguous about his treatment of the Native Americans within his poetry. While he appears, on some level, to call them noble and give them every right that he would give to all inhabitants of the Earth, his deep abiding love of America and its fate, as he saw it, prevents him from fully embracing
those that stand in America’s way. He is accepting of European immigrants who feed America’s expansion westward, and he even praises African Americans because they are a part of America as well. But he cannot come to terms with a people that were American before any Europeans arrived on the continent. As so many before him and since, Whitman attempts to resolve this division in his writing by moving the Native Americans and the events that surround them into legend and the past. For Whitman, the Native Americans are a noble people because they mirror the best of what the United States is. Seen in this manner, Whitman is able to romanticize them and not deal with them. By writing out the Native Americans, Whitman makes room for the United States to continue to increase its borders until it can fulfill its Manifest Destiny.


Dustin Purvis

“Then, What is Life?”: Vitality, Veils, and Questions that Must Remain Unanswered in the Writings of Percy Shelley

Metaphysical themes, questions of religion, revolutionary politics, and the promise of utopian futures characterize the writings of Percy Bysshe Shelley. His poems are driven by superhuman actors: fairies, spirits, witches and titans. In fact, the dedication of his poem *Witch of Atlas* is to his wife, Mary Shelley, precisely in response to her objection to the poem “upon the score of its containing no human interest” (Shelley 367). A passing familiarity with Shelley’s writing, then, might lead one to presume that the poet’s lofty interests were on such a
cosmic, grandiose scale that his work would neglect issues of the immediate, material world. Further, a noted Platonist, Shelley appears to provide support for such claims early in his essay “On Life,” wherein he denounces materialism as the seductive philosophy that as a “young and superficial” thinker he had once embraced (506). And yet, Shelley was deeply influenced by the science of his day—Romantic era debates over biology, chemistry, and physiology had consequences that exceeded mere curiosity and, according to Sharon Ruston, were a major catalyst for Shelley’s writing.¹ In this essay, I will attempt to convey the influence that the scientific climate—and its ideological entanglements—during the 1810’s had on Shelley’s life and writings. I will then move to a discussion of Shelley’s own materialism, detailing his philosophical debt to Lucretius before considering his materialism as it compares to our contemporary notions of assemblage theory as expressed by Gilles Deleuze and Manuel DeLanda. Finally, I will approach Shelley’s multiple uses of veils within his writing, particularly in his sonnet “Lift not the painted veil,” from multiple perspectives as I debate whether or not the figure of the veil is intended to conceal anything at all.

Body Politicking: The Abernethy/Lawrence Debate

After publishing his pamphlet The Necessity of Atheism in 1811, the 19-year-old Percy Shelley refused to repudiate authorship and—along with his friend Thomas Jefferson Hogg—was expelled from University College, Oxford. Afterward, he decided to pursue his longtime desire to be a surgeon. His cousin, Charles Grove, was a student at the prestigious St. Bartholomew’s Hospital in London, where Shelley himself soon began to make acquaintances while attending lectures and demonstrations himself. Bart’s—as the

¹ Ruston’s Shelley and Vitality is a fantastic summary of the impact science had on Shelley’s life and will be drawn from extensively in this essay.
hospital was commonly referred—was especially renowned at this
time on account of the anatomy lectures being given by John
Abernethy, along with his esteemed demonstrator and former pupil,
William Lawrence. Students flocked in masses to the school,
flooding the halls in the hope of witnessing one of the famous
surgeons’ works. In addition to a growing familiarity with
anatomical and physiological functions, along with a practical
understanding of medicine, which he would utilize for the remainder
of his life, Shelley’s notions of life—whatever it is that the word
refers to—and the forces that animate and sustain it, were drastically
altered by his visits to the hospital. In a letter written in January
1811, while still at Oxford, Shelley demonstrates a belief in a
hierarchical Chain of Being, with humans possessing a ‘soul’ while
ontologically inferior living entities depend on lesser principles of
‘animation’ to sustain their lives (Ruston 76). Yet in another letter,
written in the spring of the very same year, after spending a great
deal of time at Bart’s, his tone has changed, as a new brand of
monism begins to permeate his thoughts (85-6). Humans, animals
and plants now share a similar plane of physical existence and,
aligned with the vitalist theories of Lawrence, Shelley believes that
the cause of animated matter—whatever that may be—exists within
the matter itself. This is a bold, even subversive, claim when we
consider the highly publicized schism, which began to divide the
English medical community at this time.

The debate between John Abernethy and his talented protégé
William Lawrence was a rancorous affair, which took place almost
entirely in public, with frequent updates in the popular rival
magazines, the Edinburgh Review and the Quarterly Review. As the
disagreement became an increasingly prevalent aspect of London
culture, its political and theological implications grew. Abernethy’s
attempts to interpret the work of his mentor, John Hunter, led him to
claim that while a physical body requires matter, it is an external
force that must be ‘superadded’ onto the form. While he did not
claim to be able to state specifically what this superimposed external
essence was, Abernethy suggested the principle of life may behave
similarly to electricity—this theory drawn in part from the experiments of the Italian physicist Giovanni Aldini, who would publicly electrocute recently-hung bodies to illustrate its apparent capacity to briefly revive dead matter. Lawrence, however, rejected haphazard, arbitrary appeals to mysterious external forces, claiming that such practices represented the threat of dangerous unions between science and religion.

Lawrence was still a vitalist, though, and spoke of possible “vital properties” embedded within material bodies. However he made no claims at being able to identify the source of vitality, stating simply that life existed in the organization of matter itself. Lawrence, in fact, objected to the very term “life” insofar as it is used as a noun, as something whose properties we attempt to decipher, preferring, rather, to “‘fix’ the meaning of life by deciding how it differs from other signs; life is to be defined by death and the inanimate” (150). The idea that this public, vitriolic debate over vitality could be hindered by its very language is an issue that would concern Shelley for the remainder of his life and is discussed below. For Lawrence, we can only know life through its expressions—regardless of the bodies we dissect, or the veils we lift, we can never confidently point to the referent for that which we call life.

The debate between Abernethy and Lawrence occurred as England was experiencing a widespread shift toward reactionary politics. The fact that it was the educated classes—not simply the impoverished masses—who were sympathetic with many French ideals, exacerbated fears of the potential contagiousness of revolutionary France’s message of a sovereignty of the people (Romantics 55). Suspicion of intellectuals was increasingly legitimized by polemical texts such as Edmund Burke’s Reflections on the Revolution in France, which was a driving force behind the counter-revolutionary movement. This contributed to the launching a series of intellectual “witch-hunts,” efforts of the powerful to tarnish the reputations of those whose work was considered to include subversive qualities (the meaning of such a label becoming ever
more nebulous as the country’s conservatism grew). William Lawrence epitomized the intellectual qualities that London society had grown weary of: a brilliant, eccentric thinker who quoted Shakespeare in his rebuttals of Abernethy, criticized the English government and monarchy for not being more like the French, who invested money in scientific research, and refused to settle for mystical explanations of the animating force of living phenomena. Further, it is important to note that many of our twenty-first-century disciplinary distinctions—where various specialists quarantine themselves off, opting to remain within the confines of their given discipline’s discourse—were not quite as solidified during the Romantic era. Interests in literature, politics, theory, and a variety of other fields of study were not viewed as incompatible with the concerns of their contemporary surgeons at Bart’s. They were, rather, inextricably tied to their outcomes.

On their surface, the differences between Lawrence and Abernethy may appear minor, but because their heated debate concerned a fundamental component of life itself, the stakes were significant. Abernethy’s view, that life is superadded onto matter, lent itself to theories of an intrinsic order wherein various entities must, in their natural state, be subservient to their supreme authority. His arguments for natural organizations of power affirmed the British constitution, its system of law and order, religious conviction, and even the importance behaving morally and honorably:

It is equally apparent that the belief of the distinct and independent nature of mind, incites us to act rightly from principle; to relieve distress, to repel aggression, and defend those who are incapable of protecting themselves; to practice and extol whatever is virtuous, excellent, and honourable; to shun and condemn whatever is vicious and base; regardless also of our own personal feelings and interests, when put in competition with our duty. (Abernethy 49-50)²

² Reprinted in Ruston, 53.
The Tories enthusiastically embraced Abernethy’s theory, believing it legitimizes a vision of society as a series of bodies, dutifully obeying the friendly regulatory demands of those-who-know-better. Abernethy did his part to incite anger by publically questioning Lawrence’s loyalty to his country. Prominent figures such as Samuel Coleridge—a patient and friend of Abernethy’s—were willing to speak out on the issue. Coleridge “took great interest in seeing that the kind of vitality proposed by Abernethy triumphed over Lawrence’s supposed materialism, atheism and republicanism” (Ruston 52). As the decade drew to a close, it became apparent that any objection made by Lawrence would be flooded by public outcries of atheism and various other, similarly vague accusations. In 1819, the year of the Peterloo Massacre and the “gagging acts,” Lawrence was suspended from his position as surgeon, and in 1822, he was forced to publicly recant his view of vitality in order to save his career.3

Shelley’s Unusual Materialism

When Shelley published Queen Mab in 1813, it included a series of illuminating notes illustrating the poet’s broad interest in scientific speculation and philosophical materialism. It was not until writing Prometheus Unbound in 1819 that his poetry would revisit these topics with the same steadfast attention. Traditional Shelley scholarship has followed the lead of Desmond King-Hele’s assessment that “from 1814 till 1819, if we judge from [Shelley’s] poems alone, science was buried beneath a humanistic landslide” (King-Hele 102).4 Yet these are the exact same six years in which Abernethy and Lawrence were fighting over their vital scientific issue—a debate in which Shelley not only followed through the

3 From this point on, Lawrence was able to have a highly successful—if not compromised—career as a surgeon, even receiving baronetcy from the Queen shortly before his death in 1867.

4 Reprinted in Ruston, 102.
journals he read but held a personal investment. Shelley had met Lawrence in 1811 at St Bartholomew, but it was only later that the two were able to spend significant time together, as Shelley was introduced to Lawrence’s circle through their shared acquaintance with William Godwin. Lawrence’s influence on Shelley is evident, for instance, in the insistence of Prometheus that we maintain possession over our lives rather than submissively allowing external powers to dictate the terms of our experience. This being said, Shelley—despite being grouped with Lawrence as a radical materialist in numerous magazine articles at the time—was not quite the partisan that we might expect when it came to vitalism. We could, conversely, interpret the actions following the release of Prometheus, in which he kisses the ground, an example of an external force that restores life to the Earth, in a light sympathetic to Abernethy:

I hear, I feel;
Thy lips are on me, and their touch runs down
Even to the adamantine central gloom
Along these marble nerves; ‘tis life, ‘tis joy,
And through my withered, old, and icy frame
The warmth of an immortal youth shoots down
Circling. Henceforth the many children fair
Folded in my sustaining arms—all plants,
And creeping forms, and insects rainbow-winged,
And birds, and beasts, and fish, and human shapes,
Which drew disease and pain from my wan bosom,
Draining the poison of despair—shall take
And interchange sweet nutriment; to me
Shall they become like sister-antelopes
By one fair dam, snow-white and swift as wind,
Nursed among lilies near a brimming stream.
(Shelley 3.3.84-99)

In her introduction to the reprinting of the 1818 edition of *Frankenstein*, Marilyn Butler examines the extent to which both Lawrence and Abernethy influenced other members of Shelley’s
circle, including his wife Mary, the most apparent example being the very method in which Victor’s creation is given life: an inanimate configuration of parts, animated with electricity (Frankenstein xv-xxi).

By the time Shelley’s circle, which included writers John Polidori, Claire Clairmont, and Lord Byron, along with Percy and Mary, are grappling with issues of vitality in Geneva, any divergence from the established position (i.e. Abernethy’s) could be expected to be publicly shunned as a French-influenced radicalism arguing for atheism. These conclusions are particularly absurd when we consider that even Shelley’s above-mentioned treatise, The Necessity of Atheism, remains a nuanced form of materialism that—given in part for its nod to the philosophy of Spinoza—suggests an alignment with pantheism: “There is No God. This negation must be understood solely to affect a creative Deity. The hypothesis of a pervading Spirit co-eternal with the universe remains unshaken” (1). Thus, even when Shelley attempts to be explicitly atheist, it is still difficult to merely write him off as a stereotypical early-eighteenth-century radical thinker.

The complicated cycles of life and death, the constant flux of the material world, and the generative, dietary, and enduring properties of living substances are clearly present in poems like Queen Mab and Prometheus Unbound, but the language of vitality is a prevalent metaphorical device throughout Shelley’s works. Looking briefly at the poems written during the height of the Abernethy/Lawrence debate, we find The Sensitive Plant, The Cloud, Ode to the West Wind, Mask of Anarchy, and England in 1819—all of which, to various degrees, employ metaphoric language that stresses an engagement with the question of what it means for something to be alive or, alternatively, what it means to be dead.
This is why many readers are surprised by Shelley’s claim midway through his essay “On Life”: “The shocking absurdities of the popular philosophy of mind and matter, and its fatal consequences in morals, their violent dogmatism concerning the source of all things, had early conducted me to materialism. This materialism is a seducing system to young and superficial minds. It allows its disciples to talk and dispenses them from thinking” (Shelley 506). Raymond Williams influential definition of materialism describes it as “a very long, difficult and varying set of arguments which propose matter as the primary substance of all living and non-living things, including human beings” (Williams 197), and given Shelley’s reputation as an atheist, the overtones of his arguments for vegetarianism, and his general skepticism of appeals to the supernatural, he has developed a reputation as a materialist par excellence. Just as with his nuanced dismissal of deism, though, it is worth considering just what it is, exactly, that Shelley is rejecting in his denouncement of materialism. The “dogmatism concerning the source of all things” would indicate a criticism of those seeking first principles, which are laws axioms from which theorists can (lazily, according to Shelley) draw further conclusions. Lawrence’s attempts to deny dogmatic adherences to the ambiguous life force proposed by Abernethy, and the subsequent systems of morality that were said to be its logical extension, can be seen as a rejection similar to Shelley’s. Lawrence, however, does not do so as a rejection of materialism but, rather, as an argument for it.

Shelley’s materialism is even more evident when we consider the tremendous influence that the first century BC Roman
Lucretius’ 7400-line philosophical poem *De Rerum Natura*—or, *The Nature of Things*—is one of the seminal texts of philosophical materialism. Influenced by ancient Greek philosophers like Epicurus, Heraclitus and Democritus, Lucretius’ poem presented a world whose existence and activities are shaped not by the gods, but by natural, physical laws. These laws were contingent on Lucretius’ notion of atomism, wherein none of the material forms we encounter are discrete, solidified bodies, but a composite of ever-shifting atoms. Atoms, for Lucretius, are eternal, in perpetual motion, and can be used to explain all of the world’s phenomena. This also means that living bodies are merely a conglomeration of matter that exists in fixed quantity—we are in a constant state of flux, composed entirely of that which was once dead.

For Shelley, the mutability of human subjects had implications for our ideas of self—if such a thing exists at all, it is nothing more than a fleeting apparition: “The words, *I, you, they* are not signs of any actual difference subsisting between the assemblages of thoughts thus indicated, but are merely marks employed to denote the different modifications of the one mind” (508). We can imagine that Shelley understood the political consequences of Lucretius’ view of an immanent materialism as being quite the opposite of those in the transcendent speculations of Abernethy. Accepting a form of literal selflessness can drive us toward collective ideas that exceed individual interests. Further, it reinforces the conviction—highly suppressed during the time Shelley is writing—that even those seemingly permanent institutions, which impose various degrees of control over everyday life, cannot escape the transitory nature of matter. Empires, dynasties, religions, and political systems are subject to the same fate as the compost heap in

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5 Shelley’s list (508).
Shelley’s “The Sensitive Plant”: “Leaf after leaf, day by day / Were massed into the common clay” (3.32-3).

**“Strip[ping] the Veil of Familiarity from the World”**

The suggestion that we can apply visions of a world that is in constant motion to social and political structures brings to mind our more contemporary ideas of assemblages. In her book, *Vibrant Matter*, Jane Bennett defines assemblages as “ad hoc groupings of diverse elements of vibrant materials of all sorts. Assemblages are living, throbbing confederations that are able to function despite the persistent presence of energies that confound them from within” (23-4).

Assemblage theory spawns from Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s *Thousand Plateaus*, and was primarily a response to the traditional views of organisms—as something that can be reduced to the relations of its parts—that can be found in the influential work of Shelley’s German contemporary, Hegel. In his *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel claims that the parts of a larger whole are fused together to create a seamless totality. Such parts have no autonomous existence outside of their relation to the whole: “This substantial unity is an absolute unmoved end in itself, in which freedom comes into its supreme right. On the other hand this final end has supreme right against the individual, whose supreme duty is to be a member of the state” (156).6 This widely-accepted idea was the backing for the

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6 For the most comprehensive example of Hegel’s so-called “organicism” see sub-section three (The State), located within the “Third Part: Ethical Life” of his *Philosophy of Right*. For contemporary reconsiderations of Hegel’s organic conceptions of political life, which allow a more developed form of individual autonomy, see Michael Wolff’s “Hegel’s Organicism Theory of State: On the Concept and Method of Hegel’s ‘Science of State’” in *Hegel on Ethics and Politics* (Cambridge: CUP, 2004, pp. 291-322) and Philip Quadrio’s “Hegel’s Relational Organism” (*Critical Horizons: A Journal of Philosophy & Social Theory* 13.3 [2012]: 317-36).
“organismic metaphor,” which became a “superficial analogy between society and the human body, and to postulate that just as bodily organs work together for the organism as a whole, so the function of social institutions is to work in harmony for the benefit of society” (DeLanda 8). This can be found in the political theories of Hindu social thought, Aristotle, Cicero, Livy, Seneca, Paul, Rousseau, Hobbes, Schelling and others, in addition to Hegel.7 Viewing social organizations in this matter lends itself to both the naïve “connectedness”—with the earth, with other humans, with the stars etc., or what Freud refers to as the “oceanic feeling”—that is fashionable in U.S. popular culture, as well as to the social beliefs of Abernethy and his supporters. When individuals are resigned to the fact that they exist as insignificant, replaceable parts of an ontologically secure whole, they are more prone to blind allegiances toward oppressive systems of control. It is also important to note in passing that assemblage theory does not subscribe to the opposite approach to social relations either. That is, it does not claim that the individual actors within an assemblage are all that exist, where the larger wholes—selves, societies, nations etc.—are simply metaphysical abstractions (present in Margaret Thatcher’s famous claim there is “no such thing as society,” only individuals and their families).

Assemblage theory, as alluded to by Deleuze and Guattari, and then further developed by Manuel DeLanda, is a helpful supplement to the Lucretian atomism adopted by Shelley. In an assemblage, parts must interact with one another in a way that yields a whole that is irreducible to those parts. DeLanda and Deleuze both use the image of a warrior on a horse with a weapon as an example of an assemblage—the warrior, horse and weapon each have independent existences and can easily be detached and “plugged

“into” new separate assemblages—but when the three entities assemble, they create a whole that entails a significant deal of cultural and material power. While Shelley (along with Lucretius, Deleuze and DeLanda) certainly recognizes the vital importance of relations within a whole, he distinguishes himself from organismic metaphors associated with Hegel and Abernethy in recognizing assemblages of interrelated parts—cities, social structures, forests—without losing sight of the autonomous existence of those individual parts, which can be disengaged from one assemblage and incorporated into another.

Through the influence of Lucretius, Shelley is able to demonstrate a unique form of materialism—with political, philosophical and environmental import—that still resonates today in areas such as assemblage theory and post-humanism, however he remains troubled by the fundamental concept of life itself. Being able to approach a conceptualization of the “life” of society, through its complex networks—veins, arteries, organs etc.—is one thing, but the biological phenomena that separate the living from the non-living remain elusive. Shelley was living in an age of demystification, which saw countless reasons for reconsidering the way we viewed life. Life was discovered to exist at microscopic levels, too small for humans to physically access, while a growing understanding of the vastness of the universe exponentially increased the likelihood of extraterrestrial life forms. Yet Shelley’s curiosities were obstructed by what he recognized as a pivotal disconnect between the act of analyzing life from the outside, as an observer, and the conscious experience of living, of being “inside” life. He begins “On Life” with a discussion of our essential familiarity of life and the ways in which this familiarity restricts us from any formal understanding of its features. However, he later declares, in his Defense of Poetry, that life can be defamiliarized by poetry, which has the capability of revealing life to us anew:

Poetry turns all things it touches to loveliness; it exalts the beauty of that which is most beautiful, and it adds beauty to that which is most deformed: it
marries exultation and horror, grief and pleasure, eternity and change; it subdues to union under its light yoke all irreconcilable things. It transmutes all that it touches, and every form moving within the radiance of its presence is changed by wondrous sympathy to an incarnation of the spirit which it breathes; its secret alchemy turns to potable gold the poisonous waters which flow from death through life; it strips the veil of familiarity from the world, and lays bare the naked and sleeping beauty which is the spirit of its forms. (Shelley 533)

Poetry, then, has transformative properties for those things that it comes into contact with, separated even from narrative fiction:

A Poem is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth. There is this difference between a story and a poem, that a story is a catalogue of detached facts, which have no other bond of connexion than time, place, circumstance, cause and effect; the other is the creation of actions according to the unchangeable forms of human nature, as existing in the mind of the creator, which is itself the image of all other minds. The one is partial, and applies only to a definite period of time, and a certain combination of events which can never again recur; the other is universal, and contains within itself the germ of a relation to whatever motives or actions have place in the possible varieties of human nature. (515)

For Shelley, poetic or metaphorical language is unique insofar as it is capable of sprouting new, unexpected relations and forms. Denise Gigante has written on the life-bearing potentiality of poetry, stating that for Shelley: “[p]oetry … is plastic and even ontopoietic: it is in touch with the same creative power responsible for living forms of the natural world, or the transient material shapes that power can take. Modeled on biological form, it unfolds not as a historical
product but as a process, a mode of epigenesist poetics that the poem states for future generations” (Gigante 164).

Shelley’s skepticism of narrative form, of the ability of language to mechanically transfer truth, is vital. Mary Shelley explained in her introduction to the 1831 version of Frankenstein that the task of narrating the pursuit of the principle of life fell to her because “[Percy] Shelley, more apt to embody ideas and melodious verse that adorns our language than to invent the machine of a story” was not interested. And as Gigante points out, he appears to abandon all hope of maintaining anything resembling a narrative story in the lyrical fourth act of Prometheus Unbound (M. Shelley 194; Gigante 166). Here, Shelley appears to be moving beyond any form of traditional scientific exploration. The possibility for humans to absorb anything resembling truth is forbidden by our very structures of understanding: our language, physical senses, historical awareness, etc. The idea that the world as we witness and try to conceptualize it is in fact an illusion, is, in part, a product of Shelley’s Platonism but is also a result of the influence of Lucretius, who spoke of the superficial “image” as “a sort of outer skin perpetually peeled off the surface of objects and flying about.”8 This phenomenon is manifested repeatedly, throughout the works of Shelley, in the form of a veil. References to veils include appearances in Prometheus Unbound, Epipsychidion, The Triumph of Life, and, of course, the sonnet “Lift not the Painted Veil.”

Veils do not have a consistent logical function or meaning in Shelley’s work—sometimes they represent life while others signify death; sometimes they are an impediment to something humanity would benefit from unveiling, other times we are explicitly told to leave the veil in place. The most obvious reading of a veil would be that of ignorance or superstition. This is the kind of veil that appears to be draped over the masses in The Triumph of Life, where life is an affliction, a coat of confusion so thick that “none seemed to know /

Whither he went, or whence he came, or why / He made one of the multitude” (47-9). Shelley believed that science had the ability to lift the veils of misunderstanding, and thus liberate humans from their confusions, such as in the climactic scene in *Prometheus Unbound*:

The painted veil, by those who were called life,  
Which mimicked, as with colours idly spread,  
All men believed, and hoped, is torn aside—  
The loathsome mask has fallen, the man remains  
Sceptreless, free, uncircumscribed—but man.  
(3.4.190-94)

There is something underwhelming in Shelley’s decision to remind us that man, after tearing aside the painted veil, remains “but man.” Again, if lifting the veil simply means to conceptualize the world in empirical ways, then we will endure with the same essential ignorance, able to grasp life as a corporeal occurrence, but not in any ontological sense. In addition, the action of removing the veil can be interpreted as a merely critical, negative act—we become familiar with the falseness of our preconceptions, recognizing our basic illusions, but have uncovered nothing to stand in their place.

There are moments that suggest that the veil itself represents an endpoint for our investigation. It is possible to read “Lift not the painted veil” from the materialist perspective of someone who has directly confronted the vitality debate between Abernethy and Lawrence. Here we are instructed not to lift the veil. Lurking behind the veil are “Fear / And Hope, twin Destinies, who ever weave / Their shadows o’er the chasm, sightless and drear” (4-6). Regardless of how we elect to perceive the “twin destinies” of fear and hope (and they may be nothing more than phantoms, imposed onto the abyss by the viewer themselves), there does not seem to be anything worth seeing beneath the veil. We are then told about a man who once lifted the veil who sought “things to love / But found them not.” Interestingly, the lifting of the veil seems to have had an impact on the man’s life in spite of this, similar to the passage from *Prometheus Unbound* above, as he became “A splendor among
shadows—a bright blot / Upon this gloomy scene” but is ultimately unsatisfied, a “Spirit that strove / For truth, and like the Preacher, found it not.—.”

Given the poem’s context, written amongst the heated debate between surgeons, we can think of this sonnet and its veil in terms of a dissection. In our search for life, we can lift the external surface, the membrane of the body, to examine the workings of its interior, the presumed source of life. And yet, as Lawrence would be sure to point out, there is no centralized nucleus, regardless of how deep we burrow, that we can declaratively identify as the source of life; no first cause that ignites dead matter into animation. For Shelley, it is in the organization of the parts, and the relations that they form with one another, where we can indirectly find life. Any attempts at identifying it directly will be unsuccessful by way of the same pitfalls that Shelley identifies in his critique of narrative—the limitations of our language, which cannot signify those facets of our lives and experiences (including life itself) that are beyond our symbolic, conscious understanding. Additionally, it may not be too much of a stretch to read the heroic man in “Paint not…” as being Lawrence—someone who sought truth but could not find it, was chastised by the reactionary forces representing the status quo, and was destined to stand out among the “unheeding many.”

Hugh Roberts considers Jacques Derrida’s claim that it is “an error to think of meaning as something stable, an ‘inmost naked beauty’ that is won with difficulty by diligent hermeneutical endeavor” (314). To think of meaning, as a noun, is to think of something that is in a habitual state of inter-subjective flux. Meaning proliferates and deteriorates and any search for stable meaning will be in vain—much like Shelley’s Lucretian view of matter. This would seem to eliminate the possibility of most epistemological and/or hermeneutical interpretations of Shelley’s veils, wherein, if our search is rigorous enough, we may eventually access the seed of meaning or value that was previously hidden.

Conversely, we can view Shelley’s veils as actually concealing something, even if we cannot appreciate or conceptualize
its meaning as, again, our language fails grasp it, a point Shelley is continually attempting to drive home: “How vain is it to think that words can penetrate the mystery of our being?” (Shelley 506). As a concealment, the surface of the veil assumes an alluring, sexual quality. In her analysis of the presence of veils in Gothic novels, Eve Sedgwick states that “the veil that conceals and inhibits sexuality comes by the same gesture to represent it, both as metonym of the thing covered and as a metaphor for the system of prohibitions by which sexual desire is enhanced and specified … and characters in Gothic novels fall in love as much with women’s veils as with women” (256).

We can further imagine that it is the sexually-tinted veil which shields us from the possibility of being exposed to the Real, that which exists beyond signification, resisting any kind of symbolization such as language. To be exposed to the Real is to suffer a trauma severe enough to break down the symbolic order that permeates our lives. Expanding the Lacanian order of the Real, Slavoj Žižek discusses the horrific nature of the “imaginary Real,” “the mysterious je ne sais quoi, the unfathomable ‘something’ that introduces a self-division into an ordinary object, so that the sublime shines through it” (82).

Within a psychoanalytic framework, then, the veil exists for a good reason, as very few (perhaps the “sacred few” who flee from the chariot in The Triumph of Life?) of us can actually endure the trauma and vulnerability of lifting the veil. Shelley’s instruction not to lift the painted veil, then, can be read as a kind of caring, cautionary gesture, as the veil is there for our protection. A related act of compassion occurs in Shelley’s Witch of Atlas, written shortly after “Lift not the Painted Veil,” where the witch is of such devastating beauty that she mercifully weaves a veil to shield the worshipping beings that surround her from the full force of her beauty. Again, the veil acts here as an obstacle to the objet petit a of the nymphs and dryads whose lives in the poem are defined by the love and desire they express toward the witch.
Finally, we can adopt a similar framework when considering Shelley’s use of unanswered or avoided questions: Asia’s cosmic questions for Demogorgon are not answered. Readers of *Prometheus Unbound*, despite the amount of work they may put into the text, are refused any precise meaning by the poem. The narrator of *The Triumph of Life* is unable to get a direct answer from his encounter with Rousseau, the latter often preventing the narrator from even finishing his question. Then, when the narrator turns to the cripple, who allows him to finish the question that had become central to Shelley’s work—“Then, what is Life?”—the cripple begins his answer and is interrupted, by Shelley himself, who ceased writing mid-sentence and died shortly afterward, never completing the poem.

Works Cited


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