Re:Search

The Undergraduate Literary Criticism Journal at the University of Illinois

Volume 2, Issue 1 | 2015

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The Undergraduate Literary Criticism Journal
at the
University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

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EDITOR'S NOTE

It is my honor to introduce you to the second edition of *Re:Search, the Undergraduate Literary Criticism Journal* here at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. This year, the Executive Board endeavored to extend our journal's core vision from not only to producing an exceptional final product but also to engaging as many students (and faculty) in the process of researching, editing, and publishing. We continued to recruit student peer reviewers and copy editors, whose critical eyes have been instrumental to ensuring articles of the best quality. New for this year's edition, we integrated faculty-led workshops to guide the authors in their research and writing processes. Lori Humphrey Newcomb and Harriett Green each coordinated and facilitated a workshop dedicated, respectively, to drafting an argumentative thesis and to honing research methods. It is worth noting the exciting developments in the platforms circulating this work and our increasingly wider audience—our online version of the journal is now searchable on Google Scholar, the University Library Catalog, and in IDEALS (Illinois Digital Environment for Access to Learning and Scholarship). A valuable feature of this journal is that all students involved in *Re:Search*, especially our Executive Board, are gaining valuable skills in leadership, critical thinking, and editing—a skill set that will prove indispensable in any professional setting.

This journal exists largely due to the reliable guidance and care of our Faculty Advisor, Lori Humphrey Newcomb. Lori, thank you for demonstrating with and to us that our ambitions can indeed be such stuff as dreams are made on. This year, Alaina Pincus joined our team as our Graduate Advisor; her prior experience in publishing proved very useful in our copy editing stage and in training our student copy editors. The continued support of Michael Rothberg, Head of the English Department, which you can all see in his contribution to this year's journal in the Note from the Department Head, speaks volumes to the collaborative effort to enable undergraduate research in the humanities at this university. Another thanks goes to Merinda Hensley from the University Library, for again offering your services to train us in the online platform, Open Journal Systems. Harriett Green—we treasure your unblinking willingness to offer your expertise as the English and Digital Humanities Librarian, especially attending our informational sessions. I cannot forget to recognize the quick and efficient help that Anna Trammell, a student in the Graduate School of Library and Information Science, gave us in times of technological troubles. The support of the Director of Undergraduate Studies, Dale Bauer, for organizing a panel for the Undergraduate Research Symposium, which allowed us to share our work with a range of students and faculty. Many thanks to the English Advising Office, including Anna Ivy, Kristine McCoskey, Angela Smith, and Kirstin Wilcox, each of whom has made a concerted effort to share opportunities to participate in the journal with the undergraduate student body and prospective Illinois students.

EDITOR'S NOTE

This issue of the journal features five articles, peer-reviewed and copy-edited by undergraduate students and guided under faculty mentorship. These articles engage with a variety of scholars, ranging from literary critics on Joyce, Shakespeare, and Orwell to philosophers of phenomenology such as Hegel and Merleau-Ponty, while offering original insights on its selected primary texts. It is evident, as you will see, that these authors have transitioned from students to autonomous thinkers and scholars in their own right.

The evolution of this journal, in just a short two years since this project was conceived, astounds me in the best way; most profoundly in witnessing how this organization brings faculty, graduate, and undergraduate students into the fold, an accomplishment that at least to my knowledge is unprecedented in the humanities here at Illinois. I consider this journal a project produced collectively, and I look forward with great anticipation to the ways that this thriving organization and publication will continue to evolve—I encourage you all as readers to also follow along. With the utmost pleasure, I welcome you to the second edition of *Re:Search, the Undergraduate Literary Criticism Journal*!

Nick Millman
Editor in Chief and Founder

LETTER FROM DEPARTMENT HEAD

It is a great pleasure to have a chance to welcome you to the new issue of *Re:Search: The Undergraduate Literary Criticism Journal at the University of Illinois*. Last year, *Re:Search* joined our literary journal *Montage* as a new voice of undergraduate research in the department.

In its first two issues, *Re:Search* has brought together essays by undergraduate scholars that exemplify the great breadth and diversity of approaches to literature in the department of English and other literature departments on campus. In those issues, you can find essays on everything from George Orwell and Elizabeth Gaskell to the comics of Jack Kirby and the problem of paternal masculinity in video games. The essays range across periods, genres, themes, and media. They are all now searchable on Google Scholar and indexed on the University library's online catalogue.

While I find the content of the journal impressive, I am equally impressed by the process that lies behind that content. Each issue is the outcome of collaboration between a number of our majors as well as between students and faculty. *Re:Search* is run by students—an executive board as well as teams of editorial & review board members and copy editors—who carefully select, edit, and publish the essays. Faculty members are very happy to help out by serving as mentors who work closely with individual authors and by providing more general guidance regarding research and writing. This year, for instance, Professor Lori Newcomb, who has been the journal's faculty advisor, led a workshop on thesis drafting, and Harriet Green, our English and digital humanities librarian, led another on research methods. English graduate student Alaina Pincus has served as graduate advisor and has offered her own expertise and experience derived from work on a public scholarship forum dedicated to women and women's issues in eighteenth-century literature.

Re:Search is a key part of a departmental and campus-wide effort to promote research by undergraduates. Students who contribute to the journal—as author, editor, peer reviewer, copy editor, or member of the executive board—gain credit toward the Undergraduate Research Certificate offered by the Office of Undergraduate Research. Papers published in the journal have also been presented at the Undergraduate Research Symposium.

In thinking about these flourishing activities on our campus, I am struck by the fact that when I was in college—just a few short decades ago!—nobody ever talked about "undergraduate research." It wasn't really until my final semester, when I was working on an honors thesis on Shakespeare and the printing press, that I did something that now seems like research—though I'm not sure I would have described it that way back then.

LETTER FROM DEPARTMENT HEAD

And only later, when I was in graduate school, did I have the chance to work on a journal like *Re:Search* and that turned out to be one of the best experiences I ever had in school. I'm glad our students get to take part in something like this earlier than I did.

The fact that nobody was talking about undergraduate research when I was in college didn't stop us from being excited about our education or about the possibility of developing new ideas, but it meant we didn't really have a framework or vocabulary for thinking about what we were doing *as research*. And I believe that matters. The reason it is important to think of our work as research—and not just a paper or assignment required for a class—is that it allows us to conceive of what we're doing as part of a *larger conversation* about culture, about knowledge, about the world. Although we in the humanities do most of our work alone—in the library or in front of a computer—understanding that work as research means recognizing that we are part of a community of other researchers, of people trying to make sense of the world in newer and better ways. It is a good feeling to be part of a collective undertaking aimed at greater insight.

I am so happy to see undergraduate research alive on our campus—and I am especially pleased to be able to introduce the new issue of *Re:Search*. Enjoy your reading—and get involved in the conversation!

Michael Rothberg
Professor and Head of the Department of English

AIMS & SCOPE

Re:Search: The Undergraduate Literary Criticism Journal at Illinois Urbana Champaign is an undergraduate produced, peer-reviewed open-access online journal designed to annually publish works exclusively by undergraduate students. It seeks to create a place for undergraduate students to showcase and publish literary criticism within a greater academic discourse while nurturing a collaborative community between faculty, administration, and undergraduate students. All published work is by Illinois students; students from any discipline may submit to *Re:Search* as long as the submissions are in accordance with our vision of the journal as a site of critical analysis. We encourage undergraduate students to submit literary, media, or cultural criticism. We accept revisions of papers written previously for a class, current or completed honors theses, and even projects conceived outside the classroom. The most important criterion for acceptance is that the author offers fresh, new critical analysis of a text, film or other work. We welcome an analysis of texts from any period or language, given that modern English translation is provided for any material quoted within the submission. Although theory is not the journal's primary topic, we encourage submissions that refer to, reflect on, and engage with theory to provide richer and more nuanced analyses. Our audience includes university students, instructors, administration, alumni, and prospective students.

Re:Search is unique among journals of its type in supporting students throughout the research and publication process by working closely with the Illinois English Department, the Office of Undergraduate Research (OUR), the English Student Council (ESC), and the Scholarly Commons in the University Library. The process includes faculty mentorship, in which students work side-by-side with a faculty advisor throughout the writing process. The OUR and ESC will offer opportunities to share work-in-progress and train students in the Open Journal Systems online platform to participate in the peer-review and copy editing processes, and the Library will provide a fully-indexed platform for completed articles. This journal fosters collaboration between faculty, administration, and undergraduate students, and we hope for this to be a joint project among us all.

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Re:Search

There's No Place Like Home:
Orwell and a Return to the Domestic Sphere

Melissa Flisk, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

ABSTRACT

In his novels *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* (1936) and *Coming Up for Air* (1939), George Orwell depicts the world of the lower-middle class in the English suburbs during the Interwar period in the 1930s. Through the eyes of his two male protagonists Gordon Comstock of *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* and George Bowling of *Coming Up for Air*, Orwell shows the struggles of the middle class Englishman as he attempts to break from the imperfect society in which he lives. However, these novels, written rather early in Orwell's career, are understudied and overshadowed by his later works; in my paper I reopen a discussion of Orwell's earlier works, which are rich in complexity and dialectical in nature. In this paper I will argue that the novels do not end in a retreat to the domestic sphere, but may in fact support the average, middle-class Englishman's attempt to live decently and raise a family.

KEYWORDS

Capitalism, Domestic Sphere, George Orwell, Mass Culture, National Decline

"Our civilisation is founded on greed and fear, but in the lives of common men the greed and fear are transmuted into something nobler. The lower-middle class people in there, behind their lace curtains, with their children and their scraps of furniture and their aspidistras—they lived by the money-code, sure enough, and yet they contrived to keep their decency. The money code as they interpreted it was not merely cynical and hoggish. They had their standards, their inviolable points of honour. They 'kept themselves respectable'—kept the aspidistra flying. Besides we're alive. *They were bound up in the bundle of life."*

-George Orwell, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*

In his novels *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* (1936) and *Coming Up for Air* (1939), George Orwell, with an amused yet critical eye, views the world of the lower middle class in the English suburbs during the interwar period in the 1930s. Through the eyes of his two male protagonists, Gordon Comstock of *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* and George Bowling of *Coming Up for Air*, Orwell dramatizes the struggles of middle-class Englishmen as they attempt to break from societies tainted by capitalism. Loosely based on Orwell's own experience working in the Hampstead-based bookshop Booklover's Corner, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* tells the story of Gordon Comstock, a "moth-eaten" twenty-nine-year-old who chooses, somewhat perversely, to struggle as a shopkeeper at a used bookstore and write poetry after declaring his "war on money" (3, 120). Three years later, Orwell published *Coming Up for Air*, which follows a middle-aged, denture-wearing insurance salesman named George (Tubby) Bowling who attempts to temporarily break from pre-World War II English society in order to return to his boyhood home in Lower Binfield.

In both novels, Orwell presents his readers with male protagonists who appear on the surface to be rather unremarkable in appearance or talents. Over the course of each novel, Bowling and Comstock develop into complex figures who are intelligent, adaptable, and funny, arguably capturing the experience and voice of the class-conscious Englishman during the 1930s. Orwell's attempt to depict the common man is reflected in both names of the protagonists: Gordon Comstock acts as a symbol of "the nation's common stock" and George Bowling may refer to the bowler hat, which was extremely popular with the middle-class Englishman of the 1930s (Kuchta 182, 174). By offering readers an intimate portrayal of the average man in a

period of increasing anonymity and ubiquity of mass culture, Orwell immerses readers in 1930s English society, a period in which the middle class is widening and World War II is on the horizon. Though both protagonists strive to find their place and identity by escaping flawed societies, both novels conclude with the protagonists establishing a sense of identity within the comfort of the domestic sphere.

Though many critics, Jed Esty in particular, would argue that these Orwell novels depict 1930s England in a state of "pervasive national decline," I find that this reading of Orwell's work inadequately represents the complexity of Orwell's protagonists Gordon Comstock and George Bowling (Esty 9). In addition, reading these novels as mere signs of political and financial decline is complicated by, and overlooks, many textual nuances including Orwell's use of humor and irony to depict his protagonists' ambivalence about success. Gordon Comstock declares war on capitalism and rejects mass culture, leaving his job at an advertising firm to pursue a career as a poet. George Bowling takes a secret vacation to Lower Binfield, his childhood home near the River Thames, to escape his family and the premonitions of war that consume his thoughts. However, neither novel ends in failure, but instead concludes with the protagonists returning to and accepting circumstances in order to maintain their duty to family, which appears to offer the protagonists at least some measure of comfort and purpose. To view Bowling's and Comstock's return to the domestic sphere as merely a sign of decline would disregard the agency that Comstock gains through the establishment of a family and the sense of purpose that Bowling gains from providing for his family. In this paper, I will argue that these critically overlooked texts are actually rather hopeful in the portrayals of middle-class English life in the 1930s, especially in comparison to Orwell's later novels such as *Animal Farm* (1945) and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), and deserve attention and continued critical study by twenty-first-century readers.

Ambivalence towards Success

In his novel *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, Orwell introduces his readers to Gordon Comstock, a public-school-educated poet living in the London suburbs who works in a shabby used bookstore. However, Orwell's protagonist is not the summation of the "[f]ivepence halfpenny," tattered clothes, and small amount of tobacco that is in his possession in the opening

pages of the text (*Aspidistra* 3). Coming from a middle class family, Comstock had once gained a respectable position in the accounts department at an advertising firm, the New Albion. Though he "despised and repudiated the money-code," Comstock's poetry and creativity earned him the recognition of his boss and a promotion to copywriter's apprentice (51-2). Orwell writes that "Gordon showed, almost from the start, a remarkable talent for copywriting" and that this was in fact the first time that Comstock's writing and creativity led to success; this success suggests that he is basically intelligent and has creative potential, which is valued by his employers and capitalist society (53). However, Comstock viewed his success at the advertising firm as damaging to his spirit, deciding instead that he must seek out a job that would allow him to escape the "money-world"; though this attempted escape is depicted as rather noble, it is ultimately doomed (54).

Gordon Comstock's scorn of financial success and his decision to take a job in a used bookshop may be viewed by readers as an illustration of decline in prosperity in 1930s England. However, this reading of decline is complicated by Orwell's depiction of Samuel, or "Gran'pa" Comstock, who "rose on the wave of Victorian prosperity," becoming wealthy by "plunder[ing] the proletariat and the foreigner of fifty thousand pounds" (37). His exploited wealth was largely unsustainable as his children "dribbled it away" unsuccessfully in their various failed business attempts (39). Though readers are introduced to Gordon Comstock when he has a miserable bookstore job and only a few coins in his pocket, he is depicted as different from his family in that he refuses to live his life as a slave to capitalism or to engage in the exploitation of others. Through the characterization of Samuel Comstock as ruthless and unjust, Orwell challenges the view that the character of an individual can be assessed in terms of wealth or financial success; Orwell is critiquing capitalist society and making readers increasingly sympathetic towards Gordon Comstock's struggle to break free from this system.

In addition, Gran'pa Comstock is portrayed as a destructive force; the kind of man that Orwell will caricature in his later novel *Animal Farm*: "Man is the only creature that consumes without producing. He does not give milk, he does not lay eggs, he is too weak to pull the plough, he cannot run fast enough to catch rabbits. Yet he is lord of all the animals" (7). This image of man as a "lord" who "consumes without producing" is a portrait of Gordon's grandfather Samuel Comstock, who despite a virility to produce eleven children, ultimately inhibits his children's economic success and prosperity later in life with his oppressive

demeanor. Orwell remarks "[h]e had lain upon them as a garden roller lies upon daisies," crushing their spirit and leaving them "listless, gutless, [and] unsuccessful" (38). This lack of productivity is also reflected in their disinterest in family, as many of the Comstocks died unmarried and produced only two grandchildren, one of whom is Gordon, who was "unintended" (39). Though Samuel fathered eleven children, he seemed also to have destroyed the future of the Comstock family through the sheer force of his overbearing personality.

The contrast between Samuel Comstock's destructive desire for financial success and Gordon's interest in artistic dignity over wealth shows that Gordon's ambivalence about success is not only a sign of national decline. Although the wealth acquired by Samuel Comstock in the Victorian period has been lost, leaving Gordon and his sister Julia living arguably less comfortably than their parents, Gordon chooses to live his life as free from the stresses and demands of capitalist society as possible. In order to craft poetry untainted by American mass culture, which Orwell represents by vulgar advertisements and billboards consuming London, Gordon chooses to leave his respectable and comfortable position at the firm. Gordon's ambivalence about monetary success is thus rooted in his desire to live a more artistically pure life, free from the destructive forces of capitalism.

In understanding Gordon Comstock's chosen disinterest in success and self-inflicted poverty, one cannot merely argue that Comstock is "an idiot" who is "[t]oo self-pitying to see the world as it is" (Colls 40). I would argue instead that even though Comstock fails in his attempt to break from capitalist society, his struggle is still admirable, though at times it may appear ridiculous. Comstock, like Orwell, is "a 'public-school-educated Socialist'" with a desire to write and support the common man (Hitchens 121). His desire to break from the capitalist society in which he lived proves to be a more difficult task than expected. However, the narrator is somewhat forgiving of Comstock, as he struggles yet fails to live a life of poverty in order to write with a spirit untainted by capitalism. Readers are sympathetic to the financial anxieties consuming his thoughts, as these anxieties are shared by the common man and thus by readers. Therefore, the argument that Comstock is merely "[t]oo self pitying" underestimates the character's complexities: his slight, though evident, literary success and his shared humanity. In addition, this argument fails to recognize that the novel is loosely based on Orwell's own experience as a young writer who was employed in the Hampstead-based bookshop, Booklover's

Corner, from 1934 to 1935, and thus the novel might contain a note of autobiographical self-mockery.

Like Comstock, George Bowling, the protagonist of *Coming Up for Air*, also appears rather disinterested in achieving success or accumulating wealth. Bowling is introduced to readers as he prepares for a day off from work at The Flying Salamander insurance company and leaves his home to take the train into London to get his new false teeth. Unlike Comstock, who is anxious over the little money he has, Bowling lives a life of relative comfort due to his position at the insurance agency and begins the day by deciding how to spend the seventeen quid he has won, unbeknownst to his wife, at the horse races. However, though Bowling has a respectable job and would be viewed by Comstock as a slave to the "money-god," he is also conscious of his artificial role in capitalist society. Bowling thinks that though "[t]he prole[tarian] suffers physically. . . . He's a free man when he isn't working," acknowledging the demeaning nature of his own kind of white-collar work (13). He goes on to admit that "[m]y own line, insurance, is a swindle . . . but it's an open swindle with the cards on the table," clearly suggesting a sense of disinterest in professional success as his work is a "swindle" (13).

Though Todd Kuchta has argued that Orwell depicts the suburban men of *Coming Up for Air* "as English avatars of the colonized: exploited, disposed of their homes, and plagued by feelings of powerlessness and enslavement," I instead argue that the lives of suburban men appear increasingly insignificant with World War II on the horizon (172). These men and women of the suburbs are members of the lost generation, who have already experienced a major world war that left them feeling powerless and defeated. Bowling, like the other "poor bastard[s]" who are never free from the burdens of maintaining a middle-class existence in a capitalist society, works not to be successful, but to maintain decency (13). However, Bowling doesn't seem to feel that his disinterest in financial success is due to the exploitation of the common man in capitalist English society in the 1930s, but rather that his generation's involvement in World War I left him with a desire to lead a quiet, decent life in the suburbs.

Though Bowling appears disinterested in attaining professional success, his story is definitely not one of decline. Thinking back to his boyhood in Lower Binfield, Bowling believes that his father "would probably be rather proud of me if he could see me now . . . own[ing] a motor-car and liv[ing] in a house with a bathroom" (39). Though Bowling reflects back on his years in Lower Binfield with great nostalgia, he also establishes a comfortable middle-class life

and escapes his lower-middle-class upbringing through hard work. Unlike his father who "[m]ostly … did a rather petty class of business," Bowling read often and prepared himself for a career in business, "suddenly turn[ing] highbrow" during his period of service in World War I (48, 115). Bowling's ability to educate himself and leave behind his rural childhood in Lower Binfield resembles the bildungsroman trajectory, as he reflects on his journey to adulthood. His marriage to Hilda Vincent further proves his financial stability and ability to maneuver up social classes, as she "belonged to . . . the poverty-stricken officer class" that had status but lacked money (156). Bowling's life does not show England in a state of decline, but instead a nation with opportunities for mobility, even though these opportunities may only exist within the realms of capitalism and mass culture.

Though both male protagonists appear disinterested in accumulating wealth and achieving professional success, this by no means indicates that the nation is in a state of financial, political, or moral decline. Both Comstock and Bowling are somewhat intelligent, well-read men; Comstock found success as the apprentice of a copywriter but quit his position in order to pursue a career writing poetry, and although George Bowling had to leave school to help support his family, he worked hard to learn business and read often, earning a position at an insurance company. These flawed societies engender their ambivalence for success, in which both Bowling and Comstock live and work and from which both protagonists desire to escape.

The Attempted Escape

[H]e wanted some kind of job; not a "good" job, but a job that would keep his body without wholly buying his soul.
George Orwell, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*

In *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, Comstock attempts to escape Americanized mass culture in order to produce poetry of artistic dignity. With the reluctant support of his sister Julia, who struggles to maintain a decent lower-class existence, Comstock is free to quit his respectable position at the New Albion to pursue a career as a poet. Comstock declares war on the "money-god" and decides to work "the very reverse of a 'good' job," taking a poorly paid position at McKechnie's used bookstore (105, 55). In the opening pages of the novel, readers view

Comstock after he has broken away from the "money-god" and capitalist society that he loathed. He is among stacks of old Victorian novels that sit on the bottom shelves "quietly rotting," a scene that suggests Comstock's escape is ill-fated in this environment of decay (8).

Across the street from his shop, a wall of billboards and advertisements that "symbolize … the death and decay not only of English culture but the independence of English manhood" stare back at Comstock as he attempts to write poetry between assisting customers (Gopinath 74). Comstock despises these advertisements; they steal his focus and attention, reminding him of the individual's anonymity in modern society. The constant gaze of the billboards seems to make his dream of writing poetry even more difficult. Though Comstock's departure from the advertising firm enabled him to publish his short book of poetry entitled *Mice*, which was well received by numerous critics who noted that his work was "[o]f exceptional promise," the novel opens ironically with Gordon consumed with thoughts of how to ration his remaining cigarettes (*Aspidistra* 66). The reader's rather humble introduction to the protagonist suggests that, though Comstock has embarked on a noble journey to break with capitalist society, his consciousness of his own poverty has started to consume his thoughts, suggesting that his somewhat ridiculous attempt is doomed.

Comstock's disdain for the material trappings of English decency emblematizes his attempted escape from capitalist structures of power. Comstock is often described as wearing worn, tattered clothing, lacking any interest in dressing decently, and refusing anyone's assistance in purchasing new clothes by remarking that "[t]hey're suited to my station" (*Aspidistra* 108). His scorn for maintaining a facade of material decency is most vividly epitomized in his contempt for the aspidistra plant, which adorns the front windows of the lower-middle-class homes that line the block where he lives. Comstock decides he will even try to kill the aspidistra in his own window by "starving it of water, grinding hot cigarette-ends against its stem, and even mixing salt with its earth" (28). However, the plant continues to survive humbly, like the middle-class Englishman in general. His loathing of the aspidistra plant also sheds light on Orwell's mockery of Comstock's own self-pity as Comstock attempts to destroy this symbol of decency. Comstock's battle against the aspidistra allegorizes a struggle for agency, emphasizing Comstock's disempowered state.

In contrast to Comstock who strains to completely break from the capitalist system, Bowling, who basically accepts his role as a father, husband, and insurance man and maintains a

façade of decency as suggested by his false teeth, desires to "come up for air" or temporarily break from society. After fifteen years as a family man, Bowling remarks that he was "beginning to get fed up" with being a good father and husband (*Coming Up* 6). Bowling is also depicted as physically irritated, which materializes in the "disgusting sticky feeling" of a soapy neck that remains after he is rushed out of the bathroom by his son Billy (7). In these early moments of the novel, readers are introduced to a male protagonist who is in desperate need of a break from his job at The Flying Salamander, his wife "Old Hilda," and his needy children (7).

However, Bowling's trip back to his childhood home of Lower Binfield is not a vacation from his family. Over the course of the novel, George Bowling is haunted by visions of war to come; he envisions planes flying over the suburb in which he lives, "[h]ouses going up into the air, bloomers soaked with blood, canary singing on above the corpses" (24). Bowling's only moments of comfort are when he suddenly flashes back to his childhood and his memories of a beloved fishing hole. Unable to confront his future and the future of England, George attempts to remove himself from the present to return to his past, to a state of lost freedom and innocence.

Though Comstock is a cranky poet and Bowling a bluff survivor, both characters share a distaste for mass culture, especially Americanized mass culture. We see Comstock's distaste for mass culture most noticeably in his departure from the New Albion firm, but also in his contempt for the ads that capture his attention while at the bookstore. One such advertisement pictures a clerk drinking a cup of Bovex in a café that reads, "'Corner Table enjoys his meal with Bovex,'" suggesting that the man is not a man but reified as "the Corner Table" (*Aspidistra* 5; Gopinath 74). In this novel, mass culture, especially advertisements, takes from the average man his autonomy and strips him of his individuality in order to transform him into a malleable object, like the "Corner Table" (*Aspidistra* 5).

Similarly, in *Coming Up for Air*, Bowling compares mass culture to "[a] sort of propaganda floating around . . . [in which] nothing matters except slickness and shininess and streamlining" (26). American brand names seem to consume London, as Bowling notes that restaurants no longer serve real food but instead "[j]ust lists of stuff with American names" (26). In the society of interwar London, things are not as they appear; this commonplace deception is manifested as Bowling bites into a frankfurter that is surprisingly, and rather disgustingly, made of fish. However, neither Comstock nor Bowling completely succeeds in escaping from modern mass culture.

The Thwarted Escape

The mistake you make, don't you see, is in thinking one can live in a corrupt society without being corrupt oneself.

George Orwell, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*

Though Comstock finds some success as a poet, receiving fifty dollars from the *Californian Review* for one of his poems in addition to publishing *Mice*, he ultimately fails to truly break from capitalist society as his thoughts are constantly consumed by his lack of money. His escape from capitalist respectability, which supposedly freed his soul from the "money-god," instead ironically increases his anxiety about money, clouding his ability to write. His break from capitalist society and embrace of poverty causes Comstock's self-destructive nature to surface. Comstock remarks that "[i]t was the lack of money, simply the lack of money, that robbed him of his power to 'write'" (*Aspidistra* 9). Throughout the novel, Comstock is completely preoccupied with money: borrowing money from Julia, spending money frivolously, and struggling with what little money he has. In addition, Comstock's frivolous spending speaks to his self-destructive nature, and his lack of financial stability leaves him, at nearly thirty-years-old, living alone in a boardinghouse in which "tea-making was the major household offense, next to bringing a woman in" (29). Comstock's attempt to break free from the "money-god" leaves him disempowered with little peace of mind and independence.

Comstock's obsession with his relative poverty eventually strains his friendship with Ravelston, his wealthy socialist friend whose help he often refuses, and complicates his relationship with his sister Julia, to whom he turns frequently for financial support though she also is barely surviving on a meager salary. Comstock's frivolous spending of his payment from the *Californian Review* on drinks and tarts begins his downward spiral in which he is arrested for public indecency and disorderly conduct, causing him to lose his job at McKechnie's bookstore. Comstock then finds an even worse paying job in an even worse bookstore, "go[ing] down, deep down, into some world where decency no longer mattered" where he appears even more miserable, though his own self-destructive tendencies cause his misfortunes (203). When Comstock seems to have given himself over to squalor and self-hatred, he is visited by Ravelston who advises him that one cannot live uncorrupted in a corrupt world and suggests that he seek

out a better job with a higher pay. Though Ravelston's advice does not immediately cause Comstock to surrender in his war against the "money-god," it acts as a major turning point in the text, leading indirectly to Rosemary's pregnancy and Comstock's return to respectable professional life.

Comstock's self-imposed poverty most acutely complicates the relationship with his girlfriend, Rosemary, as Comstock feels that his poverty prevents him from dating and marrying her. His obsessive thoughts of money inhibit Comstock's ability to consummate his love with Rosemary, as he wonders, "how can you make love when you have only eightpence in your pocket and are thinking about it all the time?" (*Aspidistra* 139). In their only moment of intimacy, Comstock realizes he has stupidly forgotten to bring a condom. Rosemary questions, "[h]ow could you be so *thoughtless*", to which he replies, "[y]ou must take your chance," blaming his lack of financial stability for his self-destructive nature (141-142). Though Gordon wants to marry Rosemary, he wonders, "how can you marry on two quid a week? Money, money, always money!" (104). In "Orwell and the Feminists: Difficulties with Girls," Christopher Hitchens argues that Rosemary "never even pretends to have the smallest idea what Gordon is talking about," but I would argue instead that Rosemary tolerates Comstock's lack of financial stability because, as an independent earner, she does not wish to be taken care of (Hitchens 148).

However, Rosemary finds Comstock's insistence on shabbiness and squalor rather off-putting, asking him, "why can't you look after yourself properly?", to which he replies "[c]leanness, decency, energy, self-respect—everything. It's all money" (*Aspidistra* 108-109). However, Comstock's financial insecurity causes him great anxiety, leaving him feeling emasculated as he cannot take Rosemary out for dates without constantly calculating his money. In addition, Rosemary's financial independence may threaten Comstock, as her independence offers her a sense of agency and freedom outside of the domestic sphere. Emasculated by his own lack of financial freedom, Comstock seizes agency by verbally and physically coercing Rosemary to consummate their relationship, a self-destructive course of action that Rosemary refuses to pity. However, Comstock cannot remain free from the burdens of capitalist society and the financial demands of romance after Rosemary announces her pregnancy.

Escape from society is also thwarted in *Coming Up for Air*, as Bowling also quickly realizes that he cannot break from the present when he sees how much Lower Binfield has

changed since his departure. The place that he remembers so fondly no longer remains, as Bowling remarks: "The first question was, where was Lower Binfield? I don't mean that it had been demolished. It had merely been swallowed. The thing I was looking down at was a good-sized manufacturing town" (211). Bowling, attempting to escape from a London where "[e]verything [is] slick and shiny and streamlined" finds that his childhood town, too, has grown, becoming more modern and prosperous (*Coming Up* 25-6). The town, which used to have a tiny population of two thousand, has sprawled into a population of twenty-five thousand, with factories and beautiful new houses lining private roads. Bowling's father's shop has been transformed into a tea shop and the old stockings factory is "making bombs nowadays," revealing to Bowling that Lower Binfield has not gone untouched by the mass culture of the period and the threats of war on the horizon (230). Lower Binfield is not then a symbol of national decline as it has actually progressed in terms of economic growth and development. What Bowling truly loses is a pre-war innocence and a state of childhood to which he can longer regress. Because the places in which Bowling spent his childhood days are unrecognizable, he learns quickly that one cannot return to the past or truly break from the present.

Bowling's attempt to "come up for air" is finally thwarted, and he is driven back into adult life when an English bomber plane accidentally releases a bomb over the streets of Lower Binfield, killing three and forcing him to realize that he cannot prevent the war on the horizon. With this newfound knowledge and a few comical situations including a run-in with his old girlfriend, Elsie, whom he describes as "merely shapeless," Gordon returns home to his wife and children (*Coming Up* 243). As he returns, Bowling wonders, "Why had I run away like that? Why had I bothered about the future and the past, seeing that the future and the past don't matter?", emphasizing that one must instead focus on the present (277-8). This knowledge strangely empowers Bowling, who intends to focus on the present needs of his family and wife, because that is all he can truly do.

The Protagonists' Return to Family Life

"He was thirty and there was grey in his hair, yet he had a queer feeling that he had only just grown up."

George Orwell, Keep the Aspidistra Flying

After Bowling and Comstock find that they cannot escape from modern London life, they return to the domestic sphere to take up their roles as fathers and husbands. Yet these returns are not a depressing setback, but instead a message of hopefulness. Through their reaffirmed duties to the English family structure, Bowling and Comstock embrace the ideals of English decency. Their roles as fathers and husbands offer the male protagonists a sense of agency and comfort in a modern English society of increasing anonymity.

At the conclusion of the novel, Comstock, who was greatly disempowered by his impoverished state, finds a renewed sense of agency in his ability to start a family and his realization of his creative powers manifested through the fathering of Rosemary's child. Comstock's commitment to Rosemary and their family is not truly affirmed until he visits a library and views two pictures of a nine-week- and six-week-old fetus; it is in this moment that Gordon finally realizes that "he had created" something of which he can be proud, far surpassing the poetry he has produced over the course of the novel (*Aspidistra* 234). Comstock's fathering of a child is the pinnacle of his creative endeavors, as it was truly his only creation that lacked ties to the capitalist society in which he lived. Though Orwell himself (under the pseudonym of Eric Blair) was unable to father a child, Comstock's desire to have a family may in fact reflect Orwell's own desire. According to Gordon Bowker's biography of George Orwell, while writing the novel in 1935, Orwell met his future wife, and they married on June 9, 1936. Though the couple tried and failed to have children, they later adopted a son, Richard Horatio Blair. This suggests that the novel, with its arguably hopeful portrayal of the domestic sphere, is in fact quasi-autobiographical. Therefore, though Comstock's acceptance of the role of father and husband leads him to resume his position at the New Albion, Comstock is ultimately empowered by his familial duties and arguably has more peace of mind at the conclusion of the narrative, which would reflect Orwell's view of the family life at the time in which he was writing. This return to the middle class and the establishment of a family "signifies growth and maturity" for Comstock (Gopinath 85). He accepts his role in a society that is corrupt but inescapable and

decides to "keep the aspidistra flying," stuffing his poetry manuscript "between the bars of the drain," watching it "plop into the water below" and exclaiming "vicisti, O aspidistra" (*Aspidistra* 240).

Comstock's new sense of empowerment is reflected in his ironic insistence on buying an aspidistra. He now views this once despised plant, a symbol of conventionality and a facade of English decency, as the "tree of life," a symbol for the lower-middle-class English family and its survival instinct (*Aspidistra* 239). Comstock's demand for an aspidistra plant, with him remarking that "[i]t is the proper thing to have. It's practically the first thing one buys after one's married. In fact, it's practically part of the wedding ceremony," is met with disapproval from Rosemary who argues that the aspidistra is "awful depressing" (246). Though Comstock's insistence may appear foolish and ironic, the choice to have an aspidistra in the house does not prove that Comstock has succumbed to the drudgery of middle-class existence but instead is an opportunity for Comstock to exert his agency as a husband and head of family, as Comstock remarks, "Didn't you promise to obey me just now?" (246). The fight concludes with the newly married couple going to the florist to purchase the aspidistra, which will now symbolize Comstock's somewhat comic sense of agency and dominance within his own domestic sphere.

Though Todd Kuchta argues that "[t]o keep the aspidistra flying is thus to wave the flag of defeat," I argue that the aspidistra instead is actually only a self-conscious symbol of middle-class decency (182). As Comstock returns to mainstream society with a greater understanding of poverty, he no longer views the aspidistra as a surrender to mediocrity but self-identifies with the aspidistra as it "stands for the ordinary but 'noble' aspirations of the 'common man' that are integral to the family hearth" (Gopinath 87). Therefore, I would argue that Orwell views the English middle class of the 1930s empathetically. These middle-class men and women, like Gordon and Rosemary Comstock, "keep the aspidistra flying."

Over the course of the novel, we follow Comstock's struggle to break from the capitalist English society, which proves unfruitful in that his heightened anxiety about money clouds his ability to create poetry. Despite Comstock's rebellion against the "money-god" and the New Albion, he only achieves a stable identity when he produces an heir and settles down to raise a family. Some critics view Comstock's return to capitalist society and middle-class life as a sign of defeat and a retreat that "Orwell wants us to find . . . disturbing" (Kuchta 183). However, this argument fails to account for Ravelston's assertion that man cannot live uncorrupted in a corrupt

society and the fact that at Comstock's moment of surrender "he was at peace" (*Aspidistra* 238). Though the average middle-class Englishman experiences society as a cog in a wheel, as reflected in the Bovex advertisements, one can still find a sense of purpose in the domestic sphere. In addition, Gordon Comstock does not simply retreat back into the domestic sphere and his job at The New Albion, but returns back into society a wiser man, knowing now that a life free from all the burdens of respectability is not perfectly free at all. In *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, Comstock's only successful break seems to come in his establishment of a family and the comfort and agency he finds within the domestic sphere; he returns to society with a new understanding of money and decency as he learns to tolerate capitalism rather than fighting against it.

In *Coming Up for Air*, after bombs drop on Lower Binfield, Bowling looks at the destruction caused by this strange occurrence and thinks to himself, "This finishes me with Lower Binfield . . . I'm going home" (265). On his drive home, Bowling comes to the realization that his life, and the lives of all English men and women, is on the cusp of inevitable change. Bowling muses:

> The bad times are coming, and the stream-lined men are coming too. What's coming afterwards I don't know, it hardly even interests me. I only know that if there is anything you care a curse about, better say good-bye to it now, because everything you've ever known is going down, down, into the muck, with the machine guns rattling all the time. (269)

Though these thoughts may be viewed as a period of existential crisis in which "Bowling is pretty much on his own," I argue that these thoughts offer the protagonist a sense of calm in that neither he nor any other individual has the power or agency to prevent these changes from occurring (Colls 129). With this knowledge, Bowling returns to the only thing he "care[s] a curse about," his family (269).

Though many critics, including Christopher Hitchens, criticize Bowling's wife Hilda as "a tight-fisted and joyless type," I would argue that, although an imperfect couple, George and Hilda do, in a way, truly love each other (Hitchens 148). From the beginning of the novel, Bowling admits that he is far from the perfect husband as he discusses cheating on his wife while on business trips and remarks that the thought of Hilda with another man would not bother him, stating, "not that I'd care a damn, in fact it would rather please me to find that she'd still got that much kick left in her" (*Coming Up* 22). In fact this portrayal of married life may be semi-autobiographical

as suggested by D. J. Taylor in his article "Another Piece of the Puzzle" which states that "Orwell, by his own admission, was unfaithful to his wife, but [their relationship was] durable," like the marriage of Bowling and Hilda (1). At the end of the novel, Bowling returns to his wife with the realization that he really does care for her. Bowling thinks to himself:

> So I'm fond of Hilda after all, you say? I don't know what you mean by fond. Are your fond of your own face? Probably not, but you can't imagine yourself without it. It's part of you. Well, that's how I felt about Hilda. When things are going well I can't stick the sight of her, but the thought that she might be dead or even in pain sent shivers through me. (*Coming Up* 271)

Therefore, having certainty of the coming war, Bowling returns home, because this is what he truly cares about.

Keep the Aspidistra Flying and *Coming Up for Air* are complex comic novels that have been overshadowed by Orwell's later, more explicitly political novels such as *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Animal Farm*. In fact, many readings of these earlier works may be influenced by the heavily allegorical fear of totalitarianism in Orwell's more well-known, later novels. The influence of these later texts may in fact cause readers to view the lives of Gordon Comstock and George Bowling as bleaker than they actually are. This influence may shadow the novels' interpretations, causing Todd Kuchta to view Comstock and Bowling rather one-sidedly as "English avatars of the colonized," though they in fact do also practice agency and move freely in a minimally oppressive society, and leading Robert Colls to call Comstock "an idiot" for his self-pitying nature, failing to recognize that his self-destructive nature may be rooted in his unfruitful though admirable attempt to break from the imperfect society in which he lives (Kuchta 172; Colls 40). These later novels may also cause leading writers such as Jed Esty to make broad claims that for Orwell, amongst other writers, "imperial decline . . . impl[ies] national decline"; overall, bleakness is greatly overstated in such critical writings (Esty 215).

These arguments of decline, however, insufficiently register the complex and dialectical nature of the novels. Gordon Comstock and George Bowling are not examples of the "existential male antihero," but they are characters, though slightly limited by the demands of society, who are capable of change and growth throughout the novel (Esty 9). In contrast to Winston Smith, the protagonist of Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* which concludes with Smith's declaration of love for Big Brother after being tortured at the Ministry of Love, Comstock and Bowling freely choose to work and support a family. They are realistically-depicted characters

whom readers both love and hate as they continuously struggle, fail, and succeed throughout the novels; they are the average, middle-class man who must work to support his family and maintain decency. I argue that because Orwell writes such complex protagonists in these novels, readers are sympathetic to the struggle of the everyday man, because their struggles are in fact shared struggles. The return to the domestic sphere at the end of the novel should not then be written off as a retreat or a sign of decline, because the domestic sphere is where our protagonists find a sense of agency, comfort, and purpose despite the mass culture society that surrounds them.

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Re:Search

The Invisible (S)elf:
Identity in House Elves and Harry Potter

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ABSTRACT

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, a French phenomenological philosopher, argues in *The Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) for the creation of identity through the use of the body. Subjects are born into a world with coded rules and traditions. The subject constructs their identity through a space that they have no say in. The use of servile creatures, the House Elves, in J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series in relation to Merleau-Ponty's ideas on identity display how even constricted beings can create a space for themselves. The House Elves operate in a position beneath the wizards. They become ontologically suppressed but are able to traverse spaces that the wizards cannot and gain the ability to create identity within their confined servile positions.

KEYWORDS

House Elves, Humility, Identity, Ontology, Phenomenology, Self-Suppression, Space

The creation of identity comes through a negotiation of the subject's surroundings. A constricted subject's agency will never be the same as another's who is not confined. J.K. Rowling introduces the House Elves, servile creatures tied to homes that can only be freed from their servant status through the donation of clothes from their masters; characters, whom I argue, function as an entry point to explore the question of identity. House Elves are the ideal servants to the ruling class: the wizards who are humans with the ability to cast magic through the use of a wand. What exactly leads House Elves to accept their position as "objects" whose only goal is to serve the wizards? Are they trapped within their station with no ability to impact and express themselves while under the domineering eyes of the master wizard class? J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter book series constructs a wizarding community that constricts and oppresses the House Elves. They are indoctrinated into a system where they come to view freedom, paradoxically, as the ultimate punishment. Even at the end of the series, the House Elves are not fully liberated; they choose to remain servile to the wizards. The tension between House Elves and their liberation is made ambiguous by how oppression often functions in latent ways. The House Elves do not immediately become unoppressed just because they are liberated; they are still burdened by mentalities and identities learned from their subjection.

The construction of an identity is dependent on how subjects view themselves. Identity or the "self" that is created comes from a constant negotiation of the subject's environment in which they must adapt in response to changing stimuli. However, the House Elves' position as servants never undergoes a significant change. While many readers focus on Dobby's freedom as a progressive gesture, they forget that, even within his new found freedom, Dobby is still tied to the mentality of the old ideology in which he believes he is not the equal to wizards. The House Elf mentality reduces them to subhuman status, making them unable to acknowledge themselves as sentient beings. They must constantly deny their selfhood.

So what exactly do I mean by the "invisible self"? The "self" cannot be physically touched, rather it is an abstract concept demonstrated through the actions of the body upon the world. The "self" is expressed through the interaction of the subject's corporal form and their environment, which is not only done through actions but also involves the use of verbal commands. If the self is a concept that comes into being through the physical interaction of the subject and their surroundings, what does it mean to be invisible? Being "invisible" in relation to self is displayed in a lack of autonomy within the movements of the subject. The House Elves

forego their identity in order to better accomplish their task, working with the other House Elves in a robotic manner in which they only exist so long as they can continue to work, and thereby achieve their objective at the cost of their own safety and well-being.

House Elves are by no means powerless; they possess abilities and magical powers that may even rival those of the wizards. However, they never attempt to fully break free from them. Rather, they use loopholes within their "contract" with wizards in order to accomplish ends contrary to the interests of their masters. Of course, I use the term "contract" quite loosely. The contract between a wizard and a house elf is a blood contract in which the house elf gives up their freedom in order to serve the master. House Elves become constricted not only by their subservient position, but also by the wounds inflicted on their very flesh that reminds them of their place. They come to view their indentured servitude as the only rightful space that they can occupy and as subjects whose worth cannot compare to that of wizards. Humbled by their very existence, House Elves do not attempt to exceed their position in society. Rather, they must navigate the limited space given to them. Even with all of the opposition to their existence, they still manage to carry out their master's orders and gain a relative agency. One of their defining qualities is the manner in which they degrade themselves to the point of non-being, producing an erasure of their identity in a culture that views them as little more than cleaning and household items.

The House Elves are born into a world in which they have already been enslaved for generations, and they have no knowledge of a time when they weren't the servants of the wizards. Merleau-Ponty discusses how space and time impact the creation of an identity. He constitutes identity in the passing of time and argues against the notion of past, future, and present as existing in separate moments. Rather, he says the:

> Past, therefore, is not the past, nor the future the future. It exists only when a subjectivity is there to disrupt the plentitude of being in itself, to adumbrate a perspective, and introduce non-being into it. A past and a future spring forth when I reach out towards them. (Merleau-Ponty 489)

The "past is not the past, nor the future the future," Merleau-Ponty's takes a bold stance, in which he argues against a linear timeline. Instead of relying on old information, he brings the idea of time and combines it with the perception of one's environment. Past and future tend to be seen as separate moments in time, but that's not the definition of time that Merleau-Ponty attempts to convey. Time becomes dependent on the subject's interaction with moments that

occur; the subject assigns meaning to each moment and designates it as occurring in the past, future, or even in real time, according to their view or attempts to "reach out towards them." The act of "reaching out towards them" represents a subject's control over the natural world around them and gives meaning to the phenomena that are occurring. Without the subject, there is no "time," but only a stream of events with no one to separate one from the other. Thus, through the subject's immersion in these moments, they create a past and future that "spring forth" according to the meaning that the subject places on time, and subjects gain agency in their control or lack of control in the events that they come to associate with the past or present.

House Elves work for the wizards, and often in ways that are not only often underappreciated but underacknowledged too. The elite Purebloods tend to forget that the House Elves are also sentient beings with their own magical powers and rules who have been enslaved. Many wizards, and Purebloods specifically, foolishly believe that their control over the small creatures is absolute and do not give House Elves the respect they deserve, nor do they place importance on minor slip ups caused by the House Elf as a means by which the House Elf creates spatial and temporal autonomy.

The subject's environment comes into being and becomes recognized through the perception and acceptance of the subject's interpretation. A subject constructs their own world around them where:

> Time exists for me only because I am situated in it, that is because I become aware of myself as already committed to it, because the whole of being is not given to me incarnate, and finally because one sector of being is so close to me that it does not even make up a picture before—I cannot *see* it, just as I cannot see my face. . . . But the present nevertheless enjoys a privilege because it is the zone in which being and consciousness coincide. (Merleau-Ponty 492)

The existence of time is constructed through the personal lens of each subject that is "situated in it." The subject immerses themselves within a timeframe that is perceived differently according to each subject's identity. They create their own present, past, and future; the subject is invested in their own creation of identity. Subjects accept the concept of time because it has become an everyday occurrence by which to define themselves. In relation to one's identity, time becomes indispensable as a manner by which to measure moments in the stream of consciousness. Time is no longer apart from us, rather it is as though it is a part of our bodies, "our face." It is a medium that we use to project ourselves and construct the manner in which we exist, often revisiting the past or reimagining the future. The present is the moment in which "being and consciousness

coincide." It is a moment in real time in which we create a self and project that self, our being, and the manner in which we interpret the world around us, our consciousness, to create the image that others see. We often revisit the past with this new found self and reconfigure the memory in accordance with the new lessons that we have learned. Some subjects get trapped, however, by the past, a moment in time forgotten that can no longer be changed. Thus, time is not only the way by which to quantify moments, but it serves as a means to construct an identity through those experiences. Even the House Elves, whom the Purebloods regard as subhuman species used to clean their homes, experience the passage of time in relation to their identity. Kreacher feels remorse over what he views to have been a failure on his part to protect Regulus Black, the brother of Sirius Black and a Death Eater, and is haunted by those memories. He carries a heavy burden until he relates the circumstances of Regulus Black to Harry Potter, and with that he is able to state the grief that he feels in having:

> Failed to obey orders, Kreacher could not destroy the locket! And his Mistress was mad with grief, because Master Regulus had disappeared, and Kreacher could not tell her what had happened, no, because Master Regulus had f-f-forbidden him to tell any of the f-f-family what happened in the cave. (*Deathly Hallows* 197)

Time, as constructed by Kreacher, leaves him with regret over what he has failed to do. For the first time, the reader sees a being who is not as cold as he appears. He has been indoctrinated into a system that he himself barely understands and merely echoes the belief of the people he serves. This makes him appear as a cold and unlovable character, but of course, he is used to that kind of abuse because Kreacher never expects that a wizard could ever treat him with respect. He becomes trapped within the memory of the one wizard who had ever given him any kind of attention or care close to kindness. Thus, his inability to complete his "orders" and the fact that he "could not" destroy the locket constrict him not only was unable to fulfill his duty as a House Elf, but because he has failed the distant memory of the one man he greatly admired. If the present is the meeting of being and consciousness, then Kreacher's inability to fulfill his task means that Kreacher never feels as though he belongs to the current age and is displaced by his memories and ideologies that are from a forgotten time. The old House Elf is forced to be silent and is unable to tell his Mistress what happened "because Master Regulus had f-f-forbidden him." The inability to tell or speak because it is "forbidden" demonstrates a moment in which Kreacher is denied the formation of an identity and the right to express his true intention. He must operate under those constraints and deal with the feeling of sadness and isolation alone.

Pureblood ideology is not only limited to House Elves in the service of Pureblood families. Their ideology consists of the inferior being who will never break free from their superior overseers. The Hogwarts House Elves move away from "Dobby, as though he were carrying something contagious" (*Goblet of Fire* 378). Liberation is a contagion that the working class does not want to acquire. They serve half, pure, and even mudbloods, but they will never be liberated from the serventile ideology, and therefore, they will never exist on the same plane as wizards.

To the subservient Elf, the "highest law is his Master's bidding" (*Deathly Hallows* 195). They are taught to obey their "Master's bidding" above all else and have had this instilled in them from a very young age. They are born into a world that already has traditions and rules in place, as Merleau-Ponty argues, for which they had no say. The House Elves are not given the chance to "talk about a choice [being] born into the world and that I exist in order to experience my life as full of difficulties and constraints—I do not choose so to experience it" (Merleau-Ponty 516). They are "born into the world" with its own coded definitions and standards. Their "choice" within the structure, which they have entered, is to serve or be punished, yet they are able to come up with a third option. In this third option they operate under the wizards while still enacting their own form of freedom through small acts of resistance and are able to enforce their sense of agency, limited as it may be. Kreacher, perhaps, is one of the best examples of this agency. He echoes the ideology of Purebloods because the manner in which he has been brought up by the Black family, but his new master, Harry Potter, is in opposition to that ideology. Kreacher is ordered to not use the term Mudblood in regards to Hermione Granger. Mudblood is a derogatory term used by the Purebloods to signify wizards whose lineage is not made up entirely of wizards. This occurs through the marriage of a wizard to a non-wizard or the ability to perform magic manifesting in a child born to non-wizard parents. After no longer being permitted to use those words out loud, Kreacher's "lips move soundlessly, undoubtedly framing the insults he was now forbidden to utter" (*Deathly Hallows* 190). The House Elves must operate under the role of a good House Elf, and the result is that they are able to "move soundlessly" within their position. As long as they don't attract any attention to themselves, they are free to come and go as they please. Even within the rule that has been put on Kreacher's speech, he is still able to "move his lips" and mouth the words he is "forbidden to utter." The fact that he can still move and speak the "forbidden" words suggests that the wizard's law isn't as impenetrable as it would seem, since the House Elves have leeway in the manner in which they follow the

order—they just don't seem to have as much knowledge about it. Therefore, they are able to create their own agency within the rigid rules of the wizards who don't place as much value on their existence, despite their own brand of powerful magic.

How interesting it is then that in Nancy J. Holland's *Ontological Humility: Lord Voldemort and the Philosophers,* she fails to draw attention to the plight of the House Elf condition. She instead takes on the more obvious comparison of good versus evil, Harry Potter versus Lord Voldemort, in order to elaborate on ontological humility. According to Holland, ontological humility situates the subject in the "face of the unknowable whatever that is responsible for the fact that we exist, and that also explains how and why we exist" (Holland 4). This "unknowable whatever" is what enables the House Elves to manipulate the spaces they inhabit; they are subjected to the whim of the being that gives them a reason for why they exist. The being that gives House Elves purpose is their wizarding master. Depending on their master's kindness or lack of, their time spent within the home could be one of the worse places to be in. With regards to the House Elves purpose for "existing," it is important to examine the fact that they are called "House" Elves rather than just "Elves." If it was just a question of being subservient to the wizards, why is it that the only occupation that the House Elves occupy lies within the confinement of a wizard's home? From the moment of birth they are designated to live within the house tied to their namesake. The power of language in the Harry Potter series is equivalent to that of magic; after all, only a select few witches and wizards possess the ability to cast magic through nonverbal commands. Therefore, from the very beginning, the "(s)elf" is confined to a destiny that they cannot go against. The House Elf must then create their identity in relation to the space that they inhabit.

If ontological humility comes through the acceptance that there are forces beyond our control, knowledge that we do not have, and ontological arrogance is the belief that we are perfect and are able to transcend the limitations of a higher being, then where in that spectrum do House Elves fit in? They are nowhere near ontological arrogance. In order for that to happen, they would have to control every aspect of their life, not just their space, but their own magical abilities without the need for approval too. By the same concept, they are not defined by ontological humility due to the fact that while they respect the wizards and hold them in high value, there are certain things that they can never accept. That being a system in which their manner of living is disrupted, they enjoy a certain amount of safety in the status quo. That is how

life has always been for them, and they are in no hurry to disrupt the status of their situation, or willing to challenge social conventions. The House Elves view their very existence as an affront to the wizard population. However, they are unable to completely break down their very essence in order to become the perfect servant. Therefore, rather than say that House Elves display ontological humility, I would say they display "ontological suppression." Identity is constantly in a cycle of renewal and reconstruction. The House Elves are in a state of stagnation where they aren't fully able to create an identity. They approach a period of "reduced activity," not in physical labor, of course, but in a psychological sense. They become accustomed to their daily tasks and through that grinding process to self-create the ideal servant that never talks back, which only exists to serve. They are able to adapt to their role, while retaining a bit of their identity. However, through this period of "reduced activity" the subject begins to learn their place within a world that seeks to dominate them. They begin with a slow start towards the formation of their identity and progress into a state where they are able to use their space as a means by which to operate and move. The subject is faced with the constraints of a society that seeks for nothing, but the ultimate destruction of the "being" that is seen as inferior. The subject begins to adapt to his new surrounding and is able to find relative power within the limitations of his forced imprisonment. They may have a slower and later start at the formation of a self, but that does not mean that their ability to build upon old structures is obliterated.

The wizards in power attempt to derail and imprison the House Elves through the objectification of them; they cease to view them as sentient beings. The House Elves are trapped into a role in which they are transformed into an "animal 'so constituted and shaped that it is suited to a user's interest in bringing about a certain sort of effect.'" (Holland 11). The idea that a living being can be "constituted and shaped" in order to fulfill a certain function that the ruling class instills in them suggest that they are attempting not only dehumanize but also remove any feelings with regards to the House Elf condition. Take note of the use of the words "user's interest." User implies that there is a wielder of an object; that is all the House Elves are good for in the eyes of the Pureblood elitist wizards. According to Marilyn Frye, an American philosopher and feminist theorist, "exploitation and oppression are how humans adapt other humans as tools for their use, balancing the dehumanization of their objects with the manipulation of their uniquely human abilities" (qtd in Holland 11). Incidentally, if we replace the word "humans" with "magical beings," we arrive right back to the relationship between the House Elves and

their wizard masters, who seek to dominate their will through the dehumanization and mutilation of their bodies. Dobby, the first House Elf that the reader meets, has been conditioned to "punish himself most grievously for coming to see you, sir. Dobby will have to shut his ears in the oven door for this" (*Chamber of Secrets* 14). The physical manifestation of the wizard is no longer needed: just the thought of disobeying the ruling class leads Dobby to have to "punish himself." Their word is law and going against it means having to "shut his ears in the oven door." The "oven door" represents a domestic confined space that Dobby has been conditioned to cage himself within for his infractions and desire for freedom. Yet, even within the punishment, Dobby is able to create a space and agency for himself because the act that merited that punishment was "coming to see [Harry]." The fact that Dobby was able to "come see" Harry suggests that even within the confinements of the elitist household, the House Elves can operate within a narrow space and create a sense of mobility and agency for themselves that gives them the power to escape. While their ontology is suppressed and hindered by the ideology that they have come to accept, Rowling suggests that House Elves can still reclaim some sense of self-awareness of their identity and makes it apparent in the House Elves' small acts of disobedience for which they punish themselves.

The House Elves are restricted in a position that is engraved into their bodies; the body is an extension of one's identity. The interaction between body and environment create an "experience [that] forces us to acknowledge an imposition of meaning . . . which clings to certain contents. . . . I am my body, but my body is not a machine—it is the presence of my consciousness in the world" (Holland 82).

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, a French phenomenological philosopher, argues that "body experience" makes us acknowledge an "imposition of meaning." Phenomenology is the experience and information that we gain from the five senses and how we interpret and process the external stimuli. Through the "imposition of meaning," the House Elves come to take on aforementioned values, one of which is that they must obey all commands of their masters. This can be seen in Kreacher, who is the house elf of the prominent and elitist Pureblood family: the Blacks. Kreacher's greatest ambition in life is "to have his head cut off and stuck up on a plaque just like his mother" (*Order of The Phoenix* 72). Kreacher has been raised with the sole purpose that at the end of his life he will be mounted on a "plaque" and become a part of the home that he already sees himself as being. The "imposed" meaning comes not only from the severing of a

head, in which Kreacher becomes silenced, but also in the manner which he will be objectified after his death. That doesn't mean much since, even in his current position as a house elf, he is already objectified and secluded from the rest of society. From the beginning, Kreacher was marked with a name that made him a lesser "other," already cast as the "monster" of the story, and he is forced to go through his life with this role given to him. Kreacher is expected to follow a certain code of conduct; he is bound to the rules that his masters, from the Black family to Harry Potter, set forth. However, while the role of master and House Elves seem quite defined, there are times when a House Elf has the ability to resist an order. This occurs when Harry first inherits the House Elf after the death of his godfather, Sirius Black. Kreacher displays an unwillingness to obey Harry Potter, verbally stating that "Kreacher won't go to the Potter brat, Kreacher won't, won't, won't" (*Half Blood Prince* 55). Through the verbal confrontation and resisting of the passing of ownership onto the new master, Kreacher attempts to fight the system that he has been initiated into. And although he only states that he "won't" because Harry is not the master he wants, it still does not diminish the agency and power that Kreacher has to display in order to fight against a wizard, and not just any wizard, but the one wizard who survived Lord Voldemort's attack. The confrontation ends with Kreacher being silenced. However the effect was achieved, Kreacher vocalized his unwillingness to serve a master of the ruling class, despite the fact that he knows what is expected of a House Elf and their position. Through this small act, he goes beyond his ontological suppression and slowly begins to break away from the "ideal submissive house elf." The outburst shows that he is not just a "machine" that has encoded instructions built right into him. Rather, he perceives the information that he gains from his surroundings and adjusts his space as his body represents his "consciousness" in the world.

The House Elves are not as weak-minded or shackled within their station as it would first appear; they are just limited in the manner in which they can express their agency due to their lack of knowledge or desire to stay within the status quo. Karen Brown's *Prejudice in Harry Potter* discusses the manner in which House Elves come to be subjugated and held in a position where they are in constant space of oppression in relation to the wizards. She argues against the:

> perception that House Elves simply 'like' being slaves, or what their natures oblige them to love and serve their wizard masters unconditionally, or that the 'enchantments' placed upon them are anything more than mental barriers whose roots have grown deeper after centuries of enforced conformity. (Brown 99)

These "mental barriers" that have been constructed are due to "roots" and rules that were in place before they even came into being. How exactly are they supposed to counteract a system in which they have been marginalized and beaten for having an opinion? The "mental barriers" that make them conform to society only act as a superficial means of keeping them down, for they possess magical abilities that not even the wizards can do. While it's true that they are expected to obey the wizards "unconditionally," not all of them succumb to that role in which they have no power, even though most do. Brown portrays the male House Elves as the only ones who are able to go against the authority as opposed to the female House Elf, Winky, who is "freed" for failing to do her duty. She is stuck in what Brown considers the female mindset that has "facilitated the perpetual mental enslavement of their kind, by raising their offspring to think and act as the master's servant and dependent" (Brown 98). She places the blame of enslavement on the female condition in which they are "raised" to think and act in accordance with the wishes of the masters in order to avoid punishment. The female House Elf is therefore punished and blamed for following the rules and not displaying a desire to go against the status quo like her male House Elves—Dobby and Kreacher. However, I wish to offer a reading that attributes a relative agency to Winky that Brown does not consider. Winky, although disenfranchised by both gender and magical hierarchies of the wizarding universe, creates a space in which she influences her wizard master even while under their service. And although she is "a good house elf, who is properly ashamed of being freed," her case is different than the other two male House Elves (*Goblet of Fire* 379). Winky does not desire freedom because, unlike the two other House Elves, she is devoted to the "Crouches because they treated her relatively well." (Brown 101). The manner in which Brown speaks of the female House Elf makes it seem as if they are all weak-minded beings who follow the ideology that a females place exists within the private sphere like the house and kitchen. Brown argues that they didn't treat her well enough because "they still abuse her slave status by ordering her to climb high up in the stadium stands, when they knew she was afraid of heights" (Brown 101). Yet it seems Brown forgets why Winky was at the Quidditch match, a sport played by wizards using broomsticks. "Winky talked [Mr. Crouch] into it…She spent months persuading him. . . . she told my father that my mother had died to give me freedom" (*Goblet of Fire* 685). Winky uses her female mentally, that Brown argues enslaves the House Elves, and through her desire to be kind actually forces her will upon Mr. Crouch. The act of attempting to "persuade" a wizard, and a male one at that, suggests that

while she does operate under the expectations of a "good Elf," she is not as powerless as it would initially seem. Winky is able to use empathy and rational arguments in order accomplish her goal of allowing someone else to be "free," despite the fact that she has no desire to be free herself. Through the invocation of Mr. Crouch's dead wife, Winky obtains the freedom of a fellow prisoner, who actually feels caged unlike herself. House Elves' mobility surpasses that of the wizards. They are not bound to the same rules when transporting in and out of magical spaces. Unlike wizards, they "can Apparate and Disapparate in and out of Hogwarts" (*Deathly Hallows* 195). The ability to Apparate and Disapparate is done through ignoring space and time to get to another location. Their magical abilities are not gated by their space; they create circumvent rules in order to accomplish their task. Dobby's death, although tragic, is a progressive gesture. He dies among the "large white stones, smoothed by the sea, marking the edge of the flower beds" (*Deathly Hallows* 481). The "sea" represents a space without any restraints; he is finally liberated through death. Dobby is struck by the knife in Malfoy Manor, but his burial takes place at sea. He is no longer caged within a domestic sphere.

The House Elves do not need to be freed from their servile positions in order to create a sense of self and identity, rather they operate within the enclosed quarters of their imprisonment in order to obtain what they desire. Through a quiet resistance in the wizarding world, they are able to create a space that they control out of the wizards' sight. Even though the novels do not end with the complete liberation of House Elves, there is no better example of their ability to impact and move than the mobilization they display in the final battle against the Death Eaters. Despite their miniature height and status as part of the lower classes, they "were hacking and stabbing at the ankles and shins of Death Eaters, their tiny faces alive with malice, and everywhere Harry looked Death Eaters were folding under sheer weight of numbers" (*Deathly Hallows* 735). The House Elves combat the Death Eaters, the embodiment of the Pureblood elitist values who regard them as less than human to the point of objectification. They are able to operate from their lower class standing and "hack and stab" at the Death Eaters without having to elevate themselves to their status to harm them. Through the "hacking and stabbing" of the Death Eaters, they are taking control of their own bodies and inflicting the torment that their kind have faced at the hands of, not only the present Death Eaters, but their ancestors as well. While they can't do much alone, together they are a force to be feared. They are able to control the space they inhabit and make the Death Eaters fold under the sheer weight of numbers. It becomes

evident that their small acts of resistance come together and not even the wizard class can ignore the identity that House Elves have created for themselves. The House Elves construct a space in which their small bodies can be empowered even while under the "control" of the wizard class, and they are able to move through the negotiation of the space that they have been given.

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Re:Search

Super Power, Power Struggle:
Captain America, Authority, and the Atomic Bomb

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ABSTRACT

Jack Kirby was one of the most influential and innovative American comic book creators of the 21st century. Kirby's body of work reflects the evolution of comic books as the medium shifted toward more complicated narratives and characterization. Kirby's *Captain America* series—beginning in the early 1940s and spanning over two decades—is a prime example of this. As time went on, Kirby's portrayal of the titular super soldier became more dimensional. This not only reflects how comics and the comic book industry transformed over the years, but also changing attitudes toward American militarization at the time. A character that originated as a patriotic endorsement of military force began to take on a more critical tone. In the advent of the atomic bomb, the *Captain America* comics began to question the legitimacy of domination in terms of Max Weber's definition: "the possibility of imposing one's own will upon the behavior of other persons." This project examines the claims to authority made by both heroes and villains in these comics, through of lens of Weber and other theorists interested in power dynamics—including Hobbes, Hegel, and Nietzsche.

KEYWORDS

Authority, *Captain America*, Comic Books, Domination, Jack Kirby, Power

"The legitimacy of charismatic rule . . . rests upon the belief in magical powers, revelations and hero worship."

–Max Weber, "Power and Authority: When and Why Do People Obey?"

Comic book heroes often possess exceptional strength or intelligence; Jack Kirby's Captain America happens to have both. However, Captain America is unique in how he is not just a superhero—he's a super soldier. Unlike most heroes who are either born with special abilities or have powers thrust upon them, Steve Rogers (C.A.'s birth name) volunteered. In the 1941 origin story "Meet Captain America," scrawny weakling Rogers is deemed by a military medical examiner physically unfit to enlist, but is then chosen to undergo an experiment. Rogers is taken to a secret lab and "calmly . . . allows himself to be inoculated with the strange seething liquid" that transforms him into Captain America (4). The *Captain America* series was rebooted in the 1960s, and with the reboot came a revamping of C.A.'s origin story, which further emphasized his "self-awareness" in the transformation (Hatfield 71). But this is not the only way in which C.A. of the Silver Age (1960s) differs from his Golden Age (1940s) predecessor. C.A. no longer represented a gung ho nationalistic endorsement of American military involvement as he did in WWII. In the advent of the atomic bomb, the reimagined Captain America questions the legitimacy of American domination.

Captain America Comics in its original format was, as Charles Hatfield notes in *Hand of Fire: The Comics Art of Jack Kirby* (2011), a "prewar triumph" that "generated a kind of graphic excitement that galvanized the then-new superhero genre" (21). "Superheroes in the forties," Hatfield asserts, "were linked to the war effort and served as effective instruments of wartime propaganda" (21). In fact, *Captain America* championed an anti-Nazi stance before the US even officially entered the war. As Bradford W. Wright points out in *Comic Book Nation* (2001), "the brash and unforgettable cover of *Captain America Comics,* No. 1 depicted the ultra-American hero slugging Adolf Hitler in the face almost a full year before the United States declared war on the Axis . . . Captain America's dramatic debut was a call to arms, urging the nation to united against foreign aggression" (30-1). Richard Reynolds echoes this sentiment in his essay "Masked Heroes," explaining how "World War Two gave the superheroes a whole new set of enemies,

and supplied a complete working rationale and worldview for a super-patriotic superhero such as Captain America" (100).

Captain America started off as a transparent symbol for pro-war sentiment, but would gradually be transformed into a character with more depth. The end of WWII brought about an industry-wide shift away from the superhero genre due to "falling readerships" (Reynolds 100). As Hatfield summarizes, "seemingly dependent on the war, costumed heroes fell sharply in popularity in the latter forties . . .as culture in the United States shifted from wartime jingo" (114-15). This marked the end of an era commonly referred to by comic book scholars as the "Golden Age of Comics" (Reynolds 100). Wright notes that Marvel tried and failed to revive *Captain America* during the Cold War era; it went from being "Marvel's top-selling title" during World War II to a series that "lasted only a few issues" (100). The reason for the failure, according to Wright, was that "the postwar comic book market had not only grown, it had grown up. Even young people understood that the Cold War was not going to be won as quickly and easily as the comic book version of World War II. The existence of the atom bomb alone removed all doubt about that. Times had changed since 1945, but . . . superheroes had not changed with them (123).

Creator Jack Kirby's military experience likely had an influence on the evolution of a more dynamic C.A. Kirby went on hiatus from his work on *Captain America Comics* when he was "called into military service" where he "saw heavy combat in the European theater, eventually returning with a medical discharge in 1945" (Hatfield 22). Kirby had been changed by the war. In the words of Mark Evanier, who served as an apprentice to Kirby, "Jack loved to look back, especially to his days in World War II. He came out of said war with frozen feet and hundreds of anecdotes . . . and then at night, at least once a week, Kirby would have nightmares of those days. It's tough to leave something like that behind" (3). When the superhero genre made a more successful revival at the start of the 1960s, an era dubbed "the Silver Age", all of these factors weighed upon Kirby's next crack at the character of Steve Rogers—how comics had changed, how the world had changed, and how he, a veteran and comic book artist, had been permanently altered (Reynolds 101).

C.A.'s character evolved with its author and industry, reflecting a shift in attitudes toward American domination. Domination, in this sense, refers to the definition established by philosopher Max Weber in *Economy and Society* (1922): "the possibility of imposing one's own

will upon the behavior of other persons" (181). Weber points out that a dominating force will take great strides to "establish and to cultivate the belief in its legitimacy" (181). In other words, a dominating force will attempt to justify its claim to authority.

According to Weber, there are three main claims to legitimate domination: "legal authority, traditional authority, or charismatic authority" (192). Legal authority refers to domination based on "the legality of enacted orders" (192). For example, the authority granted by the state to its police officers would classify as a kind of legal authority. Weber defines traditional authority as "resting on established belief . . . in the legitimacy of those exercising authority" (192). An example of this kind of authority would be a king, whose authority is based upon primogeniture. The final kind of authority, charismatic, is defined by Weber as "resting on devotion to the exceptional sanctity, *heroism* or exemplary character of an individual person" [Emphasis added] (192).

At least in terms of Weber's definitions, Captain America's claims to domination are at root similar to the claims made by his arch nemesis, The Red Skull. Though on the surface they seem polar opposites—one a patriotic symbol of American democratic values, the other a jingoistic caricature of Third Reich tyranny—both make claims to domination based on charismatic authority; their authority rests upon the unique traits and abilities they possess (as hero and villain respectively). How then are a villain's claims to authority portrayed as illegitimate, whilst a hero's are justified? Before delving further into how C.A. and Skull foil one another and what implications can be drawn in a macrocosmic context of American military involvement, some further insights into how domination functions in the text can be gained by looking at the interactions between C. A. and another Nazi villain: Rathcone.

In "The Chessboard of Death," C.A. squares off against a hunchbacked Nazi spy named Rathcone. With Rathcone, Kirby first introduces a motif that he revisits again and again in his work on the super soldier's narrative: the deserving villain. Rathcone is the first of many villains who claims some kind of edge over the rest of humanity that justifies his desire to rule. Not only does Rathcone see himself as superior to all humans, but he fixates his villainy only on those whom he considers worthy of his time: highly ranked American generals and the most powerful soldier of all, C. A. Rathcone's obsession for a worthy adversary to conquer—and ultimately prove his worth—is symbolized by a chessboard populated with miniatures of his foes; the bulk of Rathcone's depictions involve him tinkering with the figures on the board, plotting his next

victim. In one scene, Rathcone has a conversation with the miniature version of his next target, Admirable Perkins, saying, "Even though you are a capable man, Admiral Perkins . . . I am your superior! You will never lecture tonight, for I am removing you from the game!" ("Chessboard" 2).

Rathcone delivers his assassination orders to his minions via a speaker, remaining concealed in his chamber to protect his identity. "You never see him!" one minion tells another, "But the time will come when all America will bow down before him—before the Fuehrer of the new regime!" (2). Rathcone thrives on perpetuating this mysterious and fearful persona, perhaps because he deems his minions unworthy to interact with him one-on-one, or else to conceal his disfigurement (which would be seen as a weakness). Since Rathcone never elaborates exactly what about himself makes him a superior being, it is perhaps his ability to conceal his weaknesses and still command his followers that he sees as justification for his rule—that might makes right.

Ultimately, however, Rathcone does not live up to his own delusions of grandeur and is defeated by C.A. Before delivering the blow that incapacitates him, C.A. taunts the fleeing Rathcone, "You can't get away that easy, Rathcone . . . *old* Feuhrer!" harkening back to earlier on when Rathcone's associate claimed he would become "the Fuehrer of the *new* regime" [Emphases added] (15; 2). The narrative, in a way, seems to be presenting Rathcone as merely a stepping stone for C.A., a villain to test his mettle before confronting the man who will become his ultimate nemesis, The Red Skull. The first splash page of the comic foreshadows this, depicting Rathcone with his chessboard and C.A. sneaking into his chamber (see figure A). Rathcone doesn't seem to notice C.A. as he is focused on his chess opponent—a skeleton wearing a top hat. This skeletal figure—who never appears in the actual Rathcone narrative—suggests that although C.A. will defeat Rathcone, the ultimate enemy to conquer is death (personified by the Red Skull).

Figure A: Rathcone and his Chessboard.
Image from "The Chessboard of Death"

C.A. and The Skull first square off in "The Riddle of the Red Skull," and like Rathcone before him, Nazi assassin Skull cultivates a fearful and mysterious persona. He is also equally narcissistic, seeing himself as a superior being and only seeking adversaries he deems as worthy. When Mrs. Manor, the wife of one of Skull's targets, interrupts the scene of her husband's murder, the Skull only incapacitates her and refuses to kill her, claiming that his method of death "is only for important people" ("Riddle" 10). Skull attempts to personify death itself, fashioning himself as a kind of grim reaper figure. In the moment before killing, Skull forces his victim to

meet his eyes and "look at death" before seemingly ending their life with just his gaze alone (2). Although he does not actually possess godlike powers (he uses a hidden electric device), the Skull thrives upon forcing his victims into submission, and thus perpetuating the fantasy that he is a superior being.

Figure B: The Skull murders Major Croy.
Image from "The Riddle of the Red Skull"

Both Rathcone and The Skull are examples of charismatic authority because they justify their right to power based on a belief in their own exceptionalism. On the surface, it would appear that C.A.'s authoritative claims are based on legal authority because he seeks to punish wrongdoers and his means to do so were granted by the US government. However, C.A.'s near-godly power transcends him above the realm of the legal authoritative systems Weber describes. This analysis rests upon Thomas Hobbes' theory of the nature of man fleshed out in his influential text *Leviathan* (1651). Weber's arguments are modeled after Hobbes' basic premise that individual wills can be dominated by an authoritative figure, and thus understanding Hobbes is vital to the critical conversation about domination and authority. As Hobbes argues in *Leviathan*, although one man may be "manifestly stronger in body or of quicker mind than another," in the grand scheme of life all humans are roughly equal, and thus they possess an equal opportunity to obtain power and equal risk to be dominated (1598). This, Hobbes argues,

creates the need for systems of justice in society, or else man would exist in a state of nature—"war . . . of every man against every man" (1599).

Hobbes suggests that "justice and injustice are none of the faculties neither of the body nor mind," but "qualities that relate to men in society, not in solitude" and that "where there is no common power, there is no law, where no law, no injustice" (1600). In other words, Hobbes argues that a ruling power must exist to keep men in line, such as a king. But where a king's power, as previously discussed, originates from tradition, superheroes in their nature are exceptional *in body and mind*. Thus, their role as a disciplinarian of men stems from what Weber defined as charismatic authority.

Nietzsche would take this a step further. Like Weber, Nietzsche functions on a model of Hobbes, but differs in how he would argue a hero's godlike power ascends them into the position of "creator of values" (*Beyond Good and Evil* 6). As Nietzsche contends in *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), a person in power will "honor whatever he recognizes in himself" and those "who [have] power over [themselves]" (6). Designation of moral values, according to Nietzsche, is "first applied to *men*" and "derivatively and at a later period applied to actions" (6). Charismatic authority for Weber rests upon the likelihood that an authoritative figure will be obeyed; thus, an authority is defined by his actions as they are perceived by his subordinates. Nietzsche, on the other hand, emphasizes the autonomy of authority—the power to define others in relation to the self.

As Mark D. White notes in *The Virtues of Captain America* (2014), one of C.A.'s core values is a sense of honor, which "does not depend on the behavior or ethics of those around him" (80). White goes on to describe C.A. as a "lone wolf" in that "the content of his character, while having been influenced by the ethics of the men, women, and organizations he worked with over the years, does not *depend* on any of them" [Emphasis added] (80). In the original comics, C.A. maintains a secret identity of Private Steve Rogers. As Rogers, he is still subject to the authority of his military superiors (to humorous and ironic effect). When *Captain America* was rebooted in the 1960s, a Rogers displaced in time (after being trapped in suspended animation for 20 years) re-emerges with his ties to the military now only symbolic. Kirby revisits C.A.'s origin story in a flashback in "The Hero that Was." This time, C.A. is narrating his own story, and his agency within the transformation is emphasized. The retelling of the origin story

from C.A.'s perspective reincarnates a new version of the super soldier as a self-governing entity.

In "Meet Captain America," Steve Rogers is first introduced as he enters Professor Reinstein's (the inventor of the super soldier formula) laboratory to begin the experiment. "The Hero that Was" traces the narrative to an early origin point when Rogers, "too frail for military duty," is denied his recruitment (an event which is only summarized by Professor Reinstein in the first origin story, not shown) (9). Rogers is devastated by the rejection; he insists that there must be some capacity in which he can serve and that he will do "anything – *anything*!" (9). This prompts an officer to interrupt and ask if Rogers would "become a human guinea pig—in a deadly experiment.".

Rogers agrees and is taken to an antiques store, a cover front for the super soldier operation. In the penultimate scene before his transformation, an interesting array of objects is highlighted in the foreground, almost as if the antiques are observers.

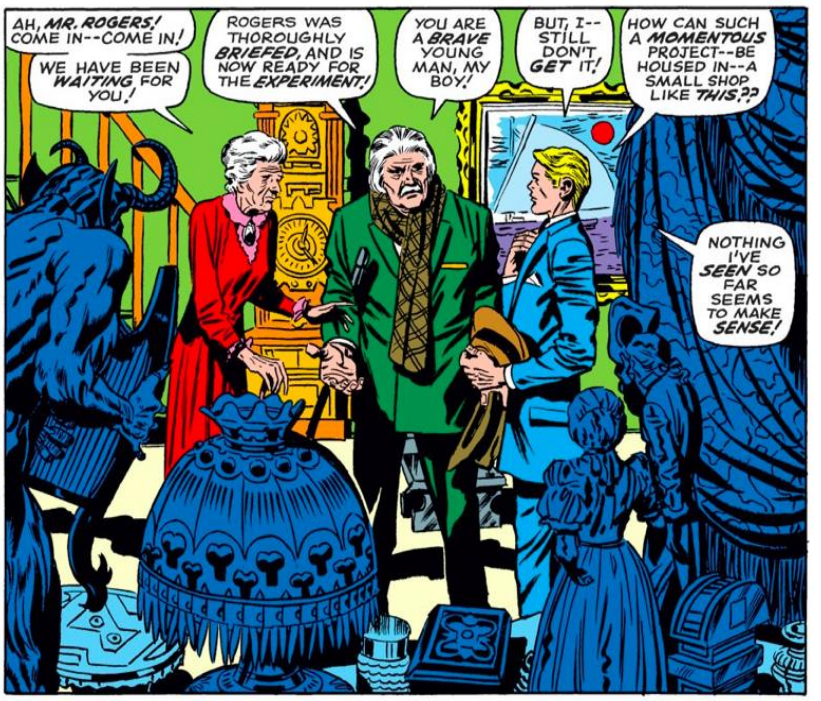

Figure C: A Momentous Project Housed in a Small Shop
Image from "The Hero that Was."

Depicted on the far left is a mythological figure carrying a lyre. The figure appears to be Pan, the Greek god of shepherds. Flanking the scene on the opposite side are two colonial figures, one of

whom is removing his hat in a gesture of respect. Pan symbolizes a protective authority—the shepherd who watches over his flock. The colonial figure is positioned almost as if he is saluting Rogers, who will soon be endowed with the authority and responsibility to protect his country. These themes are echoed again in the scene directly following C.A.'s transformation, in which Professor Reinhart exclaims, "Rogers is *not* super human—but he has become a nearly *perfect* human being! He personifies the ideal of—*mens sana in corpore sano*—a sound *mind*—in a sound body!" (16). Reinhart is alluding to the Roman poet Juvenal's Satire X, "So Much for Prayer." An excerpt translated into English follows:

> Then you might pray for a sound mind in a healthy body.
> Ask for a heart filled with courage, without fear of death,
> That regards long life as among the least of nature's gifts,
> That can endure any hardship, to which anger is unknown,
> That desires nothing, and gives more credit to all the labours
> And cruel sufferings of Hercules, than to all the love-making
> All the feasting, and all the downy pillows of Sardanapalus.
> The prayer I offer you can grant yourself; without doubt,
> The one true path that leads to a tranquil life is that of virtue. (355-364)

The poem reflects upon how a desire for kingly power and a long, comfortable life is less spiritually gratifying than a life in which one overcomes hardship. The "cruel sufferings of Hercules" are considered by the narrator to be more virtuous than "all the love-making, all the feasting, and all the downy pillows of Sardanapalus," an Assyrian king. Like Hercules the demigod, the authority that Captain America's demigod-like power affords him comes with the price of a hero's trials, to be tested. In "When Wakes the Sleeper," an old foe returns to once again challenge C.A.—the Red Skull. With the Red Skull's return comes the familiar power struggle, but with new tensions influenced by monumental changes in real-world warfare that occurred in the intervening years.

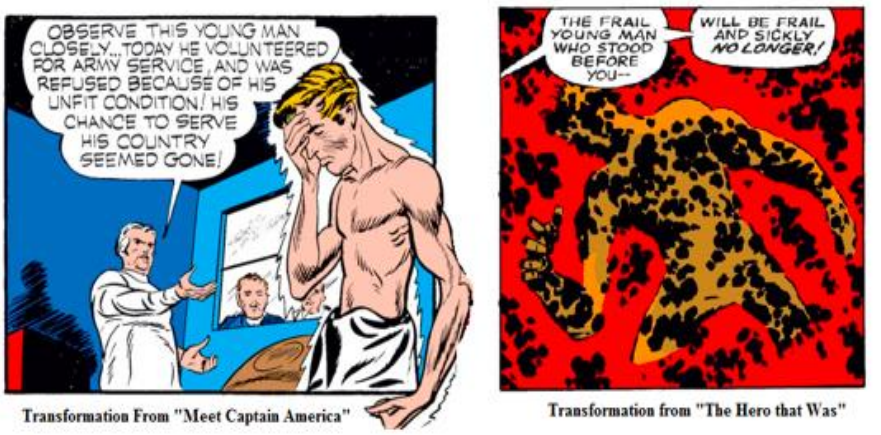

Figure D: Comparing the original transformation scene from "Meet Captain America" [left]

to the rebooted scene in "The Hero that Was" [right]. As Hatfield notes, Kirby updated "the mechanics of Cap's origin by emphasizing the idea of radiation" (69).

When The Skull and C.A. face off again in "When Wakes the Sleeper," it is a struggle of old enemies wrought by the tensions of the Atomic Age. The Skull has awakened The Fourth Sleeper, a robot with the ability to "alter the basic molecule structure of his own artificial body" so that he can "move thru tons of solid earth and rock" and erupt like a volcano ("When Wakes" 9). However, The Skull fails to gain control of The Sleeper, which then proceeds to go on mindless rampage to destroy what was previously believed to be an "indestructible" building (18).

Figure E: The Skull tries and fails to master The Sleeper.
Image from "When Wakes the Sleeper."

C.A. and The Skull physically brawl over the key to control The Sleeper, each touting their own philosophy amid blows. The dialogue alludes to Nietzsche's Master-Slave dialectic, in how The Skull justifies his authority to rule by saying that, "Men were all born to be slaves!" and "Men are no more than animals!" ("When Wakes" 17). Nietzche's Master-Slave dialectic is a response to Hegel's Master-Bondsman, and Hegel's version illuminates how the struggle between C.A. and the Skull is both physical and metaphysical. As Hegel describes, "the counterpoised selves have so much at stake that . . . they prove themselves and each other through a life-and-death struggle . . . each individual [preferring] to guarantee continued recognition from the other, while not extending that recognition in return" (Leitch 538). The irony, however, is that when C.A. obtains the key from The Skull, he discovers that it will not stop The Sleeper.

The Sleeper is an explosive weapon that, when unleashed by The Skull, puts the entire world at risk. It can be interpreted as an allegory for the power of the atomic bomb, which neither C.A. nor The Skull are deemed worthy to control. In an absurd *deus ex machina*, it is only when C.A.'s love interest, Agent 13, holds the key and fears for C.A.'s life that The Sleeper is destroyed. Atomic power has usurped the super soldier or super villain as the ultimate godly power, the kind, as Hobbes would say, "to keep [all of humanity] in awe"

(1602). Thus, the ultimate authority is no longer super soldier but super weapon, and as "When Wakes the Sleeper" cautions, this new form of power is one that should not be patriotically praised but rightfully feared, a power that should not be monopolized by any one authority—whether it be man, hero, or nation.

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Re:Search

Audience Vicarious Desire for Revenge:
William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

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ABSTRACT

Revenge tragedy rose to prominence during the mid-16th century and blossomed over the course of the next few of decades. Audiences of the era returned to watch revenge tragedies almost religiously—a genre which had previously been seen as lesser and improper took on new and unchartered territory. Throughout the period, playwrights toyed with the conventions of the revenge tragedy genre, and it steadily rose in notoriety and popularity among spectators. One playwright and his most well-known play, however, truly exemplified and used these conventions to the fullest extent. William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* used varied layers of audiences both on and off the stage, which allowed for spectators to create and interpret the ideas that were being acted out on stage in their own mind. Spectators vicariously lived out vengeful desires by watching revenge tragedies spectators without having to face the consequences associated with these actions. Within each audience member exists a moral compass, one that Shakespeare acknowledged and manipulated so as to make each spectator draw ethical and moral boundaries. Through this, audiences gained more agency within the theater, and their tastes and ideals began to shape the way playwrights wrote during the period.

KEYWORDS

Agency, Audience, Hamlet, Moral Compass, Revenge Tragedy, William Shakespeare

Revenge has been a leitmotif in literature for as long as humans have been putting ink to parchment. Most modern critics assume that the genre of revenge was "primordial slime," and yet, from this, the Shakespearean tragedy emerged and garnered vast popularity (Woodbridge 3). Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1603) epitomizes the conventions that had been grappled and toyed with since Thomas Kyd first introduced this genre to Elizabethan audiences with his play, *The Spanish Tragedy*, in 1587 ("Revenge Tragedy"). Many critics and scholars have looked at the ideals and themes within *Hamlet*, but few have contemplated the essential relationship between the production and its audience. Within the context of Elizabethan plays, audience is viewer specific—no two audiences are the same, mainly because each individual spectator reacts and engages differently with each play. To that extent, each individual spectator also forms connections with different characters, which in turn forces them to analyze their morals and ethics. The connection formed between the audience and Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is one unlike any other—it instilled early spectators with a deeply embedded desire to live out vengeful desires without engaging legal codes, as would an actual crime. Elizabethan and Jacobean audiences remained attached to the revenge tragedy genre, and *Hamlet* serves as the prime example of how authors and playwrights realized and exploited this attachment so as to make audiences connect on a more emotional level with their works. Within revenge tragedies exists an underlying common essence that attracts audiences to return time after time. They are drawn back to this genre because of the nationalism[1] exhibited, the justice attained, the omniscience gained by the audience, and the closure offered within these plays.

The "pleasure of tragedy," as some critics name this phenomenon, is ever-present in the revenge tragedy genre. Audiences remained attached to this genre of literary work because it invited them to vicariously live out their desires by siding with the revenger at the beginning of these plays. In Act One of *Hamlet*, Shakespeare establishes a connection between father and son that transcends life and death—the ghost of Hamlet's father comes and speaks with him. Hamlet tells the ghost, "Speak. I am bound to hear," to which the ghost replies, "So art thou to revenge, when thou shalt hear" (1.5.7-8). It is at this point that Shakespeare persuades spectators to side with Hamlet, just as Hamlet is "bound" to listen to the ghost's story, so too is the audience, and consequently, they become bound to the revenge that will soon transpire. Shakespeare used the moral compass embedded within every individual viewer to manipulate audiences to side with the revenger. Audience members thus serves as co-conspirators to Hamlet's revenge, and they in

turn question their moral and ethical limits by watching Hamlet avenge his father's murder. This moral self-evaluation allows audience members to gain agency within theater.

The pleasure ignited by the expression of revenge is a double-edged sword of sorts. On the one hand, revenge brings about a sense of justice and righteousness—but on the other, it plays with the moral compass of every individual watching. It forces spectators to come to terms with the orthodox moral compass[2] instilled in them, and consequently, they begin to draw moral boundaries—lines that they could never ethically cross. As John Kerrigan has noted, "The avenger, isolated and vulnerable, can achieve heroic grandeur by coming to personify nemesis," and therefore, audience members also join in on this "heroic grandeur" by siding with the avenger and coming to identify with him (3). The varying layers of understanding between the audience, the avenger, and the initial perpetrator become blurred. Rules and regulations, both within and outside the play, take on new meaning. Hamlet acknowledges these layers while performing "The Mousetrap," telling, "Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you, trippingly on the tongue" (3.2.1-2). The individual Hamlet is addressing within this context is initially perceived to be one of the actors, but when looked at more closely, it is much more vague and elusive. Is Hamlet addressing the actor? The audience (specifically the King)? Or the audience who is watching the audience watch the play? The degree of complexity associated with this scene of Hamlet adds to the overall intricacy and the iconic status associated with Shakespeare's most well-known revenge tragedy. By playing with what the audience believes is intended towards them and what is not, Shakespeare creates a new realm of perception in which audiences create new and varied meaning from the actions of the characters on stage.

Deeply embedded in the revenge tragedy genre is the unrelenting desire to avenge a wrong that has been committed against a character. Hamlet tells how he was "prompted to [his] revenge by heaven and hell" (2.2.505). There appears to be some externality associated with the yearning for revenge—some force greater than the will of man that lures these personas into vengeful thoughts and desires. Revenge has to be precise; it must make the offender suffer while simultaneously giving pleasure to the avenger, and through the avenger, pleasure to the audience. Hamlet had other various opportunities to kill Claudius, but he decides against it—his revenge must not only last while he attains it, but must last an eternity. Hamlet states:

> Now might I do it pat, now he is praying;
> And now I'll do't. And so he goes to heaven;
> And so am I revenged. That would be scann'd:
> A villain kills my father; and for that,
> I, his sole son, do this same villain send
> To heaven. (3.3.73-78)

The mere possibility of having Claudius enter heaven seems ludicrous to Hamlet; his revenge must endure even in death. This instance invites audience members to question what their ideal ending entails—mere death or eternal damnation? Through these moral qualms, audiences begin to frame their understanding of Hamlet's actions within their own set of moral boundaries.

Audiences were drawn to the revenge tragedy genre partially because it held the nation up on a pedestal. Most of Shakespeare's plays are set abroad because of the prejudices early modern audiences had about other cultures. Revenge tragedy plays, such as *The Tragedy of Hamlet: Prince of Denmark*, *The Spanish Tragedy*, and *The Revenger's Tragedy*, were always set in non-English locations. This distance simultaneously allowed for audiences to look down upon other cultures for their apparent immoral tendencies and consequently made the English feel superior in moral standing as opposed to these other cultures. Prosser comments on this effect, saying, "[N]ot only did revenge violate religion, law, morality, and common sense, it was also thoroughly un-English" (10). Hamlet ends in complete surrender; Fortinbras says, "Bear Hamlet like a soldier to the stage,/ For he was likely, had he been put on,/ To have proved most royal" (5.2.370-372). Although there exists an ancestral tie that along with *Hamlet's* Protestant undertones allowed for audiences to more adequately identify with the avenger and his agenda, Hamlet fails to prove himself to be royal by dying. The demise of the Prince of Denmark invited audience members to contrast their lasting monarchy to the flimsy and incomparable ones throughout the rest of Europe. Through these plays, audiences gained false perceptions of what other cultures were like and through them became more aware of their own national identity.

Audiences returned to watch these plays almost religiously, despite the authorities who claimed that their values were degenerative, immoral, and unchristian. Woodbridge tells, "The sheer number of revenge plots attests to the theme's popularity—authors wouldn't have kept writing or companies staging such plays unless audiences flocked to them" (4). By watching revenge tragedies, audiences vicariously lived out these desires without any of the moral ramifications or legal consequences associated with seeking revenge:

> [M]ost critics still hold that the average Elizabethan believed a son morally bound to revenge his father's death. The most thoughtful of these critics have not ignored the orthodox code; they have insisted, rather, that a popular code approving revenge had far more influence than the code of the Elizabethan Establishment (Prosser 4).

The "code" referenced by Prosser is one of moral awareness, and "popular literature and dramatic conventions indicate that the orthodox code did in fact have widespread influence. At the same time, they indicate that the average spectator at a revenge play was probably trapped in an ethical dilemma—a dilemma, to put it most simply, between what he believed and what he felt" (Prosser 4). Going a step further, by placing religion as a central part of *Hamlet*, Shakespeare was able to play with his audiences' moral limits in a remarkable way. The ghost of his father alludes to the Roman Catholic idea of purgatory, yet much of Hamlet's thoughts, asides, and conversations are Protestant in nature. This entanglement of Catholicism and Protestantism manipulated audiences into questioning not only what they saw as right and wrong but also their thoughts on afterlife (Taylor 3).

In order for closure to be attained within the play itself, the act of revenge must be made public. The audience plays a key role in this aspect of revenge and is largely why Shakespeare's *Hamlet* resonated with audiences so profoundly. Hamlet's tale lived in and through them—his act of revenge, in the name of his beloved father is carried out in front of them, and following Claudius' death, Hamlet inadvertently addresses the audience:

> You that look pale and tremble at this chance,
> That are but mutes or audience to this act,
> Had I but time (as this fell sergeant, Death,
> Is strict in his arrest) O, I could tell you-
> But let it be. Horatio, I am dead;
> Thou liv'st; report me and my cause aright
> To the unsatisfied. (5.2.308-313)

As his final act, he assures justice, but more importantly, he assures his revenge against Claudius. Without witnesses to tell his tale, there is no rationale behind seeking revenge—"revenge cannot bring back what has been lost . . . only memory, with all its limitations, can do that" (Kerrigan 188). By watching the play, the audience becomes complicit with the revenge. This is why when Hamlet asks Horatio not to drink from the poisonous cup, Hamlet begs him:

> As th'art a man,
> Give me the cup. Let go! By heaven, I'll ha't.
> O good Horatio, what a wounded name
> (Things standing thus unknown) shall live behind me!
> If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,
> Absent thee from felicity awhile,
> And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain,
> To tell my story (5.2.316-323).

They fulfill the necessity of acknowledging the events that led to the final moments in the play. Act Five of *Hamlet* gives spectators this cross to bear: they are a living testament to what happened and must judge whether or not the ends justify the means.

Hamlet's monologue at the end of Act Two serves as a direct connection between Hamlet and audience members. Having just concocted the idea of producing a play as a means of clarifying whether or not his uncle murdered Hamlet's father, he states:

> For murder, though it have no tongue, will speak
> With most miraculous organ. I'll have these Players
> Play something like the murder of my father
> Before mine uncle. I'll observe his looks;
> I'll tent him to the quick. (2.2.514-518)

Observing becomes key within this play and outside this play—Hamlet's perception of his uncle, Hamlet's perception of his mother, the audience's perception of Hamlet and those around him. Observation becomes key in the revenge tragedy, and without it, the act of revenge would serve no purpose. Without observation, there would be no closure: "[Hamlet's] struggle with the constitutive pressures of court and family takes place in the audience's acknowledged presence" (Escolme 55). Herein lies the recurring back-and-forth between the stage and the audience's relation to it—without establishing a connection between the revenger and spectators, it would be impossible for spectators not to question the moral grounds on which these vengeful acts are based upon.

Essential to the revenge tragedy is assuring the audience that they are in possession of all relevant information at the play's finale. Spectators become all-knowing, and in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, they are perceived to be unbiased witnesses to the events that have transpired. At the play's end, Fortinbras says,

> Let us haste to hear it,
> And call the noblest to the audience.
> For me, with sorrow I embrace my fortune.
> I have some rights of memory in this kingdom
> Which now, to claim my vantage doth invite me. (5.2.360-364)

This acknowledgment at the end of the play exemplifies the spectator's importance within Hamlet because of the power Fortinbras receives through their presence. The audience's omniscience throughout *Hamlet* adds to their agency because spectators become fully aware of their role within the play.

Within the revenge tragedy genre exists the blurring of roles—initially, you have the first offender (Claudius, in Hamlet's case), who, in his conquest for power, falls from grace and commits heinous crimes that usually involve killing someone. Consequently, this allows for the creation of the revenger, Hamlet, whose relationship to the initial offender forces him into this role out of duty to the memory of his father. Despite having strong moral convictions, the revenger is overtaken by the desire to exact revenge and will not rest until justice has been achieved. This clash between morals and justice causes confusion for not only the revenger, but audience members as well. Kerrigan writes that "Its 'confusion' intelligently reflects the 'confused system of values' which 'our culture' has inherited from the classical and Christian worlds" (139). Linda Woodbridge has posited the question: "Can two wrongs ever make a right?" (22). Within the context of Christian values, this question, however, is much more complex than just its surface level interpretation. Revenge has always been looked down upon within Christian ideology, yet seeking revenge completely alienates any and all other aspects of Hamlet's life. He does not see a future after revenge, and thus, it foretells Hamlet's certain death. Redemption serves no purpose while seeking revenge, which entices the audience—it allows them to dabble with unchristian ideas without suffering the damnation associated with them.

Audiences and the revenger take on the role of God—audiences do so in a more figurative manner, while the revenger does so more literally. Salvation, at least within the context of what is transpiring on the stage, becomes irrelevant to the actions being perpetrated. Hamlet's actions not only avenge his father's death, but also make amends for what was stolen from him. Claudius's actions not only cause his father's death, but also disrupt the line of succession to the throne. Hamlet makes this known by stating:

> Does it not, think'st thee, stand me now upon—
> He that hath kill'd my king and whored my mother,
> Popp'd in between the election and my hopes,
> Thrown out his angle for my proper life,
> And with such cozenage—is't not perfect conscience,
> To quit him with this arm? and is't not to be damn'd,
> To let this canker of our nature come
> In further evil? (5.2.63-70)

Morals become overshadowed by the desire for justice to be served; "when [the offender and avenger] represent single omnipotence and multiple human frailty, [the offender and avenger] become incommensurable" (Kerrigan 119). And, to the same extent, the audience also stands to have their own standard by which they are judged and how they judge others' actions. Hamlet's revenge must also be made public so that the Claudius becomes aware of the actions that are taken against him. As the final act of *Hamlet* unfolds:

> Hamlet registers a recognition that revenge is incoherent unless it possesses that recapitulative power which the passage of experience makes impossible… it not only compromises action by substituting remembrance for revenge but points up the incoherence of violence by staging more persuasive recapitulation than stabbing in the back could contrive. (Kerrigan 187)

Having Claudius die becomes unimportant to Hamlet; Claudius must suffer at his hands in order to truly bring about a full onslaught of revenge. These dark and wicked desires entrapped within Hamlet are now being experienced by the audience, and thus they become implicit in the revenge that Hamlet accomplishes.

Elizabethan revenge tragedies awakened a genre that had been seen as lesser, and as the genre quickly flourished, it took center stage because it allowed audiences to enjoy revenge tragedies without the condemnation that the church associated with the actions being acted out on stage. William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* utilizes the conventions of the revenge tragedy genre magnificently—it produces varying layers of understanding for the audience, which challenges their perception of their relationship to the stage. Within *Hamlet*, the audience is seemingly addressed various times, which adds to this inherent connection between the play and audience members. The main conventions used by revenge tragedies gave way to greater audience enjoyment and allowed for them to gain more of a role within the theater. Their tastes, ideals, and visions of the world allowed them to help shape the way in which playwrights and authors viewed and wrote their works throughout this time period.

NOTES

[1] Although modern day conceptions of nationalism were not present in the early modern era, the roots that gave way to it were beginning to flourish in theater as playwrights set their productions abroad so as to glorify England and place it as superior to other cultures.

[2] Anything that serves as a guide to making a morally informed choice

[3] To assist or give aid to; to give a start or cue to an individual.

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Re:Search

Symbolism and Fact of Matter:
History, Politics, Journalism, and Waste in James Joyce's *Ulysses*

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ABSTRACT

Joyce uses excrement in *Ulysses* (1922) not only to bridge the gap between literature and reality, but as a gateway to history as waste, journalism as irrelevant, and the politics that influences them both. Critic Valérie Bénéjam says that looking at feces through a symbolic lens is problematic because it takes away from the physicality of the act. Joyce is able to convey both the reality and the symbolism attached to the expulsion of human waste. Leopold Bloom's trip to the bathroom breaks down a barrier between what can and cannot be written about in literature. Instead of writing about fecal matter in a satirical or overtly humorous way, this particular bowel movement possesses a frankness about the body and its function that was unheard of in the 1920s and even now is considered impolite. Joyce's ability to layer frankness and history, and journalism and politics comes from his need to create the "new now" as opposed to the news of the now. Rather than printing titbits, he carefully constructs the new now using the thought by thought stream of consciousness of Bloom and the nutritious bits of history, leaving the waste behind.

KEYWORDS

Irish Nationalism, James Joyce, Journalism, New Now, Scatology

James Joyce expands the literary wealth on excrement in literature in his *Ulysses* (1922). Joyce bridges the gap between reality and literature by depicting one of life's mundanities through the character of Leopold Bloom. History, journalism, and politics in Ireland are represented or connected to each other by Bloom's fecal matter. History is the waste of time and civilization; journalism, the news of the day, is only relevant for that day and then becomes the paper that wipes the excrement off the people who read them yesterday; and politics influenced both history and the *Freeman's Journal*, an Irish nationalist paper, and *Titbits*, an English tabloid.

Valérie Bénéjam—a Modern Literature and Irish Literature researcher, critic, and lecturer at the Université de Nantes—suggests that working with food, digestive processing, and the end result of feces is sometimes problematic in how the symbolic significance takes precedence over the actual physicality and materiality of the action in her essay "Innards and Titbits: Joyce's Digestive Revolution in the Novel." However, it is difficult not to speak about excrement symbolically especially within Joyce's works, and specifically *Ulysses* for the purpose of this essay, when symbolism is such a large part of understanding the different layers and motivations behind an act that is often overlooked in literature.

Doctors Alan Bradshaw and Robin Canniford, both professors of Marketing and Management at Royal Holloway University of London and University of Melbourne, say in "Excremental Theory Development" that "aversion to excreta has arisen without due concern for health or hygiene but instead as an ossification of symbolic levels" (108). When social and economic meaning and pressure is applied to keep that part of life private, the topic, by definition, becomes taboo, discouraging forthright discussion and effectively causing shock and awe when it is discussed. Therefore, excrement is privatized for the sake of propriety. Talking about excrement in a candid fashion goes against everything we have been taught, so it is either discussed symbolically, whereby it can be damaging by clouding truthful meaning and importance, or it is discussed as a humorous device. Bradshaw and Canniford, citing Simon Critchley, Slavoj Zizek, and Norbert Elias, suggest that waste is considered uproarious for the simple reason that we are the least human—that is, stripped of our postured humanity—when defecating. Critchley posits that the very act of defecation is inherently humorous as it strips away the hilarious facade through which a person has to act like a person. Like Elias, the presence of this bodily function stands for the absence of the delicate airs and graces that support

our social selves, reducing us to disgusting food processing machines who are unable to control basic shameful urges (qtd. in Bradshaw and Canniford 108).

Though Bloom's costiveness implies an apparent lack of control over his bodily function, it also exhibits a kind of self-governance over his "basic shameful urges": he chooses what to eat, his body holds on to its waste, and he controls the excretion by taking a laxative. It is Joyce's frankness about Bloom's body and its functions that possess humor; however, beneath that humor is commentary on history, journalism, and politics in Ireland and England in the early twentieth century.

The reader is introduced to Leopold Bloom through his preferred, meaty dishes:

> Mr. Leopold Bloom ate with relish the inner organs of beasts and fowls. He liked thick giblet soup, nutty gizzards, a stuffed roast heart, liver slices fried with crust crumbs, fried hencod's roes. Most of all he liked grilled mutton kidneys which gave to his palate a fine tang of faintly scented urine. (*Ulysses* II.4.45)

In the meat market, organs were the cheapest part of the animal and were therefore purchased by people with lower incomes, but Bloom genuinely relishes the innards of beast and fowl. Bloom is a consumer of cheap foods leading to his incidents of constipation.

The reader is given a link to political happenings in 1904 between Ireland, England, Great Britain, and France through these specific organ-based dishes. Thick giblet soup is attributed to Greater Britain, which includes Ireland, much to most of the Irish Catholic population's chagrin. The Catholic population of Ireland was intensely, profoundly, and violently for Irish home rule which would sever them from Britain completely (McConnel; "Education in Great Britain and Ireland"). Giblets are an amalgamation of the innards of a fowl, representing, in this case, the countries England colonized. If the soup represents Great Britain, then the individual pieces of meat represent Ireland, Scotland, India, and so forth.

France is the stuffed roast heart. In 1904, France and Britain reaffirmed their intentions to remain peaceful and prosperous with one another in an agreement called *Entente Cordiale*. These two "'natural and necessary enemies' sign a document solidifying peace and enabling trade" (*Entente Cordiale*; Embry). This could be France offering up its heart to England, but with half of Ireland violently rebelling against their rule, to refuse a political alliance with a powerful country would be diplomatically illogical.

If food is thought of as history—Irish and English and their relations to other countries—then history is waste or will be soon enough. Catherine Whitley in her "Nations and the Night: Excremental History in James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* and Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood*" says, "History itself is figured as a waste product, ejected by the peristalsis[1] of a nation's forward movement in time" (81). Joyce seems to be embodying European history through food, creating in Bloom the power to consume current political events and become the conduit for the nations to expel their pasts. However, if history is waste, then it is also fertile; it is recyclable, so there is an opportunity in the future for something fruitful to spring from the waste. But Bloom is costive; he does not want to let go of the past and has to take a "tabloid of cascada sagrada" (*Ulysses* II.4.56) to actively move on from yesterday's constipation.

Bénéjam draws attention to a particularly interesting quote from the philosopher and Joyce scholar, Andrew Mitchell, in his "Excremental Self-Creation in *Finnegans Wake*":

> To think excrement is to encounter life. A life that is not eternal, but intensely finite. A life that must devour and consume in order to grow; a life which consequently dies. To take shit seriously is to become a student of this life and to understand it at the level of process. Life lives through expulsion. Joyce is an author of life and our greatest thinker of shit. (qtd in Bénéjam 31)

Joyce bridges the gap between reality and literature in this honest depiction of one of life's mundanities. The process of excrement is an ongoing cycle, just as history is cyclical. History is happening every second; every moment that has passed is dead. However, history holds within it a vast wealth of knowledge. History is a fertilizer for the brain. Joyce knew that connecting the past to the present by extracting the vitalizing nutrients from the otherwise useless muck would propel him into the future of literature; he just had to choose the history that was relevant to his new now[2].

Bloom thinks about the people that work in a journal publishing house as animals on a farm:

> He held the page from him: interesting: reading it nearer, the title, the blurred cropping cattle, the page rustling. A young white heifer. Those mornings in the cattlemarket, the beasts lowing their pens, branded sheep, flop and fall of dung, the breeders in hobnailed boots trudging through the litter, slapping a palm on a ripemeated hindquarter, there's a prime one, unpeeled sandwiches in their hands. He held the page aslant patiently, bending his senses and his will, his soft subject gaze at rest. (*Ulysses*, II.4.48)

Bloom is comparing journalists and their publishers to animals, specifically, cattle, beasts, and branded sheep. The cattle market is the newsroom; the beasts and the sheep are the workers; the breeders the bosses that strain any innovation and creativity from the herd and slaughter them for this naked, sensual, carnivorous pleasure; and the 'flop and fall of dung' is the writing. The "now" journalism is already history by the time anyone writes it, before a reader can digest the news; so instead, they digest their food and use yesterday's tabloid for today's outhouse paper.

Though these comments are not particularly flattering, Bloom is very calm about them. Bloom sees the world in a visceral, corporeal way that others have been culturally bred to believe is not polite or socially acceptable, making him the perfect candidate to bring honest excrement to life in literature.

On his way to the bathroom, Bloom thinks about animals and their waste; he thinks about how dung is a necessary fertilizer for prosperous plant life. He also thinks over "dirty cleans":

> A coat of silver Sulphur. All soil like that without dung. Household slops. Loam, what is this that is? The hens in the next garden: their droppings are very good top dressing. Best of all though are the cattle, especially when they are fed on those oilcakes. Mulch of dung. Best thing to clean ladies' gloves. Dirty cleans. Ashes too. (*Ulysses*. II.4.55-6)

Without the animal dung, the soil would not be fertilized, plants would not grow as well, and Ireland might not be so green. The animals are the "food processing machines" Bradshaw and Canniford suggest that humans are, but the bodily function and the end result of the processed food ultimately creates and maintains life. Something that is considered dirty, inappropriate, and taboo helps inspire health, wealth, and prosperity. The idea that something dirty can clean another thing is connected to this life cycle—cow eats grass, or "oilcakes," cow makes waste, dung fertilizes plants, cow eats plants—in how it is not something that is talked about or thought of, if it can be helped, because it is a strange inversion of what is presented as truth. The dirty thing, the body creating feces and the feces itself, is cleaning out the body. The waste only truly becomes dirty once it leaves the body.

Having this account of animalian dung and how it is useful before Bloom makes it to the outhouse sets the reader up for the account of human feces to come. It allows the reader to approach Bloom's morning constitutional[3] from a more comfortable place, because animal excrement is easier to endure than human fecal matter. Joyce uses the animal dung to ease the

readers into the expulsion of human feces, perhaps so as not to offend those delicate sensibilities society has developed about a natural process.

This introduction also compares Bloom's feces to the more useful animal dung by the sheer proximity of the two passages within the text. Humans are more divorced from their bodily functions than animals are from theirs; however, Bloom is written as more frank with his bodily functions than the average literary character. There is a certain level of equality between Bloom and the animals. Bloom is very much the carnivorous animal: he eats the organs of other animals and he thinks of his feces in terms of, or at least in close proximity to, animal fecal matter. Bloom is more in touch with his base, animalistic instincts, making his comfort level with his body and bodily function easier for him to accept as a fact of life and for the reader to understand. People find it difficult to identify with animals and embrace their excrement because they find it "shameful, not because of its husk, but because in it we expose and externalize our innermost intimacy" (Bradshaw and Canniford 106). It is not that Bloom does not feel that shame, but that in some way he has blocked himself from that innermost intimacy.

Bloom kicks open the door of the outhouse, careful not to get his pants dirty, and the reader enters into a literary space that has been seldom occupied and never in the same capacity:

> Quietly he read, restraining himself, the first column and yielding, but resisting, began the second. Midway, his last resistance yielding, he allowed his bowels to ease themselves quietly as he read, reading still patiently that slight constipation of yesterday quite gone. Hope it's not too big bring on piles again. No, just right. So. Ah! Costive. One tabloid of cascara sagrada. Life might be so. It did not move or touch him but it was something quick and neat. Print anything now. Silly season. He read on, seated calm above his own rising smell. Neat certainly. *Matcham often thinks of the masterstroke by which he won the laughing witch who now*. Begins and ends morally. (*Ulysses*, II. 4. 56)

Bloom is measuring his bowel movement with the column in the tabloid *Titbits* which starts the parallels between the excrement and journalism. He, his body, has been holding on to the feces since the day before and this issue of *Titbits* is yesterday's edition. He likens the tabloid to the laxative, cascada sagrada, he took to get his bowels moving. Joyce intersperses moments of movement with thoughts on the piece in the tabloid. The story does not move him emotionally, but he is moved physically; it was quick and neat, like his expulsion. The phrase "print anything now" implies that the story is shit and that the institution of journalism is not much better. The

article "begins and ends morally," just as the fecal process begins and ends naturally. Like food, journalism is of the present, of the now, but they are both temporary and become waste and rag a day later.

It is speculated that the story in *Titbits*, *Matcham's Masterstroke*, is a piece of Joyce's lost, unpublished juvenilia, so he could be mocking himself for past works, adding to the idea that history is waste and yesterday's writing is shit. Joyce was a journalist in his early days and managed to get his novel, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), serialized in the *Egoist* from February 1914 to September 1915; *Ulysses* began serialization in the *Little Review* in March 1918, but "a complaint from the Society for the Suppression of Vice stopped publication" in 1920, making him familiar with the news of the now (*Dubliners* 231).

Jour in French means "day"; journalism is the news of the day or the news of the moment. In some ways, the novel itself is a nouvelle du jour because it takes place over the course of one day—June 16, 1904—but its thickness and style sets it apart from any other type of literary publication. Joyce set out to write a novel that would makeover the now. The now that people were used to was journalism that would "print anything now." The titbits[4] in *Titbits* and the *Freeman's Journal* are the in the moment, no substance, unable to touch or move, now that he writes *Ulysses* to defy, redefine, and create new. It is a carefully constructed stream of consciousness that thought by thought creates Bloom's, and Stephen's, present.

However, Joyce does not use the *Freeman's Journal* as the rag[5] that wipes up after Bloom is finished, but the *Titbit*, an English publication. Joyce was a nationalist and a pacifist so the turn for the violent that the radical nationalists took after Charles Stewart Parnell died put a wedge between nationalism and Joyce in that they advocated for different means for an end to British rule of Ireland. Parnell was a leading figure in Irish nationalism and home rule whose political career and personal life was decimated after he was cited in the O'Shea divorce case as Mrs. O'Shea's lover and betrayed by his friend, Timothy Healy, in November 1890. He died soon after and became viewed as a martyr for the Irish nationalist cause, though it was they who alienated him and inadvertently killed him. Though this happened when Joyce was young, Parnell's death marked a change and divide in the Irish nationalist community.

Bloom's innermost intimacy is exposed, but at most he seems jealous of Boylan:

> Is that Boylan well off? He has money. Why? I noticed he had a good rich smell off his breath dancing. No use humming then. Allude to it. Strange kind of music that last night. The mirror was in shadow. She rubbed her full wagging bub. Peering into it. Lines in her eyes. It wouldn't pan out somehow. (*Ulysses* II.4.57)

Bloom has been costive, constipated, which reveals a bit more of his character than simply the status of his processed food. He is slow and reluctant to action in his marriage and his sex life with his wife, Molly. He is stuck with this knowledge that his wife is cheating on him, but he does nothing about it, at least not this day. His obstacle is himself; he is passive and not a man of action.

Matcham's Masterstroke becomes something that he can exert force against and use as a rag: "He tore away half the prize story sharply and wiped himself with it" (*Ulysses* II.4.57). His contempt for Boylan and his frustration with himself and Molly are the clear emotional incendiaries; however, Bloom has reached the end of the excremental life process. He must start over again. He must consume history through life through organs; digest food, history and news, extracting only the valuable, the necessary, to feed the brain and the body; and finally, expel the useless waste and wipe using yesterday's now news.

Joyce gives the reader the option to abandon repugnance, shame, embarrassment, and disgust over excrement, allowing for a certain amount of freedom from social convention, conventional storytelling, and bottled up, costive taboo through unabashed frankness of language and character. He defied convention and fought to keep his work alive and circulating to bring audiences a new now even approximately 100 years after its first publication. There is no other literature quite like Joyce's *Ulysses* that represents excrement candidly while managing to symbolize and comment on Irish and English history and journalism. Rather than hiding "truth behind metaphor and synecdoche," Joyce layers truth, symbolism, Irish nationalism, commentary on journalism, and so forth, and does not sacrifice any one for another, but rather finds a way for symbolism; the now and allusion work together without compromising (Bradshaw and Canniford 103).

NOTES

[1] Peristalsis is the involuntary constriction and relaxation of the muscles of the intestine or another canal, creating wavelike movements that push the contents of the canal forward (Encyclopedia Brittanica).

[2] *Ulysses* is full of Biblical, Catholic, Irish, English, and Jewish references. The entire structure of the book is based on Homer's *Odyssey*: chapters, characters, obstacles, and so forth. .

[3] Constitutional relates as a delicate term for a trip to the bathroom that takes place in the morning.

[4] Titbits are defined as small and delicate pieces of food; a toothsome morsel, delicacy, *bonne bouche*; or—as is the more appropriate definition for this particular section—a brief and isolated interesting item of news or information; hence in *pl*., name of a periodical consisting of such items (*OED*).

[5] Rag content was the portion of rag used to make a particular paper. The rag end is the last part or remnant of something. The rag house (in the paper making industry) is a building in which rags are stored or prepared (*OED*). Rag is also a slang term for tabloids that are produced daily, bi-weekly, and weekly.

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