

## Reflections from Our Past President

“A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and many others; the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own. The great instrument of moral good is the imagination.”

– Percy Bysshe Shelley, [A Defence of Poetry and Other Essays](#)

A few years ago, ACETA established empathy and the sympathetic imagination as its annual conference theme. Since then, numerous presentations advocating empathy have been shared at ACETA conferences by undergraduate student panels, graduate students, tenured and non-tenured English faculty, and nationally recognized scholars from our state’s many community colleges and universities.

But little did we know in February 2020 that the ACETA conference held at UNA in Florence would be the last live, in-person professional gathering some of us would experience, perhaps even for the remainder of 2020. Shortly after COVID hit and forced us all into quarantined seclusion, attention to one of our nation’s persistent blights, racial injustice, erupted with a force equal to that of the rampant pandemic virus. Never has the

need for empathy and sympathetic imagination been greater.

As we return to classrooms this fall that likely will be exclusively or largely managed through distance learning platforms, let us use our imaginations even more keenly to put ourselves “in the place of another and many others” and encourage our students to do so as well.

It has been an honor to serve you as ACETA President the last two years. Anissa Graham, who has served as Executive Secretary for five years and last year as Vice-President, will take the lead as ACETA President 2020-2022, with the assistance of Pamela Horn-Vice-President, Ashley Kitchens-Executive Secretary, and the Steering Committee members.

Stay safe and continue to imagine compassionately,

Rebecca M. Duncan, ACETA President 2018-2020



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## **Robert C. Evans Named the 2020 Eugene Current-Garcia Award Winner**



(Photo courtesy [Auburn University at Montgomery](#))

The Association of College English Teachers of Alabama Steering Committee has been honored to work with the Monroeville Literary Festival in the annual selection of the Eugene Current-Garcia Award winner. As the [Monroeville Literary Festival](#) site explains, the Eugene Current-Garcia award recognizes “notable scholars with Alabama roots, or who have made significant contributions to the study of the literary arts in Alabama.” Dr. Robert C. Evans of Auburn University at Montgomery was named the 2020 winner for his excellent work as a mentor to students in addition to his prolific work in Renaissance studies. Dr. Evans will be the keynote speaker at the 2021 ACETA conference. Below is the Monroeville Literary Festival’s announcement of Dr. Evans’ award:

Author of eight books and hundreds of articles, Dr. Evans’s prolific literary scholarship has advanced the field of Renaissance Studies. Over the years, Dr. Evans has been the recipient of numerous

research fellowships and has served as an editor for several journals and more than forty books. Although his scholarship began with a focus on Ben Johnson, his research at the Yale library in 1993 recovered a lost Renaissance author, Martha Moulsworth – a discovery that garnered the attention of the Alabama Humanities Foundation and the inclusion of her poem in two of Norton’s anthologies of literature. Over the years, Dr. Evans’ scholarly inquiry has expanded to include work on Kate Chopin, Flannery O’Connor, Harper Lee, and most recently, Ralph Ellison.

Just as notable, however, has been his commitment to students, not only as an admired professor, but also as a mentor to more than a hundred graduate students and student writers. While at AUM, he has received numerous awards, including the Faculty Excellence Award, Distinguished Research Professor, Distinguished Teaching Professor, Who’s Who among College Professors nomination, and Professor of the Year by the South Atlantic Association of Departments of English.

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## **Mary Evelyn McMillan Undergraduate Writing Award Winner Causes of Devastation and Pathways to Healing in “September 1, 1939” Maria Kersteins**

War has long been a subject of philosophers’ and poets’ contemplation, and perhaps this is because war is not an unstoppable natural disaster;

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it is a calamity brought on by humankind itself—a sort of completely preventable self-destruction. W.H. Auden presents a deft representation of this relationship between war and humanity in his poem, “September 1, 1939.” Auden suggests that although people might view politics and intelligence as pathways to seeking progress or betterment, these inherently selfish forces can be used to generate power and evil, but they alone can never be used as effective solutions to such evils. Subscribing to this thought, one understands that a humankind that glorifies intellectual and political power above all else can bring forth destruction, but it cannot dispel it. As Auden suggests, if war exists because of want for profit, progress, or political gain, its evils cannot be truly healed by use of money, intelligence, or governance. When people cannot act upon these evils with their usual—albeit destructive—means, they isolate themselves from the consequences they wrought and become alienated from the real world. They retreat into their own selfish comforts, be they from unrequited love or material goods, and this perpetuates an unchanged cycle of destruction. Auden brings these ideas to light by capturing humanity’s loss of political and intellectual agency and their subsequent alienation through use of thematic, hopeless language, which he then juxtaposes with a true means to secure the agency and community humanity misses—love.

The speaker details humankind’s invented governance and futile attempts to use power to control the actions of an earth that pays it no heed. In the first half of the poem, the speaker expresses

that “...blind skyscrapers use / Their full height to proclaim / The strength of Collective Man” (35-37). Here, materialism, money, power, and labor have created testaments to man’s greatness; however, the speaker counters this unfounded claim later in the poem. The speaker exposes the falsehoods and deceptions of arbitrary, constructed power:

...the lie of Authority,

Whose buildings grope the sky:

There is no such thing as the state,

And no one exists alone; (82-85).

Although men seem to meddle directly with reality, the speaker suggests that they have no actual control over it through political means. Buildings will be built, but they are nothing more than displays of denial—feeble attempts at impossible dominion. States may govern, but they are nothing more than invented governance with no real influence. Any power or control seized in the world holds weight only in the perception of the falsely powerful and those who submit to recognizing them.

As governance fails humanity, so do their feeble attempts at intelligence, reason, and logic. Knowledge and progress, in times of prosperity, seem to be the constant contributors to the betterment of society. However, it is only in times of peril that humans understand that their intellectual efforts cannot withstand great suffering; reason is nothing in the face of utter devastation. The speaker notes that, upon receiving news of Germany’s invasion, “the clever hopes expire” (Auden 4). The speaker seems to pose the question: if we are truly so clever, why do war,

death, and ineffable destruction exist in spite of our attempts at intellectual progress? The agency that humanity placed so much faith in fails them; they can know, but they will never control with the means in which they have invested.

Auden reveals that, as a result of the loss of these agencies, humankind feels increasingly alienated from reality and action. The poem first reveals the theme of alienation through physical location. The speaker shares, “I sit in one of the dives / On Fifty-Second Street,” a setting which evokes a sense of normality; however, the footnotes reveal that the average existence of ordinary people in such mundane settings is disrupted with news of invasion (1-2). The speaker is not in the advancing army nor in the occupied European land, but in New York City (2). Rather than being physically affected, the speaker is physically alienated from the action. The speaker is helpless; their agency to control the conflict of the world through direct means is seemingly stripped away. This creates moods of frustration and unrest for the poem as humanity is politically and emotionally ravaged by war, though many people are simultaneously separated from physical action towards it. They are forced to watch, to know, to experience internally, but without the proximity necessary to change anything by political or intellectual action; perhaps to them, it might seem that any action that does not have a direct and immediate effect is not action at all. Thus, they remain helplessly stagnant.

This experience of sorrow and alienation leads people to turn to conventions and routine life to distract from the horrors of war, therefore

alienating themselves further from reality, community, and meaningful action. The speaker notes that when “anger,” “fear” and “the odour of death” infect the crevices of the earth and the “private lives” of individuals, the September evening is “offended”—not devastated, not heartbroken, but inconvenienced and stained by the unattractive tragedies of man (6, 9, 10-11). Furthermore, the people “cling to their average day,” for the illusions of peace and undisturbed familiarity serve as coping mechanisms for those who wish to deny the situation of their existence (46). The speaker writes of “conventions” used to transform a “fort” into “the furniture of home” (49-51). By stating this, the speaker comments on humankind’s refusal to accept reality and its desperate measures to search for comfort. The image of a “fort,” a post or sanctuary used for defense in the midst of war, implies that the world is nothing more than temporary shelter waiting to be invaded (50). The fort does not become the emotional solace of home; it becomes the “furniture” of home, satisfying its sheltering functions but not its definition in an emotional sense (51). Auden suggests that humankind has constructed this shelter with political or intellectual means; void of love and human emotion, it becomes a structure to house individuals, not a home to embrace a community.

Furthermore, humankind seems eager to distract itself with manufactured elements thought to bring happiness and peace. The speaker expresses that “the lights must never go out,” and “the music must always play” (47-48). These two

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items both fill space and dispel their opposite. Light ensures the absence of darkness, or the dark reality of life. Similarly, music is noise that fills silent space. It ensures that people do not have the opportunity to encounter the reflection and realization that accompanies silence. Music can mask the silence of death so it is easy to ignore. By filling its collective mind with light and music, humankind further alienates itself from true love and life. As sorrow increases, humankind adopts alienations as a solution for surviving despite unbearable circumstances. The human world is “defenceless under the night,” lying in a “stupor,” a hazed, incomplete image of itself, assuming that because of its stripped intellectual and political agency, it is left with no choice but to hide or flee (89-90).

Perhaps the best representation of humanity’s alienation and loss of political and intellectual agency in the poem is the metaphor of the mirror:

But who can live for long  
In an euphoric dream;  
Out of the mirror they stare,  
Imperialism’s face  
And the international wrong. (40-44).

The “euphoric dream” represents humanity’s imagined image of the world—the one in which they have intellectual agency and influence (41). However, as the poem suggests, this image is, indeed, a dream, and one must always wake from a dream, no matter how lovely and lengthy it may seem. Contrary to conventional mirror metaphors, this one positions humankind as the reflection

rather than the figure controlling the reflection. They stare “out of the mirror,” as if it is a window (42). Perhaps, from that viewpoint, humankind gazes into the window of reality—thinking that it is the figure controlling the reflection—when, in truth, it is humanity that is controlled by reality. In this picture, humanity is embodied by “Imperialism” and the “international wrong” (43-44). “Imperialism” represents humanity’s mindset that they can seize dominion, and the “international wrong” is the essential folly of the human existence—seeking “not universal love / but to be loved alone” (43-44, 65-66). Humanity’s shortcomings form a sheet of glass, the mirror, that maintains their alienation from reality and prevents them from true action.

Despite their stripped agency and alienation, though, the speaker suggests there is but one saving grace for humanity—love. The speaker remarks that “We must love one another or die,” positioning love as the only option for meaning and action in human life (88). Love is “ironic”—its existence perplexing and almost unbelievable (92). Love shines from the “Just,” little lights “dotted everywhere” (92, 94). If political and intellectual power reap only harm in time, then love is the only human action that can dismantle the evil institutions created by a blind belief in and obsession with such political and intellectual action. Love perpetuates a foundational system of compassion, generosity, and selflessness, whereas faith in intellect and governance perpetuates a system of greed, oppression, and unbalanced power—factors that often lead to war. Love, Auden

suggests, is humankind's only action that can bring healing to a devastated world.

Though the poem's main message is dismal and disheartening, it concludes with a sliver of hope. Recognizing humankind's alienation, lack of political and intellectual agency, and self-serving tendencies is important because, once these elements are accepted, humanity can begin to shift its focus to what can and does matter in the world; for Auden, this is love. Though war may be raging all around and our intelligences and governing forces fail us, we will still have the shining lights of pure love, and perhaps, with much cultivation, such love can begin to erode the innate human characteristics that cause separation and helplessness.

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**William J. Calvert Award Winner**  
**Visibility in Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary***

## **Imagination and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* Kiietti Walker-Parker**

I read initially Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* and found it very intriguing many years ago as to the fascination of the perceptions of cultures "othered" or those very different than societal acceptance to the extent that the very acceptability of societal buy-in came at the price of ethnic diminishing or othering. I was enthralled to the relatedness of Morrison's chapter titles and subsequently the chapter epigraphs. This presentation is an attempt to shed a brief introduction to the contents of *Playing in the Dark* as well as a subsequent comparison to Ralph Ellison's novel titled *Invisible Man* that instead of weakening or fading a cultural presence actually imprints handprints and footprints of otherness as if set in wet concrete establishing visibility and longevity instead: even as an other, there is a presence nonetheless.

Darkness (Black culture/ "other") is often held in contrast to light (White culture/non-"other") and accordingly pushed to the back and into the shadows of the word light. For instance, the term "without light" has nothing to do with culture; however, considered alongside the word "other" for darkness, it now has a definition that signifies culture, most often unfavorably. Toni Morrison explores this in *Playing in the Dark* as her purpose for this work revealed in her very own words:

... traditional, canonical American literature is free of, uninformed and unshaped by the four-hundred-year-old presence of, first, African and then African Americans in the United States. It [American literature] assumes that this presence-which shaped the body politic, the Constitution, and the entire history of the culture-has had no significant place or consequence in the origin and development of that culture's literature. ... knowledge assumes that the characteristics of our national literature emanate from a particular "Americanness" that is separate from and unaccountable to this presence. ... [the] views [of white males, genius, and power) are without relationship to and removed from the presence of black people in the United States (5).

In order to illustrate her point, Morrison uses epigraphs at the beginning of her three chapters. To further illustrate the interdependence of white and black in American Literature, African-American author Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* will be examined in short segments (bits and pieces).

## "Black Matters"

Morrison uses this epigraph of T.S. Eliot for her first chapter: "I am moved by fancies that are curled/Around these images, and cling:/The notion of some infinitely gentle/Infinitely suffering thing" (qtd. in T.S. Eliot from "Preludes, IV"). It is fitting that Toni Morrison include this quote from T. S. Eliot, a white, American male poet. These words

quoted from Eliot's work do more than hint at the acknowledgement that "Black Matters," (1) the title of chapter one in this literary work; these words speak it. Morrison further proves this as she states: "Through significant and underscored omissions, startling contradictions, heavily nuanced conflicts, through the way writers peopled their work with the signs and bodies of this presence-one can see that a real or fabricated Africanist presence was crucial to their sense of Americanness. And it shows" (6). Even though Eliot does not mention Africa, Africans, slavery, or a black presence explicitly, he does with the mention of "some infinitely gentle/Infinitely suffering thing" (1). Africa's presence and the presence of slavery are in Eliot's "underscored omission" (6) of it.

Ralph Ellison's literary work *Invisible Man* does something similar. Ellison states: "I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allen Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids – and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me" (3). In this description of the narrator, the protagonist, Ellison does not mention color; he avoids it. Yet, as Morrison notes, "[authors] peopled their work with the signs and bodies of this presence" (6), Ellison descriptively portrays a black man in all essence of a body, "flesh and bone, fiber and liquids ... a mind" (3). Ellison further seals his portrayal of a black man with his statement: "simply because people refuse to see me" (3). What other being in the course of the United States of

America has been invisible, unseen, essentially there but figuratively not? The answers to that question are those of Africa and African descent, slaves, the institution of slavery.

## "Romancing the Shadow"

Morrison uses the following quote as an epigraph for the second chapter of her literary work. "... shadows/Bigger than people and blacker than [the N word] ..." (29). Morrison aims to illustrate how fanciful, dreamy, and passionate American literary authors are when illustrating something larger than life, people, and words - a shadow. She includes portions of white, American male author Edgar Allen Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*: "... a sullen darkness now hovered ... nearly overwhelmed by the white ashly shower ... continuously beyond the veil ... Hereupon Nu-Nu stirred in the bottom of the boat. . . found his spirit departed ... shrouded human figure ... hue of the skin of the figure was of the perfect whiteness of the snow" (31-32). The words of Poe in which Morrison captures highlight the romance of the shadow, of light and darkness, constantly present in American literature. Morrison also notes that "images of the white curtain and the "shrouded human figure" with skin "the perfect whiteness of the snow" both occur after the narrator has encountered blackness" (32). She also notes that Poe is the most important American author central to the concept of American Africanism.

In the prologue of Ellison's *Invisible Man*, the narrator is also struck by a sense of romance in references to black and white. The narrator responds: "That is why I fight my battle with Monopolated Light & Power. The deeper reason, I mean: It allows me to feel my vital aliveness. ... In my hole in the basement there are exactly 1, 369 lights. I've wired the entire ceiling, every inch of it. And not with fluorescent bulbs, but with the older, more expensive-to-operate kind, the filament type. ... Nothing, storm or flood, must get in the way of our need for light and ever more and brighter light. The truth is the light and light is the truth. When I finish all four walls, then I'll start on the floor. ... Yet when you have lived invisible as long as I have you develop a certain ingenuity" (7). In his own way, Ellison portrays a fascination with light. Light is good. Light is truth. Light is power. Light is the way. As Morrison regards without saying as well as Ellison, if light is good, truth, power, and light, what is darkness regarded as? Ellison's work, his views, are similar to Poe's in that only after encountering darkness as Ellison's narrator regards "my hole" (7), can the narrator engage in a fascination and seemingly obsession with light. Does the number of 1, 369 lights seem obsessive? Not if one regards light with power, truth, brightness, and good. Does covering all four walls and plans to cover the floor sound passionate or romantic? Sure it does because in this passion and romance described, readers envision the narrator's quest to become more than what he is. Readers envision romantically that the narrator himself is unable to be more than what he is in his

own skin. The amount of light and the strong fixation of it only bring more attention to what is not light and what is not right and foreseeable. Ellison depicts blackness by bringing more and more and more attention to the need for light. He further sums this up as he remarks: "Yet when you have lived invisible as long as I have you develop a certain ingenuity" (7). The narrator's invisibility is further highlighted by the absence of light. Light is important and he is determined to grow and become more of what he wishes to be in order to obtain it.

## **"Disturbing Nurses and the Kindness of Sharks"**

"But there was a special hell besides where black women lie waiting for a boy -" by William Carlos Williams from "Adam" (Morrison 61). This epigraph is used for Morrison's third and final chapter. Williams is an American writer who loved to write about everyday people and everyday circumstances ("William Carlos Williams" 1). Ironically, the everyday Williams' targets in this instant, this moment is a black woman. This portion of Williams's poem "Adam" depicts an ordinary picture of "black women slaying,]" however it is disturbing in the sense that Williams speaks of it as a "special hell" (Morrison 61). In this portrayal of black women, readers envision them as caring beings but caring beings in the midst of somewhat uncaring beings and uncaring times as remarked by the words "special hell" (61). Here, blackness is the choice of Williams's writing.

Morrison further elaborates on the choice of blackness and race for white, male American writers as she compares Ernest Hemingway's characterization of blackness as "servile black bodies" (69). She describes a character in his *To Have and Have Not*, Harry, as "passive powerlessness" (Morrison 73). Only in the character's own mind are readers clued that his name is 'Harry. With a name, the character, the man, has power, authority, and self-worth. However, the narrator refers to him as "he," "nameless," and "[n-word]" (71), usurping the power, authority, and self-worth that every man deserves. According to Morrison, Hemingway's seeing characters are the powerful ones, the authoritative ones (73), but also according to Morrison those without power are oftentimes "nameless, sexless, nationless Africanist [origin]" (73). Taking another look at Williams's "black women" and "boy," both are without names and except for color, nationless. This is a pattern Morrison equates to white, American male authors.

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* conveys the point Morrison aims. Ellison's main character, the narrator, is never given a name by himself (in his own thoughts) or by others, whether they are black or white. For example, even just after graduating primary school, right before college, when he is allowed to speak to a group of white men, Ellison refuses to have him acknowledged by name: "We almost forgot an important part of the program. A most serious part, gentlemen. This boy was brought here to deliver a speech which he made at his graduation yesterday ... I want you to give him your

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attention” (29). The narrator is only referred to as “this boy” and “him.” Also, Ellison shows how the narrator sees himself: “I remember that I am invisible and walk softly so as not to awaken the sleeping ones” (5). The self-made mandate to be invisible and to walk softly amongst others lets readers know that the narrator is not himself because he cannot be himself. The narrator cannot be alive, boisterous, engaged, or challenging; he has to “walk softly” (5). The narrator cannot know himself because to know himself and to be true and strong to the notion of who he is, he must have a picture, an image, or even a reflection of himself in the face of other people. Being invisible does not allow the narrator that ability; a reflection of invisibility is itself, invisibleness, nothing.

Morrison uses three epigraphs to highlight the introductions of the three chapters in her literary work *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. These epigraphs are words from three of America's most prominent writers who all happen to be white males. In light of the works she uses to illustrate her points, Morrison does not wish to portray that her summations center on an author's own perception of race. However, she does wish to highlight that the presence of Africanist beings, thoughts, conditions, and stature are always present, even when an author and other authors (critics) deny it (91). Morrison notes: “All of us, readers and writers, are bereft when criticism remains too polite or too fearful to notice a disrupting darkness before its eyes” (91). America's present is a compilation of its past, and its future is interdependent upon both.

Morrison does not mind an all white presence in literature or even an all black presence or both, but it is feasible to state that to determine a presence by denying another presence is just plain out wrong and impossible. Also, Morrison also infers as well as Ellison that in the attempt to diminish a presence in order to heighten another does the reverse in all actuality. The second presence cannot stand on its own as the othered presence is its support. Thus, otherness is in fact cemented in stone as its power is not weakened or faded, but instead, it is the very foundation used to support the structure that is aimed to be made to shine, holding the other in its place. As Morrison and Ellison unintentionally highlight, that is power right there, real power.

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<<http://www.poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/119>>.
- Kiïetti Walker-Parker is a poet, writer, and Instructor of English at Alabama A&M University.*

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**James Woodall Award Winner**

## **An Artistic Tactile Experience in Class Struggle and Divide: Play-Doh in the American Literature Classroom** **Ashley Harlan Kitchens**

When was the last time you played with Play-Doh? For many students, years, maybe even a decade has passed since they found enjoyment in squeezing the brightly colored material between their fingers. Play-Doh is famously a child's medium, but when introduced into a college classroom to illustrate the purpose behind Rebecca Harding Davis's "Life in the Iron Mills," it becomes a powerful tactile tool that creates opportunity for both creativity and critical thinking. Davis's short story, printed in *The Atlantic* in 1861, examines the underbelly of America's labor system during the span of years labeled the Industrial Revolution. Additionally, the story examines issues surrounding both immigrant mill workers and female laborers, illustrating the wide gulf between upper and more well-to-do middle-class citizens and the men and women who comprise the lowest class system in society. The story itself is a mixture of sentimental and realistic fiction, embedding sentimental characters in verisimilitude of setting; the author also employs authorial intrusion to lure the audience in to critical examination of both character and setting, which then demands an emotional response and call to action from the reader. So how does brightly colored child's-play material find its way as a tool to unlocking the purpose of the story set in the smoky, soot-covered town of Davis's "Life in the Iron Mills"? Wolfe's

skill as a sculpture artist provides the perfect logical connection to this modern material, and thus, paves the way for an activity in class struggle and divide. In an early American literature survey class, students are given the chance to truly experience empathy as they tactily explore and reflect on themes of beauty and artistic expression, class divide, and oppression presented in Rebecca Harding Davis's "Life in the Iron Mills."

### **The Experience Explained**

When students enter the classroom on the day after having read "Life in the Iron Mills," they are immediately grouped together, forming 5-6 groups of between 4-6 students. The discussion of the work will come later in the class because students will first go through the experience before writing responses or verbally sharing thoughts on the story. The students are then given direction for the activity that will take place in the first half of the class period:

Students will create a representation of "wealth" using Play-Doh. Each group will come up with its own idea of what symbolizes wealth, and it will produce a visual display that the group can also verbally explain to the class. The displays will be judged based on three criteria: 1. Overall originality – the display is not similar to another group's product, 2. Creativity – the display and the verbal discussion provide well thought out and symbolic notions, and the display uses color, shape, and idea to advance those symbols, and 3. Cleanliness and

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professionalism – the display is not sloppy, and it has artistic standard. The previous criteria are set because there will be a winner, and the winner will receive a prize. Students may use up to four jars of Play-Doh (provided by the instructor), and groups will have 30 minutes to plan and create their displays. Once completed, students will present their displays to the class, telling the class what their representations are and the symbolism and purpose behind them.

The students then get to work constructing their visual projects. Some groups jump right in; whereas, others write out a plan first and then begin their artistic process. Once the groups are nearing completion, the instructor gives each group a slip of folded paper with a social class group written on it: Upper Class Men, Upper Class Women, Middle Class Men, Middle Class Women, and Lower/Labor Class Men and Women. The instructor already has a good idea of which display will win (unbeknownst to the students), as she has been walking through the groups during their construction asking questions about the meaning behind the displays; she does this to be able to assign this “winning group to-be” the “lower/labor class men and women” slip of paper. Students sit with their displays and the still folded piece of paper to wait on the next set of directions.

Once projects are completed, and slips of social class assignments are handed out, students present their projects to the class. Groups tell the class what they constructed and why they chose the

idea, colors, and formation of it; after all groups discuss, students get up to walk around and look at the projects to be able to help the instructor judge the best work. After inspection, students return to their groups and the instructor gives the judging direction:

Groups will now provide the instructor with feedback on the best display based on the initial three criteria. Before the instructor speaks with students about their feedback, groups will open the slip of paper they received. This is the social class among the classroom today. The instructor will now solicit feedback and award a winner.

Once students know their social class, the instructor begins walking around to talk to the groups out loud so every student can hear. The first question the instructor asks is “What social class are you?” The groups comprising the middle class and upper class women get questions from the instructor about instruction of children, daily household issues, or the weather, or they are praised for looking quite neat and tidy (pretty) on that day; these questions are set to have them give answers on anything except the important business at hand (the winner of the contest). The reason behind this is to give this group a sense of empathy for the female plight in the public sphere of the nineteenth century. When the instructor reaches the group comprised of the lower/labor class, she immediately scoffs at them and runs from the group insisting that it cannot possibly give any kind of advice or direction on such an important contest. The reason behind this small display of unjust

treatment is to give this group the feeling that its opinions do not count, that it is really not part of society. The instructor then heavily relies on groups comprising the middle and upper-class men because they are the groups that really count in her eyes. The middle-class men give their opinions on the best products in the class as do the upper-class men. However, the instructor then turns to the upper-class men as the group that she wants to really decide the contest; she needs their help in agreeing with her and together picking a winner. If the instructor feels they are not going to pick the group deemed as the lower/labor class, she will instruct them to show them how that project fits the criteria the best. In the end, the upper-class men and the instructor award the lower/labor class group as the winner.

As the instructor goes to her desk to retrieve the full-size candy bar prizes for the winners, the group of the lower/labor class students usually tends to celebrate its victory, but victory is soon cut short with the next steps in the activity. The instructor congratulates the winners for their ability to create something so well made and thought-out, and she tells them they have great talent and very creative mindsets. As she is congratulating the group, she walks toward the upper-class men group and gives them the candy bars for helping her choose the winners. The middle-class men get a conciliatory prize of a small piece of candy; the middle and upper-class women do not get anything as they need to “stay away from such foods,” and the lower/labor class group remains without a prize.

It is at this point that journaling begins and a class discussion of the story takes place. Students journal about their projects and what all they put into the creation of their displays; they continue to journal about how it felt to be approached by the instructor looking for help deciding the winner, and they finalize their journals by reflecting on how their group ended the experience and their feelings on the outcome. Although this experience is only a surface-level reflection of social class divide, the discussion of the students’ experience and their subsequent relation of the class activity to the events which take place in the story illustrate their connection to the purpose behind the work.

### **Empathetic Connections to Literary Themes**

Over the last few years of using this activity, the instructor has seen the students connect to the story’s comment on the notion of beauty and artistic expression as a means for sentimentality. Beauty and art are illustrated in both inanimate objects and humanity in this work. The focal object of beauty defined is the korl woman statue carved by Hugh Wolfe. This object is, in itself, a juxtaposition because it is introduced as less than beautiful: “There was not one line of beauty or grace in [the korl figure]; a nude woman’s form, muscular, grown coarse with labor, the powerful limbs instinct with someone poignant longing. One idea: there is was in the tense, rigid muscles, the clutching hands, the wild, eager face, like that of a starving wolf’s” (Davis). Students critically analyze the criticism of the statue here as surface level: the statue is not beautiful by refined taste; it is not the subject matter of standard beauty. However, one of

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the upper-class men visiting the mill, Mitchell, is touched by the figure and truly sees it for the beautiful work of art that it is. As Doctor May, Mitchell, and Wolfe converse about the meaning of Wolfe's sculpture, the beauty of the wild figure is illustrated:

'Look' continued the Doctor, 'at this bony wrist, and the strained sinews of the instep! A working-woman, - the very type of her class... 'She be hungry.' Wolfe's eyes answered Mitchell, not the doctor... 'Oh-h! But what a mistake you have made, my fine fellow! You have given no sign of starvation to the body. It is strong – terribly strong [said Doctor May]. 'May,' [Mitchell] broke out impatiently, 'are you blind? Look at that woman's face! It asks questions of God, and says, 'I have a right not know.' Good God, how hungry it is!' (Davis)

Doctor May and Mitchell, two men of upper-class stature, argue about the beauty of the work, and Mitchell finally impresses upon May how the soul of the figure reaches through its rough exterior; the beauty of the work is in the desperation it illustrates. In looking at this exchange, and lines from Clarke between the discussion, students see an illustration of how beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and that some people only define beauty by what they deem to be a beautiful subject. Mitchell is the only person who sees the figure's beauty in its wildness, and the only one who sees the artistic vision of a woman hungry for life and desperate for hope Wolfe had designed it with. With this, students empathize with Wolfe; he

beautifully and exactly replicates a form that represents the world he comes from and the people he works with, and its beauty is lost on someone from a different social class who cannot comprehend its meaning. Davis also uses distinguishing features in humanity to represent beauty. Just as the upper-class men were critiquing Wolfe's statue, Wolfe is given voice to critique one of the men himself. Wolfe sees Mitchell at the mill: "Wolfe caught with a quick pleasure the contour of the white hand, the blood-glow of a red ring he wore. His voice, too, and that of Kirby's touched him like music, - low, even, with chording cadences. About this man Mitchell hung the impalpable atmosphere belonging to the thoroughbred gentleman. Wolfe...was conscious of it, did obeisance to it with his artist sense..." (Davis). Wolfe is, in effect, so attuned to beauty's true form, that he is immediately enthralled by the refinement Mitchell embodies in his form and voice. Students see Wolfe's realization of the difference between himself and Mitchell, and they empathize with his awareness of the large degree of separation Wolfe assigns their difference. Beauty and art form within the work as a sentimental element resonate around these two main ideas in class discussion.

Furthermore, social class division is evident in both the in-class activity and the story, and students experience this first hand. All of the lower/labor class characters are described as "[m]asses of men, with dull, besotted faces bent to the ground, sharpened here and there by pain or cunning; skin and muscle and flesh begrimed with smoke and ashes" (Davis). The physical evidence of

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their lives full of hard labor and incessant smoke from the factories is a visual reminder of the mental ruin they are in as well. Students connect this uncleanliness and a sense of heavy-heartedness with the lower/labor classes with this simple description. Students further see a connection of class division in the picture Davis paints of Wolfe and Deborah individually. Specifically, Wolfe “had already lost the strength and instinct vigor of a man, his muscles were thin, his nerves weak, his face (a meek woman’s face) haggard, yellow with consumption” (Davis). Davis’s description of Deborah further induces sympathy for this class of people: “...her face was even more ghastly, her lips bluer, her eyes more watery. She wore a faded cotton gown and a slouching bonnet. when she walked, one could see that she was deformed, almost a hunchback.” Students see these two among the crowd of the lower/labor class as ghostly, deformed people; their description matches their life situation. These are people that others do not want to associate with because the poor lower class remind others of the large division in social class; it is physically evident that these people have not been able to care for themselves in a healthy manner, and thus, their uncleanliness, deformity, and blank eyes make others not want to associate with them. Students in the group that is assigned as the lower/labor class in the activity only get a small sense of this treatment when the instructor walks away from them, not wanting to talk to them about their opinions of the winning Play-Doh group; however, it is this simple gesture that they are able to connect with when writing

about how unfair the prize system was and how bad they felt not getting the candy simply because of the social class they belonged to. Class division is also evident in the interactions between Wolfe and the group of men from the upper class after they discuss Wolfe’s talent and funding to help him become a great artist. The group decides that they can’t spare any money to help Wolfe after all, but it is in this conversation that Wolfe understands that money is the answer. Doctor May enlightens Wolfe: “Why should one be raised, when myriads are left? – I have not the money, boy” (Davis). Although the Doctor certainly has the money to help one individual, he does not want to take on the whole issue of helping all people out of poverty. Students argue that Doctor May certainly has the right to do what he wishes with his own money, but they notice that this enlightenment leads Wolfe to understand the class division even more prominently. Wolfe remarks, “‘Money?’...’That is it? Money?’” (Davis). Wolfe now not only sees the difference in himself and the men physically, but he understands the foundational difference between their classes: money. It is as if Wolfe had never known what could be used to cross the bridge of the social classes. Students parallel this experience to the lack of getting the full-size candy bars in the activity. They guffaw and say phrases like, “oh, I see what you did there,” but it is not until the upper-class men group get the candy and they don’t get any, not even after it is all said and done, that they fully realize the situation. An awakening to the class difference Wolfe finally sees is evident in his feelings the night after he has the conversation

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about his art with the group of men. The narrator of the story describes this realization: “So it came before him, his life, that night. The slow tides of pain he had borne gathered themselves up and surged against his soul. his squalid daily life, the brutal coarseness eating into his brain, as the ashes into his skin: before, these things had been a dull aching into his consciousness; tonight, they were reality” (Davis). As illustrated in the story, the reality of the class division hits Wolfe after he is able to see the other side (the wealthy class) and distinguish himself from it. Likewise, students journal and discuss in class the effects on them either getting or not getting candy parallel to the message of class division in the story.

Most importantly, students are able to experience and discuss ideas of oppression as it relates to their in-class activity and the story. There is no justice found in class division, but there is often not the means to totally eradicate that division. As the story continues, Deborah, who had been listening to Wolfe’s conversation about the need for money with the men at the mill, steals a check for a large sum of money and a few gold pieces from one of the men at the mill and gives it to Wolfe because she says it is his right to keep it; she is just trying to help him out of the situation they are all in, and thinks that stealing the money is the answer. Consequently, both Wolfe and Deborah are arrested. Readers are given the details as Doctor May’s wife reads a newspaper article to him: “Oh, my dear! You remember that man I told you of...- that was arrested for robbing Mitchell? Here he is...Sentence, nineteen years hard labor in

penitentiary. Serves him right! After all our kindness that night! Picking Mitchell’s pocket at the very time!’...the ingratitude of that kind of people...” (Davis). Students parallel these harsh words to stereotyping of other people. Some people will never be able to rise above a certain stature because of the stereotype placed upon them in the first place. The doctor’s wife exhibits her own ignorance in what actually happened the night in question, and places a stereotype on Wolfe’s “kind” of people, which in turn, illustrates the oppressive nature of social division. Wolfe ends up committing suicide in jail as he fully realizes not only the sentence placed upon him for the crime, but also that he will never be able to leave the station in life he is stuck in. He is not able to cope and takes his own life. Deborah is saved by a Quaker woman who takes Deborah in after her three-year jail sentence is served. The only way Deborah is able to finally escape oppression is through the love of Christ, a very sentimental element in literature. The narrator explains Deborah’s salvation from oppression: “There is no need to tire you with the long years of sunshine, and fresh air, and slow, patient Christ-love, needed to make healthy and hopeful this impure body and soul” (Davis). It was only among the Quaker women that Deborah was able to leave her oppressive state in society and become more at peace with her station in life. Students parallel this oppressive stereotyping to the interactions between the instructor and the groups as each is asked opinions on the winning display. The lower/labor class notwithstanding, even the middle-class women and upper-class women groups journal

about feeling that their opinions do not count, and that they get angry that they were just given random compliments. On the surface, even the small gesture of not allowing someone to speak up for himself, or not allowing someone else's opinion to count enables students to empathize with the characters in the story.

Overall, this activity not only gets students out of the element of typical lecture-style discussion, but it allows them to creatively and critically think about a piece of literature meant to propose a social question to its readers. Adding an element of student participation gives students an experience to automatically and immediately tie to discussion of the story. Giving students time to journal about their experience before the discussion begins also provides them a chance to relate what they experienced to what they read. Finding activities to allow students to empathize with characters and situations in literature, overall, ensures they connect more to the ideas and message of the work, and the use of a little Play-Do here allows for Davis's "Life in the Iron Mills" to fully impress an empathetic ideal upon students.

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## ***The Great Gatsby and The Sympathetic Imagination: Teaching *The Great Gatsby* in the 21st Century***

**Gary Bourgeois**

F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* is a metaphor for America as it exists today. The characters in the novel represent various temperaments and dispositions in relation to the American experience. The character, Gatsby, serves as a false prophet who seeks to attain the American dream. He was able to acquire a beautiful mansion in West Egg and some really nice automobiles, but his excessive materialism will not buy him the one thing that he truly wants. His American dream soon turns into an American nightmare; his pursuit of Daisy is doomed from the start. He does not realize that his dream is unattainable. The path that he has chosen can only lead to total disillusionment. Her husband, Tom, is an extension of all that is ugly about the American dream. He is a boorish, misogynist, rude, racist, millionaire who does not intend to share his inherited wealth with anyone outside of his social class. He may use Myrtle Wilson as a plaything, but he does not intend to leave Daisy. Also, Daisy does not intend to leave Tom. She will always run back to her comfortable world with Tom after they have destroyed all of the people around them.

In the sympathetic imagination, "We acquire knowledge of the inner lives of others by extending the imagination." In the world in which we live today, it is relatively easy to relate to the main

character, Gatsby, who lives in a world of excessive materialism and shallow values. He naively declares his everlasting love for Daisy, who has no intention of sharing her world with Gatsby. We see Tom on the news every day as well as his counterpart, Daisy, the shallow, materialistic wallflower. We can equally relate to Nick, the more sober, sane, side of ourselves.

In “Teaching *The Great Gatsby* in the Age of Trump,” Chris Huntington, in *The Chicago Review of Books*, says that his foreign students from India, Bangladesh, Australia, Bosnia, Russia, China, and France told him that he was so naïve: “We know you’re an American, and we know you love *The Great Gatsby*, but the idea of an American Dream? That’s just funny.” He told his students that optimism was central to the American character, and he showed them the Obama “Yes We Can” video. He showed them a picture of the astronaut planting the American flag on the moon, and one student replied: “That’s not exploration—that’s just greedy.” It’s funny how differently we appear, as Americans, to others across the ocean. We tend to see ourselves as great explorers, the greatest generation, and the most technologically advanced civilization on the face of the earth.

He tells his students: “At the end of *The Great Gatsby*, Nick moves back to the Midwest. He’s sick of hypocrisy and evasion. He knows Gatsby was a home wrecker and a criminal. He knows Daisy didn’t deserve all the attention. He calls them ‘careless people.’” But “they’re so American” (Huntington). He means, the characters in *The Great Gatsby* are far from perfect. He makes a lame

effort to defend the characters in the novel: “But Daisy suffers, too. She weeps on her wedding night and tries so hard to be something she’s not. Tom Buchanan might be a monster, but he cries for that little dog.” Or was he crying for Myrtle? “And Jay Gatsby really does make something of himself through sheer willpower. He really does believe in people” (Huntington). He really is about the most decent person in the crowd he runs with.

He wants to tell his students that they have learned so many things “American,” that they ought to be able to relate to Gatsby. He tells them “you know all the lyrics to Hamilton. You want to drive Highway One to Big Sur someday. You like Chicago-style pizza. But don’t be one of those people who gets drunk at Gatsby’s parties and then refuses to come to the funeral” (Huntington). He further states, “Don’t turn your back on America. Come and stay. Figure it out. Write *The Great Gatsby* for your own generation. If anyone can make America great again, you can” (Huntington). Anyone can achieve the American Dream—or can they?

In his article, “Teaching Gatsby under Obama was Eerie: Teaching It under Trump Is Crushing,” Jonathan Freeman-Coppadge states that “My lesson has turned from an academic contemplation of Fitzgerald’s poetry and politics to a bitter reflection on the cruel realities of power.” Freeman-Coppadge notes that when he started teaching his high school sophomores F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, he could not “shake a feeling of déjà-vu.” He had the feeling that he had lived the novel recently. Then it hit him: “Jay Gatsby reminded me

of Barack Obama. Not so much in their characters or actions as in their stations and the narratives that circulated around them.” As Freeman-Coppadge admits, he was not the only one to make this connection during the presidency of Barack Obama. There was “James Gatz’ quick rise from obscurity, his contested record from Oxford University, and his connection to Meyer Wolfsheim.” Barack Obama also seemed to traverse a controversial trajectory “from Harvard Law to community activism with folks like Jeremiah Wright, to a one term senator from the most infamously corrupt city in the nation, to the President of the United States of America” (Freeman-Coppadge). There are some similarities here.

As Freeman-Coppadge states, our world was soon to be shaken. “On the morning of November 9th, 2016, we awoke to the realization that, like Gatsby’s fantastic parties, our dream turned out to be no more certain than ‘a rock on a fairy’s wing.’ It has been one long hangover since then, and teaching *The Great Gatsby* has turned from an academic contemplation of Fitzgerald’s poetry and politics to a bitter reflection on the cruel realities of power.” As Freeman-Coppadge further states, “It is impossible not to read the scene of Gatsby’s death and feel desolate as Obama’s legacy erodes like a castle in the sand. It is impossible to watch Trump slide through the fingers of the law and public decorum and not be reminded of the Buchanans, who elude the consequences of three aggravated deaths as easily as they pack their suitcases.” Today is different from yesterday. As Freeman-Coppadge

states, “If before we read *The Great Gatsby* without feeling hopeless, it was because we could hide from the injustices of the book by pointing to the man who rose to power on a message of hope. Today, we do not have that luxury” (Freeman-Coppadge). Today is like a reality TV show.

Today, Freeman-Coppadge asks the million dollar question: “Is *The Great Gatsby* a book for the Trump Era? Is its pessimism too bleak for our own future, which might be reclaimed with some determination and grit? Might not a younger generation be better served by a call to arms than by a poetic plaint for the American Dream?” He answers the question with at least a glimpse of hope. “Perhaps so, but this also is true: The greatest risk we currently face is slipping into autocracy, in which the powerful can manipulate truth with impunity. This has already begun. As long as there exists the opportunity to challenge the dominant narrative, there is hope for truth, and perhaps even justice. When, by its force or our acquiescence, the dominant narrative becomes the only narrative, then the light of truth retreats beyond our view. *Gatsby* is a novel that questions the storied glitter of the roaring 20s, peeling back the gold leaf to find the rot lurking underneath. We need minds that can peel back the leaf on our own gold-plated present.”

Freeman-Coppadge further states, “And until that process is complete, I’ll push through my own feelings of cynicism and keep *Gatsby* in my classroom. Perhaps next time, we will teach our children better, push back on power harder” (Freeman-Coppadge). It is never too late to awaken

ourselves from this dream—this nightmare. I will continue to teach *The Great Gatsby* in my classroom; it is more relevant now than ever.

Jason Schlude, in his article, “The Politics of Consumption: From Trimalchio and Gatsby to Trump and Beyond,” discusses the behavior of Trimalchio from *Satyrica* by the Latin author Petronius. He further states, “President Trump is Trimalchio in many ways. Not in the modest beginnings he imagined for himself. He is not nouveau riche. But he is an invader in the world of established American politics. He is nouveau politique. And he is real” (Schlude). He came to us directly from American reality television in an Orwellian fashion when we least expected it.

Jason Schlude goes on to compare Trump to Trimalchio: “Trimalchio suffers from an inferiority complex. He consumes the attention of everyone in his orbit with the gravity of his self-importance. Hence, he can brook no public insult. In his own brash fashion, Trump consumes attention and power as he leaves tradition behind. Unlike the majority of his predecessors, this president often avoids polished communications with measured tone, consistency in policy, and standard grammar. The tweets come fast, hot, and at times hard to follow. These unpredictable salvos have everyone waiting for the next tweet, much like the diners hanging on Trimalchio’s every word. He likes to be at the center of things, to go head-to-head with political strongmen” (Schlude). Everything is about him and for him; everything is about making the deal and millions of dollars! He embraces the least

desirable qualities of a statesman in his deliberate cruelty and in his indifference to human suffering.

Jason Schlude lists a catalog of political blunders: “He, too, relishes surprises, but on a grand political stage. He breaks with tradition to recognize Jerusalem as Israel’s capital. He announces swift troop withdrawals from Syria—only to change course shortly thereafter --then to return to his original proposal a year later—and then threatens to bomb Bashar al-Assad (and does). He backs out of the Iran nuclear deal. His reflections on gun violence sometimes shock, no matter one’s persuasion on the issue.” According to Washington Post reporters Glenn Kessler, Salvador Rizzo, and Meg Kelly, in their article, “President Trump has made 3251 false or misleading claims in 497 days,” Trump has made over 3,000 “false or misleading claims as of June 1, 2018.” The best explanation for some is ignorance (Schlude). We have arrived--Big Brother is here--and he’s not going anywhere. At least, he doesn’t plan on going anywhere. The falsehoods keep stacking up—too numerous to count.

Like Trimalchio, Trump seems to lack compassion for the sufferings of others; instead, he is consumed with a dark narcissism. As Schlude asserts, “We also have seen how he proclaimed love for DACA recipients, then terminated their program. At least this portion of our society’s most vulnerable members are not his priority. The reality is entirely opposite; while Trump’s DACA debacle remains unresolved, the President and his Attorney General and Homeland Security Secretary aggressively pursue undocumented immigrants—

with immoral and heart-wrenching consequences.” Schlude further states, “Trump, akin to Trimalchio, no doubt imagines a glorious political end for himself—long down the road, since he is already campaigning for his next election. But will he leave the White House with the accolades and groans due to an effective senior statesman? If Trump insists on playing Trimalchio, consuming all political attention and agency, leaving little room at his table for anyone with an independent mind, and bullying those he feels beneath him, Petronius would hint no” (Schlude). It will not be a peaceful transition in the halls of power. In the end, our society will be judged by how we treat the most vulnerable amongst us. Trump deliberately persecutes the most vulnerable, totally devoid of any human compassion.

This is where we have to turn to *The Great Gatsby* for further insight: “This is where F. Scott Fitzgerald has an answer. He completes the Satyrical’s rags-to-riches story in *The Great Gatsby* (his classic critique of 1920s America), which is primarily set in New York City, a storyland of contrasts, illuminating sunshine held aloft, sometimes gliding by choking smoke. Entitled Trimalchio of West Egg at one point in the drafting process, this is the story of Jay Gatsby, an ambitious cog from North Dakota and Minnesota who dreamed of wealth in all its luxurious color—and achieved it. The title that won out, while catchier, obscured the connection, but only slightly, since Fitzgerald labels Gatsby a ‘Trimalchio’ late in the novel”(Schlude). Fitzgerald’s editor convinced F. Scott that *The Great Gatsby* was the title to go

with—most Americans don’t even know who Petronius is—much less Trimalchio. If Fitzgerald has an answer, what would that answer be?

And we have to turn to Nick Carraway in the novel for further elucidation: “Here . . . is Nick Carraway, backseat driver in his own life, watching the world of New York blow by in all its glitter and ash. He shares how Gatsby had single-mindedly sought the fortune that could win him Daisy, Nick’s cousin, and the object of Gatsby’s obsession for five long years. To win her, he buys a mansion across from hers in New York, inviting all the well-heeled to parties at his palace of surprises in the hope that Daisy will find her way there. Gatsby has to speed the process along, but the reconnection happens. The only problem is--Daisy is married to an aristocratic jerk: Tom Buchanan. In the end, Gatsby loses out. From the moment he met her, he was uncontrolled in his desire for her blue blood and the gorgeous utopia whose vast watershed sustained it, shining rivers of shallow runs fed by deep pockets. For Gatsby, Daisy is the blue river and the flower that crowns its highest bank” (Schlude). Gatsby did not realize that Tom and his crowd had no intention of sharing their world with him. Gatsby was pursuing the American Dream with all of its gold and glitter. He got the mansion—the swimming pool—the expensive suits—but what about the girl?

In the end, the “nouveau riche” must find his place in the world. There is no happy ending: “The end, however, is more tragic. Tom, together with Gatsby and Daisy, collaborate to destroy the sad life of a peasant in their midst, Myrtle Wilson, whose

mechanic husband seeks out and kills Gatsby. And so the story closes with his funeral--the funeral that Petronius failed to provide in fact, but now is planned and executed by Nick. The picture is not heartwarming or celebratory. It is lonely, attended only by the necessary help, plus a few others, including Nick. The final attendee is a nameless man once impressed by the "real" books in Gatsby's library (not "cardboard"), despite the fact that their uncut pages reveal that Gatsby likely never read a one—a real Trimalchio" (Schlude). It is as if Gatsby's world was entirely invented; his mansion and his cars could not save him. All the money in the world could not save him. His idealism is what did him in. He believed that loving Daisy would deliver him from the emptiness of his existence.

And what about Trump? As Schlude explains, "like the nouveau riche characters Trimalchio and Gatsby, Trump as a nouveau politique likely will see a different end to his political career, however and whenever that will be. One who is self-consumed, feels entitled to take and abuse, and refuses to genuinely share his table with others will likely find himself alone, largely uncelebrated, and ultimately forgotten, except perhaps as a cautionary tale of disdain and failure. This end would have historical precedent. A timely example is the Roman emperor Nero. What do we know about Nero? If asked this question, many would point to his brutal execution of Christians. Indeed under suspicion for burning much of Rome in 64 CE to make room for a new imperial palace, Nero blamed the Christians instead. As such they were vulnerable—and Nero used it to his advantage. He made them a

scapegoat, sought them out, and openly butchered them with wild beasts, crucifixion, and fire. The treatment was so horrifying that it made even the most intolerant sympathetic" (Schlude). Like "the wall" and the treatment of Mexican-Americans—the prisons have replaced the coliseum. Deliberate cruelty and an inability to relate to the sufferings of others have replaced the gladiators and the crucifixions.

Let this serve as a cautionary tale: As Jason Schlude explains, "Fitzgerald shows us the arrogance, ignorance, and brutality of Trimalchio belongs not only to pretenders, but also to some of the socio-economically well-established. To continue our analogy, Trump is at risk of *damnatio memoriae*, but the prediction extends to any politician who celebrates a cult of self-interest and turns a blind eye to the needy. He is one who upholds principles entrenching oligarchy, rather than strengthening democracy, lacks a morality that inspires and is unworthy of endorsement" (Schlude). History will not be kind to Trump—his name will live in infamy. Just like those who have come before him, they may celebrate their power and their cruelty in their season, but that season will soon come to pass and reveal the injustices of their times.

As Jason Schlude explains, perhaps this problem is larger than Trimalchio, Gatsby, and Trump: "If you think, however, this will right the ship, there is a final, deeper problem. According to Fitzgerald, what direction we should now turn is far from clear. The political establishment by and large has failed many of us. Many who have chased—and even

achieved—membership in that order so far have managed to deliver little better. Trump has offered worse. Tempted, however, to think on the good old times, the romantic age of collaborative politics and ethical policy, we may not find a solution in the past—only the right question to ask. Gatsby could never realize his dream, could never reach that utopic moment when he first fell in love with Daisy. As Schlude explains, “He did not know that it was already behind him, somewhere back in that vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night.” And what is that question we should ask? Is the American Dream real, or is it some vestige of our imagination? Is the world in which we are living real, or are we living in a reality TV show? If all of the riches in the world will not make us happy—then what will?

As Jason Schlude intimates, like Gatsby, have we passed the point of no return? Schlude explains, “The insight here is terrifying. Fitzgerald thinks of Petronius as much as he thinks of Gatsby. Writing around the time of Nero amid a recent, but rapidly entrenched empire, as well as the consumption and injustice it produced among its ruling class, Petronius knew the Roman republic was never to return. It may be that our republic, too, at least as we once knew it, can exist only as a memory lodged in the wrinkles of the mind, unfolded and released with painful nostalgia. As we close our eyes and embrace a one-time love, time moves fast, and the smoke and clouds they feed race to steal the night sky. Starless, where will we go next” (Schlude)?

Like Gatsby, perhaps we will never know when the dream is already past us—only a distant memory. Or perhaps there is still hope—that the pendulum will swing—that all of these nightmarish events that we are witnessing in the present will surely become a part of our past. Perhaps there are brighter days to come where the birdsongs are more pronounced and the grass is greener and the skies are bluer. One must be an eternal optimist to still believe in something in times like these! We have survived greater calamities—we will survive them again. Tomorrow is on that distant horizon, and the dawning of a new day is upon us!

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## A Grumble, a Growl, a Roar: Women's Struggle for a Voice in Western Literature Moira Butler

What is the point of feminism, anyway?

Throughout history, women have become more and more outspoken about the inequalities that exist between men and women. The expectations of each gender are very different, and these expectations set the power dynamic between them. This power dynamic is clear in the epic poem *Beowulf*, in which the hero the poem is named after achieves infamy by conquering a demon named Grendel, Grendel's mother, and a dragon. A different kind of conquest is portrayed in John Donne's "The Flea," in which the speaker attempts to seduce a woman by pointing out that their blood is already mixed together within a flea and is rejected. This is like the storyline of "The Reasons that Induced Dr. S. to Write a Poem Call'd the Lady's Dressing Room" by Lady Mary Wortley Montagu. Although her poem is a scathing response to a misogynistic poem by Jonathan Swift, the plot of a man being rejected by a woman is similar. On a completely different note, the 2006 #MeToo movement started by Tarana Burke was intended to support women who had suffered sexual violence, but it started a worldwide discussion on gender-based violence by encouraging women to speak up about their experiences with this epidemic (#MeToo). These sources can all be analyzed to see the progress women have made towards being treated as equals.

While the expectations of women as being obliging servants and caretakers is portrayed as a given in the epic poem *Beowulf*, the acceptance of this role by women begins to be questioned in later works such as John Donne's "The Flea" and Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's "The Reasons That Induced Dr. S. to Write a Poem Call'd The Lady's Dressing Room" and is further challenged by the #MeToo movement by Tarana Burke.

In *Beowulf*, the stark contrast between the characterizations of Grendel's mother and Queen Wealhtheow outline the expectations of women in that time period. As Grendel's mother moves on the hall in which Beowulf sleeps after killing her son, the poet sets up her attack by writing, "But now [Grendel's] mother had sallied forth on a savage journey, grief-racked and ravenous, desperate for revenge" (*Beowulf*, 70). Grendel's mother's attack on the hall was a direct retaliation for her son's death. This is a valid quest for justice, and yet she is still portrayed as evil. She is introduced as a "monstrous hell-bride" (*Beowulf*, 70), but a reason for her portrayal is never really given. The poem never lists a particular crime that she has committed before her justified attack on the hall, which leaves one to draw the conclusion that her faults lie within her character. Alternatively, Queen Wealhtheow is introduced as, "Wealhtheow came in, Hrothgar's queen, observing the courtesies. Adorned in her gold, she graciously saluted the men in the hall, then handed the cup first to Hrothgar..." (*Beowulf* 55). She embodies all that is expected of a woman. She is gracious, demure, and does not question her place. Although she is queen, she is

still expected to be a hostess and serve the wine to her guests, and she does so without hesitation. Her introduction is smooth and unassuming, just as she is and is expected to be. This is opposite of the power and sense of self that Grendel's mother shows by seeking her own revenge on the people in the hall.

Grendel's mother may be portrayed as a monster, but she is first and foremost portrayed as a woman. Jane C. Nitzsche points out in her essay, "The Structural Unity of *Beowulf*: The Problem of Grendel's Mother:" She is specifically called a *wifunhyre* (2120), a "monstrous woman", and an *idesglocwif* (1259), a "lady monster-woman." "Ides" elsewhere in *Beowulf* denotes "lady" and connotes either a queen or a woman of high social rank; (...) Grendel's mother inverts the Germanic roles of the mother and queen, or lady. She has the form of a woman (*ideseonlcnas*, 1351) and is weaker than a man (1282ff) and more cowardly, for she flees in fear for her life when, discovered in Heorot (1292-93). But unlike most mothers and queens, she fights her own battles (Nitzsche 1).

Throughout the poem, Grendel's mother is never given her own name and is only referenced with gendered titles such as those Nitzsche lists. This kind of erasure of all actual identity is in itself a testament of women's roles in society at this point in time. They are not allowed any further importance than the positions they fill and the duties they perform. In this way they are seen as subhuman without any possibility of a voice of their own. Grendel's mother's demonization warns of the

dangers of a female with a voice of her own, as well as suggests what might happen to said female.

In "The Flea" by John Donne, the shift in a woman's power is suggested by the female character's ability to reject the narrator's advances. In the final stanza of the poem, the woman has turned down the speaker's seduction by killing the flea that his argument has focused on. Donne writes, "Cruel and sudden, hast thou purpled thy nail in blood of innocence?" (Donne 923) Although the speaker is insulted and calls the woman cruel, there are no formal repercussions to her actions. Furthermore, she goes as far as to nonchalantly say, that neither of them is terribly effected by her action (Donne 923). This freedom to brush off the desires of a man shows the increasing power of women over themselves and their positions. They may speak for themselves and be heard to an extent.

While women are beginning to be portrayed with some personal power in the Fifteen-Sixteen hundreds, David Buck Beliles quotes Helen Carr in his essay, "Donne and Feminist Critics" saying, "[John Donne] orders or cajoles the women to acknowledge both his power and their equality. Claiming his right to possess, he presses her to give herself freely" (Beliles). This suggests that the growing voice of women results in men pushing back with shows of force. However, the fact that Donne is even attempting to convince women of their equality shows that too much ground has been lost in this fight for men to retake full control. Women must have made it clear that they are unequally treated, and the war has begun.

Finally, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's "The Reasons that Induced Dr. S. to Write a Poem Call'd the Lady's Dressing Room" is an example of women speaking for themselves in literature rather than being portrayed by a man. In Montagu's poem, after the male character requests his money back because he cannot perform in bed, she refuses and they argue.

"I'll be revenged you saucy quean"

(Replies the disappointed Dean),

"I'll so describe your dressing room

The very Irish shall not come."

She answered short, "I'm glad you'll write,

You'll furnish paper when I shite." (Montagu 642)

These lines portray a woman who is self-assured and confident. She will not just quietly take abuse.

She speaks up for herself and knows her own worth.

This clash between man and woman accurately portrays the bigger struggle going on between the genders in society. Women are speaking up and men are offended by it.

Every battle women have waged for equality has paved the way to the #MeToo movement by Tarana Burke in which women are speaking out globally about the sexual violence they have endured from men and saying "Enough is enough." According to the #MeToo About page, "Our work continues to focus on helping those who need it to find entry points for individual healing and galvanizing a broad base of survivors to disrupt the systems that allow for the global proliferation of sexual violence" (About).

By cultivating a conversation on sexual violence and encouraging women to find their

voices, this movement has clawed its way to the front line of modern feminism. This is women supporting women and confronting the world on why sexual violence (and, by default, unequal treatment of women) is still so widespread.

While #MeToo has swept the globe and certainly amplified the voices of women, it has also revealed how far women have to go. ABC News quotes Tarana Burke's TED Talk in which she says, "We start by dismantling the building blocks of sexual violence: power and privilege" (#MeToo). That is a pretty tall order and highlights the connection between the inequality between men and women and the prevalence of sexual violence in the world. While women have found their voice in society, they still must fight to be recognized and heard. Even the #MeToo movement is struggling with people in power refusing to truly listen. ABC News quotes Burke commenting on this backlash by saying, "Suddenly, a movement to centre survivors of sexual violence is being talked about as a vindictive plot against men" (#MeToo). This clearly shows how far society is from fulfilling Burke's dream of dismantling power and privilege (#MeToo). By calling the movement vindictive, the people behind this backlash are in turn conveying some of what society thinks of women – that they are petty and dramatic. This oppressive viewpoint is a testament to what women are fighting against and have been for so long.

The shift from the submissive expectations of women in *Beowulf* to the call to action held within the #MeToo movement exemplify how far women have come in their fight against gender-

based oppression. Women have found their voice and are now roaring globally for a change. However, bringing this change about still seems far on the horizon as the people in power are not particularly keen on giving up their privilege. This does not mean women should give up. Quite the opposite – this is the time for women to band together and push with all their might to bring what feels like the eternal struggle for gender equality to a close. Women have a voice now, and it is time to take advantage of it.

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## Behold the Beloved Flesh So Hated: On the Freedom to Motherhood in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* By Donovan Cleckley

"Grown don't mean nothing to a mother. A child is a child."

-**Sethe** in *Beloved*

"We are together, my child and I. Mother and child, yes, but sisters really, against whatever denies us all that we are."

-**Alice Walker**, "One Child of One's Own" (1979), from *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983)

"This is flesh I'm talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved."

-**Baby Suggs** in *Beloved*

Toni Morrison's 1987 novel, *Beloved*, conjures the human need for communion under conditions of abject dehumanization, in this case, under American chattel slavery. Morrison's work provides a way for us, as readers, to consider the lasting psychological trauma of slavery. More than mere survival, the narrative draws to our attention the sustaining of human ties, as threatened as these loving bonds amid hateful bondage may seem. As bell hooks discusses in her 2001 book, *Salvation*:

*Black People and Love*, we find "little cultural space to talk psychoanalytically about post-traumatic stress and negative scars on the psyche," those aftereffects which we see manifested as a result of the enduring legacies of chattel slavery and racial apartheid and their continuing impact, psychologically, upon Black people (97). In what ways, we might find ourselves asking, does love manifest itself, particularly for Black people, under the very "peculiar," institutionalized, exceedingly cruel material conditions that actively suppress the feeling of pleasure itself?

On *Love*, Erich Fromm emphasizes the social function of love not only between the self and the other, that dyadic relationship, but also between the self and the society. In Fromm's 1956 book, *The Art of Loving*, he writes: "Love is not primarily a relationship to a specific person; it is an attitude, an orientation of character which determines the relatedness of a person to the world as a whole, not toward one 'object' of love" (43). "Whatever is going on outside my door ain't for me. The world is in this room," Sethe thinks to herself. "This here's all there is and all there needs to be" (Morrison 215). Because she holds her daughter *Beloved* close, she feels that "*the world is in this room*," with her discovering a sense that, in the moment of claiming motherhood for herself, she claims her freedom. Contrary to what may be assumed about Sethe, as if misinterpreted as selfish in her love, I find this passage moving, because her motherlove, the flame consuming her, demands its fulfillment; her drive to nurture aches to care for that child whom she lost. Sethe's love burns

brightly, as it does, because of her hunger for loving, after finding herself severed from Beloved for so long.

Memory fights against memorylessness in Morrison's text, the remembrance of things past being at war with the simultaneous, pained desire not to know of those memories, jagged and sharp, stabbing in the brain and bleeding one's heart. As we proceed through this analysis, I wish for us to consider what Morrison shares about her novel, *Beloved*, in her own words:

“History versus memory, and memory versus memorylessness. *Rememory* as in *recollecting* and *remembering* as in *reassembling the members of the body, the family, the population of the past*. And it was the struggle, the pitched battle between remembering and forgetting, that became the device of the narrative. *The effort to both remember and not know became the structure of the text*. Nobody in the book can bear too long to dwell on the past; nobody can avoid it.” (“Rememory” 324) (emphasis added)

*To remember and not to know*, Morrison writes. Like Morrison, hooks adds, speaking in a dialogue with Amalia Mesa-Bains, that memory allows for a knowing of oneself, a coming back to the site of the self. “When we lose sight of who we are, when we lose touch, when we lose our minds, we find ourselves through remembering, through talking cures, which are reenactments of remembering” (*Homegrown* 107-108). Reenactments of remembering, however, can be burdensome, when

trauma remains stuck even to one's more pleasurable memories, which, in recollection, result in pain. We see this burdening represented, particularly, in the character of Sethe, who, having committed what seems to be the unspeakable, feels at once a wish for (re)memory, while also a sense of forgetting what she does not wish to know. Because the reality of loss itself burdens her psyche, she finds herself defending against the memories which themselves threaten to pull her apart. What remains of the beloved is precisely that impression, left behind, which stays not only in the mind, but also lives somewhere outside, loose as the silk of the corn, where there is freedom from bondage.

Morrison's novel explores not only the suffering and torture, the everyday social reality of being treated as property, as it occurred under American slavery, but also the struggle for love despite loss, this yearning for communion as a place beyond alienation. Loss, even the absence of the self, a feeling of *somebody/something* as *nobody/nothing*, factors into these configurations of desiring and longing, beyond that self which one feels also must be somehow not also oneself. One feels a coming apart. In the novel, we see how Morrison posits freedom as something that does not simply mean living unpossessed, not just surviving; it means, much more deeply, self-possession of that flesh which *should be* one's own, that which should be *together*. “Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another,” she writes (Morrison 111-112). Compelled to alienate herself from her children, told not to love too much, Sethe feels only a deeper

compulsion to nurture and love them, both Denver and Beloved, which undermines the American slave system built upon killing the Black mother's love for her own children.

Part of the complexity of *Beloved* is precisely the challenge Morrison's novel poses to simplified understandings of what we think of love and protection; we might presume, wrongly, that a slave mother, much like Margaret Garner, killing her child must signify her craziness, that she does not also deeply love her child. But, in quite simplistically reading this woman's individual act as crazy, we neglect giving necessary critical attention to the social circumstances under which she lives, such conditions that limit her choices, coercing her into doing an otherwise unthinkable act of violence in the name of love. "Unless carefree, motherlove was a killer" Morrison writes (155). And, indeed, we find motherhood in bondage a place where motherlove, the mother's drive to make living livable for a child of her own, intervenes, by any means necessary. We forget, markedly, the meaning of this act as liberation in death that remains unachievable in life. Stamp Paid, a formerly enslaved Black man who helps slaves escape to freedom, provides a rebuttal to claims of Sethe's craziness: "She ain't crazy. She love those children. She was trying to out-hurt the hurter" (Morrison 276). Indeed, he himself, firsthand, knows the pain of this hurting as an act of love, for he did the same to his wife.

Sethe *does* out-hurt the hurter. In this mother out-hurting the hurter, she provides her child an escape, a way to go somewhere else,

anywhere else, without finding oneself caught between the jaws of chattel slavery and struggling for life in living death. Morrison asks us to consider "the point of view of slave women," a historically marginalized perspective, in relation to childbearing, "to claim them [the children] as one's own; to be, in other words, not a breeder, but a parent": "Suppose having children, being called a mother, was the supreme act of freedom—not its opposite?" (*On Beloved* 282). A mother who rejects the role of "breeder," seeking to claim motherhood, Sethe sees her children as parts of her; she does not see them as detached from her being, *dismembered*, but rather a part of her entire being, that measure of her sense of self even beyond herself. A passage from the novel reads:

"She just flew. Collected *every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her* that were *precious and fine and beautiful*, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there *where no one could hurt them. Over there. Outside this place, where they would be safe.*" (Morrison 192)  
(emphasis added)

This moment in the text describes, as we see, Sethe's flight, with her children in hand, when she rushes to the shed, ready to kill them in order to save them. Indeed, she succeeds in killing Beloved, not entirely, of course, because, liberated, her baby lives within her and beyond her. She describes her children as "every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her," these fragments of herself for which she feels "motherlove," that forbidden love among loves for the slave mother.

Central to Morrison's novel, we see Sethe's refusal to disassociate herself from both her children, Denver and Beloved. I remember thinking of a moment in Harriet Jacobs's 1861 book, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, in which she writes: "When I lay down beside my child, I felt how much easier it would be to see her die than to see her master beat her about, as I daily saw him beat other little ones" (71). A woman looks at her child, finding that it seems better for that child dead and in peace than alive and in pain. Jacobs describes how the lash crushes the spirit of the slave mothers, so much so "that they stood by, without courage to remonstrate," that Jacobs herself feared being "broke in" like that (71). This scene from Jacob's novel fits with a passage from *Beloved*: "What she called the nastiness of life was the shock she received upon learning that nobody stopped playing checkers just because the pieces included her children" (Morrison 28). One finds that the dehumanization coincides with the objectification, that children become mere pieces to be moved around at will, not seen as people, certainly not seen as babies with mothers. Morrison's representation of Sethe as a mother rebels against that broken spiritedness Jacobs writes about as she saw it possess other women; Sethe cannot refuse the desire to love and protect, even if her motherlove is a killer. In love, Sethe kills Beloved to protect her, although she finds herself feeling the presence of her loss with her, pressing down upon her mind. "To Sethe, the future was a matter of keeping the past at bay," Morrison writes. "The 'better life' she believed she and Denver were

living was simply not that other one" (51). Loss comes from the unspeakable, which marks Sethe's unwillingness to utter it. It is, in this way, that I find the concept of melancholia helpful, used in a descriptive sense, as we consider Sethe's psychological response to the social circumstances of slavery.

This reading of love, loss, and longing encompasses "stickiness," as Sara Ahmed puts it in her 2010 book *The Promise of Happiness*, a stickiness which we see in relation to how feelings exist "around" Beloved as the object toward which Sethe identifies her own sense of being. Morrison's novel complicates any notion of interpreting Beloved as either *this* or *that*, either *here* or *there*, because the presence of an enslaved mother with her children remains constantly threatened by their potential absence from her arms. Paul D thinks to himself about the real danger of Sethe's love for her children:

"For a used-to-be slave woman *to love anything that much was dangerous*, especially if it was her children she had settled on to love. *The best thing, he knew, was to love just a little bit; everything, just a little bit*, so when they broke its back, or shoved it in a croaker sack, well, maybe you'd have a little love left over for the next one." (54) (emphasis added)

Race, in its sociopolitical structuring under racism, produces the differences in how we perceive freedom from our differing standpoints. As such, Ahmed contrasts white feminist consciousness novels against Black feminist consciousness novels,

writing that the former “tend to involve *freedom-from-family* and its narrow scripts of duty and obligation,” while the latter “may involve *freedom-to-family*, as family is what is lost through unfolding histories of displacement and dispossession” (86) (emphasis added). For the Black community, freedom to family becomes, as Morrison tells us, “the supreme act of freedom,” rather than a barrier to liberation. For Sethe, this emancipation from within the self takes the form of her self-naming as the mother of her children. Morrison’s novel, *Beloved*, fits into the paradigm of freedom-to-family, in that the central struggle, particularly that of Sethe, Denver, and Beloved, appears to be their efforts to establish a family together.

Against the displacing and dispossessing mechanisms of chattel slavery, which still influence American racism as we know it today, we see characters in Morrison’s fiction resist by seeking each other, mother and child. They feel love together. They feel pain together. They feel pleasure together. They commune with one another, or at least they try desperately to meet their aim, all in rebellion to the imposed alienation that surrounds them and tries to strangle their spirits. Love matters, as that which exists as both personal and political. Indeed, as bell hooks tells us: “Loving blackness as political resistance transforms our ways of looking and being, and thus creates the conditions necessary for us to move against the forces of domination and death and reclaim black life” (*Black Looks* 20). More specifically, in the context of American society and culture, loving the

flesh functions as self-possession in Morrison’s novel, because love between and among Black people itself becomes a revolutionary act against white-supremacist ideology.

What we see in Morrison’s *Beloved* exemplifies, as she writes herself, the threat that memory poses to forgetfulness, the knowledge of that which we wish not to know, because the pain feels so deep, the suffering so profound. Yet, also, we find revealed the value of communion, the way in which, for slaves, coming together functions in the narrative as rebellion against the pulling apart of the body, that is, the people who constitute its flesh, who make merriment and mourning together as one. Free, the flesh can be a text, not simply for pain, not just passively written upon, but rather for pleasure, an active seeking to belong, in the closest human bonds from body to body. “*What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head,*” Sethe says to Denver. “I mean, even if I don’t think it, even if I die, *the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there*” (Morrison 43) (emphasis added). Apparition or not, it does not matter; upon searching deeper, moving beyond the surface, we see the way in which motherlove, in Morrison’s novel, defiantly blooms forth under conditions that would otherwise kill it altogether.

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## When a Hero Needs Sympathy R. Marian Pierce

Everyone loves a hero. Some can imagine themselves as heroes. Even more of us can imagine ourselves needing to be rescued by a hero and thus can empathize with the character in need of saving. Most heroes typically conduct themselves according to a code of honor, though perhaps less often in today's literature than previous time periods.

Looking back to the Middle Ages, we find many of the most famous heroes to read about and to cheer along in their quests. Often the heroes of that day were the knights of King Arthur's Round Table. Some knights are viewed as more chivalrous than others, depending on the source of the story. Most people with a basic knowledge of the knights in King Arthur's service would think of Sir Lancelot as the best of those knights. In the thirteenth century, French romances were the primary source for Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur* and for later Arthurian stories. However, Lancelot, a knight who hails from France, is not always presented as the most valiant of the knights. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, attributed to the *Pearl* poet, depicts Sir Gawain as the noblest of Arthur's knights. Gawain may indeed be the best, but he, like Lancelot and all the others, is still human, and as such, is subject to human weakness. Though Sir Gawain's actions are typically cause for celebration, his failures cause readers to empathize with him as he himself recognizes his failure.

*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* begins at the holiday season, specifically on New Year's Day. Gawain, the son of Arthur's sister, is seated by Guenevere, a place of recognition. He exhibits courtly manners, one of the traits of a good knight. Gawain is a model of all the best of chivalrous conduct.

During the festivities, a strange knight enters the hall and surprises everyone with his unusual appearance:

There hurtles in at the hall-door an  
unknown rider,

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One the greatest on ground in growth of his  
frame:

From broad neck to buttocks so bulky and  
thick,

And his loins and his legs so long and so  
great,

Half a giant on earth I hold him to be,  
But believe him no less than the largest of

men,

[...] Great wonder grew in hall

At his hue most strange to see,

For man and gear and all

Were green as green could be. (1.136-41,  
147-50)

So completely unusual is the Green Knight, as he is called, that all of the assembly are in wonder. Even of his horse, the poet says, “The steed he bestrides of that same green/so bright” (1.174-5). The Green Knight’s purpose is to determine whether the Knights of the Round Table deserve their sterling reputation. To do this, he challenges Arthur and his men to a game or contest. What he proposes is a beheading game, saying, “If any in this house such hardihood claims,/Be so bold in his blood” (1.285-86) to accept the challenge. His offer is not immediately accepted, prompting him to question the reputation of the Arthur’s knights:

“What, is this Arthur’s house,” said that  
horseman then,

“Whose fame is so fair in far realms and  
wide?

Where is now your arrogance and your  
awesome deeds,

Your valor and your victories and your  
vaunting words?

Now are the revel and renown of the Round  
Table

Overwhelmed with a word of one man’s  
speech,

For all cower and quake, and no cut felt!”  
(1.309-15)

When no one volunteers, Arthur’s embarrassment is obvious as the Poet says he is “grieved” and “The blood for sheer shame shot to his face” (1. 316, 317). As a result, Arthur accepts the challenge himself. Consider the challenge of the game—on this day, the person who accepts the challenge will strike a blow to the Green Knight’s neck to behead him, but a year from that day will have to submit to a similar blow from the Green Knight. Logic tells us this will be impossible, that the first to receive a blow loses his head and cannot possibly administer the same a year later. Yet the strange and unnatural green appearance of the knight indicates that something unnatural or supernatural is going on, thus giving rise to fear on the part of the knights being challenged.

Sir Gawain, as a knight and as the cousin of the king, asks, “I beseech, before all here,/That this melee may be mine” (1.341-2). Gawain’s offer is for the sake of preserving King Arthur’s life, as well as for preserving the reputation of the Knights of the Round Table. Just as the other knights must have, Gawain clearly struggles with his own fear of death—which the average person would as well. Ultimately, Gawain considers his own life less valuable than Arthur’s and volunteers:

# The Light

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I am the weakest, well I know, and of wit  
feeblest;  
And the loss of my life would be least of any;  
That I have you for uncle is my only praise;  
My body, but for your blood, is barren of  
worth;  
And for that this folly befits not a king,  
And 'tis I that have asked it, it ought to be  
mine  
And if my claim be not comely let all this  
court judge,

in sight. (1.354-61)

Although a challenge such as this one would seem simple (after all, how can someone who has been beheaded cut off another's head later?), with the involvement of magic or the supernatural—since the knight and his horse are green—there is clearly an expectation on the part of the Green Knight to be able to fulfill the second part of the game. But Arthur's confidence in Sir Gawain is obvious when he says, "You shall stand the stroke it will strike after" (1.374).

In Part Two of the poem, time passes quickly for Sir Gawain as it often does when one is facing an unpleasant task. The Poet compresses ten months into only 44 lines, quite a difference from having the day of the Green Knight's visit take approximately 400 lines. When All-Hallows Day arrives, Gawain takes his leave of Arthur to go in search of the Green Knight. Though not particularly happy with what he faces, Gawain still upholds his commitment to the game. He says to Arthur that he must go and receive "a stroke /From the grim man in green" (2.549). Grim is indeed an appropriate

word for the future Gawain faces. Here the reader feels is sympathy for this honorable knight. After all, Gawain has garnered the admiration of all by stepping up and accepting this challenge.

When Sir Gawain assembles his gear for the journey, his shield is the focal point. It is described in detail and is an obvious symbol for the traits a knight must have, such as courage and honesty. The image on his shield is a pentangle, a five-pointed star. According to the Poet, the pentangle symbolizes truth: "It is a sign by Solomon sagely devised/To be a token of truth" (2.625-26). Each of the five points on the star represents something else that has five parts. The last one represents five character traits: "beneficence boundless and brotherly love/And pure mind and manners, that none might impeach,/And compassion most precious" (2.652-64). Sir Gawain has clearly proven himself in his past exploits as his fellow knights "[are] sore aggrieved" (2.672) at his departure. They think that there is no other knight of the caliber of Gawain.

Gawain searches for the Chapel of the Green Knight until Christmas, when he arrives at an estate and seeks lodging. The host graciously grants his request. Once Gawain is in the home of his host, both of them have responsibilities because the guest-host relationship is extremely important, sacred even. Gawain tells his host, "While I lye in your lodgings your laws will I follow" (2.1092). It is this relationship that creates difficulties for the knight. Once the host has set in motion an exchange game, Gawain becomes less open with his host. The host's wife comes to Gawain's room each

day and tries to seduce him. Her attempts make it very difficult on him because he cannot violate his host's trust. At the same time, he must be extremely careful about how he rejects the woman's advances so as not to insult her. She is, after all, his hostess. On the first two days, the host returns with a deer and a boar, respectively, and Gawain has only kisses to give his host: one for the first day and two for the second day. However, he will not tell his host where he got the kisses. That does not technically violate the rules of the game. So far Gawain has been able to maintain his honor on all fronts.

Finally, the third day brings the lady of the house back to Gawain's room. Again, Gawain rejects the lady's advances. Again he receives kisses—three this time—from the lady, but she wants a token from him. When he says he has nothing to give her, she offers him a token. He feels he should not take any token since she is his host's wife. After offering a ring that is rejected by Gawain, she offers a green girdle that is magical; it has the ability to keep whoever wears it from incurring injury, including fatal blows. This time Gawain accepts the token as he considers that the girdle could help him live through the second half of the game with the Green Knight. He is, after all, a man, and one of man's basic instincts is that of self-preservation. It is also easier for the audience to have empathy for the man who is not perfect than for one who is. When it is time to exchange trophies with his host this time, Gawain does not follow his code of honor because he only gives his host the three kisses, not the girdle too. The host's gift to

Gawain is the fox he has killed in the hunt that day, seemingly appropriate for this last exchange since a fox is sly or cunning, and Gawain is exhibiting cunning by withholding the girdle from his host.

Near the end of the poem, when Gawain finds the Green Knight's chapel, he submits for the second half of the challenge—for the Green Knight to strike him on the neck to sever his head. Gawain receives three strikes from the Green Knight. For the first blow, Gawain's instincts kick in, he looks up at the ax, and he flinches at this blow, a realistically human action. The Green Knight rebukes him:

“You are not Gawain the glorious,” the green man said,

“That never fell back on field in the face of the foe,

And now you flee for fear, and have felt no harm:

Such news of that knight I never heard yet!”  
(4.2270-73)

Gawain does not want to die yet—and in what seems to be an uncouth manner. Gawain fears the defeat of his frail body. Once he admits that his shrinking from the ax was completely out of character for him, he remains where he is for the next blow, which the Green Knight does not actually deliver. According to the Green Knight, the second false hit was for Gawain's lying. The final blow is “hammered down hard” (4.2311), but because of the girdle, Gawain suffers no more than a scratch. From this, the Green Knight knows Gawain wears the girdle. As a result, he offers yet another reproach to Gawain for his un-knightly

behavior. As the audience, we may be disappointed in Gawain's deceit, but we can hardly fault him for not wanting his life to end at this point.

Finally, there is some degree of faith involved in the code of chivalry that knights uphold. Seen as the best, Gawain is probably the knight most devoted to God. He is made to be human so that we can identify with him in some respect. He is made to continue his service to his king so that we can still accept him as a knight and look up to him when he returns to Camelot. And what is more, we can applaud the fact that he has learned a lesson:

“Behold there my falsehood, ill hap betide it!

Your cut taught me cowardice, care for my life,

And coveting came after, contrary to both  
To largess and loyalty belonging to knights.

Now am I faulty and false, that fearful was  
ever

Of disloyalty and lies, bad luck to them  
both! (4.2378-83)

Because Gawain wears the green girdle on his arm as a reminder of the fact that he is susceptible to the frailties of men, the other knights support him by wearing one as well, and the audience is given the outcome that shows us if Sir Gawain can learn from his faults, so we can learn from ours.

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## Triangulation and Sympathetic Imagination in Paired Short Stories: A

## Pedagogical Strategy for Literary Analysis A Student-Led Panel from Alabama A&M University

The emphasis in Honors English Composition II at Alabama A&M University is on literary analysis, so several years ago I adopted an anthology that seemed to appeal to contemporary freshmen and at the same time to encourage critical thinking and quality writing. That textbook, *Portable Legacies: Fiction, Poetry, Drama, Nonfiction*, 2nd ed. by Jan Zlotnik Schmidt and Lynne Crockett, published by Wadsworth/Cengage in 2013, suggests that a critical reading/critical thinking connection is strengthened by a process described as text-to-self, text-to-world, and text-to-text analysis. Using that three-sided approach as a foundation, students started experimenting with alternative ways to shape an analysis; they expanded the triangle to include author-to-text, historical context-to-text, philosophy-to-text and then contracted it to “look inside” the story, poem, or play: character-to-character, character-to-self, character-to-setting. As long as they limited the process to three angles, the possibilities for shifting the focus of the analysis were manageable for constructing a well-organized analytical essay. (The students compared the “tumbling” effect to a kaleidoscope!)

For the ACETA Conference proposal, students wanted to present a demonstration of their method with two short stories (later they decided to add a poem to allow the audience to apply the triangulation). Keeping the concept of

sympathetic imagination in mind, they chose “Say Yes” by Tobias Wolff, “Hills Like White Elephants” by Ernest Hemingway, and “At My Father’s House” by Nancy Travis. These three choices promoted differing perspectives for text-to-reader, text-to-audience, and text-to-text (age, race, gender, class). In their planning, the students rejected the concern that the sympathetic imagination involved pity, condescension, or patronizing attitudes, and they determined instead that sympathetic imagination should be a consideration of and respect for the complexities of experiences, positions, and cultures.

A week or so before the conference, the controversy over *American Dirt* prompted Adam Kirsch to publish an article in *The Wall Street Journal*: “Whose Stories Should We Read?” As an introduction to our demonstration for the ACETA Conference, I borrowed Kirsch’s conclusion because he expressed so eloquently the core of our “discoveries” about sympathetic imagination and its potential:

...to cultivate more and better readers. And an important part of that cultivation

involves being open to stories that challenge our expectations. Literature thrives

when readers have the confidence to encounter genuine difference, to hear all kinds

of stories so long as they are well told. In this sense, a healthy literature and a healthy

democracy may be more deeply connected than we usually think.

Participants:

Student panel members were Ms. Leonna Trammell, a freshman English major in the Honors Program, and Mr. Byron Wesley, a sophomore English major also in the Honors Program. Both students intend to pursue careers in education. Ms. Cheryl Carpenter has been a member of the faculty of the English and Foreign Languages Department at Alabama A&M University for the past 18 years.

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**Has your department hosted an interesting event? Have you started a new course or a new program?**

**Share your successes in *The Light* to let your colleagues in on your great work!**

**Submit your articles (350 words max. please) and photos to Executive Secretary, Ashley Harlan-Kitchens, at [alcollegeenglish@gmail.com](mailto:alcollegeenglish@gmail.com).**

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**Attention, Writers!**

**#readerslivesmatter**

**Audience Analysis and the Sympathetic Imagination**  
**Charlotte Teague**

*Who is my audience? How will they use my writing? What do they need to know and why? How can my writing connect to them? How will they be affected by it?*

Audience analysis can be seen as the frame that centers all writing with purpose, and these leading questions are central to understanding and acknowledging audience in written communication, and they should be pondered earnestly by writers. Acknowledging one’s reader is an acknowledgement that writing is not just about the writer; productive writing that achieves its

prescribed purpose must also consider and seek to engage the reader. This concept is taught rigorously in Technical and Professional Writing courses, but how can this concept be shifted to and explored in real-life contexts in the composition classroom?

In *Writing That Works* (2013), Oliu, Brusaw, and Alred wrote that “...many writers forget that they have an audience and focus solely on their own purposes” (6). In fact, many of the flaws in writing can be traced to what can be termed as audience analysis neglect, and research shows that when writers fail to consider readers thoughtfully, the writing suffers. With this thought in mind, getting students to consider the audience, before and during writing, seems to be the great impasse for English teachers on all levels—particularly college teachers because students have become socialized to only write for grades or teachers, and even with this limited audience, they do not adequately connect with the reader’s desires and the needs of the writing, and this is true in social contexts as well. The idea that “one is actually writing for someone else in a real or fictional context rather than themselves only,” appears to be a foreign concept. Much of the writing fails to show empathy and/or make considerations that would inform the writing from ethical or critical thinking perspectives. In short, students seem to struggle with how to cultivate their own sympathetic imaginations in basic college writing.

By using the idea of current social media movement hashtags #blacklivesmatter, #bluelivesmatter, and #alllivesmatter, the research aligns writing to reading in order to illuminate this

problematic part of writing. Readers should matter to writers, and therefore, it would be helpful if this concept is re-introduced and re-framed for students in an unconventional way. The presentation discussed how to cultivate the Sympathetic Imagination in the writing classroom by adapting technical and professional writing audience analysis guided techniques.

The #blacklivesmatter movement sparked a conversation in this country that was unprecedented. Because the movement was controversial, #bluelivesmatter and #alllivesmatter also emerged as hashtags that offered other perspectives about what should matter. The originators of #blacklivesmatter argued that this movement was not started to say that other lives do not matter; it was started to bring attention to the abundance of Black lives that were being unfairly murdered and disenfranchised in the country and to assert that Black people have value—even though society may not think so, or that current behaviors or dogma may suggest otherwise. Just like breast cancer is celebrated in October with lots of pink. The month does not suggest that other cancer does not matter. The month is meant to draw attention to the need for breast cancer research, early interventions, and finding a cure. In this same way, this project addresses writers because #readerslivesmatter. The perspective is not to say that writers do not matter. The goal is to require writers to make some basic considerations for readers that would enhance the overall quality of the writing. In short, professors should challenge students to use their sympathetic imaginations, and

how can this be done? The following steps provide insight:

1. Challenge students with interactive assignments that give actual audiences rather than just the normal teacher or fellow student audiences.
2. Assign multiple audiences in the class. For example, a teacher could assign four different audiences in a class of thirty.
3. Require audience analysis pre-writing sheets. This means that the students must answer prescribed audience analysis questions about their respective audiences.
4. Engage students with role-playing connecting to peer-editing activities i.e., students must become the audience of the paper that they read. They must give a response from the perspective of this projected audience.
5. Allow oral readings of final drafts from each audience type in class.

This sample activity will allow students to engage their sympathetic imagination by seeing information, scenarios, and life from other perspectives. Of course, different types of assignments employing similar characteristics will also enhance audience analysis perspectives. The main point is that audience analysis must be centered in writing assignments. Any assignment of this type can show how writing with the same purpose will be very different depending on the requirement of a selected audience, and student writers should have practice shifting and analyzing audiences in their compositions to understand that #readerslivesmatter. Thus, this focused practice

through interactive writing assignments in the composition classroom can transform writing through audience analysis techniques.

## Works Cited

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(Photo Courtesy Ashley Harlan Kitchens)

## Looking to the Future

As the local host for the 2020 annual conference, I had the pleasure of both showing off my campus and meeting fabulous students and faculty from across the state as we shared our knowledge, our curiosity, and our expertise. That

has been one of the elements of ACETA conferences that I have enjoyed over the years, the community of learners that changes and grows over the years.

COVID-19 drastically changed how we engage with each other, how we think about our teaching and learning, and what sort of content is vital for today's learners. The isolation wrought by COVID-19 has given us time to reflect on practice and left us with lots of questions as we work to plan for an uncertain fall semester. How do we create classroom experiences whether they are face to face or online/remote/distance that foster equity and inclusivity? How do we build learning frameworks that encourage active, thoughtful, and purposeful reflection and action on personal and cultural bias? The how's and the why's seem endless, but as a community, I think we are in a good position to answer some of those questions through the kinds of collaboration I saw at the conference. I witnessed several wonderful informal conversations that popped up in between sessions or at our shared meals where faculty and undergraduate and graduate students really **listened** to one another as they wrestled with the hard questions of sympathy and empathy that are the heart of our conference.

I encourage you to pull out your conference program and reach out to that person you had a brief hallway chat with. Visit our Facebook page (Association of College English Teachers of Alabama) or follow us on Twitter (@ACETAexec). Start or join conversations. Together we can begin to answer some of the pressing questions facing our institutions, our discipline, and our world.

Here's to seeing you at our 2021 conference.

Anissa M. Graham, Incoming ACETA President