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Miss Froy (Dame May Whitty), Iris (Margaret Lockwood), and Gilbert (Michael Redgrave).
It is nearly impossible to over-emphasize the omni-presence of the courtship—or marriage—plot in western literature, particularly as a subplot that comments upon the main action of fiction or film. Indeed, so conditioned are we to accept the presence of this subplot that we rarely notice or bother to analyze it. However, attending to both literal and figurative marriages adorning a main plot—especially when legitimate as well as problematic unions are represented—can yield important insights into a text’s meaning. A case in point is Alfred Hitchcock’s 1938 film *The Lady Vanishes*, a thriller that suggests the dangers in store for democracy and western Europe with the rise of fascism. Hitchcock repeatedly sounded this theme in his 1930s British films, including the classics *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1934), *The 39 Steps* (1935) and *Sabotage* (1936); like *The Lady Vanishes*, these films pull ordinary people into a world of mystery, murder, and political intrigue that threatens the British way of life. Happily, when the Hitchcock hero—or heroine—solves the mystery or foils the villain of the main plot, s/he is rewarded with marriage to the perfect mate; united they represent a new society, one the audience feels “should be”:

In the first place, the movement of comedy is usually a movement from one kind of society to another. At the beginning of the play the obstructing characters are in
charge of the play’s society, and the audience recognizes that they are usurpers. At the end of the play the plot device that brings hero and heroine together causes a new society to crystallize around the hero, and the moment when this crystallization occurs is the point of resolution in the action. . . . (Frye 163)

Marriage, then, operates as a sign of the general social condition. When unions are false, unhappy, unfruitful, society, too, is tragically out of kilter. In the comic mode, however, the hero-heroine’s marriage symbolically repairs this condition.

Indeed, *The Lady Vanishes* presents a number of problematic “marital” couplings before the hero and heroine come together to suggest why Britain is in such danger from the threat posed by fascism. Mr. and “Mrs.” Todhunter, an adulterous couple at the end of an extended period of European travel and, apparently, also at the end of their affair, have elevated personal satisfaction over commitment to their vows, spouse, and the social order. Charters and Caldicott, homosocially bonded men apparently joined at the hip through prep school, university and the army, are so obsessed with the soccer test matches being played in England that they are oblivious to everything else. The comic scene in which the men, one wearing the top and the other the bottom half of a single pair of pajamas, occupy a single narrow bed in a hotel garret and pore over the sports page of the London paper demands the audience read them as a “married” couple.

Initially, the hero and heroine seem unlikely candidates to redress British complacency in the face of the gathering political storm: Iris, a young woman of privilege and independent means, appears self-centered and spoiled. She plans to return to England to marry only because she can’t think of any other adventuress that might forestall her fate. Gilbert, a musicologist collecting folk songs and dances, is boyish and boorish, and most definitely not upper-crust. True to comic form, each takes an immediate dislike to the other, Iris calling Gilbert a cad and he labeling her “a stinker.” Yet when Miss Froy, a grandmotherly governess,
impossibly vanishes from train traveling from eastern to western Europe, they unite to solve the mystery of her disappearance despite the resistance of all others to the project. Those complicit in Miss Froy’s sudden absence try to convince the couple that the governness had never been on the train; the British “couples” who have in fact seen Miss Froy refrain from assisting in the search because of their own private obsessions. An investigation into “the old girl’s” disappearance might require a prolonged delay to Charters and Caldicott’s plans to make the English test matches; for Mr. Todhunter, giving evidence might bring to light his affair and undermine his aspirations to the judicial bench. And besides, British subjects—especially sweet old ladies—don’t just vanish!

Eventually of course, Iris and Gilbert prevail, not only finding the abducted governness but uncovering a ring of political thugs who are bent on keeping vital information from British authorities: the grandmotherly Froy is in fact a British agent carrying a coded message home. When the car carrying Miss Froy and her compatriots is separated from the main train and side railed into a desperate shootout, all but Mr. Todhunter realizes that the world is not England and that they will have to fight if they are to survive. Todhunter, willing to surrender to the fascist strongmen, is shot dead as he emerges from the car waving his white handkerchief. Recognizing in Iris and Gilbert the seeds of cultural survival, Miss Froy essentially sanctions their “union” when she entrusts them with the secret code as she slips from the embattled train, hoping that either she or they will make it home. The “new society” that such a marriage promises seems a certainty when, arriving at the Home Office, Iris and Gilbert—now mutually besotted—are received into Miss Froy’s open arms. Northrup Frye’s observation that “the theme of the comic is the integration of society” is important in understanding a formerly “problematic” union represented in the film: that of Charters and Caldicott. It is far too easy to suggest Hitchcock rejects the homosocial—or homosexual—union in favor of Iris and Gilbert’s conventional heterosexual pairing. Indeed, I’d suggest that proper unions finally have nothing to do with the sex of the partners, but with the necessary recognition
that private individuals cannot divorce themselves from public responsibility. Pulled out of their monomaniacal focus on what counts as boys’ games in the face of Hitler’s rise, Charter’s and Caldicott’s error is redeemed by their willingness to take on the enemy; both play crucial parts in defending the waylaid locomotive and, indeed, putting it back on the track to the west. Vigilant of Britain’s freedom and values, Iris and Gilbert as well as Charters and Caldicott represent a return to a citizenry that recognizes its duty to the social whole and not merely their own part in it.

These essays from the spring 2012 senior seminar in Marriage and Literary Form reflect the insight seminar participants brought to bear on novels, plays and films as they grappled with marriage as a plot element, metaphor and structural device. That so many of the essays engage modern texts suggests that the long tradition associated with the marriage plot not only lingers, but flourishes, in a world that seems to have lost its ability to negotiate its way to fruitful public or private unions.

**Work Cited**

IT’S NOT ABOUT MARRIAGE, IT’S ABOUT UNION: THE COUNTER-TRADITION IN HENRY FIELDING’S TOM JONES

BRANDON PERRY

In the analysis of narrative structure as indicative of constructed purpose, it would be all too easy for a surface-level analysis of Henry Fielding’s Tom Jones to stop well short of anything resembling a challenge to the traditional marriage plot. The boy—that is, Tom—meets the girl—that is, Sophia—and then the reader is forced to trudge through an elaborate set of circumstances that carry the two lovers on an intersecting journey of struggle, betrayal, and in the end, a union represented by marriage. To stop there, however, and call the structure of Tom Jones a clear example of the marital tradition would be a mistake. Hidden beneath the veneer of a simplistic—if lengthy—marriage plot is a critique of the conventional marriage plot itself. Fielding accomplishes this by way of using the traditional marriage plot as a lens through which to examine its own tropes, rather than the direct deconstruction proposed by Joseph Allen Boone in Tradition Counter Tradition, where he contends that the counter-traditional marriage plot begins with “temporal and spatial dislocation, duplication, juxtaposition, and irresolution” (142). One might argue that several of those elements are at work in Tom Jones, but even if they are, they are only present in so much as they happen to coincide with the larger structure of Fielding’s built-in critique. The narrative structure of Tom Jones needs no assistance from an outside set of theories to examine itself as a traditional marriage plot. Fielding
himself provides a much simpler way—he draws the reader’s attention to the process of textual analysis.

Throughout the novel the reader is made aware of the “truth” of the novel as an accurate portrayal of “history.” However, Fielding’s narrator makes regular reference to his ability to shape the narrative—such as including certain facts and omitting others—and in so doing he also reminds us that we ought to be careful in making judgments before all of the “facts” have been presented to us. This implicit caution invites the audience to take a step back and examine not only the narrative itself, but also the way in which we ourselves are performing as readers. In this way, Fielding ensures that a critical audience might find it difficult to unify “the text’s manifold possible meanings or contradictions into a centrally unifying statement and must therefore actively struggle to reach even a tentative judgment” (Boone 146). He does this, however, not by introducing some sort of direct challenge to the marital tradition within the text, but rather by using the reader as a combination of both lens—in the way that each reader sees the text—and mirror—in the way that said reader then “reflects” on why in the text elicits that unique response. Thus, *Tom Jones* is a counter-traditional novel in spite of its apparently conventional narrative structure; the direct interaction Fielding’s narrator has with the audience challenges the constructed nature of marital culture by paralleling it with the artificially created nature of the narrative itself.

In any discussion of a “traditional” versus a “counter-traditional” marriage plot it is important to take a brief moment and define one’s terms. For the purposes of this essay, the definition that will be referenced is Boone’s, in which he emphasizes that the core of a traditional marriage plot is that which supports the longstanding status quo of marriage as an idealized state of being. If a marriage fails, according to Boone, the traditional marriage plot will always lay the blame for a divorce at the feet of the individuals involved rather than the social institution of marriage itself (Boone 127). Any failures of marriage are individual, not corporate. It makes sense, then, that a “counter-traditional” work is just the opposite of this, pinning the blame of a failed relationship on the warped
social inequities inherent in the marriage contract. Here the blame of a failed marriage falls on the institution of marriage itself, and the larger social order is often charged with some sort of moral or intellectual deficiency at the root of it all. This is all well and good, but a natural question arises from these two definitions: aside from basic usefulness, why bother being so specific? Why not just call a traditional marriage plot that which has a “happy ending,” and a counter-traditional plot that which doesn’t? The problem with these simplified definitions is that they rely too much on an analysis of plot. For example, in William Howells’ *A Modern Instance*, the story ends with not only an unconventional divorce, but also the death of an adulterous man instead of the usual death of the adulterous woman, better known as the classic “seductress.” Aren’t these aspects of the novel signs of a counter-tradition? The key defining property here is not whether or not the story ends happily, but whether or not marriage is upheld as the “good end” for all relationships. *A Modern Instance*, for all of the things that go wrong in the protagonist’s relationship, still upholds monogamous marriage as the virtue to be achieved. Yes, Bartley divorces his wife, but only after leaving her and fleeing to a different state to do so at a distance. Yes, Bartley dies for his adultery instead of a woman, but the emphasis here is that *someone* has to die for violating the sanctity of marriage. This separation of tradition and plot is important to understanding Fielding’s ability to take what looks like a traditional plot and use it to question the notions we have as readers about marriage and the way things in a story about marriage should work themselves out.

The greatest evidence of Fielding’s strong narrative control over *Tom Jones* has less to do the text itself and more to do with what is missing from the text. In Stephen Dobranski’s essay, “What Fielding Doesn’t say in *Tom Jones*,” he proposes that the areas in the novel where the narrator chooses to omit information—often informing the reader that he is doing so—exist in part so that “the reader can enter into the text, forming his own connections and conceptions” (635). The reader’s participation in textual construction is central to our point: the reader’s entry into the story is a key component in deconstructing the text. Rather than present the reader with direct
examples of the counter-tradition, Fielding’s narrator invites the reader into the storytelling process and encourages his audience to poke holes in the traditional marriage plot that he presents. However, within this proffered interpretive freedom Fielding still exerts control, and “attempts to shape our interpretations through even the incidental scenes that the narrator passes over” (636). Dobranski gives one example of this narrative shaping, referencing a latter portion of the novel during which Mrs. Fitzpatrick is “interrupted by the arrival of a visitor, which was no other than his lordship, and as nothing passed at this visit either new or extraordinary, or any ways material to this history, we shall here put an end to this chapter” (Fielding 606). Dobranski makes the correct inference that “the narrator’s omission hints at the improper nature of the lord’s visit,” and that the idea of nothing new or extraordinary taking place implies that the affair has been going on for some time (Dobranski 640).

On the other hand, the narrator’s ability to leave out gaps also empowers the reader. By not giving out certain information, the narrator admits that others may attempt to interpose their own opinion on what happened. As Dorbranski explains once again:

But if Tom Jones’s conspicuous omissions represent one of Fielding’s subtle techniques for trying to reinforce his authority and shape readers’ understanding, I would argue that many of the book’s gaps also expose the potential power that the novel’s readers possess. The scene in which Nightingale informs Jones of Lady Bellaston’s true character suggests Fielding’s own awareness that, despite all his efforts, readers may have the last word. ‘[Nightingale] entered upon a long Narrative concerning the Lady; which, as it contained many Particulars highly to her Dishonour, we have too great a Tenderness for all Women of Condition to repeat; we would cautiously avoid giving an Opportunity to the future Commentators on our Works, of making any malicious Application; and of forcing us to be, against our Will, the Author of Scandal, which never entered into our Head’ (15.9.818). (646)
Despite all the literary criticism proclaiming Fielding as the master of his domain, pushing and pulling the reader here and there like a puppet-master, even Fielding knew that his power to withhold information could be used against him. Notice the particular language Fielding uses to describe this process, such as “forcing… against our will” (718). No matter how much control he possessed as a writer, Fielding felt the influence of his readership even before the book was complete. This system of “checks and balances” built into the novel’s narrative structure allows for a cooperative storytelling effort in which the audience and the author enter into a kind of contract—a marriage contract, even—and through a system of cooperation and equal input, deliver and interpret the story in a way that cannot be achieved through taking Tom Jones at face value. Like any true relationship, Fielding’s bond with the audience requires input from both parties, tempered by “tenderness” for each other wherein each partner seeks to neither undermine nor assert firm dominance over the other. It is the ideal marriage.

Fielding’s authorial control, mixed with the reader’s ability to fill in the gaps is precisely the type of narrative cooperation that is used throughout Tom Jones to make the audience stand back from the text and look at the story through a personalized lens. He makes an open and obvious call to the audience to examine the story’s structure—and thereby the larger world in which it takes place—rather than drawing attention to the failures of individuals. Tom Jones himself, the hero of the story, is referred to throughout as a “foundling.” This title, like “husband” or “murderer” or “child”, is a social construction of the period that Fielding highlights as early on as the book’s full title. The emphasis placed on Tom’s status as a foundling—on his social role rather than on him as an individual—serves a double purpose. It simultaneously charges Tom’s culture with the crime of erasing Tom’s individual identity while also drawing attention to the social systems responsible for doing the erasing itself. The emphasis of moral and intellectual failure lies, as with Boone’s description of the counter-tradition, with the larger social system rather than Tom.

Fielding’s control over the novel’s structure goes well beyond simple omission however; he also uses his audience-oriented narra-
tion to make sure that the reader is reading his novel in the “proper” state of mind. Of course, we now have to go about defining what we mean when we say “right mindset.” In James Lynch’s essay, titled “Moral Sense and the Narrator of Tom Jones” he makes it a point to emphasize the importance of Fielding’s narrator and how he gives the reader pause when examining the story. Lynch explains that “despite the romance hopes that we are programmed to entertain early in the novel […] the mechanics of a purely conventional romance plot do not and cannot make the ending satisfactory” (601). Like a lawyer presenting evidence to a jury, Lynch contends—just as I do—that the narrator’s addresses to the audience “modify a purely sentimental response [to the story] by pointing out the pitfalls of both approving and disapproving moral actions too hastily” (601). Fielding is doing much more in Tom Jones than a simple critique of culture. As has been said before, rather than present us with a counter-traditional narrative and just call it a day, Fielding uses his narrator to make the reader consider more than just the story. This is why a plot-oriented analysis of the deeper points in Tom Jones is doomed from the start—Fielding’s narrator wants little to do with plot himself. Rather, he calls on the reader to examine him or herself and the way in which they are approaching the novel. Lynch highlights the best example of this, when in the beginning of Book 6 the narrator calls upon the reader to “accept his definition of benevolent love” (603):

Examine your heart, my good reader, and resolve whether you do believe these matters with me. If you do, you may now proceed to their exemplification in the following pages; if you do not, you have, I assure you, already read more than you have understood; and it would be wiser to pursue your business, or your pleasures (such as they are), than to throw away any more of your time in reading what you can neither taste nor comprehend. (235)

Lynch calls this an urge from the narrator for the audience to become what he terms “good-natured” readers (603). Fielding’s speaker takes on a biblical tone in this and similar passages, echoing the oft
repeated cry of Christ: “He who has ears to hear, let him hear” (New International Version, Mk. 4:9). This tonal allusion puts Fielding’s narrator in the position of a moral teacher, rather than a simple historian, and emphasizes his desire to impart more to the reader than a simple recitation of historical “facts.” Like a parable, there is a lesson to be learned in Tom Jones, and these lines demonstrate that the narrator wants to change the way his readers think, not merely entertain us with a fanciful love story. Following the biblical allusion to its furthest point, one might also assert that these passages sanctify—or even deify—Fielding’s narrator, who sees his writing as held to a higher moral and intellectual standard than some readers might be able to appreciate. This is not unlike the Apostle Paul, who asserts that the message of the Gospel is “foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (NIV, 1 Cor. 1:18). A directive like this encourages those who understand to read on, and warns those who do not understand—who accept the story at face value just as they accept the established social structure around them—to reconsider whether or not the novel is still worth their time. While not, in the strictest sense, tied to the story arc of Tom Jones, this passage has more to do with the novel’s structure than any amount of plot development. Much like the character of Tom Jones and his status as a “foundling,” the novel’s status as mere “history” is a false and shallow title that only those who read “well” will ever be able to understand and hopefully see past.

The complexities of Tom’s nature—his seeming good intentions versus his often destructive and selfish actions—do demand a certain kind of reader, but I believe the notion goes deeper than that. These didactic lessons coming straight from the mouth of the narrator call, above all else, for a reader who is ready and willing to look beyond the obvious. That is the point of the narrator’s call to be a “good-natured” reader—not to see the book as Fielding the author or “Fielding” the narrator do (which is what Lynch argues), but to examine the book’s narrative with a careful and critical eye, to gather all the available evidence, and come to an independent conclusion. Fielding’s goal with the narrator is to turn the reader into a valuable member of the narrative’s creation, not an obedient reader who agrees
with every word the narrator speaks. By forcing the reader to accept
that they themselves live in a larger social construction that affects
everything they do (including the way the read a book), Fielding
can emphasize the artifice of Tom Jones as well, both as a fictional
story and as a book that challenges the traditional marriage plot.

As each example of Fielding’s purpose in writing Tom Jones has
been listed thus far, a pattern becomes evident: despite his control
over the narrative, Fielding wanted a relationship with his readers.
By highlighting the constructed nature of his own comic marriage
plot, Fielding lets the reader into his world of narrative construction
while slipping himself into the reader’s own sense of perspective by
referring to his readers as “sagacious.” This title is more than flattery.
In Henry Power’s essay, “Henry Fielding, Richard Bently, and the
‘Sagacious Reader’ of Tom Jones”, he posits that Fielding’s identifi-
cation of “his readers as ‘sagacious’” (749) is an invitation to “offer
conjectures on his narrative” (749). Fielding wants his reader’s input,
not because he desires the reader to change the story for themselves,
but because without that bond the audience can never connect with
the charged underbelly of his narrative— that the tale of Tom Jones
is drawing attention to the conventions of both narrative structure
and storytelling. In this way, Fielding creates a kind of marriage
between himself and the reader. This marriage, much like a real
one, requires input from both parties in order to function. On the
one hand there is Fielding’s storytelling, which is the foundation of
the relationship. However, his repeated cries for an “attentive” and
“sagacious” reader imply that no matter what kind of story he may
have written, he desires a certain kind of “partner” in order for the
story to work as intended. This marital metaphor between author
and reader is made apparent from the novel’s outset by way of a feast.
Just as the traditional marriage plot often ends in a feast, Fielding’s
narrator begins the novel by describing his story in terms of a large
meal that he will allow his potential readers to “peruse at their first
entrance into the house; and having thence acquainted themselves
with the entertainment which they may expect, may either stay and
regale with what is provided for them, or may depart to some other
ordinary better accommodated to their taste” (29). This unusual
order—putting the feast before the marital commitment—is indicative of the entire novel’s counter-traditional structure. By placing the meal at the beginning of the relationship with his reader, Fielding prioritizes individual choice over the usual norms of a courtship and encourages his readers to decide for themselves early on whether or not *Tom Jones* is worth their time. There is no proposal for marriage in Fielding’s version of the marriage plot (henceforth referred to as the “authorial” marriage plot); first he gives his readers a sample of the kind of experience they’ll have with him, then he allows them to make a decision. This authorial marriage plot is the underlying structure beneath the often clichéd storyline of *Tom Jones*, and is the center of Fielding’s counter-traditional intent.

To be clear, however, Fielding does not discard his narrative by any means—in fact, he calls upon his “sagacious” readers to use their good judgment when encountering many of his characters. As James Lynch explains, the “presentation of perfectly good and perfectly evil characters misrepresents nature...in our moral response to characters drawn from nature, we [the audience] should be cautious at leaping to judgments drawn singularly from our moral sense” (Lynch 611). The main point is this: Fielding’s repeated desire for good and capable readers is as important to the authorial marriage plot as it is to the reading of the novel itself. Neither the authorial marriage plot nor the story of *Tom Jones* will work without a bond between a “sagacious” reader and the text itself. By drawing attention to this bond via regular breaks in the narrative, Fielding forces his audience to reconsider the constructed nature of their own world. Much like a novel, many of the accepted societal norms we live with every day—marital or otherwise—were put there by someone else. Like a good book we follow along throughout our lives, going with the story without thinking too much about our choices. *Tom Jones* is a novel that forces the reader out of its story on a regular basis, never letting the audience “forget that [Fielding] is telling a story, and that we are reading a book” (Power 749). This awareness of structure informs the entirety of the novel, and is the center of the *Tom Jones*’ counter-traditional purpose.
One theme often touched on throughout the novel’s actual story is that of misunderstanding. As the titular hero, Tom Jones is the focus of much of the novel’s attention. This has its disadvantages, however, as Tom routinely does things that many other characters—and perhaps the audience—see as immoral or at least misguided. One of Fielding’s admonitions to his “sagacious” readers is again, as Lynch says, to “modify a purely sentimental response [to the story] by pointing out the pitfalls of both approving and disapproving moral actions too hastily” (601). A reader without a critical eye may see some of Tom’s actions—such as sleeping with several women throughout the novel while the love of his life, Sophia, is searching for him—as proof of a bad character. However, Fielding encourages his readers to treat Tom with the same amount of critical thought as the novel’s structure, reminding the audience that the authorial marriage contract is one of thoughtful cooperation, and not to force their own opinions on it without first thinking things through. If we as the audience fail in this, then we become complicit with the other characters in Tom Jones who see or hear about Tom’s actions and rarely hear his side of the story before passing judgment. That kind of uncritical, reactionary, face-value response is something that Fielding won’t stand for in his authorial marriage, which is based around cooperation, not force or haste.

Despite all of its counter-traditional aspects, Tom Jones is still a novel about union. That union, however, is not about Tom and Sophia coming together at last, but is instead a celebration of the authorial marriage contract between Fielding and his audience. As John Unsworth states in his essay, “Tom Jones: The Comedy of Knowledge,” this novel “is one that relies on its readers for—and to some extent involves them in—its realization” (242). The realization of this novel depends entirely upon the relationship between the reader and the author. Anything less and the novel’s ability to examine the traditional marriage contract in any critical way becomes stifled at best, or non-existent in the worst case. With a substantial length of almost nine-hundred pages—a standard length for some novels of the day, but overlong considering the basic story it tells—as well as the constant narrative interruptions, blatant omissions,
and the repeated failures of its principal hero Tom, Fielding almost invites his readers to toss the book aside. He makes it plain as early as the first page of the novel that he never intended to cater to any but the most “sagacious” of his audience, and makes no apologies to those who just read *Tom Jones* as a decent love story. Fielding didn’t need a novel of this size just to write a love story—there have been love stories since long before and well after Fielding’s time. What makes this novel special is the authorial marriage that forms between the narrator and the reader, and by doing so Fielding espouses a marital ideal expressed through narrative construction that emphasizes cooperation, equity, and tenderness. By regularly breaking into his own narrative to establish this bond with the reader, Fielding downplays the importance of the traditional marriage plot as witnessed within the apparently conventional tropes of *Tom Jones*. The authorial marriage contract Fielding strives to create with the reader demonstrates that individual choice and “sagacity” ought to be at the center of marital relationships, not the hierarchal tradition of marriage that has always been. *Tom Jones* may follow the yellow-brick road of the traditional marriage plot on the surface, but there are few romance novels that work harder at finding what lies beneath—or that the road was never the point to begin with.

**Works Cited**


CAGED BIRDS AND FEMALE SUBJECTION IN KATE CHOPIN’S THE AWAKENING

ERIC BICKHAM

Kate Chopin’s The Awakening, published in 1899, is an intriguing novel in the late nineteenth-century American canon. In contrast to traditional marriage-plot novels that, as Joseph Allen Boone explicates in his treatise Tradition Counter Tradition, propagate sentimental notions of connubial permanence and legitimate hierarchal order of masculine and feminine conduct within matrimony (144, 33), The Awakening, as a counter-traditional marriage-plot text, serves to reveal “the failings of real-life marriage, particularly in regard to the position of women within its institutionalized strictures” (130). For nineteenth-century married women, especially affluent married women, the “institutionalized strictures” firmly established the husband as the head of the family and the wife as his subservient accoutrement. Moreover, the patriarchal structure of the Victorian family did not proffer females bound within conjugality modes of negotiating legally within their marriage.

In Louisiana, where The Awakening is set, the Code Napoleon that was the basis of state law governing the marriage contract decreed that married women and their progeny were the legal properties of their husbands; married women could not sign legal contracts without their husbands’ consent, appear in court, petition the court for divorce, or hold public office. Furthermore, matrimony, a hegemonic institution of patriarchy, obliged women to be vacuous objects in marriage and motherhood, where women existed only as vessels of maternity and commodified beings with a modicum of opportunity to establish
identities beyond prescribed gender roles. Chopin’s *The Awakening* is a marriage-plot novel of the counter-tradition that delineates Edna Pontellier’s quest to construct her own identity and escape wedlock in nineteenth-century Creole society’s restrictive social and matrimonial culture. Although Edna is married to a wealthy Creole businessman, Léonce Pontellier, their marriage does not bespeak the traditional “courtship plot’s momentum toward the ‘happy ending’” (Boone 38); and for Edna, marriage does not culminate in the “external symbol of female identity formation” that the female *bildungsroman* espouses (Fox-Genovese 271). Furthermore, while many traditional marriage-plot novels portray their protagonists as pious, domestic, submissive women who affirm patriarchal notions of femininity, Chopin depicts Edna as a nascent “new woman,” a nineteenth-century woman who challenges conventional standards of female identity (Rudnick 79). And contrary to the traditional marriage-plot novel and the female *bildungsroman*, the counter-traditional narrative trajectory of wedlock, as well as the female quest for self-agency, becomes a mode by which Chopin’s novel critiques the patriarchal institution of matrimony. For Chopin’s female protagonist, matrimony is neither a reward that satisfies her on a personal and sociocultural level, nor is marriage the paramount event that endows Edna with a satisfying identity. Moreover, by utilizing narrative structural aspects such as the motif equating females with caged or wounded birds, Chopin suggests that the hegemonic institution of marriage confines women within fixed bounds of patriarchal constructs and delimits their ability to self-define.

Although the anomalous and complex character of Edna Pontellier and *The Awakening*’s radical theme of a female protagonist’s struggle against the restrictions of her society has gained the attention of readers and critics since its publication, it is Chopin’s intricate use of repetitive symbols and images to delineate Edna’s endeavor to escape the patriarchal constructs of matrimony that makes the novel an exemplar of a counter-traditional text, where the counter-tradition’s metaphoric expressions function in *The Awakening* as the corollary of patriarchal constructions of gender roles and masculine power within wedlock (Boone 144). *The Awak-
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*en* ing employs images of birds—caged or wounded—as metaphors for female entrapment within marriage and as a symbol for Adèle Ratignolle’s embrace of the “ideological forms underlying the presumed order of marriage” in Creole society (Boone 145). The avian symbolism and imagery in *The Awakening* are multifaceted; they not only serve as structural markers that illuminate Chopin’s interrogation of the institution of matrimony’s circumscription of Edna Pontellier’s attempt to self-identify and escape a loveless marriage, Chopin’s symbolic use of birds also indentifies her with other female writers, writers who contribute to discourses on the oppression of women by patriarchy and its social constructs in their literature.

In her 1792 feminist manifesto *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Mary Wollstonecraft employs the trope of birds to illustrate the effect of patriarchal conventions upon female subjectivity. According to Wollstonecraft, women are “confined then in cages like the feathered race, they have nothing to do but to plume themselves, and stalk with mock majesty from perch to perch. It is true they are provided with food and raiment, for which they never toil or spin: but health, liberty and virtue are given in exchange” (125). This metaphor of the female as a caged bird refers to women’s entrapment within marriage, a sociocultural constraint that Edna must contend with. Additionally, Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s poem *Aurora Leigh* (1857) introduces the caged-bird image as a symbol of the female who, although confined to the sphere of domesticity, is content with her adoption of the patriarchal ideal of muliebrity. Although Aurora Leigh seeks an existence beyond the assigned gender roles imposed upon women by dominant ideologies, her aunt, espousing sentiments that serve to isolate women in distinctive spheres defined by patriarchy, attempts to delimit Aurora’s aspirations. Browning describes Aurora’s conventional aunt with the following metaphorical expression:

She had lived.

* a sort of caged-bird life, born in a cage,

Accounting that to leap from perch to perch

Was act and joy enough for any bird. (13)
This metaphor of the female as a contented caged bird alludes to what Louis Althusser posits as interpellation—the recognition and adoption of hegemonic ideologies and their practices by subaltern individuals (699). For Chopin, Adèle Ratignolle, the superlative “mother-woman” of Creole society, who “[flutters] about with extended, protecting wings when any harm real or imaginary, threatened [her] precious brood,” interpellates the hegemonic ideal of leisure-class married women of the nineteenth century (Chopin 9). For the ideal wives of nineteenth-century Creole society were females “who idolized their children, worshipped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels” (9). Similar to Edna “who must have strong wings” to attempt her own flight to freedom from motherhood and the confines of patriarchal marriage, Adèle and the other Creole mother-women have wings (79). Nevertheless, their wings operate to perpetuate patriarchal ideologies that define the role of women only as biddable wives and mothers. For Edna, these self-effacing Creole hens, fluttering to loving service of husband and children, are antithetical to the “new woman’s” ideology of unencumbered individuality, sexual choice, financial independence, and companionate unions, where the female’s position shifts in the hierarchy of the sexes, and she becomes a companion—an equal—rather than a subordinate and dependent of her husband. Chopin carefully crafts her references to birds to expose how the institution of matrimony imprisons women within the bounds of limited expressions of identity that are sanctioned by the dominant patriarchal ideology, and to illuminate the counter-traditional text’s revelation of the “narrative impasse” that defines Edna’s nuptial life with her husband (Boone 146).

In The Awakening, avian imagery is used to explore how wealthy nineteenth-century married women must contend with their confinement in figurative cages—albeit gilded cages—by husbands who view them as commodified beings to be utilized as breeders and displayed as prized possessions that signify their husband’s socioeconomic standing in the community. The novel opens with the image of two caged birds, a green and yellow parrot and mockingbird dinning:
A green and yellow parrot, which hung in a cage outside the door, kept repeating over and over: “Allez vous-en! Allez vous-en! Sapristi! That’s all right!” He could speak a little Spanish, and also a language which nobody understood, unless it was the mocking-bird that hung on the other side of the door, whistling his fluty notes out upon the breeze with maddening persistence. (1)

The reader can take note that the birds are separated, and their vocalizations are discordant. This scene is an image of isolation, confinement, and lack of harmonious communication, which is indicative of the counter-traditional text’s exposure of Edna’s union with Léonce Pontellier as a state of “narrative impasse” (Boone 146). Similar to the parrot that speaks French and understands other languages, Léonce and Edna both speak French and English, thus the reader assumes that they can communicate effectively with one another. However, like the parrot who speaks “a language which nobody understood, unless it was the mocking-bird,” Léonce speaks a language that Edna feigns not to comprehend (Chopin 1). Léonce parrots the patriarchal ideology that relegates women to an object position, an object position established by the leisure-class sentiment of conspicuous consumption (Veblen 65-67). Although Edna married into the leisure-class Creole society of conspicuous consumption, her “awakening” induces her to rebel against the notion that she is Léonce’s “valuable piece of personal property” (Chopin 4). As Edna begins to “realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relation as an individual to the world within and about her,” she can no longer abide a marriage that conforms to Victorian, leisure-class norms and perpetuates the hegemonic ideologies that demand her interpellation as a commodified being and a vacuous vessel of maternity (14). Although Edna is conversant with the ethos of her social sphere, because of her “awakening” to herself as an autonomous individual with agency and voice, Edna can no longer “keep up with the procession” of the leisure-class, obliging mother-women, women who echo the restrictive canons of nineteenth-century matrimony (49). Edna comprehends the ideology of conspicuous consump-
tion that Léonce espouses, just as the mockingbird understands the parrot. Nevertheless, just as the mocking bird refuses to change its “whistling [of] fluty notes . . . with maddening persistence,” Edna refuses to alter her actions and speech that assert the rights of an inviolable individual who cannot be possessed or defined by others. She articulates her notions of female autonomy within marriage to Robert Lebrun, one of the male Creoles who sparks a latent passion within Edna: “I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier’s possessions to dispose of or not” (102). In contrast to the caged green and yellow parrot whose speech signifies its conformity to the world of its captors, Edna, as an “impassioned, newly awakened being,” refuses to mimic unremittingly her captor—her husband—who upholds societal conventions that serve to regulate female conduct within patriarchal marriage (44). Furthermore, Edna’s assertions of female self-realization and independence become to her husband, Léonce, a surprising transformation of behavior that utterly confounds him (55). Similar to the caged mockingbird’s “whistling [of] fluty notes,” Edna insists upon expressing her newfound sense of self-autonomy to Léonce “with maddening persistence,” which initiates the “sex war [that] becomes a central issue and image in the counter-traditional reevaluation” of their marriage (Boone 145). While the disharmonious vocalizations of the birds serve as a metaphoric expression of the “narrative impasse” and marital discord between Edna and Léonce, the caged birds also symbolize the married woman’s state of entrapment within matrimony.

The metaphor of caged birds as females entrapped within matrimony implicates the systems of nineteenth-century patriarchy as the ultimate culprit in a married woman’s fate. Moreover, as Marilyn Frye, a twentieth-century feminist philosopher, explicates in her essay “Oppression,” the representation of women as birds confined in cages cannot be fathomed without exploring the mechanism—the cage—that serves to restrain them:

If you look very closely at just one wire in the cage, you cannot see the other wires. If your conception of what is before you is determined by this myopic focus, you could
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look at that one wire, up and down the length of it, and be unable to see why a bird would not just fly around the wire any time it wanted to go somewhere. . . . It is perfectly obvious that the bird is surrounded by a network of systematically related barriers, none of which would be the least hindrance to its flight, but which, by their relations to each other, are as confining as the solid walls of a dungeon. (4-5, emphasis added)

Frye’s analysis of the cage explains why the extraordinary “mother-woman,” Adèle Ratignolle, does not discern the oppressive ideolo-
gies that circumscribe her to the socially-imposed sexual and social roles that construct her identity within the elite society of the Cre-
oles. Comparable to a caged bird whose vision is obstructed by the wires of the cage, Adèle does not see beyond the fixed bounds of patriarchal constructs that dictate her position within “the sexual hierarchy institutionalized by matrimony” (Boone 89); and she cannot conceive of a self that transcends her interpellation of the singular expression of female identity: a vacuous object to be pos-
essed. This role of women, imposed by the patriarchy’s “network of systematically related barriers” to alternate gender roles, is defined only in relation to authoritarian concepts of matrimony and motherhood perpetuated by the hegemony of men. Additionally, just as a caged bird is restricted to a demarcated space, Adèle is entrapped by patriarchal codes and social constructs that serve to confine her within the definitive sphere of matrimonial domesticity. For Adèle, the repressive institution of matrimony “possesses” her wholly—“body and soul” (Chopin 109). Analogous to the caged bird who must abide a life of perpetual captivity, Adèle abides a connubial life of perpetual dominance by oppressive constructs of patriarchy that delimit her ability to self-define beyond the role of a passive, vac-
uous object, a possession of her husband that is utilized for breeding: “Madame Ratignolle had been married seven years. About every two years she had a baby” (10). Everything about Adèle’s identity satisfies the hegemonic paradigm of the ideal wife and mother in nineteenth-century Creole society, where her essential self exists only
in relation to her husband and children. And like the contented caged bird, “Accounting that to leap from perch to perch / Was act and joy enough for any bird” (Browning 13), Chopin’s depictions of Adèle insist that she is pleased with her identity as a commodified being and a symbol of sublime maternity (Chopin 9-10).

In *The Awakening*, Adèle “puts her husband’s preferences above her own in all things,” (Skaggs 347). According to Chopin, the Ratignolle marriage is observed by Edna as a “glimpse of domestic harmony” (Chopin 54). However, this “domestic harmony” is more likely the result of “Adèle’s willing suspension of her individuality in favor of her wedded function as a ‘mother-woman,’” rather than from the union of their two identities (Boone 12). The success of their marriage is accomplished by Adèle’s *interpellation* of her role as a commodified being, a person devoid of an individual identity, an appendage to her husband. When Edna dines with Adèle and Monsieur Ratignolle at their house in New Orleans, Adèle does not discuss concerns are interests that are not relevant to her wifely and motherly duties, but when Monsieur Ratignolle speaks, Adèle is “keenly interested in everything her husband says, laying down her fork the better to listen, chiming in, taking the words out of his mouth” (Chopin 54). Clearly, Adèle is devoid of an identity outside of her role as wife and mother. Her lack of selfhood and inability to recognize her entrapment within matrimony are integral aspects of her adoption of patriarchal constructions of gender roles that conform to the hegemonic ideal of womanhood. Adèle is indeed the blissful caged bird whose sentiments, actions, and articulations advocate for her circumscribed existence of “blind contentment” within the institution of matrimony (Chopin 54).

Contrary to Adèle who concretizes patriarchal ideologies of the married female as the domestic property of her husband, Edna Pontellier, who “[begins] to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her,” ascertains that a state of “blind contentment” within the repressive institution of nineteenth-century marriage is “not a condition of life which fitted her” (14, 54). As Edna becomes fully conscious of her discontent with the
gender role—the “mother-woman”—patriarchy insists is her sole function, she rebels against nineteenth-century cultural concepts that determine marriage to be a benign “resolution of the female quest for self,” where the belief that marriage and maternity must remain the ultimate culmination of a satisfying female identity (Fox-Genovese 271). In *The Awakening*, matrimony is, for Edna, an oppressive system of patriarchy, a sociocultural force that compels her to exist as a compliant, voiceless occupant of the spheres her husband and society define for her. With Chopin’s counter-traditional text, conjugality becomes the inescapable, monolithic construct of patriarchy that serves to hinder Edna’s aspirations to self-define and to attain an essential selfhood that deviates from social conventions that relegate her to “a condition” of confinement within marriage. Edna, perceiving that she is restrained by the hegemonic ideologies that inform her nuptial life, begins to undertake drastic actions to redefine her station in the elite society of the Creoles, independent of her husband. As Edna endeavors to free herself from the confines of her leisure-class marriage, she attempts to form new patterns that defy social and moral paradigms constructed by patriarchy.

The individual steps of Edna’s rebellion against the identity imposed upon her by patriarchy lead directly to clashes with the sociocultural forces of elite, nineteenth-century Creole society and to “irresolvable conflicts” with her husband, Léonce (Boone 142). Shortly after Edna and Léonce depart from Grand Isle and return to New Orleans and their home on Esplanade Avenue, Edna ceases the custom of “reception day,” where once a week, she is expected to remain home and receive visitors (Chopin 48). When Léonce discovers that Edna has abandoned this ritual of affluence, he becomes agitated. As he sorts through the calling cards, the reader becomes aware of the true source of Léonce’s irritation. He is displeased with Edna for defying the orthodoxies of her class and sex. Because Léonce echoes the ideology of leisure-class conspicuous consumption, he deems Edna to be one of his assets that functions to advertise his socioeconomic status within the community. As one of his possessions, Edna’s compliance with the role patriarchy requires her to perform within marriage is expected, and he depends on her “sense
of submission or obedience to his compelling wishes” (30). However, Edna begins to oppose nineteenth-century precepts that condemn married women to definitive functions and spheres. Edna’s refusal to perpetuate the assigned role of drawing room hostess illustrates her growing recognition that marriage stifles women’s capacity to self-define beyond traditional gender roles established by nineteenth-century Creole society. Moreover, Edna’s rejection of the “hostess” role ascribed to leisure-class women bespeaks her breach of the figurative cage that restricts her to the conventional realm of domesticity. During supper, Edna informs Léonce that “[she] found their [calling] cards when [she] got home; [she] was out” (49). By dismissing her wifely duties within the home, Edna aspires to expand her identity outside the constraints of gender conformity; and she begins her own flight to freedom when she tests the boundaries of women’s domain: Edna frequently takes excursions to the race track (70). Instead of acquiescing to her strict confinement within her nuptial abode, Edna rebels against social regulations that demand she exist, as a contented caged bird lives, within the spheres demarcated for her. Moreover, Chopin depicts Edna’s revolts against matrimonial strictures to contest patriarchal notions of female passivity and submissiveness.

In *The Awakening*, Edna and Léonce’s marriage is indicative of wedded life as an “emphatic dead end, a state of moral and narrative impasse,” where they quarrel and evince contempt for each other (Boone 142):

Mr. Pontellier had been a courteous husband so long as he met a certain tacit submissiveness in his wife. But her new and unexpected line of conduct bewildered him. It shocked him. Then her absolute disregard for her duties as a wife angered him. When Mr. Pontellier became rude, Edna grew insolent. She had resolved never to take another step backwards. (Chopin 55)

This passage depicts Edna and Léonce clearly as “hostile combatants, locked in an unending battle of personal and societal dimensions” (Boone 145). Because Léonce is concerned with observing the social

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customs—les convenances—of leisure-class Creole society, he expects Edna to adhere to the cultural etiquette that dictates her conduct as his wife and mother of his children (Chopin 49). However, Edna, resisting the notion that she must remain content with her existence as an appendage to her husband and a doting mother to her children, begins to alter her deportment within their marriage; for Edna no longer exudes the “tacit submissiveness” that is paramount to the institution of matrimony’s “hierarchical order based on male dominance and female suppression” (Boone 33). Edna challenges the authority of her husband by acting decisively to eschew her duties as the traditional “mother-woman,” stepping outside of the “procession,” the parade that Léonce insists she join to maintain his social position within Creole society. Edna rids herself of external and internal appearances of conjugal felicity; she ceases her sexual relations with Léonce altogether, which prompts him to complain to Dr. Mandelet: “[Edna’s] making it devilishly uncomfortable for me. . . . She’s got some notion in her head concerning the eternal rights of women; and—you understand—we meet in the morning at the breakfast table” (Chopin 63). By refusing sex with Léonce, Edna exercises the “eternal rights of women” in insisting that she has agency and she owns her body; she is no longer a passive, commodified object that can be used to satiate her husband’s lust, or utilized as an expedient breeder. Furthermore, Edna “[casts] aside her fictitious self,” the self that assumed patriarchy’s definition of female identity, an identity that exemplifies the singular expression of the female self sanctioned by the authoritarian society of the Creole elite: the self-effacing “mother-woman” (Chopin 55). Because Léonce, who reflects the restrictive matrimonial and social creeds of hegemony, insists on Edna’s obedience to nineteenth-century social rules that serve to hinder her from attaining a satisfying identity of her own design, their marriage, for Edna, becomes a circumstance of “indescribable oppression,” where Léonce, her oppressor, acts to combat Edna’s resolve to “soar above the level plain of tradition” and attain a self that no longer “[belongs] to another than herself” (Chopin 8, 76, 79). Chopin’s representation of the Pontelliers as “hostile combatants” exposes the “irresolvable conflicts and contrary
attitudes” between Edna’s “newly awakened” sense of selfhood and Léonce’s notions of Edna’s marital and social role, as well her essentialized femininity and sexuality (Boone 145). Moreover, Chopin’s counter-traditional trajectory of Edna’s marriage to Léonce reveals *The Awakening*’s literary strategy to contravene nineteenth-century sexual ideologies that serve to limit expressions of female desire and sexuality within the socially-approved bounds of marriage.

As Edna embarks on her journey of self-realization and escape from her stultifying marriage to Léonce, she develops an ardor for Robert Lebrun, a passion that she did not “[feel] for her husband, or had ever felt, or ever expected to feel” (Chopin 46). The emotions she experiences from her attraction to Robert incite Edna to evince her sexuality in a manner that is contrary to socially-sanctioned paradigms of female sexual expression. Edna attempts to construct her own sexual identity, one that “dares and defies” the conventional sexual ideologies that are forced upon nineteenth-century women (61). For Edna, the ability to express her sexuality and sensual sensibilities with little regard to the mores that govern Victorian society signifies a “[decisive break] from [the] oppressive conception of heterosexual [relationships],” an “oppressive conception” that defines women’s sexuality by the immutable laws of nature and biological destiny, where maternity is an inextricable component of female sexuality (Boone 33). This sentiment of female sexual identity is reinforced by one of the Creole patricians, Dr. Mandelet, when Edna opines an opposing view of the sexual function of women in society. Dr. Mandelet asserts that “[Edna] is given up to illusions,” and women’s sexual urges “[seem] to be a provision of Nature; a decoy to secure mothers for the race” (Chopin 105). However, Edna regards her romantic relationship with Robert as an enterprise that affords her the possibility of flight to a new life of sensual independence, a life that is not encumbered by the biological oppression of childbearing and constrained by social mandates that oblige women to be dutiful mothers and subservient wives. Edna’s “advocacy of free union” with Robert contests conservative attitudes that bolster patriarchal notions of limited sexual choice and sexual subjection for females (Boone 130). At a dinner party given for her father and Dr. Mande-
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Edna articulates her sentiments of female sexual choice by telling a tale of a woman who ventures to “taste of life’s deliriums” with a beau (Chopin 54). Edna tells the story “of a woman who paddled away with her lover one night in a pirogue and never came back. They were lost amid the Baratarian Islands, and no one ever heard of them or found trace of them from that day to this” (67). What her party guests are hearing is a fantastical account of her excursion with Robert to *Chênière Caminada*. Edna’s tale of the two lovers is self-revealing, for the story conveys the passionate cravings of Edna’s soul, a soul characterized by a hunger for selfhood and a yearning for audacious sensual experiences; “The brave soul” that affirms female sexual autonomy, as well as female self-sufficiency (61). Moreover, through the imagery of vibrant birds in flight, Chopin intimates Edna’s inclination to elude socially-imposed sexual norms. As her guests listen to her tale, “They could feel the hot breath of the Southern night; they could hear . . . the beating of birds’ wings, rising . . . from among the reeds” (67-68). By espousing the notion of female sexual self-ownership, which in the nineteenth century was imbued with an egregious contravention of social mores, Edna’s open-ended tale becomes a narrative of a female who experiences an exhilarating sense of sexual possibility coupled with threatening personal and social uncertainty. As Edna struggles to establish a future existence that is liberated from the myriad social forms that are inhibiting and oppressive to her, she begins to “drift whithersoever she chose to set her sails” (33). Edna chooses to abandon her marriage and her role as mother by leaving the conjugal home on Esplanade Avenue, setting up her residence at a small Creole cottage in the *Faubourg Marigny*.

Although Edna does not have the legal authority to petition the court for a divorce in Louisiana, she aims to live a life free of the authority of her husband, an authority that denies her self-ownership and self-sufficiency. For Edna, moving into the Creole cottage serves to test conventional gender and economic boundaries; she rents the cottage with the money she inherits from her mother, with her winnings from the horse races, and with her earnings from the paintings she sells, which frees her from the financial support of her husband (76). Additionally, by maintaining a one-person residence, Edna
strives to escape the social role of motherhood, a role Edna describes as her “soul’s slavery” (108). However, her rejection of her role as mother and her exploration of female independence is self-deceptive. Chopin reveals the fleeting state of Edna’s autonomy and freedom from motherhood by labeling Edna’s new abode as the “pigeon house” (87). Although Edna’s cottage affords her a refuge to strengthen her zeal for self-determination and indulge her sensual longings that defy the tradition of passive female sexuality, the appellation Chopin confers upon the habitation suggests a cage. A pigeon, after all, is a domesticated dove. Although Edna’s action to move out of her husband’s opulent home might be indicative of “her strength and expansion as an individual,” perspicacious readers of The Awakening fathom that she simply exchanges her gilded cage for a simpler, less confining one (89): a pigeon roost allows its birds to fly freely because, once domesticated, they return of their own volition. The “pigeon house” is “just two steps away,” located merely around the corner of the house she shared with Léonce and her children, Raoul and Etienne, on Esplanade Avenue (76). Therefore, Edna remains within the social sphere of her captors—her husband and children.

Edna attempts to flee the constraints of Victorian motherhood, but just like a pigeon, she is not a free, soaring bird, and her attention returns to her children, as the pigeon returns to her coop: “After a little while, a few days in fact, Edna went up and spent a week with her children” (89). With The Awakening, Chopin presents children unequivocally as instruments of Edna’s entrapment within the institution of matrimony: “The children appeared before her like antagonists who had overcome her” (108). Although Edna aspires to break the bonds of marriage, she is incapable of liberating herself from the cage because of her children, the biological snares that render women captives to a patriarchal system that determines them to be wives first, mothers last, and autonomous individuals never.

Failing to overcome the conventions of marriage that oppress her, Edna becomes fully cognizant that her quest for self-identification is in vain, and transcendence of the hegemonic social codes of patriarchy is ostensibly impossible for mothers and wives in the nineteenth century: “better to wake up after all, even to suffer, rather
than remain a dupe to illusions all one’s life” (105). Aware that she cannot actualize an essential self that “[t]ramples] upon the lives, the hearts, the prejudices of others,” Edna becomes a wounded bird, a “[weakling] bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth” (105, 79). Edna is broken psychologically by cultural edicts that undercut her realization of autonomy. And similar to a caged bird whose wings have been clipped so it cannot soar to freedom, Edna does not possess the mettle, the “strong wings,” required to soar above the barriers of social conventions that decree female behavior in her world. Despite Edna’s “awakening” to notions of self-ownership and her desire to rebel against female conformity, she does not obtain the “many gifts—absolute gifts” necessary to sustain a life of independence and female sexual liberation within the patriarchal reality of the nineteenth century (61). Moreover, Edna cannot exist in the role of “mother-woman,” a role that marriage as an institution will impose upon her “for the rest of her days” (108). Wanting to evade conjugal-ity and motherhood, Edna returns to the place of her “awakening,” Grand Isle, where she finds a way to “elude them.” Edna, “bruised and exhausted” like a “bird with a broken wing . . . reeling, fluttering, circling, disabled down,” yields to the solitude of the “sensuous,” “seductive,” and “inviting” expanse of the watery deep (108-109).

With the close of The Awakening, Chopin’s open-ended form of the counter-tradition destabilizes the traditional marriage-plot ideology of “happy endings.” The protagonist of Chopin’s novel dies. The tragic ending is intentionally unsatisfying to the reader and prompts cogitation about Edna’s failure to redefine herself as an independent woman. Chopin’s The Awakening posits that the only escape afforded nineteenth-century married women who desire freedom from the oppressive institution of matrimony is death. The open ending leaves the readers to imagine her death as liberation and rebirth: “She felt like a new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known” (109). This scene of rebirth represents Edna’s final gesture of self-realization, where Edna boldly, actively refuses to recognize a world that esteems her only as a “mother-woman,” a woman whose value to society is based on her propensity for self-sacrifice and self-effacement. Edna refuses to return to a world
in which patriarchal insistence of female deference to husbands is pervasive and unfortunately inescapable. Furthermore, Chopin chooses death as the completion of Edna’s endeavor for self-autonomy because Edna’s desire to attain self-ownership cannot supplant her adherence to the social and moral obligations of marriage and motherhood that are forced upon women in the nineteenth century. As Rachel DuPlessis explicates in her monograph *Writing Beyond the Ending*, because *The Awakening* is a nineteenth-century novel, “death occurs as a ‘cosmic’ or essentialist ending when a woman tests the social and historical rules governing the tolerable limits of her aspirations” (16). Edna’s demise becomes a symbolic protest against female conformity, where Chopin utilizes Edna’s death as a method of female transcendence of the network of systematically related barriers patriarchy constructs to hinder women’s ambitions for autonomy and identities that deviate from those determined by the dominant culture. By walking naked into the sea, Edna affirms that she solely possesses her body and soul. When readers consider Edna’s final act of agency, they will comprehend fully her dissent when she states, “I give myself where I choose” (102). Edna chooses death as the ultimate bid for freedom: “She went on and on... She did not look back now, but went on and on... believing that it had no beginning and no end” (109). For a moment, Edna envisages the liberating and incalculable reality of independence.

*The Awakening’s* open-ended form allows Chopin to advocate for further explorations of the institution of marriage’s merits for women in modernity. Through Edna’s struggle to escape marriage and maternity and Adèle Ratignolle’s *interpellation* of her role as “mother-woman,” Chopin, employing the images of caged and wounded birds, comments upon the oppression of women within marriage. By utilizing counter-traditional forms to expose the marital experience of Edna Pontellier, Chopin creates a novel that serves to deconstruct Victorian ideals of matrimony and maternity. Chopin’s narrative attempts to depict with veracity the obstacles women must overcome to obtain self-ownership in nineteenth-century America. *The Awakening* articulates Chopin’s attitudes toward the position of women in society, where the poetic language,
themes, and protagonist of the novel create a compelling case for women to aim for autonomous lives outside of their roles as wives and mothers. Because Edna chooses not to live in a world that forces her to regard herself only as a wife and mother, The Awakening induces its readers to examine women’s roles and broaden the dialogue about the nature of marriage in literature and society.

Works Cited


Donning a suit and tie, Harold Chasen, whose face we do not see, places a Cat Stevens vinyl record onto a record player. As “Don’t Be Shy” plays in the background, Harold signs his name onto a slip of paper and lights a candle. Harold ties a rope into a noose, stands upon a stepstool, and hangs himself from the ceiling. The viewer has yet to see Harold’s face; instead, as Harold sways from side to side, the viewer sees only Harold’s feet and the stepstool upon which stepped. Harold’s mother, Mrs. Chasen, enters the room and glances at his body hanging from the ceiling, apparently lifeless. She walks over to the phone, dials a number, looks back at Harold’s hanging body, and says, “I suppose you think that’s very funny, Harold.” As Mrs. Chasen cancels an appointment over the phone, Harold begins to choke, gag, and flail his limp arms at his sides. This is the first time the viewer sees his face, which is cast partly in shadow. Two candles burn behind him, each on his right side—the side cast in shadow. Mrs. Chasen, still on the phone, does not acknowledge Harold’s motions or sounds. She rises to exit the room. However, before she does so, she stops, turns around, and says to Harold, whose body still hangs, “Oh, dinner at eight, Harold. And do try to be a little more...vivacious.” After she leaves the room, a look of
disappointment comes over Harold’s face. His body sways back and forth, casting both sides of his face between shades of dark and shades of light.

In his 1971 film *Harold & Maude*, director Hal Ashby depicts a young man who repeatedly fakes suicide in order to attract the attention of his single, widowed mother. Harold’s constant attempts to frighten his mother exemplify Jacques Lacan’s interpretation of Sigmund Freud’s Oedipus Complex, the latter of which Dr. Seymour Keitlen describes as “a theory that postulates that in early childhood, between the ages of two and six, the young child develops two emotional ties to its parents, namely, a purely affectionate tie to the parent of the opposite sex and a hostile tie to the parent of the same sex, taken as a rival” (3). In particular, Harold’s prime motivation behind the suicides—namely, to gain the attention of his mother—illustrates a textbook example of the Lacanian interpretation of the concept, which Madan Sarup describes as the attempt “to rationalize Freud’s thesis by not taking the Oedipus Complex literally” (16). Furthermore, unlike Freud, who believes that the “Oedipal Father might be taken for a real, biological father,” Lacan argues that it is purely symbolic of sexual identity and the assumed phallus—or, “the attribute of power which neither men nor women have” (16). According to Sarup, “Lacan suggests that all our fantasies are symbolic representations of the desire for wholeness” and that “the phallus is the signifier of an original desire for a perfect union with the Other. The phallus refers to plentitude; it is the signifier of the wholeness that we lack” (16). Furthermore, Lacan argues that the death of a father permanently situates and assigns each member of the family unit to a specific role one defines in relation to the dead father. This is what Lacan refers to as the “Law of the Dead Father.”

Lacan’s concept suggests that a father’s death is “linked to the notion that the children will from then on renounce the women in their own group—their mothers and sisters—and seek marriage in another group[.] However, by instituting the law—which is the law of the *dead father*—the father then becomes
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more powerful than he had been when alive” (Perelberg 719). The end goal of the Oedipus Complex, then, becomes unattainable, as the son cannot replace the deceased father because the father’s death permanently situates the son below the dead father and, by proxy, the son’s mother. The violation of the “Law,” Lacan argues, also symbolically violates the incest taboo. Therefore, the son must depart and create his own family unit in which he is the father (Lacan 824).

Harold aims to become the center of attention in the wake of his father’s death and to fill the vacant role by actually becoming like his father. This fails, of course, because of Lacan’s “Law.” Unable to fill the role, Harold cannot become a “full person” and remains defined against Mrs. Chasen—against the Other, always subject to the social order that the father figure creates in death (Perelberg 719). Until Harold renounces his desire for Mrs. Chasen’s attention and seeks a woman who bears no familial relation to himself, he cannot become a whole person; he must reconcile the Other with his Self and recognize the authoritative “Law of the Dead Father,” which entails a separation from his mother and a search for a mate, in order to become a full person—to transform from what Jean-Paul Sartre calls a being-for-others to a being-for-itself.

In the book *Being and Nothingness*, Jean-Paul Sartre argues that a relationship between two individuals exemplifies the relationship between the Self and the Other. In such a union, one objectifies and defines oneself because of its relation to the Other, which Sartre refers to as “the indispensable mediator between myself and me,” because “the mere appearance of the Other” places one into a position in which one judges one’s Self as if the Self is an object (198). Harold initially defines himself in relation to his mother because of his Oedipal desire to grab her attention through mock suicides. As the film progresses and his relationship with Maude, a 79-year-old, widowed Holocaust survivor who embraces both the eccentricities of life and the independence of selfhood, draws the two closer together, Harold begins to transform himself from
existing purely as a being-for-others (one whose Self is defined in relation to the Other) in relation to his widowed mother to living as a being-for-others in relation to the elderly Maude, who initially fills the role Mrs. Chasen refuses to fill. Maude’s actual suicide is the emotional catalyst from which Harold asserts himself as a being-for-itself (one whose Self is defined in relation to the Self). The repetition of suicides—both Harold’s mock suicides and Maude’s actual suicide—represents Harold’s progression from his initial state as a being-for-others to his state as a being-for-itself in the film’s concluding scenes.

Harold Chasen’s suicides exemplify what Joseph Allen Boone refers to as a courtship or marriage plot’s structural repetitions. In his book Tradition Counter Tradition, Boone describes the concept as “a number of formal and structural features that have traditionally served to reinforce the ideological power of the marriage tradition” (71). Repetition, he argues, “serves an ultimately familiarizing and stabilizing function” because it seemingly connects and unifies “scattered parts of the text for its ‘proper’ and ultimately conservative expenditure of energy in a seemingly unified climax and release” (77). Furthermore, “structural repetition” provides a text with an “illusion of completeness and stability” (77). Harold’s mock suicides provide the narrative a certain balance that unifies the narrative as a whole. Furthermore, the suicides (as they relate to his desired unions—first, to his and then, to Maude) detail what Boone describes as a plot’s “breakthrough” and reversal,” which lead to an ultimate “resolution” (77). As the film’s narrative progresses, Harold slowly begins to transform from a being-for-others to a being-for-itself; as evidenced through the repetition of mock suicides—first, in relation to his mother; then, in relation to Maude; and finally, in relation to himself.

In this paper, I will argue that Harold Chasen’s series of fake suicides represent his transformation from a being-for-others to a being-for-itself as his relationships with both his mother and Maude define through his existential gaze of the Other. Furthermore, I will argue that Harold’s mock suicides initially stem
from his Oedipal desire to fill the vacant role his dead father no longer fills. After numerous failed attempts, the desire he has for his mother’s attention eventually leads him to transfer his desires onto Maude, whose suicide later provides Harold with the desire to live for himself—to define himself in relation only to himself. Thus, he completes the transformation and becomes a genuine Self in spite of the Others that he initially defines himself against. The argument I put forth, then, will not regard unions in a strict, *marital* sense. I will consider Harold’s unions in order to examine how he defines himself in spite of the roles that both Mrs. Chasen’s and Maude’s late husbands leave vacant. From each relationship, Harold is able to marry the disparate parts of his Self into a coherent and unified Self and define himself in relation to only his Self and not the Others.

I. Harold and Mrs. Chasen

With the death of his father, the symbolic order assigns Harold and Mrs. Chasen roles that define them in relation to the deceased father. According the Lacanian interpretation of the Oedipus Complex, the father’s death transforms the father’s role into a static position that the son can no longer fill; the late husband will forever be defined in relation to Mrs. Chasen, and vice-versa. Though he cannot occupy the position physically, Harold’s late father nevertheless occupies the position metaphysically. Unable to compete against the father that no longer exists, Harold is permanently confined to the role of the son. With the desire to attain a sense of wholeness and an inability to merge with his initially desired Other (Mrs. Chasen), Harold must establish his own family unit, in which he occupies the same role his father once occupied, albeit in relation to another partner who is not his mother.

During a dinner party, Mrs. Chasen compares Harold with his father before she demonstrates her motherly dominance over Harold. She describes her late husband and Harold as having “a similar sense of the absurd.” Their traits, then, provide a founda-
tion upon which they can construct a possible rivalry. She then recalls a memory of her late husband:

I remember once in Paris, he had just stepped out for cigarettes. The next thing I knew, he was arrested by the police for floating nude down the Seine, experimenting in river currents with rubber water wings. Mauve ones. Well, that cost quite a bit of influence et d’argent to hush up, I can tell you.

According to Madan Sarup’s explanation of the Lacanian interpretation of Freud’s Oedipus Complex, the final stage of development entails an “identification with the father” who symbolically “castrates the child by separating it from its mother” (9). The story Mrs. Chasen relates to the guests of the dinner party places emphasis upon the absence of her late husband—as if her husband still exists. Though she compares the two as similarly absurd, Mrs. Chasen’s story illustrates a major difference between the two: unlike Harold, his father was able to win her affection through his “absurd” exploits.

When she finds Harold hanging from the ceiling in the film’s opening scene, she expresses little concern or care for his seemingly dead body. However, the event that takes place in the story elicits a different reaction—both at the time the story takes place and in its present retelling. Not only does she laugh as she shares her memory, but the story itself depicts a scene in which Mrs. Chasen expresses concern: “Well, that cost quite a bit of influence et d’argent.” The lighthearted reaction to her husband’s antics castrates Harold, leaving his deceased father with both the phal- lus and power even in death. Mrs. Chasen then juxtaposes the memory with a command: “Harold, dear, don’t play with your food.” In that single moment, Harold’s mother establishes a sense of dominance—a sense of separation between his Self and his Other (Mrs. Chasen). It also defines Harold’s relationship to his mother. So not only does the reference to her dead husband remind the
viewer of the vacant role her husband once physically occupied, but it also reinforces Harold’s role and his permanent inability to fill his father’s position. Though the telling of the story seems to suggest that Mrs. Chasen’s late husband still occupies the position as if her husband still exists, it is a conditional and metaphysical occupation that prevents Harold from achieving his goal—from achieving “wholeness.” However, the scenes that immediately follow the dinner party complicate matters.

In the very next scene, Mrs. Chasen finds Harold lying in the bathtub of the master bathroom with his throat and wrists slit and blood everywhere—on the mirror, the floor, the walls, the ceiling, etc. Mrs. Chasen, though, reacts differently than she does when Harold hangs himself in the film’s opening sequence. This time, Mrs. Chasen screams in absolute horror, “This is too much! This is too much to bear!” She then rushes out of the bathroom with her hand over her mouth. When the camera pans over to Harold’s seemingly dead body and zooms in on his face, Harold sticks out his tongue. The gesture is, of course, meant for his mother. Unlike her reaction to Harold’s hanging body (and all of his other mock suicides), Mrs. Chasen reacts as one should expect a mother to react, regardless of whether her son is dead or not. Why, then, should she react differently this one moment? A mock suicide is a mock suicide is a mock suicide. So why should this one elicit a different reaction—a reaction of horror? Because this is the only scene in which he desecrates a space within Mrs. Chasen’s beautiful, dream-like home specifically designated as the master’s. This is the only fact that separates the bathroom suicide from all of Harold’s other mock suicides. In the act to gain his mother’s attention, Harold inadvertently desecrates part of his parent’s home—the master bathroom, no less—with mock blood. For Mrs. Chasen, this is a significant breaking point: Harold must be insane when he commits this particular mock suicide, so Harold most definitely needs psychiatric help.

While he visits his psychiatrist for the first time, Harold and the doctor discuss Harold’s numerous mock suicides. According
to the psychiatrist, “There seems to be a definite pattern emerging. And, of course, this pattern, once isolated, can be coped with. Recognize the problem, and you are halfway on the road to its, uh, it’s solution.” The psychiatrist makes two assumptions: first, that Harold performs mock suicides out of some type of insanity (bipolar depression, schizophrenia, etc.); and second, that Harold can “cope” or solve the “problem” if Harold can “recognize the problem.” Furthermore, the “pattern” is not of his own will, but it is instead the result of the unidentified “problem.” During their second meeting later in the film, the psychiatrist asks Harold, “Tell me, Harold, how many of these, uh, suicides have you performed?” He answers, and then the doctor asks, “Were they all done for your mother’s benefit?” Harold responds, “I would not say benefit.”

Considering both visits with Harold’s psychiatrist, one can gather that Harold’s actions do in fact derive from an unusual mentality, but it is not insanity. Instead, it is something all too natural: “[T]he Oedipal complex is [a] neurotic conflict. [...] The boy represses his desire for mother, creating an internal conflict within his character. In movies, this internal neurotic conflict is usually represented by an external obstacle that blocks a character from his object of love and desire” (Indick 5). Harold does not perform mock suicides for his mother’s “benefit.” Ignoring Lacan’s “Law of the Dead Father,” Harold commits the various fake suicides for himself—to overcome the obstacle of Lacan’s “Law.” Later, Mrs. Chasen even implies that he commits his “amateur theatrics” because the suicides feel “psychologically purging.” Once again, the narrative suggests that Harold performs the mock suicides because something mental causes him to do so in order to relieve the pain that derives from the unresolved Oedipus Complex. However, Mrs. Chasen follows Lacan’s “Law,” and in doing so pressures Harold into finding another partner or mate:

You have led a very carefree, idle, happy life up to the present, the life of a child. But it is time now to put away childish things and take on adult responsibilities. Oh, we’d
all like to sail through life with no thought of tomorrow, but that cannot be. We have our duties, our obligations, our principles. In short, Harold, I think it is time for you to get married.

Harold’s attempts to grab his mother’s attention are “childish,” and he must seek out a partner or mate and establish his own family unit. To do otherwise would be a violation of his “adult responsibilities.” Essentially, no one can ignore the natural order. Everyone would prefer to live “the life of child” with “no thought of tomorrow,” but the obligation to establish one’s own family supercedes the desire. Mrs. Chasen, then, feels it is her duty to maintain the natural order, so she willingly pushes Harold into finding a partner or mate any way she can, even if it means that she must find Harold’s significant other herself. Later in the film, Mrs. Chasen even pressures Harold into completing a singles’ dating survey. While Harold idly sits in his chair, Mrs. Chasen reads each question of the survey to Harold, but at no point does she allow him to actually answer any of the questions. Instead, she fills the survey out for him. The answers Mrs. Chasen writes reflect what she desires in her son, as she seems to fear that his answers will not reflect what she feels are proper or satisfactory. As Mrs. Chasen reads, Harold pulls out a gun and shoots himself in the head. Mrs. Chasen does not react; instead she continues to fill out the survey until it is complete. In this scene, Harold’s silence allows his mother to define his Self against his Other, Mrs. Chasen. Her lack of response to Harold’s attempt to gain her attention during this scene emphasizes her desire that he find a mate. Harold cannot fill his late father’s role, and thus he must create a union of his own with a woman of no familial relation to himself.

II. Harold and Maude

In a scene that precedes Mrs. Chasen’s announcement of her “decision,” Harold’s psychiatrist asks, “Harold, what do you do
for fun? What activity gives you a different sense of enjoyment from the others? Uh, what do you find fulfilling? What gives you that special satisfaction?” Harold replies, “I go to funerals.” In the very next scene, Harold attends a funeral and catches his first glimpse of Maude, who is sitting on a bench several yards away and watching as the funeral concludes. Later, Maude introduces herself to Harold during a memorial service. Then Maude, referring to the deceased, asks Harold, “Did you know him?” Harold says no, to which Maude replies, “Me neither.” This establishes that neither Harold nor Maude attend the funerals out of grief. However, though the two have the same hobby, they do not attend for similar reasons. Considering Harold’s various mock suicides and the purchase of his Hearse, one can safely assume that Harold’s attendance at funerals is an extension of his fascination with death and destruction. When taken into context, Harold’s fascination seems to suggest that perhaps Harold identifies with the dead, as if part of him is metaphorically dead. Considering Lacan’s “Law,” it seems that Harold lacks “wholeness” due to his inability to establish himself as Mrs. Chasen’s counterpart following his father’s death (Sarup 16). Maude, however, attends the funerals for another reason all together.

Maude’s fascination with death spawns from her optimism. Maude considers memorial or funeral services to be celebrations of life: “I’ll never understand this mania for black. Nobody sends black flowers, do they? Black flowers are dead flowers. Who sends dead flowers to a funeral? It’s absurd.” For Maude, death is not the destruction of life or the absolute end to life. Maude celebrates change, rebirth, and the natural life cycle: “I’ll be 80 next week. Good to move on, don’t you think? [...] I mean, 75 is too early, but at 85, you’re just marking time. You may as well go over the horizon.” Because Maude celebrates life, she must accept the inevitability of death. One’s death, then, is not so much the end to life as it is the latter stage of the same process as life: “I like to watch things grow. [Plants] grow and bloom and fade and die and change into something else. Ah, life.” Maude believes in change
and rebirth, and thus she accepts death as willingly as she accepts life and the lives of other creatures: “At one time I broke into pet shops to liberate the canaries, but I decided that was an idea way before its time. Zoos are full, prisons are overflowing. Ah, my, how the world still dearly loves a cage.” In a metaphorical sense, Harold cages himself. He holds himself prisoner under the “Law of the Dead Father,” while Mrs. Chasen treats Harold as an animal on display.

Mrs. Chasen aims to maintain the familial order and, since a relationship between Harold and his mother will symbolically violate the incest taboo, an upstanding appearance in order to blend in with society and what she considers natural—marriage for the sake of societal duty and obligation. When Harold appears during one of Mrs. Chasen’s parties with his new Hearse, Mrs. Chasen ridicules his “childish” decisions:

Why you purchased that monstrosity, I have no idea. You can have any car you want, but that ugly black horror is an eyesore and an embarrassment. Really, Harold, it is time you settled down and stop flitting away your talents on these little amateur theatrics, these little divertissements, no matter how psychologically purging they may be.

Mrs. Chasen also puts Harold on display when she introduces him to possible mates that she finds herself. If Maude’s claim that “the world still dearly loves a cage” is true, then the natural duty or obligation to which Mrs. Chasen refers is nothing more than a tool for imprisonment. In order to break free from the cage and celebrate life, Harold must liberate his Self and grow from a being-for-others to a being-for-itself. As her relationship with Harold draws the two closer together, Maude will free Harold from his cage, just as she once liberated the canaries. However, Harold must fly from the cage on his own. Until is ready to do so, he will remain defined against an Other, which slowly shifts from Mrs. Chasen to Maude.
When Harold and Maude consummate their relationship, Maude becomes the object of Harold’s desire, to whom he defines himself against. Interestingly, Harold is only able to fill the role of Maude’s lover because Maude’s husband is deceased. Lacan’s “Law,” then, does not apply to all relationships—only to those with family ties. His relationship with Maude does not violate the incest taboo, and it allows Harold to meet the “duties” and “obligations” his mother insists that he confronts. Alas, Lacan’s “Law” only applies to situations in which the deceased male has surviving offspring. However, even if he accepts the “Law,” Harold still defines himself against an Other. Lacan’s “Law” may solve the problem of the Oedipus Complex, but it does not solve the problem that Sartre describes in *Being and Nothingness*. With his Oedipus Complex seemingly resolved, he now must tackle the problem of the Sartrean *being-for-others*. Maude will gradually reveal more of Harold’s Self to him, and he will eventually reach a breakthrough and only define his Self against his Self.

During a walk past a lake and field of daisies, Maude says to Harold, “I should like to change into a sunflower most of all. They’re so tall and simple. What flower would you like to be?” Harold replies that he would like to be one of the daisies “because they’re all alike.” Maude then explains the problem with Harold’s answer: “Oh, but they’re not. Look, see. Some are smaller, some are fatter. Some grow to the left, some to the right. Some even have lost some petals. All kinds of observable differences.” Maude completely dismantles Harold’s thought.

Harold wishes to define himself against an Other, but Maude’s reply implies that Harold should define himself only against his Self. As the camera focuses on the two, Maude points to the daisy in her hand, she says, “You see, Harold, I feel that much of the world’s sorrow comes from people who are this.” Then she points to the field of daisies and concludes, “Yet they allow themselves to be treated as that.” The image then dissolves into an aerial view of a cemetery, where all of the clean, white head-
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stones look alike. Maude fears that the world’s problems stem from peoples’ attempts to define themselves against their Others and become a projection of what they think should be. If Harold only defines his Self against his Self, then Harold can be what he is and not what his mother wants him to be. Death is the great equalizer, but life is only what we make it. Furthermore, the image of the cemetery could also represent the consequence of defining the Self against an Other. Such a comparison will result in a metaphorical death, never allowing one to achieve “wholeness” (Sarup 16). Because of this conversation, Harold begins to construct himself as a being-for-itself, and the subsequent suicides--both Maude’s actual suicide and Harold’s final mock suicide--represent the turning point and the completion of Harold’s transformation, respectively.

On her 80th birthday, Maude ingests “tablets” of some unidentified poison. Her suicide--the only real suicide in the film--forces Harold to examine the manner in which he defines himself. In the ambulance, Harold tells Maude that he loves her. Maude responds, “That’s wonderful. Go and love some more.” As Harold cries, he softly says, “Never.” When Harold tells Maude he loves her and repeatedly states that she cannot or will not die, Harold essentially defines himself against her. It is as if Harold cannot see the value or beauty in life without her presence--her life--her love. Maude, however, reassures Harold that he does not need her in order to love; he can do that on his own. He can share love with other people, and that is in fact the beauty of life. Though Maude will pass, his ability to share his love will not. To think otherwise would be to define himself against her--to say that he cannot be a person who loves because of her absence. For Harold, then, her death would mark the death of a part of himself. However, Maude’s words are clear: “Go and love some more.” Harold can love because Harold is alive. To think that he can’t love because Maude is dead would mean that he is just a daisy in a field, exactly like everyone else, imprisoning himself into his own cage. The final scene of
the film, though, illustrates that Harold finally understands and reaches the end of his transformation.

Harold drives down a winding road in his Hearse. He gradually picks up speed until the car flies off the edge of a cliff and onto a rocky shoreline, where the car lands upside down. The camera zooms in on the car, then it tilts upward until the audience sees Harold on the edge of the cliff, dancing and playing a banjo as Cat Steven’s “If You Want to Sing Out, Sing Out” plays over the film’s credits. Harold’s final mock suicide marks the beginning of a new era for Harold, an era in which he becomes a being-for-itself, no longer defining himself against an Other or allowing himself to be defined against the destructive nature of death. He celebrates Maude’s death, just as she celebrated her life.

Works Cited


“To Part Us At Last”: Marriage, Ritual Closure, and Tragedy in Death and the King’s Horseman

Andrew Nsirim

Elesin Oba—Wole Soyinka’s tragic figure in Death and the King’s Horseman—strolls into the marketplace (both, materially, a place of trade and sale in Yoruba society and, cosmollogically, the world of the living) vociferously singing his confirmation of mortal fear conquered. His allegorical song-poem, irreverent of the “Not-I bird,” or death, infects the communal ear of the marketplace as it affirms Elesin’s agential recognition of a ritual whose closure depends on his voluntary suicide. Ritual closure certainly requires ritual context: the king, or Alaafin, of Oyo State has died precisely a month prior to this ceremonious day on which Chief Elesin Oba, as horseman to the king, must escort his companion to the Yoruba’s ancestral world. Consequently, ritual interrupted merits the anathematic ruin of an entire universe, virtually brewing the cataclysmic formula for a world imploded and subsequently disintegrated. Thus, to say “Tell my tapper I have ejected / Fear from home and farm. Assure him, / All is well” (9), serenades the listening Oyo audience, for their world of the dead, the living, and the unborn depends on Elesin’s fearless subordination to death. Elesin’s death-affirming song precedes life-affirming rejoice. In all, “[it] sounds like the death of a great chief and then it sounds like the wedding of a great chief” (24) for the reason that the ceremony also includes Elesin’s marriage to a young bride.

And yet, the indigenous madness of ritual suicide, its unequivocal barbarity, drives Mr. Pilkings—the district officer—and his colonial
coHORTS TO WIELD, QUITE FORCIBLY, THE IMPERIAL HAND IN ORDER THAT ELE-
SIN’S SUICIDE NEITHER STAINS THE PRINCE’S TOUR OF THE REGION NOR COM-
PLETES ITS UNINTELLIGIBLE SAVAGERY. THAT WORD OF THE AUTOCHTHONOUS
THUS BARBARIAN RITUAL REACHES PILKINGS IN TIME TO OBSTRUCT THE TRANSITION
COINCIDES WITH THE RETURN OF THE HORSEMAN’S SON FROM STUDY IN THE
METROPOLE. OLUNDE, EXPECTED TO BURY HIS FATHER AFTER HIS TRANSITION
FROM THE LIVING WORLD TO THE NEXT, IS PART AND PARCEL OF ELESIN’S FATED
TRIUMPH IN ACCOMPANYING THE KING TO THE ANCESTRAL WORLD. BUT FATE,
LOYAL TO TRAGEDY, DISRUPTS ALL YORUBA SIGNIFIERS OF A SUSTAINED UNIVERSE.
That is, Mr. Pilkings interrupts Elesin’s frenetic dance-trance to arrest
the prospective perpetrator—an arrest which witnesses a crucial role
reversal wherein Olunde, disgusted by his father’s failure, assumes
horsemans status and resumes the ritual himself. He kills himself in
punctilious allegiance both to Yoruba metaphysics and to sustaining
his family’s name. Barred and shackled in a former slave hall before
Iyaloja (“Mother” of the marketplace), his new bride, and his son’s
sacrificial corpse, Elesin laments blame’s elusiveness and deception,
his unshakeable shame, and his betrayal of the Oyo community. The
horseman de jure strangles himself with his chains still wrapped to
his wrists, leaving Iyaloja to explain to Mr. Pilkings that the tragic,
shameful but necessary suicide “is what you brought to be” (62).
The theme which reckons the marriage of two characters or the
figurative marriage of any number of disparate elements is every-
where present in Death and the King’s Horseman, arguably Soyinka’s
principal tragedy. The marriage theme’s ubiquitous evidence receives
attention to such a degree that it produces voluminous readings that
rely, invariably, on the tragedy’s many unions. Admittedly, serious
criticism of the play conforms only provisionally to the language
that characterizes discourse on the marriage plot and, by extension,
its fundamental presence in Soyinka’s tragedy. The playful spectrum
that consists of these discrete variations—largely metaphoric—
begins with Biodun Jeyifo’s frank depiction of the drama’s wedding
the Yoruba cosmic order with Elesin’s literal marriage: “As a consum-
mation of this unbroken chain of being(s) Elesin takes a young wife
on this night of his death: the product of their union—the old, the
ancestor-to-be, and the young—will attest to that consummation”
Jeyifo’s attention to Elesin and his bride’s consummation and its nurturing stability of the Yoruba universe anticipates other readings of the tragedy’s representation of marriage. Take, for instance, Henry Louis Gates’s elaboration: “The mixed symbols of semen and blood…stand as signs of a deeper idea of transition and generation” (159). These unambiguous images of the tragedy’s marital union between Elesin and his young new bride, once betrothed to Iyaloja’s son, tend towards interpretations of metaphorical marriage in the play. Accordingly, the pervasive metaphor informs such readings as Joan Hepburn’s insistence that Iyaloja and the Praise-Singer are agents who ensure “the mediation of ritual closure” (180)—a mediation whose merits in Soyina’s tragedy D.S. Izevbaye expands from “a person” to “an act…or a structure” all of which function as tragedy’s “reconciliation of opposites” (142). There are as yet few returns, if any, to the correlative play between the text’s two marriages: Elesin and Olunde’s marriage to the king, and Elesin’s marriage to his young wife. I want to identify the overlooked yet pivotal point that these marriages instruct, forcibly, Soyinka’s construction of African tragedy—a response to, and integration into, the Western tragic mode.

The primary intention of putting into dialogue these criticisms is not to mislead, cheaply, from predilection or to craft fraudulent formulas in order to squeeze into the marriage plot Death and the King’s Horseman. Rather, the present dialogue serves the conviction that a variation of the marriage plot governs Soyinka’s construction of African tragedy. The construction reveals an African literary form whose distinctions contrast little from its Occidental counterpart given its evident Greek and Shakespearean influences; it also constitutes a fraction of Soyinka’s dramaturgical work—the whole of which, according to Phillip Brockback, makes “[influences] more accessible to us in plays that have gone before” (78). So, it is revealing of a post-colonial African literary identity (the text was published just fifteen years after Nigeria’s independence from the British Empire and takes place a mere fourteen years before it) which, at once, resists, desires, conforms, and responds to “the discourses of imperial Europe” (Newell 3). In fact, Soyinka delivers his own
cautionary reading of the play which warns against the “reductionist tendency” to apply to the tragedy the “the facile tag of ‘clash of cultures’”—the tendency to sack the play’s “threnodic essence”:

The Colonial Factor is an incident, a catalytic incident merely. The confrontation in the play is largely metaphysical, contained in the human vehicle which is Elesin and the universe of the Yoruba mind—the world of the living, the dead and the unborn, the numinous passage which links all: transition. (3)

Would it then not be plausible to say that “incident” observes the simultaneous happening of two events in whose unraveling a connection casually compels the two to form an apparently singular result? Subsequently, the significance made evident in one event subordinates the other’s now secondary importance: the hierarchy, and the consequent subordination, in the two events form an uncanny, though stretched, parallel to marriage in non-egalitarian societies. It is, indeed, the union of the “Colonial Factor” and the indigenous ritual process, or “the human vehicle which is Elesin and the universe of the Yoruba mind.” Regardless of the many, nuanced metaphors themselves, the play’s content—its literal and metaphorical marriages—gives form to the drama’s sometimes rigid but, other times, strikingly malleable adherence to the tragic mode.

The literary forms that appear most extravagantly, made most evident in the play are those which rely on tragedy and myth. In fact, the skeletal and essentially constituent variation of the play’s action perhaps proceeds as follows: Yoruba cosmology and, by extension, society grants to Elesin Oba, the king’s horseman, the distinction that requires his will to accompany the Alafin to the world of ancestors—a distinction which merits his voluntary suicide. The “Colonial Factor”—District Officer Pilkings—intervenes to prevent the barbaric act: the incidental rupture in ritual process severs the cosmic stability which Elesin and the King’s posthumous union promises to the Yoruba Universe. Consequently, Olunde, Elesin’s son, inherits and completes the ritual obligation; the ritual
realized, though deferred by “incident,” restores and sustains the once dwindling Yoruba Universe. The action then accords tragedy in its anathematic shift in duty and social role inasmuch as the son’s corpse further provokes the father’s lamentable fall. Therefore, it is reasonable to propose myth as that which instructs tragedy. And, in fact, the Praise-Singer who speaks for the Alafin directs attention to this proposition: “I know the wickedness of men. If there is / Weight on the loose end of your sash, such weight / As no mere man can shift; if your sash is earthed / By evil minds who mean to part us at last…” (34). The Praise-Singer substantiates the king’s presence in the material world and thereby authors the mythic structure from which the Yoruba discern tragedy-inducing elements such as “wickedness” and “evil.” Certainly, these “evil” intercessors trigger the separation between horseman and king upon which we return to Soyinka’s “catalytic incident,” the convenient juxtaposition which threatens mythic continuity. The “incident” indeed refers to the “evil minds who mean to part us at last” which marks the Alafin’s anxiety over tragic catastrophe.

Marriage between king and distinguished subject/friend then conforms to the grammar that governs myth, ritual death, and, finally, tragedy. And yet, Act I confirms the marriage between Ele-sin Oba and Iyaloja’s already betrothed daughter—the marriage which instructs that between king and subject and, consequently, Soyinka’s tragedy:

…It is those who stand at the gateway of the great change to whose cry we must pay heed. And then, think of this—it makes the mind tremble. The fruit of such a union is rare. It will be neither of this world nor of the next. Nor of the one behind us. As if the timelessness of the ancestor world and the unborn have joined the spirits to wring an issue of the elusive being of passage…Elesin! (17)

The elusive marriage “neither of this world,” “the next,” nor “the one behind” escapes the typical categories which order the Yoruba universe. Soyinka’s tragedy does not limit its “mythopoeic intent”
(Soyinka 76) to only the cosmic division of worlds, but the tragedy indeed capitalizes on such chthonic divisions: “The Yoruba conceive of the cosmos as consisting of two distinct yet inseparable realms— *aye* (the visible, tangible world of the living) and *orun* (the invisible, spiritual realm of the ancestors, gods, and spirits)” (Drewal, Pemberton, and Abiodun 69). Though *Death and the King’s Horseman* relies on an already established Yoruba cosmology, the text’s mythic structure operates in such instrumental convenience to Soyinka that it at once adheres to a unique mythopoeia and also to a mythic tradition extending, to say the least, from Greek to Shakespearean drama. So, for Soyinka, to manipulate “the fruit of such a union” in order to dissolve, if for a moment, the rigid divisions in the Yoruba cosmos means to disturb and thus recreate these cosmic codes. Then, his mythopoeic reconstruction achieves a reordering of not only the Yoruba cosmos but also the poetics that construct Western tragedy.

In recalling the measure in which Soyinka constructs African tragedy, I invoke Soyinka’s deliberate addition to his tragedy the marriage between Elesin Oba and his bride. In fact, neither the historical episode from which Soyinka adapts *The King’s Horseman* nor Duro Ladipo’s *Oba Waja* (*The King is Dead*)—an earlier Yoruba-language dramaturgic adaption of the episode—(re)present any other marital union besides the metaphoric one which would unite king and stableman. Thus, “Elesin’s wedding on the night of transition and his subsequent suicide” (Olaniyan 49) are particular to our tragedy in question; in other words, the unique facts of his wedding and suicide questions further the role each plays either to resist or conform to Western literary structures that produce tragedy. Act I opens to reveal Elesin’s social distinction as the king’s horseman: that he lives only to die. But the distinction grants him social and literary status as hero, and he conveys this status in lyrical protestation against fear of death or the “Not-I bird”:

There was fear in the forest too.
Not-I was lately heard even in the lair
Of beasts. The hyena cackled loud Not-I,
The civet twitched his fiery tail and glared:
Not-I. Not-I became the answering-name
Of restless bird, that little one
Whom Death found nesting in the leaves
When whisper of his coming ran
Before him on the wind. Not-I
Has long abandoned home. This same dawn
I heard him twitter in the gods’ abode.
Ah, companions of this living world
What a thing this is, that even those
We call immortal
Should fear to die. (9)

Joan Hepburn appropriately labels Elesin’s heroic lyrics as the song which “helps to establish the height from which Elesin falls.” Hepburn observes Elesin’s celebration of Death and its imposition on not only him but equally on “beasts,” on his human “companions” (from all social strata), and on the “immortal” gods (183). So the distinction to draw between Elesin and the others is Elesin’s will to confront and subsequently embrace the Not-I bird; and this distinction consequently marks Elesin’s unwillingness to encounter Death at the moment of vexatious clash between indigenous rite and colonial intrusion. Though his shift warrants tragic consequences, his ritual suicide would prevent cosmic disintegration and would reserve his place among the Yoruba’s distinguished, otherworld “ancestors.”

If Elesin’s suicide accomplishes social integration and universal preservation, then Soyinka’s tragedy (even before the play reveals its tragic substance) departs from the typical course of both Western tragedy and comedy. And yet, according to Northrop Frye’s “Theory of Modes” in Anatomy of Criticism, the high mimetic mode recollects, precisely, the particular heroic characterization which tragedy imposes on Elesin: “If superior in degree to other men but not to his natural environment, the hero is a leader. He has authority, passions, and powers far greater than ours, but what he does is subject to both social criticism and to the order of nature” (34). The significance of Elesin’s social status—his inherited distinction
as “horseman”—requires no persuasion of its local immensity. He, in fact, receives from Iyaloja the epithet “husband of multitudes” (9) and the authority which instructs the epithet privileges him to have “powers far greater than ours”:

As Horseman of the King, the juiciest
Fruit on every tree was mine. I saw,
I touched, I wooed, rarely was the answer No.
The honour of my place, the veneration I
Received in the eye of man or woman
Prospered my suit and
Played havoc with my sleeping hours. (14)

The titular equation of “husband of multitudes” and “Horseman of the King” not only literalizes the collective significance attributed to Elesin, but the equation also compounds the weight of “social criticism” he receives at the time of ritual disruption. Epithet and title observe the socio-political implications of ritual disruption: to confound the epithet and the title after Elesin’s failure to complete his rite means to divorce the singular hero, the popular “husband” from the dependent society. In much the same manner that ritual disruption upends the Yoruba universe, Elesin’s authority in society yields to severe “social criticism”; “the veneration [he] / receive[s] in the eye of man or woman” is swallowed by the preposterous—ass-first—reversal of father/son roles. The hero’s most burdensome critique comes from Olunde whose verdict is, upon seeing his father living still: “I have no father, eater of left-overs” (50). The “husband of multitudes” perhaps lays rightful claim to “the juiciest / Fruit on every tree,” but the disgraced “Horseman of the King” warrants only the derisive appellation “eater of left-overs.”

Marginalized to the realm of “catalytic incident,” the “Colonial Factor,” however, obstinately disrupts the central rite that precedes the fall of the “husband of multitudes.” In due course, District Officer Simon Pilkings decenters from perspective the cosmic weight that entails Elesin’s ritual death. Instead, the “catalytic incident” inserts ritual failure and, thus, Elesin’s fall into a cultural and social
context. His failure to consummate his posthumous marriage to the king, in effect, demonstrates the disjunction between the social, material world (which includes the colonial setting) and the ancestral cosmic realm. Iyaloja’s scorn prompts Elesin’s telling defense: “You saw me struggle to retrieve my will from the power of the stranger whose shadow fell across the doorway and left me floundering and blundering in a maze I had never before encountered. My senses were numbed when the touch of cold iron came upon my wrists” (55). His defense tells of the drama’s conformity to the higher mimetic tragedy in which the hero’s fall isolates him from society for the exact fact that he is a social leader. Elesin’s mortality—again, necessary to preserve the Yoruba universe and society—reveals his “humanity” and indicates the “social and moral fact” of the tragedy. Still, striking is Frye’s reading that these codes in higher mimetic tragedy correspond to a falling aristocracy in crisis during fifth century Athens and Shakespeare’s seventeenth century Britain (37). The “husband of multitudes” and his fall do not escape a parallel categorization: Soyinka’s tragedy observes British imperial intrusion into and interruption of the aristocratic structure that governs Yoruba society; Elesin’s critical fall then mirrors the cultural response—a collapsing Yoruba world—to colonization’s “cold iron.”

Elesin’s heroic subjection to social criticism from, most vocally, Olunde and Iyaloja, and his tragic isolation from Yoruba society both beg the question of the play’s relevancy to the marriage theme. Elesin’s schematization into the higher mimetic mode and, subsequently, into higher mimetic tragedy marks a rough but evident departure from comedy. Even so, tragic departure from comedy plays an elemental role in revealing the tragedy’s dialogue with the comic mode. In fact, the dialogue in *The King’s Horseman* capitalizes on distinctive coded elements in comedy. In the play’s first acts, Elesin, the hero, is in “control of the play’s society” so, as such, his social authority denies any other hero entry into the drama. Implicit in Elesin’s ritual closure, if achieved, is the Yoruba celebration both of Elesin’s fulfilling his duty to accompany his companion and king to the world of answers and of the sustenance of the Yoruba universe. For the Yoruba, Elesin’s ritual closure—his voluntary sui-
cide—indeed would categorize the text as comic in mode. Soyinka’s drama then would maintain a quasi-comic grammar inasmuch as the text would produce some variation of a scene where “a new society crystallizes on the stage around the hero and his bride” (Frye 44). Elesin and his new bride or Elesin and the king—both variations of “the hero and his bride” work equally—witness the emergence of a renewed Yoruba universe and “a new society.” Elesin makes evident to his bride that their marriage mediates his ritual closure: “Our marriage is not yet wholly fulfilled. When earth and passage wed, the consummation is complete only when there are grains of earth on the eyelids of passage. Stay by me till then. My faithful drummers, do me your last service” (32). His invocation of both literal and metaphorical marriage illustrates the necessary congruency of his marriage to his new bride and the marriage that unites subject and king, earth and passage. The play everywhere refers to Elesin’s death as “transition”; certainly, transition is accomplished on both levels of ritual closure and of a new society’s emergence.

Integral to and inextricable from Elesin’s anticipated image of marriage, transition, and ritual closure, his “faithful drummers” indicate the drama’s attention to the festive atmosphere which surrounds marriage and death. The sonorous resonance of the drums and their oscillating rhythmic patterns mark, for Olunde, the transition between old society and new:

OLUNDE. The drums. Can you hear the changes? Listen. … There, it’s all over. 
JANE. You mean he’s . . .
OLUNDE. Yes, Mrs Pilkings, my father is dead. His will-power has always been enormous. (45)

And yet, the drumming’s true signification reveals, in fact, that Elesin fails to consummate his ritual and his marriage to the king (though Olunde cannot discern this unimaginable fact). Frye observes that in “Greek New Comedy” a “kind of party or festival” indicates the emergence of the new society: to represent the comedy’s festive element
most frequently and prominently means to impose on the comedy a wedding’s occurrence. The drum’s sonorous transition—its shift from festive celebration to choric lamentation—also marks the text’s radical break from the comic mode and its entrance into tragedy: “The drums come over, still distant but more distinct. There is a change of rhythm, it rises to a crescendo and then, suddenly, it is cut off. After a silence, a new beat begins, slow and resonant” (45). Soyinka juxtaposes the drumming and the festival ritual in such close proximity that the two together govern the mediation between ritual closure and marriage. In effect, that the tragedy begins where the ritual fails renders any distinction between departure from the festive and departure from the comic unintelligible. The “threnodic” initiation of “slow and resonant” drums indeed reveals not only a new conformity to the tragic mode but also marks marital interruption. In other words, *The King’s Horseman* constructs tragedy in such a way that the action’s tragic formation cannot be separated from the marital unions, figurative or literal, whose consummations the “Colonial Factor” everywhere interrupts, hinders, and attempts to untie.

Though the drama undergoes a modal transposition into tragedy, the threnodic weight of Soyinka’s transition-signifying drums equally produces a lapse in colonial disalienation between imperial lord and indigenous subject. Stranded in a world of unresolved ambiguities, Simon Pilkings cannot read the burdensome silence that characterizes the absent festival chanting and drumming:

PILKINGS. The light on the leaves, the peace of the night . . .
ELESIN. The night is not at peace, District Officer.
PILKINGS. No? I would have said it was. You know, quiet . . .
ELESIN. And does quiet mean peace for you?
PILKINGS. Well, nearly the same thing. Naturally there is a subtle difference.
ELESIN. The night is not at peace, ghostly one. The world is not at peace. You have shattered the peace of the world for ever. There is no sleep in the world tonight. (50)
Pilking’s inability to understand Yoruba ritual and cosmology reflects the colonialist tendency towards a dangerous narcissism that, for Elesin and his society, destroys entire worlds. The immense implications that dominate the district officer’s alienation from the Yoruba quotidian make the “Colonial Factor” a consequently recognizable source of the disruption of Elesin and the Alafin’s marriage. Pilking conflates “peace” and “quiet,” whereas Elesin interprets the absence of rhythmical drums as signifying the cosmic collapse which his ritual failure heralds. “The catalytic incident” effaces the festival atmosphere that ushers in the comedic mode; the silence, “the peace of the night,” indicates the tragedy’s conformity to genre continuity. Thus, the drumming, the chanting, the sonorous explosion between the two, all possess the comic substances that observe the marriage between “hero and bride” and the subsequent “crystallization of a new society.” And yet, to discern that lyrical and musical abandonment in the play grants uniqueness to Yoruba celebration of marriage in death means to suggest, indeed, that the “Colonial Factor” contributes to Yoruba tragedy in its refusal to recognize the social and cosmic role of marriage for the Yoruba.

To return to the drama’s mediation between Elesin’s literal marriage to Iyaloja’s daughter and his cosmic-sustaining marriage to the Alafin reveals the pressing web of play between the metaphoric and literal. These two marriages, which form the essential marital structures in the play, first appear incongruent, disparate, and unchained. Yet, Soyinka’s interpretative reconstruction of Nigeria’s colonial history, inseparably akin to the tragedy itself, recognizes its dependence on the twin marriages. Though Soyinka reduces the “Colonial Factor” to mere incident, this “catalytic incident” irrevocably intrudes on the corresponding moment which observes the “barbaric” linkage between king and stableman. The more urgent “reductionist tendency,” rather, provokes the particular dismissal which informs the implied reading, “so much the worse for Elesin and his new bride’s unconsummated marriage.” But Soyinka begs to differ and subsequently disambiguates the streaming dialogue between the two pivotal marriages: “I needed you as the abyss across which my body must be drawn, I filled it with earth and dropped my seed in it at
the moment of preparedness for my crossings” (53). What does it mean that Elesin’s final words to his bride are those which reconcile the disparate marriages throughout the tragedy? Of course, the weight such reconciliation provides is hardly distinguishable from Soyinka’s construction of African tragedy. Or, the repetition of marriages and their significant reconciliations anticipate tragedy in such a manner that Soyinka’s unique adaptation of the historical episode would be virtually void of poetic distinction. To speak, even in banal terms, of the title Death and the King’s Horseman suggests further the virtual marital union between Elesin and the Not-I bird. But the self-assuring presence of marital unions throughout Soyinka’s drama recognizes the play’s ultimate tragic structure—one that irrefutably depends on the wedding, or its interruption, of hero and bride.

**Works Cited**

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---. “[Ideology and Tragedy].” Gikandi 164-171.
Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* can be described in a number of different ways, but the society within this novel is most accurately described as dystopian. In *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, M.H. Abrams defines dystopia as “a very unpleasant imaginary world in which ominous tendencies of our present social, political, and technological order are projected in some disastrous future culmination” (218). Completely opposite from utopia, dystopia presents a world in all its negative aspects. In this specific dystopian society, every person’s life is carefully monitored and the disobedient are quickly taken away. In creating a world filled with misery and repression, Atwood focuses her readers on the actions of an overly rigid authority and how those actions can lead to the oppression of all those beneath the positions of the high ranking. Her dystopian civilization unmasks the horrors that all people hope never to see or experience in their lifetimes and depicts the hidden fears of the masses. All human closeness is condemned by the government, women who once held positions as wives and mothers endure new roles in positions that are deemed necessary as means of protection, and knowledge and education are reserved for only a few of the elite. In Atwood’s particular dystopian future, enslavement and punishment become the new normal where love and enjoyment are no longer valued or tolerated.

Through this dystopian society, *The Handmaid's Tale* explores gender, identity, and domestic politics within the realms of mar-
riage and society. Set at the end of the twentieth century and with women on the verge of achieving equality between the sexes, *The Handmaid’s Tale* portrays the dissolution of the United States of America, resulting in the Republic of Gilead. In this societal rebirth, the novel’s title character, Offred, shows the effects and transformations that occur as all characters within the novel try to redefine themselves and adjust into what the newly formed Republic expects of them. Vaguely concealed is the hatred of women through the actions of the Republic that undermine women’s public and private worth. The Republic gains control of women by reverting back to Biblical standards where men consider women as property, passing them between men as if they were currency in a business transaction: women now have access to money only through their husbands and it is illegal for women to work and vote. Through the Republic’s new laws, a patriarchal society reasserts itself, requiring women to be controlled and manipulated solely because they have no other choice. In this particular future, Atwood realizes a world where men could no longer tolerate the parity women were beginning to obtain, resulting in women being returned to roles of quiet submission. Without a moment’s notice, an upheaval occurs and women are meant to submit to the new social roles given or be sent away to the Colonies, where the unknown is a thing to be feared. The Republic determines these new roles and sets out a caste system which regulates women’s behavior, their dress, and their social duties, all of which must be performed with precision and without complaint. In setting up this system, Gilead eliminates cultural trends and beliefs that once caused women “to step out of place”, while controlling the entire population into being exactly how the Republic wishes them to be.

While all of the inhabitants of the United States are disturbed during this cataclysm, women are the target for most of the changes that occur. Those who become Handmaids are stripped of their names, essentially becoming the property of whichever Commander they are assigned to; the narrator takes the name Offred as she is now “of” Fred. In this caste, Handmaids are assigned to bear the children of couples who are unable to do so themselves,
thus reviving the low population rate and allowing the government to control reproduction at the same time. Through her narrative, Offred details the events of her daily life and her emotions which she struggles to keep in check. The reader learns of the restrictions placed upon her as well as all other Handmaids: once a month, she has sex with the Commander in the presence of his wife, Serena Joy; her door can never be completely shut; and her freedom is restricted to shopping trips where local signs are now pictures because women are not allowed to read. In all of this, Offred shows her struggles and dreams of the past where she sometimes questions her own memories of how things used to be. Like Offred, the reader also begins struggling when reading the novel because of how easy it becomes to lose a sense of feminism that is so strong in society today because of the way females are treated within the story. As with Offred, the reader begins to question the past. This loss for the reader is only magnified for Offred, who must submit to the Republic and a Commander who controls her every move.

Through the actions of the Republic of Gilead, Atwood seeks to clarify for her reader the destruction that can lead from an overzealous governmental body made up of men losing patience with women who are making their ways towards equality between the sexes. Joseph Allan Boone’s *Tradition Counter Tradition: Love and the Form of Fiction* helps to clarify how the marital relations constructed by Gilead serve the patriarchy at the expense of women. Diving deeper into the novel, the reader sees that Atwood is going further than just critiquing domestic politics; she is aspiring to draw a parallel between her contemporary society in the 1980s and the futuristic society created in Gilead. The struggle between men and women and their places within this new society conform to Boone’s ideals of a counter traditional marriage, but change these ideals to where they are traditionally acceptable only because of the new society that is formed: everyone believes, or, rather, is hoped to believe, in this new situation between a man, his wife, and their Handmaid, which yields a new attitude as to what a traditional marriage is. At its core, *The Handmaid’s Tale* challenges the traditional notions of marriage that Boone describes, making
it simply a counter traditional novel where Offred’s position as a socially and sexually stifled woman within Gilead is subjected to scrutiny through feminist lenses.

Overturning past traditions, the Republic of Gilead sees no need for love as it only leads to actions that do not align with their new regulations. While with the Commander, Offred reminds him that they presently live in a place where love does not exist: “‘What did we overlook?’ ‘Love,’ I said. ‘Love?’ said the Commander, ‘What kind of love?’ ‘Falling in love,’ I said” (Atwood 220). The Commander replies, “Oh yes . . . But look at the stats, my dear. Was it really worth it, falling in love? Arranged marriages have always worked out just as well, if not better” (220). In restricting, or abandoning love, Gilead moves its people towards a life where feelings do not cause conflict because they are no longer relevant or even present. The Handmaids were schooled early on that “Love is not the point” (220). The governors of Gilead incorporate this loveless notion of matrimony because it fits into their ideal for the new society: “Those years were just an anomaly, historically speaking . . . . Just a fluke. All we’ve done is return things to Nature’s norm” (220). This social implementation is seen within the novel in how the government rejects the idea of allowing people to love whomever, instead, relinquishing people from the misery and heartache that can sometimes be associated with love. Love also has the ability to cloud judgments and create emotions that the government is unable to afford.

Another hold that is released from society is the notion that women are anything more than birthing canals for the elitist, revealing the pain and affliction Gilead is willing to place upon women in order to secure Handmaids for reproduction purposes. In her book Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity, Judith Butler states that “a feminist view argues that gender should be overthrown, eliminated, or rendered fatally ambiguous precisely because it is always a sign of subordination for women” (xiii). Butler’s ideas are used against women in Gilead, forcing them to lose their femininity while still maintaining the subordination Butler claimed would be lost. Her notion that gender creates
subordination is contradicted as soon as Gilead implements her ideas. For Offred, losing her gender only reinforces her submissive role because part of her is taken away. As a type of stand-in for a wife, Offred’s biological sex is thrust onto her, while her gender is stripped away: “I used to think of my body as an instrument, of pleasure . . . . Now the flesh arranges itself differently. I’m a cloud, congealed around a central object” (Atwood 73-74). Offred once felt her body, the way it moved and worked, but now she only sees what the Republic wants her to see: that she is a means for reproduction, nothing more. By having her only within the household for reproductive purposes, the government makes it where she will not be quick to forget that she is a female, a subordinate. Offred is expected to perform sexually, but her femininity is of no consequence here. She is not required, but rather forbidden, to show herself as a feminine character per Gilead. She is a sexual object explicitly used for reproduction and nothing more in the eyes of the government. In describing herself as “a cloud”, Offred understands that her body has changed into being merely a protective covering for her reproductive organs and that she is not even a real entity, but a wispy substance that can fade away. Offred floats in her realization that she is only a birthing vessel of viable ovaries. Gilead makes certain that all Handmaids know their sex so that they will always feel the domineering male presence which rules above them.

The feminist movement that was evolving at the time Atwood wrote *The Handmaid’s Tale* stands in stark contrast to the world she creates in Gilead. During the 1980s, conservative and feminist viewpoints were simultaneously being espoused to the masses. Women were marching for abortion rights, the banning of pornography, striving for equal pay for equal work, and against the institutionalized violence against women, hoping for a time when men and women would truly became equals within society. As women began to fight for equality, the war between the sexes only heightened in the midst of wedlock: women wanted rights that their husbands had obtained hundreds of years ago. In Gilead, a different war rages as their traditional marriage involves a man
and two women, leading to a power struggle evolving between the women as they become the ones who have the most to lose in this new society because of their statuses as women. The conflict of “the sex war [emerges and it] becomes a central issue and image in the counter-traditional reevaluation of romantic and marital companionship” (Boone 143). The sex war between Offred and Serena Joy marks a change in the struggle for power, resulting in a focus on the same sex instead of the past struggles of females against men. Boone goes on to assert that “Here is a battle which must always be going forward—a balance of power only to be decided by single combat, deadly and uncompromising” (143).

During a time where a new social order seemingly provides a safe society for women, Atwood appears to suggest that one of the flaws in the feminist community is the belief that women automatically feel loyalty towards one another. Instead, the gap between men and women is only surpassed by the widening contempt women are beginning to feel towards each other as they search for a way to gain any sort of power.

In *The Sexual Contract*, Carole Pateman states, “Contemporary feminists have also emphasized the fact that a married couple cannot determine the terms of the marriage contract to suit their own circumstances” (164). This idea is also the driving force behind the marriages set up in the Republic of Gilead. All parties involved, husbands included, are then at the mercy of the government as to how their marriages function, down to their sexual relations. In the government presiding over every aspect of a marriage *The Handmaid’s Tale* falls right into the standard model Pateman describes as a target for feminist critique. This also challenges Boone’s theories of men always having a more powerful role than women, further aligning the novel closer to a counter traditional marriage. Despite Gilead’s dedication to serving male prerogative, Gilead men are still disempowered through the government’s control of sex because any loss of autonomy, no matter how small, represents a loss of self. Further into her argument, Pateman suggests that while a higher authority might determine the public terms of matrimony, it is possible that the couple involved privately decide on a new agree-
ment, but, despite this private agreement, the contract would hold no value in the public sphere. Within the confines of Gilead, the Commander establishes a private contract with Offred where they secretly meet to play Scrabble, talk, and read magazines, which serves them both as he feels he is lessening Offred’s contempt for her place as a Handmaid and she is allowed to socialize with him, garnering information about the outside world at the same time. This agreement goes against everything the Republic wants and would be punishable by death if ever discovered as private agreements hold no value in the Republic’s eyes because of the terms already set up within their public version of the marriage contract.

There are multiple marriages and marriage like relationships in the novel that work to transform the marriage contract Pateman describes in her essay “Feminism and the Marriage Contract”. Pateman states that “Feminist criticism takes a ‘contract’ to be an agreement between two equal parties who negotiate until they arrive at terms that are to their mutual advantage. If marriage were a proper contract, women would have to be brought into civil life on exactly the same footing as their husbands” (154-155). Of course, this does not happen in Gilead, instead, the integration of Offred into the marriage of the Commander and his wife occurs, not only changing the conventional marriage contract, but the traditional marriage as well. Gilead takes the hopes of feminists and shatters them by not only denying a contract that considers both parties, but constructs one that insists on involving another woman within the marriage. In representing a government that is so involved in an arrangement that is typically considered private, Atwood reminds her readers that no matter how intimate marriage might seem, it is actually an extremely public institution; the wedding ceremony itself is a performance for the public. Atwood’s representation of marriage within *The Handmaid’s Tale* shows the lengths at which the government’s hand can reach; a thing as intimate as marriage can and is, within the novel, shown to be altered to suit the needs of a higher power.

The marriages of Gilead differ from traditional matrimony in how the contract becomes valid: first, a traditional marriage con-
tract is constituted through speech as when a couple proclaims their ‘I do’s’ before one another. Through this “performative utterance’ . . . the standing of the man and woman is transformed” (Pateman 164). Secondly, the couple must consummate their relationship in order for the marriage to be official: “Not until a husband has exercised his conjugal right is the marriage contract complete” (164). Viewing a legitimate marriage in this way, Atwood begs her reader to question which people are truly married within her novel. While the Commander’s wife is technically Serena Joy, they are forbidden to ever engage in sexual intercourse which means that the second part of the marriage contract is left incomplete. The Commander and Offred fulfill this second duty while never coming close to the “performative utterance”. In having Offred perform the second act in not only the presence of Serena Joy, but between her legs, molded to her body, and holding her hands, the boundaries blur even further:

I lie on my back . . . . Above me, towards the head of the bed, Serena Joy is arranged outspread. Her legs are apart, I lie between them, my head on her stomach, her pubic bone under the base of my skull, her thighs on either side of me . . . . My arms are raised; she holds my hands, each of mine in each of hers. (Atwood 93-94)

This twisted sexual experience reclassifies the customary definitions of marriage and builds a new understanding of matrimony for the Republic of Gilead and for Atwood’s reader.

During a sexual encounter, the Commander’s “harlot”, Offred, experiences a loss of identity as she takes over the duty of sexual partner for the Commander. In her position as the Commander’s mistress, Offred’s identity is at the mercy of the reader for close examination. The reader must question what happens to Offred’s gender during this bizarre sexual occurrence. Butler investigates the underlying meanings of feminism and shows how gender is a socially constructed idea, which varies between every person and can easily be taken away. There is a subversion of identity within
all people that cannot be controlled no matter what society says or what others mandate as right and true. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Atwood uses the idea of sexual practice to destabilize femininity in women. The men who form Gilead want to cement women into their roles by taking sex and requiring women to lie together, joining hands in hopes of reproducing perfect children for the Republic. This culmination of a sexual experience between the Commander, Serena Joy, and Offred places tension on the reader to compare what is normal for the reader and what is normal for the characters. Offred reveals that the closeness occurring between herself and Serena Joy “is supposed to signify that we are one flesh, one being. What it really means is that she is in control, of the process and thus of the product” and that “Serena Joy grips my hands as if it is she, not I, who’s being fucked, as if she finds it either pleasurable or painful” (Atwood 93-94). This coming together, or forced company between the two women, changes Offred and gender is now at the mercy of a new sexual experience. As Offred changes during this experience, so does Serena Joy who must live through this sexual performance without ever feeling anything at all. Serena Joy losses all sense of her feminine self because her place is underneath her husband’s mistress, literally a support for Offred. This sex act destabilizes the sense Offred and Serena Joy have of their roles within femininity and what used to be the customary standards in the past of one women and one man.

One of the only ways in which *The Handmaid’s Tale* stays true to tradition is in how its men continuously seek to maintain male dominance in order to preserve their ruling power over women. Boone describes women of the 18th century as ones who must protect their sexual purities and be pious, while a man of this time could be exceptionally promiscuous and, through the virtue and purity of women, later become a pure being himself. It was part of women’s duties to safeguard themselves so that they stayed sexually pure creatures, but, while protecting their purities, they were also supposed to be attractive and alluring: “women were now denied [having] any sexual feelings at all. The result placed women in a rather difficult bind . . . since the pure maiden was
nonetheless expected to exude the sexual attractiveness necessary to lure this ‘unregenerate Adams’ to the paths of righteousness and matrimony” (60-61). These gender roles meant aligning a woman’s purpose in life with being a pious individual: “at the issue in the sex combat of seducer-virgin, of course, was the issue of female chastity” (61). Atwood takes Boone’s wanton man’s ‘harlot’ and brings her into the home, literally placing her between the husband and wife inside of the bedroom. Atwood is also keeping with tradition by creating a wife who is pure and virtuous for her husband in Serena Joy who never herself engages in sexual intercourse with the Commander.

The tight grip enclosing women and their gender is only magnified when set against the lax attitude given to men concerning their maleness. Gilead forces women into submission while not expecting any change of manner from high ranking men, such as the Commander, instead allowing them to continue performing their lives, emotions, practices naturally. During the Ceremony, “the Commander fucks, with a regular two-four marching stroke . . . . He is preoccupied . . . . It’s as if he’s somewhere else, waiting for himself to come . . . . There’s an impatience in his rhythm now” (94). He performs his duties as though he does not feel anything physically or emotionally towards either woman beneath him, as though his performance is an unconscious act. Despite his actions here, later on he shows how easily it is for him to exude his maleness during sex: “[Offred] felt, for one thing, that he was actually looking at me . . . . He reached his hand up as if to touch my face” (160-162). The Commander has to submit to the Republic’s schedule regarding sexual intercourse, but he also still has the option to execute his part of the Ceremony as he chooses, such as caressing Offred or looking into her eyes, reinforcing his assertive role over Offred and Serena Joy’s lives. The Commander is able to get away with these actions because he is a man, while there would certainly be punishment for Offred. She notes that two women at one time was once “everyone’s wet dream . . . . Exciting, they used to say” (94). The terms of sexual intercourse in Gilead’s marriage contract alters the result sleeping with two
women at once previously had on men because of the submissive nature now placed upon women. The changed women beneath the Commander no longer excite him because they are simply not allowed to and because the act of sex itself has become a monotonous and compulsory operation.

In Butler’s book, Catharine MacKinnon argues that “sex inequality takes the form of gender; moving as a relation between people, it takes the form of sexuality. Gender emerges as the congealed form of the sexualization of inequality between men and women” (qtd. in Butler xii). McKinnon’s argument is that gender is an ever flowing term which ultimately leads to sexuality. Within this sexual space, femininity and masculinity are free to flow or become constricted, depending on the regulations that might be set in place, such as what happens within Gilead. The Republic seeks to suppress gender in females so that the loss of identity will allow them to keep women in submissive roles. In keeping the female gender at the forefront of all people’s minds, Gilead figures out how to regulate women. It is not the daily practices of men that destabilize gender, but it is what happens inside the bedroom where men and women struggle for power the most often. The Republic already directs women in their clothing, their speech, their freewill, but it is the male dominance that occurs during sex that finalizes the impact of their control.

In Deborah Hooker’s “(Fl)orality, Gender, and the Environmental Ethos of Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale,” McKinnon’s idea of gender as fluid is taken one step further. Hooker asserts that “In contrast to Gilead’s rigidly circumscribed roles for women—as Handmaids, wives, Marthas, or Jezebels-Offred’s oral, synesthetic experience of the mythologically resonant garden suggests a world of more fluid subjectivities, where the boundaries between the human and natural world are not so rigidly drawn, a realm in which, [Offred] declares, ‘metamorphoses run wild’” (56). In Northrop Frye’s Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays, he describes in his fourth phase of comedy an experience that can be paralleled to Offred’s garden realizations. Frye depicts his model of the green world as “the action of the comedy begins in a world represented
as a normal world, moves into the green world, goes into a metamorphosis there in which the comic resolution is achieved, and returns to the normal world” (182). Through Frye’s representation, the reader can see how Offred goes from the harsh world of Gilead to the garden, which is her green world; it is a place set apart from a tyrannical society where she can have an experience akin to a type of awakening. Through the readings of Hooker and Frye, the reader sees that Offred is quite aware of a world where all things, including people, are fluid subjects that change from one thing to another. The metamorphosis that is seen within the garden also occurs with gender in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. In the dual world of the garden, the fluidity of all things is more noticeable. Everything, gender included, is fluid, but Offred is able to see it more clearly while in the garden among the flowers where she becomes in-between Gilead’s world and a softer green world. Gilead has no control over the identity of the garden or what it produces or how it moves. The conflicting images of Gilead and the garden serve to highlight the rigidness of the outside world where every move is questioned and followed.

Mirroring its beginning, the novel concludes with another upheaval for Offred as supposed members of the resistance group “Mayday” disguised as government police come to take her away from the Commander’s house. Offred decides that she has no other choice but to go with them even without a way to know whether or not she is being helped towards freedom or about to be taken to her death: “whether this is my end or a new beginning I have no way of knowing: I have given myself over into the hands of strangers because it can’t be helped. And so I step up, into the darkness within; or else the light” (Atwood 295). By leaving *The Handmaid’s Tale* open-ended, Atwood refuses to give “easy answers,” forcing her readers to “engage with the text beyond its actual close” (Boone 146). Boone goes on to state that “the prototypically open-ended text refuses to bring its multiple narrative lines together in one univocal pattern because . . . . ‘unresolvedness’ is part of the meaning” (146) of the counter traditional text, adding to the other significance that has already been discovered.
throughout and begs the reader to seek closure for themselves and for the characters. The novel has been

stripped bare of authorial commentary and judgment and [is] therefore disruptive of the reader’s traditional expectation of repose and relaxation of tension; forced to engage with the text beyond its actual close, the reader loses the ability to recuperate, hence naturalize, the text’s manifold possible meanings or contradictions. (146)

The reader is forced to continue thinking about the consequences that could occur from Offred leaving with the resistance group instead of staying behind. The reader must also decide the end of the marriage contract which had formed between the Commander, Serena Joy, and Offred. Will the contract be transferred over to another Handmaid? Will the members of the resistance be able to rise against the Republic of Gilead, resulting in another change for the marriage contract? What will become of Offred now that she is possibly free; could she find a place where the marriage contract is open for debate, resulting in a completely new form? These questions further the interaction of the reader with the novel and portray how Atwood hoped for a greater understanding of her text than just what she could have written for it, encouraging for solutions to be found and executed before contemporary society finds itself dealing with the same harsh issues located in the Republic.

Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* is a cautionary novel aimed towards women with a lesson in how easy it can be to become subject to the wants of men. Offred is forced, easily enough it seems, to bend to the demands of Gilead and, as a Handmaid, she is made to comprehend her place as a female throughout the novel. In the transition from old to new society, she loses her femininity, but not her biological sex because that is what keeps her in a submissive role. Her name is taken from her as she becomes the property of the Commander, she is told when and how to have sex, and she is constantly reminded that
her female sex is what defines her worth. Through a feminist lens, the reader understands that in keeping Offred, as well as all other women, continually aware of her sex, Offred will be incapable of taking back any power she had before the rise of Gilead. Gilead constructs rules and regulations for Handmaids that remind themselves and all around them that their place in society is based upon femaleness and what can come from it; the Handmaids are eternally categorized as potentially pregnant. Taking their moral beliefs from the Bible, the fundamentalists of the Republic reform the traditional marriage and insert another member, dividing a wife’s duty between herself and another woman, defying previously instated natural law, understanding that keeping women as women, and by having them continuously confronted with their sex, they will always be controlled. Through her novel, Atwood exercises Joseph Allan Boone’s theories to set up a counter traditional novel that seeks to redefine marriage so that it recognizes women as equal partners. Atwood also utilizes feminist writers who examine gender in relation to socially and sexually repressed female characters.

Works Cited


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Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* is an epistolary narrative that demonstrates the value of freedom as an alternative to marriage. Celie, the narrator, is the victim of a patriarchal society. Celie communicates to God through her letters because she does not have anybody else to communicate with after her sister, Nettie, moves to Africa. The novel chronicles Celie’s transformation from a young and insecure girl to a self-assured woman, change effected with the help of God, her sister, and the community of women around her. Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* is a counter traditional narrative that is told through an African American feminist consciousness that perceives the institution of marriage not as a sign of liberation and civility, but as a form of control in a patriarchal society. African American women in *The Color Purple* have to reclaim and resexualize their female body and the novel ends in their freedom rather than the traditional plot of marriage.

Traditional marriage plot narratives are centered exclusively on the courtship rituals between a man and woman and the obstacles that face the potential couple on their way to marriage. In the African American community, marriage for recently released African American slaves, was a long denied human right. Ann Ducille explains, “The call to bourgeois civility was a loud one which many newly freed blacks responded by donning the trappings and conventions of civilized society, including the hegemonic ideology of monogamous marriage” (Ducille 219). African American feminist writers narratives demonstrate the pervasiveness of
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patriarchal power and the struggle of black women to regain their female authority. According to Ann Ducille, “black feminist criticism has taken the important steps of reclaiming lost texts and inserting black women and black women’s experience into historically white or predominantly male Anglo-and Afro-American literary traditions” (Ducille 216). In doing so African American feminist representations of marriage plots differ from the traditional marriage plot.

Alice Walker usage of the epistolary style makes new commentary on the institution of marriage. An aspect of the epistolary novel is its connection to women. Women are well represented in epistolary fiction. Ruth Perry notes that, “Letters were the one sort of writing women were supposed to be able to do well. Literate women wrote letters even in the days when they put pen to paper for no other reason, and so the public was ready to buy volumes of letters published under a woman’s name” (Perry 68). In Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela*, the female heroine Pamela writes to her parents about suffering at the hands of Mr. B. Pamela becomes submissive to her husband after he begins to love and appreciate her. Like Pamela, Celie too suffers at the hands of men and writes about her experience.

*The Color Purple* consists of letters written by Celie and her sister Nettie, who live in the rural south of the United States. Celie’s letters to God allows the reader to enter into the private thoughts of a traumatized and depressed young girl who has been repeatedly raped and impregnated by the man who she believes is her biological father. Celie’s father proclaims, “You’d better not never tell nobody but God. It’d kill your mammy” (Walker 1). Walker opens her novel with this scene to symbolize the sexual abuse of the black woman by the black man. With this threat, Celie’s father imposes fear and guilt upon her. Celie takes her father’s threat literally and begins writing letters to God. Celie’s identity is her voice which is taken away from her by her father with this quote. Celie’s voice is only heard throughout the novel with the letters she
writes to God. Celie writes, “Dear God. I am fourteen years old. l-am I have always been a good girl” (Walker 1). Celie draws a line through “I am” because she blames herself for her trauma and is ashamed of what has happened to her. Charles Prodfit argues, “the letters are characterized by short, choppy sentences, halting rhymes, repetitive grammatical structures of subject with concrete physical descriptions in an ongoing present style that mirrors Celie’s depression caused by her repressed rage” (Proudfit 115). Though Celie’s letters are addressed to God, her letters are never answered in the way a reader expects from epistolary communication. Celie views God as a man with whom she can share her confidences and who can provide the necessary answers and protection from the world around her.

*The Color Purple* epistolary style is structured linearly into three parts. Each part reveals the radically changing nature of events in Celie’s life. First, Celie addresses God, asking “Maybe you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me” (Walker 1). The novel then describes the situations leading up to her question. After being raped by her father, Celie becomes unfamiliar with her own body. At twenty, Celie is married off to Albert, a widower with children. Celie’s experience of beatings and rapes are repeated in her marriage to her husband Albert. Marriage is not a safe haven for Celie, and serves as an extension of her unhappy home life as a child. This counters the idea that marriage represents the female bildungsroman. In *Tradition Counter Tradition*, Joseph Allen Boone argues “the happily ever after endings in the marriage plot is a system of narrative strategies that have alternately explained, evaded and less frequently exploded the tradition of romantic wedlock embedded in Anglo-American fiction since its beginning. During the 1920s, other voices began to break through the hegemony of dominant literary discourse” (Boone 141-42).

Celic does not have the traditional marriage of a young woman. Celie explains, “I spend my wedding day running from the oldest boy. He twelve. His mama died in his arms and
he don’t want to hear nothing bout no new one. He pick up a rock and laid my head open. The blood run all down tween my breasts” (Walker 12). Celie’s intimacy with Albert is equivalent to rape as she explains, “He git up on you, heist your nightgown round your waist, plunge in. Most times I pretend I ain’t there. He never know the difference. Never sat me how I feel, nothing. Just do his business, get off, and go to sleep” (Walker 79). Celie tries to ignore and nullify her body as a defense against her husband’s assaults stating, “He beat me like he beat the children. It all I can do not to cry. I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie, you a tree. That’s how come I know trees fear man” (Walker 22).

Celie’s choice to ignore her body signifies her choice to ignore the abuse in her marriage. According to Daniel Ross, “One of the primary projects of modern feminism has been to restore women’s bodies, appropriated long ago by a patriarchal culture, to them because the female body is the most exploited target of male aggression, women have learned to fear or even hate their bodies” (Ross 74). By reclaiming their African American female bodies, these women are able to progress intellectually and emotionally. Throughout this progression, African American women are able to find freedom within themselves from the patriarchal society. Adrienne Rich argues that, “but fear and hatred of our bodies had often crippled our brains. Some of the most brilliant women of our time are still trying to think from somewhere outside their female bodies—hence they are still merely reproducing old forms of intellect” (Rich 284).

The next structure of the novels epistolary mode is Celie receiving an answer to “what is happening to her” through Nettie’s letters. Nettie runs away from home to escape her father’s sexual advances and joins Albert and Celie. Nettie teaches Celie, “spelling and everything else she think I need to know...to teach me what go on in the world” (Walker 25). Nettie is forced to leave Celie after refusing unwanted sexual advances from Albert, but begins writing letters to Celie. Nettie’s letters help Celie during her healing process and bring truth to her. Nettie’s letters reveals
that her father, Alphonso, is not their biological father, her children are not the result of incest and she has been living with her children in Africa. Also, Nettie’s letters gives Celie a broader vision of her roots in Africa and the problems the Olinka tribe faces with European colonialism. Celie then begins writing to Nettie rather than God stating, “you [God] must be sleep” assuming that he never listened (Walker 137).

Along with this structure, Celie learns about womanhood from the women in the narrative in order to break the bondage of men. The alternative to marriage that Walker advocates is Celie’s bond with other women. Celie’s bond with other women begins to function like a marriage. The growth that is supposedly part of the traditional marriage plot begins to happen for Celie. Celie grows in confidence and her life begins to take a new direction as she meets Suge Avery and Sophia. After being sexually abused by her father and married against her will to Albert, Celie becomes attracted to Suge Avery. Celie finds a picture of Suge Avery, the free-spirited blues singer, and begins to idolize her. Suge’s beauty and rebellious spirit becomes the ideal woman for Celie, since she has not been broken through years of abuse. Celie states, “Shug Avery was a woman. The most beautiful woman I ever saw. She more pretty then my mama. She bout ten thousand times more prettier then me... An all night long I stare at it. An now when I dream, I dream of Shug Avery” (Walker 6).

Celite is introduced to her body with the arrival of Shug Avery. Shug encourages Celie to look at her body and feel her feminine qualities. Shug explains to Celie, “right down there in your pussy is a little button that gist real hot when you do you know what with somebody” (Walker 77). Shug’s advice changes Celie’s perspective about herself and becomes part of Celie’s progress. Celie learns from Suge Avery that women should own their own sexuality. Shug also teaches Celie to find God within herself, in nature, and in her own feelings. Shug believes God has no gender and no race and is something inside of every person. In a letter to Nettie, Celie states,
“I don’t write to God no more. I write to you” after Suge explains that “When I found out I thought God was white, and a man, I lost interest. The thing I believe, God is inside you and inside everybody else” (Walker 219). God is set up as the ultimate patriarch and this is why Suge has to reimagine God as an it, because as long as she sees God as a man, she will be oppressed by men.

Celie’s relationship with Sofia also functions like a marriage. Sofia exemplifies the strength a woman should have within a relationship. Sofia refuses to be dominated by her husband Harpo who wants Sofia to be submissive like Celie. Harpo states, “I want her to do what I say, like you [Celie] do for Pa.... But not Sofia. She do what she want, don’t pay me no mind at all. I try to beat her, she black my eyes. Oh boohoo, he cry” (Walker 66). Harpo knows no other image of marriage than the one he see with his father, Albert, in which a husband beats and dominates his wife. Celie’s bond becomes evident when Sofia confronts her after she encourages Harpo to beat Sophia. Celie and Sofia reconcile over cutting torn curtains into quilting squares. The quilt becomes an image of unity among the women.

Celie learns from her sister Nettie, her way of expression through reading and writing. After Celie realizes that Albert has been keeping her letters from being delivered to Nettie, Celie is so angry that she nearly kills Albert with a razor, but Shug replaces the destructive razor with a constructive needle. Celie begins to reject God and associate him with the men in her life stating, “Anyhow, I say, the God I been praying and writing to is a man. And act just like all the other mens I know. Trifling, forgetful and lowdown” (Walker 199).

Once the bonds among the women are established, Celie becomes confident enough to assert her freedom from her husband. Celie is able to break away from the female role of being domestic by cleaning her house, cooking, tending to the children and obeying her husband. Marriage begins on a restrictive base and demonstrates the stereotypical role that
both men and women play in marriage. Marriage assumes feminine inferiority. Celie proclaims, “I’m pore, I’m black, I may be ugly, and can’t cook, but I’m here” (Walker 187). Celie develops her identity and is able to break the bondage of the patriarchal society. Speech becomes Celie’s primary arena of action. Celie is able to turn Albert’s negativity back on himself. Celie’s ability to gain her voice allows her to become completely reborn without bearing witness to the scars left in her past.

The final structure of *The Color Purple* is when Celie begins addressing God as a spirit rather than as the ultimate patriarch. Celie accept Shug’s belief in a God who is everything and understands that God is not restricted to the image of a man. Celie’s understanding of God as a spirit happens while living with Suge Avery in Memphis. While there Celie repeatedly sews trousers for people, which turns into a prosperous business called Folkspants Unlimited. Celie discovers how in demand the trousers are for both men and women and combines her care for meticulous quality with her skill of sewing. Walker uses the technique of repetition with Celie’s pants to function as a renewal of the initial social order. Sewing is a way of expression that explicates an alternative to the violence of patriarchal society.

As Celie sews and creates pants out of new fabric to enhance the people who wear them, she begins to sew her life back together. Daniel Ross argues, “Celie’s sewing associates her with a select group of female characters in American literature who use their art not to reveal their shame, but to transplant it, by placing it where it belongs-on their male oppressors” (Ross 71). The pants are comfortable and designed with the wearer in mind. Celie states, “these pants are soft, hardly wrinkled at all, and the little figures in the cloth always look perky and bright. And they full round the ankle so if she want to sing in ‘em and wear ‘em sort oflike a long dress, she can” (Walker 219). She sews purple and red pants for Sofia, orange and red pants for Squeak and blue and red pants for Shug.
Celie sews Albert’s clothes as well who insist that his shirts, “Got to have pockets. Got to have loose sleeves. And definitely you not spose to wear it with no tie. Fold wearing ties look like they being lynch” (Walker 290). Since the clothes are meant to enhance the people who are wearing them, Alberts explanation for how his clothes are to be designed, represents the point he has come to, where he supports life rather than stifle it. Albert is willing to talk about their past and apologizes for his dominate behavior. Celie forgives Albert and allows him to join her in her creative process. Celie’s forgiveness is the basis for the new society. Sewing demonstrates the progress Albert has made within himself. While sewing on the porch with Celie he states,”When I was growing up, he said, I use to try to sew along mama cause that’s what she was always doing. But everybody laughed at me” (Walker 238). Celie and Albert’s sewing together represents their unity and renewal of the social order. Through sewing, Albert becomes part of Celie’s community after she introduces him and Shug as “my people” to Nettie when she returns from Africa (Walker 250). Alice Walker is demonstrating that once Albert has been transformed and included in the new social order, that he is able to participate in feminine activities such as sewing. With this inclusion society can move toward equality among men and women.

In Celie’s final letter she addresses not only God, but everything that has a godly spirit. Celie writes, “Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God” (Walker 285). Her identification with stars, trees, and people represents her living free from all kinds of oppression. Celie’s perception of God becomes all inclusive and she comes to accept Shug’s belief that everything incorporates a godly spirit. With Shug’s love, Celie is able to regain her inner strength which liberates her from the patriarchal society and from the customary image of God as a white haired man with big feet and a beard. Celie finds a new personal identity and writes in expectation of a more fulfilling future. The final day of the narrative is the fourth of July, Independence Day and takes
place after Nettie’s return home. Alice Walker uses Independence Day because it has a different meaning to African Americans than other groups. Celie explains, “White people busy celebrating independence from England July 4th, say Harpo, so most black folks don’t have to work. Us can spend the day celebrating each other” (Walker 282). Lauren Berlant believes the date is, “uniquely positioned to provide textual commentary about the relationship between its limited set of characters and the operation of dominant and contested cultures that has marked African American experience” (Berlant 831).

With the renewal of the social order, where the women find liberation from the patriarchal society, *The Color Purple* has elements of a comedy. Comedy seeks to improve social conventions and provides a critique of societal limitations. Priscilla Walton suggest, “the novel is arguably bleaker than many of the others that are included in the mode of comedy, since it deals with rape, incest, and social prejudice; yet the ideal womanist world in which it culminates is joyous and celebratory- a condition of the comic” (Walton 63). Unlike the traditional comic characters, the renewal of the social order is not committed by foolish or frivolous characters, but by the women in the narrative with whom the reader is expected to sympathize with. According to Northrop Frye, the victimized character who is “opposed to or excluded from the fictional society and has the sympathy of the audience appears in comedy in one of two ways and can be regarded as a fool or worse by the fictional society, and yet impresses the real audience as having something more valuable than his [or her] society has” (Anatomy 176).

The renewal of the social order is presented as complete, even with the adversity Celie endures from Albert. This element concurs with Northrop Frye’s belief of “how frequently a comic dramatist tries to bring his action as close to a catastrophic overthrow of the hero as he can get it, and then remove the action as quickly as possible” (Anatomy 178). Frye also believes that comedy is about the integration of society which emphasizes the beginning of an ideal society.
The ending of *The Color Purple* is a celebration of kinship. Celie and Nettie are reunited, Shug visits her estranged children, and Albert and Celie are reconciled. Also, the ending demonstrates the positive aspects of society when social values are reexamined. Society becomes more enlightened when those within it are able to reject the expectations of societal norms. These social norms often times restrict individuals of their freedom within a marriage. Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* exemplifies that when women utilize their voice and assert their freedom, a new social order of equality among both men and women will be formed in our culture.

**Works Cited**


For the past ten years on the fourth Sunday in March, the corporation Wedded Bliss Foundation holds Black Marriage Day programs across the country. According to their website, the purpose of Black Marriage Day is “to change the hearts and minds of the Black community to cherish and celebrate the marriages that we currently have while encouraging others to commit themselves to marriage” (“Black Marriage Day”). While their goal seems to be a noble one, one might ask why a Black Marriage Day is even necessary; there is no White Marriage Day or Asian Marriage Day. No other community of people insists on encouraging their members to get married as much as the Black community does. Why is this so? Historically speaking, the struggle for equal rights in the Black community is the platform on which Black Marriage Day stands. As former slaves, Blacks grasped the idea of marriage as one that would put them on equal footing with the dominant culture (i.e. White America). By marrying one another, they hoped to lay claim to something of which they were deprived, first by slavery and then by the failures of Reconstruction. In her Pulitzer Prize winning novel Beloved, Toni Morrison tackles the notion of Black love, Black marriage, and what it means to love in the midst of a tribulation as horrifying as slavery. Her female protagonist, Sethe, participates in two relationships: one with Halle Suggs, a man who, for all intents and purposes, serves as the prototypical husband despite the harsh realities of slavery
that prevent an emotional connection between him and Sethe, and Paul D. Garner, a former chain gang member haunted by his past who refuses love until he meets Sethe, a girl from their old plantation Sweet Home. By juxtaposing the community-sanctioned marriage of Sethe and Halle, one directly molded after the White community that oppresses them, and the romantic relationship of Sethe and Paul D., Morrison examines the institution of marriage as an extension of the institution of slavery and establishes her 1987 novel as a direct critique of wedlock, insisting that true Black love does not rely on the confines of marriage.

During the time of slavery and later Reconstruction, Blacks formed their ideas of marriage around the examples set in place by the Whites around them. For Morrison’s protagonist Sethe, marriage was not complete without a proper wedding and she wanted the type of wedding she had seen:

I thought there should be something—something to say it was right and true. I didn’t want it to be just me moving over a bit of pallet full of corn husks...I thought there should be some ceremony...That’s what I wanted. But it wasn’t going to be nothing. They said it was all right for us to be husband and wife and that was it. (Morrison 59)

Sorely disappointed, Sethe realizes that she will have neither a fancy wedding nor an ornate gown. It is obvious that, for Sethe, the title of wife means more to her than the idea of love. Throughout the novel, she focuses on her wedding to Halle rather than the actual marriage. She never says that she loves him or ever did. She repeatedly insists that he was a good man, a hard worker, and even a nice friend, but she never mentions loving him. During the time that the novel is set, love was irrelevant to slaves and ex-slaves when the titles of husband and wife were available. They were unaccustomed to owning anything and because of that, laying claim to one another overweighed the idea of true love. The people preoccupied with the idea of marriage were not searching for true love; likewise, the people searching for true love were not
preoccupied with the institution of marriage. Rather than grounding her novel in the idea of traditional versus counter-traditional marriage plots that critic Joseph Boone details, Morrison’s novel would be better analyzed through Ann duCille’s idea of a coupling convention which “reflects the problematic nature of the institution of marriage for a people long denied the right to marry legally” (duCille 14) and then denied an equal place within society, the very society that sanctions both marriage and the literary form.

Sethe’s first example that a true Black love operates differently than the love upheld by Whites comes from her mother. Sethe’s mother was not born into slavery, but instead came “from the sea” (62). Her life is no fairytale; she does not fall in love with another slave and marry. Instead, she is raped many times by the ship’s crew members and one of these rapes results in her first child. Later, after arriving on the island, she conceives more children by White men. Nan, a female slave that represents a mother-figure for Sethe tells Sethe of her mother’s illegitimate children:

She threw them all away but you. The one from the crew she threw away on the island. The others from more whites she also threw away. Without names, she threw them. You she gave the name of the black man. She put her arms around him. The others she did not put her arms around. Never. Never. (Morrison 62)

Nan insists that Sethe’s conception and birth were more important to her mother because she had an opportunity to choose her mate, something not usually afforded to slaves. The chance to choose made marriage and coupling significant to Blacks because it represented their status as human beings. Because marriage represented a social status for Black slaves rather than a joining of like-minded souls, Morrison’s neo-slave narrative speaks from a time in which a man and woman actually falling in love and building a life together was almost unheard of. Therefore, when Sethe finds Paul D. sitting on her porch, she is completely taken aback by her desire to have this man, a man who made her won-
der, “Would it be all right? Would it be all right to go ahead and feel? Go ahead and count on something?” (Morrison 38). As Sethe discovers the strength of the connection between herself and Paul D., she reexamines her previous marriage with Halle and infers that marriage, in the sense of the White community’s idea, is just that: an idea. Her marriage to Halle stands in the way of her marrying Paul D., but that is the least of Sethe’s concerns. She realizes that her love for Paul D. cannot successfully exist in the confines of an institution that insists on excluding Blacks.

Although Morrison’s novel asserts that slavery presents a difficult circumstance and makes it almost unfeasible to successfully live and love, she does not say that loving is impossible. Morrison showcases a variety of Black relationships, each different from the ideal relationship celebrated by the dominant culture. Despite the fact that these relationships operate differently, Morrison does not imply that they are devalued; in fact, they are valued even more because of their rarity. Known for his work in the Civil Rights Movement, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. offers his opinion of Black love during and after slavery:

Through the ante-bellum era, the Negro family struggled against the odds to survive, and miraculously many did. In all this psychological and physical horror many slaves managed to hold on to their children and developed warmth and affection and family loyalties against the smashing tides of emotional corruption and destruction. (qtd. in Foster 118)

Like the relationships that King discusses, Sixo and the Thirty-Mile Woman struggle to continue a successful relationship despite their conditions as slaves. Their relationship comes to a horrific halt after Sixo is hanged, but the love was always present. Slavery, as terrible as it was, did not prevent Blacks from loving if that is what they sought out to do. Sixo says of his woman, “She is a friend of my mind. She gather me. The pieces I am, she gather them and give them back to me in all the right order”
Even though he had to travel thirty miles to see her because they lived on different plantations, they still manage to build a relationship based on true affection. In her book ‘Til Death or Distance do us Part: Marriage and the Making of African America, Frances Smith Foster states that it is imperative to give the full narrative rather than parts when discussing Black relationships. By implying that Black relationships are always less strong because of the effects of slavery, we run the risk of “making propaganda, reconstructing history, forgetting our Beloved” (Foster 118). It is important to say that though Blacks did not always have the ability, under the law, to marry, they forged relationships independent of law. Morrison’s novel critiques the institution of marriage while upholding the very things that it claims to stand for; in fact, she is saying that love does not insist upon marriage to be true. It exists without it, just like it does for Sethe and Paul D. By providing examples of what Black love looks like, Morrison compares and contrasts the type of relationships that Boone details in his text, addressing traditional and counter traditional marriages with the relationships that Ann duCille portrays in The Coupling Convention. Boone’s text does not address Black marriages because it is clear that his argument is not relevant for African-American literary tradition. By incorporating the idea of coupling in her narrative, Morrison gives her readers a different type of union on which they can pattern their own relationships.

Set in 1873, a time where “men and women were moved around like checkers” (Morrison 23), Beloved casts marriage as a status not worth striving for. Sethe marries Halle because he is, as the mistress of the plantation calls him, “nice” (26) and not because she loves him. She sees him as a viable candidate for marriage because he works to secure his mother’s freedom. How can Sethe resist “a twenty-year-old man so in love with his mother he gave up five years of Sabbaths just to see her sit down for a change?” (Morrison 11). Initially, Halle represents everything right about marriage: stability, devotion, and affection. However, as Sethe matures from a young slave girl to a single mother acting as head of household
because of Halle’s absence, she becomes like the new heroine that Karen Tracey references in her essay “The Renegotiation of Marriage:” “The passive, clinging, feminine nature represented in the ‘old fashioned heroine’ permits the husband’s dominance; the assertive new heroine challenges that dominance” (Tracey 3). Although Tracey’s essay more thoroughly deals with the double proposal plot appearing throughout women’s fiction in the 19th century, her idea of the new heroine effectively describes Sethe. The vulnerable point that causes Sethe to switch from a woman of dependence to an independent woman is Halle’s absence from their Ohio home. The novel does not clear up whether or not Halle is still alive, although many of the characters believe him to be dead. Instead, Morrison focuses on the fact that he is absent which is just as bad as being dead in the Black home where the wife and children need the Black male’s protection. Circumstances like slavery serve to show that marriage for Blacks was not as simple as the traditional or counter-traditional plot would portray it as. In fact, texts set in post-Civil War America like Morrison’s novel “expose the ideological limitations of such concepts as genteel femininity, female virtue, and marital protection” (duCille 6) because being Black in America does not offer that type of status. Since, like many female slaves, Sethe is accustomed to being alone, Paul D.’s presence in her life and home causes a stirring. Halle has been absent from the home for eighteen years and this absence of a male figure puts Sethe in a position to take care of herself and not look to another for protection or love. When Paul D. arrives at 124 Bluestone Road, he forces Sethe to reconsider her ideas about the meaning of love, especially since Paul D. is not “her true-to-life husband” (Morrison 115).

As a counter-traditional marriage plot rooted in the coupling convention, Beloved “reclaims and resexualizes the Black female body” (duCille 4) by allowing Sethe the opportunity to choose a mate rather than accepting the one chosen for her. duCille states that instead of looking at the outburst of Black marriages during the post-Civil War era as “a matter of choosing again an old mate,” we should view it as the “claiming of a new right (or rite)” (duCille
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Although Morrison writes that Sethe “chose him” (11) referring to Halle, it should be noted that Sethe’s choosing of Halle differs greatly from her choosing Paul D. She chose Halle out of the group of Sweet Home men “fucking cows, dreaming of rape, thrashing on pallets, rubbing their thighs and waiting for [her]” (11) in order to protect herself from the other over-sexualized male slaves on the plantation. Jacqueline Jones describes the formula used to marry slaves in her book Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to Present: “Demographic conditions and cultural traditions specific to individual plantations could interfere with the romantic ideal [of marriage]. An unbalanced sex ratio, in addition to the slaves’ exogamous customs, often limited the number of partners” (Jones 32). Because Sethe is the only young woman mentioned on the Sweet Home plantation, she stands as the only option for the Sweet Home men. Rather than choosing Halle because she wants to, she realizes that she is not left with a choice. She must marry to continue adding to Sweet Home’s slave population; any children she had with Halle would belong to Garner. In comparison to choosing Sethe as a healthy male slave to procreate with, she chooses Paul D. based on an affinity for him and because “there was something blessed” (Morrison 17) about him.

Black love during the times of slavery and Reconstruction was hard to come across and slaves more than often leaned toward self-hate embedded in them by their masters instead of uniting in a communal love. Halle’s mother Baby Suggs, holy, gives a sermon to the Blacks of Cincinnati to instruct them on the tenets of self-love:

In this here place, we flesh…Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it…You got to love it, you! …More than eyes or feet. More than lungs that have yet to draw free air. More than your life-holding womb and your life-giving private parts, hear me now, love your heart. For this is the prize. (Morrison 88-89)
Sethe reminisces over Baby Suggs’ speech as she wonders “what she should do with her sword and shield now” (Morrison 89). She needs to figure out a way to love Paul D. because she is not accustomed to loving anyone but her children. Like Baby Suggs says, Blacks know nothing about loving themselves because they have always been taught hate therefore Sethe must rearrange her notions of what it means to actually free herself from the bondage of slavery and open to love. Sethe realizes that “freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another” (Morrison 95), and, initially, she is not sure how she can transfer the love she has for her children to Paul D. She wants to learn to love another as much as she loves her four children and it is Paul D. Garner, not Halle, who brings her to this conclusion. In Sethe’s opinion, her marriage to Halle “functions [solely] as the primary signifier of freedom and humanity” (duCille 19) whereas her feelings for Paul D. are sincerely from her heart. Choosing Halle was a signifier to the outside world that she was human and able to marry; choosing Paul D. is something she does for herself.

Despite his personality flaws, Morrison sets Paul D. up as Sethe’s perfect match without mentioning the idea of marriage. If marriage is, as Ann duCille suggests, “a sign of the time that shifts with the times, the places, and the people” (duCille 4), Beloved can be read not only as a direct critique of matrimony, but a call for another union that signifies love. Webster defines coupling as “the act of bringing or coming together; specifically: a sexual union” (“Coupling”). Though Paul D. does not propose marriage to Sethe, what he is willing to propose to her is so much more: “a life” (Morrison 46). Initially, Sethe balks at this idea of a commitment, but Paul D. dismisses her assumptions by saying, “Leave it to me. See how it goes. No promises, if you don’t want to make any” (46). Instead of offering her “forever,” like Halle, a concept that, in reality, he was not able to give her, Paul D. offers her his right now. Sethe answers his proposal of a relationship by telling him to “come upstairs [with her]…where [he] belongs” (Morrison 131). Not only does Paul D. offer Sethe a life with him, he also comments that she should have his baby. During this time,
creating a life together signified the ultimate union, one stronger than a community-sanctioned marriage. For Paul D., getting Sethe pregnant would be “a solution, a way to hold on to her, document his manhood and break out of [Beloved’s] spell—all in one” (Morrison 128). Unlike the idea of marriage which says until death do us part, Paul D.’s proposal is one that makes more sense in the context of their situation. Sethe realizes that, unlike Halle, “Paul D. was adding something to her life—something she wanted to count on but was scared to” (Morrison 95). Morrison shows through Paul D.’s attempt at connecting with Sethe that, although Whites hold up the ideology of marriage as one to aspire for, for Blacks, coupling is a more meaningful choice.

Unlike Halle, who Sethe describes as “more like a brother than a husband” (Morrison 25), Paul D. represents an emotional partner, someone who Sethe can love without the unnecessary White-washed titles of husband and wife. Sethe trusts Paul D. because she believed that “the last of the Sweet Home men was there to catch her if she sank” (Morrison 18). They share a mutual history and are able to bond because of it. However, although Paul D. realizes the strength of Sethe’s feelings for him and can even admit that he feels the same way or at least has the potential to, he comments that it was risky “for a used-to-be-slave woman to love anything that much…The best thing, he knew, was to love just a little bit…so when they broke its back, or shoved it into a croaker sack, well, maybe you’d have a little love left over for the next one” (Morrison 45). Paul D. is worried about Sethe’s habit of over-loving because he does not see how that type of love can exist in the late 1800s. In his mind, Sethe should be “obedient (like Halle), shy (like Halle), and work-crazy (like Halle)” (Morrison 164), but she is not and to him, that is a dangerous notion. Morrison writes, “Suddenly [Paul D.] saw what Stamp Paid wanted him to see: more important than what Sethe had done was what she claimed” (Morrison 164). What Sethe claims is herself, the freedom to be, and to love because “when [she] got off that wagon, there wasn’t nobody in the world [she] couldn’t love if she wanted to” (Morrison 162). Although marriage was not available at that time, not in a way
that was protected under the law, love was something that freedom from slavery afforded Blacks. Cincinnati, Ohio was “a place to get where you could love anything you chose— not to need permission for desire—well now, that was freedom” (Morrison 162).

It is clear that Sethe has an all-consuming love for her children and her love causes the eventual demise of her self-image. When Schoolteacher arrives in Cincinnati to recapture Sethe and her children and sell them back into slavery, Sethe believes that the only way to save them from this horror is to kill them. For her, there is no other choice. She ends up killing her two-year-old daughter Beloved and, eighteen years later, Beloved comes back from the dead, not to haunt her but to seek reconciliation. In Morrison’s novel, Beloved is more than just a dead baby. The name Beloved, or Be-loved, represents Sethe and the community’s desire for something they never received from themselves or from others: love. Until they are able to reconcile their differences and unite as a community, Beloved’s presence intends to cause a rift in their relationships. She challenges them to love each other and to be loved. At the end of the novel, the community stands together in support of Sethe causing Beloved to leave because her mission is finished. She showed the community the necessity of solidarity and love. Right after Beloved leaves, Sethe’s true love, Paul D., returns.

Although Beloved is a catalyst for Paul D.’s fleeing, the text also makes it apparent that Paul D. has to leave in order to prove the strength of his love for Sethe. His leaving and then eventual return serve as characteristics of the double-proposal plot. Karen Tracey writes that double-proposal novels “can be analyzed according to how their authors deploy two specific opportunities created by the double-proposal device: the opened space between rejected and accepted proposals and the inherent contrast between rejected and accepted marriage conditions” (Tracey 4). For Sethe and Paul D., there is no traditional marriage, but there is a relationship proposal. After Sethe rejects Paul D.’s idea to have a child together and he learns that she killed her child, he leaves. Sethe believes that Paul D. has left and will never return and that he will not tell her so because he does not want to hurt her: “Sweet, she thought.
He must think I can’t bear to hear him say it…that [...] goodbye would break me to pieces. Ain’t that sweet” (Morrison 164). Paul D. does not understand Sethe and judges her for her actions and her “too thick” (164) love. Because of this, they must be separated in order to eventually be together. On this separation, Tracey says, “It is not enough that the suitor ‘loves’ the heroine passionately; he needs to be reformed, humbled, or otherwise transformed” (Tracey 23). Obviously Paul D. loves Sethe, but because he could not accept her for who she is, he had to “undergo changes to become ‘Mr. Right’” (Tracey 23). When he finally comes back, it is with the knowledge of Beloved’s coming and going, the understanding that Sethe loves big, and the acceptance of her for who she is. He offers Sethe another proposal, this one not wrought by baby-making, but instead a promise of a kind of forever: “Me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow” (Morrison 273).

Toni Morrison is what Boone refers to as an author who “wished to break loose of the formal constraints of the marriage plot” (Boone 142) and her text Beloved uses its counter-traditional form to comment on the traditional marriage plot used in literature. Beloved does not end with a marriage or a union, but rather a forgetting of events. After Beloved leaves Cincinnati, she becomes even less than a memory: “Disremembered and unaccounted for, she cannot be lost because no one is looking for her, and even if they were, how can they call her if they don’t know her name?” (Morrison 274). Morrison uses the end of her novel to veer away from the traditional narrative ending. Yes, Sethe and Paul D. form a union, but immediately after, Morrison asserts that everything else was a figment of the community’s imagination. By second-guessing Beloved’s presence in Cincinnati, Morrison leaves her reader with a sense of unease. Beloved becomes open-ended rather than resolved and “refuses to bring its multiple narrative lines together in one univocal pattern” (Boone 146). The open-ended form is representative of the unresolved nature of wedlock. In Morrison’s case, her use of this form represents the gap between African American relationships and the traditional marriage plot.
By focusing on the fact that Sethe truly loves Paul D. even though she is not married to him, Morrison draws attention to the idea that love can and does exist outside of White-sanctioned marriages. Sethe was never given consent by anyone, especially the Garners, to love Paul D. She did not have to ask for permission to be with him. Yet, she is with him. Morrison casts marriage in a negative light, especially for Blacks who did not view marriage as a lifelong promise to love another, but instead viewed it as way to say, “I am here. I am human.” Marriage may not have been the way for Blacks, in Morrison’s opinion, but love was something completely different. Through comparing and contrasting Sethe’s relationships with Paul D. and Halle, Morrison asks the reader to choose which one is the strongest. Of course, any reader would answer Paul D. and Sethe, but what does that really mean? What is Morrison implying about marriage if the only Black marriage in the novel is built on fallacy and eventually falls apart? Just as Sethe is her own “best thing” (273), Blacks have always found ways to love and live outside of the confines of White society. They are their own best thing and coupling is African Americans’ way of asserting dominance over their destinies and refusing to conform to the ideology of the majority.

Works Cited


Nicholas Sparks’ novel, *The Notebook*, takes place mainly during the years of 1946 and 1996, with Noah Calhoun and Allie Nelson as the main characters. Noah is from a poor family with a single father, while Allie comes from a wealthy family. This novel is an example of a more modern version of the traditional marriage plot, because of the courtship that the characters go through and how it ultimately affects their relationship throughout the novel. While their relationship in the beginning of the novel (1932 and 1946) follows the traditional marriage plot, the courtship in 1996 proves to be counter-traditional, because there is never a moment where the characters reach full closure; it is always a cycle of Allie remembering the past and then having a memory lapse. However, it also can be considered to be a divorce plot as well, because Allie suffers from Alzheimer’s disease, which divorces her physically from herself and her family, and metaphorically divorces the union of the two lovers. Though the courtship and marriage between Allie and Noah in the beginning of the novel is representative of the traditional marriage plot, there is a turn to it becoming both a divorce and counter-traditional plot due to Allie being diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease.

Similar to Elizabeth Bennet’s situation with Mr. Darcy in Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, Allie’s parents do not initially approve of the courtship between Noah and Allie. Because Noah comes from a single parent household with little money, and Allie’s family
is wealthy, her parents would rather her not associate with him at all. Noah, as the narrator, in regards to first meeting Allie, states that “he knew before he’d taken his next breath that she was the one he could spend the rest of his life looking for but never find again” (*The Notebook*, 13). Noah knows at this point that he wants to be with Allie, no matter what it takes. And he also knows that if he lets her get away from him, then he would probably never be as happy with anyone as he believes he could have been with her. Allie’s mother says to her, “I’m sure you think that I don’t understand what you’re going through, but I do. It’s just that sometimes, our future is dictated by what we are, as opposed to what we want” (58). Allie’s parents plan for her to marry a wealthy man; someone whose name will raise Allie’s social class, rather than lower it, as would happen if she were to marry Noah. She later learns that her mother was in a similar position, but unlike Allie, her mother knows what her place in society is, and was aware of the fact that she has to marry up. Allie, on the other hand, is somewhat rebellious when she first is dating Noah: she is in the relationship for love, not social status. The social and economic constructs in the 1930s and 1940s still maintained that a young woman was to marry into a wealthy family, because the roles of marriage in the upper class were more widely accepted than for a wealthy woman to marry a poor man, since the husband is supposed to be the one who cares for the family.

Throughout their courtship, Allie and Noah are faced not only with having to deal with her parents not approving of the relationship, but at the end of that summer, Allie is forced to break off the relationship she has with Noah, because her parents force her to return home. In the fourteen years that Allie and Noah are apart, she finishes school, goes to college, and then volunteers as a nurse for injured soldiers, but all the while she still thinks about Noah. During the time that she is a volunteer nurse, she meets Lon Hammond, Jr., who will later become a wealthy lawyer, as well as her fiancé. But before she is to be married, she has a feeling that she needs to go back after reading a newspaper article that brings her mind back to Noah Calhoun. Reminiscing on her previous
relationship with Noah, and anticipating her return, “She slowed the car as she approached, turning into the long, tree-lined dirt drive that led to the beacon that had summoned her from Raleigh” (35-36). Even though it has been fourteen years, and the last time she saw the house, it needing fixing up, she remembered that it was exactly what she was looking for. She went to see Noah looking for closure: “Allison Nelson […] searching for answers she needed to know” (36). She knows that before she could finally marry Lon, she had to know for sure that what she had that one summer with Noah was completely over. She also knows that if she does not get closure now, then for the rest of her life, she will be haunted by thoughts of Noah and what she could have had with him. However, for Noah, this visit from Allie only complicates his feelings even more, because it is now impossible for him to get over her.

During Allie’s return to North Carolina in 1946 to see Noah before her wedding, her mother comes to visit. In this scene, Allie’s mother takes her out and explains to her about how she knows what Allie is going through. This fact had been brought up to Allie fourteen years prior, but she never did ask her mother to elaborate on what she meant. Mrs. Nelson proves this to her daughter by explaining that she was in a similar situation, and she did not marry Allie’s father for love, but rather because that is what her parents expected of her, and she does not want Allie to make that same mistake, because ever since she married Allie’s father, Mrs. Nelson has wondered what her life would be like if she had married the man she loved instead. This is a similar situation in *Pride and Prejudice* when Elizabeth’s father tells her that if she marries Mr. Collins rather than Mr. Darcy, he will never speak to her again, even though doing the opposite would cause her mother to never speak to her again. It is during this scene with her mother that Allie realizes that she still loves Noah, and that she thinks she would be happier with him than she could ever be with Lon Hammond, Jr. It is also the moment that she makes her decision to break off her engagement to Lon, because it would not be fair to anyone if Allie married someone that she did not love wholeheartedly.
In regards to the article “Tradition Counter Tradition,” Noah and Allie’s overall relationship is representative of the traditional marriage plot. In his article, Boone states that the lovers are “enduring in the courtship plot’s momentum toward the ‘happy ending’ that simultaneously functions as a return to a narrative immobility or ‘oneness’” (38). Allie is searching for closure in her relationship with Noah so that she can be happily married to Lon in the near future, however, rather than proving to be an easy task, both Allie and Noah are faced with their past feelings for one another. So instead of reaching the idea of oneness with Lon, Allie is being to feel as though there could still be a chance for her and Noah, because they are both realizing that neither feel out of love with the other. Boone also talks about the “dissolution of identity as the only means of overcoming otherness and achieving ultimate union” (39). Here, Boone is making the point that the only way for any relationship to ultimately succeed is for there to be a termination or ending of a previous relationship that two people identify themselves with. In the case of Allie going back to visit Noah, this represents a relationship that is going to end while another results in a union. However, the outcome of the meeting is different than Allie thought it would be. She was under the impression that she would get closure that her relationship with Noah was over, but the meeting just recovers lost feelings, and she ends up breaking off the engagement that she had to Lon because she knew that her one true love was Noah. Instead of reaching the marital oneness with Lon like she had originally thought would result of this visit to Noah, Allie reaches this oneness with the man that she has love since she was fifteen years old. The Boone text, at this point, is showing how the relationship between Allie and Noah is an example of a traditional marriage plot in fiction.

Because Allie believes that she loves two different men, she has to decide who she is truly in love with: Lon or Noah? In Boone’s article, he says that “a person without a beloved is necessarily incomplete” (39). Boone is stating in this passage that, even if one is loved by another person, they will feel incomplete if the love held for them is different that what another person might hold.
In regards to Allie’s situation, she needs to figure out if she feels more complete with Noah or if she feels more complete with Lon. While visiting Noah uncovered her lost feelings for him, she is still engaged to Lon and she needs to figure out which direction she wants to go in order to be happy with the decision she makes. She has truly been in love with Noah since she met him fourteen years prior, however, she does also love Lon. However, Lon and Noah are two completely different people, in social standing, personality, and in the level with which Allie loves them. But she begins to feel as though she only really loves Lon because he is the one that society and her family wants her to be with, since he is wealthy and a well-respected lawyer. Noah, on the other hand, was her first love, and more specifically her first and, ultimately only, true love. But society cannot accept that because he does not have the means to keep them financially stable, even though neither Allie nor Noah cares as long as the two are happy with one another. The result of the trip to North Carolina is that Allie chooses to follow her heart, rather than listen to and care what everyone else has to say about how she should live her life. Since it is her life, she is the only one who needs to choose what would make her happy in the end.

The entire novel of *The Notebook* is a journal that Noah has kept, recounting every part of their lives (when they were together as well as when they were apart from one another), which he uses to try to jog Allie’s memory when she is diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease. While the disease affects Noah and Allie’s relationship, and all of their loved ones as well, it affects Allie the most because she can no longer remember who she is, or who those around her are, including her family. This is physically divorcing her from herself and everyone she loves, while it is also metaphorically divorcing Allie and Noah through their marriage because she no longer knows who he is, or even that they are married. In the article “Texting Doppelgangers: Repetition, Signs, and Intentionalities in (Auto)biographical Alzheimer Writing,” Vaidehi Ramanathan says that “One context […] is the case of Alzheimer patients and their caregivers, for whom the grasp on (their loved one’s) memory,
language, and general Dasein (existence, sanity, balance) is slipping away” (68). Though Allie is living in a nursing home, Noah is adamant to stay with her and try to help her remember her life and everyone in it. He reads to her their story every day, hoping that she will remember who he is. As Ramanathan says in the article, Allie is at a point where her memory has been deteriorated so much that she can no longer even recognize her husband, let alone her own children and grandchildren, even though they all spend a great deal of time with her.

As a result of Allie being an Alzheimer’s patient, Noah reintroduces himself to her everyday when he goes to read to her. And ultimately, he is successful a few times in Allie remembering her life, but it never seems to last for more than a few minutes at a time. Ramanathan also says that “memories and the interpretations of those memories are traces” (70) and “By ‘traces,’ Derrida means something left behind, residue that points to other residue and never to external realities, fragments of other times and spaces that we cull as we narrate and that are endlessly displaced and deferred” (70). It is apparent that this is what is happening to Allie once she is diagnosed with Alzheimer’s and she goes into a downward progression of forgetting who she is. This is acting as a way of her physically becoming divorced from herself because she is losing sight of everything that she knew about herself, as well as what she knew about others. It is divorcing her from herself and her memories because her brain is blocking off access to what would allow Allie to remember every aspect of her life that Noah has recounted for her in the journal.

The Notebook can be considered a counter-traditional courtship because throughout the courtship taking place in 1996 between Allie and Noah, there is ultimately no breakthrough in Noah’s reading to her of their story, and it is just a long cycle of Allie regaining her memories for a few minutes, only to have a memory lapse again. Noah narrates within the first few pages that “The romantics would call this a love story, the cynics would call it a tragedy” (2). It could be considered a love story because of the fact that it is recounting Noah and Allie’s entire relationship, but ultimately it
is a tragedy because Noah can never get passed the walls built up in her memory by the Alzheimer’s, which does not allow Allie to remember her past or for there to be any kind of breakthrough. More proof to there being no breakthrough is that despite how Noah reads to Allie everyday, he says, “I understand, for she doesn’t know who I am. I’m a stranger to her” (4). By this point in time, Allie’s Alzheimer’s disease has progressed so much that she cannot even recognize a face, let alone be able to place a name with it, even if it is someone that she sees every day in the nursing, and has also seen every day of her life since 1946. However, Noah has come to accept this reality and always reintroduces himself to her, even if he never actually introduces himself to her as Noah Calhoun. Since she already does not know who he is, and the Alzheimer’s disease never truly allows her to remember anything, his new identity when he reads to her does not mean much to Allie.

As Noah’s reading to Allie never serves as a breakthrough in her memory lapses due to Alzheimer’s disease, the relationship between Allie and Noah in 1996 now becomes a counter-traditional marriage plot. Even though she occasionally regains her memory, it is never for more than a few minutes, and she always returns to not remembering anything about her life prior to this point in time when Noah is reading to her. Since the cycle never changes, hope is always crushed and lost on the parts of her family, whose hopes begin as being high for her to remember herself and everyone around her, but as time wears on, the children become discouraged, and try to talk their father into leaving the nursing home and going home with them. Noah, however, is not ready to give up so easily on the one that he has loved since he was seventeen years old. This is also representative of the way that Allie is divorced from herself as well as everyone around her. She is physically divorced from herself, her family, and Noah because her memories of her entire life are gone. But she is also metaphorically divorced from Noah, because she does not recall that they are married, nor does she even recall the courtship that the two had as teenagers. For all she can remember, Noah is a stranger to her, and there is no possible way that they can be married, but she occasionally regains
her memory long enough to remember who she is, and who Noah is, and what their relationship to one another for years.

The Boone article defines the counter-traditional marriage plot as “wedded life proved less a hopeful beginning than an emphatic dead end, a state of moral and narrative impasse” (142). This describes the courtship between Allie and Noah during 1996, because Allie’s memory has blocked out everything that happened in her life, and she cannot seem to get passed the roadblock in her life. Alzheimer’s disease causes the brain to repress memories to the point that the victim of the disease cannot retrieve their memories anymore, unless there is a specific trigger, and even then, the chances are slim for the patient to ever truly remember anything about their lives. This is exactly what Allie is suffering from. Her memories are being locked away in her brain and blocked off so that she cannot access them. This is common in patients with Alzheimer’s disease, but occasionally, some memories can break through the walls that the brain builds up, which does happen to Allie on a few occasions in the novel.

Though she occasionally has a breakthrough with her memories being closed off from her, she will never fully remember her life before she was diagnosed with the disease. Allie suffering from Alzheimer’s disease is what Boone refers to as an “irresolvable conflict” (142). As Alzheimer’s disease is incurable, this fits in to the category of a conflict in Allie and Noah’s marriage that cannot be resolved. However, Noah never gives up hope that maybe there will be a miracle one day, and she will regain her memories for good. But not only does the Alzheimer’s disease affect her memories before the diagnosis, but since it is a disability of the brain and mind, it affects all aspects of her day to day life. She cannot retrieve the memories after the diagnosis of Alzheimer’s disease either.

Even though Noah knows that there is no possible way for Allie to ever regain her full memory again, he never gives up hope that a miracle can happen. On the last page of chapter one, Noah says, “And that leaves me with the belief that miracles, no matter how inexplicable or unbelievable, are real and can occur without regard to the natural order of things” (5). In most of his novels, Nicholas
Sparks does write about miracles happening for characters, and *The Notebook* is no exception to this convention of Sparks’ writing. However, the miracle that is hoped for in *The Notebook* is never actually reached. Noah does not want to just rely on what he is told by the doctors about his wife’s condition. He puts his faith into a higher authority, so that maybe, even for a few minutes, Allie will remember that she and Noah are married and love each other. And even in the instances where she does remember and regain her memory, it is only for a few minutes before she relapses into not knowing anything about her life in the past, or even really much of the present. She only knows that she does not know her past, and this circle of uncertainty is representative of how there is never a true breakthrough.

Because Noah never gives up hope that his wife will somehow regain her memories, there is a sense of spirituality throughout the 1996 courtship in regards to Allie’s disability. It is common for family members of Alzheimer’s patients to look to spirituality in hopes of a miracle happening. Judy Kaye and Senthil Kumar Raghavan in explain in their article, “Spirituality in Disability and Illness,” that there is a “Transformation of perceptions, such as hopelessness and helplessness, experienced with disability and illness” (233) and that it “may provide some comfort and aid among adults trying to deal with these conditions” (233). The perceptions that Kaye and Raghavan are referring to is what allows the ones trying to deal with disability and illness to have hope that there can be a change in their condition. Even if the condition is not directly affecting a specific person, like in the case of *The Notebook*, family members are still affected by the disease, disability, or illness, so they try to keep up the hopes and spirits of the one affected.

The reason why Noah reads this notebook everyday, recounting his entire relationship with Allie, is because he believes that there is something in those pages that will jog Allie’s memory. He never gives up hope, even when he is told by everyone around him that she is basically a lost cause, and there is no point in him trying anymore. The only time that there seems to be an instance of a miracle happening in the novel is right at the very end, when Allie
regains her memory of her and Noah right before both of them pass away together in their sleep.

Through the lens of the disability study on Alzheimer’s disease, *The Notebook* is both a counter-traditional marriage plot as well as a divorce novel, because there is no breakthrough in Allie’s disability, which forces her to become divorced from herself and all of her loved ones. Even when her family hopes for a miracle to happen, everyone, including Allie, is let down when she continually cannot force herself to remember her past or present. But the novel was not always representative of a counter-traditional marriage plot and divorce novel. In the beginning of Allie and Noah’s relationship, the courtship was representative of the traditional marriage plot, because both characters were looking for that one person to reach marital oneness with. Allie and Noah’s relationship, though it was representative of the traditional marriage plot, was not approved of by her parents. They had high expectations for her to marry a wealthy man, so that a well-known and respected name would be associated with their family. Her parents also disapproved of Noah because he was from a single parent family, and he and his father were poor, in comparison to the Nelson family. Allie’s family was wealthy and all her parents wanted for her was that she married into another wealthy family. However, social status and money is not what Allie wanted. She wanted happiness, and she knew that she could never be truly happy if she was not with the one that she loved. Since the title of the novel is *The Notebook*, however, the main plots are the counter-traditional marriage plot and the divorce plot. The journal that Noah reads out of is meant to help Allie in regaining at least some of her memories, but her mind is so divorced from itself at this point that there is not much that can be done in helping her memory to latch on to something that could trigger it into remember everything. Noah does not completely give up his hope that something will change though, and his dedication to being in miracles and trying to help his wife shows a strong determination that many loved ones of Alzheimer’s patients may not share. He is well aware of the fact that Allie will never make a full recovery, but he is happy with just the few breakthroughs of
memory loss that he helps her to achieve. The never-ending cycle of not being able to reach a breakthrough is what makes *The Notebook* a counter-traditional marriage plot. The courtship that Noah has created through this journal is always the same, because Allie does not know who he is. His having to continually reintroduce himself shows the never-ending cycle of no breakthrough of the counter-traditional marriage plot because she never remembers who he is, and her brain never allows her to remember.

**Works Cited**


THE EFFECTS OF “LIKKER” IN RICK BRAGG’S MARRIAGE PLOT

KALI RATCLIFF

Hillbilly. Ridge runner. Redneck. White trash. Everyone has different opinions about the various meanings each of these terms conveys and to whom exactly they refer. In the South, some of these terms have become positive affirmations of a unique culture, as evidenced by popular country songs such as “Redneck Woman” by Gretchen Wilson. However, to the rest of the nation, all of these terms conjure an image that looks very similar and altogether negative. The popular conception of poor Southern white people has been the same for quite some time: shiftless, violent, stupid, alcoholic, and racist. Literary critics have largely ignored writing for and by this segment of Southern culture for the majority of this nation’s history, and only within the last fifty years have “white trash” authors been able to elbow out a space in an ever-expanding and -diversifying canon. Rick Bragg, awarded the Pulitzer prize for feature writing in 1996, breaks from pure journalism and steps foot into the Southern literary arena with his two memoirs, *All Over but the Shoutin’* and *Ava’s Man*. These two texts, which together span over three generations of personal history, represent Bragg’s attempts to correct the often misrepresented cultural mythology of poor Southern Appalachian whites. In the course of rectifying the white trash myth, Bragg ultimately depicts an evolution of the literal marriage between man and woman as an institution that no longer registers with him as an authentic, plausible responsibility. Through this progression of the marriage plot, Bragg narrates himself as the embodiment of a larger, more
complicated and precarious cultural marriage composed of his “white trash” roots as well as his current identity. Specifically, by tracking the intensification of alcoholism’s effect on the literal marriage plot, a narrative becomes discernible in which Bragg corrects the white trash countermyth, complicates that myth, and finally revises it in the face of contemporary culture.

Bragg’s writing situates itself among a strenuous literary tradition in which Southern authors have long struggled with how to manage the region’s past with its present. Historically, the literature of the South has been obsessed with cultural infringement, or the loss of “real” Southern culture to encroaching modernity, and much of the literature coming out of this tradition seeks “to capture the moment of its passing and to commemorate its glory” (Gray 3). The Southern Renascence, as identified by Allen Tate, was the period between the 1920s and 1950s during which Southern writers began to contend for serious critical attention in the national literary arena, breaking free of the popular conception that the South had nothing to offer rest of the nation in terms of the arts (Brinkmeyer 149). Through re-assessing the standard historical foundation of the Civil War and joining the rest of America in modernity, Tate argued, the best Renascence writers “embraced rather than avoided the difficult demands and challenges arising from conflicting artistic and cultural allegiances” (Brinkmeyer 150). The writers and critics of the Renascence canon, however, rejected many modern Southern writers from participation in the movement, ignoring anyone who offered a different depiction of the South. Tate and his followers “attempted to represent the South and its literature as free from the turmoil of gender, race, and class dissent” and anybody who wrote about those things was excluded, “casually dismissed, typed as treacly sentimentalists or misguided propagandists” (Brinkmeyer 152). As a result, the original Southern Renaissance canon lacked the consciousness of many segments of Southern society: literary analysts systematically ignored women, African Americans, and the poor.

In the light of postmodernity, then, contemporary Southern writing has expanded with the ushering in of a new class of authors
The Effects of “Likker” in Rick Bragg’s Marriage Plot

who reportedly disregard the traditions of Renascence writers and tackle the issues of gender, race, and class from the inside the oppressed faction. Understandably, these contemporary authors seek to re-invent the Southern literary myth which has so long preferred their absence. Southern writers have been slow to catch up to postmodernity, but they have now become “a new class of writers who approach literary convention with either indifference or hostility” (Guinn ix). Guinn splits up contemporary Southern writers in terms of naturalism and what he calls “mythoclasm,” both camps which ultimately aim to dismantle the traditional depictions and conceptions of the South. Neonaturalist writing in the South, he argues, “constitutes another renaissance of a sort….in which newly educated poor Southerners … expose the fallacies and injustices of a culture…obsessed with the notion of aristocracy” (xii). These naturalist authors “bring the sensibility of an earlier literary movement to bear on the contemporary South” and “their late arrival to the Southern literary consciousness represents a latter-day renaissance” (Guinn xiii). Though Bragg, using the most realistic form of narrative, the memoir, fits almost perfectly into the seemingly retro-tradition of neonaturalism Guinn identifies. However, this paradigm seems to reinforce the notion that the result of such literature “is to transfix the beings, the objects of study, and leave them stamped with an inalienable, non-evolutive character—to sever them from the living tissue of their moment in time” (Gray 4-5). However, taken as a pair, *Ava’s Man* and *All Over but the Shoutin’* establish and evolve the countermyth of white trash, and Bragg essentially marries his past with his present in such a way that complicates Guinn’s conception of neonaturalist writers.

The depiction of literal marriage in *Ava’s Man* represents a counterstory that responds to and corrects Renascence literary tradition, but upholds a counter mythology; *Shoutin’* evolves that depiction further by undermining the myth of Ava and Charlie’s marriage in the light of modernity. In *Ava’s Man*, Bragg depicts the marriage between Ava and Charlie in a manner that acknowledges the downfalls of their union, thus correcting the Renascence myth, but ultimately upholds a countermyth that celebrates and dignifies the
culture of poor Southern whites. Specifically, Bragg acknowledges his grandfather’s alcoholism, which threatens to run counter to the myth of constant attendance to familial responsibilities, as a major force derailing the otherwise palatable marriage. Bragg explains, but does not excuse, this blemish on the overall shine of Ava and Charlie’s marital model by appealing to the cultural and historical situation in which Charlie’s alcoholism becomes acceptable.

The problems stemming from Charlie’s alcoholism center around the more indirect effects of drinking “likker,” and Bragg uses this distinction to explain how Ava and Charlie’s marriage could still function. Charlie “was never mean to [Ava] when he drank. In fact, she never saw him drink. She just dealt with the fallout” (Bragg 70). The “fallout” from Charlie’s drinking includes the occasional need to relocate not because the work in the area had dried up, but “because one of the lawmen had found one of Charlie’s stills” (Bragg 93). This moving is constant enough that Ava and Charlie’s children have trouble situating the stories they tell Bragg in certain dwellings. Although largely stemming from their inability to purchase land outright, this constant moving is one of the downfalls of the white trash countermyth, and here, Bragg intertwines that rootlessness to Charlie’s involvement with moonshine. Bragg also acknowledges that his grandfather’s being drunk directly results in his inability to fulfill his responsibility as a father on at least one occasion. In relating the story of a young Margaret’s (Bragg’s mother) dress catching on fire and burning her severely while Charlie was away at a job, he writes that his grandfather came home to take care of his daughter, but had been drinking when his family “needed him stone-cold sober” so he could accurately assess how bad his daughter was hurt. However, Bragg allows that “it would be one of the few times, times his daughters can count on one hand, that he failed them”. Bragg does not excuse Charlie’s drinking, but does offer that “men often took a drink after work, sneaking a few sips of home brew smuggled into the dry counties” (123).

Essentially, Bragg offers penitence by affirming that Charlie, though he was not an infallible legend, did meet the responsibility
of having a family while at the same time conforming to the norm of his day. The author describes a distinct “culture to [drinking], almost a religion,” that dictates that as long as familial responsibilities were met, drinking was an acceptable ritual (126). Bragg reveals the culture’s limitations on the consumption of alcohol when he maintains that Charlie “never would have let his babies go hungry to drink—because that is, and forever will be, the mark of a sorry man, but if you are making it, drinking it just doesn’t seem to be such a sin” (Bragg 115). Charlie’s “likker” even helped bring Bragg’s mother into the world, because although the Bundrums may not have had the money to pay a doctor to deliver Margaret, he was able to afford a quart of homemade ‘shine. In fact, Bragg concedes that the culture upholding the deceit needed to make and even drink alcohol “was almost noble” because it helps provide for and even expand the family unit (Bragg 127). Bragg’s ability to uphold the countermyth even under the pressure of Charlie’s alcoholism leans on the culture and selective morality of the people inhabiting the time and place he describes.

Guinn argues that the newest Southern writers “defy the traditional approaches to history, place, and community” (xi). Bragg indeed relies heavily on the foundation of history, place, and community; he also defies the traditional modernist approaches to those monoliths of Southern culture by complicating the stereotype of the drunken hillbilly in such a way that affords white trash the same dignity as the Southern gentry. Thus, Bragg essentially constructs a countermyth which he illustrates, in part, through Charlie’s alcoholism: even though that part of his family’s history is not palatable, he doesn’t ignore it, but explains it through a critical eye on history, place and community. Gosselin, in her examination of addiction memoirs, observes that the ambivalence characterizing drug use, as evidenced by attributing addiction to a specific culture and time, typically carries over into “all relevant aspects of identity” (138). The complexity Bragg acknowledges surrounding Charlie’s alcoholism essentially allows this contemporary author to make sense of more pressing instances of addiction, specifically Bragg’s father, Charles. Bragg admits Charlie “is so much more
precious smelling of hot cornbread and whiskey than milk and honey. His story is more important knowing how the moonshine made him sing instead of cuss,” showing that Bragg still values the countermyth he has constructed, even with the faults inherent in it (Bragg 11). Peculiarly, however, Bragg upholds the myth of his grandfather’s generation precisely because he has seen its failure in his parents’ generation: “I am not trying to excuse it. He did things that he shouldn’t have. I guess it takes someone who has outlived a mean drunk to appreciate a kind one” (Bragg 133).

Outliving a mean drunk becomes Margaret’s (Bragg’s mother’s) main goal at the end of Ava’s Man and the first third of All Over but the Shoutin’. Bragg’s structuring of Ava’s Man follows a roughly chronological order and, at first glance, appears to consist of short stories that could almost stand alone. Bragg in fact admits constructing the memoirs the way he tells a story: by leaning “the words against each other so that they all don’t fall down,” indicating that while each chapter in his memoirs could stand alone as separate short stories, taken as a whole, they construct a story larger and more complex than the mere summation of its parts (Shoutin’ xix). As with a house of cards, with a closer look, one can discern several patterns in Bragg’s memoirs that combine to produce not just a unified whole, but a continuous narrative that achieves the construction and complication of a cultural counter-myth. Bragg accomplishes this by folding in stories that hint of Charlie’s impending death (from drinking) with the stories of the blossoming courtship plot between his mother, Margaret, and his father, Charles Bragg.

Bragg introduces the courtship plot between Margaret and Charles by framing stories about their early relationship with chapters that begin to close in on Charlie’s inevitable death from drinking, and this framing ultimately indicates that Margaret’s only choices are to hold on to a dying myth or to weather a marriage to Charles. In “Hello, and goodbye,” Margaret and Charles meet for the first time, and in the very next chapter entitled “Underwater,” Bragg begins to introduce the idea that Charlie, though the closest thing to a legend the white trash of the South can claim,
will eventually die. Charlie gets locked up in a Birmingham jail for vagrancy, and his family cannot locate him for three days. This story reveals how Charlie could no longer live freely in the modern world, and its position between “Hello, and goodbye” and “Pilfered Roses,” the chapter in which Charles proposes to Margaret, clearly points to a connection between the encroachment of the modern world and the crumbling of Bragg’s countermyth.

The countermyth Bragg constructs in Ava and Charlie’s marriage ultimately buckles under the weight of alcoholism and familial irresponsibility in the modern generation. Bragg spans this marriage plot across *Ava’s Man* and *All Over but the Shoutin’*, and its dysfunction indicates a deterioration of the countermyth the author has spent the entire memoir trying to correct. Bragg evidences the failure of the countermyth much in the same way he constructs it. This countermyth relies on Charlie’s ability to fulfill his familial responsibilities while still indulging in alcohol. In the light of modernity, however, the deterministic setting Bragg’s family inhabits intensifies, and Charles cannot uphold both of these myths. Bragg concedes that Charles “had shown [Margaret] flashes of warmth and kindness, but he fought his war, still, and drank his paycheck, and he let his babies do without” (*Ava’s* 239). Charles cannot maintain his responsibilities as a husband and father because of his alcoholism, and although this act is unforgiveable—it “is, and forever will be, the mark of a sorry man”—Bragg still attempts to account for his father’s alcoholism by explaining time and place, the same way he accounts for his mothers’ inability to leave Charles (*Ava’s* 115). The ultimatum Charlie finally gives his daughter, that she can only return to her husband if she leaves her first son, Sam, with him, represents that given to her by the rest of the society. Essentially, Bragg realizes the determinism set against his mother and refuses to allow that thread continue in his lifetime. He explains:

She was not some steel magnolia thrust into an alien poverty by a sorry man, but a woman who grew up with it, whose own mother would just forget to eat supper if there
wasn’t enough to go around. Her sisters wed men who worked hard, who bought land, homes and cars that did not reek of spilt beer. Through their vows, and some luck, they made good lives and had good things that had never been used before. Momma, bless her heart, picked badly, and the years of doing without spun a single, unbroken thread through her childhood, her youth, her middle age, until the gray had crept into her hair” (Shoutin’ 25)

Bragg’s attention to determinism, the way in which he infers that marriage was really the only option for his mother and her sisters, helps cast him in the role of a naturalist writer. Modernity essentially intensifies loss of agency in both Margaret (who cannot leave Charles) and in Charles (who cannot halt his love affair with alcohol).

Bragg represents and writes his family history as a means of exposing the larger potential for cultural union evident in his ability to both honor and respect his “white trash” roots while successfully functioning in the dominant, privileged society. As a result of the evolution of the literal marriage between Ava and Charlie (as a countercultural mythology) to that between Margaret and Bragg’s father (as an undermining or failing of that myth largely due to alcoholism), Bragg comes to describe himself in the predicament of the southern Renascence author: mythology has failed, so he in turn must revise the myth in order to sensibly relate his past with his present. The author sheds both the continuing strain of alcoholism and responsibility to a family of his own in the present generation, and the marriage in this generation occurs in professional achievement as a journalist.

In Shoutin’, Bragg acknowledges a string of relationships, and even a literal marriage, but each of them seems to end and begin matter-of-factly and seemingly without much fanfare. The author mostly ascribes this pattern to his white trash roots by saying that the girlfriends “came and went by an average of two a year, often—you could time it by a clock—when they found out who I really was, where I came from” (Shoutin’ 144). Thus, his back-
ground and the failure of the countermyth in his parents’ generation necessitates that Bragg transform his idea of marriage, of his own bildungsroman. Even in describing his first marriage, Bragg writes as if matrimony was the natural course of events, but it is really just an automatic response. He writes that “after I got my first good full-time job, at the Anniston Star, I proposed. I got the ring at Service Merchandise, on credit. When I gave it to her, she cried” (Bragg 143). Bragg’s repetitive sentence structure reveals that the marriage is really just an automatic progression. The marriage fails, but not due to alcohol, because Bragg essentially rejects both myths. The author confides that he actually fears the seduction alcohol has to offer: “I fear, mostly, I would find in it the absolution that people on both sides of my family have found, for generations” (Shoutin’ 155).

In rejecting both literal marriage and avoiding the alcoholism that plagued his family, Bragg constructs for himself a new marriage tradition. His work as a journalist essentially serves to successfully manage his past with the present. Bragg conceives of his work as a marriage, and describes it that way more than once. While interviewing with the Los Angeles Times, Bragg remembers gearing that the position they offer him “would be a perfect marriage, they told me, a happy one” (Bragg 231). Although this position in Los Angeles does not work out for Bragg, he describes his next job with the New York Times as “a marriage so perfect, in my mind’s eye, that [he] was almost surprised when [he] got a cold, or stubbed [his] toe, or got a parking ticket, because such things do not belong in dreams” (Bragg 269). Not only does Bragg refer to his work as a marriage, he directly acknowledges that the responsibility his writing as a journalist carries ultimately replaces that of a family. When Margaret expresses concern that Bragg has not settled down, he consoles her by saying “this job is who I am, what I have instead of a wife and children, in place of a garden and a house with a porch swing” (Bragg 294). Bragg’s personal appropriation of the marriage plot, then, develops into an occupation in which his white trash background becomes a
distinguishing factor. He believes that “one could not have been without the other” (Shoutin’ xx).

Although the sort of cultural union witnessed in Bragg’s memoirs may seem as though it stems from “the sensibility of an earlier literary movement” at first glance, a closer inspection proves that to be false (Guinn xiii). Bragg’s memoirs, though they do espouse the modernist urge to comfortably merge history with the present, represent more than a late-coming to the modernist perspective. Bragg in fact wrote Ava’s Man after All Over but the Shoutin’ in order to get to the root of how Margaret was able to survive a marriage to Charles and raise three sons from the bottom of the barrel, meaning that Bragg did not set out to construct and demolish the white trash countermyth in a linear, chronological order, and therefore tends toward disjointed narration which, in a sense, must go backwards before it can go forward. Guinn’s conception that authors stemming from oppressed backgrounds are somehow “stuck” in an earlier literary tradition lends itself much too easily to arguments that “that these people, given a choice of better housing, jobs, and opportunities to rise in social status with a little effort, chose to stay with the social groups in which they feel comfortable” (Gurkin 268). Guinn’s condescending analysis also suggests that newly educated authors from the lower brackets of Southern society are also “stuck” in the development of their cultural complexity and depth. Though he acknowledges himself that literature continues to evolve, with or without critical attention by saying that “outside the academe the literature itself (of course) continued apace,” his premise in the argument that contemporary naturalist authors write from “an earlier literary consciousness” obviously ignores that development outside academia and assumes that since these lower-class authors were not acknowledged by the original Renascence critics, their writing has been stunted. With Ava’s Man and All Over but the Shoutin’, then, Bragg not only rectifies earlier conceptions and analysis of Southern white trash literature, but continues to disprove contemporary critiques as well.
Works Cited

“I’M NOT BITTER, I’M MAD AS HELL!”:
IDENTITY AND RECREATION IN
THE WORK OF TYLER PERRY

SELENA ALEXANDER

The opening images of 1970’s Diary of a Mad Housewife show a young white woman hectically rummaging through her home, answering the phone, walking the dog, tackling massive loads of laundry, passing by her black housekeeper, and finally finding peace at the end of the day as she lies in bed, closes her eyes, and prepares to repeat the same frantic schedule on the morrow. So, what does it mean to be a wife? Here we see a young white woman perform chores and serve as her husband’s trophy; and the politically correct definition probably reads something like: “the female partner in marital relationships whose rights and obligations vary between cultures and have altered over time.” Fast forward to 2005 where now the black housekeeper whimsically passed by in the 1970 film finds herself the focal point in the re-invented film now titled Diary of a Mad Black Woman. The black woman in the opening scenes of Mad Housewife has evolved from the help, to the wife of one of the most well-known attorneys in the city of Atlanta. Cleary, the marriage tradition has developed from its conventional structure—where white woman meets white man—to now include a once discounted African American race. The marriage tradition in African-American literature is one that cannot be traced back as far as the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries—how could it be when African-Americans were not even considered citizens until the nineteenth century? Thus, I find it compelling to investigate an issue that questions how the tradi-
tional marriage plot situates itself in a population that had been suppressed, even ignored, for so long. In Tyler Perry’s 21st century play and film, both entitled *Diary of a Mad Black Woman*, issues of race, violence, religion, love, and hate are all intertwined in the story of Helen McCarter and emerge as the director’s controversial contributions to the genre. A black woman living in high society who suddenly finds herself amongst her lower class counterparts must come to terms with the idea that she will no longer be living the life she has become accustomed to. At the hands of her unfaithful husband, Helen struggles to define her own identity and restore her faith in Black men. As a Black woman, Helen’s actions are often questionable as a twenty-first century audience would observe; but do her actions actually follow the mode tradition has set forth? The bridge between a past where marriage merely meant the union between white woman and white man, and a present that has at times rewritten this entire traditional ideal, seems to be a central concern of Perry’s, and he interestingly attempts to make sense of it all in his theatrical adaptations. But, just as Ann DuCille asserts that her own text, *The Coupling Convention*, defining Black marriage “is not an act of recovery or reconnaissance. It assumes no single tradition and, in fact, argues against the notion of a black tradition, a common black female experience, or a shared black woman’s language” and I argue that Perry, too, does not seek to recreate, nor solidly define Black marriage, but to offer his own donations to the genre (DuCille). Perry’s work even seems to challenge the ideals that popular culture associates with Black marriage and in turn offer texts that acknowledge both a past when African Americans were denied the right to be married, and a present in which convention, perception, and performativity introduce a new 21st century model of Black marriage that neither completely follows tradition nor strictly strays from it.

Perry released two forms of *Diary of a Mad Black Woman*: a play to be followed up with a film; but in both versions his message seems to be consistent—marriage is so much more than saying “I do.” This message certainly mirrors the descriptions of ideals that critics before him like Joseph Allen Boone and Ann DuCille,
and Carole Pateman offered, but Perry attempts to merge his own contributions with the tradition as well. The literal marriage that Perry provides for his audience is between Charles and Helen McCarter, and it serves as the central union from which to examine the construct of an African-American marriage. It is the model of a contemporary marriage that incorporates many of the shallow ideals of the marriage tradition: the powerful husband, and the dedicated and faithful wife who is not allowed to work, who is seen and not heard. In the opening scenes of the film we learn that we are in Atlanta, Georgia, where a young couple lives the “American Dream.” What is not clichéd about this couple, though, is that they are African-American. Far from the poverty-stricken African-American families often seen in traditional depictions of the American culture, this couple is comprised of Charles, who has just received accolades as Atlanta’s Attorney of the Year award, and Helen, his beautiful housewife, and they are on the verge of celebrating their nineteenth anniversary. Charles has collected the type of wealth and prominence that propels him into upper class America—and we see him, as he accepts his award, thank his devoted wife for supporting him: “without [Helen] I would be nothing.” It appears that Helen and Charles share a union most would envy—a hard working husband, complemented by a wife who has stood by his side since day one. Thus, though it initially appears Helen and Charles have a “good” marriage, Joseph Allen Boone would remind audiences that in the traditional marriage plot there is no such thing, and that notion should “serve as [a reminder] of the potentially destabilizing contradictions embedded within an emergent ideology of wedlock that urged companionship but not equality within its bonds” (Boone 57). So, while Helen and Charles seems to have established the dream of equality and “happiness” in a union, Boone urges the acknowledgement of the difference between companionship and parity, and it will emerge that Perry, through his work’s rough treatment of Helen, will do the same. So, when they arrive at their million dollar home later that evening and Helen offers to run Charles a bath, she is coldly shunned by her husband, and it becomes apparent that the
private lives of Helen and Charles stand to reveal a darker reality lying within their marriage. These are the opening images of *Diary of a Mad Black Woman*, and it seems that Tyler foreshadows that “happiness” comes at a price.

Perry’s abrupt unveiling of the darker side of this marriage in order to dismantle what passes for happiness in the outside world is his way of offering an entirely different meaning to the traditional marriage plot. In “Feminism and the Marriage Contract,” Carole Pateman explains that “the “contractual” element in a marriage [was] simply the consent of each party to marry the other,…To contract a marriage was to consent to a status which in its essence was hierarchal and unalterable” (166). Here Pateman’s descriptions of the ideals of the marriage contract offer a structure that stands in opposition to the expectations of what the outside world often sees in a marriage. Suggesting marriage as a contractual agreement exposes the romanticized ideas of marriage as a signifier of love and fidelity, and instead minimizes these ideals to one-dimensional terms such as “consent” and an “element.” Tyler’s work seems to lend itself to the ideas that Pateman suggests here and even seems to punish Helen, and her “happy” union, for confusing “happiness” with marriage.

In challenging Helen’s beliefs, so is to challenge the Black community as a whole and the diverse representations of African-Americans are to be noted when examining both the film and the play as they cause one to question Perry’s intentions as he attempts to recreate representation and meaning in his productions. Perry seems to be dedicated to invoking to particular African-American stereotypes, and providing his own twist on them. Helen, the protagonist, provides a link for audiences between a pre-civil war past and the present. In both the film and the play Helen is played by a woman whose skin tone straddles dark and light: as Margaret Hunter contends, “[o]ne of the key phenomena to understanding skin color stratification among U.S Blacks is the history of sexual violence against African women by White men during slavery” (Hunter 518). Like the former slave woman, subject to the dominance of the men around her, whether she be the victim of
the sexual advances of a slave master, or the wife of the man who feels entitled to her. Helen, too, is subject to this type of oppression. In an argument with his wife, Charles raises a harsh hand and even accuses Helen of being an unappreciative wife to him: “What makes you think you can question me about anything I do? Woman, this is my house. I pay the bills. You need to know your place” (“Diary”). Here, it becomes clear that Charles believes that Helen’s position as a woman automatically makes her inferior to a man with his economic position—he even refers to her as “woman” instead of using her name. As Lawrence, Littlefield, and Okundaye assert, “Rigidly defined Eurocentric concepts of masculinity and femininity in a discussion addressing African American…relationships must be closely scrutinized” (626). In using Helen’s sex to oppress her position within the household, Charles seems to follow the Eurocentric concepts of masculinity that men are assigned; forbidding her from working and using this notion as just cause to limit her rights as a wife—she does not pay the bills, therefore she is told to “know her place.” This control that Charles has over Helen was at one point expected in American culture, and was accepted not by measures of Black or white, but by male or female; and Perry does not stray from it in his representations of Black marriage.

Helen’s lack of autonomy in her marriage speaks not only to a long history of male dominance in the lives of African-American women, but also to the associations of skin tone in the Black community. As noted before, Helen’s skin tone middles between what could be termed dark-skin and what would be considered light enough to “pass.” The film surrounds Helen with darker-skinned actors, including her husband, but also incorporates many significantly lighter actors; and the actors of the play are cast the same way. What I assert Perry is doing here is evoking empathy from his audience for Helen. Her somewhat lighter skin lends her some significances of whiteness. Even in her behavior, she often acts in what some call a “white” manner. Perry, then, correlates this whiteness with weakness and the powerlessness that he ascribes Helen is meant to be reminiscent of weakness that is not thought to be
ttypical of contemporary Black women. Helen goes to great lengths to gain the acceptance of a man to whom she has been faithful for almost two decades, and even in the most brutal of moments, as Charles begins to physically drag Helen out of their home while his mistress stands behind him, she pleads, “Tell me what I need to do and I will do it” (Diary 2005). Characters often comment on Helen’s submissive “white” behavior. In one scene of the play, Charles forcefully orders Helen to go to her room, and Helen does so obediently. Charles’ own father comments that Helen “run[s] up them stairs like a white woman. A Black woman would’ve ran to the kitchen for a butcher knife” (“Diary”). Here, Daddy Charles’s commentary on how a white woman acts in comparison to a Black woman’s response confirms the way in which Perry treats Helen’s skin tone. He points to her performance of whiteness and contrasts it with the expectations of Black performativity. Thus, the kind of reversal we see here seems to imply that while historically, Black women are always victimized, weak and essentially helpless, 21st century African-American cultural production asserts that it is actually whiteness that stands to be correlated with weakness.

Perry goes on in both versions of Mad Black Woman to suggest that as long as Helen acts submissively, she will never be able to pull herself completely out of this tragic marriage. Whenever she does not fight back or allows Charles to mistreat her, she demonstrates, in the minds of other characters at least, a kind of white performativity that will prevent her from ever obtaining any autonomy. It is clear how different the conceptualizations of whiteness and blackness have completely switched over time for a society that once valued light skin and correlated dark with savagery; and it is through Helen and her marriage that audiences are able to see this difference. Helen’s separation from the “authentic” black woman can be further seen in the fact that she cannot bear children. Traditionally, black women are known for their dependence on family. For black women child bearing has involved everything from slave women subject to rape by their owners to the incomparable strength of being a single mother in a contemporary society that now sees more Black men in prison
than as the heads of their households. So in a union that lasts over
the span of eighteen years, Helen’s infertility only stands to remove
her even further from her Black roots. Moreover, Helen’s inability
to reproduce also becomes another way her husband mentally
abuses her. Towards the beginning of the film it is implied that
her inability to give him children is one of the reasons that he is
unhappy in the marriage and growing more sexually frustrated
with her. Her failure to give him any children becomes a means
for him not only to attack her as a wife, but as a woman period.
Helen’s marriage continues to grow progressively tragic and her
role as a “white” woman seems to jeopardize her position.

Skin tone and the color line becomes another window that Perry
probes in order to convey his message and Charles’ infidelities
further complicate the issue of race within the film. When Helen
appears unexpectedly at Charles’ job to bring him lunch, she is
first stalled by a co-worker of his who seems to try and intercept
her from making her way to her husband. It is soon after this
encounter that we learn the reason why—Charles exits his office
with a young woman carrying a toddler. We learn that this woman
in his mistress, and actually has two children with him. Brenda
(the mistress) is played by a much lighter skinned actress, and the
children she shares with Charles could easily be mistaken as white
with their light skin and straight hair. So it seems that Perry con-
tinues emphasize the ideals of skin color. But what exactly is his
position on lighter skin and the idea of “passing?” Here it appears
that lighter skin benefits Brenda. After all, she has the children,
and ultimately she becomes Charles’ new fiancée when he puts
Helen out of their house. Further, it is Brenda who demonstrates
the strong characteristics of a Black woman—she stands behind
Charles as he drags Helen out of the house, and boldly claims “I
am the owner of this house.” She essentially embodies a sense of
power that Helen is never quite able to grasp. It becomes clear
through his treatment of Helen and Brenda that Perry writes his
own scripts on Black and white performativity. He alleviates the
concrete statutes that once deemed the darker your skin the more
“Black” you were. Helen’s submissiveness juxtaposed with Brenda’s
Selena Alexander

dominance creates its own 21st century mold in the Black community, where skin color no longer carries the same connotations as it once historically did. Blackness is now no longer a measure of pigment in the skin, but performativity and assertiveness.

Her “white” performance noted and refuted by her fellow characters, it is from her Black community—namely, her mother and aunt—that Helen gains strength. Physically removed from her house at her husband’s hands and replaced, Helen gains strength from the community and women around her. Unlike the mode set forth by early white female writers like Jane Austen, Perry strays from the notion that women are in constant search of, and even obligated to the ideal of marriage for reasons like financial gain and security; and at the base of all of their internalized ideals usually stands the community—like Mrs. Bennet in Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*. In *Diary*, though, Helen’s mother does not follow this tradition, and when Helen dutifully tells her that “Charles is my everything,” her mother snaps “*God* is your everything!” Shocked at her daughter’s willingness to submit to a man who mistreats her, her mother attempts to surround her with strength drawn from religion. Certainly unlike the norm in nineteenth century literature, we see here that in this African American community, the best interest in the woman is favored by the community even when she lacks the strength to favor it herself. *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* would fit what Frye terms “the second phase of comedy,” and again we see Perry pay homage to those that come before him while simultaneously creating his own tradition. (180).

Frye explains this phase as “a comedy in which the hero does not transform a humorous society but simply escapes or runs away from it, leaving its structure as it was before” (180). Frye continues in his description of this specific phase of comedy by alluding to the notion that “in this situation [...] we either have a hero’s illusion thwarted by a superior reality or a clash of two illusions” (180). Frye terms this scenario “the quixotic phase of comedy” and the tense dynamic between the women, her society, and Helen precisely addresses the “clash of two illusions” that Frye notes. Helen, unable to grasp the idea of leaving her husband, even at
the persistence of the woman around her, is only frustrated at the persistence of her society. Conversely, though, the women in her life aim to dismantle the “tradition” of marriage, and so the “illusions” debated between all of these women do nothing but clash. Eventually, though, Helen channels this newfound strength, and when she attempts to care for Charles in the aftermath of his paraplegic misfortune but he tells her to get out of their home, he doesn’t need her help, she quietly does so… but returns with a vengeance. Thus, as Frye classifies that second phase of comedy, “the hero does not transform a humorous society but simply escapes or runs away from it, leaving its structure as it was before,” Helen does not transform the society of Black women surrounding her, she “escapes” (180). Perry’s take on it is that she is not escaping from the society that she once clashed with, but she has actually gained the strength to welcome it, and Perry rewards her for doing so by reinventing his protagonist and allowing for her to discovery the identity she lost eighteen years ago when she said “I do.”

As a gunshot wound to Charles’ back leaves the attorney a quadriplegic confined to a wheelchair, and doctors are timid to predict whether he will ever be able to walk again or not, he loses everything. Since he can no longer provide his new, young fiancée the lifestyle she expects, she leaves him, and he has no one. This situation presents Helen with the opportunity to become his primary caregiver and be in his life again. She seizes the opportunity, and to it she brings a reformed attitude. Upon Helen’s return she does not bathe or feed him regularly, and it is apparent that the abuse she has suffered for the past eighteen years has finally taken its toll on her: “the Christian in me says to forgive him, but my flesh wants to beat the hell out of him. A few months in a divorce can take you through as many emotions as eighteen years in a marriage, and I’m starting to feel them all at once—but the one that is clear, is rage” (Diary 2005). No longer willing to submit and play the role of “wife,” Helen grasps the reality that she has served as a doormat in her marriage, and faults Charles for it. At one point she even blames the fact that she does not have children on his inability to behave the way a husband should: “I wanted
children, Charles, and had you not been with those whores, we would have them. You got me all stressed out, my hair falling out, my weight up and down, can’t keep anything down, **TWO MISCARRIAGES**. You took life from me, and you never even said I’m sorry” (*Diary* 2005). Finally, Perry’s work allows Helen to take power of the relationship of which she has been victim—he gives her the Black performativity that was lacking from her existence until this point. By affording Helen the internal strength that she was unable to attain while she was with Charles, Perry seems now to be punishing Charles. It appears that the writer shuns the idea that male dominance is ok, and rewards Helen for enduring it for so long. Charles is paralyzed, his light skinned mistress has left with his children, and the only person even willing to assist him secretly tortures him to her own gratification. Additionally, this issue of skin tone is further complicated. The light skinned mistress clearly does not demonstrate the faithfulness that Helen once did. Helen was willing to perform as a wife in spite of all of Charles’ wrong doings because she understood and accepted her role. Brenda, though, rejects the ideals of a marriage—though she is never even made a wife—and refuses to perform for a man who is not beneficial to her. Perry again creates his own tradition in which skin tone, “passing,” does not at all signify higher value.

The Black community Perry creates even becomes more interesting in delving, too, into the characters that serve as Charles’ and Brenda’s respective partners outside of their marriage. For a people who were denied the legal right to marry for so long, the sense of community often plays a large role in the way marriages, as well as black women are defined in an African American social construct. As DuCille points out, black female writers, like Zora Neale Hurston in her text *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, often emphasize the importance of community in defining their female protagonists. The community in Hurston’s *Eyes* closely follows this tradition and is often critical of Janie, as they expect her to act a certain way in her marriages. Likewise, they almost turn on her after the death of Tea Cake, and she has to turn back to the women, like Phoebe, for support as does Helen in Perry’s work. Moreover, what Perry’s
Diary does is emphasize the strength to be gained from community. Characters surround Helen in her time of need and admonish Charles and his treatment of her. Likewise, Brenda’s character is unwelcome for she represents not only the destructive entity to their union, but a threat to the community as a whole. As Lisa Anderson explains in *Mammies No More: The Changing Image of Black Women on Stage and Screen*, “[t]he sexual black woman is deemed dangerous because she appears capable of undermining the patriarchal notions of family on which the country was based. Her self-sufficiency makes it seem that her only need for men must be sexual” (Anderson 88). In the play, Brenda is an independent woman who works with Charles as an equal partner in their law firm. Obviously she earns the kind of money that allows her to be independent from a man and, as Anderson suggests, this notion appeals to men—and for Charles, it certainly provides a dynamic that his stay-at-home wife lacks. In the film, though we never learn of Brenda’s occupation or any information about her other than she is sleeping with Charles: she is portrayed as a bold woman who is on a mission to attain the comforts of life she desires at any cost. She enters the house and claims it as her own even before Helen has been told to exit. Likewise, she is heard stating “I’m a woman who knows how to get and a keep her man.” Clearly, Brenda is a woman who negates the ideal of community. She exists solely for self, and so she threatens any notion of the Black community not only by acting as the jezebel who ruins what appeared to be a solid black marriage, but also by refuting the once sacred entity of Black women’s reliance upon one another.

As a light-skinned woman in the film, Brenda is more closely read as white than Helen is, and so her better treatment from Charles follows the traditional mode in which lighter-skinned blacks are treated better. Margaret Hunter points out that, “in terms of skin color as a status characteristic, marital homogamy manifests itself in the marriage of two high-status people, or two light-skinned people. Marital homogamy may also be achieved if one spouse has high status from being light-skinned and the other spouse has high status from another status characteristic, such as

“I’m not bitter, I’m mad as hell!”
education” (Hunter 522). Interestingly, it seems as if Perry would agree with Hunter as it pertains to his film. Charles and Helen’s marriage cannot work because they are not two high status people. As a dark-skinned man, Charles draws his high status from the fact that he is a successful lawyer; however Helen cannot be high status because, though she is not dark skinned, she only straddles the line between light and dark, and cannot “pass”—and so she must be replaced by Brenda whose high status comes merely from the fact that she is light-skinned.

In keeping with the idea of skin tone, it is interesting that Brenda’s “knight-in-shining armor” is played by a light skinned actor. Though we see Perry juxtapose the ideals of skin tone in his female characters, the male characters are not always treated in the same way. Charles, played by a dark skinned actor performs in a barbaric manner towards his wife that, present day, would cast him as the antagonist of the work. Though he has amassed wealth and prominence that tradition would not have afforded him as a Black man, he cannot escape his assigned behavioral role—and the savage (by contemporary measures) way he treats his wife, is historically accurate with the tone of his skin. This is to say the same for Orlando, the man who watches as Brenda is drug out of her house, hurts for her, and eventually falls in love with her, claiming: “I’m in love with you...I carry you in my spirit. I pray for you more than I pray for myself.” Here we can see that, not only are the two in love and even share religious beliefs that can afford for a relationship beyond a “contract,” but Brenda’s faith in men and marriage is restored...as she repeats Orlando’s words back to him in the final scenes and accepts his proposal of marriage. Orlando, though not as financially stable as Charles, and Helen, though not as light skinned as Brenda, are rewarded for their actions with what appears to be a happy union and a renewed faith in the institution of marriage.

Tyler Perry’s work addresses some of the most pertinent issues in the Black community that has constantly evolved since post-civil war era. His work in *Diary of a Mad Black Woman*, both the play and film, lends itself to the critique of a race that has battled
against Eurocentric tradition and even self-imposed racial ideals such as the color line. The way Perry uses his work to assist his protagonist in defining herself not only in her marriage but as a Black woman in her own community, draws from the work of conventional ideals while incorporating a newly defined Black society. In this way, Perry calls upon the traditional marriage plot, as well as the economy of color, in order to capture his own tradition in this 21st century.

**Works Cited**


A plump brown teddy bear, dressed snugly in a tuxedo, stares blandly at the two children as they hold hands and exchange vows in a room dangerously close to their mothers. Love, of course, is not the issue, but the fact that poor Ludovic Fabre sports a taffeta night-gown more beautiful than any of his mother’s and a cotton-candy coated lipstick that floats more easily on his lips than ever before; this, of course, coupled with the fact that the dress belongs to Jerome’s deceased sister. These morbidly curious details still do not reference the true countertraditional elements inherent in this child-marriage; it is, instead, the fact that Ludo was born a boy, a boy that now is wearing a wedding dress and earrings. So begins Ludovic’s transcendence into the magic realism of Alain Berliner’s 1997 film, Ma Vie en Rose. Ludovic’s desire is not to merely defy his biological gender assignment, but is to create a new society in which a formal marriage between a girl-boy as it were and between a boy can occur, and in actuality be celebrated. In contradiction to conventional modes of the comedic marriage plot, Berliner’s film subsumes the complex implications of defying traditional gender assignment that compose both the marriage plot and the marriage contract; as such, the formal narrative structure of the film and marriage plot work against notions of reality to propel Ludo into a world unscathed by the institution of convention or heterosexist repression that allows for the legitimacy of his sexuality and marriage.
Ma Vie en Rose initiates a dialogue with both the theoretical tenets of gender and the synthesis of heterosexual power differentials upon transgendered and homosexual individuals. A reading of the film’s use of the marriage plot engages this commentary to extend into a dialogue concerned with how sexual identity is both espied and exploited within marriage and its public presence/importance. Focusing the center of the film on both gender and the abject as they are defined by Kristeva and Butler is vital to understanding the gender conflict within the film; however, Ma Vie en Rose presents a world where both social and personal acceptance is completely confined to a public recognition of marriage. As such, these texts must be read in conjunction with theorists such as Carole Pateman and Northrop Frey. Ludovic’s transformation into a sexually abject being forces him to not only deconstruct and subvert traditional models of marriage, but also requires him to adhere to and rely upon them for modeling purposes. With this, I intend to explore such modes of marriage within the text and how they work both to inform Ludovic’s sexual identity and to censure it. As the marriage of Hanna and Pierre works as the primary reinforcement for the film’s traditional marriage plot, Ludovic utilizes his parents’ marriage as a model on which to base his fantasy marriage with Jérôme, inherently reinstating the traditional marriage plot; however, to utilize Butler’s terminology, the film works to disidentify Ludovic’s transgenderism and create a non-traditional marriage plot that contradicts the contract upheld by society and outlined by Carole Pateman.

However, disregarding sexuality or gender performance as either innate or regulatory leads to a constructivist psychology seeking to envelope queer agency or queering ideology into a power differential synthesized by the heterosexist worldview. As this text provides a theoretical lens through which to approach transgenderism within the film, Butler’s musings on transgender representations in cinema allows further analysis on the either heterosexual or homosexual tenets of Ludovic’s marriage to Jérôme. Dressed in Jérôme’s deceased sister’s gown, Ludo constructs a marital ceremony that seemingly outlines and adheres to all traditional marriage con-
tracts, all the way up to the vicar that is, unfortunately in this case, a teddy bear. However, this marriage is under attack long before its consummation or even its close; the scene is immediately disrupted and subverted once the children’s parents arrive, leaving this marriage not only defunct, but now hovering along the border of morbidity. This morbidity, although strong enough to completely deconstruct any semblance of legitimate marriage, is not, at least in the viewer’s mind, what makes this marriage illegitimate. Butler asserts in her book *Undoing Gender* the transgender experience in constant fracture; altering from a complete identification as either female or male, the person must scramble amidst realizations of her/his physical or corporeal sexual identification, especially in film (Butler 142). Altering from representations of the male to female transgenderism being emphasized or exposed by quick shots of a tampon search or a readjustment of the genitalia, film can force the viewer to confront the actual sex of the character and inherently view any transgender, heterosexual partnership as homosexual.

However, how does this film portray actual sexuality? Are we to assume this a heterosexual partnership, or is the viewer confronted more often with reminders of a carnal contradiction, inherently inducing a homosexual reading? The disidentification found in this film is primarily inherent in the caprice offered by Jérôme’s mother upon her realization of Ludovic as transgender. As Jérôme’s mother faints, she blatantly fractures the marriage between her son and Ludovic while reinforcing Ludo’s sexuality to the viewer as male; as such, the viewer is now faced with a homosexual marriage between two males. By enhancing this scene with morbidity and a fracturing of gender alteration, the film takes great care to ensure the viewer’s notice of the biological sex of each participant in this marriage, calling closer attention to the illegitimacy, as traditional marriage would contend, that this marriage holds. With this, what are the repercussions of a marriage between two men on the larger, theoretical aspects of the film’s subject matter? By withholding the expected and desired heteronormative outcome, the viewer is forced to confront the reality of homosexual unions, and the inherent power dichotomy subverted therein.
The marriage between Ludo and Jérôme is deemed illegitimate also by way of the very logistical inconsistencies provided in the ceremony itself. While Ludo and Jérôme have access to a teddy-bear that can serve as vicar, they fail to possess witnesses and inherently place this marriage ceremony as completely irrelevant to or void of traditional marriage legitimacy. Cordula Quint asserts, “Indeed, Ludovic is engaging Jérôme in a queered ‘doing’ of the ‘I do,’ but his staged citation of the marriage vows fails to be performative because it takes place in the absence of witness and so the ‘ceremony’ can bear no legitimacy in the public eye” (47). With this, “because the boy’s action takes place in the wrong circumstances the queer agency manifest in it is no more than provisional; it fails to engage socially with the community” (47). The film works to make the marriage between Ludo and Jérôme inconsequential in various capacities; however, the implications of such makes the progressive ideologies within the film incomplete or inadequate in terms of the actual marriage contract. The film can seem to blindly tackle issues in relation to queerness and transgenderism, yet blandly reproduce a marriage that subscribes to models of marriage that devalue the confounding possibilities of homosexual marriage; however, by calling further attention to the biological genders of Ludo and Jérôme, there is a further notification of homosexuality on behalf of the viewer that causes an upending of the traditional marriage contract.

However, as Michael Schiavi’s article “A “Girlboy’s” Own Story: Non-Masculine Narrativity In Ma Vie En Rose” engages in depth with the concept of homosexuality and transgenderism in film, it can be useful in determining to what extent transvestitism works as a smokescreen to undermine the presence of queerness in the film. As Ludovic’s sexuality is read to be latent heterosexuality, or, assumed heterosexuality glittered with the spectacle of transvestitism, Ludovic’s prepubescence throughout the film underscores the sexuality that he may or may not contain. As Schiavi asserts Ludovic to be “too young to declare credibly that he is either homosexual or transsexual, Ludo is presumed innately heterosexual by default—and thus cannot initially rise even to the basic nar-
rative level of conflict” (3). As such, those negotiating within the parameters of the film must view his marriage to Jérôme as folly, thus negating its influence on and by the marriage contract. This leads to a conception of this marriage as neither heterosexual nor homosexual, leaving any subversion of the traditional marriage plot to remain nonexistent; as such, the film essentially ascribes to the very modes of marriage that it seeks to completely either disregard or deconstruct.

The opening of the film confronts the viewer with three separate instances of heterosexual marriages, establishing models of successful marriage which either complement or foil Ludovic’s affection for Jérôme. These marriages, all of which follow the legal rule as defined by Pateman as between one man and one woman, work to structure a model by which to norm marriage within the film. In this world, Ludovic is presented with a model of marriage that is completely dependent, either implicitly or explicitly, on the combination of two separate genders and gender expression as the proper combination for the marriage contract’s success. As such, the marriages viewed in the opening sequence of the film show women putting dramatic cosmetics, jewelry, and dresses on; with this, the film works diligently to create a world where the most important facet of the marriage contract is gender expression. Pateman asserts that the marriage contract’s reliance on separate sexes ensured the proper differential power upon separate genders (Pateman citation). As such, a marriage between two males completely undermines this rule and in effect confuses the power rules of the male.

As Carole Pateman’s description of the marriage contract requires both one female and one male to negotiate within the confines of a union, Ludovic’s abject sexual identity both becomes party to this marriage contract and subverts it. Pateman asserts, “unlike other contracts, the marriage contract cannot be entered into by any two (or more) sane adults, but is restricted to two parties, one of whom must be a man and the other a woman (and who must not be related in certain prescribed ways)” (167). If Ludovic’s gender identity is in fact feminine or is assumed as a matter of child’s play, does this marriage with a boy threaten this
marriage contract? In this instance of marriage, the connection made can be more closely linked to a childish game of cowboys and Indians, a simple allegory of the fantastical imaginations of children. However, it is seen in this situation that when negotiating even in a game of cowboys and Indians, someone must always be an Indian. This idea of childsplay can lead the viewer to assume Ludo’s nondescript sexuality as unimportant as he is merely filling a required role of a game. Ludovic is certainly able to be viewed as sexually nondescript in that he is far from reaching sexual puberty and has a longer, feminine haircut; Ludovic can pass as female without any elements of cross-dressing. With this, the marriage between he and Jérôme can be viewed, speaking in terms of performativity, as a heterosexual partnership between one man and one woman; however, the disidentification of Jérôme’s sexuality throughout the film, whether it be through Jérôme’s mother’s fainting or Ludovic’s parents making him cut his long hair works to reinforce the queerness inherent in the film and to subvert the traditional marriage plot offered by Pateman.

However, what must also be called into question within the film is on what levels and to what degree are gender roles still at work in defining the marriage contract (within the film) as either traditional or countertraditional? According to Keith Reader, the fantastical nature of Pam within the film is “counterbalanced by what Kate Ince calls ‘the very excessive character of Pam’s femininity’—never more than in the final shot where she winks broadly at the audience. This evokes Joan Riviere’s view of womanliness as a masquerade” (55). This becomes important in correlation with realizing Pam’s role within the film; after all, “Pam is frequently seen in flight, like Peter Pan who for Garber is a major icon of the cross-dressing world and thus may seem to encapsulate the ‘volunatrist fallacy’ of gender, with its comforting but dubious implication that it is possible to soar free from the trappings of biology and society”. Pam represents exactly what Ludovic wants to be; however, she represents the very models of femininity that have been reinforced by traditional modes of gender and marriage.
The film presents a version of transgenderism and marriage that seemingly requires the compulsory heterosexual ideologies enveloped within the traditional marriage plot to be present for the viewer’s either comfort or the implementation of a comedic mode of plot structure. According to Cordula Quint, “Pam’s dominance in the boy’s fantasy life—her vibrant red dresses and blonde bombshell appeal (Dolly Parton-style drag)—calls up in him an awareness of male desire and his own desire to oblige to it” (46). Cordula Quint also calls attention to the very behavior displayed by Ludo throughout the film; for instance, in one scene, Ludo is dancing about and singing “I read all the books about romance and roses / I mark all the parts where the boyfriend proposes / I long to be happy, it’s like a neurosis” (qtd. In Quint 46). What becomes clear throughout the course of the film is Ludo’s reliance upon the hyper-sexualized conception of female identity that he feels is inherent in a portrayal as a girl. Quint asserts that “Ludovic’s attempts at ‘being a girl’ strictly fit the conventional narrative model established by Pam, according to which female happiness and success mean being sexually attractive, chosen, proposed to, and finally married—in short, being passive and desired” (46). The film seemingly takes heteronormative ideologies to extremes beyond the marriages or relationships presented throughout the film via the use of the La Monde de Pam. This doll represents a complete transcendence from the natural and oppressive world into a world that is seemingly filled with the agency so longed for by Ludovic; however, the doll serves as the very model of the yielding half of a binary that this film seeks to completely refute. By reinforcing models of a feminine/masculine dichotomy, Ma Vie en Rose is unable to create any statement in advocation of an identification of support, and must, rather, deem Ludo as the very girl that problematizes the marriage contract and plot.

Another point that contextually places Ludo within the parameters of a complete heteronormative society is with his cross-dressing relationship with Christine. Ludo visits Christine’s birthday party dressed in, as his parents would deem, appropriate garb consisting of a musketeer costume when he meets Christine, a bullying young
girl that feels equally inadequate in her extremely feminine dress. As Christine forcibly makes Ludo exchange costumes, the reader is faced with cross-dressing that can be seemingly seen to subvert traditional modes of gender expression. According to Quint, “The film introduces here a female inverse image of its boy protagonist. In fact, at the end of the physical appearance of the two children collapses the hyperbolic gender dyad so deeply encrypted in the public imagination” (56). However, it can also be seen that this literal mode of cross dressing reinforces compulsory heterosexuality by maintaining the desired heterosexual outcome of the film. Instead of presenting a world in which Ludo’s inherent queerness can be acknowledged, the film glosses over this realization by making Ludo a girl and Christine a boy. Quint also argues that “If, as Butler argues, conventional gender performance ‘conceals the gender discontinuities that run rampant within the heterosexual, bisexual, gay and lesbian contexts’ then the two children at the end of Ma Vie en Rose reveal and foreground those discontinuities” (56); however, while the film does indeed foreground this gender discontinuity, any semblance of either a literal or metaphorical marriage or relationship within the text must be met with some levels of gender ascription, inherently deeming the marriages and relationships as having little threat to the convention of marriage.

Classifying Ma Vie en Rose as a comedic marriage plot requires a reading into the formal narrative structure of the marriage plot within the film and its correlation to Northrop Frye’s seven phases of comedy. Frye asserts, in most comedies “the happier society established at the end of the comedy is left undefined, in contrast to the ritual bondage of the humors” (181); however, as the La Monde de Pam invites Ludo into a space unrestricted or unpolluted by social convention or the humorous world surrounding the film, this plot requires a reading on the periphery of this quasi-traditional marriage plot. Pam reflects a breach of humorous success and entrance into Frye’s fourth phase of comedy, “which has affinities with the medieval tradition of the seasonal ritual-play. We may call it the drama of the green world, its plot being assimilated to the ritual theme of the triumph of life and love over
While the humorous society surrounding the ideologies of Ludovic’s either homosexuality or dissimulated heterosexuality refuse to acquiesce to a marriage defying or in actuality threatening the marriage contract, he is, even at the film’s pseudo-assuring close, forced to remain scathed by the humors. However, upon invitation into the world of the La Monde de Pam, either through the television or a public advertisement, he is able to leave the humorous sphere and enter freely into a lollipop colored world where “the boy is able to cast her/himself in the role of a young bride, where s/he can spend whole days combing her hair, gazing into mirrors, or gaping at the city park with its wedding pavilion and heart-shaped duck pond” (46). Within a Shakespearian context, Northrop Frye outlines the model of the green-world: “the action of the comedy begins in a world represented as a normal world, moves into the green world, goes into a metamorphosis there in which the comic resolution is an achieved, and returns to the normal world” (182). If this cosmic resolution is indeed achieved, the pretend marriage between Ludo and Jérôme can no longer be deemed fictional, and moreover, compulsory heterosexuality cannot influence any ideologies reiterated or originated within this marriage. However, the green-world of Ma Vie en Rose can take on a much larger context as “the green world charges the comedies with the symbolism of victory of summer over winter”; also, “in the rituals and myths the earth that produces the rebirth is generally a female figure, and the death and revival, or disappearance and withdrawal, of human figures in romantic comedy generally involves the heroine” (182).

With this model, the green-world works on two separate levels in Ma Vie en Rose to initiate a dialogue with both the humorous world from which it departs and with the inherent feminine qualities it contains. Essentially, Berliner utilizes this film in ways to not only subvert the traditional marriage plot and create a narrative in opposition to the traditional boy-meets-girl bildungsroman, but also utilizes this film to create a commentary or dialogue contradicting the viewer’s conventional conception of marriage’s placement within society and its importance in regard to gender.
codification and subordination. As Frey asserts, the rebirth or the resurrecting aspects of marriage are inherently female, defying the traditional marriage contract that places on some levels, conscious or not, power within the masculine. *Ma Vie en Rose* utilizes not only gender transcendence but also the actual institution of marriage to provide or endow the feminine half of this binary with some levels of agency.

In *Ma Vie en Rose*, marriage works in twofold manner to subvert the non-discursive restrictions placed upon heterosexual marriages and the marriage contract. Pateman asserts, “Not only does a ‘husband’ obtain a certain power over his wife whether or not he wishes to have it, but the marriage contract is sexually ascriptive. [...] That follows from this criticism? The argument that marriage should become a properly contractual relation implies that sexual difference is also an aspect of ‘status’” (167). As such, a homosexual marriage would indeed create a threat to the marriage contract that extends to heterosexual partnerships. Ludovic’s marriage to Jérôme subverts the expectations of gender within the ascriptive system of marriage; however, it is not just in this regard that Ludovic deconstructs the marginalization of sexuality within marriage. Cordula Quint asserts “that one’s gender and one’s sexual desires and practices may not be continuous with anatomically sexed bodies in the way that compulsory heterosexuality prescribes can be communicated only by means of performative cultural tactics that stress discontinuity: for example, a male body citing the gender prescriptions for the female and vice versa” (48). As Butler’s assertion that the female transgendered body must, in some ways, be viewed as male within film, this facet of gender as either a homosexual or heterosexual partnership between Ludovic and Jérôme becomes irrelevant; the mere transgressive act of changing gender lends Ludovic agency.

How, then, do we identify the agency provided in Ludo’s desire to change or alter his sexual identity or genitalia? While I do not intend Irigaray to work as a primary source to this research, I am interested in her conception of the agency in gender as it is found in the physicality of the body or genitalia. The corporeality of
the female body is, as Irigarian theory asserts, a signifier for both voice and the agency of self-expression: she points out: “Woman ‘touches herself’ all the time, and moreover no one can forbid her to do so, for her genitals are formed of two lips in continuous contact. Thus, within herself, she is already two—but not divisible into one(s)—that caress each other” (Irigaray, This Sex 24). This self-expression is under attack by those in conflict with Ludovic’s sexuality; both the actual self-expression of the female body, and the self-expression created by transgenderism must be completely eliminated for a successful implementation of the proper marriage. The conception of heterosexist gender roles forced upon Ludovic works with his own perception of gender and seeks to provide him more agency in becoming female. This is in complete contradiction to the power afforded to the male within the traditional marriage contract and seeks to subvert the concept of a male having the power within the relationship. Irigaray asserts the female to have more agency or voice simply in the physicality of her genitalia, and as Ludovic seeks to become female, he is completely deconstructing the power differential inherent in marriage.

While the film upends traditional models of marriage in ways that relate to both queerness and transgenderism, it does, on levels both overt and covert, reinstate a heteronormative society in which Ludo is unable to negotiate within a contract limited to sexualities outside of convention; however, Butler’s assertions that fracturing the transgender experience within the film creates an inverse of marriage that calls the reader’s focus to a homosexual notion of marriage, subverting the traditional marriage plot and contract, subsequently reducing the power of the masculine and articulating agency for the feminine. With this, the film works to ‘subjugate’ heterosexuality and focus, instead, on the agency afforded to those that transform from male to female. The film complicates notions of marriage in that the readings into the act of matrimony or relationships within the film seemingly places the film within the realm of blandly reproducing heteronormativity instead of calling into question the very marriage rites that have adversely affected the queer community; however, both Ludovic’s
time in the green world and the very transgressive act of choosing a life as a female places, on theories related to strictly gender, power for the female.

Works Cited