Beauty in Literature, History, and Culture

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The initial pages of Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* attest to the impression beauty can impose on a person, as the biographer/speaker of the novel soliloquizes on the exquisite figure of the title character. Within the first chapter, beauty seizes the exquisite figure, Orlando, as well, who likewise attempts to put this spectacle into words. Orlando halts during an intricate court dance, a beautiful and enigmatic fig-
ure arresting his attention from across a Thames frozen solid by the “Great Frost.” Though he cannot immediately identify the figure’s sex or categorize the figure by gender, he desperately seeks to pinpoint the stranger’s beauty: “Images, metaphors of the most extreme and extravagant twined and twisted in his mind. He called her a melon, a pineapple, an olive tree, an emerald, and a fox in the snow all in the space of three seconds….so he raved, so he stared” (17). These two early moments in *Orlando* effectively frame the novel with an emphasis on beauty and the language used to inscribe the beautiful. Orlando soon discovers the name of the object of his scrutiny and linguistic exploration: Russian Princess Marousha Stanilovska Dagmar Natasha Iliana Romanovitch, or, as he names her, Sasha, who continues to frustrate him linguistically: “Ransack the language as he might, words failed him….English was too frank, too candid, too honeyed a speech for Sasha” (22). Early in the novel, Orlando realizes the limitations of his language as he attempts and fails to pin and pen down Sasha’s beauty. As the novel progresses, Orlando gradually realizes an essentially problematic relationship between language and beauty that becomes the major obstacle of Orlando’s life and narrative.

Woolf wrote in her essay “Modern Fiction” about a similar quandary—the problematic relationship between conventional fiction and real life. Everyday life does not follow the equations of timing, plot, and emphasis that fiction mortars and sets in stone. Rather, “The mind receives a myriad impressions—trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel” (106). These impressions are what compose a day, a life, “so that, if a writer were a free man and not a slave…there would be no plot, no comedy, no tragedy, no love interest or catastrophe in the accepted style” (106). In “Modern Fiction,” Woolf hints at the innumerable, incredible impressions a person receives each day and how traditional modes of fiction err gravely in how they organize, emphasize, and inscribe these impressions. Likewise, Orlando’s life refuses to yield to the plot of a traditional biography, forcing the speaker to set aside records and artifacts and notate more impressionistically. Orlando him/herself is a character sublimely sensitive to beautiful impressions, as his first encounter with Sasha shows. Orlando’s life is also a journey toward authorship, and as s/he diligently seeks to pin and pen down the impressionistic world around her/him, s/he turns the vivacious beauty of Sasha into a melon, a tree, a fox, effectively objectifying her, describing her beauty in terms that dismiss her own subjectivity. This destructive process mirrors the ways in which traditional fiction nails the beautiful
impressions that constitute a “Monday or Tuesday” into the iron structure of exposition, climax, and denouement.

Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* radically diverges from the traditional, playfully mocking, yet seriously criticizing, not only traditional modes of fiction, biography, and history, traditional notions of gender, or traditional concepts of beauty, but also the very language that underlies these ways of thinking. *Orlando’s* characters perform how language nets and reconfigures moments and impressions of beauty, objectifying and misrepresenting the beautiful, but *Orlando* is far more than a demonstrative critique. Orlando is also an imagining of a new way of communicating beauty, an impossible fantasy of a language grounded in androgyny that redeems beauty from representation.

_Armed (and Legged) with Beauty: Androgyny as an Aesthetic of Mind, Body, and Word_

Orlando lives for four centuries and ages less than four decades, and he wakes from a seven day nap to find he has transformed into a woman; *Orlando* is a novel of impossible things, not the least of which is the state of androgyny its main character achieves. The most apparent form this androgyny takes is Orlando’s appearance. The novel opens with the remarkable phrase, “He—for there could be no doubt of his sex” (5), seemingly indicating a stable, essential view of sex and gender. Critic György Kalmár differs from this superficial interpretation, agreeing with M. Keith Booker’s assertion that the statement is highly ironic, explaining that the text calls into question whether such a stable gender identity is natural by affirming it, an act which works to make Orlando’s gender identity and “the duality of his identity and appearance” a source of speculation (61). Kalmár explains the highly textual quality of this process: “The text does not say whether it could not be known whether Orlando was a boy or a girl, but creates a world in which these concepts need explanations, words, descriptions, and focus an erotically charged attention on the body” (61). This “erotically charged attention” is explicit. The biographer goes on to describe Orlando’s body in detail, not only in the pages shortly following this opening sentence of the novel, but frequently throughout the text, most often in praise of Orlando’s infamously beautiful legs. As Orlando stands naked after her/his transformation, the biographer attests: “No human being, since the world began, has ever looked more ravishing. His form combined in one the strength of a man and a woman’s grace” (67). Orlando’s beautiful, visible, physical androgyny is cause for
description, utterance, the use of language. This outward androgyny is not the length and breadth of Woolf’s theory of beauty in the novel, however. Rather, it serves as a sign for the much deeper androgynous travail the novel is undergoing.

Androgyny is a term oft-associated with Woolf, particularly with her extended essay, *A Room of One’s Own*, wherein she commends mental androgyny as a quality in the possession of such writers as William Shakespeare and Jane Austen, and essential to successful writing. Woolf speaks of an alleviation of gender-oriented complaints and how an inheritance enabled her to think beyond her gender. She writes of the result of this androgyny, “[T]he greatest release of all came, which is freedom to think of things in themselves. That building, for example, do I like it or not? Is that picture beautiful or not? Is that in my opinion a good book or bad?” (39). Here, Woolf draws a connection between an androgyny of thinking, the ability to judge beauty for oneself, and successful writing, a connection Orlando’s mental, emotional, and writerly maturation traces through the novel.

In her article “Virginia Woolf and Androgyny,” Marilyn R. Farwell ponders whether the androgyny Woolf praises is one of balance or fusion. Woolf’s use of this term proves frustrating to many critics and readers, and, as Farwell laments, “Virginia Woolf...creates enough ambivalence in her book to prompt equivocation” (435). This ambivalence is not entirely Woolf’s fault, however, as Farwell concedes:

Because androgyny is a deep-seated fantasy, a dream of return to the harmony of paradise, or, in more psychological terms, a dream of return to the innocence and freedom of childhood, it has been treated as an ideal without the close scrutiny that is needed for the practical use of the word. Androgyny has...a history of being used as a cover term for a multitude of ideal, harmonious states. (436)

Farwell continues an exhaustive attempt to pinpoint the exact brand of Virginia Woolf’s androgyny in *A Room of One’s Own*, which is the site of Woolf’s most explicit declarations on the subject. Perhaps that is the problem. *Orlando* may prove a richer site for excavation pertaining to androgyny, because androgyny is a term which evades precise, logical definitions; androgyny is an ideal that conjures thoughts of dream and fantasy, terms which describe *Orlando* as well and which function more clearly in the realm of fiction.
Nancy Toppin Bazin, one of the most prominent researchers and theorists on Virginia Woolf’s concept of the androgynous mind, illuminates one aspect of this mental androgyne: “[A]s Virginia Woolf created her characters she moved back and forth between the world of details (the masculine vision of the evanescent) and the world of abstractions (the feminine vision of the eternal). Otherwise, a balance between the two would have been unobtainable” (26). Bazin avoids Orlando in her text, *Virginia Woolf and the Androgynous Vision*, which tracks androgyny throughout the bulk of Woolf’s novels, yet her statement proves helpful in an exploration of what Orlando uniquely posits about androgyny. *Orlando* is a novel both focused on the minute details of Orlando’s life, including a list of Orlando’s purchases for her/his ancestral home, and the overarching characteristics of an age. The androgynous aesthetic the novel espouses—and which eventually defines the way in which Orlando sees and describes beauty—exists between these masculine and feminine visions and their respective domains of ephemeral detail and eternal abstraction.

The masculine vision first dominates Orlando’s way of seeing beauty, a lens which alone proves highly problematic. In the first chapter, Orlando departs from the realm of decorum and ancestry and retreats to the oak tree, what will become one of the chief tropes in the novel, a sign of the transcendent beauty of Nature. What Orlando sees during the novel’s first record of his visit to the oak tree is less than transcendent:

“He had walked…to a place crowned by a single oak tree. It was high, so very high indeed that nineteen English counties could be seen beneath; and on clear days thirty or perhaps forty….For a moment, Orlando stood counting, gazing, recognizing. That was his father’s house; that his uncle’s. His aunt owned those three great turrets among the trees there. The heath was theirs and the forest; the pheasant and the deer, the fox, the badger, and the butterfly.” (8)

Orlando, submerged in a beautiful landscape from his privileged position underneath the oak tree, ponders possession. He counts, gazes, recognizes, embodying the detail-oriented masculine vision, as well as the language of the father, a view of beauty that pinpoints, categorizes, names, and ultimately objectifies. Instead of indulging in the dense dark green of the forest or the plump pheasant lifting its wings, Orlando sees titles and deeds of ownership. Such is the relationship between what
Bazin describes as the masculine vision of details and a traditional, patriarchal language that reduces beauty to deeds of possession.

Orlando’s radically androgynous perspective on beauty yields even further material in connection to gendered conceptions of sight and beauty. Eighteenth century contemporaries Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant proposed a split between the beautiful and sublime, with the beautiful being distinctly feminine and the sublime distinctly masculine. In his treatise *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, Kant most explicitly applies gender to this specific aesthetic dichotomy, as evident in the section entitled, “Of the Distinction of the Beautiful and Sublime in the Interrelations of the Two Sexes”: “All the other merits of a woman should unite solely to enhance the character of the beautiful, which is the proper reference point; and on the other hand, among the masculine qualities the sublime clearly stands out as the criterion of his kind” (76-77). Kant goes on to state that all judgment of a person must take their gender and corresponding beauty/sublime category as the criteria, and all attempts at moral perfection of one sex or the other must take their respective category as its guide, “unless one wants to disguise the charming distinction that nature has chosen to make between the two sorts of human being” (77). Orlando again posits an androgynous ideal through the novel’s ability to hold an idyllic space both between and in opposition to these categories, not only physically, but through Orlando’s developing vision of Nature. Critic Kari Elise Lokke sees Orlando as a humorous retaliation against condescending statements like Kant’s which use aesthetics as a means to reinforce the gender inequality that sex-based systems of oppression perpetuate.

In “Orlando and Incandescence: Virginia Woolf’s Comic Sublime,” Lokke examines the jocular way in which Orlando critiques the division of the beautiful and sublime, mocks the attempts the Romantic Sublime makes to be more inclusive, and creates its own space for a “female sublime.” As Lokke details, since Mary Wollstonecraft, feminist critics have made apparent the complicity with which the sublime/beautiful dichotomy reinforces the culturally constructed opposition between male and female (240). This aesthetic dichotomization makes “the rhetorical grandeur, poetic power and moral dignity of the sublime” exclusive to the male realm (240). Lokke goes on to explain how the Romantic Sublime of such “[m]ale theorists and poetic practitioners…as varied as Kant, Schiller, Wordsworth, and Emerson…sought to transcend or defeat these dualisms of spirit and matter, mind and nature, male and female through a glorification of the individual human spirit and its infinite
imaginative potential and freedom” (241). These attempts fail, Lokke argues. The Romantic Sublime, similarly to Transcendentalism, privileges a sublime, ineffable experience wherein Nature overwhelms the viewer, an experience that is not of one-ness with Nature, but rather, Lokke states, an appropriative and egotistical gesture, a “disembodied sublime that represents aggressive appropriation and abstraction of nature” (242). Instead of sidestepping binaries through a sublime encounter with Nature, “[w]ith Orlando Woolf, instead, challenges the validity of the very dualisms that are the source of the Romantic sublime—most particularly the opposition between male and female—thus allowing her a radically new and vital aesthetic vision” (241). Fully developed over the course of the novel, Orlando’s vision does not simultaneously abstract and objectify Nature, but recognizes its subjectivity. Orlando’s feminine or horizontal sublime, both terms Lokke utilizes, grounds its vision of Nature in an androgynous perspective that does not yield to the categories of beautiful/sublime or male/female. The gendering of theories, perspectives, and abstract terms seems endless, and Orlando is indefatigable in its ability to find or create an androgynous space between these gendered categories.

Orlando, despite pre-dating Lacanian theory, evidences an evasion of his gender-based dichotomization of metaphor and metonymy, asserting an androgynous space which at turns utilizes and resists these terms, ultimately leading to the liberation of beauty through freer, more imaginative ways of signification. In Reading Lacan, Jane Gallup very helpfully elucidates Lacan’s theories and provides explanations and critical discourses on Lacan’s Ecrits. Metaphor is the replacement of one signifier by another. Metonymy is more difficult to define. Gallup states Lacan’s definition of metonymy as a word-by-word relation and expands upon this concept: “It is the relation between two signifiers along the line of any concrete discourse (linear because only one word is pronounced or written at a time)” (121). Gallup gives an example of this process; metonymy can be the relationship between words that share the same sentence or the same paragraph (121). In this way, “[i]n the metonymic dimension, the signifier can receive its complete signification only...after the fact” (121). Because of this reliance on the relation between the words and the consequent delay in meaning, Lacan aligns metonymy “with the horizontal dimension of language (the line of Western writing, the syntagmatic) and metaphor with the vertical dimension (the paradigmatic stack of possible selections for any point along the line)” (122). This distinction between horizontal and vertical translates into gender, which Lacan’s
algorithms for each term supplement: “In a psychoanalytic context, this binary opposition between a plus and a minus, between a lack and a nonlack, has resonances with sexual difference, or more specifically with a certain binary misreading of sexual difference, the opposition phallic/castrated” (124). Metonymy’s horizontal “insufficiency” can connote a “phallic lack,” showing the “vertical privilege” that associates itself with the privileging of the phallus, and therefore the vertical, phallic masculine over the horizontal, “castrated” feminine (125).

*Orlando* predates Lacan, but as Micki Nyman details in “Positioning Orlando as Subject in Lacan’s Imaginary,” *Orlando* very much engages with Lacanian theory, particularly metonymy and metaphor. Speaking of metaphor and metonymy, Nyman asserts that “a covert tension inheres in the psyche with respect to the gap that exists between these two figures that mediate meaning and language, and between each sliding act of signification itself” (20). This gap between metaphor and metonymy is “where Orlando’s agency is situated” (20). Nyman neglects to mention the gendering of metaphor and metonymy that makes her “gap” even further pertinent to a study of *Orlando*. Nyman’s gap, which she relates to the creation of Lacanian real, symbolic, and imaginary registers in the novel, is just as resonant in regards to androgyny in *Orlando*. Just as *Orlando* finds “gaps” between the gendered categories of male/female temporal perspective or a Kantian, explicit gendering of the beautiful and sublime, the novel also undermines Lacan’s gendering of these important linguistic concepts in its creation of an androgynous, inclusive space for the making of meaning. These androgynous spaces are the foundation of the impossible, fantastical, and imaginary language that Orlando gradually develops to redeem beauty from conventional, representational language.

**A List of Demands: Beauty and Replication**

*Orlando* is an account of an impossible figure, a person who exists between the categories of gender, the binary of sublime and beautiful, the endless gendered dichotomies of language and thought, but this is not the primary reason Orlando’s life calls for a biographical account. The long-suffering biographer of Orlando stages his subject with a careful detailing of his undeniable beauty, a catalogue of each physical virtue. Orlando appears first in the novel with “shapely legs…handsome body…well-set shoulders…. lips…drawn back over teeth of an exquisite and almond whiteness….arrowy nose…. eyes like drenched violets…. and a brow like the swelling of a marble dome” (6). The biographer
introduces Orlando via his beauty, foregrounding this one aspect of Orlando as a character. Orlando’s beauty indeed seems worthy of the admiration it garners not only from his biographer, but from innumerable ladies of court and tavern, and from historical figures as illustrious as Queen Elizabeth I.

This beauty is one that not only commands admiration, riches, or honors, but language. The biographer introduces Orlando through identifying him as beautiful, but the biographer also introduces her/himself through Orlando’s beauty: “From deed to deed, from glory to glory, from office to office he must go, his scribe following after, till they reach whatever seat it may be that is the height of their desire. Orlando, to look at, was cut out precisely for some such career” (6). Orlando’s beauty demands not only great deeds, fame, and titles, but, above all, a scribe, and this is precisely what the biographer sets out to do: provide a record of the material achievements of a beautiful aristocrat. While the pseudo-biographical frame of the novel does touch on Orlando’s many honors—Queen Elizabeth’s favor, grants of house and land, the titles of ambassador and duke under King Charles II, the company of the illustrious Messrs. Pope, Addison, and Swift—the subject of the biography frustrates these efforts, forcing the biographer to eventually become less and less preoccupied with these honors or deeds and more and more invested in Orlando’s thoughts, feelings, and writing. From the first pages of the novel, however, the biographer states his intent, to follow after, recording the progress from office to office of a beautiful young aristocrat.

This impulse to record the illustrious deeds of the beautiful Orlando is a form of what beauty demands: replication. As theorist Elaine Scarry posits in her treatise *On Beauty*, in the section entitled “Beauty Prompts a Copy of Itself,” beauty gives rise to sexual reproduction and the producing of children, and the “begetting of poems and laws” which further prompt literary and legal commentaries: “This phenomenon of unceasing begetting sponsors in people like Plato, Aquinas, Dante the idea of eternity, the perpetual duplicating of a moment that never stops” (5). Scarry goes on to assert that the simplest gesture of this replication is sight, the act of staring, which wills the extension of a moment of beauty, as when regarding a bird flitting through the trees (5-6). This impulse to reproduce and replicate is the drive behind not only the biographer’s arduous work to record the beautiful Orlando’s life and times, but behind Orlando’s enduring attempts to write and publish and her/his continuous admiration of writers.
As Scarry points out, the result of the replicative act is to extend time, an idea that the novel amply reflects. Most literally, Queen Elizabeth I saves Orlando’s life: “He was about to sail for the Polish wars when she recalled him. For how could she bear to think of that tender flesh torn and that curly head rolled in the dust? She kept him with her” (11). The Queen must extend Orlando’s life and must have him in her presence solely because she cannot bear the thought of the end of his beauty. The novel itself enacts this same desire to perpetuate Orlando’s beauty, extending his life presumably far beyond the four centuries the novel contains. Orlando himself evidences this desire for an eternity with beauty. Near the end of their affair, as Orlando waits for Sasha—who is on board her ship allegedly looking for a clothing chest, but possibly canoodling with one of the ship’s staff—he ponders her beauty: “Orlando, wrapped in his own dreams, thought only of the pleasures of life; of his jewel; of her rarity; of means for making her, irrevocably and indissolubly his own” (23). Orlando continues the rope of metaphors he is continually tying together, wherein Sasha becomes a jewel, “[s]now, cream, marble, cherries, alabaster, golden wire…a fox, or an olive tree…the waves of the sea when you look down upon them from a height…an emerald; like the sun on a green hill which is yet clouded” (22). Orlando’s propulsive need to put Sasha’s beauty into words is evidence of beauty’s demand for replication, but as Orlando schemes of a way to extend his time in Sasha’s presence, his replicative act becomes a violating force.

“A Natural Antipathy”: Language as an Act of Possessing the Beautiful

Much of Orlando’s relationship to beauty occurs through his language, his desire to inscribe beauty, particularly through his writing, and Orlando fails innumerable times before he succeeds in this endeavor, precisely because of the highly appropriative and possessive nature of the replicative linguistic process. The novel displays Orlando’s problematic view early in the text, before Orlando attempts to possess Sasha’s beauty in word and through an attempted elopement. The masculine vision that Orlando embodies as he gazes out from beneath the oak tree translates a beautiful landscape into deeds of ownership; the heath, the forest, the pheasant, fox, and butterfly all become objects which Orlando’s extended family owns, things which can be counted and recognized (8). This view of beauty is what influences Orlando’s ill-fated affair with Sasha; he seeks to own beauty, and beauty flees. Sasha becomes a jewel, a fox, a melon, because these are objects which Orlando can own. Possession
distorts the ideal replicative gaze that Scarry posits, a gaze which honors and perpetuates beauty and potentially leads to great works of art, like Homer’s *Odyssey* or Leonardo Da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa* (5), into the male gaze which seeks to objectify beauty and inscribe the beautiful thing into legal deeds of ownership.

Orlando’s attempts to inscribe beauty and the ways in which this impulse to inscribe disrupt both his life and writing appear early in the novel, foregrounding the importance of the subject. Orlando sits, scribbling voluptuous pages of poetry and drama, and stops, needing to find the exact color of green for his description of nature. Orlando peers out of his window at a laurel bush and is undone: “Green in nature is one thing, green in literature another. Nature and letters seem to have a natural antipathy; bring them together and they tear each other to pieces. The shade of green Orlando now saw spoilt his rhyme and split his metre” (7). The biographer seems to acknowledge how language fails in attempting verisimilitude, how representational language ruins nature and its beautiful shades of green, or vice versa.

This “natural antipathy” between the vivid green in Nature and Orlando’s attempts to replicate this beautiful green in his writing finds a parallel in Walter Benjamin’s celebrated essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” wherein Benjamin criticizes the destructive and corrupting power mechanical reproduction wreaks on the “aura” of the original art piece it attempts to replicate. Though Benjamin speaks very specifically about art objects and excludes natural objects from the vulnerability which an art object’s aura possesses in the face of mechanical reproduction, Benjamin’s theory and its framework is very helpful in an analysis of how language can corrupt the “aura” of its subject in the act of replicating its beauty. Benjamin asserts that an art object’s “aura is tied to its presence; there can be no replica of it” (229). No replication of an art object can be perfect, because the produced copy necessarily features a corruption or absence of the original’s aura:

We define the aura...as the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be....Every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction....To pry an object from its shell, to destroy its aura, is the mark of a perception whose ‘sense of the universal quality of things’ has increased to such a degree that it extracts it even from a unique object by means of reproduction. (222-3)
Benjamin’s analysis has interesting implications for Scarry’s theory of replication, which describes beauty’s “prompting” of reproduction as a desire for proximity that tends toward eternity. Benjamin’s replication brings close and makes permanent the beautiful thing, and it shows the cost. The violence Benjamin attributes to the act of mechanical reproduction can also apply to the oppressive, objectifying effects of linguistic replication, which strips away both the presence or aura of the beautiful thing, and as Sasha demonstrates, its subjectivity. Benjamin points to a specific mindset that he holds at fault for the destruction of the aura, a perspective so invested in the “universal quality of things” that it corrodes the unique nature of the beautiful thing.

The damaging perception that Benjamin blames resonates with the depiction of the Romantic Sublime in *Orlando*, revealing its appropriative impulse and further exemplifying how representational, linguistic replication corrupts the beautiful. After Orlando becomes a woman and during her stay with a community of nomadic “gipsies,” she experiences the beauty of Nature in a new way. Orlando explores the Turkish landscape, mountain, valley, stream, and in so doing, discovers that the flowers are like enamel, the turf like threadbare Turkish rugs, the trees like old crones, and the sheep like boulders: “Everything, in fact, was something else” (70). From the mountaintops, she views with her “admirable” eyes, sights both near and impossibly far: “[H]er soul expanded with her eyeballs, and she prayed that she might share the majesty of the hills, know the serenity of the plains, etc. etc., as all such believers do…she beheld the eagle soaring, and imagined its raptures and made them her own” (70). For Lokke, this interlude in Orlando’s career as a poet and lover of Nature constitutes “a perfect parody of the Wordsworthian sublime” (241). Orlando’s experience of her “soul expand[ing] with her eyeballs” is likewise “a ludicrous literalization of the sublime experience—perhaps also a jab at Emerson’s ‘transparent eyeball,’” a literalization that “exposes the clichéd and rhetorical quality of her experience of nature” and which “saturizes the sublime as an appropriative gesture, as evident in Orlando’s appropriating the eagle’s “raptures” through her imaginative act which she attempts to further verbalize, unsuccessfully, when she returns to camp (242). The perception that Benjamin describes resonates with Lokke’s commentary on the Romantic Sublime, a view of beauty which appropriates the beautiful, bringing it closer and, literally in Orlando’s case, making it one’s own, effectively diminishing and erasing the unique, separate nature, the aura, of the beautiful thing. Lokke describes this perception as an
“aggrandizement of the personal ego,” quoting critic Thomas Weiskel who explains, “[e]verything external or ‘out there’ is transmuted into the substance of the mind, which accumulates like a kind of capital” (242). This appropriative, egotistical act further manifests itself when Orlando sets out to pen “a long, blank verse poem, and to carry on a dialogue with herself about this Beauty and Truth” (71), which Lokke points out is in true “Wordsworthian fashion” (242). Orlando’s poetic attempts only serve to further, and more literally, inscribe the beauty of Nature, asserting her ownership, not only through her gaze, but through verbalization and the writing process. Thus does Orlando fully address the consequences of representational language, how the conventional language for beauty destroys the “aura” of the beautiful thing, rejecting its unique, separate, and independent state through appropriation and ownership which function through the linguistic act.

Virginia Woolf’s Orlando so exhaustively details the consequences of a representational language for beauty that it would almost seem more sensible to do away with a language for beauty, but Orlando addresses that scenario as well. In order to explore the realistic consequences of a society with no linguistic relation to beauty, Orlando completely takes this premise out of the hypothetical realm. After Orlando undergoes the transformation from man to woman, she realizes the sensitive situation she has suddenly found herself in and flees to a nomadic society of gypsies. At first, Orlando seems to have found an ideal society for a woman of her unique experience; the accoutrements of the gypsy life are not gender-specific. Orlando and the gypsies soon realize, however, that their ideologies, specifically about beauty, are irreconcilable to the point that the gypsies reluctantly decide they must execute her and Orlando fortunately decides she must return to England. After one of Orlando’s excursions into Nature, she returns home for dinner, exclaiming “How good it is to eat! How good it is to eat!” (70). The biographer explains this strange announcement in a parenthetical aside: “For it is a curious fact that though human beings have such imperfect means of communication, that they can only say ‘good to eat’ when they mean ‘beautiful’ and the other way about, they will yet endure ridicule and misunderstanding rather than keep any experience to themselves.” Orlando meets with not only ridicule and misunderstanding, but anger. Rustum el Sadi, the man who brought Orlando to the gypsies, comes across her weeping one day, and he assumes she has finally realized that Nature, her “God,” is cruel. He shows Orlando the ways Nature has deformed his body, admonishing her that this is what “her God d[oes] to man,” but Orlando only
Megan Bell

says, “‘But so beautiful,’ using the English term” (70). She repeats her confession, and el Sadi becomes angry: “He saw that she did not believe what he believed, and that was enough, wise and ancient as he was, to enrage him” (70-1). Gradually, the entire gypsy community comes to fear and despise Orlando for her insistence on beauty, which disrupts their work and their sleep, and by the time Orlando readies to depart for England, “[a]lready the young men had plotted her death. Honor, they said, demanded it, for she did not think as they did” (74). Orlando’s life is in danger because “she prefers a sunset to a flock of goats” (73), a statement which attests to the single-minded utility and intolerance that accompany the absence of a language for beauty (73). Thus, despite the blissful lack of gender-enforced systems of oppression that Orlando will soon experience as she returns to England, she does not find an inclusive utopia with the gypsies. Mirroring the dismissal of linguistic replication of beauty, the gypsies do not value possession, do not see land as property, and appear to have no interest in the writing act. Where conventional language seeks to own through replication and thereby destroys the “aura” of the beautiful thing, the absence of this language refuses to recognize the “aura” of the beautiful, that which requires or “prompts,” as Scarry would say, attention, acknowledgement, and adoration. Orlando equally demonstrates the errors inherent in the conventional, representational linguistic replication of the beautiful and the errors inherent in the antithesis of this act, the absence of any language for beauty.

“The Beautiful Name”: Orlando’s Fantasy of a New Language for Beauty

Orlando goes further than simple criticism; the novel succeeds in imagining a linguistic replication of beauty that does not destroy, but preserves the “aura” of the beautiful, bringing it close without appropriating it, recognizing its separate and unique presence in time while eternalizing it, finding an ideal way to satisfy the human impulse to communicate beauty. This novel way of verbalizing beauty commences at the time of Orlando’s immediate engagement to a figure on horseback she meets in the forest. Orlando and her new lover fall in love and become engaged before exchanging many words or even procuring each other’s names, but language proves a very prominent, if not the most prominent, aspect of their relationship. When Orlando learns that her fiancé’s name is Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine, Esquire, she declares that she already knew it, “for there was something romantic and chivalrous, passionate, melancholy, yet determined about him which went with
the wild, dark-plumed name” (124). Orlando does not only appear to recognize Shelmerdine’s aura, both of his person and his name, but also visualizes a scene connected to this name, “a name which had, in her mind, the steel-blue gleam of rooks’ wings, the hoarse laughter of their caws, the snake-like twisting descent of their feathers in a silver pool” (124). Shelmerdine likewise claims to have known Orlando’s name, “[f]or if you see a ship in full sail coming with the sun on it proudly sweeping across the Mediterranean from the South Seas, one says at once, ‘Orlando’” (124). Both Orlando and Shelmerdine exclaim that they knew each other’s names before hearing them, claiming beautiful images as their means of knowing. For both Orlando and Shelmerdine, nomenclature becomes a site of beauty, each visualizing a scene of beauty that the other’s name represents. The key to this unprecedented association between name and imagistic, scenic beauty is that both Orlando and Shelmerdine visualize a moment of beauty, not merely a stationary thing of beauty, a gem or a melon, but a moment in time. These moments of beauty resist the appropriative attempts of conventional linguistic replication, as, unlike a gem or melon, moving scenes in real time are not available for ownership. Furthermore, these moments of beauty retain their Benjaminian aura; they remain attached to a present moment in the imagination. The couple curiously and imaginatively intertwines their linguistic act of naming with the beautiful and visual, and together they make meaning horizontally, distinctly separate from conventional language and its appropriative, vertical bent.

This nascent language further manifests its relational, horizontal way of communicating beauty through Orlando’s unique catalogue of names for Shelmerdine. At the same time that Orlando searches for metaphorical material to adorn Sasha, he reduces her full name, Princess Marousha Stanilovskia Dagmar Natasha Iliana Romanovitch, to a literal pet name, the name of a fox he owned as a child, dismissing her subjectivity. In contrast, Orlando does not diminish or shorten the name of Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine, Esquire. She rather utilizes all of his names to convey varying meanings. When Orlando uses “Mar,” the first syllable of his name, she is “in a dreamy, amorous, acquiescent mood, domestic, languid a little, as if spiced logs were burning, and it was evening, yet not time to dress, and a thought wet perhaps outside, enough to make the leaves glisten, but a nightingale might be singing even so among the azaleas” (126-7). Orlando has conditions and moods that she associates with all of Shelmerdine’s many names, calling him by one or another to communicate not only her varying states of mind,
but also the beauty that surrounds them. This unique nomenclature is thus distinctly relational, conveying much more than a name, a site of ownership, but beauty, imagery, and subtleties of feeling. The novel emphasizes and privileges this union of beauty and language in names at the close of the novel when Orlando calls out Shelmerdine’s full name: “The beautiful, glittering name fell out of the sky like a steel-blue feather. She watched it fall, turning and twisting like a slow-falling arrow that cleaves the deep air beautifully….Then he came” (162). Orlando never details the beauty of the face or person of her husband; it is his name that is so beautiful that it glitters and even moves beautifully and his aura that she is recognizing and conveying through a name that is not representational of the beauty it stands for. The couple has their own language, communicating vast and perfect descriptions, particularly of what they find beautiful, with few and seemingly unrelated words.

Orlando’s manifold ways of calling Shelmerdine are non-representational, yet replicative, and the words the couple uses to communicate beauty in the outside world follow this same impossible pattern. During Shelmerdine’s absence, sailing around Cape Horn, Orlando runs out on errands to the city and sees a toy boat on a pond in a park. Orlando sees beauty as so interconnected, that she immediately imagines the toy boat as her husband’s ship, the pond as the ocean, and she must convey this moment of unity and beauty with Shelmerdine immediately: “‘Ecstasy!’ she cried. ‘Ecstasy! Where’s the post office?’ she wondered. ‘For I must wire at once to Shel and tell him . . . ’ And repeating ‘A toy boat on the Serpentine’, and ‘Ecstasy’, alternately, for the thoughts were interchangeable and meant exactly the same thing, she hurried towards Park Lane” (142). “Ecstasy” is the aura of not only the beautiful scene of the toy boat on the pond, but the aura of the connection between this toy boat and Shelmerdine’s ship, two moments in time which beauty connects.

Orlando and Shelmerdine’s language operates on the interconnectedness of beautiful things, which attests to the androgynous grounding of their language for beauty. The use of “Ecstasy!” to signify the toy boat and Shelmerdine’s ship is neither metaphor nor metonymy, though it functions in a similar way to these terms in its use of another signifier and the relation between signifiers to create meaning. “Ecstasy!” occupies a space between the masculine, vertical metaphor and the feminine, horizontal metonymy. Likewise, “Ecstasy!” occupies the space between Bazin’s gendered, temporal perspectives, signifying both the detailed, ephemeral, masculine perspective—the moment of a toy boat on the
Serpentine in Hyde Park—and the abstract, eternal feminine perspective—the overarching connection between this one moment and the fate of a ship many thousands of miles away. Furthermore, the moment is both beautiful and sublime for Orlando, whom the toy boat charms with its quaint appearance and terrifies with its implications of the peril Shelmerdine’s ship encounters and passes through. “Ecstasy!” thus signifies a specifically androgynous space between many gendered concepts. *Orlando* also calls attention to this androgynous foundation with the gender-defying way in which Orlando and Shelmerdine see each other; multiple times in the text, Orlando and Shelmerdine identify each other as the opposite sex: “‘You’re a woman, Shel!’ she cried. ‘You’re a man, Orlando!’ he cried” (124). Orlando and Shelmerdine’s relationship and the language which arises from it have an androgynous foundation which liberates the lovers from an obligation to adhere to a standard of representing their conventional genders and consequently liberates beauty from a similarly oppressive representational language.

This intimate language that Orlando and Shelmerdine create together not only allows them to see each other beyond conventional gender identities, but beyond the illusion of a unified and visible self. Orlando realizes she has innumerable selves, and searching for her “true,” “Captain,” or “key” self, Orlando realizes she has been haunted all her life by the fleeting goose she can never capture: “[A]lways I fling after it words like nets… and sometimes there’s…six words…in the bottom of the net” (155). It is at this moment that the self Orlando wishes to call appears. Lokke comments on the curious connection between the goose, Orlando’s linguistic endeavors, and her selfhood: “This full self comes into being when Orlando, as a poet, imagines her perpetual effort of trying to capture a wild goose in a net of words. Such an appropriative gesture will, however, never be fulfilled” (245). Just like the goose, the symbol or signifier for beauty’s endless repulsion of appropriative replication, Orlando’s manifold selves resist representation, as her biographer confesses, “For she had a great variety of selves to call upon, far more than we have been able to find room for, since a biography is considered complete if it merely accounts for six or seven selves, whereas a person may well have as many thousand” (153). Orlando’s manifold selves powerfully resonate with Benjamin’s idea of the aura of the beautiful art object, and the biographer’s account does compromise this aura through its inability to representationally replicate all of these selves. Orlando gives up the wild goose chase within which conventional language is forever trapped in its attempts to replicate beauty. Orlando returns home,
and, lovingly gazing at familiar sights, she feels an inclusive love for the beauty around her: “All this, the trees, deer, and turf, she observed with the greatest satisfaction as if her mind had become a fluid that flowed round things and enclosed them completely” (155). In Lokke’s terms, the human mind becomes “a nurturing amniotic fluid” at the close of the novel (245). This fluid mind directly correlates with her impossible, fantastical language for beauty, both evidencing an androgyny of mind, body, and word that is endlessly inclusive and which rejects the appropriative drive behind conventional representational language as a means of replication. Orlando no longer seeks to “net” the goose with her words, rather her fluid perspective makes her one with the beautiful sights that surround her through her horizontal, relational, non-representational language for beauty, a language that honors, preserves, and perpetuates the aura of the beautiful.

Virginia Woolf’s Orlando is a novel of strange and fantastic detail, and so it seems curious that when Orlando gives birth to a son in the final chapter, the biographer grants the occasion a mere paragraph and fails completely to provide the name of this auspicious heir to Orlando’s long and illustrious heritage. Orlando instead privileges a very different progenitor of its title character: the unprecedented language Orlando imagines and realizes. The novel faithfully pens not what it sets out to, the glorious offices a figure as beautiful as Orlando is destined to rise to, but the herculean linguistic feats she accomplishes in life. With this in view, the incredible events of Orlando’s life, his/her titles and properties, the transformation from man to woman, marriage to an adventurer, the publication of “The Oak Tree,” the birth of a son, all become comprehensible signposts for the one incomprehensible achievement that the novel is truly an homage to: the engendering of a language for beauty that does not corrode the aura of the beautiful thing, objectify it, or seek to own it, but which recognizes beauty as subject, preserving its aura and making it eternal, while miraculously retaining its historical and relational location. That Orlando’s transformation is the most remarkable event in her life only reaffirms that this language is born out of an androgyny that imagines the ideal space between ephemeral and eternal, metaphor and metonymy, sublime and beautiful, and masculine and feminine. It is Orlando’s language that the close of the novel reveals as the subject of Orlando’s imaginative and impossible fantasy of a biography, the masterpiece at the end of Orlando’s four centuries long travail with pen and ink.
Begetting Beauty, Engendering the Mot Juste

Works Cited


A single cold and deep night on the moors serves as the crux of *Wuthering Heights*. Heathcliff’s reign as a monomaniacal tyrant bent on destroying the Earnshaw family softens slightly after his night in the graveyard with Catherine’s ghost. Her power guides his actions on that night, as he eagerly drives himself closer to the day of his own death. Years after Catherine’s burial, Heathcliff recounts to Nelly his visit after-hours to the gravesite, and how he almost dug Catherine up with a spade. His hands are on the lid of the coffin, cracking it open, when:

There was another sigh, close to my ear…I knew of no living thing in flesh as blood was by—but so certainly I felt that Catherine was there, not under me, but on the earth. A sudden sense of relief flowed, from my heart, through every limb. I relinquished my labor of agony, and turned again at once, unspeakably consoled. Her presence remained with me; it remained while I refilled the grave, and led me home. (Brontë 294)

Heathcliff almost unearths Catherine’s body because he feels a terrific pull towards it; he wants to see and touch her body once again, dead or alive. Catherine’s beauty, to Heathcliff, is an unchanging thing, despite its form: in life, in death, and in that in-between spirit world which Catherine inhabits for most of the novel. Indeed, it is the very essence of Catherine herself which Heathcliff seeks, and not so much her physical...
beauty, although her outward appearance is coveted by Heathcliff. This self, this presence, is what leads Heathcliff away from the grave and then disappears, leaving Heathcliff with years of torment and eternal longing for Catherine to return once more as a ghost. For Heathcliff, the beauty he seeks to unearth that night in the graveyard serves as his savior.

Heathcliff does not unearth the body because a replication of Catherine stops him, a replication that serves as a more accurate representation of Catherine than her earthly body. As a ghost, all of the mixed beautiful and sublime qualities of Catherine manifest into an eerie, unearthly creature; the limits that her earthly body posits—her gender, her physical weakness—are no longer boundaries to the sublime nature that has always nested in her soul. Edmund Burke’s concepts of the sublime and beautiful lie in sharp contrast to one another in *Wuthering Heights*, but Brontë deliberately blurs the lines of Burke’s theories. She creates her own theories, destroying the limitations of gender that Burke places on his masculine sublime and feminine beauty. The theorist defines the sublime as “the product of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling,” that the feeling being pain or fear of death (Burke “Of the Sublime”). Heathcliff does not fear pain or death; rather, he welcomes it: he welcomes the end result of the sublime, which is Catherine’s ghost. This reaction shoots down Burke’s claim that it is only the appearance of beauty, and not the sublime that “causes some degree of love in us, as the application of fire and ice produces the ideas of heat or cold” (Burke “Proportion not the Cause of Beauty in Vegetables”). Ghosts are a product of death, which, if Burke’s theories are true, should cause in Heathcliff a reaction of great fear and terror in the graveyard. He feels the exact opposite—a calm reassurance, a consolation he cannot explain in words.

Heathcliff desires the sublime in Catherine—craves it, really—whereas Burke believes in the sole pursuit of the beautiful. This does not mean that Catherine is wholly sublime and not beautiful, because Brontë clearly gives examples of her physical beauty. When Catherine returns to Wuthering Heights after an extensive visit at Thrushcross Grange, Hindley notices a change in Catherine’s outer appearance, remarking that his sister is “quite a beauty” and that he “should scarcely have known [her]” (53). A visit in a quiet, more conventional household markedly improves Catherine’s outer appearance. Desiring Heathcliff’s outer form to match hers, Catherine says, “Heathcliff, shake hands, at least! It was only that you looked odd—if you wash your face, and brush your hair, it will be all right” (55). Catherine prescribes a groom-
ing ritual for Heathcliff so that his physical appearance will change like hers. Heathcliff refuses to clean himself, mistranslating Catherine’s suggestion into a wish that Heathcliff’s physical appearance matched Edgar Linton’s: “I must wish for Edgar Linton’s great blue eyes and even forehead. I do, and that won’t help me to them” (58). While pointing out the obvious physical differences between himself and Linton, Heathcliff presents a clear-cut binary of the sublime and the beautiful. The binary remains throughout the novel in the form of the two opposing households; declares Margaret Homans, “The disparity between the characteristics of Wuthering Heights and those of the Grange is neatly formulated in opposable natural terms, and those natural symbols center in the part of the book most involved with the tension between the two worlds” (13). Catherine, ranked among the wild and rough characteristics of Wuthering Heights, attempts to create a beautiful veneer at the Grange. Since Heathcliff cannot match Catherine when she is beautiful, then he desires for her inner sublime self to dominate her outward appearance. He pursues her inner self, which manifests in the graveyard after her death and calmly reassures him that, one day, they will be together.

Therefore Heathcliff does not rely on Catherine’s physical beauty to sustain him, but rather her spirit, because her spirit cannot and does not change. Elaine Scarry’s theories in On Beauty focus on the life-giving aspect of beauty. However, while Scarry posits a claim about the saving quality of beauty, her life-giver is one of three things: a person, place, or object. What about a ghost? For Catherine’s ghost sustains Heathcliff and grants him the will to live; he wants nothing more than to die and be with Catherine in spirit. He recognizes that her body will be transformed, but that does not alter his obsession with Catherine; because he says he “expected such a transformation on raising the lid” (Brontë 293). It is not her dead body, nor the moors, the shared landscape of their childhood that Heathcliff pursues, but rather the ghost. Death does not scare Heathcliff; in fact, he welcomes it, making him a sort of metaphysical rebel, as well as Emily Brontë: “death is easier to accept if one hopes for salvation and otherworldliness. But for the metaphysical rebel, for the anti-theist, in a context that does not leads to God, there is no reasons for suffering and dying” (Ghnassia 25). Heathcliff, at first, does not accept Catherine’s death because he believes that Catherine cannot journey back to him on this earth. However, when her ghost appears, Heathcliff realizes that the limitations he previously imagined about death are actually untrue. The moment he feels Catherine’s warm
breath on his ears, Heathcliff morphs into a metaphysical rebel that no longer fears the eternal separation caused by death.

Heathcliff brings Catherine’s ghost, a replication of her truest form, to life by a longing to unearth her beauty and see her again. Scarry states that replication is the ultimate act of enjoying beauty, or of recognizing something as beautiful (Scarry 71). According to the beauty theorist, two people conceive a child because “each wishes the beauty of the beloved, already in the world, to enter it a second time” (71). If a child is the sum of two wholes (being the parents’ best and most beautiful qualities), then a ghost can be placed in the same category of replication. It is never explicitly stated in Wuthering Heights that Catherine’s ghost is indeed real; however, Heathcliff believes in her spirit wholeheartedly. Heathcliff loves Catherine and understands her sublime inner self and regards that self as precious; her ghost is similar to the beloved’s children that Scarry mentions. Catherine’s spirit is a brain-child of Heathcliff’s, and therefore the replication of a beautiful life-giver. She arrives in Heathcliff’s hour of need, a representation of the real body that lies buried in the ground.

However, since Catherine desires an upper-class gentleman in order to bring Heathcliff to a higher societal position, she does not consider Heathcliff worthy of marriage yet. Edgar’s societal rank and gentle manner prove him a “worthy” candidate for Catherine’s affections. Edgar’s feminine attributes contrast with Catherine and Heathcliff’s sublime natures and proves that Catherine’s outer beauty is not a true reflection of the beautiful. In order to be categorized as sublime or beautiful, one’s inner and outer characteristics must align together. The soft outer form of Edgar and the dark bleakness that pervades Heathcliff’s countenance are accurate measurements of their respective beauty and sublimity. One afternoon Heathcliff, insulted over Catherine’s jabs to his education and mysterious past, leaves Wuthering Heights just as Edgar enters: “Catherine marked the difference between her friends…The contrast resembled what you see in exchanging a bleak, hilly, coal country for a beautiful fertile valley” (Brontë 71). A very simple contrast, but one that also leaves no room for ambiguity: a valley can never be a hill, just as Edgar, the mild-mannered, pale man that he is, can never be like the dark, brooding Heathcliff. Their backgrounds do not allow it, and that is the reason Catherine argues with Heathcliff just moments prior. For Edgar already possesses everything that Catherine desires: name, class, and rank. His past is not mysterious; it is as open as the valleys. Heathcliff does not even possess a last name; he is a gypsy of unknown origin.
He does not have a title or a place in the class system except that of the lowest rung, and that Catherine cannot bear. It is his sublime aspects that make Heathcliff unwelcomed and long for revenge against his unwelcoming adopted family later in life, argues critic Martha Craven Nussbaum: “Heathcliff, from the beginning mocked and humiliated for his dark skin, his poverty, and his unknown origins, devotes his entire life to revenge against Hindley and the Lintons” (371). Outward circumstances beyond Heathcliff’s control mark him forever a sublime creature, one that should create a spark of fear in beautiful beings. If Catherine were wholly beautiful, she would not be attracted to Heathcliff, but she is. Her inner dark and wild nature trumps any hint of outward passivity and beauty that she possesses.

Heathcliff is the only one who truly understands Catherine, just as no one has seen the depths of Heathcliff’s soul but his beloved. Catherine’s essence—that quick, true part of a person that shines through in tight situations—displays a good deal of Burke’s sublime, and nothing of the beautiful. In front of Edgar on that same afternoon, Catherine pinches and slaps Nelly with such vehemence that the servant cries out in pain. Catherine’s physical reaction reveals her sublime nature; Nelly reports that “her ears [were] red with rage. She never had any power to conceal her passion, it always set her whole complexion in a blaze” (Brontë 72). After shaking Hareton, the baby, and slapping Edgar, Catherine begs Edgar to stay. Edgar complies, which perpetuates his weakness. Nelly observes: “The soft thing looked askance through the window—he possessed the power to depart, as much as a cat possesses the power to leave a mouse half killed, or a bird half eaten—Ah, I thought, there will be no saving him—he’s doomed” (74). Nelly does not describe Edgar as the victim here, however; he is not the mouse or the bird, but the cat. Catherine’s passionate rages—her display of the sublime—attract Edgar, like a cat to a mouse. Despite his fascination, Edgar cannot return Catherine’s temper. Only Heathcliff understands.

Catherine acknowledges the differences between her two lovers through descriptions of nature; these eerily resemble Burke’s definitions of the sublime and the beautiful. Edgar proposes marriage, and Catherine accepts, which defies everything her heart feels for both Edgar and Heathcliff. When explaining the pain her soul is in over accepting Edgar’s hand, Catherine verbally acknowledges the contrasts between Edgar and Heathcliff, and how Heathcliff’s sublime nature triumphs over Edgar’s softer beauty. Catherine describes her love for both men in terms of nature; she says her “love for Linton is like the foliage in
the woods. Time will change it, I’m well aware, as winter changes the
trees—my love for Heathcliff resembles the eternal rocks beneath—a
source of little visible delight, but necessary” (84). Rocks are hard foun-
dations with little pleasure in their visual beauty, but they are timeless.
Nothing will change the rocks, although the rocks are not pleasing to
the eye. The beauty of Linton will eventually fade, and Catherine will
lose interest; she knows this before marrying him. The subsequent
marriage fails because Catherine’s connection with Heathcliff does not
fade; its power does not come from physical or even mental attraction,
but something much deeper—a shared understanding of the terror and
horror that the sublime creates between them:

The passion caused by the great and sublime in nature, when
those causes operate most powerfully, is astonishment; and
astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions
are suspended. In this case the mind is so entirely filled with the
object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequences
reason on that object which employs it. Hence arises the great
power of the sublime, that, far from being produced by them,
it anticipates our reasonings, and hurries on by an irresistible
force. (Burke “Of the Passion Caused by the Sublime”)

In Catherine and Heathcliff’s case, the objects of passion are each other.
They are blinded by their feelings; the astonishment connected with one
another is too powerful for words. Burke’s explanations lean towards a
limited agency on the lovers’ parts; the force of the sublime is “irresist-
able”. This is perhaps the only instance in which Brontë does not fight
against Burke’s reasoning; her characters both comment on the pull of
the sublime as a force that is too powerful to fight against. Catherine
submits to Heathcliff’s position in her soul; her dramatic words to convey
such a feeling are not far beyond Burke’s description of the beautiful.

Catherine’s connection with Heathcliff defies the Christian concept
of heaven, of which Nelly, Catherine’s confidante, is a devout follower.
Soon after Edgar’s proposal, Catherine exclaims to Nelly: “I am Heath-
cliff—he’s always, always in my mind—not as a pleasure, anymore than
I am always a pleasure myself—but, as my own being” (84). Catherine
and Heathcliff consider each other equals; the despair Catherine feels
about choosing between Edgar and Heathcliff is not about which per-
son would make a more suitable husband, but about which person she
cannot live without. Catherine even makes it clear that she wants to
marry Edgar so that, with the money gained from her marriage, she can help Heathcliff rise in society and thus become a suitable companion (85). Heathcliff overhears the conversation and leaves before Catherine confesses her love. She labels Heathcliff and low-class because he lacks money and a known past by the only person he loves in the world… and he continues to love Catherine. Their love is not defined by worldly things, such as money, race, and class position, and yet Catherine thinks Heathcliff must change because Edgar, a richer, more suitable husband figure, finds her beautiful and attractive.

Here Catherine role-plays by putting on the mask of the demure woman who plays house and dutiful wife all day, instead of someone who runs wild on the moors with a foreigner. Nussbaum blames this support of social hierarchy on what she labels “institutionalized Christianity” (95). The “Linton world” inhabited in the novel “excludes the poor and the strange, the dark-skinned and the nameless. Heathcliff’s dark looks and lower-class manners must keep him apart from a Cathy who is taught that to marry him would “degrade” her (95). Heathcliff’s lack of a Linton-like beauty permanently excludes him from Catherine’s world. If he were a rich gypsy, he would still be dark-skinned and foreign, a companion suitable for no one of Catherine’s class and attractiveness. Heathcliff’s very nature, his sublime qualities, forever cast him out of the beautiful, Eden-like world that the Lintons attempt to create at Thrushcross Grange. However, Heathcliff’s rejection and the strife between this newfound gentleman and Edgar cause Catherine’s illness, which she retains until her death.

After seeing Heathcliff again, Catherine rejects his new, more “admirable” position as a rich gentleman, the very position she once sought for him:

He would not relent a moment, to keep me out of the grave! That is how I am loved! […] That is not my Heathcliff. I shall love him yet; and take him with me…he’s in my soul. And the thing that irks me most is this shattered prison, after all. I’m tired, tired of being enclosed here. I’m wearying to escape into that glorious world, and to always be there; not seeing it dimly through tears, and yearning for it through the walls of an aching heart; but really with it, and in it. (Brontë 164)

Because of the stark, ugly accusations she flings at Heathcliff, Catherine sounds like she hates him: “He would not relent a moment, to keep me
out of the grave!” And in a still more sarcastic tone: “That is how I am loved!” (164). However, what if Catherine utters these terrible things through a deep yearning for her death to actually happen? Not as a result of “getting even” with Heathcliff for leaving her, but by the recognition that they will be together, without inhibition, through dying? Heathcliff drives Catherine to death with the conviction that they will be together someday: not just as bones lying next to each other in the ground, but in a new, subliminal space that they create for the sole purpose of being in one another’s company forever. This is why Catherine wants to escape into the other world, which is not anything traditional, or is perhaps not even a place, but rather Heathcliff personified. However, that escape cannot be complete without Heathcliff himself, for Catherine must obey Heathcliff’s command to haunt him. Tytler Graeme, author of “The Workings of Memory in Wuthering Heights”, claims that “Heathcliff’s memory [of Catherine is] instrumental in bringing about his subsequent obsession with her in what he says to her just after her death: ‘You said I killed you — haunt me, then!’” (12). The words of both characters carry an ugly prophecy; Catherine and Heathcliff are bound to the words they say out of passion. Yet the frightening thought of being haunted is not so frightening for Heathcliff or Catherine: rather, it is a natural measure to take in the event of being separated.

Both Catherine and Heathcliff vehemently reject the Christian idea of heaven in favor of haunting the moors forever, which is their ultimate replication of a sublime landscape. Catherine fears that she will enter heaven and be terribly alone, flung out onto the moors and “sobbing for joy” at the act (Brontë 82). Catherine’s dream foreshadows their futures, because it is impossible to imagine Heathcliff and Catherine to successfully live with one another in heaven, since the institutions of class and race distinction that separate them on earth are enforced by institutional Christians. Yet their determination creates another way; Catherine describes a dream to Nelly about arriving in heaven and hating it: “Heaven did not seem to be my home; and I broke my heart with weeping to come back to earth; and the angels were so angry that they flung me out, into the middle of the heath on the top of Wuthering Heights” (82). Catherine’s ecstasy at her rejection prophesies the lonely wandering years she serves as a kind of penance while waiting for Heathcliff to join her in death. For it is only one night that Catherine and Heathcliff are together while he is still alive, and she a ghost: when she leads Heathcliff away from her grave and back home. Heathcliff makes the space her heaven.
Through defining their own “truth,” Catherine and Heathcliff create a beautiful world free of restraint, fulfilling Elaine Scarry’s declaration that “what is beautiful is in league with what is true, because truth lies in the immortal sphere” (31). It is the quest for beauty, an eternal moment together, that forces Catherine and Heathcliff to create their own secret, immortal realm. They must create their own type of beauty because they cannot be together alive on earth or dead in heaven; only as ghosts can they roam the moors forever in peace. Therefore, Catherine’s ghost represents not only the ultimate replication of her beauty, but also the beauty of another space. Her ghost haunts Heathcliff in preparation for their eternity together. When she is about to die, Catherine uses a curious preposition to describe her future; she yearns for the day she can be “with” her heaven, as well as “in” it (164). Catherine makes Heathcliff her paradise, her Eden; he in turn does the same. Almost twenty years after Catherine’s death and on the brink of his own, Heathcliff remarks: “To-day, I am within sight of my heaven—I have my eyes on it” (335). The ultimate act of rejecting the Christian heaven is to make a person, a created being, the ultimate destination of the soul. It is ungodly in the lightest terms, yet accurately describes the dark gypsy and his sublime companion who would rather spend eternity as ghosts than separate. Their immortality is not so much a space but the presence of each other: the presence of the beloved, and that is enough. Their original versions of heaven reveal what Catherine and Heathcliff desire as truth because what they both want is to simply be together in that sublime space—but together.

Catherine, as a ghost, attempts to break into Wuthering Heights because she cannot exist in the sublime space of the moors without her companion and guide, Heathcliff, who is the ultimate representation of sublime nature in Wuthering Heights. She regrets dying before Heathcliff can join her; Ingid Geerken reads her ghost as an “economical metaphor for regret” (386). Without her heaven, her ultimate version of beauty, Catherine as a ghost merely becomes a spectre: one that stands, haunts, and regrets the lack of movement in her new body. Her ghost transforms into what Jacques Derrida terms “the spectre”: a ghost-like figure that, instead of carrying a shameful or harmful secret, “gesture(s) toward a still unformulated future” (Davis 379). The ghost Catherine serves as a guidepost for Heathcliff, a remembrance that this life is but temporary, and that when he dies, they will be together in paradise. Intriguing, however, is the fact that Heathcliff spends over eighteen years aggressively and obsessively searching for Catherine’s ghosts on the moors, calling
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out to her, but she never appears. However, she is seen by Lockwood in an attempt to break into Wuthering Heights, the domestic space she despised as a child. Lockwood speaks with the ghost, and quickly panics when she reaches inside the house, instead of maintaining her natural habitat of the cold, snowy outside. Lockwood describes this scene as a nightmare, fully convinced that he was asleep the entire time as he grasps a hand that reaches inside his window:

A most melancholy voice sobbed, ‘Let me in! Let me in!’ ‘Who are you?’ I asked, struggling, meanwhile, to disengage myself. ‘Catherine Linton,’ it replied, shiveringly…‘I’m come home, I’d lost my way on the moor!’ As it spoke, I discerned, obscurely, a child’s face looking through the window—Terror made me cruel…I pulled its wrist on to the broken pane, and rubbed it to and fro till the blood ran down and soaked the bed-clothes: still it wailed, ‘Let me in!’ and maintained its tenacious grip, almost maddening me with fear (25).

Catherine’s ghost serves no purpose except a selfish one; she wants to be back inside her childhood home and closer to Heathcliff. Her continuous cry of “let me in” proves that, while Heathcliff is still alive, the moors are not their reuniting place. Perhaps Catherine’s ghost attempts a break-in because the house is now Heathcliff’s choice of haunt.

The encounter forces Lockwood to violently react against her ghost and cause it bodily harm: the blood on the sheets of her childhood room suggest a loss of innocence, that the ghost is not pure or holy but just as stained as Catherine before her death. His conversation with the ghost is not particularly useful, but Derrida’s spectres are known for their looseness: “Conversing with spectres is not undertaken in the expectation that they will reveal some secret, shameful or otherwise. Rather, it may open us up to the experience of secrecy as such: an essential unknowing which underlies and may undermine what we think we know…” (Davis 377). Surely Lockwood’s view on the supernatural shatters when he encounters Catherine’s ghost, but what is the purpose of the “essential unknowing” that Catherine reveals? Everything in Catherine and Heathcliff’s relationship circles back to an essential unknowing: they are from virtually two different worlds and are of the opposite sex: they should not be friends, very much less lovers. Yet both reject the conventions and create a subworld to inhabit, free of societal restrictions or codes of conventional beauty. Their future ghost world, to which Catherine’s
ghost beckons (not the past, as it seems traditional for ghosts/spectres to represent) contains an element of the essential unknowing that is pure, and brave, and good.

Indeed, Heathcliff’s desire for death heightens with each sighting of Catherine’s ghost. Her figure, ever-present in his mind, forces him to think of something beyond the present moment and even the past, for now her body has corroded, it has morphed into something unrecognizable. Only her ghost is constant as it moves towards a future beautiful space, rather than a truth. In “The Dead Are Not Annihilated,” Ingrid Geerken argues that “the work of mourning literally becomes one of restoration” (376). While Heathcliff’s physical body declines in health, his spirit is continuously restored by the hope that one day he will reunite with Catherine. His mourning, therefore, is not negative, but one of perpetual joy, a search for the truth that Catherine’s presence brings. Her spectre carries the promise of a more sublime world in Heathcliff’s future. Heathcliff realizes that death should not cause grief or horror to strike the soul, but rather hope. As Geerken concludes, “Brontë turns vehement grief into a perpetual process of renewal and revitalization: by resisting the limits of mortality she proves, in Heathcliff’s words, “that the dead are not annihilated!” (400). The processes that Geerken describes are also touched upon by Scarry: “It is not that a…person is “true,” but rather that [they] ignite the desire for truth by giving us, with an electric brightness shared by almost no other uninvited, freely arriving perceptual event, the experience of conviction” (52). If Catherine’s spectre ignites the desire for truth, then the “essential unknowing” that the spectre also brings is actually rather beautiful: the hope for an eternal world, engineered towards Heathcliff and Catherine’s sublime natures. Death is not the end; it is also not cause for horror. Bronte successfully flips Burke’s staunch binaries by transforming the most feared object of Burke’s (death) into a symbol for life and peace.

Just before death occurs for Heathcliff, that “electric brightness” Scarry gestures towards becomes reality (52). Heathcliff does not find the long years of waiting for death to be particularly restoring, however. He tells Nelly: “Now that I’ve seen [Catherine’s ghost], I’m pacified—a little. It was a strange way of killing, not by inches, but by fractions of hair-breadths, to beguile me with the spectre of a hope, through eighteen years!” (Brontë 295). Although Heathcliff recognizes the hope embedded within the ghost, what he really wishes for is a quick death. He cannot stand the torture of knowing the goodness to come; he would rather be ignorant for a few short hours than be, as he calls it, “tortured.” He
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does not want the image of the truth, but rather the whole truth: to be finally reunited with Catherine’s spirit in that sublime space currently unavailable to both. As Heathcliff remarks, “there is a strange change approaching—I’m in its shadow at present—I take so little interest in my daily life” (329). When the spiritual finally outweighs this physical life, Heathcliff can shed his tyrannical revenge like dead skin and reunite with the woman he loves.

Heathcliff and Catherine, finally seen by the public on the moors (but only as ghosts), prove that their created sublime landscape can only be enjoyed through death. This simultaneously defies and observes Edmund Burke’s rigid principles. Two sublime creatures belong to a space that expresses their inward nature; it is the only space that can contain them for eternity. It is not heaven that satisfies, it is rather life as it should be. According to Burke, Catherine does not belong because she is a woman, but also because she is the first to travel to that space: alone, without a guide, a female trailblazer into the magnificent unknown. While Burke does not explicitly say that the sublime is not made for women, he argues that beauty is vastly superior in females (whereas males “naturally” possess sublime traits): “both sexes are undoubtedly capable of beauty, and the female of the greatest; which advantage I believe will hardly be attributed to the superior exactness of proportion in the fair sex” (Burke “Proportion not the Cause of Beauty in the Human Species). Catherine’s “exactness” makes her beautiful and not sublime; she is supposed to be soft and beautiful like Linton, not capable of jagged atrocities like Heathcliff. Yet Catherine defies Burke’s concepts by blending the two traits together in one astonishing sweep, haunting Heathcliff while maintaining a sense of beauty. All seems well, but Joseph Carroll reads the haunting as disturbed:

“The narrative offers evidence that the earth containing the bodies of Catherine and Heathcliff is still troubled, and always will be, by their demonic spirits. Nelly Dean deprecates the rumor that the spirits of Catherine and Heathcliff walk the moors, but she also reports that the sheep will not pass where the boy saw the ghosts of Heathcliff and Catherine, and she herself is afraid to walk abroad at night.” (248-249)

Carroll’s reading sounds negative, but it contains truth. First, it is not Catherine and Heathcliff who are troubled in his reading; it is the earth that holds their bodies. When Heathcliff asks the sexton to open up the
side of Catherine’s coffin, his purpose is to forever haunt the beauty he so detests in Edgar. Heathcliff recounts the act with a smile: “By the time Linton gets to us, he’ll not know which is which!” (293). Deep in the ground, Heathcliff’s bones mix with Catherine’s; they are forever intertwined. Therefore the very earth is haunted by their physical bodies, as well as their ghostly ones. Since the pair rejects the Christian heaven and is flung out, then Carroll’s assertion that Catherine and Heathcliff are demons stands true as well. However, this is exactly what Heathcliff and Catherine desire; it is their idea of heaven. As an eternal mixture of bones and spirits, the long wait for Heathcliff is over; he can roam the moors with his beloved in relative peace.

On the eve of Catherine’s burial, Heathcliff finds consolation in the promise of future peace. The beauty that lies beneath the ground no longer begs to be held; it is the warm breath of a ghostly presence that brings him truth: there will be a forever that looks like heaven. Death is no longer feared, no longer the enemy. Because of Catherine’s sublime characteristics, she carves a path to a world that holds her and Heathcliff without the pressure to be beautiful or a gentleman. In this landscape of divine and astonishing promises, Heathcliff and Catherine wander, their souls mixing together just like their bones, buried deep underneath the unquiet earth. The beauty of Catherine and Heathcliff’s handmade world extends beyond the pages of *Wuthering Heights*: it brings hope for a world beyond Earth, but one that is crafted, molded, around passions of this world. Catherine and Heathcliff long to enjoy each other’s presence for eternity, alone. This can be done; this is a possibility strengthened by the unearthing—but not completely uncovering—of beauty.

**Works Cited**


Near the end of the documentary *Exit Through the Gift Shop* its creator, Banksy, sits in a dark warehouse, face blurred out, voice intentionally distorted to hide his identity, and says, “I don’t know what it means. Thierry is a huge success and a rival in the art world. I mean maybe Thierry was a genius all along. Maybe he got a bit lucky. Maybe it means art is a bit of a joke.” The irony of a world-famous artist saying this is not lost on its audience. Here Banksy admits that his life’s work, when commodified and made commonplace, is left nearly meaningless. But has it diminished true beauty or merely the glamour of societal fads? Can one occupy the same space as true beauty, while simultaneously exist in the commoditized society that created it?

In order to understand the differing views presented in *Exit Through the Gift Shop* one must start from the beginning of it all. Thierry Guetta is a French immigrant living in L.A. who is obsessed with filming the monotonous, day-to-day activities of everyone around him. He has his camera rolling wherever he goes, and aspires to be a real filmmaker one day. Soon he starts working with his cousin, a street artist called “Space Invader,” and begins filming the nightlife of street art in its entirety. Through this series of moonlighting, Thierry makes a mysterious contact that allows him to find Banksy, the most celebrated street artist in the game, and someone that Thierry is recently enamored with. And so begins a mentor-protege relationship of sorts between the two of them. Thierry helps Banksy as an assistant, and also decides to film a documentary about the street art underworld. After many months, Banksy
asks to look at what Thierry has put together. Banksy notes then that, “Ummm... You know... it was at that point that I realized that maybe Thierry wasn't actually a film maker, and he was maybe just someone with mental problems who happened to have a camera.” The footage is a disaster, and from there Banksy decides to take over the work on the documentary. Before leaving Thierry, he gives him an assignment: Make your own art. Thierry takes this very seriously, and pours his entire life savings into one art show. He forms the persona of “Mr. Brainwash” within months, hiring an entire team of graphic designers and sculptors to realize his dream of being an artist. Herein lies the problem when attempting to create beauty through art. Producing art in an assembly line fashion like Mr. Brainwash inherently comes with certain problems. This system of creating art stands at odds with Walter Benjamin’s primary marker in art, that is, the “aura” or uniqueness, and presumably, its authenticity. In Benjamin’s “Illuminations”, he states, “In principle a work of art has always been reproducible. Man-made artifacts could always be imitated by men. Replicas were made by pupils in practice of their craft, by masters for diffusing their works, and finally, by third parties in the pursuit of gain” (218). Benjamin seems to explore the notions of technology and its place in producing art, in that the fact that it allows art to be made much easier, and for more profit. This can easily be witnessed in the documentary, as Mr. Brainwash wheels by pieces of artwork on the floor in his wheelchair, misting the prints with spray-paint, an action that attempts to imbue authenticity to the work, but ironically does the opposite. The issue of authenticity of the work is brought into question of course. How can the artwork embody true beauty if it lacks authenticity and ownership by the artist? Once we see Thierry fielding calls from prospective buyers before his show it becomes apparent his true intent is skewed. He says, “It’s like gold, you just spray some paint on it and say this one is $18,000, this is $12,000.” One can then see how Thierry views the art world, as something to be mined for profit, and in this manner he embodies the ideals of the glamour world. It is easy to see how Thierry was swept up in the glitz and glamour of the art world. The critic Robert Morgan delves into the foray when he notes in “A Sign of Beauty” that “Most of what the fashion world has to offer is glamour. Most of what Hollywood has to offer is glamour. Most of what the art world has to offer is glamour. Glamour like the art world itself, is a highly fickle and commercially driven enterprise that contributes to what the late critic Lewis Mumford used to call ‘the humdrum’” (7). While Thierry definitely gets carried away in the ‘hum
Exit Through the Wasteland

drum’ as it were, it is also important to note the world that surrounds him. One cannot fault him for wanting success in his endeavors. It is a natural drive to strive for success—and yes—money. The art world, and within that, beauty, occupies a realm of commodification and functions in a society that values money over truth. Morgan notes that, “But the artist has to exist—to live—within a world that is mediated through glamour. The allure is constantly in the air. It is both omnipresent and omniscient. It carries the seduction of instant fame and success” (7). But does that world, then, exhibit characteristics of true beauty, or is it all merely subjective in the end?

For reasons of positing a concise argument, I intend to delineate the manner in which intent and the ever-increasingly commodified world has shaped how we perceive beauty in art, and ultimately, that the artist’s desire for his work determines either true beauty in art, or a fading glamour that wishes to be superficial and topically relevant. Through a cross-examination of the films Exit Through the Gift Shop and Wasteland, I will dissect how these artist’s treat the figment of beauty in art through the lenses of other beauty critics. Mr. Brainwash and Banksy offer two conflicting views on the intent and purpose of beauty in art, and how it should be commodified. The documentary Wasteland by Karen Harley complicates these ideas further by introducing the artist Vik Muniz. Muniz travels to Rio de Janeiro, his hometown, to use his artwork and prestige to give back to those who need it most. By working with “pickers,” the poorest people in the city who rifle through the garbage to find something of value to recycle he creates art of their likeness out of the trash they gather. The profits are all shared with the destitute people, showing the commodification of art in a completely new manner than cast in Exit Through the Gift Shop. Three differing views on beauty’s role in the commodified art world are viewed in these two documentaries, and while Morgan insists ‘the humdrum’ dictates the societal impact of beauty, or lack thereof when concerning glamour, one can see that the overall intent of the artist operates in tandem with the subjective nature of art to crystallize an opinion upon the viewer after being impacted with its impression.

The fact that artists such as Mr. Brainwash are famous problematizes the notion of beauty and authenticity in art further. The layperson can observe that he siphoned the style of numerous artists in an attempt to create his own twist on modern art. In particular, Mr. Brainwash uses Campbell soup cans in his work just like Andy Warhol. Banksy notes in the documentary then that, “Warhol repeated iconic images until they
became meaningless, but there was still something iconic about them. Thierry really makes them meaningless.” Even still, with Thierry’s images being obviously fabricated and cherry picked from other artists’ work, the people flocked to his show, buying his artwork like he was the next Picasso. If the common man is moved by artwork, and finds something of note in it, then is there beauty within it? Or are these people deceived by the glamour of the art world, and focusing on the hype of it all? Is the ‘humdrum’ society being driven by fads, or is this beauty subjectively authentic? If you take the crowds’ reaction at face value then one may not know what to believe. One of the exhibit goers states that, “It’s a triumph. It will go down in history. I’m glad my friends turned me onto this.” Another woman, with an air of haughtiness, states that, “Art is not dead. It’s all around us.” If these amateur art critics can be believed, Mr. Brainwash is already an artist to be celebrated. And he only started creating art six months before the art show. Banksy notes that, “Most artists take years to develop their style, Thierry seemed to miss out on all those bits.” So because he rushed his art, and transplanted beauty from other artist’s work, then is the end result fake beauty? And is art created for the people, or for the actual art critics then? Who is the final arbiter of beauty within art? Is it the people who get copies to hang on their wall? Or is the critics and elites who buy the expensive originals and analyze them? Morgan argues that “One cannot intend or predetermine beauty to be the condition of a work before the work exists; rather beauty becomes a condition after the fact of the work—an aura that is received” (6). If one takes this line of thinking, then Thierry most certainly did not create beauty, as he predetermined the entire thing. But it’s Morgan who flips his own idea on its head when he states, “Paradoxically, the concept of beauty may no longer be absolute, as considered by Plato or Kant, but relative. This relativity, however, is contingent on the recognition of a form’s conceptual understanding as much as its aesthetic coherence” (5). Relative, and subjective, there cannot be a final answer for what beauty is in art, as its ever-changing. And while the commodification of art, that art that is made for commercial purposes, seems to make genuine beauty harder to attain, it is ultimately the artist’s overall intent that determines its beauty. Because of the artist’s plight—that of living in a commercial world—the side effect of greatness is, sometimes, profit. Success, therefore, does not immediately determine beauty in art, or a lack thereof.

It is also important within this analysis to outline the type of beauty being discussed, and how it functions within a certain context. For the
purpose of this argument, the ideals of beauty will be narrowed to those involving art, and the effects that it has on the viewer. Elaine Scarry notes in her book “On Beauty”, that “The beautiful person or thing incites in us the longing for truth because it provides by its compelling ‘clear discernibility’ an introduction to the state of certainty…” (31) Taking this line of thought then, beauty is whatever stands apart as truth, and indeed, must be wholly authentic given its parameters and place in society. This is not to posit the claim that any art can be absolutely without inspiration taken from others though. It is the nature of the beast, in any art, that one must glean ideas and feelings from others before a personal style can be attained. And such is the problematic of art, in that, it is nearly impossible to set oneself apart as unprecedented. But truth in beauty is something that can be felt inside the receiver. Notwithstanding the powerful nature of some art once first viewed, Morgan adeptly notes that, “Whereas language is the condition by which work is selected, resolved, or understood, beauty is the effect by which it is sensed, transmitted, and finally, remembered” (82). For this paper, I will align myself with Morgan’s notions of beauty as well as Hegel’s sense of beauty, cleanly stated by E.F. Carrit as he says, “For him art is the presentation of truth or spiritual reality in sensuous form. It is a lower revelation of the same ‘truth’ which is more adequately grasped by religion and philosophy; or at least of some part of it, for some truths are artistically inexpressible and only attainable by reflection” (The Theory of Beauty, 103). Taking these lofty ideals of beauty and juxtaposing them with the artists found within these two films, it becomes starkly apparent of the differences in the way they treat truth and beauty, commodification and authenticity. It will be important to systematically deduce their motives pertaining to beauty, how their art effects its viewers, and why their versions of beauty in art exist in the first place.

Once these seemingly abstract ideas of beauty are contextualized, what do they say about these films? Blanketing them across the text, one can start to a familiar pattern, an outline that maps out what may be argued as the truth in the artwork. It is hard to flesh out the reality of the relationship between money and art, because of the subjective nature it entails. If asked, people would surely give completely varying responses to the question, but it remains important to take sides if an argument is made. Therefore, I posit that true beauty in artwork is only real if the overwhelming intent behind its creation was not molded by profit and commodification. This notion seems to align, for the most part, with many philosophers and critics grasp of the relationship between beauty/
glamour and money/authenticity. Banksy accurately affirms this concept when he asserts, in relation to high-end art auctions, “All of a sudden they were selling street art, and everything was going a bit crazy, and everything was about the money, but it never was about the money. So I said to Thierry, you have all the footage, and you can tell the story.” This quote very clearly aligns Banksy with the notions of Hegel and Morgan, as well as others, and cements his place among those most concerned with truth in beauty. His request for Thierry to tell the story of street art comes much earlier of course, before Thierry became Mr. Brainwash, and seemed to lose his way, driven by greed and the glamour. For Banksy, beauty can be found on the street, among the common people, and promotes a general sense of enlightenment. Indeed, his street art focuses on making political statements about the sad plight of society, and coercing viewers to re-think their ideologies, political, and societal views. And it should be noted that Banksy has never accepted payment from these art auctions that, basically, steal his artwork and sell it without permission. It is the strive for original thought and honesty that envelops Banksy’s works, and therefore, the reason people find beauty within them. A well-known piece of his is a quote merely stating, “One original thought is worth a thousand mindless quotings.” Such irony, while comical, seeks to inspire change in society, and therefore inherently speaks truth, whether one agrees with it or not. Another stencil depicts two male police officers kissing. In this manner, Banksy facilitates truth by generating controversy and a real dialogue about issues our society deals with. Etienne Gilson writes that, “Truth has a beauty of its own, no doubt the highest of all, and this is why the intellectual experience of truth is accompanied by pleasure” (The Arts of the Beautiful, 26). The only idea that problematizes this notion is the subjectivity of truth. Everyone has their own ideals of truth, and therefore, of what beauty embodies. These characteristics of truth found within Banksy’s art are so far removed from Mr. Brainwash’s monetarily focused art that the argument of truth, and glamour, can be easily determined with further introspection.

Mr. Brainwash’s quest for artistic fulfillment starts innocent enough, but soon turns into a money-obsessed rat race. As he is interviewed for the art show by a major magazine, one can see Thierry’s ego inflating before their eyes. His eyes give away his true intentions within the art world. His careless comment about merely spraying paint on items and selling them for tens of thousands of dollars reeks of a man not interested in creating truth, but attaching himself to the glamorous bits of society. Even his name, Mr. Brainwash, is reminiscent of someone not
being entirely honest. To brainwash someone is to manipulate them into thinking a certain way, usually with devious purposes. Interestingly, Thierry does not shy away from this definition when he states, “That’s why I call myself Mr. Brainwash. It’s because everything that I do... somewhere... it brainwash your face!” In this instance, one could argue, that Thierry intentionally admits that he brainwashes people into believing in his art, something that surely must have happened in the opinion of Banksy and others. Mr. Brainwash’s manipulation of art and people was so successful that Steve Lazarides, an art curator, remarks in the film that, “I think the joke is on... I don’t know who the joke’s on —really. I don’t even know if there is a joke.” Basically a well-respected art curator becomes baffled by Mr. Brainwash’s tactics, not counting Banksy himself. Such comments on the artists do not exactly permeate with truth and respect.

Even at a glance, the work of Mr. Brainwash problematizes and defies convention in terms of beauty in art. Therefore, his presence in the art scene begs the all-pertinent question, is there truth in art? Such a sweeping question requires intense research, and can be argued from many standpoints, but for the purpose of this argument we shall examine it from the outlook of Nietzsche, as well as the critic Herman Rapaport in his book quite succinctly titled, “Is There Truth in Art?” Rapaport outlines the troubling query as he states, “As criticism (or the idea of the work as criticism and hence as ‘research’), works of art are supposed to routinely question aesthetic and metaphysical protocols, among them, beauty, harmony, grace, balance, coherence, and truth” (10). One can ascertain then, that art should always challenge the status quo of what constitutes truth and beauty. In this manner, it could be argued that Thierry, did indeed, defy the societal and artistic norms of beauty, even if with questionable means. This theory of defying established ideals of truth is even more accurately defined when Rapaport notes that:

Undoubtedly, the most significant precursor of a post metaphysical consideration of art and truth is Friedrich Nietzsche, whose aphorism ‘We have art in order not to die of the truth’ exposes a number of theoretical aporias. When Nietzsche wrote that ‘We have art in order not to die of the truth,’ he self-consciously inverted and ironized a metaphysical cliché from antiquity that asserts that we have art in order to live the truth. Whereas the inversion calls the presumption of truth into question, it did not escape Nietzsche that he was merely
displacing one proposition about truth by substituting another in the form of an aphoristic critique. He knew that in the subversion of truth there is simultaneously a restitution of it in the form of a truth of truth. This means that whenever one asks a question like ‘Is there truth in art?’, the issue is not matter of the presence or absence of truth—is there truth in art or not?—but of the displacement of one truth by another” (11).

While Nietzsche’s viewpoint seems to marginalize the aforementioned argument against Mr. Brainwash’s artistic merits and authenticity, it is exceedingly important to offer a didactic framework in which to work around. Earlier, the idea was brought to bear that Thierry’s sense of beauty and overarching intent within art was skewed, and in many ways detrimental to the art world as a whole. His rapid rise to fame, and penchant for the celebrity status that comes with it flies in the face of his mentor, Banksy, as one can most assuredly note. Banksy’s proclivity for secrecy and distaste for the money-centered art world easily aligns itself with a more conservative view of what truth may embody. And so if Banksy exemplifies truth within the commoditized art world, how can Mr. Brainwash inhabit the same truth-space as it were? Is it possible that another truth displaced the traditional sense of truth, and that, in the end, truth is what the masses make it? That the work of artists has always been governed by the commoditized society it inhabits, and true beauty is only created in nature?

Changing gears now, one must investigate other areas in which the function of beauty in a commodified world is situated. The worthwhile efforts of Vik Muniz in Wasteland are indeed worthy of analysis, if only, for their total and complete conflicting intentions when cast against Mr. Brainwash’s. It is necessary to differentiate how beauty operates in these two documentaries, and while its apparent how Banksy and Mr. Brainwash clash theoretically, how does Vik Muniz fair when cast alongside the other two artists? What is the documentary Wasteland expressing about beauty, and its role in our commodified world? Where Banksy seems to find beauty in changing the mindsets of viewers, and more politically focused in art, Muniz decides to narrow his focus, and change the lives of a group of people in a beautiful way. Early in the documentary Vik notes that, “Right now, im at this point in my career where I’m trying to step away from the realm of fine arts. it’s a very exclusive, restrictive place. What I really want to do, is be able to change the lives of a group of people with the material they work with everyday.” Such a goal is
beautiful, and at the same time daunting. To take it upon oneself to change peoples’ lives is such a loaded goal, at once brave and heroic, and arguably egotistical as well. But the documentary sets the situation up in such a way that the viewer is most assuredly on Vik’s side and rooting for success. Any criticism can only be voiced after it is over, as you see the final effects of Vik’s experiment. To briefly explicate the goal of Vik Muniz in Wasteland, the viewer soon learns of Vik’s early life involving poverty in the slums of Rio de Janiero, and a struggle to get out, finally culminating in a highly successful career as an artist in New York. Vik decides to go and live next to Jardim Gramacho, the largest landfill in the world, and transform the lives pickers, or people who salvage for recyclable materials, by capturing the essence of their spirit in art. The garbage they rummage through every day creates the art. And it is the people’s resilient spirit that defines the beauty found within the finished product. There is Valter, the oldest and most respected picker in the landfill, who has a penchant for inspiring quotes as he says, “People sometimes say ‘But one single can?’ One single can is of great importance. Because 99 is not 100, and that single one will make the difference.” Such a profound statement is exactly what Vik attempted to showcase through the pictures photographed of these remarkable people. The beauty, in his art, and in the people, lies within what Morgan called the “aura” or uniqueness. This authenticity brought real truth and emotion to the art pieces, and in turn stirred a reaction in the people that witnessed it. The actual art pieces were pictures taken of the pickers’ faces, but their entire shape and outline were created using garbage. The pictures were taken of them in their element, within the landfill, posed, but at the same time candid. In this manner, Muniz was able to bottle their essence as it were, and then recast it onto another medium, thus creating something wholly authentic with the finished pieces.

Looking further into the permanent effects of money and commodification on art, in this certain instance, one can see it goes beyond the truth of the people involved, but more importantly the overarching result of the experiment. In this instance, money was the absolute goal in mind for Vik and the group of pickers, because money could change their lives and bring education, housing, and better living situations. Mr. Brainwash of course became motivated by money, but not to change anyone else’s life but his own, and maybe his families. Here is where intent becomes such an important factor in the declaration of how money distorts beauty in art. Jumping ahead, Vik does end up selling the pieces, the first one of Thiao, the President of the Picker’s
Association, and nets $50,000, a sum that Thiao and the other pickers
could only dream of. The money goes right back into the Association
and creates a stable environment for the company to grow. But as with
all things good, there is usually an unintended side-effect. Vik’s efforts
to show the picker’s the good life, so to speak, leads them to hate their
old life, some of whom seemed to be perfectly happy. After the art shows
are over, and the picker’s fifteen minutes of fame has subsided, they are
left basking in the afterglow of something now unattainable. They know
they want something different, but do not know how to get it in some
ways. We are left with spare information, and only that some have found
a way in the outside world, and that others are struggling to cope with
the newfound sense of purpose and discovery. In this manner, one can
see how money can have a life-changing and adverse effect simultane-
ously on people, through the beauty in art.

Paradoxically, it has been postulated that not only the commodified
world is beautiful, but also the base function, that is commerce. Such
an off-kilter idea directly disputes my own argument, but it should be
declared in order to present the most exhaustive discussion on beauty
and its role in these two films. This argument undoubtedly aligns itself
with Mr. Brainwash’s sense of purpose within the art world, and sees
no harm in creating art for the sole purpose of profit. Alan Osborne so
expertly presents this viewpoint in his article “Commerce is Beautiful”
when he states, “And so now on several dimensions we have a straight-
forward correspondence between beauty—something formed with an
eye toward perfection, though never quite achieving it—and commerce,
converging toward the socially optimal outcome. Even if the actual
equilibrium does not perfectly mimic the competitive one for the usual
reasons of economic frictions, the collective efforts of buyers and sell-
ers competing against one another are very suggestive artists—either as
individuals or as a group, each playing his own indispensable role in the
orchestra or the cast, and thus moving as close as possible to the Platonic
or divine ideal” (6). While this passage does not specifically focus on the
art world and its burgeoning marketplace, it’s couched in an argument
that has ties to the themes expressed in these two documentaries. Simply
put, the society that allows art to exist also decides how it is treated in
a financial capacity. And because people find beauty in artwork, they
instinctively want to possess it, which requires some sort of exchange
or payment. This is commerce at its basest form, and the unfortunate
truth that dominates every industry. Interestingly, Osborne posits that
the actual back-and-forth dance between seller and buyer, that is the
actual transaction, mimics the beautiful connection between orchestra members or actors within a play. This line of thinking would make Thierrys’ art show a splendidly beautiful display where Mr. Brainwash might represent the conductor, and the buyers symbolizing the musicians, following his every beck and call. This analogy works quite well when one remembers how Mr. Brainwash so effortlessly manipulated potential buyers with his persona and image, without substantial talent. Osborne continues his incursion into the complicated relationship between money and art as he states, “The ability of a beautifully crafted object to elicit admiration or affection or delight in a person whose aesthetic tastes are well formed because of the culture, reason, or mere human evolutionary inheritance is strikingly similar to the ability of a good to be chosen as the result of a competitive bidding for a consumer’s resources to maximize his utility. Indeed, that the very word utility is both a cornerstone of the modern demand function and sometimes a characterization of the satisfaction derived by the individual from a beautiful object suggests that the merchant—especially the successful one—and the artist perform similar functions” (9). This offering only serves to reinforce the perception that art is, arguably, merely a good to be bartered or paid for; it is on par with perhaps maybe not a need, but a want, like getting a new gadget that just came out. It is an item that one believes will not only be impressive to others, but may somehow fulfill a void in ourselves. These two documentaries converse with this idea in different ways though. The contrasting viewpoints of Banksy and Mr. Brainwash both argue for and against Osborne’s striking argument. Banksy finds beauty in art through the freedom of expression and an utter distaste for the marketing and business model involved with the industry, even allowing his works to be sold for massive amounts of money, and not pocketing what is inherently his money. Banksy would surely then not find beauty in the transactions of commerce. Indeed, he calls the immediate popularity of street art and subsuming art auctions surrounding it “crazy”. Mr. Brainwash meanwhile relishes in the commerce side of art, and would wholeheartedly side with Osborne’s impressions of art’s role in society. And as stated before, Vik treats art in much the same manner as Thierry, but does so with different intent, and this makes all the difference. For Vik Muniz, the sale of art eventually becomes merely the gateway to a higher purpose, which changes other people’s lives.

Another lens in which to view the film Exit Through the Gift Shop is more Meta, in that one must view the entire film as a commodity. In
doing so one realizes that Banksy is the sole creator of the film, and therefore stands to profit the most money. It is possible to view the entire film and goings-on as an art-piece, Banksy’s masterpiece if you will. If this is to be believed then Banksy certainly goes against some of his core beliefs by selling beauty for profit, and not creating for its own sake. Looking at Wasteland through the same lens it seems to offer up similar results. While Vik appears to be grounded and humble, it is possible the documentary was created as a ruse for fame and prestige. As Morgan noted, the majority of art exists within a bubble of glamour, and perhaps all artists are confined to its power. Andy Warhol, Salvador Dali, both are wildly famous artists who shared commercial and critical success because of their talent. But it is no secret they adored the limelight and all the celebrity status they could muster. Their lives embodied the culmination of Morgan’s thoughts on glamour, and yet are considered to be true artists responsible for bringing great beauty into the world. Such clashing ideals are difficult to reconcile together. Morgan notes that “To use a spectacle in art is one thing; to make art into a spectacle is something else” (5). With this in mind, did Banksy and Vik Muniz make art into a spectacle through their documentaries? Or did they purely incorporate spectacle into their art in order to call attention to greater issues, and perhaps change their world for the better? These questions spotlight the subjective nature of opinions involved in the issues at hand. As a humble subjective claim then, I would posit that Banksy and Vik’s intent was pure enough, and exhibited a certain truth that made it escape the realm of glamour, and occupy one of beauty. Vik reinstates this pure belief when he states, “I’d rather want everything and have nothing, than have everything and want nothing. Because at least when you want something your life has a meaning: it’s worthwhile. From the moment you think you have everything, you have to search for meaning in other things. I spent half my life wanting everything and having nothing; and now I have everything and I don’t want anything.” Because Vik has everything he needs, it is easier to believe his motives are truthful for creating and selling the art in the documentary, especially once one sees him take a backseat to the picker’s limelight in the end at the unveiling of the artwork. He especially appears to take great joy in the happiness of the others, during the show, as well as once they get their own copy to hang in their homes. Intrinsically though, it is impossible to know these artists internal wants and desires, fears and desires. It is therefore total conjecture when one claims the intent of another person’s actions, something that is inherently problematizing while creating theory.
The problem of where commodification and money should exist in the space in which we call art is, as we have seen, a tricky one indeed. It spans the gamut between objective/subjective, and True/fabricated. These binaries hold significant truths in and of themselves depending on one's own specific perspective, past experience, and artistic background. Once data is gleaned from these instances found within the texts, and a personal assessment made, it is necessary to solidify a succinct argument aligns with one's own truths, theoretical as it may be. Commoditization plays a weighted role in every venue in life, and the arts are no different. For the films Exit Through the Gift Shop, and Wasteland, arguments can be made on both sides concerning Mr. Brainwash, Banksy, and Vik Muniz's treatment of its meaning, both in the films and in general. What is the determining factor then when estimating their usage of Truth, and overall employment of beauty in a commodified industry? Problematic as it seems, these films bolster the idea that while pure intention is paramount to emit Truth in beauty, it is nonetheless the fickle concept of subjectivity that supersedes the impact it has on the viewer. Alan Osborne squarely delineates this fluid argument when he infers that:

In addition, artists themselves often pursue their own self-interest in the course of creation, both to further their own artistic goals and to receive rents from the state. The same reasoning that argues that works that provide utility apart from the sheer pleasure of beauty cannot be beautiful themselves also suggests that no work created in an attempt to pursue one’s own interest can be so characterized. If an object’s usefulness to the observer negates the possibility of its beauty, why not the usefulness of the act of creation to the creator? Objects created in the self-interest of the artists—for compensation, for renown, or for the achievement of influence in the artistic world—are not divorced from interest, either. Artists who create work for the advancement of their own interests (including the pursuit of beauty itself), which is to say all artists, cannot in the Kantian reasoning formulation be said to have created a beautiful thing. Kantian reasoning implies that no author can ever be trying to create beauty because then his creativity is bound up in his own interest. This view implies that if beauty exists, it arises merely by accident and unrelated to any intent of the creator, which is an absurd proposition.
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Such a forceful argument directly eschews Morgan’s notion that, “Beauty is a felt concept that exists as a condition of receivership. It remains elusive in relation to the artists intent” (7). And while I certainly agree with Morgan that beauty can be “elusive,” I would posit that it can be pinned down, and molded into what is required of it. Stated matter-of-factly then, if possible, beautiful art would not exist if the artists never intended it to happen, and ultimately wished to be successful in some capacity. Once this idea is believed, then the issue of whether the extent of intent becomes relative to the argument. Artists like Muniz, Banksy, and yes, I suppose, Mr. Brainwash must come to terms with how exclusively important the profits from, and only these profits, are to the overall character and beauty in their work. It is a delicate balancing act between creating beauty because ones unique “aura” must be expressed, and doing so in the pursuit of success and viable commodity like every other industry. But despite this somewhat troublesome condition we find ourselves in, it is important to ruminate on the beauty and truth that are sometimes created from our commodified society, and then decide if they align with our own personal beliefs, because ultimately the relativistic nature of beauty holds the most truth.

Works Cited

Elaine Scarry asserts that “how one walks through the world, the endless small adjustments of balance, is affected by the shifting weights of beautiful things,” suggesting a constant movement from one beautiful thing to another (Scarry 15). Her description of “small adjustments of balance” evokes an ideal world where only minor irritations occur. On the other end of the spectrum, George Santayana resists the temptation to reduce beauty to “the expression of the ideal, the symbol of divine perfection, and the sensible manifestation of the good” (Santayana 11). He suggests that “such phrases stimulate thought and give us a momentary pleasure, but they hardly bring any permanent enlightenment. A definition that should really define must be nothing less than the exposition of the origin, place, and elements of beauty as an object of human experience,” even if that experience might be difficult or ugly (11). Giving validity to both trains of thought, Tim O’Brien’s,
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_The Things They Carried_ intensely examines the existence of both the ugly and the beautiful intermingling in the same reality. His narrative allows for the recognition of the intrinsic nature of beautiful things, while simultaneously illustrating the possibility that what one perceives as beautiful may change with experience. Though contradictory to the ugliness of war, O’Brien illustrates the ability, and the necessity, of the horrible and the pleasing to coexist along an ever shifting continuum in order to produce a more complete picture of truth and reality. In his novel, O’Brien works to replicate experiences of the Viet Nam War. As he does so he produces an implicit theory of beauty amidst war, and illustrates that during times of war the “small adjustments of balance” mentioned by Scarry instead prove to be huge battles to overcome the heavy weight of armed conflict, and to find beauty in and around atrocity. Shifting weights of ugly and beautiful images fill O’Brien’s narrative as he intricately weaves depictions of beauty with tales of horror and death. Explaining this contradictory relationship, O’Brien asserts:

War is hell, but that’s not the half of it, because war is also mystery and terror and adventure and courage and discovery and holiness and pity and despair and longing and love. War is nasty; war is fun. War is thrilling; war is drudgery. War makes you a man; war makes you dead. The truths are contradictory. It can be argued, for instance, that war is grotesque. But in truth war is also beauty. (O’Brien 77-8)

This surprising declaration illustrates the difficulty of processing war, of bringing balance to horrific experiences that, nonetheless, appeal to the senses. While O’Brien illustrates the essential nature and changing perspectives of beauty, he also explores the aesthetic properties of elements of combat, and investigates the desire to replicate war experiences. In these ways he closely connects war with theories of beauty, offering insight into the complicated relationship between the intrinsic and perceptive attributes of beauty, and the surprising ability to find beauty amidst atrocity.

Throughout his novel, O’Brien’s narrator continually notices the ugliness of war and the natural beauty of its surroundings, emphasizing beauty’s intrinsic nature. In relating the story of the death of Curt Lemon, the narrator elucidates an almost ethereal scene, full of wonder and light. He explains that as the soldiers march on a particularly peaceful day, they take a break just off the trail before entering the jungle.
He describes the lighthearted atmosphere as more of a “nature hike… not even a war,” and notes that Curt Lemon and Rat Kiley move off the path under the shade of a tree and begin “playing catch with smoke grenades” (66). The narrator describes “giant trees and a soft dripping sound somewhere beyond the trees” (66). He remembers the “smell of the moss,” and that up in the canopy of the tree “were tiny white blossoms…” (67). He relates that they were surrounded by “ragged green mountains” and that “except for laughter things were quiet” (67). In the midst of this serenity, the narrator then recalls:

I glanced behind me and watched Lemon step from the shade into bright sunlight. His face was suddenly brown and shining. A handsome kid, really…and when he died it was almost beautiful, the way the sunlight came around him and lifted him up and sucked him high into a tree full of moss and vines and white blossoms. (O’Brien 67)

Even in describing a horrific death, O’Brien’s narrator experiences an overwhelming sense of the beauty of his surroundings. The white flowers, Lemon’s handsome face, and the way the light seems to lift Lemon while being blown to bits, depositing his body fragments in the beautiful tree, seem to supplement, rather than contrast with the beauty of the day. It is as if Lemon, himself, becomes one with the tree, extending a life-giving quality to the experience. Scarry explains that “the moment of perceiving something beautiful confers on the perceiver the gift of life,” and that “the moment of perceiving beauty also confers on the object the gift of life” (Scarry 90). By imposing images of beauty onto the depiction Lemon’s death, the narrator infuses a feeling of aliveness, rather than death, into his memory of the event. The narrator continues describing the beauty of white flowers and sunlight, even while retrieving pieces of Lemon from the tree and gathering them into a body bag to be returned home. This narrative offers a powerful example of the intrinsic beauty of nature—of its straight-forward existence, irrespective of the human actions with which it coexists. He also asserts the idea that even death, itself, can be beautiful, although tainted by the ugliness with which it coexists. In explaining this phenomenon, Scarry suggests that “there is no way to be in a high state of alert toward injustices—to subjects that, because they entail injuries, will bring distress—without simultaneously demanding of oneself precisely the level of perceptual acuity that will forever be opening one to the arrival of beautiful sights and sounds” (Scarry 60-1). To
be sensitively perceptive to the ugliness of an event also means one must
be keenly aware of the beauty surrounding that event as well. Just as the
narrator sees the repulsive effects of war, he is just as acutely aware of the
simultaneous presence of beauty inherent in the landscape and the people.

The narrator continues to offer descriptions of beauty amidst war
affirming the indiscriminate nature of beauty as it easily exists alongside
the immoral elements of the world. The narrator describes how:

You’re pinned down in some filthy hellhole of a paddy, get-
ing your ass delivered to kingdom come, but then for a few
seconds everything goes quiet and you look up and see the sun
and a few puffy white clouds, and the immense serenity flashes
against your eyeballs—the whole world gets rearranged—and
even though you’re pinned down by a war you never felt more
at peace. (O’Brien 34)

The narrator’s observations on the abundance of beauty inherent in
nature remain a characteristic of beauty theory undisputed by most
theorists. Plato affirms that as one beholds “beauty with the eye of the
mind, he will be enabled to bring forth, not images of beauty, but reali-
ties (for he has hold not of an image but of a reality)…” (Plato 77).
The realities of the beautiful aspects of nature perceived by the narrator
cannot be disputed, even when observed under frightful circumstances.

In the midst of atrocity, the nature of the beauty never changes;
however, the appreciation of that beauty can be heightened by a sense
of possibility of its loss. The tension between the two seems to intensify
the effect of each. The narrator explains that “after a firefight, there is
always the immense pleasure of aliveness. The trees are alive. The grass,
the soil—everything. All around you things are purely living, and you
among them…” (O’Brien 77-8). He further states that:

at the hour of dusk you sit in your foxhole and look out on a
wide river turning pinkish red, and at the mountains beyond,
and although in the morning you must cross the river and go
into the mountains and do terrible things, and maybe die, even
so, you find yourself studying the fine colors on the river, you
feel wonder and awe at the setting of the sun, and you are filled
with a hard, aching love for how the world could be and always
should be, but now is not. (O’Brien 78)
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Through the juxtaposition of the ugly and the beautiful, the narrator asserts that one is inspired to be a better human being. The shock effect of battle compels its surviving participants to seek beauty and goodness as a way to re-establish balance within themselves. The narrator describes that after one has survived a battle, “you feel an intense, out-of-the-skin awareness of your living self—your truest self, the human being you want to be...in the midst of evil you want to be a good man. You want decency. You want justice and courtesy and human concord...there is a kind of largeness to it, a kind of godliness” (O’Brien). Here the narrator articulates what Elaine Scarry believes to be an important aspect of beauty as she states that “the beholder, in response to seeing beauty, often seeks to bring new beauty into the world” and that “beholders themselves become beautiful in their interior lives” (Scarry 88). The desire of the narrator to become a better person, after his close proximity to death, underscores the great intensity with which he now perceives beauty and seeks to be an inwardly beautiful person.

However, not all encounters with death defying experiences inspire one to be a better person, but rather enact a change in perception in the mind and heart of the participant, who now understands a very different concept of beauty. The narrator offers an example of this shift in perception as he describes the relationship between Lieutenant Jimmy Cross and his friend Martha. Among the things he carries with him to war, Cross includes letters from Martha: “they were not love letters, but Lieutenant Cross was hoping, so he kept them folded in plastic at the bottom of his rucksack” (O’Brien 1). Martha’s letters offer Cross a means of escape from the drudgery of war. He especially enjoys looking at photographs of “Martha’s smooth young face,” and keeps a small pebble Martha sent as a good luck charm (6). Edmund Burke believes smoothness and smallness to be essential qualities of beauty. He states that “beautiful objects are comparatively small,” like the pebble Cross keeps in his mouth (Burke “Beautiful objects Small”). Cross’s appreciation for Martha’s smooth young face aligns with Burke’s idea that smoothness is a quality so essential to beauty, that he does “not now recollect anything beautiful that is not smooth” (Burke “Smoothness”). On one particular day, while Cross is carried away in daydreams about the beautiful Martha, he is vaguely “aware of how quiet the day was, the sullen paddies, yet he could not bring himself to worry about matters of security. He was beyond that. He was just a kid at war, in love. He was twenty-four years old. He couldn’t help it” (O’Brien 11). While Cross remains carried away in thought, Ted
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Lavendar is shot and killed. Later, while contemplating the tragedy, Cross feels shame: “He hated himself. He had loved Martha more than his men, and as a consequence Lavendar was now dead, and this was something he would have to carry like a stone in his stomach for the rest of the war” (16). Significantly, the image of the small pebble held in his mouth changes to that of an uncomfortable stone in his stomach no longer associated with smallness or beauty, but heaviness, discomfort, and guilt. Cross feels responsible for Lavendar’s death, realizing he was daydreaming rather than watching over the safety of his men. He vows to burn Martha’s pictures and to discard the pebble she has sent him. The narrator writes that Cross now hated Martha, “Yes, he did. He hated her. Love, too. But it was a hard, hating kind of love…there was a new hardness in his stomach. He loved her but he hated her” (23). The nature of Martha does not change. She still remains the girl with the beautiful, smooth skin. But Cross now sees her differently. He realizes he is in a world where there are “no pretty poems or midterm exams,” but rather, in “a place where men died because of carelessness and gross stupidity” (23). His perception of beauty has shifted and now takes on a new form, that of the loyalty of a leader for those he commands. He decides to “dispense with love…his obligation was not to be loved but to lead” (25).

As a result of Lavendar’s death, Cross experiences a shift in his emotional consciousness that changes what he values. George Santayana explains that “aesthetics is concerned with the perception of values” and that “for the existence of good in any form it is not merely consciousness but emotional consciousness that is needed” (Santayana 13). He further asserts that “there is no value apart from some appreciation of it, and no good apart from some preference of it before its absence or its opposite” (13). The death of Lavendar enacts a change in Cross’s emotional consciousness as he realizes that his previously flawed value system contributed to Lavendar’s death. Cross blames himself for the death and now values leadership over love. In arguing that qualities such as leadership are more sublime than beautiful, Burke states that a person with those qualities has “much to admire, much to reverence, and perhaps something to fear; we respect him, but we respect him at a distance” (Burke). Clearly, Cross now has a stronger appreciation for the sublime quality of leadership and his attachment for Martha is now tainted by guilt. The nature of the beautiful Martha has not changed, but Cross’s perception has forever been altered, lessening his appreciation for the value of her memory. Through this example, the narrator illustrates the
fluid nature of beauty: what is considered beautiful at one point may not be considered beautiful at another. Elaine Scarry explains that this type of “correction in perception takes place as an abrasive crash” in which it undergoes a “radical alteration—it crashes…or disintegrates,” and as it does so “the moment might be… stark and highly etched” (Scarry 12, 13). Indeed, abrasive encounters with mortal combat experienced by Cross produce this type of stark, highly etched crash resulting in his change in perceptions of beauty.

This unexpected shift in perception goes even further in some characters who astonishingly discover an attraction, and even an addiction to war itself. The narrator introduces Mary Anne Bell, in the chapter “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong.” She enters Viet Nam as a “cute blond—just a kid, just barely out of high school—white culottes” and a “sexy pink sweater,” and has “long white legs and blue eyes and complexion like strawberry ice cream” (O’Brien 86, 89). Mary Anne’s innocent outward appearance proves to be deceiving. Very quickly Mary Anne becomes interested in the inner workings of the war. Rat explains that when four casualties came in, “Mary Anne wasn’t afraid to get her hands bloody. At times, in fact, she seemed fascinated by it. Not the gore so much, but the adrenaline buzz that went with the job…” (93). Mary Anne disappears from time to time with the Greenies (Green Beret’s), who go out unexpectedly on secret missions. Each time she returns, her appearance changes. Rat explains, “No cosmetics, no fingernail filing. She stopped wearing jewelry, cut her hair short and wrapped it in a dark green bandanna” (94). Alarmed by her rapid transformation, her boyfriend, Fossie, encourages her go to back home. In response, “Mary Anne laughed and told him to forget it. ‘Everything I want’ she said, ‘is right here’” (95). Eventually Mary Anne leaves Fossie to stay in the Greenies’ barbaric tent. Mary Anne is now practically unrecognizable. Rat states that, “it took a few seconds…to appreciate the full change. In part it was her eyes; utterly flat and indifferent. There was no emotion in her stare, no sense of the person behind it. But the grotesque part… was her jewelry. At the girl’s throat was a necklace of tongues. Elongated and narrow, like pieces of blackened leather…” (105). Rather than being enamored with the traditional trappings of femininity such as make-up, nail polish and pretty scarves, Mary Anne now seeks the shocking and the grotesque. Her necklace of blackened tongues presents a twist on the usual concept of beautiful jewelry, and contrasts with her previous description of pink-and-white, strawberries-and-cream type innocence. Mary Anne explains her own change as she states:
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...Sometimes I want to eat this place... the dirt, the death—I just want to swallow it and have it there inside me...It's like this appetite. I get scared sometimes ...but it's not bad. You know? I feel close to myself. When I'm out there at night, I feel close to my own body. I can feel my blood moving, my skin and my fingernails, everything, it's like I'm full of electricity and I'm glowing in the dark—I'm on fire almost—I'm burning away into nothing—but it doesn't matter because I know exactly who I am. You can't feel like that anywhere else. (O’Brien 106)

Mary Anne experiences a feeling of astonishment that captivates and adds her to the atrocities of war. Explaining this phenomenon, Immanuel Kant states that “the various feelings of enjoyment or of displeasure rest not so much upon the nature of the external things that arouse them as upon each person's own disposition to be moved by these to pleasure or pain. This accounts for the joy of some people over things that cause aversion in others...” (Kant 45). Truly, Mary Anne exhibits an attraction to things most regard repulsive. Burke further explains that “the passion caused by the great and sublime...is astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror” (Burke “Of the Passion Caused by the Sublime”). The allure of the war with its astonishing horror intrigues Mary Anne until she eventually disappears into the night and never returns, finally becoming one, albeit dead or alive, with the war she seems to love.

O’Brien’s inclusion of Mary Anne’s striking story illustrates the inner conflict faced by many soldiers as they find themselves enticed by the aesthetic beauty of the actual battle itself. In the epilogue to his article “Illuminations,” Walter Benjamin argues that Fascism introduces aesthetics into politics, and that “all efforts to render politics aesthetic culminate in one thing: war” (Benjamin 241). He quotes Marinetti in commenting on the Ethiopian colonial war:

...War is beautiful because it establishes man's dominion over the subjugated machinery by means of gas masks, terrifying megaphones, flame throwers, and small tanks. War is beautiful because it initiates the dreamt-of metallization of the human body. War is beautiful because it enriches a flowering meadow with the fiery orchids of machine guns. War is beautiful because it combines the gunfire, the cannonades, the cease-fire, the
scents and the stench of putrefaction into a symphony. War is beautiful because it creates new architecture, like that of the big tanks, the geometrical formation flights, the smoke spirals from burning villages, and many others… (Benjamin 240-1)

Thus, war is similarly described as more conventional types of beauty: colorful, astonishing, and pleasing to the senses. Burke explains that “when danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are, delightful, as we every day experience” (Burke “Of the Sublime”). Whether resulting from adrenaline rush, visual display, or camaraderie, these perceptions surprise and even disturb soldiers who struggle to justify their heightened sense of appreciation of atrocious events.

Pat C. Hoyt II, who also served in Viet Nam, offers similar observations on the attractive nature of the aesthetics of war that align with Burke's theories. In his article, “War's Haunting Beauty,” he explains that “a seductive beauty is often woven into the very fabric of destructive events—and addictive, spellbinding beauty that soldiers, perhaps more than others, pay court to all their …lives, although they rarely speak of it” (Hoyt 576). Hoyt goes on to describe his own experience after a particularly fierce battle, requiring the coordination of many men. He explains that:

Inside the chaos of that night’s performance, [the] men experienced something that will probably haunt them until death. I'm not speaking of an idea of beauty a man can conjure in his mind when he thinks of the nobility of his sacrifices, or of his concern for his fellow soldiers, or of his contribution to the nation's welfare, or even of his having somehow survived a devastating rain of fire. No man or woman in the thick of combat thinks of such things. A different kind of beauty, less cerebral, manifests itself in the heat of the battle, something more akin to the body and its rhythms resulting from death-defying teamwork under fire. (Hoyt 577-8)

Hoyt continues to explain that “on the battlefield, when soldiers have been trained well enough they fall into a concerted rhythm of survival, as if they have been waiting all their lives to play their assigned roles, they become godlike” (578). A feeling of euphoria overcomes those who
survive a close brush with death, infusing them with a feeling of immortality. Helping to explain the connection between war and beauty, Scarry states that “one can see why beauty has been perceived to be bound up with the immortal, for it prompts a search for a precedent, which in turn prompts a search for a still earlier precedent, and the mind keeps tripping backward until it at last reaches something that has no precedent, which may very well be the immortal” (Scarry 30). Triumph in battle, with its high stakes of life or death, while bringing painful awareness of lives lost, also brings a heightened sense of value of the lives spared.

Turning the mind back to visions of beautiful art or performances in the midst of battle may very well be that type of precedent that Scarry discusses, proving the eternal nature of the elements of beauty experienced, even in battle. Hoyt describes some of the elements involved in this kind of perception that leads to exultant feelings. As he describes the chaotic events on the battlefield requiring the coordinated efforts of every man as they fiercely fight for their lives, he concludes:

When you witness such a performance, or hear about it in the aftermath of battle, you realize that you might just as well have seen a stunning play at Lincoln Center, or a perfectly executed game at Yankee Stadium, but for one thing: on the battlefield death and destruction underscore the rhythmic orchestrated performance, intensifying the performers’ experience, searing it into their brains and their bodies for a lifetime…In war, the choreographed dance with death, the sublime harmony, stays with a man for life. (Hoyt 578-9)

Using words such as “rhythm,” “godlike,” “performance,” “stunning,” and “harmony,” hardly brings to mind thoughts of war, death, or destruction. Yet, these men experience events that are aesthetically pleasing to their senses, and cannot deny the connection between beauty and war. Indeed, the skill, mastery, luck, or divine providence involved in a victorious battle for life can easily be seen to induce euphoric feelings associated with beauty. As in any type of performing art such as dance, drama, or musical performance, although requiring at times grueling, painful practice to achieve perfection, it is customary to use language expressing elements of beauty, such as colorful, harmonious, astonishing, or rhythmic. Can we not assume, then, that a sense of beauty would be even more greatly heightened when the very lives of the performers are
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at stake? Tim O’Brien also describes his experiences in language usually reserved for conversations about beauty. He says that:

For all its horror, you can’t help but gape at the awful majesty of combat. You stare out at tracer rounds unwinding through the dark like brilliant ribbons. You crouch in ambush as a cool, impassive moon rises over the night-time paddies. You admire the fluid symmetries of troops on the move, the harmonies of sound and shape and proportion, the great sheets of metal-fire streaming down from a gunship, the illumination rounds, the white phosphorus, the purply orange glow of napalm, the rocket’s red glare. It’s not pretty, exactly. It’s astonishing. It fills the eye. It commands you. You hate it, yes, but your eyes do not. (O’Brien 77)

Words such as “brilliant ribbons,” “fluid symmetries,” and “harmonies of sound and shape and proportion” combined with the colors white, purple, orange and red, evoke the sense of a beautiful work of art by a master painter. These words, commonly associated with the creation of works of art, when applied to the act of war, intensify this ironic relationship. Like a beautiful piece of art in any form, the act of writing is a form of reconstruction. In crafting his narrative, O’Brien seems sensitive to artistic elements connected with beauty, and transfers that connection to the experience of war.

Finally, O’Brien’s use of the art of storytelling aligns with theories of beauty that compel a replication of experience. Elaine Scarry asserts that “the requirement beauty places on us to replicate, the simplest manifestation of the phenomenon is the everyday fact of staring” (Scarry 5). The narrator includes in the chapter “The Man I Killed” the obsession he felt to stare at the dead Viet Cong soldier. Underscoring his depth of anguish, he reiterates the details of the young man’s appearance six times in the novel. He describes how “his jaw was in his throat, his upper lip and teeth were gone, his one eye was shut, his other eye was a star-shaped hole…his forehead was slightly freckled, his fingernails were clean, the skin at this left cheek was peeled back in ragged strips, his right cheek was smooth and hairless, there was a butterfly on his chin…” (O’Brien 118). Here, again, the narrator painstakingly mingles a scene of ugliness and human emaciation with an acknowledgment of its simultaneous beauty. This contradictory scene impels the narrator to stare endlessly at the corpse. Disturbed by his inability to move on,
Kiowa continuously urges him to stop staring, as he pleads, “Nothing anyone could do...stop staring...Tim, it’s a war” (120). Just as he cannot refrain from staring, the narrator continues to recount the description of the dead young man in differing levels of detail, and as he does so, invents a story of the young man’s life. Interestingly, the story the narrator invents about the man closely parallels his own life. Using cues from the dead man’s appearance, he describes how the young man,

...had no stomach for violence. He loved mathematics. His eyebrows were thin and arched like a woman’s, and at school the boys sometimes teased him about how pretty he was, the arched eyebrows and long shapely fingers, and on the playground they mimicked a woman’s walk and made fun of his smooth skin and his love for mathematics. The young man could not make himself fight them. He often wanted to, but he was afraid, and this increased his shame.... In the presence of his father and uncles, he pretended to look forward to doing his patriotic duty, which was also a privilege, but at night he prayed with his mother that the war might end soon. Beyond anything, he was afraid of disgracing himself, and therefore his family and village. But all he could do, he thought, was wait and pray and try not to grow up too fast. (121)

Clearly, in creating this story, the narrator closely humanizes and identifies with the young man, realizing how easily he could have traded places with him in death. Similarly, the narrator asserts that he, like the dead young man, is also a scholar, and that his decision to go to war has nothing to do with bravery, but everything to do with not wanting to disappoint his family and community. When first receiving his draft notice, the narrator confesses, “I was too good for this war. Too smart, too compassionate, too everything. It couldn’t happen. I was above it...I was no soldier” (39). However, as he sits in a boat on the Rainy River, contemplating a desertion to Canada, he painfully concludes: “I would not swim away from my hometown and my country and my life. I would not be brave...It had nothing to do with morality. Embarrassment, that’s all it was. And right then I submitted. I would go to the war—I would kill and maybe die—because I was embarrassed not to” (57). The parallel between the narrator, and the story he creates of the young man illustrates his need to replicate his own experience as he identifies with his enemy. In his article, “Salvation, Storytelling, and Pilgrimage in Tim O’Brien’s The Things They
Carried,” Alex Vernon states that the act of storytelling “constantly reinforces the universalizing spirit engendered by sharing the combat experience and by achieving identification not only with the members of one’s unit but also with the enemy and with the reader” (Vernon 175). The fact that the narrator replicates his own life through the creation of the story of the dead young man closely aligns with theories of beauty. Elaine Scarry explains that “beauty brings copies of itself into being. It makes us draw it, take photographs of it, or describe it to other people” (Scarry 3). Through his fabrication of the life of the dead young man, the narrator deeply internalizes the dangerous reality of his own current situation. Continuing his story, the narrator explains that “after his years at the university, the man I killed returned with his new wife to the village of My Khe, where he enlisted as a common rifleman with the 48th Vietcong Battalion. He knew he would die quickly. He knew he would see a flash of light. He knew he would fall dead and wake up in the stories of his village and people” (O’Brien 123–4) Just as Shakespeare penned, “so long as men can breathe or eyes can see, / So long lives this, and this gives life to thee,” through storytelling the narrator creates a realm of immortality for the dead young man as he works to replicate the details of his life.

However, stories told of the Viet Nam War tend to create an ambiguous type of reality that more clearly reflect the nature of the conflict. As O’Brien uses the art of storytelling to convey true events experienced in war, he also offers a retraction, telling readers the stories are not true —leaving the reader always in doubt. Robin Silbergleid explains that

The book calls attention to its apparent basis in reality, reasserting what many readers take to be the central premise, or promise, of mimetic representation, that life will be mirrored in the book. However, this mimetic gesture inevitably frustrates newcomers to O’Brien’s work, for as soon as the narrator declares something to be true, he invariably confesses he made it up, putting history itself in question. Arguably, it is precisely this liminal space—between fiction and nonfiction—that allows the text to do its critical work. (Silbergleid 130)

This vague use of both fiction and nonfiction paints a murky picture of reality. Elaine Scarry explains that creation, such as storytelling, “sometimes…gives rise to exact replication, and other times to resemblances and still other times to things whose connection to the original site of inspiration is unrecognizable” (Scarry 3). Just as an impressionist art-
Joy Coles

ist, O’Brien manipulates story-telling in such a way that the reader is unsure of the difference between “story-truth” and “happening-truth” as he blurs the lines between fact and fiction (O’Brien 171-2). In the chapter “Good Form,” the narrator discusses his purpose in writing his Viet Nam War experiences. He explains that he wants the reader “to feel what I felt. I want you to know why story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth” (171). He continues to explain that,

> What stories really do, I guess, is make things present. I can look at things I never looked at. I can attach faces to grief and love and pity and God. I can be brave. I can make myself feel again. “Daddy, tell the truth,” Kathleen can say, “did you ever kill anybody?” And I can say, honestly, “Of course not.” Or I can say, honestly, “Yes.” (172).

O’Brien continuously asserts the ambiguous nature of every story told, leaving the validity of truths unclear. Through the use of many true facts of his own life, and the act of dedicating this book to the “Alpha Company,” including a list of the actual soldiers of that company, O’Brien blurs even more the lines between truth and fiction.

In the act of storytelling, as in any type of artwork, the artist portrays what he or she perceives. In this way, the same scene, viewed by various artists, would, therefore, be represented in different ways. In an interview with Jack Smith, O’Brien explains that because of differing perceptions, we live in “an invented or imagined world or a mix of the real world and the imagined world” (Smith). He continues that in writing The Things They Carried, he “wanted to capture that feeling…. I wanted to explore multiple planes of ‘reality’ and multiple planes of ‘truth.’” Yes, there is a real war going, with real casualties and real horror, but at the same time those realities are being processed in a mix of memory and imagination: which is how we shape experience” (Smith). Speaking now as if he were a sculptor, O’Brien explains how in storytelling,

> “…the war might take on a heroic shape. Or it might be shaped with bitterness and irony and guilt. This shaping process ultimately subsumes ‘reality.’ Reality—or what we call reality—has traveled through the human mind and comes out the other end as a blur. Which is why, late in the night, I’ll sometimes find myself thinking back on Vietnam, asking such questions as, God, did I really do that?” (Smith)
Even in processing his own memories O’Brien struggles to find clarity of fact or purpose in his experiences at war.

O’Brien’s use of ambiguous storytelling reflects the uncertain nature of the Viet Nam War, itself, and in this way may be the most accurate portrayal of his experience. In his article, “An Historical Study of United States Religious Responses to the Viet Nam War: A Matter of National Morality,” Rick Nutt observes the wide swing in opinions of the war. He asserts that “the attitudes and actions of…citizens manifested a complete range of viewpoints: from strong support for stopping communism in Asia, to silent consent, to silent dissatisfaction, to outspoken and orderly disapproval, to civil disobedience, and to violent activism” (Nutt 4). On both ends of the spectrum Nutt asserts there remained a firm moral ground. He explains that those who supported the war “argued that the United States acted to protect a weak nation against Communist aggression, and… to stop the global expansion of Soviet and Chinese totalitarianism” (6). On the other hand, “those who opposed the war also thought that the nation had a moral role to play, but a different one than the protectionist role that required military action…” (6). Unlike the more clear perceptions of a moral foundation apparent in previous American wars, the Viet Nam conflict found the country torn between two opposing ideas of morality, creating a deep rift. The nature of the war itself: the draft compelling young people to forcibly enlist and the ambiguous nature of guerilla warfare in dense jungles and mountains, combined with uncertain moral ground contribute to the ambiguous nature of the war and depictions of it in writing. In this way, O’Brien’s use of blurred lines between reality and perception may truly paint a more accurate picture. Silbergleid argues that “the implication of O’Brien’s legally declared ‘fiction’ of Vietnam is that, ironically, it is in storytelling that the ‘truths’ of Vietnam might best be spoken” (Silbergleid 136). The constant shift between truth and fabrication in storytelling may, indeed, offer the most accurate accounting of reality, for what is seen appeals only to visual acuity, whereas, the way things are perceived and felt goes beyond mere vision.

The urge to replicate remains one of beauty theory’s major themes. The need to replicate terrifying war stories complicates this theory, compelling one to question this connection. Sparing no details, O’Brien depicts death, destruction and human agony, and couches his account in equally ugly language. Defending his crude language, O’Brien speaks through his character, Norman Bowker, as he conducts an imaginary conversation with his father. He explains that “it was not a question of
offensive language but of fact” (139-40). Indeed, dirty, gritty, offensive language abounds in this account, as a natural outcropping of its ugly topic. However, laced artfully through the novel, O’Brien interjects striking observations about love, innocence, virtue, and beauty. Though contradictory to the ugliness of war, O’Brien illustrates the ability, and necessity, of the horrible and the pleasing to coexist along an ever shifting continuum in order to produce a more complete picture of truth and reality. Robert C. Morgan asserts that “Beauty is an act of grace and is given neither to force or imposition. It is not an intent. It promises nothing.” (Morgan 7). To further this thought, Elaine Scarry similarly notes that, “it asks nothing more of us than that we occasionally notice it. But when [it] ceases to be visible,” then it becomes “pressing, active, insistent, calling out for, directing our attention toward, what is absent” (Scarry 109). O’Brien presents a picture of war that, while steeped in bloodshed and carnage, just as strongly calls forth perceptions of the beauty that surrounds it. Indeed, O’Brien’s acute awareness of both the beautiful and the ugly aspects of war combine in this breathtaking narrative, forcing the reader to face the contradictory truths. Whether intentionally, or not, through his novel O’Brien presents strong assertions of beauty theory in the way it is noticed and perceived, and counters previous notions of war, revealing aspects of beauty inherent in war itself. Conversely, Scarry might be seen to be commenting on O’Brien’s work as well as she states that, “simultaneously what is beautiful prompts the mind to move chronologically back in search for precedents and parallels, to move forward into new acts of creation, to move conceptually over, to bring things into relation, and does all this with a kind of urgency as though one’s life depended on it” (Scarry 30). Through his vague storytelling, the persistent acknowledgment of beauty coexisting with war, and shocking revelations of beauty found in the act of war, itself, O’Brien artfully combines perceptions of war with established theories of beauty.

**Works Cited**


Smith, Jack. “The things he carries: For Tim O’Brien, the Vietnam War has remained a crucible in his fiction, but the power if imagination and memory, and ‘our elusive interior worlds,’ loom large, too.” *Writer*. 123.7 (Jul 2010): 16-47. Print.

Vampire literature has seeped into contemporary culture as a well-loved genre, from the sparkling, vegetarian vampires in Stephanie Meyer’s *Twilight* to the rock star vampires in Anne Rice’s *The Vampire Chronicles*. Contemporary vampire literature communicates the content of our current historical moment. The modern vampire character portrays cultural desires while over-look­ing, for the most part, the horror traditionally associated with vampires. Edward Cullen does not incite fear. Rather, he is a potential boyfriend due to his impeccable morality, charming good looks, and functional family life. Lestat tries to be a feared being, but through his capitalist and materialistic nature, women swoon for his handsome face, great taste in fashion, and suave personality. Contemporary vampires speak upon the current cultural movements of open-mindedness, or political correctness, in that even the traditionally horrific supernatural—or other—can meld into society successfully while being accepted. These vampires convey the current obsession with capitalism and the cultural awareness of materialism; these vampires exist within their own historical moment differently than other classics may be perceived within the same social time, making them diverge from classic vampire literature, while also making them similar. Contemporary vampire literature does not comment as much on the gruesome, as in *Dracula*, but relates more to love and affections, as in *Carmilla*.

Classic vampire literature existed within its own historical and cultural moment, and these connections hold different meanings for those readers within that moment and readers within our current moment.
Laurence A. Rickels posits in his book *The Vampire Lectures* that “Vampirism figures in a projective kind of way” (12). Cultural fears, desires, ideas, and beliefs are projected through the literature of the time. For example, although Sheridan Le Fanu’s novel *Carmilla* was written and published previous to Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, the latter remains as the first prevalent classic vampire novel. This could be attributed to many aspects of the Victorian era; quite possibly, *Carmilla* did not receive the same recognition initially due to the abrasive nature in which it comments upon female sexuality, an ideal that was still rather unaccepted during the Victorian era, the time of the novel’s publication. Both novels make claims about issues within the historical moment. Through this, both novels posit a claim as to the way in which beauty and aesthetics function within their cultural moment as well. As history and time have progressed, ideas and views pertaining to beauty have shifted; for example, society as a whole, used to consider a beautiful woman as being voluptuous, whereas now beauty within supermodels is portrayed as thin and shapeless. Both novels, however, posit different claims on beauty: while *Carmilla* uncovers the beauty of female sexuality and agency, *Dracula* focuses on the beauty of life and the giving thereof. By examining the historical context of each novel, the function of aesthetics within each novel can be better understood; by analyzing the relationship of the use of historical context and aesthetics within the texts, readers can see the shifts in vampire literature from the classics to the contemporaries, while also appreciating the affect societal and historical moments have upon the relative literature of the time.

**Literature and History: Importance of Historical Connections in Vampire Literature**

Many lenses of literary critique have failed to acknowledge the importance of history within works of literature—“new critics, structuralists…, and deconstructionists,” just to name a few (Parker 218). With the rise of new historicism, critics developed a lens through which “to read history and literature together, with each influencing the other” (219). By applying the lens of new historicism to the genre of vampire literature, connections between historical and societal moments and literature can be made, so as to appropriate a link between the prevalence of beauty and aesthetics in vampire literature and how beauty and aesthetics affected the historical moment.

Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* began the popular prevalence of vampire literature; this could not have been accomplished without Stoker’s
keen awareness to societal fears present within his historical time. Within the novel, Stoker elegantly plays upon the cultural fears and desires of 19th century Britain in order to capture the attention of his audience in such a way that created an interest in the literature in a subconscious manner. During this historical moment in Britain, imperialistic ideals—primarily financial gain and a need for resources to support Britain’s position in the Industrial revolution—drove Britain to become the imperial power of the world. However, Russia asserted itself as an opponent, threatening the reign of Britain. From 1854 to 1856, Britain and France joined forces in a fight against the impending invasion from Russia. In this instance, Britain feared Russia for having the same imperial desires as themselves; although Britain desires to colonize as much of the world as is possible, it fears the threat of losing a foothold upon its imperial power by an invasion of eastern imperial power. Stoker projects this fear within *Dracula* by replicating a universal fear of eastern Europe; Stoker describes the region through which Jonathan Harker would be travelling to reach Castle Dracula as “one of the wildest and least known portions of Europe” (Stoker 12). As Harker’s travels continue eastward, the prevalence of evil becomes more noticeable; the fact that Harker was travelling on the eve of St. George’s day—a day when “all the evil things in the world will have full say”—combined with the natives continually crossing themselves with “a charm or guard against the evil eye” suggests a latent fear of the east, or rather a belief that evil resides in the east (15, 16). Also, Stoker chooses to bring attention to the landscape in such a way as to create a sense of the supernatural and scary. Harker describes the landscape as having “dark, rolling clouds,” “darkness,” “gloom,” giving a “strange chill,” “uncanny,” and a wind that “moaned and whistled” (19, 18, 18, 20, 21, 23, 22). Harker describes these experiences with his travels as giving him “a sort of shock” (21). According to Edmund Burke in his text *On the Sublime and Beautiful*, Burke posits that “the passion caused by the great and sublime in nature, when those causes operate most powerfully, is astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror” (Burke “Of the Sublime”). Harker’s travel east unquestionably creates a rising sense of fear and horror within not only Harker, but the reader. For the reader, the aesthetics utilized to create the scene of the journey to Dracula’s castle instill fear with those readers of the 19th century, due to societal fears of eastern invasion and Stoker’s use of the sublime. Stoker projects the negative 19th century sentiments of invasion upon
the setting of the novel; he exploits the ability to interpret the societal fears of eastern invasion prevalent during this time and impose them upon an atmosphere that creates a truly chilling quality. In Laurence A. Rickels book *The Vampire Lectures*, he suggests that “Vampirism figures in a projective kind of way….The threat, embodied, for example, as vampirism, always comes from the East…, even when at all times it is the west that is doubling over with hunger” (12). Historically, British imperialism asserted itself as a prevalent moment; it created a fear of invasion from the east within the citizens of the time. Stoker projects this fear within the novel by displaying a genuine fear of the east within characters in the novel. By comparing the historicity of the moment with the projection of the fears within the novel, the previous statement can easily be said to be true. Britain viewed the east as a threat when in actuality it is the west that is burdened by the greed of Imperialism. Vampirism merely creates a vessel through which a projection of the aforementioned cultural fears, along with the cultural desires of gathering colonies, can be expressed.

Although *Dracula* was originally published in 1897, during the fin de siècle, a time period occurring at the turn of end of the 19th century, the affects and memories of imperialism were still prevalent in the history of Britain during this time period. According to Sally Ledger and Scott Mc Cracken in their introduction to the book *Cultural Politics at the Fin de Siècle*, in the 1880s Britain experienced an “economic depression [that] signalled the end of Britains reign as the ‘workshop of the world’” (4). Imperialism categorized Britain as the “workshop of the world” due to the fact that the gathering of colonies took undeveloped areas of the world and introduced qualities of those industrialized nations, essential building the world to be a more industrialized place. Although this time of imperialism had passed for Britain by the time Stoker was writing and publishing this novel, the economic depression during the fin de siècle served as a reminder to a recent historical moment within Britain that significantly shaped the mindset of many British citizens still alive.

Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu’s *Carmilla* reflects a very different societal moment, although positioned in a relatively close time period to that of *Dracula*. According to Janet K. Boles and Diane Long Hoeveler in their book *Historical Dictionary of Feminism*, “the period of 1870-1928 is characterized by extremely active suffrage activity and parallel educational and social reform movements” (7). The original publication date for *Carmilla* was in 1872, two years after the commencement of women’s suffrage activism. Although *Carmilla* was published such a short time
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after the beginning prevalence of this movement, the ideologies influencing this movement were implemented within the feministic society before the movement reached any momentum. Parker also posits that “at its most fundamental level, feminism is a simple concept. It is about taking women seriously and respectfully” (136). Feminism consists of giving women agency outside of the societal constructs of what is right and wrong for a woman. An underlying key portion of the feminist movement has been the need to express a female sexuality; due to the oppressive nature of the Victorian culture—during the reign of Queen Victoria, from 1837 to 1901—sexual agency was forethought of the movement. In her book *Facing the Complexities of Women’s Sexual Desire*, Vera Sonja Maass describes the Victorian woman as “asexual” (6). In *Carmilla*, the women are everything but asexual. Laura’s first encounter with Carmilla is characterized as a strangely intimate scene. Laura sees Carmilla as she is alone in her nursery, at which time Carmilla “caressed [Laura] with her hands, and lay down beside [her] on the bed, and drew [her] towards her, smiling” (Le Fanu 8). Immediately following this moment, Laura is “wakened by a sensation as if two needles ran into [her] breast” (8). In this instance of their initial meeting, there is a physical intimacy that is strange for two unacquainted individuals, especially two women. Even from their first meeting, their physicality functions as a beacon of female sexuality. When Laura describes what pleases her about Carmilla, she focuses largely on Carmilla’s physical appearance:

She was slender, and wonderfully graceful. …[H]er features were small and beautifully formed; …I never saw hair so magnificently thick and long….I have often placed my hands under it, and laughed with wonder at its weight. …I loved to let it down, tumbling with its own weight, as, in her room, she lay back in her chair talking in her sweet low voice. (29)

This moment exists as a strangely intimate one, describing how Laura plays with Carmilla’s hair in the intimacy of Carmilla’s room. The erotic nature within the vampire character of Carmilla separates her from the rest of those male vampires within vampire literature. Nina Auerbach states in her book *Our Vampires, Ourselves* that “most members of [Carmilla’s] species were more squeamish: no male vampire of her century confronts the desire within his friendship” (41). Historically, this sets *Carmilla* apart from other types of vampire literature during the 19th century; this would suggest that, since female sexuality is not only latent
in the text but also different from other vampire texts of its time, Le Fanu is attempting to make a comment of some sort through this prevalent sexuality. Auerbach also posits in her text that “Carmilla has all the agency of our male vampires with none of their erotic ambivalence,” “Carmilla feeds only on women with a hunger inseparable from erotic sympathy,” and that “Carmilla is one of the few self-accepting homosexuals in Victorian or any literature” (40, 41). Within this, Carmilla obviously possess a degree of agency through her sexuality, a trait similar to the feminist movement beginning towards the end of the Victorian era. By relating this obvious female sexuality with the societal temperament of the beginning to first-wave feminism, beginning in 1870, Le Fanu posits the importance and drive for female agency within the Victorian era. At its base, Carmilla begins what will be a commentary with female sexuality and agency within this time period.

**Beauty and Vampirism: Aesthetics of a Perverse Beauty**

George Santayana defines beauty as “pleasure regarded as the quality of a thing” and Edmund Burke defines the sublime as “fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger” (Santayana “The Definition of Beauty, Burke “Of the Sublime”). According to these two theorists, beauty resides in the realm of pleasures while the sublime resides in the realm of pain. While these two terms seem to be at two opposite sides of the spectrum, vampire literature utilizes both the beautiful and the sublime to create a unique aesthetic experience for the readers.

In *Dracula*, the characters present a duality of nature in regards to aesthetics; while most of the qualities seem repulsive and horrible, there is always an alluring and beautiful aspect of the vampires themselves. When Harker first describes Dracula’s physical appearance, Harker resembles this dual nature in the way that he shifts from describing Dracula in a handsome nature, then immediately being repulsed by his physique:

> His face was strong...with high bridge of the thin nose and peculiarly arched nostrils; ...The general effect was one of extraordinary pallor. Hitherto I had noticed the backs of his hands..., and they had seemed rather white and fine; ... I could not but notice that they were rather coarse.... The nails were long and fine, and cut to a sharp point. As the count leaned over me and his hands touched me, I could not repress a shudder. It may have been that his breath was rank, but a horrible feeling of nausea came over me.” (Stoker 27)
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Harker progresses from noticing Dracula’s “extraordinary pallor” to immediately being repulsed in the next sentence. Theorist Elaine Scarry posits that, in relation to beauty generating the desire to reproduce that beauty, “the simplest manifestation of the phenomenon is the everyday fact of staring” (Scarry 7). It can be concluded that, initially, Dracula’s appearance is a form of the beautiful due to the fact that his appearance captures Harker’s attention. The beauty of Dracula causes Harker to stare and causes a pleasure, in the sense that the qualities he notices about Dracula are extraordinary characteristics. However, Harker’s perception changes quickly to be a sublime description; Dracula’s appearance causes Harker to “shudder” and causes Harker a sense of horror. Stoker uses these binary oppositions of aesthetics to represent the dual nature of vampirism.

Within the transformation of Lucy, this same duality of juxtaposing the beautiful with the sublime can be seen, though in a different manner. As Dracula feeds upon Lucy, her health deteriorates, constantly bringing her on the brink of death. Stoker describes Lucy as “more horribly white and wan-looking than ever. Even the lips were white, and the gums seemed to have shrunken back from the teeth, as we sometimes see in a corpse after a prolonged illness” (Stoker 136). However, when Lucy actually approaches death, her fiancé states that “she looked her best, with all the soft lines matching the angelic beauty of her eyes” (Stoker 167). Scarry posits a claim relative to immortality, stating that beauty incites “the perpetual duplicating of a moment that never stops” (Scarry 5). Immortality is a state in which life is continually lived, if you will. The cessation of life only occurs under very limited circumstances; in all other case, those beings who are immortal get to experience life for an infinite amount of time. Scarry also suggests that “it is not that beauty is life-threatening…, but instead that it is life-affirming, life-giving” (Scarry 27). Under these circumstances, the continuous giving and affirming of life is a beautiful process; therefore, vampirism, in relation to the vampire character, creates beauty with the vampire itself. This would explain why Lucy becomes more beautiful, not only as she nears her immortal life, but also within her immortal life. Immediately after Lucy dies, the Doctor Van Helsing observes that “some change had come over her body. Death had given back part of her beauty” (Stoker 168). After Lucy’s mid-day funeral, and also following the night when the men opened Lucy’s coffin to find it empty, the men describe Lucy as “more radiantly beautiful that ever; … The lips were red, nay redder than before; and on the cheeks was a delicate bloom” (Stoker 206). Rickels
also makes this same conclusion in his text as he states that “when Lucy dies, …she becomes a mortician’s vampire: she has never been more beautiful” (Rickels 42). Hence, in her immortality, a restoration of life and beauty occur due to the vampirism.

Within *Dracula*, blood, or an exchange of life, acts as a replication or restoration of beauty. Referring to the previously mentioned theory of Scarry, Beauty is life-giving. Up until Lucy dies, she receives blood transfusions, which restore her to her beautiful self; in immortality, it is the blood of her victims that gives her an intense beauty. The presence of blood also causes the same restoration in appearance in Dracula. Compared to Harker’s previous repulsion of Dracula, Harker later describes Dracula after having found him asleep in his coffin:

> There lay the Count, but looking as if his youth had been half renewed, for the white hair and moustache were changed to dark iron-grey; the cheeks were fuller, and the white skin seemed ruby-red underneath; the mouth was redder than ever, for on the lips were gouts of fresh blood. …Even the deep, burning eyes seemed set amongst swollen flesh. (Stoker 60)

Again, this description of Dracula functions in a dual nature; the sight of Dracula insights horror in Harker, the vampirism creates a type of beauty to the character of Dracula through its life-giving, restorative properties. The beautiful, restorative qualities Dracula possesses due to his vampirism in conjunction with the sublime reflects the dual nature which imperialism functioned in 19th century Britain. On the one hand, Britain vampirically leeches resources from the Eastern other, and on the other hand, they must construct an image of the East as “other” in order to justify subordinating it. Essentially, Britain fears imperialism, but it also has life-giving, beautiful qualities that attract the desire as well.

Although it would seem Stoker posits that the tangible blood is beautiful, he also makes a claim as to the beauty of the general quality of life. On the one hand, the taking of human blood—or life—is societally unacceptable; herein lays an aspect of vampirism that incites fear in the readers. On the other hand, human life or blood acts as a source through which these creatures must sustain their own life. Characterizing the blood as beautiful translates as the essential components of life being beautiful, since the circulation of blood symbolizes being biologically alive. More basically, the immortality of these vampiric characters is beautiful, the act they participate in in the consumption
of beauty. Several instances throughout her book *On Beauty and Being Just*, Scarry relates several aspects of beauty to aspects of immortality. Within immortality, there exists no end; Scarry suggests that an “impulse towards begetting” defines a beautiful thing, and that “it is impossible to conceive of a beautiful thing that does not have this attribute” (9). Also, Scarry states that beauty incites a sort of “unceasing begetting [that] sponsors…the idea of eternity, the perpetual duplicating of a moment that never stops” (5). Both beauty and immortality lie within the confines of eternity; the two ideas lie hand in hand. Immortality presents the possibility of unceasing replication, unceasing begetting, and—most importantly—an unceasing search for precedent. Scarry directly relates how the beauty and the immortal seem intertwined with each other:

One can see why beauty…has been perceived to be bound up with the immortal, for it prompts a search for a precedent, which in turn prompts a search for a still earlier precedent, and the mind keeps tripping backward until it at last reaches something that has no precedent, which may very well be the immortal. (30)

Stoker replicates the beauty of the cyclical process of giving and taking life that is immortality through vampirism. By replicating cultural fears within the beautiful immortal, it seems Stoker possibly questions the unprecedented sublime; through combining both the beautiful and the sublime in one physical entity, Stoker questions the horrific nature of cultural and historical moments that are reflected within his vampiric characters. It leads the reader in search for a precedent, of a moment more horrific and more sublime than the historical moment and cultural fears replicated within the text. In reality, what is replicated is essentially the same at its core. Although Britain fears invasion from the east, they essentially fear their own quest for colonies that is projected upon another country—or, more simply, Britain fears eastern invasion. The projection of their desires upon another entity develops into a fear, quite possibly they fear the loss of control of that which they project. Both the fear and the desire is the same; both the sublime and the beautiful exist within the vampire character in the same way this fear and desire are replicated.

The duality of the beautiful and the sublime can be posited as a characteristic of the vampire character, since the same can also be claimed about Le Fanu’s *Carmilla*. Carmilla incites both pleasure and fear within her victim, Laura. The first encounter with Carmilla initially begins
the juxtaposition of the fearful and pleasurable. When Laura first sees this strange woman beside her bed in the nursery, she is immediately calmed; Laura states, “I looked at her with a kind of pleased wonder, and ceased whimpering” (Le Fanu 8). However, when Laura feels the prick of Carmilla at her breast, she exclaims, “I cried loudly. …I was now for the first time frightened, and I yelled with all my might and main” (8). Within this moment exists a strange innate attraction to Carmilla, followed by a definite repulsion. After many years, when Carmilla was much older, Carmilla happened upon Laura’s schloss after being injured in a carriage accident. When Laura meets Carmilla’s eyes, Laura immediately recognizes her face as the one from her childhood nightmare and is horrified into silence. However, as Carmilla speaks—exclaiming she also remembers Laura from a childhood dream—Laura begins to slowly forget about that dream, focusing on Carmilla’s physical beauty. Eventually, Laura states, “she was certainly the most beautiful creature I had ever seen, and the unpleasant remembrance of the face presented in my early dream, had lost the effect of the first unexpected recognition” (28). Rickels also makes the same observation in *The Vampire Lectures*; he states, “During Carmilla’s return engagement, Laura senses an immediate attraction to the guest or ghost—but she is at the same time repelled. Every time she is drawn to Carmilla, there is also an element of repulsion” (164). What resides in this situation is along the same lines as the duality within *Dracula*. Burke states that the sublime incites fear, which Carmilla definitely does; however, the beauty within *Carmilla* has different qualities than the beauty within *Dracula*.

While, within *Dracula*, the blood exchange of vampirism is beautiful, the exchange of admiration and love is beautiful in *Carmilla*. The unique factor in Laura’s family life is her lack of a mother figure; Rickels describes Laura’s childhood as “a time when she felt neglected, abandoned” due to the absence of her mother and the invalidity of her father (164). Carmilla is able to enter Laura’s life as a beautiful female figure through which Laura can obtain the female affections she never received as a child. Auerbach summarizes the attraction between Laura and Carmilla that facilitates this relationship built from loss:

[B]oth have lost their mothers and their countries; each suffuses the image of the other’s absent mother. …Like Laura’s dead mother, Carmilla is a Karnstein, a vibrant remnant of an apparently extinct family. When Laura’s mother breaks protectively into a vampire reverie, her message is so ambiguous that Laura
misconstrues it, turning herself into Carmilla and her own mother into her friend’s. …Laura fuses self, killer, and mother… In the flow of female dreams, murderer and murdered, mother and lover, are one; women in *Carmilla* merge into a union the men who watch them never see. (43)

The absence of Laura’s mother allows for Carmilla to become a defined part of a love relationship between the two women. Their interactions with each other suggest that the love and admiration are important for Laura, as well as the continuation of Carmilla, since Carmilla is also left without her mother at the schloss. Both women function as a place holder for that intimate female relationship they lack.

Within the course of the novel, there is never a blatant exchange of blood, which is stereotypical of vampires; however, Carmilla is depicted as feeding from Laura on several occasions, although Carmilla appears to feed upon the love and affections given by Laura. Two important factors emerge about these feedings. Firstly, Carmilla is never described as taking blood from her victims. In the two occasions when Carmilla feeds upon Laura, it is always upon her breast. Although these moments are highly sexualized due to the choice in place of feeding, they incite pain and fear within Laura; both times, Laura either “cried loudly” or waked with a scream” (Le Fanu 8, 50). What is depicted as the traditional vampiric way of feeding on a victim is perfectly horrible and sublime. However, on the second point, there is an exchange of affections and love between the two women that could be said to be a form of feeding for Carmilla. Laura describes the exchange in a weirdly physical moment:

> My strange and beautiful companion would take my hand and hold it with a fond pressure…; blushing softly,…breathing so fast that her dress rose and fell with the tumultuous respiration. It was like the ardor of a lover;…it was hateful and yet overpowering;…she drew me to her, and her hot lips traveled along my cheek in kisses; and she would whisper, … “You are mine, you shall be mine, you and I are one for ever.” (32).

In reaction to this intensely sexual event for Carmilla, Laura states, “it embarrassed me,” and that it also left her “trembling” (32). Carmilla’s physical reactions in the moment are similar to the heightened physicality during a vampire feeding; instead of the feeding being a moment latent with the traditional vampire exchange of blood, Carmilla appears
to take something from Laura, since Carmilla leaves Laura in the weakened state of trembling after this entire affair. According to Scarry, again, this exchange is a beautiful one, because it sustains the life of a beautiful being and the giving of life is an aspect of the beautiful. Although Laura describes Carmilla as beautiful several times throughout the novel, it can be concluded that Carmilla, as a character, would also beautiful in the opinion of theorists as well. Scarry posits that one can “describe beauty as a “greeting.” At the moment one comes into the presence of something beautiful…it lifts away from the neutral background as though…to welcome you” (25). When Laura first recognizes Carmilla after their initial meeting as young children, the appearance of Carmilla first stuns her into silence; when Carmilla approaches Laura and speaks to her in a welcoming tone, the fear of recognition that had previously rendered her speechless allows for Laura to overcome “with an effort the horror that had for a time suspended my utterances” (Le Fanu 25). Upon exchanging a greeting with the beautiful Carmilla, Laura is able to be taken out of the place of horror—or their neutral background, since both women exclaim to have seen each other in dreams—and Laura is now completely at ease with Carmilla, exclaiming, “I felt reassured, and continued…in the vein which hospitality indicated…to tell her how much pleasure her accidental arrival had given us all” (25). This also corresponds with what Burke calls “the beautiful in Feeling” (Burke “The Beautiful in Feeling”). Burke states two qualities, or the combination of them, that the beautiful in Feeling is “the chief pleasure we received by feeling”: “bodies that are pleasant to touch” and “the continually presenting something new” (Burke “The Beautiful in Feeling”). It has already been mentioned that there is a physical closeness between Carmilla and Laura, and a pleasure derived from this closeness from the two women. When the two women meet after their initial childhood dreams, although there is recognition between the two women, Carmilla is presented in a new and different way to Laura. The Carmilla that Laura has envisioned in her mind is the one who caused her to learn the meaning of fear and horror as a child; the older Carmilla Laura meets is beautiful, alluring, and presented as a companion. The new prospective of Carmilla that is offered provides Laura with the prospect of a beautiful friendship with a beautiful girl, a substitute for the loving relationship she never had with her mother, and the beauty of feminine relationships as a whole.

Vampirism as a whole, during the time periods of Dracula and Carmilla is depicted as a beautiful thing. The beauty of immortality in Dracula has already been concluded, that through Scarry the beautiful
blood exchange allows for the continuation of life in which to search for precedence in beauty. There is also an aspect of the immortal within *Carmilla*, although Carmilla is killed in the classic way of eliminating vampires, staking her through the heart and decapitating her. Carmilla still exists within the conscious thoughts of Laura, allowing Carmilla an avenue through which to continue to live. In the last paragraph of the novel, Laura elucidates the influence her interactions with Carmilla had upon her:

> It was a long time before the terror of recent events subsided; and to this hour the image of Carmilla returns to memory with ambiguous alternations—sometimes the playful, languid, beautiful girl; sometimes the writhing fiend I saw in the ruined church; and often from a reverie I have started, fancying I heard the light step of Carmilla at the drawing room door. (Le Fanu 106)

Both the beauty and sublimity of Carmilla lives on in her mind, as a sort of precedent to which all things beautiful and sublime must overcome to remove her eternal attention away from the girl she met in a nightmare. To recap Scarry’s position on the immortal as was stated previously in relation to *Dracula*, the immortal is beautiful because it allows for the perpetual “tripping backward” of the mind in search for a beauty that is greater than any beauty ever experienced; in immortality, there will always be a search for the beautiful, because the duration allowed to search is never-ending, allowing for an unprecedented beauty to never be obtained. In the mind of Laura, Carmilla is immortal, giving Laura’s search for a beauty a precedent which cannot be met by any mortal. Carmilla continues to live through Laura and influence Laura, even from beyond the grave; as Carmilla stated, “I live in you; and you would die for me” (Le Fanu 44).

Through a combination of beauty through the mutual exchange of affections between the women, the immortality of Carmilla, and the physical beauty of Carmilla, and the sublime nature of vampirism, Le Fanu comments of the radical social movement of feminism within the Victorian era; by unveiling a radical female sexuality within the novel, Le Fanu reveals the beauty of female agency while belittling the horror society associates with female agency and sexuality. The novel was originally published in sections from December 1871 to March 1872 in the British periodical *Dark Blue*. This periodical was of the creative- and
literary-type, publishing poems, short stories, etc. For the audience it was originally published for, the topic of female sexuality may have had more of a possibility of being accepted. However, although it predated *Dracula* by 25 years and greatly influenced the novel, *Carmilla* did not receive the same popularity; this can be credited to the nature and topic to which Le Fanu comments. Stoker took the female character from *Carmilla*—where women had agency and the men were largely absent—and molded his story to reflect helpless women who needed the men within the novel to save them from the grasps of vampirism and sin. Also, female sexuality within Stoker’s novel is portrayed, not as beautiful, but as ultimately sinful. By exhibiting an accepted female sexuality in his novel, Le Fanu posits a take on the growing feminist movement during that time period. Le Fanu poses female sexuality as a double-edged sword. On one side, there is the beauty of a woman who possesses her own body and an agency through which to express herself in that body. This does not have to strictly mean sexually, although Le Fanu expresses this through sexuality. Expression can be through knowledge, equality, sexual, verbal, etc. Within the novel, the invalidity of her father—and male influence overall—would also be indicative of a female agency; combining the absent men and the agency Carmilla and Laura possess, Le Fanu exhibits a beautiful female relationship—or a personal relationship women may have with themselves, since eventually Carmilla and Laura become one—that may flourish through the implementation of female agency. However, on the other side, this relationship becomes destructive when overly sexualized or the agency given is misconducted; this is the importance of the sublime within the vampire character in *Carmilla*. Carmilla had total agency of herself, acted in an overly sexualized manner, and eventually arrives at a physical death as a result to this lifestyle. Le Fanu presents both sides of the spectrum within the relationship, which can be stated to be both a female to female relationship and the internal relationship of women (due to the final nature of Carmilla and Laura’s relationship). By having both the beautiful and the sublime function within a singular entity, Le Fanu poses the need for a middle ground in female agency; through his use of aesthetics, Le Fanu shows the good and the evil of the situation, posing that neither side of the spectrum—total female agency or no female agency—is best. Although the beautiful and the sublime remarks solely on the total female agency side of the spectrum by offering the positives and negatives of it, the fact that Le Fanu embodies such a taboo topic within the text and gives the effort
to embody it would suggest that he is not a radical that is completely against even the mention of female agency as a possibility; also, the fact that female sexuality and agency is depicted in any sort of positive way within the text eliminates the possibility of the no female agency side of the spectrum being applicable. Le Fanu positing that there is a middle ground through which female agency can exist is similar to a claim Plato stakes about love, good, and evil in *Symposium*. Diotima states, “'Do not then insist …that what is not fair is of necessity foul, or what is not good evil; or infer that because love is not fair and good he is therefore foul and evil; for he is in a mean between them’” (Plato 68). Essentially, Plato posits that what is not good may not necessarily be evil, but something in between the two. In the same way, Le Fanu posits that female agency may not need to be completely restricted or total free, but perhaps a mean between the two.

Each of these novels makes a claim towards a societal issue of the time. *Dracula* questions the importance of British Imperialism and how the imperialistic nature of forty years prior has affected the economy of his nation at its current time. *Carmilla* provides the point of view of a male author upon what began the women’s suffrage movement through history; Le Fanu posited that although completely stripping women of agency was a negative aspect of the Victorian age, total agency would only create an evil among women. Through the clever manipulation of historical reflections and the use of aesthetics, both Stoker and Le Fanu embody an argument within a literary character. Le Fanu and Stoker crafted the basis of the vampire literature read today in the popular culture the 21st century. Stoker created more of a basis for the horrific, science fiction oriented vampire that has fallen to the wayside in contemporary culture, while Le Fanu created a vampiric-model through which social and political arguments could be framed. Although *Dracula* is and will continue to be the symbol of the beginning of a genre, the vampire character in *Carmilla* has survived as the emotion-centered model through which much of current vampire literature is framed. The fame of vampires such as Edward Cullen and Lestat de Lioncourt support that the gruesome, horrific vampires no longer exist as a cultural fear in the same way Count Dracula functioned to the readers at the end of the 19th century. The fact that the vampire has survived over one hundred years of literary circulation posits its importance to popular literary culture throughout the span of the genre’s history, despite the genre’s drastic change from the literary classics.
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Works Cited

In her book, *On Beauty and Being Just*, Elaine Scarry proposes that the value of beauty is not “life-threatening…but instead that it is life-affirming, life-giving; and therefore if…you become cut off from it, you will feel its removal as a retraction of life” (27). Such an argument posits a binary in relation to beauty. From one perspective, the presence of something beautiful creates a harmony in life, both in the individual as well as promoting social justice. The alternative, however, suggests that the absence of beauty, or to borrow Scarry’s language, the error or perceiving beauty can produce tragic results. Mary Shelley’s novel, *Frankenstein*, offers an excellent backdrop in exploring these effects of beauty. Within the text, Victor Frankenstein becomes a literal life-giver to a creature, to a figure stitched together from dead body parts. When the creature comes to life, however, he is immediately aestheticized. Victor is repulsed by his creation and abandons him to the world, a world that similarly rejects him solely on an aesthetic basis. Therefore, the creature’s purpose was not to simply come alive, but to possess beauty, and to view the creature’s purpose as beautiful would suggest him to be a work of art; subsequently, Victor is cast as the role of an artist. Indeed, the creature fits the definition of a work of art, as he is not quite human, but, at least in Victor’s original intent, a replication of a human. Yet, from an aesthetic perspective, Victor perceives this work of art as a failure. When the creature speaks, however he disputes the claim that he is a wretch. “I was once benevolent and good,” the creature tells Victor, “misery made me a fiend” (Shelley 89). Here, while Shelley seems to
confirm Scarry’s theory of beauty as life-giving, as well as its removal as a life-diminishing, the text also criticizes notions of beauty associated with goodness and ugliness with monstrosity. If the creature begins as an innocent, as benevolent and good, then it is “society’s valorization of the beautiful [that] is responsible for the monster’s abandonment and abusive treatment, fueling his bitterness and murderous rage” (Fredricks 178). While Victor insists that his experiment is a failure based on his repulsion to the creature’s appearance, his true intent was not to animate a corpse, but create life. In this respect, Victor succeeds in his experiment, as the creature is full of life, capable of experiencing beauty, and performs altruistic tasks for others. The body Victor places his work of art inside, however, is a vessel that conceals the creature’s potential beauty—the creature’s life exists within a collage of corpses. Because everyone the creature meets rejects him, his ability to perceive beauty becomes tainted, leaving him a miserable fiend. Therefore, the experience of beauty, and the binary associated with it, suggests not merely a life-giving quality, but essential to survival for the creature—it becomes the defining factor in his transition from innocence into monstrous. In order to redeem himself, the creature returns to his artist, seeking validation as a work of art through replication, as well as creating a companion who will find him beautiful, and thus re-establishing his own relationship to beauty, saving his life in the process.

Before analyzing the novel itself, it may be prudent to construct the text’s theoretical framework of beauty that operates within the text as a method of understanding how the creature perceives beauty, how that perception is altered through his experience as an object of beauty, and why the act of replication becomes important for the creature. In the introduction to his thesis on beauty and the sublime, Immanuel Kant posits that the pleasure or displeasure a person can experience relies “not so much upon the nature of the external things that arouse them as upon each person’s own disposition to be moved by these to pleasure or pain” (45). In this respect, Kant argues that the concept of beauty is not contained within an object, but that it is a subjective reaction that the perceiver experiences. However, to prove his argument, Kant chooses to focus on categorizing the various objects that would elicit such reactions, thus apparently subordinating his own claim. Therefore, according to Kant, the subjective experience of beauty is still dependent upon certain qualities of the object itself. Still, the model that Kant provides offers a useful starting point to expand on this framework of beauty. While maintaining a separation and gendering of the sublime and the
beautiful seems largely unnecessary, Kant’s model illustrates that different objects, according to their qualities, often will produce different subjective reactions. Still, this model has its limitations. In *The Sense of Beauty*, George Santayana similarly positions beauty as a subjective experience, but his theory places a greater emphasis on the subject rather than the object. “[Beauty] exists in perception,” Santayana writes, “and cannot exist otherwise” (Santayana 29). While Santayana correctly acknowledges the variable of human perception in relation to beauty, his theory diminishes the importance of the qualities of the object: “Nothing has less to do with the real merit of a work of imagination than the capacity of all men to appreciate it” (28). Santayana insists that beauty is a value, but he offers no variable to the object in relation to that value. If the whole world recognizes an object’s beauty, then that object would hold more value, at least from a cultural perspective, than if only one man could recognize the beauty. Therefore, the desire to insist that an object has beauty is not only for the sake of bolstering our own judgements, but to increase the very value that Santayana defines.

Instead of focusing on absolutes, it may prove more beneficial to construct a model that focuses on the relationship between the object and the subject, a model that incorporates both Kant’s objective variables and Santayana’s subjective variables. In short, the reaction to beauty depends on how the perceiver positions himself in relation to the object. This framework provides a useful insight while analyzing the creature in *Frankenstein*, as the creature is presented as both an object and a subject of beauty (or lack thereof). As will be elaborated later, the creature initially perceives beauty, appreciates beauty, and is drawn to the beautiful. As a subject, beautiful objects give him pleasure. When the creature encounters other people, he becomes an object of repulsion. How other people perceive the creature has a profound effect on his own perception of beauty. Though he is able to experience the pleasures of beauty, as an object he experiences rejection on the grounds that he is not beautiful. As a consequence, the pleasurable value of beauty that the creature experiences transforms into misery. “Everywhere I see bliss,” the creature tells Victor, “from which I alone am irrevocably excluded” (Shelley 89). Such a statement emphasizes the importance of the relationship between the object and subject of beauty. The revulsion he inspires in others inevitably destroys his ability to appreciate beautiful objects. In other words, the creature’s experience of beauty becomes dependent upon how other people perceive him.
The creature’s appearance repulses the perceiver, yet the creature himself is capable of both experiencing and producing beauty. Once his basic needs are met, the creature sees a “gentle light stole over the heavens and gave me a sense of pleasure” (92). Before he knows his identity, he experiences the pleasure of the beauty of the moon. Before he has language, the creature uses his voice to replicate beauty: “Sometimes I tried to imitate the pleasant songs of the birds but was unable” (93). Here, the creature’s experience of beauty is validated by Elizabeth Scarry’s claim that “beauty prompts a copy of itself,” or that the experience of beauty creates a desire to replicate that beauty (4). The creature sees people as beautiful as well, but they only meet him with aversion. While searching for food, the creature enters a cottage in a village: “I had hardly place my foot within the door, before the children shrieked, and one of the women fainted. The whole village was roused; some fled, some attacked me, until, grievously bruised by stones and many other kinds of missile weapons, I escaped to the open country” (95). Such repeated occurrences convinces the creature to isolate himself, to hide from society. He confirms his identity when he sees his reflection and is terrified: “I became fully convinced that I was in reality the monster that I am, I was filled with the bitterest sensations of despondence and mortification” (102). Through his isolation, his heart turns to sorrow, and he wishes he had never “known nor felt beyond the sensations of hunger, thirst, and heat” (107). His initial pleasure of beauty fades as he understands how his appearance repulses others; it now only reminds him of his own rejection, and adds to his misery. His own sense as a work of art fades as well. The creature turns to Victor’s journal, documenting the experiment, and compares himself to Adam: “God, in pity, made man beautiful and alluring, after his own image; but my form is a filthy type of yours, more horrid even from the very resemblance” (Shelley 116). While the pleasurable experience of beauty is viewed as life-giving, the creature now experiences his own absence from the beautiful. Now, his experience of beauty only highlights his own relationship to the beautiful object. Whenever he encounters beauty, he is only reminded of his own ugliness, which in turn becomes the source of his grief and isolation from the world.

The creature’s desire to confront his creator, the artist that made him, and his plea to Victor to replicate him is rooted in his desire to experience pleasure in beauty again. “I was once benevolent and good,” the creature tells Victor, “misery made me a fiend. Make me happy, and I shall again be virtuous” (89). By persuading the artist to replicate him, the creature
hopes to regain or reclaim his beauty, both as a subject and as an object. As an object, his replication will validate his own worth as a work of art as he will have prompted a copy of himself. Similarly, the creature hopes to reestablish his relationship to beauty through his companion. He demands that Victor “create a female...with whom [he] can live the interchanges of those sympathies necessary for [his] being” (129). If the creature’s companion finds him beautiful, then he will in turn regain his own pleasure from beauty. He does not request, however, a beautiful companion, but rather one as “hideous as [himself]...It is true [they] will be monsters, cut off from all the world; but on that account [they] shall be more attached to one another” (Shelley 130). The creature understands beauty in complicated fashion, as well as its elasticity.

As suggested earlier, the creature hopes to reclaim his own beauty, but he understands that the society he has encountered thus far will never perceive him as a beautiful object. Society, in Shelley’s text, has not only valorized beauty, as Nancy Fredricks suggests, but have defined beauty for themselves. The creature does not simply demand a companion, but a replication of himself, one just as hideous in appearance as him. This companion, the creature then anticipates, will be cast out of society just as he was, and thus will have no one else to bond with but himself. Together, they will build a relationship out of necessity, and through this relationship this companion will discover his beauty. The creature envisions a life with his new companion, outside of society, where he can redefine what constitutes beauty for a new species.

Shelley’s story, however, is not simply a tale of an ugly duckling, but of a larger critique of the cultural importance placed on beauty. “Where Wollstonecraft cites the social construction of ‘beauty,’” Bernard Duyffhuizan writes in his article on periphrastic naming, “it is the creature’s extreme ugliness... that calls into question the practices of objectification grounded on appearances rather than on the rational mind” (8). Victor repeatedly reminds his audience of the creature’s wretchedness, claiming him to be “a thing such as even Dante could not have conceived” (52). When the creature finally speaks, however, the reader is introduced to an intelligent and articulate monster, one who quotes Paradise Lost and enjoys the sounds of birdsongs. Jane Goodall similarly observes that “he is unquestionably endowed with what the Romantics defined as grace, in his capacity to respond to the beauties of the natural world” (33). During the creature’s narrative, Shelley presents a sympathetic view of the creature. He falls in love with the beauty of the DeLacey family, cutting wood for them, but careful not to reveal himself. He learns to
speak and to read through watching this family. He also learns about the concepts of poverty and wealth, and how social class can both valorize and alienate individuals. When the creature learns of the history of men, he is perplexed at the violence: Was man, indeed, at once so powerful, so virtuous and magnificent, yet so vicious and base?” (107). Suddenly, the perception of beauty is inverted, as well as any associated judgements of good and evil. More accurately, the text suggests that the creature itself is an inversion of man. The creature’s inner beauty of life reflects the aesthetic qualities of man that pleases him, while the creature’s outward appearance reflects the heart of man. Though society valorizes the beautiful, it is also responsible for wickedness. While the populace abhors the creature’s appearance, it is the heart of men that frightens him, and, as Goodall points out, “the novel itself may be suggesting that the creature is a natural being with elevated moral and social instincts and that, apart from some acute cosmetic problems, the experiment of which he is the result has been a profound success” (33). If Victor, as an artist, set out to replicate the beauty of human life, then he has more than succeeded. His mistake was in his choice of body, a body that not only symbolizes death, but is literally comprised of death.

The stark contrast of the creature’s muteness through the first half of the novel and his suddenly articulate narrative that spans across six chapters demonstrates the power and beauty of language the creature possesses as well. While Victor takes considerable pains in his narrative to cast the creature as a wretch, “it is through his acquisition of language that the creature is able to make a logical case for his right to basic kindness, especially from his creator” (Duyfhiuizen 5). Just as the language becomes important to the creature, the location of his and Victor’s conversation becomes significant. Following William’s murder and Justine’s execution, Victor plunges into such a deep despair that he embarks on a journey to seek “some relief” from his melancholy in a landscape filled with such “magnificence” and “eternity” that its mere presence would quiet his sorrow (83). He traverses through the mountainous Alpine region spotted with “cottages every here and there” forming “a scene of singular beauty…augmented and rendered sublime by the mighty Alps” (85). When he finally reaches the glacial summit, however, Victor finds the very monster that he once created and who now torments him. It is on this summit that the creature beckons his artist to hear his tale, where he is the victim of abuse and doomed to survive in extreme loneliness. Kant defines tales of tragedy as sublime: “There love is sad, fond, and full of respect; the misfortune of others stirs
feelings of sympathy in the breast of the spectator and causes his generous heart to beat for the distress of others” (52). Indeed, the creature’s tale would fit Kant’s definition of tragedy, but it is also intended to be persuasive, rhetorically designed to move Victor (and by extension, the reader) toward sympathy. Because the creature has become an outcast from society, he equally has been denied a voice in that society. While there is critique of the social preoccupation with beauty in Shelley’s novel, “the sublime settings in the text, on the other hand, provide a space where the marginalized can be heard” (Fredricks 178). Location, then, becomes symbolic to the creature’s language. Immersed in the beauty of society, the creature is denied a voice, and his muteness only contributes to his monstrosity. In the sublime isolation of the Alps, the creature acquires a voice, and conveys a beautiful tale that humanizes him. The fact that Shelley would place the creature and his tale at the top of her most sublime summit would suggest something provocative and symbolic—here is the most tragic tale of all.

Though the creature is perceived as repulsive, this perception initially arises from Victor’s narrative. It is important to note the structure of the novel as a frame story, and that all of the assumptions about the creature are filtered through Victor. In his narrative, Victor establishes himself as an authority on the subject of the creature, not as an author of the tale, but as the scientific creator himself. Victor uses this narrative authority to persuade his audience to see the creature as he sees it. Language, then, becomes a source of power, and becomes the essence of how a society can valorize and alienate individuals. Only after he has made his case that the creature is an abomination does the reader then hear the creature’s eloquent and heartbreaking tale. Despite Victor’s efforts to define the creature, the reader must now question the creature’s beauty, to sympathize with him, and to question what constitutes monstrosity.

However, as stated, the novel is a frame story. Victor is retelling the story, both his and the creature’s, on Captain Walton’s ship, which leads to two important questions regarding Victor’s narrative. First, if Victor has already heard the creature’s tale and is moved by it, then why would he preempt it by depicting the creature as a wretch, and thereby creating a contradiction in the first place? Second, if Victor wants his audience to continue perceiving the creature as a wretch, then why does he relate such an elaborate and eloquent version of the creature’s tale? The answer may lie near the end of Victor’s narrative, in his plea to Walton: “He is eloquent and persuasive; and once his words had even power over my heart: but trust him not” (184). Though Victor’s narrative is retold through
Walton’s letters, Walton notes that Victor resumed agency over his story through editing Walton’s version, “principally in giving life and spirit to the conversations he held with his enemy” (185). Even Victor’s own narrative betrays him as he contradicts his description of the monster. At first, Victor states that he chose the creature’s appearance and size for practical reasons: “As the minuteness of the parts formed a great hindrance to my speed, I resolved…to make the being of a gigantic stature” (48). Following the initial creation, Victor insists that he “had selected his features as beautiful. Beautiful!—Great God!” (51). Just a few paragraphs later, Victor recalls that he “had gazed on him while unfinished; he was ugly then” (52). Victor wishes his audience to share his repulsion for the creature, yet he betrays himself by revealing his own attraction to his work of art. While some critics have viewed this attraction as sexual confusion, it also demonstrates aesthetic confusion: Victor has created something extremely beautiful within something extremely ugly. From a rational standpoint, the creature’s appearance should not hinder his potential for beauty, but it is precisely his appearance that society has judged, and it is this culture’s tendency to judge appearances that compels Victor to regard the creature as monstrous. The creature seeks out Victor to give him beauty as life-affirming and saving. Victor, however, attempts to deny the creature its beauty as a method of destroying him.

The creature’s conversation with Victor highlights his own potential for beauty. Save for the brief encounter with the blind man DeLacey, Victor is the only man to sustain a lengthy conversation with the creature, and he is visibly moved. Yet, the creature’s ugly appearance destroys his own relationship with beauty, leaving him miserable. Victor’s refusal to replicate the creature causes doom both for the artist and the work of art. After Victor’s death, the creature laments, “Once I falsely hoped to meet with beings who, pardoning my outward form, would love me for the excellent qualities which I was capable of unfolding….I cannot believe that I am the same creature whose thoughts were once filled with sublime and transcendent visions of the beauty and the majesty of goodness” (195). Victor’s death signals the severing of the creature’s relationship with beauty. He cannot sustain pleasure, and he turns to death as his only remaining solace.

His narrative, however, endures as his legacy. Though Victor refuses the creature’s request to replicate his own image, and subsequently dooms both of their lives, his tragic and sublime tale becomes replicated both by Victor and Captain Walton. Ironically, both characters quote Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s poem, “Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” as well. In his
letters to his sister, Margaret Saville, Captain Walton likens his journey to that of Coleridge’s character: “I am going to unexplored regions, to ‘the land of mist and snow;’ but I shall kill no albatross, therefore do not be alarmed for my safety, or if I should come back to you as worn and woeful as the ‘Ancient Mariner?’” (18). Following Victor’s creation, he flees his laboratory and quotes the mariner:

Like one who, on a lonely road,
Doth walk in fear and dread,
And, having once turned round, walks on,
And turns no more his head;
Because he knows a frightful fiend
Doth close behind him tread (53).

Much like the Ancient Mariner, Victor and Captain Walton do not simply share the creature’s tale, they seem compelled to do so. While it may seem unusual to equate the curse of the ancient mariner to the beauty of the creature’s tale, Shelley’s intersection does seem poignant. The tale, as stated earlier, is a tragedy. The creature does not regain his relationship to beauty. He fails to replicate his own image. Though he cannot no longer experience beauty, the creature still has the capacity to share it. “If we take what we have seen from the monster already as an example, it is evident that what keeps him going is the need to tell his tale…searching for the human sympathy he has lost hope in finding,” writes Karen Karbiener, “Like the ancient mariner, the monster knows no release from the telling of his tale” (31). It is precisely the story of compassion that likens the creature’s tale to that of the ancient mariner’s. In Coleridge’s poem, before the mariner leaves, he preaches a message of compassion: “He prayeth best, who loveth best / All things both great and small; / For the dear God who loveth us, / He made and loveth all” (lines 615-619). And much like the narrator of Coleridge’s poem, Victor and Captain Walton feel the need to share the story, and thus the creature’s narrative is replicated as a beautiful work of art.

Mary Shelley draws from numerous literary sources to construct her novel, in a sense replicating their beauty to construct her own work of art. Her choices, however, also demonstrate how beauty and the perception of beauty can change. Language not only replicates beauty, but it possesses the power to define what is beautiful for a given society. Victor alludes to Dante’s descriptions of hell when he searches for words to describe his creation, even suggesting that the creature’s appearance
even transgresses this allusion: “It became a thing such as even Dante could not have conceived” (Shelley 52). Yet, Shelley’s choice to position Milton’s “Paradise Lost” against Dante’s text offers a curious opposition. The creature reads “Paradise Lost” as a factual historical account, and he likens himself to a different character other than Adam: “Many times I considered Satan as the fitter emblem of my condition; for often, like him, when I viewed the bliss of my protectors, the bitter gall of envy rose within me” (Shelley 116). In this comparison, both characters compare the creature to something Satanic, yet from extremely different perspectives. While Dante’s images of hell establishes Satan as hideous and monstrous, Milton depicts Satan as a sympathetic character, one who possesses beauty, but has been cast into oblivion. Therefore, which is the correct observation—Satan as a hideous monster, or Satan as a beautiful creature? The key difference between both texts is that Dante controls the narrative in his poem, while Satan is allowed a voice in Milton’s. Similarly, the reader is introduced to a repulsive monster throughout the first half of the novel, while the creature remains mute. When the creature speaks, however, he more closely resembles Milton’s devil. In the process, Victor becomes precariously monstrous, as Joyce Carol Oates writes, “with the progression of the fable’s unlikely plot, the inhuman creation becomes increasingly human while his creator becomes increasingly inhuman” (Oates 545). The creature finds power and beauty in his narrative, and like the Ancient Mariner, it becomes necessary to share the story, to present a new language that will possibly redefine what constitutes beauty in a given society.

Though the creature’s tale does endure through replication, his intent was not to simply tell a story that merited a retelling, but to save his own life by persuading Victor to create a companion. “Instead of threatening,” the creature tells Victor at the conclusion of his tale, “I am content to reason with you” (129). Much like Milton is able to transform the image of Satan, the creature understands the power of language. Initially, he believes that acquiring a voice will help him persuade the DeLacey family to accept him, “these thoughts exhilarated [him], and led [him] to apply with fresh ardour to the acquiring the art of language” (Shelley 103). His attempt to befriend the DeLacey family, however, ends in failure, just as his hopes of persuading Victor. The creature understands how language defines beauty, and through a companion he had hoped to create a new language of beauty. Yet, by the end of the novel, the creature also understands how language will be used against him. Again, echoing Milton’s Satan, the creature laments, “Am I to be thought the only
criminal when all human kind sinned against me?” (Shelley 196). Again, while beauty possesses life-giving qualities, the language that is used to describe beauty has the potential to alienate those who do not meet its own constructed definition of beauty. Just as the creature is cast out of society for his appearance, he is concerned for being forever cast out as a villain through language. Therefore, his narrative becomes even more important, even if the creature does not fully realize it. Without his tale, he is nothing more than a faceless evil, an abomination of mankind. To hear his voice is to sympathize with the devil, and to question monstrosity. Is the creature a monster because of his hideous appearance, or are those individuals that have driven him away monstrous? In other words, does the monster exist in appearance (as an object) or in perception (as a subject)? These are the questions Shelley posits throughout the text, and appears to answer through the creature. He is not born monstrous, but is created through his abusive treatment.

As characters, Victor and the creature blur the boundaries between good and evil as well as between beauty and ugliness. What initially can be judged as hideous can be thrown into question when a new perspective is offered. In similar fashion, defining what constitutes beautiful becomes increasingly challenging, as new perspectives can reposition such values. What makes the creature in Frankenstein so complicated is that he seems to possess both beauty and ugliness. When he is denied to share his love and compassion with the world, he indulges in becoming the villain. Yet, he continues to lament the role, wishing to experience some act of kindness from mankind. This argument began with Elaine Scarry’s theory that beauty is “life-affirming, life-giving” as well as “its removal as a retraction of life.” Though Mary Shelley’s text seems to support this theory, it also complicates its implications as it presents a critique on social values. While beauty may promote social justice, placing an over-reliance on the qualities of beauty can enforce alienation among those that do not meet the standards of beauty. In his theory on aesthetics, Immanuel Kant relies on gender roles as a method of communicating his ideas on the sublime and the beautiful. Such language, however, comes with risk as it not only attempts to redefine beauty, but gender roles in society as well. If gender roles are deemed as a social construct, then so, too, would the definition of beauty. Language itself, in fact, becomes an artifice for not only beauty, but reality. The creature’s appearance becomes an extension of those who have been alienated from society as absent of beauty, based on factors beyond aesthetics such as social class, race, ethnicity, and gender. Just as, for example, poverty
may seem hideous, those who reside in poverty may unfairly be seen as equally hideous. Similarly, the creature never chose the body he was given, and it may very well be repulsive, but the life it contained seems unfairly judged and rejected from society.

Works Cited


The verses of Earthseed, a religion written in poetic verse and created by Lauren Oya Olamina in Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*, “bestow” a type of beauty that encourages people to engage in activities that Delattre insists drastically alter and shape reality in a positive way. In Lauren’s dystopian world, beautiful people are in danger and beautiful landscapes and wildlife signify danger. Through the poetic verses that Lauren creates with Earthseed, Octavia Butler demonstrates that another type of beauty is necessary to keep humans from becoming extinct, a type of beauty that intertwines poetry, religion, and ethics with the sense of community and change. George Santayana argues in *The Sense of Beauty* that “all values are in one sense aesthetic” (19) and all of these values in Lauren’s religious ideas exemplify this notion. In Earthseed, Lauren provides a purpose for humans to move to the stars, humankind’s ultimate destiny. Most importantly, she suggests the humans in the stars must learn from past lessons and be more empathetic toward each other.

When Butler introduces Lauren’s world to readers, she creates an America where most people are homeless and desperately short of necessary resources such as food, water, medical care and more. There are

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*Beauty to Live By: Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents* by Heather L. McMillan*

*For it is in joyfully bestowing beauty that is to be found the deepest reality, the cosmos-shaping, reality-enlarging, life-giving, and soul-nourishing reality of the beautifying life of God.*

—Roland A. Delattre
some walled communities scattered around that endure at the start of *Parable of the Sower*, but Lauren's own community is destroyed by raiders. Other communities in the story, such as the community of Olivar, become havens of servitude where privatization offers a secure place to live in exchange for complete indenturing of the people who live and work in those communities. This servitude enforces Santayana's idea that when a person struggles constantly to avoid dying, “no breath or strength is left him for free enjoyment” (19). Further, Santayana relays that this free enjoyment marks a crucial aspect of humanity because without free time to create and to appreciate beauty, “evolution would impoverish instead of enriching our nature” (18).

Santayana's theory enforces the notion of the dystopia of Lauren's world, and Butler reveals Lauren's keen observation of this theory in action as she notices the dysfunction of beauty around her. The first sighting of the world beautiful in these novels occurs when Lauren's diary entry for February 22, 2025 refers to a man named Richard Moss. In what is a derogatory characterization of Richard, Lauren writes of him, “He's an engineer for one of the big commercial water companies, so he can afford to pick up beautiful, young women and live with them in polygamous relationships” (*Sower* 37). Here the reference to beauty involves a person and implies that only rich people can afford to pick up a multitude of beautiful women; therefore, in this instance beauty serves erroneously as negative because it represents a luxurious commodity only available to the wealth and corrupt.

To complicate the matter of human beauty further, Butler emphasizes that being a beautiful person results in exacerbated danger or even death due to the disorder and chaos of the dystopian world in which they live. Lauren describes own brother, Marcus, as “the only person in the family whom I would call beautiful” and writes “Girls his age stare at him when they think he's not looking” (*Sower* 123). While Lauren believes Marcus to be dead, he instead survives and endures tragic circumstances largely in part to his beauty. Lauren finds him later in *Parable of the Talents* and writes “I don't know what to say about this. I don't know how to deal with it. Writing about it helps” (93). As Lauren and her husband, Bankole, talk about the terrible experiences Marcus must have endured during his captivity from which she freed him, Bankole ponders “I wonder whether his looks have saved him or destroyed him. Or both” (*Talents* 106). When Marcus finally reveals his story of the last five years, he confides about the slavery and the repeated rapes that he endured because of his attractiveness. The reason he lives is largely
because his beauty preserved him in one way as a commodity much as Richard Moss uses his wealth to have beautiful women, but nevertheless, Marcus laments to Lauren that “you walk past the corpse, and you wish like hell it was you” (Talents 130). Marcus preferred the possibility of death to the hell he endures for being beautiful.

The beauty people possess in the world does not change their circumstances for the better, and in fact, beauty in women in particular in this world attracts danger as evidenced with another beautiful character in the story, Zahra, one of the wives of Richard Moss. Zahra manages to survive the burning of the walled community because Harry, the only other surviving member of the community than Zahra and Lauren, rescues her while a raider rapes her. Many women and young girls in the novel succumb to rape and most ultimately to death afterward. Lauren describes Zahra as “a beautiful woman” (Sower 183), but later admits that the reason an attacker grabs Zahra is “she’s small, and must have looked weak as well as beautiful” (234). Zahra’s beauty makes her a target for attackers in the dangerous world outside of their walled community, so a person with natural beauty in this world also typically does not fare well for long in the world without others to help look out for her. The experience of beauty in Lauren’s world so far is not positive or favorable for herself, her community, and her society. In Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature: Essays on the Aesthetics of Nature, Malcolm Budd summarizes Immanuel Kant’s aesthetic judgment as “a judgement made about something on the basis of experiencing that thing” (25). For what the reader experiences so far in Parable of the Sower, the concept of beauty through judgment based on experiences is that beauty is a liability that ultimately leads to death or danger.

Although, human beauty is not the only form present in the world, another form appears as wild wolves. With beautiful people, the danger came from the beholders of the beautiful. Reversing this, the beautiful wild wolves represent danger to the beholders of the beautiful as the wild wolves attack, kill, and then eat humans. In the first novel, Lauren goes with her father and other members of their community to target practice, and while out of the walled community, they encounter wolves. Lauren points her neighbor, Joanne Garfield, to notice a lone wolf that watches them target shoot. Joanne “gasp[s], and jerk[s] her gun up to aim at the dog” and “she was shaking” (Sower 40). Lauren realizes the terror that Joanne feels toward the wolf, and at that moment another person with them, Aura Moss, notices the wolf and shoots but misses it, nearly hitting another person in the community. None of the other members who
view the wolf comment on it being beautiful or representing anything but danger in their eyes. On their way back home, Lauren’s father shoots a wolf that gets too close to the party. Lauren laments in her diary entry “there was a beauty to it” (Sower 44). Later, she reaffirms the fact she believes the dog to be beautiful when she has to shoot it in order to put it out of its misery: “I drew the Smith & Wesson, aimed, and shot the beautiful dog through its head” (Sower 45). For Lauren, the wolf’s death is tragic because it is beautiful. However, for the rest of her party that day, the wolf’s death is necessary because of the danger it represents to them.

Just as beautiful people attract danger, beautiful landscapes also attract danger. Lauren perceives the beauty in the settings around her when she and her traveling companions stop in a park on their northward journey. She writes in her journal about the park, “Yes, the park was beautiful except where some painted fools had set fires” (Sower 215). Lauren questions locals about why the park has fire damage, as it offers no goods and it is open to everyone, but the locals cannot answer her question because “No one knew why” (Sower 215). The beauty of the park attracts the people who raid things, just as the beautiful people attract the same dangerous element.

The fact that Butler paints this world as beautiful but dangerous calls into question Santayana’s notion that beauty “is never the perception of a positive evil, it is never a negative value” (31). While Lauren’s reaction to perceive and appreciate beauty is a correct response according to most theorists about beauty, Butler creates a world where this type of beauty comes with the price of danger, death, or destruction. The concept of beauty as dangerous sends a strong message that beauty does exist but the type of beauty present lacks opportunity for Lauren and the people of her society to interact with beauty in a positive manner. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel offers a way of understanding what is missing when he states in *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics* that “artistic beauty stands higher than nature” (II). Therefore, this lack of artistic beauty and access only to natural beauty “reduces us, as regards the selection of objects and their distinction in beauty and ugliness, to subject taste as an ultimate fact, which accepts no rule and admits of no discussion” (Hegel LXIII). Hegel’s statement suggests that for Lauren and her society, the beauty present is not enough because the distinction of beauty and ugliness boils down to individual taste, while artistic beauty, or beauty created by humans, engages people not just with modalities of taste but with intellectual, social, or academic conversation about ideas or ideals represented in the artistic endeavor. Up until this point, Butler
contradicts Santayana, showing us that beauty in this dystopian world is a negative value through the outcomes of those beautiful things.

In order to counter the lack of artistic beauty or a beauty not implicitly tied with danger in this dystopian world, Lauren creates a religion in poetry form that centers around a more compassionate and empathetic human that encourages humans to work together so that mankind can fulfill their destiny of living amongst the stars. Lauren’s religion, Earthseed, represents a beauty that offers people a choice to think critically about how they treat each other and how they function in the world. Elaine Scarry in On Beauty reveals that the ability to “notice beauty… may confer a benefit by perpetuating the religion in acts of worship or perpetuating the poem by making certain it does not disappear or get revised by those incapable of seeing its beauty” (65). Importantly, this beauty is life giving rather than the life destroying type as beauty has so far represented.

In Aesthetics and Ethics: Jonathan Edwards and the Recovery of Aesthetics for Religious Ethics, Roland A. Delattre associates religion and aesthetics together through Jonathan Edward’s religious texts. Delattre asserts “bestowing beauty is more beautiful to Edwards than being beautiful” and “bestowing beauty draws one out of oneself” (290). Employing the ideas of religion and beauty linked as Delattre asserts they are per Jonathan Edward’s theories, Lauren acts as a catalyst for beauty, an active participation in creating beauty. Delattre contends “Nothing expands the soul so much as the experience of beauty and participation in beautifying deeds” (288). Through Lauren’s creation of the religion and sharing it with others, she offers the opportunity for others to experience this beauty and expand their own souls in the process. Lauren first tries to share her ideological basis of Earthseed with her friend Joanne Garfield in Robledo, but the first time she actually lets someone read her Earthseed notebook is when she, Zahra, and Harry travel northward away from their destroyed community. Harry responds, “I never knew you cared about poetry” (Sower 199) after he reads through the pages Lauren shows him. Since the world focuses so much on survival, people often do not know when another person enjoys poetry or art, because they seldom find time to engage in those leisure activities.

The act of creating a new religion for humans that functions more appropriately than the failing Christianity predominant in her society signifies Lauren’s act of bestowing beauty upon the world and drawing people out of the individual and into the sense of community that they need to keep from becoming extinct. At the beginning of Parable of the Sower, Lauren reveals to us that the children of her society “aren’t that
much concerned with religion. I am, but then I have a different religion” (8). Already, Lauren sets up that religion as it exists in her world may serve the adult population who “never miss a chance to relive the good old days or to tell us kids how great it’s going to be when the country gets back on its feet and good times come back” (80). However, that religion fails to serve the youth who see only the remnants of religions that served a very different society with more resources and less danger.

While the wild animals are dangerous, the biggest danger Lauren faces in America comes from other people. So then, it becomes imperative that she teach them to stop thinking about individual survival, and instead move their thoughts to human survival and stop turning on one another. Interestingly, Delattre describes our world today as a place where beauty “is morally of no more than cosmetic importance, not cosmos-shaping, reality-enlarging, and life-giving as it was for Jonathan Edwards,” (294) and this image of cosmetic beauty in Lauren’s world represents itself in the beautiful people, the landscapes, and the wild wolves. These things link directly with danger and they do not offer any opportunities for making the world better per Delattre’s ideas.

In order for Earthseed to spread, Lauren has to share it more with other people, and the concept of others sharing in her verses and stating or reading her verses represents a form of replication. While Butler does not depict the other members of Earthseed out there creating verses, she does illustrate in the community of Acorn how they work together following the concepts that Lauren outlines in her verses. This action of beautifying activities sustains Scarry’s concept of the “requirement beauty places on us to replicate” (5).

We are born
Not with purpose,
But with potential.
Purpose
Unifies us:
It focuses our dreams,
Guides our plans,
Strengthens our efforts.
Purpose
Defines us,
Shapes us,
And offers us
Greatness. (Talents 361-362)
Earthseed as a religion provides the people with a purpose, a destiny of humans in space, something to strive for together instead of merely focusing on individual survival, and that purpose provides another form of beauty. Collectively they need goals as Lauren speaks to in the verses above, but also individually as Lauren tells Len that helping her simplify and focus her message “will keep you alive” (Talents 362). Lauren tells Len that the reason people followed her when she was 18 years old and gathering community members for her Earthseed community of Acorn was not that she was wonderful, but that “she seemed to be going somewhere, seemed to know where she was going” (Talents 363). The idea that Lauren offers a purpose or something greater encourages them to follow her.

Lauren’s ability to imagine a different world and to share her vision of people populating outer space through religion offers the beauty of that imagining to others who have lost the ability to imagine anything in the chaos of their world. In the article “Faith in Verse and Fiction: James Baldwin’s, Phillis Wheatley’s, Octavia E. Butler’s, and Tananarive Due’s Creation of a Peaceful Space,” Mildred E. Mickle suggests that “Lauren realizes that what allows people to survive in the face of adversity is the hope of achieving something great” (93). Before the influence of Lauren’s Earthseed, people outside the walled community enjoy no hope at all. In fact, Lauren even realizes the lack of hope while she lives in the walled community. During that time, she talks to another resident, Joanne Garfield, about the hopelessness surrounding the community. Joanne asks Lauren what they can do at age 15, and Lauren responds with “We can get ready…get focused on arranging to survive so that we can do more than just get battered around by crazy people, desperate people, thugs, and leaders who don’t know what they’re doing!” (Sower 55). Already Lauren understands that hope and sharing the beauty of hope from her imagination with others calls them to action and provides a reason, an opportunity for them to plan beyond simple individual survival. Having this reason or purpose is essential, as pointed out in “Beauty as the Point of Connection between Theology and Ethics” by Stephen M. Garret: “[Beauty] forms our imaginations to envision how to live fittingly in an unjust world, giving us purpose along the way” (155). Having something to look forward to or to work toward offers hope to people, which in itself is a form of beauty. Mickle conveys that “[Lauren’s] faith and her need to help others adapt [the religion] to their own lives are what bring her hope” (92). By sharing that religion with others, she shares the beauty of her hope.
Butler places the poetic lines of Earthseed at the start of each new chapter in both of the novels to entice our thinking about what the interjection of these beautiful lines of verse mean in a world where beauty typically represents negative attributes. First Lauren pulls in the importance of change in her world. Because of the dystopian nature of the world, change is a necessary element for survival according to Lauren. The first verses we glimpse in *Parable of the Sower* are:

All that you touch
You Change.
All that you Change
Changes you.
The only lasting truth
Is Change.
God
Is Change. (3)

Upon examining the verses and Lauren’s society, the reason for the use of poetic verses is clear. These lines could be typical prose, but Butler specifically chooses to utilize poetry in Lauren’s Earthseed. The line formations above are brief and direct, and they speak to a world where quick decisions often mean life or death. The short and direct lines shift focus to the things that are possible in the future. As Aristotle in the *Philosophies of Art and Beauty* proclaims, “the poet’s function is to describe, not the thing that has happened, but a kind of thing that might happen, i.e. what is possible as being probable or necessary” (106). In addition, the short lines are easier to learn and pass along to others who move constantly adapting to their changing environments, which assist in replication by making it easier to memorize the teachings of the religion. Having large books of prose for a religion during this time would make them more difficult to spread around and perpetuate as Scarry says is necessary to make sure the beauty of it does not disappear (65). Lauren says of writing her verses, “I chose soft, non-preachy verses, good for road-weary minds and bodies” (*Sower* 213). In a way that appeals to and is logical for the people who lives in Lauren’s world, the short, easy-to-memorize verses that project the possible, the probably and the necessary are easier for consumption.

Further, I stress the content of the particular passage on the concept of change, which I assert is another form of beauty. Lauren does not believe that her society will ever be able to return to the time the grown-
ups remember. She uses the topic of the climate change to indicate this: “we can't make the climate change back, no matter why it changed in the first place” (*Sower* 57). The beauty of her new religion Earthseed comes in that it embraces change instead of viewing it as the central problem. Mathias Nigles in “We Need the Stars: Change, Community, and the Absent Father in Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*” claims that Butler “does not represent change as a solution in the novel but first and foremost as society’s central problem” (1335). However, Lauren sees change as imperative to the point of associating it with God. Through this concept of change, Lauren converts dangerous, unapproachable beauty into a beauty that people can then interact and engage with regularly.

Through Lauren, Butler posits us to consider the beauty of nostalgia versus the beauty of change, here again by associating danger with nostalgia and hope with change. Many of the adults that Lauren encounters in *Parable of the Sower* when she is a youth cling to the memories of the way things were and the way they hope to be again. Nigles elaborates that the people in Lauren’s society “seem prone to developing a regressive attachment to the structures of stability [they] feel they’ve lost” (1339). In the article “The Persistence of Hope in Dystopian Science Fiction,” Raffaella Baccolini claims that “memory remains too often trapped in an individual and regressive nostalgia;” however, she asserts that in novels like Butler’s, “critical dystopias show that a culture of memory--one that moves from the individual to the collective--is part of a social project of hope” (521). By creating a new religion that positions God as being the force of change, Lauren enables people to embrace change instead of resenting it for taking away things they knew. According to Nigles she “makes change into as permanent a structure as one can imagine” by making change synonymous with God (1338). Marlene Allen contributes to this conversation in “Octavia Butler’s *Parable* Novels and the ‘Boomerang’ of African American History” when she suggests that Lauren’s father, born in the twentieth century, “he shows many of the characteristics of people of our time, and Butler uses him to illustrate our short-sightedness” (1360). Therefore, the older generation in these novels can never fully embrace the concept of God as change as Lauren does.

In addition, Lauren offers another form of artistic beauty into her world through her sketches. These sketches serve as another way to promote her religion. During the second novel, Lauren escapes enslavement and travels with a girl named Len. They stop at the home of Nia Cortez and offer to weed her garden for her in exchange for food. When they
finish and they sit on Nia’s porch to eat the sandwiches she brings them, Lauren tells Nia “This is beautiful country” as she begins to sketch the area around Nia’s home (Talents 366). During Len and Lauren’s three-night stay at Nia’s, Lauren draws three sketches accompanied by verses from Earthseed. During that time, Len watches the beauty of the religion as Nia becomes comfortable with the words and with Lauren’s way of living the words she writes in verses. Lauren writes that after three nights there, Lauren “could speak of it as Earthseed without worrying that Nia would feel harassed or proselytized” (372). The beautiful sketches help Lauren connect with other people so she can relay her message of Earthseed.

Lauren understands the subtle nuances in this world of fear that require her to build trust with others and reach them through clear ideas of change, hope, empathy and purpose. Of those four ideas she represents in Earthseed, I addressed three: change, hope and purpose, which leaves empathy to discuss in relation to beauty. I purposely leave empathy last, because of the most unusual stress Butler places on the empathetic nature of Lauren. Not only is Lauren able to be compassionate toward others, but Butler assigns her what some of society views as a handicap, a disease called hyperempathy. Lauren reveals that doctors call it “an organic delusional syndrome,” and she quite firmly condemns that notion with her retort of “it hurts, that’s all I know” (Sower 12). The professionals attribute negative connotations to it by using the term delusional, but for Lauren and the others in the novel with the disorder, they experience it as reality. That experience of empathic reality enables Lauren to remind people to exercise more kindness toward each other.

However, Lauren’s handicap actually assists her in promoting understanding and empathy within others through Earthseed. Rebecca Wanzo discusses the Parable novels as they relate to empathy and postmodern sentimentality in her article “Apocalyptic Empathy: A Parable of Postmodern Sentimentality,” argues that Butler “gives credence to the idea of imagined feeling producing real effects, which is important in considering the work that sympathy or empathy can inspire” (76). This super-sensitive empathy of Lauren’s provides her with the ability to inspire great beauty in her world. While this empathy does not always save the day in the novels, Lauren tries to teach the concept of empathy in her verses: “Kindness eases Change./Love quiets fear./And a sweet and powerful/Positive obsession/Blunts pain,/Diverts rage,/And engages each of us/In the greatest,/The most intense/Of our chosen struggles” (Talents 45). The lines not only echo Lauren’s own truths as she experiences them, but also call others out to follow the same path in order to
help them through the difficult challenges their world poses. Clearly, the benefits Lauren lists in the verses make kindness a better option for humans than self-preservation at the cost of compassion toward others.

Lauren cares very deeply for other humans to the extent that she can in this dysfunctional world, and she attempts to understand even those who feel threatened by her and her new religion. She sympathizes deeply with others and thinks about the things they must endure in her world. Immanuel Kant contends in *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* that “a certain tenderheartedness, which is easily stirred into a warm feeling of sympathy, is beautiful and amiable; for it shows a charitable interest in the lot of other men, to which principles of virtue likewise lead” (58). While Kant does make note that if a person helps someone he is sympathetic toward, but he is already indebted to another person and that charity makes him unable to settle that debt then he cheats the beauty of justice. However, Lauren’s sympathies focus on the good of humanity as a whole; therefore, according to Kant this places her on “a higher standpoint” and in “true relation to [her] higher duty” (58). Kant’s theories on beauty and feeling come into play in this aspect of Lauren’s creation of beauty through a compassionate, empathetic, and feeling that she asks of herself and of others to represent through Earthseed. Kant confirms this type of “moral action, at least when done to another person, moves all the more further it is from self-interest, and the more those nobler impulsions stand out in it” (73). On one occasion, Lauren helps a multi-racial couple and their baby at a watering hole when two coyotes grab the couple’s water bottle and tries to run off with it. Lauren feels empathy toward them because they are a mixed race couple, which will attract attention from other people, and because they have a baby. So she stops the coyotes and gives the water bottle back to them (*Sower* 201). Later on in the journey, Lauren helps an old man stand back up after an earthquake knocks him off his feet and away from his cane. Each time she helps, the people she assists are mistrusting of her, thinking she helps only to try to take advantage of them. Lauren writes about the old man, “He was light as a child, thin, toothless, and frightened of me” (226). In their world, the act of people helping others is a rare occurrence, and Lauren bestows her beauty on the world by acting out the empathy she writes about in her Earthseed verses. Lauren’s actions promote kindness toward humanity in general, which according to Kant elevates her actions to a higher and nobler form of beauty.

In summary, Octavia Butler says a great deal about types of beauty in *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*, as she ties in danger
with human beauty, landscapes, and wild animals and provides hope with artistic beauty such as poetry, religion, change, and empathy. The types of beauty that she details Lauren taking note of with the association of danger do not let the people of this society to interact with the beauty in a positive way. Contrary, the beauty Lauren creates in Earthseed that promotes concepts of empathy, hope, change and purpose interject an artistic beauty that inspires action from the people who live in the society and encourages interaction with each other. What we learn from Lauren’s journey is first “to encourage attention to secondary beauty in the natural world and in human relations” as Lauren does, first noticing the beauty of the wild things around her even though they are associated with dangers. Then we learn “to lift the attentions of persons and communities from the attractive power of secondary beauty to the more reality-shaping power of primary beauty” which is “of beautifying lives actively bestowing and creating beauty” at Delattre concludes (296). The “secondary” beauty that exists in the world involves or invokes danger in some way, while the creation of Earthseed as a religion utilizes poetry and promotes empathy, ethics, and change to bring a non-dangerous beauty, a “primary” beauty, into interaction with people of Lauren’s world. This enables them in the end of Parable of the Talents to “fly away on these ugly big trucks” on the first shuttles with people going to settle on the moon. Lauren does not live to go with them, but she states she “will go with the first ship to leave after my death” because it is “[her] immortality” (406). For Lauren, the beauty of her transcendence into immortality by becoming physically a part of the ideals she creates on earth when her ashes leave with other humans to spread to new planets.

Works Cited


“The Death of the Heart”: Masculine Rejection of Beauty in the Poetry of B.H. Fairchild

by MacKenzie Regier

Spanning multiple award-winning collections of poetry, B.H. Fairchild constructs a portrait of the Kansas of his birth and boyhood in strikingly beautiful terms. His distinct characters, often tragic as well as charming—like “redneck surrealist” Elton Wayne Showalter—play out their lives of love and work against a backdrop of “late Friday night[s] rinsed in waves of pink neon and samba music” (“Madonna and Child, Perryton, Texas, 1967” 2-3), a Kansas “blazing with new snow, a future
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of flat land, white skies, and sunlight” (“Kansas” 14-15), and “the tree-less horizons / of slate skies and the muted passions of roughnecks / and scrabble farmers” (“Beauty” 4-6). In *Landscape and Western Art*, Malcolm Andrews asserts that “landscape depends on the human subject for giving it moral or spiritual significance, but the human subject needs the landscape to complete his meaning” (29). Fairchild fashions a Kansas which impresses upon its vulnerable subjects and which is impressed upon by those subjects, creating a contract of beauty between person and space with definite, visible energies and mechanisms at play.

His poem “Beauty,” which will serve as the central focal point for this analysis, illustrates a specific system of masculinity in which the men participating reject an appreciation and acknowledgement of beauty. This seems strange when considering their environment of “[l]ampshades like inverted flowers” (“At the Excavation of Liberal, Kansas” 27) and “the evening sun which makes a bronze plunder of brick streets” (“The Big Bands: Liberal, Kansas, Summer of 1955” 19-20). Undeniably, the Kansas which surrounds them, whether in the form of their oasis-like towns or in the shape of the natural landscape, is replete with beauty. However, Fairchild’s masculine figures are unable to acknowledge this beauty within the sign system for their projected masculinity, which is reinforced by peers and passed on to male children. Perry Garfinkel writes in *In a Man’s World* that “fathers are identified with the superego: law, restraint, industry, severity, aloofness, control and power—qualities that command awe, respect, and emulation from a son” (10). Garfinkel stresses the importance of father-son relationships, how sons experience “a lifelong struggle for respect from the man who, in the son’s eyes, represents all men” (13), and he has much to say on the subject of male peers: “Social science studies tell us that male friendships are formed in the playgrounds and continue down the corporate corridors, from nursery school to nursing home” (131). With these few claims, Garfinkel supports a reading of Fairchild’s masculine figures as participating in a system of natural male relationships which unnaturally reinforces a system of masculine beauty exclusion. This is a sign system that disallows acknowledgement of beauty for a number of reasons I will explore throughout this paper.

The speaker establishes himself as being, at present, removed from this harmful system of masculine aesthetics and illustrates an opposing example when he describes himself “transported, stunned” (line 21) at a “a discussion of beauty between Robert Penn Warren / and Paul Weiss at Yale College” (17-18). To him, the idea of “two grown men discussing
‘beauty’ / seriously and with dignity as if they and the topic / were as normal as normal topics of discussion / between men” is shocking and unfamiliar (21-25). Later, this moment of positive acknowledgement of beauty between masculine figures will serve to foreground the poisonous and perhaps even fatal consequences of the culture of aesthetics put forth by Fairchild’s male figures.

For the speaker of “Beauty,” any acknowledgement of aesthetic pleasure or appreciation strikes him as foreign due to the nature of his upbringing in an environment of men adhering to a specific set of aesthetic restrictions. Essentially, this speaker has matured in a culture in which “beauty” as a topic of discussion is rendered taboo by the male figures around him. He states “no male member of [his] family has ever used / this word [beauty] in [his] hearing…except / in reference, perhaps, to a new pickup or dead deer” (10-14). This almost complete omission in the masculine lexicon plunges deeper than words for these men, however. Acknowledgement of beauty might inspire disgust, even “anger [and] a kind / of terror…an animal wildness” (142-143). In one significant moment, the character “Uncle Ross” calls a table centerpiece “lovely,” and the speaker’s father—“clearly troubled by the word” (40)—leaves the room. The action of acknowledging something as beautiful or being confronted with an apparently beautiful object or person repulses these men and even drives them away. One essential facet of masculinity’s rejection of beauty seems to be that these men seek violent outlets as an alternative for their acknowledgement of beauty. Violence dominates any male discussion or display of beauty for these characters. Bobby Sudduth informs his male coworkers in the machine shop that the shot that killed President Kennedy was “a beauty” (93). The epigraph, a selection from James Wright’s “Autumn Begins in Martin’s Ferry, Ohio,” calls football players “suicidally beautiful” and later invokes this violent link again when describing these boys “gallop[ing] terribly against each other’s bodies” (162). In this same section, the speaker vividly imagines a schoolyard fight between two boys, in which they “[feel] for the first time the strength, the abundance, / of their own bodies” (175-176).

At first glance, the model of masculinity perpetuated by Fairchild’s men shuns beauty due to its perceived lack of utility. When the speaker of the poem which is to be our central focus posits “no male member of [his] family has ever used / this word [beauty] in [his] hearing,” he adds a caveat: “except / in reference, perhaps, to a new pickup or dead deer” (13-14). Here, we can see the masculine acceptance of the word “beauty” in reference to items which have a clear use in their daily lives—a truck
for work, a deer for food. When Bobby Sudduth describes Kennedy’s killing shot, again “beauty” is acceptable as a descriptor of an action of definite use. Perry Garfinkel writes in his book *In a Man’s World* that “across cultures and across generations fathers train sons to *do*, to define themselves and to measure their power through the performance of skills” (13). This assertion helps to contextualize the moment with the table’s centerpiece. The father does not leave the room out of disgust with “Uncle Ross from California” who “liked to tap-dance” (38, 42), but rather because, in one way, conveying positive appreciation of a dinner centerpiece, which seems to serve no purpose other than to be a pleasure for the eyes, creates friction with the acceptable parameters of acknowledgement of *useful* beauty in the masculine sphere.

However, this rejection of seemingly “useless” beauty functions as an incomplete reading of a deeper phenomenon at work: the separation of the masculine sublime from the feminine beautiful. Kant writes in his treatise on the beautiful and the sublime that women “have a strong inborn feeling for all that is beautiful, elegant, and decorated. Even in childhood they like to be dressed up, and take pleasure when they are adorned…. They love pleasantry and can be entertained by trivialities if only these are merry and laughing” (77). Kant puts forth a reading of women as decorative, certain that what they like is frivolous. His definition of beauty as belonging to femininity makes it subject to these qualifications. The aforementioned lack of utility perceived in beauty and beautiful objects is about usefulness on the surface; delve deeper, and the gendered nature of the division reveals this binary of *useful/useless* as belonging to a greater binary of masculine/feminine. Equally important is the emotional vulnerability inherent in the concept of a feminized beauty and the acknowledgement of it. Notably, Fairchild’s feminine and female figures—or his figures who do not buy into the sign system of rural Kansas masculinity, such as Uncle Ross, Robert Penn Warren, and Paul Weiss—do not encounter the difficulties in expressing aesthetic pleasure which masculine figures experience. For instance, the poem constructs an imagined wife and husband figure in the midst of a sexual encounter in section IV:

[T]hey stand naked before each other and begin to touch / in a slow choreography of familiar gestures their bodies, / … / and he does not say the word “beautiful” because / he cannot and never has, and she does not say it / because it would embarrass him or any other man / she has ever known…
The wife in this fantasy scenario has no difficulty admitting beauty in her personal thoughts and actually refrains from voicing her opinion of her husband as beautiful in order to spare him feelings of embarrassment. Notably, this passage indicates that the masculine taboo on acknowledgement of beauty actually intrudes on the sphere of feminine behavior, but only in that the woman here refrains for the sake of the man. She does not refrain because of any restrictions placed upon her in the acknowledgement of beauty. Beauty associated with femininity occurs again when the speaker wonders if the aesthetic discussion between Robert Penn Warren and Paul Weiss indicates that they “might be homosexuals” (31). Dariusz Galasiński proposes in his book Men and the Language of Emotions that “the cultural and academic model of ‘unemotional man’ is not so much a reflection of suppressing emotions in men, but, rather, the creation of the ‘emotional woman’” (17). If masculinity in Fairchild’s Kansas stands opposite to femininity, and femininity is traditionally constructed as emotionally expressive, then beauty becomes associated with vulnerability. Garfinkel writes that fear of homosexuality stems from “a basic fear of the unknown” (163), a fear of emotional openness and intimacy that a shared beautiful moment can create. In Fairchild’s “Beauty,” this phenomenon occurs not only among men and women but among men with other men. Dismissing beauty, to these men, is an exclusion of femininity which aids in defining their version of masculinity; it is a rejection of emotion evidenced by its frequent association with women and feminized men; and it is a retreat from a feared and almost shameful emotional openness extending even into intimate encounters with wives and girlfriends.

Not only does the poem define the reasons behind this version of masculinity’s repression of beauty, it also outlines the consequences. In rejecting positive aesthetic judgments, Fairchild’s masculine figures must find outlet in other arenas. Elaine Scarry writes that “Wittgenstein says that when the eye sees something beautiful, the hand wants to draw it” (3). This captures her theory of replication, an idea that a boy who sees a beautiful face “copies the face, then copies the face again and again” because “beauty prompts a copy of itself” (3, 4). She asserts that beauty is “sacred, lifesaving” (28), engendering a life-giving contract between the beautiful object and its beholder. If this energy resides in the nature of beautiful things, people, and places, then what does it mean for Fairchild’s men to shirk these energies if they are, in fact, surrounded by loving wives, healthy children, and a tapestry of daily-life images like “miles of uncut wheat… / …the metal roof of the machine shop…/ [breaking] into flame

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late on an autumn day, with such beauty”? (208-211). Fairchild’s poem creates subjects of this harmful model of masculinity who seek to release the energies of unacknowledged beauty in other arenas, often through methods of violence and sexuality. Poems which span Fairchild’s other collections weave a network of support for this reading.

Fairchild’s men often seek to impress their displaced replicative energies onto the bodies of women. The reasons for this are twofold; first, these men seek to differentiate their masculine identities from a feminine one. In Be a Man! Males in Modern Society, Peter N. Stearns writes that “[m]en are always born of women, almost always nurtured by them, and usually suckled by them. All have to carve out some distinctiveness from women…to achieve identity as a man” (3). These men renounce beauty on the Kantian basis that “[t]he sublime moves, [and] the beautiful charms” (47). The masculine sublime, in completely and totally spurning feminized beauty, often differentiates itself through violence. The theories of Edmund Burke, one of Kant’s contemporaries, seem to further support this reading: “that is, [the sublime] is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling…. [T]he ideas of pain are much more powerful than those which enter on the part of pleasure” (“Of the Sublime”). In subconsciously and culturally embracing the masculine sublime, these men inflict violence and pain upon themselves and others as an embodiment of this masculine aesthetic.

One way these men differentiate themselves from feminized beauty is by asserting their dominance over a symbolic representation of the beautiful embodied in female figures according to a Kant/Burke school of aesthetics. This theme appears throughout Fairchild’s poem in repeated comparisons of women’s bodies to landscapes. This sign-pairing seems to begin at an early age for the boys in Fairchild’s Kansas, as witnessed in “The Follies Burlesque, Market Street, Kansas City”:

…platinum coiffure, / flaming lips, billowing breasts as generous / and pastoral as the foothills of northern New Mexico / or the swelling tides of Redondo Beach, a new frontier / for boys still bogged in the muddy ruts of late / adolescence, hungry for love and learning to nurse / 3.2 beer from quart bottles. (6-12).

Women and their bodily beauty seem to serve as a space of colonization for masculinity, even in its beginning stages of adolescence. I have already established that the fields and landscapes of Kansas exert
particular energies of beauty upon its male subjects, existing as a place of work—often violent—and male inheritance, a space where these boys “[plow] their first straight furrow, [lick] the dirt / from their lips, the hand of the father resting lightly / upon their shoulder” (“Beauty” 167-169). Though the “The Follies Burlesque” positions the woman’s body as opposite to the flat lands of Kansas in which Fairchild’s men replicate, instead comparing her curves to hills and swells, further poems support a critical reading of the woman’s body as a canvas for masculine imprinting. In “Brazil,” “when Melinda Bozell boast[s] / that she would never let a boy touch her ‘down there,’” her paramour and future husband Elton responds, “Down there? You mean, like, Brazil?” (3-5). The speaker concludes upon reading about the two characters’ recent marriage that Elton Wayne has “finally arrived, in Brazil, and the Kansas / that surrounds [him] is an endless sea of possibility, genius, love” (31-32). Marriage to Melinda equates to arriving in the mythical Brazil, once again posing the female body as a destination and space for male inhabitation. Further, the poem “Kansas” from The Art of the Lathe, constructing a comparison of a wife’s pregnancy-worn body, explicitly exhibits an instance of masculine inscription upon the female body. The speaker describes a sexual encounter between himself and his wife “after changing the oil” in his car (pg 55, line 1). The penultimate stanza hearkens to an image of Kansas “blazing with new snow, / a future of flat land, white skies, and sunlight” (14-15). An image of the speaker’s wife’s body follows this description in the final stanza, in which she touches “her belly, / the scar of [their] last child, and the black prints / of [his] hand along her hips and thighs” (18-20). This example clearly defines that which previous excerpts only imply. The images of a “reborn” Kansas couple with the wife’s body marked by childbirth and now made palimpsest by her husband’s work-oiled handprints. This masculine figure has taken the actual medium of his work, oil, and smeared it across his wife’s body, which before served as a tribute to her femininity, her body as a space for beauty which in this model of Kansas may only exist as feminine. The same way the speaker will eventually travel into a Kansas “blazing with new snow” and rework and replicate to create a masculine dominance in this beauty-shaped space, he travels into the space of his wife’s body and subsumes the symbol of feminine power—childbirth—and the perceived vulnerability of a feminized beauty.

Despite Burke’s and Kant’s assertions on the inherently feminine sphere of beauty and the masculine ruling of the sublime, Fairchild’s
poems challenge this separation. Though the previous examples suggest an adherence to these gendered aesthetic structures, other moments in the texts demonstrate how these structures may fail or come to be reversed. Returning to a previous example of masculine power will allow us to see how these structures might actually undermine male dominance. For instance, at first glance, the sexual encounter in “Beauty” demonstrates how the masculine aesthetic controls and influences the actions of the feminine sphere in the way the wife refrains from using the word “beautiful” in order to spare her husband shame. In this same passage, however, these actions stand as a testament to how the taboo of feminized beauty actually grants non-masculine figures a sort of power. The wife holds the cards, here—if she speaks the word beautiful in reference to her husband’s body, she shames him, makes him submissive to the taboo his masculinity enforces upon him. In “Kansas,” though the male speaker leaves his handprints on his wife’s body, the more permanent markings are the scars of childbirth she bears which are not subject to erasure at the application of soap and a wet towel. These examples subvert the attempts of masculinity to assert dominance over feminine subjects. Furthermore, the marks of childbirth on the wife’s body directly refute a perceived lack of utility inherent in the Burke/Kant feminized beauty. I must turn to Fairchild’s “Madonna and Child, Perryton, Texas, 1967” in order to fully encapsulate this undermining of masculine power over a feminized beauty. In “Madonna and Child,” the speaker and his unnamed friends enter “Sancho’s Market” in a “grievous / late-night stupor and post-marijuana hunger” (9-10) to the sight of Sancho’s daughter, Rosa, attempting to quiet a squalling baby. The baby’s screams, which “rip through the store like a weed cutter / shredding the souls of the carnal, the appetitious, / indeed the truly depraved” (6-9) only dissipate when Rosa breastfeeds the baby. From the title alone, the reader can infer the power of the scene for the young speaker and his friends, but the description of the baby’s crying as “a kind / of rasping roar, the harangue of the gods, / sirens cleaving the air, gangs of crazed locusts / or gigantic wasps that whine and ding our ears / until the air begins to throb around us / and a six-pack of longnecks rattles like snakes / in my hand” (18-24) calls forth the sort of Biblical and godly imagery commonly associated with images of sublimity. Only when Rosa begins to breastfeed the child do its cries cease, demonstrating her feminine power over a creature of sublime force. The reactions of the boys watching emphasize the reversal of power, as well:
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[W]e all just stand there… / …holding / our sad little plastic baskets full of crap, / speechless and dying a little inside… / … / hear[ing] ourselves / breathing, the hush all around and that hammer / in our chests so that forty years later / this scene still hangs in my mind, a later work, / unfinished, from the workshop of Zurbaran. (36-45)

Rosa, a symbol of feminine power—and, therefore, beauty—wields the power over the sublime figure of the infant in this scene. The boys’ reactions are telling; they are unable to reassert a sense of masculine power, and, in fact, stand as disabled bystanders, completely in awe of the scene. The masculine domain of sublimity has been subverted by feminine power more overtly than in any of Fairchild’s other poems, further calling into question the masculine adherence to a Kant/Burke model of aesthetics.

These examples wherein femininity challenges the total masculine rejection of beauty are not the only critiques of the particularly Kant/Burke-imbued system of aesthetics defining Fairchild’s Kansas masculinity. Due to their rejection of beauty, Fairchild’s men experience a toxic and possibly fatal disconnect with their own bodies. The first indication of this disconnect in “Beauty” resides in the crucial event of the poem: the visitation of two male exhibitionists to the machine shop. According to the speaker, his father “hired them because [the shop is] backed up with work” (98), and the men in question “look like Mar- lon Brando and mention Hollywood / when Bobby asks where they’re from” (96-97). By invoking Hollywood and its connotations with the aforementioned California, the poem seeks to establish these men as “other,” as “foreign” to the masculine figures the reader has come to know so far. Naturally, these outsiders have an undeniable quality of beauty about them:

[A]nd in the shop’s center I see them standing in a square / of light, the two men from California, as the welders / lift their black masks, looking up, and I see their faces first, / the expressions of children at a zoo, perhaps, / or after a first snow, as the two men stand naked, / …as if they / are about to go swimming, and I recall how fragile / and pale their bodies seemed against the iron and steel / of the drill presses and milling machines and lathes. (116-124)
The beauty of these men “standing in a square of light” temporarily enrthalls the machine shop workers, but the perceived fragility of the bodies associated with this beauty threatens the workers’ masculine identity, so much so that Bobby Sudduth observes this tableau with “a kind / of terror on his face” (142-3). It is not just their nakedness that frightens and freezes these male figures, however; it is the refusal to recognize the male body as beautiful, on the same grounds that exclude beauty from the definition of masculinity. In section IV of the poem, the speaker constructs an image of these same workers “in the oven-warm winter / kitchens of Baptist households [seeing] after a bath the body / of the father and [feeling] diminished by it” (170-171). Where the wife from this same section “does not say [beautiful]” even as she thinks it gazing upon her naked husband, the son feels “diminished” by his father’s naked body. These men’s bodies are “identified primarily with physical sensation and divorced from higher cognition, the body [occupying] the position of Other” (Hatty 18). Unable to identify their father’s bodies as beautiful and by extension unable to identify their own as beautiful, these men, like Bobby Sudduth, experience an othering of their bodily selves. This disconnect from the body culminates in an image of violence which suggests the perhaps fatal nature of this separation of body and beauty. In the final section of “Beauty,” the speaker reveals that Bobby Sudduth has taken his own life, the poem describing the act in a startling image of “a single shot / from a twelve-gauge which he held against his chest” (197-198). This alone testifies to a destruction of self in order to bridge a gap of bodily dissonance to the beautiful; the next line cements it: “the death of the heart, I suppose, a kind of terrible beauty” (199). Unable to comprehend or integrate a feeling of beauty into a sense of self, Bobby commits what the speaker summarizes as a sort of ultimate act of beauty inscribed upon the body—suicide, the “death of the heart.” This distilled image distills Fairchild’s theories of beauty. Found in the titular poem central to the paper, the single line “the death of the heart…a kind of terrible beauty” condenses the text’s criticism of this masculine aestheticism. Highlighting Burke’s privileging of the sublime, which centers on the greater intensity of pain over pleasure, exposes the craft behind Fairchild’s phrasing. He states that “what generally makes pain itself…more painful, is, that it is considered as an emissary of [death, the] king of terrors” (“Of the Sublime”). In essence, when pain and the threat of death become too apparent, they are a source of displeasure. However, the remembrance of pain and terror associated with the sublime “at certain distances, and with certain modification…may be, and … are, delightful”
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(“Of the Sublime”). All this more clearly defines Fairchild’s uncommon pairing of the words “terrible” and “beauty” here, the action of which alone seems paradoxical to Kant/Burke assertions that these two items are separated by an theoretical gap which cannot be traversed. Here, “terrible” stands for the sublime, and its pairing with “beauty” directly challenges the Kant/Burke model of aesthetics to which this Kansas masculinity adheres. Furthermore, the context speaks to the possibility of deep psychological and physical damage in a continued reinforcement of this model of masculinity. The suicide of Bobby Sudduth is “a kind of terrible beauty,” “the death of the heart,” and hearkens to the introduction to the poem, in which “roughnecks / and scrabble farmers drunk and romantic…. / …weep more or less silently at the darkened end / of the bar out of, what else, loneliness, meaning / the ache of thwarted desire, of, in a word, beauty, / or rather its absence” (“Beauty” 5-10). This absence of beauty, this rejection of femininity and vulnerability, ironically inspires in the “muted passions” of these roughnecks and farmers the action of weeping, and even drives some to suicide, with Bobby Sudduth as the example. Only in death and the oft-reused bridge of violence can these men cross the widening gap between their sense of masculine (“terrible”) and perceived feminine (“beauty”). When they cross the chasm, some experience such despair that they feel a “death of the heart,” suggestive of the importance of the unification of beauty with all genders, no matter the hardline perpetuation of opposing ideas throughout Kansas masculine society.

The result of this repression of aesthetic pleasure, however, is not always death and destruction of the self. Fairchild’s men seek to fulfill Elaine Scarry’s prophecies of “replication” through “inscribing” the land. The first poem in the collection *Usher* offers a striking example of shaping the land as an outlet for these misplaced energies. “The Gray Man” details a former convict’s work in the fields of Kansas. These fields are described in the final stanza of the poem in strikingly beautiful image: “The plains’ wind / leaned against the uncut weeds. High wires hummed / with human voices in their travail. And the highway / I had worked but never traveled lay across the fields / and vanished in that distant gray where day meets night” (36-40). However, the “gray man” in question functions as another example of Fairchild’s masculinity at work in the rejection of beauty. The speaker watches “the way he spits into the swollen pile of bluestem” (24), “the iron heel of an August Kansas sun pushing down / on the scythes we…swing down / in an almost homicidal rage” (4-6). The gray man’s homicidal rage speaks to the type of destruction which
occurs in the aforementioned destruction of the self. He “hacks at” a lizard that “wanders into sunlight,” “chopping clods / until dust clouds rise like mist around him” (27-29). He says the words “[love thine enemy]” in line 31. In this character, the text takes the masculine rejection of beauty to the extreme. The gray man ventures into the beautiful landscapes of Kansas and dubs it his “enemy,” establishing a total opposition between beauty and masculine replications as yet incomplete in the other poems. Returning to the men in “Beauty,” “each autumn” they “[follow] / their fathers into the pheasant-rich fields of Kansas and as boys had climbed down from the Allis-Chalmers / after plowing their first straight furrow, licking the dirt / from their lips” (164-68). These two poems, published eleven years apart and differing greatly in tone and circumstance, connect clearly in the actions of these men replicating the beauty of the land. They do not need to acknowledge the autumn fields as “lovely” in order to fulfill Elaine Scarry’s theories of replication. Instead, the way they replicate is to travel into these undeniably beautiful landscapes and help to shape them.

As a substitute for replicating through shaping the land and their own bodies, Fairchild’s masculine figures seek to exert their energies on the bodies of their peers. Sometimes this occurs through violent means, and sometimes this occurs in more acceptable arenas, such as the venue of sport. In his studies of male friendship, Perry Garfinkel theorizes that “men enter into friendships with other men well-trained in the disciplines of masculinity” (129). In Fairchild’s Kansas, one of the important disciplines of masculinity is the rejection of beauty. Alongside replicating through shaping the land, these men seek to replicate beauty by marking each other. In “Beauty,” after feeling “diminished” by the sight of the body of the father, the imagined boy version of a machine shop worker “in the abandoned schoolyard felt the odd intimacy / of [his] fist against the larger boy’s cheekbone / but kept hitting, ferociously, and walked away / feeling for the first time the strength, the abundance, / of their own bodies” (172-76). Here, this violent inscription possesses the double function of allowing the boy a connection to the beauty of his own body in a masculine way and also allows him to replicate that beauty by placing his mark upon another subject. Further, the allusions to football in “Beauty” as “suicidally beautiful,” the boys “gallop[ing] terribly against each other’s bodies,” construct sport as a method of inscribing upon other male figures and replicating beauty in this violent, masculine-accepted, -approved, and -encouraged manner. This is not the only allusion to sport as a forum for male beauty, either. His poem “Body and Soul,” also from
“The Death of the Heart”

*The Art of the Lathe*, details a fateful game of baseball for a group of aging men. Though these men do not impress upon each other violently in the same way the footballers or the schoolyard brawlers from “Beauty” do, they do connect and identify through the competition and bonding of sport. The title itself, “Body and Soul,” is suggestive of the peer-related beauty of the sport. Scarry posits that “[replication] reminds us that the generative object continues, in some sense, to be present in the newly begotten object” (9). In these many strange ways, these men are “not alone in their pain—a pain born of isolation, insulation, and alienation” and particularly an isolation from beauty (Garfinkel 135). By sharing their particularly violent experiences, these men forge a link with their peers that a disconnect from beauty and a masculine disconnect from emotionality might otherwise inhibit. These poems suggest that masculinity’s rejection of beauty inhibits male bonding, closes men off from emotionality out of fear of vulnerability or feminization. Robert Penn Warren and Paul Weiss discussing beauty and watching television are the polarizing example of this tendency, the image that shows how bonding might occur through integrating an acknowledging of aesthetic pleasure. Additionally, sport exists as a forum for the display of male bodily beauty that may not otherwise occur under the restrictions of the taboo. When the young man sees his father after a bath and feels “diminished,” he experiences these emotions outside of a masculine-acceptable arena for a display of the body as beautiful. In direct competition with other men, however, the sons growing “suicidally beautiful” (Wright “Autumn Begins”) occurs within a space approved due to its foundation of existing for the purposes of sometimes violent competition.

The beauty Fairchild’s poems invoke often derives from a sense of loneliness and disparate imagery. The expansive fields of Kansas sprawl before characters and readers with a sense of promise frequently at odds with the devastation of the dusty lands scoured by wind. And yet our continued return to the sun-drenched plains of Fairchild’s youth testify to the beauty of incongruity, the magnetism of characters like Elton Wayne “betting a week’s wages / on the trifecta at Raton, then in ecstasy tossing the winning ticket / into the air and watching it float on an ascending breeze / with the lightness and supple dip and rise of a Bach passacaglia” (“Brazil” 17-20). Where man ends and Kansas begins often blurs, each shaping the other until questions of where beauty is born—with Rosa, Bobby Sudduth, Melinda Bozell, or on “Market street [in] an illuminated runway of joy”—become unanswerable. Even though Fairchild’s poems paint a portrait of self-inflicted masculine pain, this
pain, this “ache of thwarted desire” born of the Midwest, is what affords the audience such pleasure and leaves us with a sense of how beauty survives even as the men of Kansas labor to oppress it.

**Works Cited**


In 1847, the Victorian painter Joseph Noel Paton composed *The Reconciliation of Oberon and Titania*, in which he portrays a scene from William Shakespeare’s comedy, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Paton’s work displays his vision of the fairy monarchs’ reunion following a night of altered perceptions in the Athenian woods where Oberon, the fairy king, used an enchantment to cause his wife to fall in love with Bottom, a peasant transformed with an ass head, in order to manipulate
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her. Upon her disillusionment, Titania demands an explanation for her odd behavior from her errant husband, stating, “Come, my lord, and in our flight, / Tell me how it came this night / That I sleeping here was found / With these mortals on the ground” (Shakespeare 177). Similar to Titania’s explanation of the scene, Paton’s depiction separates the fairies from the mortals by making them brighter and more aesthetically pleasing than their human counterparts who are slumbering on the ground beneath them. In her article describing the trend of fey depiction in art during Paton’s era, Clare Johnston remarks that “The fairy kingdom exerted a magical power over the Victorians. Its romance and enchantment lured them away from the daily grind of industrialized society—like Keats in Ode to a Nightingale, who flies away ‘on the wings of poesy’ into a world of beauty and immortality.” Consequently, Paton creates his painted depiction of Midsummer based on his perception of the scene as a moment of sheer beauty and otherworldliness. In her book, On Beauty, Elaine Scarry remarks on the nature of beauty, stating that “at the moment one comes into the presence of something beautiful, it greets you. It lifts you away from the neutral background as though coming forward to welcome you” (25). The chiaroscuro which Paton uses in the rendition allows the pale, fey figures to rise from the darkened wood, glorifying the fairies with particular emphasis on the monarchs. Paton emphasizes his perception of their ethereal beauty by depicting Titania, Oberon, and their court in a way that makes them “greet” the viewer (Scarry 25).

Notably, the sleeping humans lack the lightness of their fairy neighbors. The human lovers seem to have become a part of the landscape upon which Paton’s fairy court dances. In the painting, he illuminates the differences between mortal and immortal from the play, exposing a major thematic from Shakespeare’s Midsummer—the ability for the perception of love and beauty to transcend and even unite worlds. For Paton, the loving couple, the divine fairy monarchs featured in the middle are the most beautiful. His depiction of Titania and Oberon’s reconciliation features his interpretation of the play with beauty and love as the center of Shakespeare’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream. However, the beauty and love which Paton depicts as the most significant and aesthetically pleasing occurs between characters of the same status—fairies with fairies and mortals with mortals.

Paton’s painted replication of Shakespeare’s comedy stages the characters to represent a social hierarchy of divine monarchy, divine world, humanity, and then nature by presenting these characters in varying
degrees of brightness. He draws his viewers’ attention to the beautiful, fairy couple central to the piece by lightening them. This parallels Shakespeare’s differentiation between fairy and mortal worlds when he alternates between prose and poetry in play to separate the social castes by using prose to denote the presence of lower-class characters such as Bottom. While the fairies surround the sleeping human couple on the ground, viewers get the sense that although these worlds are intertwined, separation exists between the divine and human. When looking at the positioning of the fairy monarchs in the play, Hugh Grady asserts that “Oberon and Titania live in an enchanted, aestheticized world that occupies the same space as the one mere mortals inhabit but operates according to a different kind of reality” (284). In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Shakespeare explores the various implications of unifying characters from different worlds—divine, noble, and commoner—through the perceptions of love and beauty. A forerunner of Shakespeare’s, Plato, the Greek philosopher, argues that “through Love all the intercourse and converse of god with man, whether awake or asleep, is carried on. This wisdom which understands this is spiritual; all other wisdom, such as that of arts and handicrafts, is mean and vulgar” (Plato 69). For Plato, Love with a capital “L” acts as a transcendent unifier for all things mortal and divine; Plato’s assertion differs from Paton’s artful reproduction of *Midsummer* because while beautiful in its craftsmanship, the piece fails to fully capture the knowledge and the mode by which love, and the subsequent perception of beauty, operates as a perceptual unifier among classes and worlds present in the work. Instead, it represents the separation.

In Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, the worlds of the divine and the human have collided as a result of the perceptions of love and beauty displayed by characters. The chaos and ultimate resolution of tension in the play depends on the recognition of beauty and love which occurs across social barriers. It seems that for Shakespeare perception, or the way a particular character views the world as a result of culture and upbringing, acts as the key motivation in the acknowledgement of what is beautiful and what is loved. Falling in love or deeming someone to be beautiful might not be a result of spontaneous observation, but rather, a calculation based on previous experiences and learned-behavior on what is acceptable to term beautiful or deem worthy of love. Shakespeare’s comedy causes readers to question the motivation behind their reasoning for falling in love as opposed to falling prey to desire; the conclusion of the play seems to create an argument that while beauty acts as
a transcendent force among all social classes and worlds, unions based on love, which are often mistaken for the admiration of beauty, only achieve longevity in socially acceptable conditions. While Shakespeare illustrates the transcendent nature of love and beauty, *Midsummer* perpetuates notions of concrete social hierarchy when it comes to marriage and sexual relationships.

Primarily, Shakespeare’s *Midsummer* raises a question of perception; more specifically, it urges the readers to consider their unconscious perpetuation of ideologies manipulating their judgments determining their decision to call someone beautiful and worthy of love. As mentioned above, Johnston indicates that Paton’s reasoning behind fairy glorification in the painting occurred as a result of a Victorian mindset. Conversely, Edmund Burke asserts a hypothesis on the common association with beauty and love as a result of a physical response “as a beautiful object presented to the sense, by causing a relaxation of the body, produces the passion of love in the mind” (“The Physical Cause of Love” 120). Shakespeare’s play might prove the opposite of this theory as it is Titania’s enchanted love for Bottom which makes her look at him as beautiful rather than the recognition of his beauty inducing the feeling of love. Grady makes the assertion that aesthetics “have political effects and intentions” (276). In other words, people justify their nomination of beauty and love through a political sphere motivated by social hierarchy. People perceive something or someone to be aesthetically pleasing if they may benefit from doing so. Similarly, Shakespeare develops his characters espousing different notions of aesthetics which both perpetuate and challenge notions of definite social station.

In the play, social demarcations come from cues performed by the actors through dialogue; Shakespeare establishes the social hierarchy in which the voices of peasantry appear less beautiful and more uneducated than nobles and fairies. With this immediate distinction, he negatively manipulates his audience’s valuation of common characters by alternating dialogue styles with prose for lowly characters such as the players and poetry for noble lovers and fairies; his use of prose makes the readers see the characters that speak without rhyme and meter as simple and less beautiful. David Scott Kastan claims that “[l]ike many of his fellow dramatists, Shakespeare tended to use prose for comic scenes, the shift from verse serving, especially in his early plays, as a social marker. Upper-class characters speak in verse; lower-class speaks in prose” (35). For example, Shakespeare indicates a lack of sophistication in the common characters through Bottom’s description of his part
in the play, *Pyramus and Thisbe*. Bottom plays with simple meter under the false impression that it will make him sound lordlier, stating, “The raging rocks/ And shivering shocks/ Shall break the locks/ Of prison gates. / And Phibbus’ car/ Shall shine from far/ And make and mar/ The foolish Fates. This was lofty!—Now name the rest of the players” (67). While he thinks the rhyming makes him look smart, the choppy, staccato, and simplistic scheme that Shakespeare creates shows readers that Bottom is from a lower class aspiring to reach or, at least, accurately imitate nobility—a state which he finds more beautiful than his own. If Scarry is correct in her assumption that “beauty is sacred,” then Bottom’s inability to deploy noble speech debases him, separating him from the realm of divine beauty (23). Furthermore, Shakespeare uses the players’ inability to speak like the nobles and fairies as a source of comedy which further alienates them from the idealized nobility who use aesthetically pleasing language. The idea of these two levels in the Athenian social hierarchy is laughable, something worthy of ridicule. In the performance of *Pyramus and Thisbe*, Shakespeare betrays Bottom’s ineptitude when he laments the mistaken assumption that his love has been murdered by a lion, asserting, “Since lion hath deflowered my dear,/ Which is—no, no—which was the fairest dame/ That lived, that loved, that liked, that looked with cheer?” (219). Shakespeare wants his readers to recognize Bottom’s ignorance in two ways—his inability to understand the words he uses and his inability to even memorize euphonic, metered lines which the noble characters like Theseus use normally. This comedic display demonstrates how Shakespeare wants the lower-class to be viewed by his audience—inferior and comical.

In contrast, Shakespeare demarcates the top of the hierarchy by portraying these characters through dialogue written primarily in verse. In “The Fey Beauty of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*,” J.P. Conlan argues that “Shakespeare must have wanted his audience to identify with and respect the fairies” (134). One could argue that he augments the perception of these socially superior characters by surrounding them with the euphonic sound of poetry. George Santayana argues that “Beauty . . . is a value; it cannot be conceived as an independent existence which affects our senses and which we consequently perceive. It exists in perception, and cannot exist otherwise” (29). In *Midsummer*, Shakespeare manipulates the way readers judge each of the characters by what each character says and how they say it. Santayana argues that beauty is a perception of value; in this instance, the more beautifully constructed the speech, the higher the class is represented. For example, Titania, the fairy queen,
uses elevated speech in her confrontation with her husband, Oberon, over the boy she raises as her own against his wishes:

These are the forgeries of jealousy, / And never, since the middle summer's spring, / Met we on hill, in dale, forest, or mead / By paved fountain, or by rushy brook, / Or in the bleached margent of the sea, / To dance our ringlets to the whistling wind, / by with thy brawls thou hast disturbed thy sport....And this same progeny of evils comes / From our debate, from our dissension. / We are their parents and their original. (Shakespeare 82-83)

Titania speaks her grievances to her husband in blank verse. Shakespeare uses this medium to denote the chaos of nature caused by disunion of the fairy monarchs. In other words, their separation is unnatural and their verse retains that disjoined quality in the midst of their argument. Through her accusatory address to her husband, Shakespeare assigns the divine monarchs the place at the top of the hierarchy. As the “parents,” all things stem from them including the manipulation of the perceptions of love and beauty. As the standard, or exemplar couple, the words of Titania and Oberon contain the highest level of aesthetic beauty. Even as they argue, Shakespeare has them employing vivid imagery and historical allusion that date back to early Greek and Roman mythology, so that only an educated audience—an audience with a lofty social position—would be able to ascertain the full meaning of their words through knowledge of great literary works.

While the separation of classes in *Midsummer* through dialogue is more black and white, characters in the play seem to have a harder time differentiating between their perception of love and beauty. Often, the two get mistakenly intertwined. For example, Demetrius, the young nobleman, wished to marry Hermia at the beginning of the play because he mistakenly thought his admiration for her beauty was love. Edmund Burke would explain this unfortunate occurrence by stating that “the passion caused by beauty, which I call love, is different from desire, though desire may sometimes operate along with it” (91). Demetrius’s desire for Hermia’s beauty leads him to reject another noble woman, Helena, who loved him before he decided that Hermia was more aesthetically pleasing. In a conversation Helena, the noblewoman who loves Demetrius, defends her attitude toward her unwelcome suitor, exclaiming, “I give him curses, yet he gives me love. . . .His folly, Helena, is no fault of mine;” to this statement, Helena replies, “None but your beauty.
Would that fault were mine!” (59). This passage reveals Shakespeare’s opinion that confusing beauty for love is a horrible mistake with negative consequences. Demetrius’s mistaken perception on the nature of his regard for Hermia leads to Helena’s broken heart and Hermia’s illegal flight from the city with her true love, Lysander.

Additionally, Shakespeare also uses a similar theme in his sonnet 130, “My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun,” in which he critiques the literary-canonized Petrarch, the father of the sonnet, for overly glorifying the appearance of his muse. In sonnet 130, Shakespeare writes about the appearance of a woman that he loves: “My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground. / And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare / As any she belied with false compare” (Shakespeare 507, l.12-14). These concluding lines demonstrate that the writer loves his mistress for all the qualities which are not commonly associated with the cannon during the Elizabethan period. Here Shakespeare asserts a theory: While men and women often describe the person they love with hyperbolic aesthetic terms, which glorify their lover’s ability to meet what he or she deem to be an ideal beauty, the perceiver commits an injustice to the object of his or her affections by failing to recognize the true qualities which induced the feeling of love in the first place. Plato argues that this main error occurs with a “confusion of loved and the beloved, which made [you] think that love was beautiful. For the beloved is the truly beautiful, and delicate, and perfect, and blessed; but the principle of love is of another nature” (70). In other words, the perceiver confuses their love with their esteem for their beloved’s outward appearance as Demetrius confuses his admiration for Hermia’s beauty for love.

Moreover, Shakespeare uses Demetrius’s flawed ascertainment of Helena’s and Hermia’s beauty to assert his point that the classification of beauty is subject to the appropriate stations outlined by a particular society. In this case, Demetrius chooses to acknowledge Hermia’s beauty over Helena’s beauty because of his relationship with Egeus which would lend him greater wealth. When Lysander and Demetrius go to Theseus to argue their case, Lysander accuses Demetrius of not really wanting Hermia for herself. After making the case that he has an equal financial endowment as his competitor, Lysander exclaims, “I am beloved of beauteous Hermia. / Why should not I then prosecute my right? / Demetrius—I’ll avouch it to his head—/ Made love to Nedar’s Daughter, Helena, / And won her soul. And she, sweet lady, dotes, / Devoutly dotes, dotes in idolatry / Upon this spotted and inconstant man” (53). In this case, Lysander acknowledges his admiration of Her-
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Hermia's beauty but feels justified to pursue a marriage because he is from the same social class and has gained her love unlike Demetrius who appears to profess love from insincere intentions. Meanwhile, Helena seems perplexed and disappointed by Demetrius's sudden repudiation of her love. She does understand that Demetrius's perception of her has been demoted because of social convention rather than physical attribute when she laments as she follows him as he chases after Hermia and Lysander:

Through Athens I am thought as fair as she. / But what of that? Demetrius thinks not so; / He will not know what all but he do know. / And as he errs, doting on Hermia's eyes, / So I, admiring of his qualities. / Things base and vile, holding no quantity, / Love can transpose to form and dignity. / Love looks not with the eyes but with the mind. (Shakespeare 61-2)

She chastises her lover for his faulty perception of her. She argues that she possesses equal beauty and accuses him of choosing not to see it for inadequate reasons such as social convention. Helena's character, like Shakespeare, spells out the importance of love in the perception of beauty. She realizes that Demetrius must be in a more honorable mental state to appreciate her again as he did before becoming involved with Egeus and courting Hermia. In *On Beauty*, Scarry declares several errors in judgment when it comes to the perception of beauty which includes a lack of “generosity,” or deciding a person is ugly after one initially called him or her beautiful (14). Demetrius commits this error, but Helena commits an error as well in misjudging her own value based on the same social premises under which Demetrius operates. Given the cultural background associated with her, Alan Altimont discusses Helena's position as “Nedar’s daughter” in the text when he gives a brief linguistic description of for the “Judeo-Christian” origin of Helena's father's name, Nedar, and describes the implications of having a parent with a name meaning “absent” in Hebrew (276). He argues that Helena suffered from a lack of attention and parental affirmation, and as a result, has very low self-esteem which contributes to her negative perception of self. Because family structure contributes to social outlooks on the perception of beauty and love, Helena's absentee parent shapes her expectation of relationships—explaining her attraction to a man like Demetrius—and lack of perceived personal value if one agrees with Santayana's outlook on beauty. Both Helena and Demetrius suffer and
make mistakes in their beauty and love judgments based on different aspects of societal norms.

Furthermore, Shakespeare shows the ways in which rigid societal hierarchies play a role in how characters’ perceptions of beauty and love affect romantic relationships when Oberon enchants Titania, causing her to fall in love with Bottom, the weaver. Their relationship serves two purposes. Bottom’s and Titania’s love affair demonstrates the socially transcendent nature of love and beauty among all individuals. Unfortunately, the affair also acts as a fortifier for the social hierarchy put in place due to the fact that Titania returns to her husband, ashamed of her liaison with an individual she considers to be beneath her.

Shakespeare uses the illicit relationship between the fairy queen and an enchanted mortal to illustrate the possibility that love and the belief that someone of a lower stature possesses beautiful qualities does exist. Readers receive the general opinion of the common players through the voice of Robin Goodfellow who relates Bottom’s transformation to Titania’s husband, Oberon:

My mistress with a monster is in love. / Near her close and consecrated bower, / While she was in her dull and sleeping hour, / A crew of patches, rude mechanicals / That work for bread upon the Athenian stalls / [...]The shallowest thick-skin of that barren sort, / Who Pyramus presented in their sport / [...] An ass’s nole I fixed on his head. / [...] Titania waked and straightway loved an ass. (Shakespeare 129-131)

For Robin and Oberon, the players’ lowly occupation and station demoted their analysis of beauty. Robin observes first that these men are uneducated and poor. Then he proudly boasts to his vengeful master that he further manipulated the situation by giving Bottom an ass’s head, thereby matching the player’s personal appearance to Robin’s assumptions and judgments of him as an individual. For Robin, commoners are lowly and comical; his transformation of Bottom only exacerbates the lowly perception that the fairies have of classes they consider to be beneath them. Before the influence of the love-spell placed upon her by Oberon, Titania would have felt the same way. However, Shakespeare demonstrates that love’s influence may alter observations of beauty. When Titania first beholds the object of her enchanted love, she exclaims, “I pray thee, gentle mortal, sing again. / Mine ear is much enamored of thy note; / So is mine eye enthralled to thy shape” (121).
In this case, love acts as a catalyst which transforms aesthetic assumptions on even the highest rung of the social hierarchy. As a fairy, Titania should view the ass-headed Bottom as an object of contempt and mockery like her husband and minions. However, her love for Bottom alters her socially constructed perception of what is beautiful and what is not. This ideologically transcendent nature of love and the perception of beauty only go so far in Shakespeare’s social hierarchy.

Shakespeare’s couple, formed from the top and bottom of the social pyramid, fails with the reemergence of reality—such as the realization of social construction. When the enchantment ends, Titania does not retain her newly formed opinion that Bottom, an individual at the bottom of the social hierarchy, contains beauty. First, Shakespeare shows how a relationship between the highest and lowest classes of society will not occur naturally. Oberon enchants his wife with the juice of a flower enchanted by one of Cupid’s arrows, telling her to “wake when some vile thing is near” (99). Second, Titania’s love for Bottom causes her to feel shame; she is ashamed of what she considers of lowly admiration. Scarry explains this phenomenon, stating that “when the beautiful thing or person or thing ceases to appear beautiful, it often incited the perceiver to repudiate, scorn or even denounce the object as an invalid candidate of carrier of beauty” (49). When Titania is disillusioned, she exclaims, “Oh, how mine eyes do loathe his visage now!” (175). Titania clearly repudiates Bottom upon her release from enchantment, demonstrating Shakespeare’s assertion that love may cause an altered perception of beauty. Third, while all of the other liaisons in the play end with marriage, their relationship ends in a mockery. This is apparent when Oberon mocks his enchanted wife with Robin, his minion, when he quips, “See’st thou this sweet sight?” (173). He only agreed to undo the “hateful imperfection of her eyes” after he had gotten the boy he wanted from her and won the argument (173). Shakespeare shows the love the fairy queen feels for an ass-headed peasant as the ultimate debasement. Titania denounces her peasant bed-fellow to reunite with her husband, Oberon. Bottom receives artistic inspiration from the encounter, yet Titania loses the argument she had with Oberon which started the whole thing in the first place. The message—lower classes gain through relations with the upper class, but a relationship between the classes will cause disgrace to the upper-classes. That the conception of love and beauty exists among all classes, Shakespeare leaves no doubt. However, the failed relationship demonstrates that successful relationships operate in concordance with societal norms such as marriage only between members of the same social class.
By examining the tragedy of *Pyramus and Thisbe*, a production presented by the common players to celebrate the marriage of noble couples, which Shakespeare strategically embeds within the comedy of *Midsummer*, readers may observe the relationship between common and noble mortals which perpetuates the image of noble beauty. In the play, a tragic love story between two children of estranged noble families, a peasant named Quince attempts to recreate the speech used by nobility in his script. His replication of noble speech glorifies the nobility with an attempt at educated, flowery, and euphonic language. Quince’s play aligns with Scarry’s remarks about the “begetting” attribute of beauty: “The homely word ‘replication’ has been used here because it reminds us that the benign impulse toward creation not just in famous paintings but in everyday acts of staring” (9). The fact that the play is written in such a way as to resemble the speech patterns of the nobility demonstrates that commoners like Quince believe that the elevated speech of nobility is more beautiful and moving than their own. Burke remarks on the influence of words over the way in which we receive input, stating:

> [A]s words affect, not by original power, but by representation, it might be supposed, that their influence over the passions should be light; yet it is quite otherwise; for we find by experience, that eloquence and poetry are as capable, nay indeed much more capable, of making deep and lively impressions than any other art. (“How Words Influence the Passions” 137)

While examining Quince’s interpretation and mimicry of nobility, Burke’s assertion points out that his replication intends to give his audience the “impression” that the peasant players are indeed the noble characters they represent. For example, readers can see how quince struggles to get his uneducated actors to properly enact their roles in an argument with Bottom, who wants to play all of the roles in the tragedy. Quince explains, “You can play no part but Pyramus, for Pyramus is a sweet-faced man, a proper gentleman as one shall see in a summer’s day, a most lovely, gentlemanlike man” (Shakespeare 71). His intention is evident; he wants Bottom to be a gentleman, a thing of beauty, a representation of the glorified nobility. However, the players’ peasant status inhibits their ability to accurately replicate the noble language and demeanor. In their line memorization, the actors repeatedly mix words up that an educated individual would have understood. For example, in Flute’s speech detailing the glories of Pyramus, he mispronounces the name of
the place where the lovers must go to rendezvous, asserting “I’ll meet thee, Pyramus, at Ninny’s tomb” (117). Not only does Flute fail to accurately articulate “Ninus’ tomb,” he also misses the literary allusion to the story from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (Shakespeare 118-119). Notably, these botched representations all occur before the performance on Theseus’—and the rest of the other couples’—wedding day.

In the midst of the actual performance, Shakespeare provides readers with the nobles’ commentary and assessment of the play and the actors to allow the audience to view their depreciating view of the common people as lesser individuals. The nobles begin the play by mocking Quince’s prologue; Lysander generously observes that “He hath rid his prologue like a rough colt. He knows not the stop. A good moral, my lord: it is not enough to speak, but to speak true” (203). This comment illuminates Quince’s mechanical articulation of his lines. In other words, Lysander points out that the players cannot recreate noble speech in a naturally sounding manner. However, he benevolently chooses to focus on the morals they are trying to portray rather than the failed meter. Less benevolent in her judgments, Theseus’ wife, Hippolyta, complains, “This the silliest stuff that ever I heard” (211). Theseus chides her for her impatience, stating, “But yet, in courtesy, in all reason, we must stay the time” (215). Their commentary upon witnessing the failed replication of their superior social stature indicates several different attitudes toward the common players. Noble characters, such as Theseus and Lysander, tend to be more benevolent in their assessment of the production, looking at the players as lowly individuals with good intentions. Conversely, Hippolyta looks at the players with contempt. She sees a failed reproduction of her status in the simplistic dialogue of the characters and labels the performance a waste of her time on her wedding night. Scarry would say that she makes the error of “failed generosity” in her judgment of their artful representation (14). While the nobles represent a mixture of condescending benevolence and willful forbearance in the face of the lyrically challenged dialogue, all of them find humor in what was supposed to be a tragic love story from their social class. Shakespeare creates a social dynamic where the nobles see the commoners as below contempt; rather, they are objects of amusement. While Theseus commends them on their endeavor, his recommendation is based on a grading scale which places common works as effort-based rather than merit based skill. He praises them for their play like a parent telling a child that the crayon drawing that the child worked on all afternoon is a masterpiece.
On his wedding day, Theseus asserts “The lover, all as frantic, / Sees Helen’s beauty in a brow of Egypt” (193). In other words, love has the power to make all things beautiful. However, recognizing beauty and sustaining a lasting and loving relationship have been separated in the play. Only couples with the same status end up married at the conclusion of the comedy. When Theseus and Hippolyta get married, Oberon blesses their marriage bed:

To the best bride bed will we, / Which by us shall blessed be, / And the issue there create / Ever shall be fortunate. / So shall the couples three / Ever true and loving be, / And the blots of nature’s hand / Shall not their issue stand. / Never mole, hare-lip, nor scar, / Nor mark prodigious, such as are / Despised in nativity, / Shall upon their children be. (227).

The fairy monarchs, the gods of the Athenian community, assert that couples marrying under socially acceptable conditions—like someone of the same social status—will be ultimately successful. Shakespeare reinforces the social hierarchy by showing characters of powerful rank achieving a happy ending through marriage. Furthermore, he maintains that divinity will ensure a successful replication of their physical beauty through their noble children unlike the unsuccessful replication of their speech and demeanor by the common players.

In *Midsummer*, Shakespeare explores the role of social structure in judgments of beauty and love. The dichotomy he creates in *Midsummer* points out that individuals at all positions of the social hierarchy may perceive beauty and experience love which transcends bounds of social propriety. For instance, Oberon observes his wife’s treatment of her mortal lover, stating, “For she his hairy temples had rounded / With coronet of fresh and fragrant flowers” (173). Oberon clearly sees Titania’s favor in Bottom as laughable. However, the fairy queen, a member of the divine realm in the play, briefly looks on a commoner with favor. While Titania feels ashamed of her love for a commoner, Bottom gains divine inspiration. Upon waking after his transformation, Bottom expounds, “The eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen, man’s hand is not able to taste, his tongue to conceive, nor his heart to report what my dream was” (Shakespeare 187). Scarry would explain his confusion after having gone through this experience of divine love, stating “The beautiful thing seems—is—incomparable, unprecedented; and that sense of being without precedent conveys a sense of the “new-
ness” or “newbornness” of the entire world” (22). The affair between a common mortal and a fairy monarch was beautiful to Bottom. Having never experienced anything of that caliber in his life, Bottom lacks the ability to articulate an experience which defies the social hierarchy in which he lives because the situation is, as Scarry says, “unprecedented.” Through Bottom’s and Titania’s interaction, Shakespeare illustrates that extenuating circumstances can lead to observations of beauty and feeling of love between levels of a rigid social hierarchy.

And, it is this uncommon transcendence of boundary and reunion of social hierarchy that draws artists such as Paton to repeatedly reproduce the play, to manifest their representations of the power that love and beauty have to unite all types of people. Paton’s depiction of Midsummer in The Reconciliation of Oberon and Titania continues to privilege the rigid social structure espoused by Shakespeare by glorifying the fairy monarchs, making them brighter and more vibrant than the dormant mortals lying prone at their feet. More recent depictions of Shakespeare’s comedy, such as the film adaptation of Midsummer by Michael Hoffman in 1999, choose to highlight Bottom’s relationship with Titania. Hoffman’s visual adaptation of the scene, romanticizes the love shared between fairy and mortal. Unlike Paton’s Victorian representation, the ultimate reconciliation in the Hoffman’s modern film occurs between Titania and Bottom after he has finished his role as Pyramus. Hoffman’s visual interpretation has Titania return to her mortal lover as a light in the sky, replenishing his faith in the love that they had shared and his sense of personal worth. This recent interpretation of Shakespeare’s work does acknowledge that their relationship could not last; however, Hoffman wishes to convey that having a beautifully loving relationship is a thing of great worth and should be respected. He downplays the shame Titania feels upon awakening next to man with the face of an ass and creates a new dichotomy where perceptions of beauty and consequent love between classes are delightful anomalies which, while fleeting, serve as a source of great artistic inspiration.

**Works Cited**


“Do I Speak You Fair?”


In his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, Edmund Burke defines the quality of the sublime as experience that “excites the ideas of pain and danger” which produces “the strongest emotion that the mind is capable of feeling” (302), and causes “astonishment...horror, terror;...the inferior effects are admiration, reverence, and respect” (306). He also asserts the that sublime is associated with “difficulty“ (306); Burke states that beauty is characterized by regularity and control. Focusing more specifically on the fundamentals of Burke’s sublime:

> Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling. (Burke, “Of the Sublime”)

James Baldwin’s writing portrays a complex relationship with Burke’s philosophy on the separation of the beautiful and the sublime; Baldwin adopts some of Burke’s elements, but revises others. Through his writing, Baldwin suggests that the separation of beautiful and sublime may be problematic, but that at other times, the separation and distinction is necessary. In his “Burke’s Higher Romanticism: Politics and the Sublime,” William Byrne states “Burke shows great concern for the
affective dimension of the beautiful and the sublime. He sets up...a contrast between and experience of the beautiful and an experience of the sublime, relating those experiences to human passion” (Byrne 18). In Baldwin’s writing there are characters that easily correlate with either the beautiful or the sublime, and others that resist such simple categorization, but are presented as equal, understanding and appreciating the differences. Baldwin’s stories assert that the divide in classes of African Americans are equal and should be perceived equal just like the sublime and the beautiful, further stating that one group is not better than the other, and whites are not better than African Americans. More specifically, in Baldwin’s short story “Sonny’s Blues,” the division is among the African Americans in Harlem: those who aspire to achieve a sense of “whiteness” and those who reject that. Characters from Baldwin’s stories—more specifically, Sonny, from “Sonny’s Blues—assist in backing Burke’s claim that:

A man who works beyond the surface of things, though he may be wrong himself, yet he clears the way for others, and may chance to make even his errors subservient to the cause of truth. In the following parts I shall inquire what things they are that cause in us the affections of the sublime and beautiful (Burke “Conclusion Pt. 1”)

This passage from Burke is also applicable to James Baldwin. Baldwin was a black man born in white America in Harlem, New York in 1924. Baldwin traveled the world writing; his time outside of the United States gave him an outsider’s perspective on his own experience dealing with his background and race. Baldwin developed an understanding of why he felt a particular way in regard to the social and political ills in Harlem, only after he removed himself from the setting. He came back to United States in the 1960’s, during the peak of the Civil Rights Movement. He came back to his place of birth only to discover that everything was just as he left it—just like his character Sonny—and decided he wanted to embrace his culture and fight for his individual beliefs. As Sonny himself began to understand the class division in Harlem, he decided he must take a stand in the social and political follies of his home town, rejecting what the other Harlem class his brother was associated with.

Like Baldwin, many of his main characters were faced with the inevitable hardships of growing up as a black, male in a dream-doomed Harlem, and their lives pre-determined by socially-constructed stereo-
types in regard to skin color and sublime setting. This sublime setting is littered with crime, drug addiction, and poverty. In “Sonny’s Blues,” Baldwin suggests that the sublime and beautiful are undeniably different in experience and understanding. He further advocates that developing an appreciation for these differences in understanding and experience enable the viewer to perceive each category as beautifully different:

If black and white blend, soften, and unite a thousand ways, are there no black and white? If the qualities of the sublime and beautiful are sometimes found united, does this prove that they are the same; does it prove that they are any way allied; does it prove even that they are not opposite and contradictory? Black and white may soften, may blend; but they are not therefore the same. Nor, when they are so softened and blended with each other, or with different colours, is the power of black as black, or of white as white, so strong as when each stands uniform and distinguished. (Burke, “Sublime and Beautiful Compared”)

Burke, like Baldwin in “Sonny’s Blues,” asserts that the sublime, beautiful, and Harlem’s class divisions should be recognized for their differences, enabling each separate to be respected as a part of a whole society; everyone has struggles in their life. Burke also implies that things that are capable of producing the sublime can also produce delight. Baldwin’s character, Sonny, exemplifies this through his sublime experiences he undergoes on his chosen path.
...I saw the girl put a Scotch and milk and put it on top of the piano for Sonny. He didn’t seem to notice it, but just before they started playing again, he sipped from it and looked toward me, and nodded. . . . For me, then, as they began to play again, it glowed and shook above my brother’s head like the very cup of trembling. (Baldwin 140-141)

This passage is from the very end of Baldwin’s short story “Sonny’s Blues,” post–World War II New York, in the hub of a significant cultural and political revolution that forever changes America. Many artists from all over the world have made New York a new cultural headquarters, deeming Greenwich Village—where Sonny periodically lives—as the bohemian-hipster capital of New York. Of these various artists—in particular—was Jazz musician Charlie Parker, who came to New York during this time. Through the eyes of the narrator, Sonny’s brother, it is evident that he is somewhere listening to music; more specifically, the narrator is at a club listening to his younger brother, Sonny play. The “Scotch and milk” mentioned was a common cocktail in the world of Jazz during the 1950s and the significance of this beverage is of greater value than merely contributing to one’s inebriation; “Scotch and milk” represent different things, just like Jazz music represents different things to the brothers in “Sonny’s Blues.” Sonny and his brother both serve in the war, and each returns to find a radically different life in America, which is the same experience that thousands of other African Americans faced following the war’s ending. In Keith Byerman’s article *Words and Music: Narrative Ambiguity in ‘Sonny’s Blues,’* Byerman asserts the image of the combination of hard liquor and wholesome milk is “an emblem of simultaneous destruction and nurture to the system; it cannot be reduced to one or the other. Sonny’s acceptance of it indicates that he will continue on the edge between the poison of his addiction and the nourishment of his music” (371). As Sonny is an ex-heroin addict, he will struggle with this experience for the rest of his life, but it is also from this addiction that he has discovered his calling in life, in addition to altering his perception of Harlem. Heroin, in addition to “Scotch and milk” was a huge part of the Jazz scene in the 1950s. Baldwin’s character, Sonny, claims that many musicians felt the need to use in order to truly feel their music; their individual understanding of the pain and suffering they have experienced personally is where Jazz emerges. This understanding of where the musician’s music comes from is similar to Sonny’s experiences that influence his chosen path in life.
In Baldwin's short story, Sonny's older brother must learn this concept in order to understand and appreciate his brother's life choices that are different than his own.

In Baldwin’s “Sonny’s Blues,” the debate over the 1950s jazz music scene demonstrates a division in the black community, represented by the brothers themselves. Not only is there a division between African American and white, but two class distinctions in Harlem. The division of the Harlem middle class parallels with Sonny’s older brother, who believe in the American Dream and that overcoming certain obstacles and better themselves by disassociating from their Harlem background and societal opinion. Sonny’s brother gets and education, starts a family, and is a teacher. In contrast to Sonny’s brother, Sonny rejects the American Dream and his brother’s idea of a beautiful and fulfilling life. Sonny embraces his background because it is through this darkness—so deemed by society—that he has discovered his own light. Jazz music is to Sonny as the American Dream is to his brother. Essentially, what society has deemed as good and beautiful—the American Dream—a “white way of living,” Sonny rejects; he finds what society—and theorists today—deem sublime as a thing of beauty from his understanding of the developed set of valued emotions and experiences from his chosen path, identified through self-discovery.

The narrator of “Sonny’s Blues,” who is also Sonny’s brother, offers intuition of Sonny and the life they’ve lived together—different, but also similar—and their environment: Harlem, New York. It is through the eyes of the narrator that Sonny and Harlem are revealed, including the divide in paths between the brothers. The narrator is portrayed as viewing himself as successful in comparison with most of the men who have grown up in the Harlem community; he has a wife, children and a good job as a teacher. Although he chooses a different path than his brother Sonny, he is continuously aware of Harlem’s darker, more dangerous side. The narrator points out the drug dealing that goes on in the play grounds near their housing projects in which they live, the destruction of older, torn-down homes, various crimes, and, most importantly, his brother Sonny’s constant struggle with finding his place in the world. He situates Sonny’s struggles within a larger framework by placing him in the same categories of drug-abuse, poverty, and delinquency that he sees throughout the entire Harlem community. Even though the narrator is fully aware of Harlem’s darker side, he simultaneously attempts to blind himself to these problems, while refusing to let the Harlem tragedies affect him emotionally and mentally. It is
evident that the narrator has a harder time expressing his emotions and ideals in comparison with his brother Sonny, who is an artist. It is not until the narrator’s youngest daughter, Grace dies that he is able to begin to communicate with Sonny, and begins to open up to him; he is determined to live out his mother’s wishes of watching over Sonny, but seems to experience feeling of the “white man’s burden” in doing so; this also shows how he aligns himself with whiteness, separating himself from the typical African Americans of Harlem. In his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Burke sums up the idea of the “white man’s burden” by saying that the individuals who “…when they are not on their guard, treat the humbler part of the community with the greatest contempt, whilst, at the same time they …make them the depositories of all power” (61). His variety of emotions confuse him, and as much as it is obvious he loves his brother, he cannot accept or understand that his brother is able to “make it” by choosing his own path. Sonny’s path entails embracing the sublime, while the narrator spends his life afraid of it, rejecting it.

As Baldwin’s short story begins with the narrator reading about Sonny’s arrest in the newspaper, he is reluctant to accept the idea that first, Sonny did not choose to take the same path in life as he did and second, that according to the newspaper, he now falls into the category of Harlem’s darker side, which he cannot fathom and is astonished by. In Edmond Burke’s *On the Sublime and Beautiful*, he asserts that “…astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror” (Burke, “Conclusion Pt. 1”) The narrator’s astonishment is evident:

I read about it in the paper, in the subway, on my way to work. I read it, and I couldn’t believe it, and I read it again. Then perhaps I just stared at it, at the newsprint spelling out his name, spelling out the story. I stared at it in the swinging lights of the subway car, and in the faces and bodies of the people, and in my own face, trapped in the darkness which roared outside. (Baldwin 103)

This passage not only conveys the narrator’s rejection of Sonny’s life choices, but his utter astonishment that Sonny chooses a different path in life than he, a path that the narrator rejects and fears. The narrator “couldn’t believe it” (Baldwin 103), and he “couldn’t find any room for it inside of [him]” (103). The narrator is in utter shock because Sonny
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has gone down a path that the narrator regards as sublime, but Sonny sees it differently. Burke states:

“…the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it. Hence arises the great power of the sublime, that, far from being produced by them, it anticipates our reasonings, and hurries us on by an irresistible force” (Burke, “Of the Passion”)

The despair and woes of Harlem fill the narrator with such astonishment, that as much as he attempts to turn a blind eye to these woes, he simply cannot. The narrator’s knowledge of Harlem’s troubles is the “irresistible force” that astonishes him, consumes him, and makes him afraid. We see this force working when Sonny’s brother mentions “faces and bodies of the people” as he is referencing the people of Harlem, from whom he alienates himself; he has chosen the “white” path in life and strives to live by guidelines of the American Dream, but he is also identifying himself with the same people and lifestyle he has disassociated from: “…in my own face, trapped in the darkness which roared outside” (103). Since the narrator describes the people on the subway as mere “faces” and “bodies” we see although he strives to separate himself from the woes and stereotypes of Harlem, he cannot fully disassociate himself from them as he mentions his “own face,” and is subconsciously aligning himself with the same people he separates himself from. When the narrator asserts that he and the other nameless, race-less, faces and bodies are parallel to him, equal to him in that they are all trapped by the inevitable hardships they face within the Harlem community.

Despite the fact that the narrator tries to disassociate himself from Harlem and its societal assumptions and lifestyle by chasing a sense of “whiteness” through the American Dream, he realizes he cannot fully separate himself. He mentions the boys living in Harlem now “were living as we’d been living then” (104), and although he is conscious to this, he still wants the same path of ‘whiteness’ through the American Dream—that he has chosen for himself—for Sonny. The narrator asserts that the young boys of Harlem only know “…two darknesses, the darkness of their lives, which was now closing in on them, and the darkness of the movies, which had blinded them to that other darkness…” (104), “this menace was their reality” (107), and “some escaped the trap, most didn’t” (112). This darkness and trap is all encompassing for poverty,
drug abuse, crime, lack of education; this is the darkness the narrator has been working his whole life to separate himself from, thinking that he can escape it; to the narrator, Sonny is not choosing to rise above this “stink” that lingers among everyone in Harlem. He loves Sonny, but he looks down on him for choosing this different path in life, although he is no different than Sonny in the fact that he still lives in Harlem. After Sonny has served his sentence, the narrator picks Sonny up after he is released from jail; the narrator brings his brother to stay at his home, which is ironically a “housing project” (112), and states that his home is “really just like the houses Sonny and I grew up” (113), implying that he has not really removed himself from the Harlem setting. Although the narrator has chosen the “white path,” his financial situation does not allow him to live in a better environment; he still lives in a housing project and is still among the Harlem crime and poverty. Baldwin portrays these brothers with conflicting ideas of the sublime and beautiful, to demonstrate the segregation among African Americans and whites, but more specifically the division between African-Americans themselves, specifically the black community located in Harlem. By portraying the distinction as he does, he is able to present the two brothers as different, but both making it; although the two choose different paths, the narrator is not necessarily better off than Sonny because he still lives in housing projects, like when they were younger. This presentation of the narrator places him at a more susceptible level for Sonny.

Although the narrator sees his chosen path as the better, more beautiful option than Sonny’s, Sonny’s life is his own. The narrator’s path has been smoother than Sonny’s and with fewer setbacks, but it is Sonny’s experiences and trials he has overcome which give him appreciation for the beauty in his life. In Burke’s terms, experiences of beauty are smooth, while experiences of the sublime are difficult: obviously one would align the narrator’s life of beauty and Sonny’s sublime; however, it is Sonny’s sublime experience that he has found beauty in his own sublime for “infinity” (Burke, “Enquiry”).

As the narrator claims that he is beginning to open up emotionally, he mentions: “I had finally begun, finally, to wonder about Sonny, about the life that Sonny lived inside” (110). As he reflects upon past memories prior to Sonny’s arrest, he continues to struggle with Sonny’s choices. Just before the narrator leaves for the army, he remembers asking Sonny, “what do you want to do?” and Sonny tells him he’s “going to be a musician” (119), “play jazz” (120). The narrator becomes furious at this because he associates the Jazz scene with drugs and addiction, and people
that do not make a lot of money; the Jazz scene was also more prominent within the African American community and looked down upon by the American Dream-chasing society. In other words, it is not very “white” of Sonny to choose this profession. The narrator asks Sonny if it takes a lot of time to become successful, and Sonny replies: “Everything takes time…and-well, yes, sure, I can make a living at it. But what I don’t seem to be able to make you understand is that it’s the only thing I want to do” (121). Sonny is trying to emphasize that he does not care what society thinks of what he wants to do in terms of becoming a musician, but Jazz music is important to him. In Meg Armstrong’s *The Effect of Blackness*, she asserts “the discomfort instigated by the sublime…might be read as a tension between two somewhat conflicting and competing possibilities” (Armstrong 214). Armstrong’s quotation implies that Sonny’s unpopular life goal makes his brother uncomfortable, causing tension between the two; the narrator is not very knowledgeable about the Jazz scene other than what he knows about how society labels it. Seeing how Sonny wants to become a part of the Jazz scene, rejecting the narrator’s aspirations for the white-middle class way of life, we see how Baldwin portrays the divide among the African Americans in Harlem. Of these classes, the narrator represents the African-Americans who want to identify with a beautiful, “white” path in life by pursuing the type of lifestyle that is portrayed through the white middle class; Sonny represents the Harlem class that rejects this path of “whiteness,” by choosing to embrace his sublime setting and situation.

To further compartmentalize these classes of the African Americans in Harlem during this time is to group them with the sublime or the beautiful. Burke implies that differences in taste should not be explained by stating that everybody has a different type or sort of taste, but difference in taste exists because of a difference in experience, natural sensibility, or attention. Sonny’s music is “life or death to him” (Baldwin 126) because his music is his way of surviving Harlem by way of his own chosen path, which is looked down upon by his brother and other African-Americans who identify with whiteness, whites themselves, and society. Sonny’s music is life or death to him in that it is like his heroin addiction: “it makes you feel sort of warm and cool at the same time. And distant. And-and sure….It makes you feel in control. Sometimes you’ve got to have that feeling” (131). Sonny also tells his brother that in order to be able “stand it” and “make it at all,”—in regard to surviving—that his music comes from his experiences and emotions. Sonny’s experiences and emotions are different in comparison to his brother’s
because at one point in Sonny’s life, he was not able to control what he was going through due to his heroin addiction; he lost control.

The experiences Sonny undergo prior to being arrested are what mold his taste and preference, which differs from his brother’s distinctively; Sonny has struggled with heroin and been arrested, and it is from these experiences that Sonny appreciates and embraces the sublime, Harlem, lifestyle because the experiences from his path have shaped him into who he is. Both brothers grew up in the same place, but because of their different desires and choices their different paths produce different stops and destinations. Baldwin enables his readers to understand how Jazz music is significant to Sonny when the narrator looks out on the streets and sees Sonny at revival, listening to the music play. He claims that there has been many a revival he has attended, but this revival is different, and he sees Sonny a little differently:

As the singing filled the air the watching, listening faces underwent a change, the eyes focusing on something within; the music seemed to soothe a poison out of them…Then I saw Sonny…He has a slow, loping walk, something like the way the Harlem hipsters walk, only he’s imposed on this his own half-beat. I had never really noticed it before. (129)

Sonny, unlike his brother understands that it is because of the experiences, life lessons, and suffering that he is what he is—which is surviving and happy—and it is from them, he is able to “make it.” “‘while I was downstairs before, on my way here, listening to that woman sing, it struck me all of a sudden how much suffering she must have had to go through—to sing like that. It’s repulsive to think you have to suffer that much’” (132). Sonny recognizes that the singer in the revival has also gone through hardships and different experiences, which he understands is tough, but he appreciates the fact that she is singing her story of pain, making it. He explains to his brother: “No there’s no way not to suffer. But you try all kinds of ways to keep from drowning in it, to keep on top of it…” (132).

Since Sonny’s brother has not gone through the same things as Sonny, which the narrator never understands his experiences until his daughter dies, he ignores what he views as the darkness Sonny has been involved in. The narrator says Sonny’s “trouble made his real” (127); he is able to recognize the darkness and suffering, specifically Sonny’s, but still clings to the idea of rejection regarding Sonny’s darkness; the narrator
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still won’t accept it fully. Sonny’s darkness represents his sublime choices and the Harlem division he associates with; Sonny chooses darkness over the “white” light. He asks Sonny why people do not accept it—the suffering—and fix it, implying people should chose the same path that he himself has chosen, while Sonny replies: “But nobody just takes it…. that’s what I’m telling you! Everybody tries not to. You’re just hung up on the way some people try—it’s not your way” (133). When Sonny says “your way” he is referencing his brother’s close-mindedness; the narrator thinks his aspirations in life are the only kind and looks down on others that aspire differently than him (i.e. Sonny). Sonny’s brother says he wanted to talk about “how life could be—well, beautiful” (133). As soon as he thinks this he questions his own ideals and says “wasn’t it”? Sonny realizes he is starting to get through to him a little and tells his brother:

...I think I’ll be all right. But I can’t forget—where I’ve been. I don’t mean the physical place I’ve been, I mean where I’ve been. And what I’ve been….I’ve been something I didn’t recognize, didn’t know I could be. Didn’t know anybody could be….I’m not talking about it now because I feel guilty…. (Baldwin 133-134)

Sonny is enabling his brother to see a glimpse of his experiences, and how he feels about them, letting his brother know what they have done for him. Sonny concludes his explanation with:

I was all by myself at the bottom of something, stinking and sweating…and I smelled it you know? My stink, and I thought I’d die if I couldn’t get away from it and yet… I knew everything I was doing was just locking me in with it….maybe it was good to smell your own stink…who can stand it….the reason I wanted to leave Harlem so bad was to get away from drugs… that’s what I was running from…when I came back nothing had changed. (134-135)

The “stink” that Sonny speaks of in the above passage is symbolic of his collective experiences and hardships; this stink is a constant reminder of who he is and where has come from, and how he is surviving. This stink also humbles and grounds Sonny, reminding him of his low points, but allowing him to utilize this stink as his foundation of where he is
now and he has gotten here. Meg Armstrong asserts that the lure of the sublime is “a thrill” which “resides in the effort to distinguish the meaning or passion within articulate voices or to make the obscure visible” (“The Effects of Blackness” 218); the “stink” is of the sublime, in that it encompasses Sonny’s experiences, representing the obscure passion and voices from those experiences.

Sonny is able to express his sublime stink showing that “the sublime could be an emblem of the superiority of reason (as an indication of the supersensible in man), exemplifying unity, mastery, and a control of frightening or alien aspects of the natural world” (Armstrong 214) as he convinces his brother to come and listen to him play at a Jazz club at a “short, dark-street” (Baldwin 135). A “coal-black, cheerful-looking man” is greeting them upon their arrival, while there is also a “bright-skinned brown man” (137) who seats Sonny’s brother at “a table in a dark corner” (136). In this passage, Baldwin tweaks Burke’s theory of color when he says “the highest degree of the sublime is intended, the materials and ornaments ought…to be…. sad and fuscous colours, as black, or brown...” (Burke, “Colour considered as a productive of the Sublime”). The description of the men who greet them is a representation of the sublime and the beautiful, unified as one; the dark corner represents sublime settings in the Jazz club, Sonny’s “kingdom” (136). Although the dark corner is seen as sublime it is only a small component of the larger picture: the kingdom. A kingdom can also be deemed sublime in that may astonish and emit a sense of awe; however, a kingdom can also be beautiful. In addition to these descriptions, Baldwin portrays Sonny and his musician-friends as embracing the sublime: “the light from the bandstand spilled just a little short of them…they were…being most careful not to step into that circle of life too suddenly: that if they moved into the light too suddenly…they would perish in flame” (137).

The narrator for the first time recognizes the darkness and the sublime that is around him, but he also recognizes that Sonny and his friends are also aware of the beautiful, and the “light,” but choose to embrace the light in a beautifully sublime way. The narrator elaborates:

All I know about music is that not many people ever really hear it…on the rare occasions when something opens within, and the music enters…we mainly hear…are personal, private vanishing evocations…the man who is creating the music is hearing something else, is dealing with the roar rising from the void…What is evoked in him, then, is…more terrible because
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it has no words, and triumphant, too, for that same reason…. (Baldwin 137)

This passage further proves that the narrator is finally beginning to understand Sonny and his choices. Although they are not the same as his, he understands that they are Sonny’s own; Sonny’s experiences have shown him just because society views something of lesser value because they fear it, does not mean that he should have to also. It is through his own fear that Sonny has learned to appreciate the sublime in order to see beauty. Sonny’s previously chaotic experiences have created a functional order for his life, which has helped him “make it” in Harlem. The narrator watches his brother on stage playing and thinks: “how awful the relationship must be between the musician and his instrument. He has to fill it…with the breath of life, his own. He has to make it do what he wants it to do….while there’s so only so much you can do with it, the only way to find out…is to try and do everything” (138). This relationship the narrator presents between the musician and his instrument parallels with Sonny and his life choices, but also the narrator and his life choices. He goes on to say that the musician must fill the instrument with his own breath and life in order for it to sound like he wants it to sound. This is a greater metaphor for all the African Americans in Harlem, implying that the individual’s choices are their own to make: no one else’s. It is from these choices that will emit music and songs of the sublime or of the beautiful, but either way it is their own song to sing and to play and to write.

Baldwin implies that although the two brothers choose different paths; both sublime and beautiful, equally significant, project a larger idea of equality and beauty. He asserts that although society or another may classify something sublime, it does not necessarily make it any less beautiful or less significant to that person; a person’s individual experiences mold them into who they become, making their experiences and journey that much more intimate. Sonny was able to represent this idea through his music. The narrator watches as “Sonny played” as “it was very beautiful” and “he began to make it his” (140). As he continues to observe:

Then it was over….in the dark the girl came by and I asked her to take the drinks to the bandstand….in the indigo light…I saw the girl put a Scotch and milk on top of the piano….it glowed and shook above my brother’s head like the very cup of trembling. (Baldwin 141)
This closing passage portrays an image of “Scotch and milk,” signifying that of the sublime and the beautiful; Scotch is representative of the sublime, while milk is representative of the beautiful. The mixing of the two separates into a single glass represent the narrator of James Baldwin’s “Sonny’s Blues” understanding of the class-based division between African-Americans in 1950’s Harlem as a reflection of Burke’s division of the beautiful and sublime. Baldwin characterizes the beautiful as that which partakes in the American Dream and indicates as white, while he characterizes the sublime as that which is exclusive to African-American culture, and indicates as black. The narrator attempts to distance himself from the African-American sublime, while his brother Sonny unreservedly embraces it. The narrator eventually realizes is that this dissection reinforces problematic divisions within the African-American community; the problematic division in Baldwin’s story projects a larger picture of African Americans and their oppression by whites.

Works Cited
Contributors

Megan Bell finds beautiful: cats, of all kinds, but specifically her own stubby-tailed Abyssinian; overgrown muscadine vines; the smell of old books; the smell of new books; old bridges over train tracks; moss; and early, misty mornings on mountains, where it seems as if you’re floating above the clouds. She does not find dewy grass aesthetically pleasing whatsoever.

Kassie Bettis has been described as a lover of morbid things by her friends, and thinks that her Senior Seminar essay reflects that. She enjoys coffee, rainy nights, and wandering in graveyards armed with a camera and a notebook. Postmodernism intrigues her, but she is not sure what to say about it.

Colin Boddy enjoys music, both listening to it and playing it. Additionally, he indulges in libations of the bourbon and craft beer variety. More importantly, these pastimes go hand-in-hand and can be appreciated simultaneously. The Dark Tower is his favorite book series; Old Boy and Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind compete for his favorite film of all time.

Joy Coles is an unconventional student, returning to college after raising seven children. She plans to teach high school English, and to continue her education. She loves movies, popcorn, traveling, and spending time with her family. She believes in life-long learning and wishes she could major in Music and Art, as well as English.

Kayla Garrett was born and raised in the West Georgia area. She enjoys reading, video games, and being outside on a beautiful, Georgia summer day. Kayla was an active member of the West Georgia campus, participating in the Student Research Assistant Program in Chemistry, Rho Lambda Panhellenic Honor Society, Sigma Tau Delta English Honor Society, UWG College Republicans, and Sigma Kappa Sorority—where she was a member to the Executive Council and Vice President of Alumnae Relations. Kayla was also the Homecoming 2012 Representative for Tau Kappa Epsilon Fraternity. Kayla was a Spring 2013 graduate of the University of West Georgia, the first ever to graduate in her family and the beginning to a family tradition of education.
Contributors

Sean Jepson is an English major completing his BA at the University of West Georgia. His literary interests include both humor and horror, and how each can be used within a text. He believes a study of beauty offers a fascinating intersection with horror to understand how culture defines both. Perhaps most interesting is that horror and beauty are not always opposing qualities.

As a child, Heather McMillan wanted to be everything from a rock star to a US Senator when she grew up; however, her favorite subject has always been literature. She recently decided that she really belongs in a classroom teaching her passion for literature and literacy to teenagers. Heather, currently a clerk at an elementary school, loves discussing novels with her thirteen-year-old daughter, who also enjoys reading. In her spare time, she loves to garden as evidenced in the Spring and Summer by the dirt under her fingernails. Heather is also a Life Member of Girl Scouts, having volunteered for the last eight years as a troop leader, delegate and formerly an area registrar. Finally, she loves dogs, travelling with her daughter and boyfriend, and building houses on Sims 3.

MacKenzie Regier is a senior English major and creative writing minor with a fascination for poetry. Somehow, she always finds herself circling back around to Fairchild. She was managing editor for the 2012 Eclectic and Editor in Chief for 2013. In fall 2013, she will begin a master’s assistantship at Texas Tech in Lubbock.

Halie Waddell is an English major at the University of West Georgia. She is originally from Lawrenceville, GA, but if asked, she will most likely claim Atlanta. Photographically, Halie is most famous for her time spent traipsing around South Africa in fairy costumes on serious Big-Game hunting expeditions for Cape buffalo. Her more recent exploits include becoming a world traveler, baking outrageously large and tasty Wedding cakes, living and teaching English as a Second Language in Ireland (a country infamous for not speaking English), and, most recently, working for West Georgia as Transfer Tour Guide. On the weekends, Halie pretends to be a writer, working on a collection of short stories with her mother, the estimable Dr. Penny Waddell, entitled, *She Can’t Help It if She's Ugly, But She Sure Could Have Stayed Home.*
Sade Winsor is a lover of red wine, groovy tunes, the written word, and all things magical. She is a Harry Potter fanatic and would prefer to live in a world without muggles (with her dog, MaryJane, of course). She enjoys drinking her coffee black and her favorite color is green. Sade communicates most effectively through her writing as opposed to her mouth, where she often sticks her foot.