“Even in the Future, the Story Begins with ‘Once Upon a Time’”: Fairy Tales Grow Up

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“The fairy tale emanates from specific struggles to humanize bestial and barbaric forces, which have terrorized our minds and communities in concrete ways, threatening to destroy free will and human compassion. The fairy tale sets out to conquer this concrete terror through metaphors.”

—Jack Zipes

Of core stories, scholar Jack Zipes argues, “over the centuries [,] we have transformed the ancient myths and folk tales and made them into the fabric of our lives. Consciously and unconsciously we weave the narratives of myth and folktale into our daily existence.” The first half of our fall semester’s course will entail unpacking this statement, noting ways in which select modern artists have consciously extrapolated fairy tale memes into their own work, thus (re)viewing the originals for old and new audiences alike. This work will see us playing through a narrative-based, episodic videogame that asks players to understand the wolf among us; reading a young adult novel that interweaves Cinderella’s plight with posthuman plague-ridden upheaval, and parsing a book of poetry by one of America’s most skilled confessional poets, Anne Sexton. In each reading event, our central task will be to understand the material from whence the work springs and to argue in our verbal and written work how new renderings enrich, modify, or invert meaning.
Idle Paradigms: Redefined Royalty and Gender Appeasement in Disney’s
Moana (2016)
by Lauren Blastow

“If you wear a dress, and have an animal sidekick, you’re a princess”
—Maui, Moana

Walt Disney Animation Studios recently produced the animated fantasy film Moana (2016), directed by Ron Clements and John Musker. The film features the voices of Dwayne Johnson, Rachel House, and introduces Auli’i Cravalho as the voice behind Moana. The film is about the journey of Moana, the questionable princess and daughter of chief Tui. The animated film takes place in the village of Motunui, a fictitious island in the South Pacific. Moana is chosen by the ocean, a personified mystical force, to find Maui, a demigod, and return a relic that symbolizes the heart of a mystical goddess, Te Fiti. Returning Te Fiti’s heart would allow the goddess to have her life giving powers restored and to save the heroine’s community and people. Walt Disney Pictures is known for making fantastical fairytale movies, starring beautiful princess characters. The early Disney Princesses, such as Cinderella, Belle, Snow White, Ariel, Jasmine and Aurora, fit into heteronormative feminine roles that America’s patriarchal society continues to perpetuate. Moana is the only daughter of Chief Tui of Motunui, and technically could be considered a princess, as the chief position is dependent upon lineage, yet she rejects the title. Moana is different from former Disney princesses because she does not divide herself in the film and has no love interest or prince who comes to her rescue. The protagonist’s undivided journey and progression toward fulfilling her personal destiny evidences how she opposes the early, traditional Disney princesses. Moana is a strong female lead character who, on the surface, seems to be free from expectant paternalized heteronormative gender roles. In
the film, Moana successfully destabilizes the mold of a traditional Disney princess. However, the heroine is subject to and must depend on paternalized approval throughout the film, enduring harsh treatment by masculine figures. Under analysis, Moana’s journey ultimately highlights problematic expectations of women in a long-standing patriarchal society: subordination, codependence, and subservient identity. The film acts as a gesture of conciliation, or appeasement, for a growing feminist society that remains in a world driven by patriarchal values.

Traditional Disney princesses emanate a prescribed femininity by patriarchal forces. According to the Disney approved children’s book “What Is a Princess?” by Jennifer Weinberg, a princess is “kind . . . smart . . . caring”; she “likes to dress up” and “always lives happily ever after!” (2-15). Weinberg’s book ascribes virtuous characteristics, showy hobbies, and idealistic goals for females in order to achieve “princess” status, yet, she completely skips over physical beauty requirements. Early princesses climb the socio-economic ladder in large part because they are considered physical beauty by a masculine figure in the story. Cinderella, for example, has soft features, long blonde hair, big eyes, a beautiful voice and a thin body. In the film, the prince is captivated by her beauty. She also has certain virtuous characteristics that a patriarchal society would categorize as desirable for women to possess: meekness, warm-heartedness, grace, submissiveness. These portrayed characteristics of a woman work to define the term “princess”, and, in sometimes subconscious ways, influence the viewer to accept that a “princess”, and thus the female gender, must perform these virtues and manipulate their body in order to perform gender in a way that wins a happily-ever-after life. Alexander M. Bruce, author and literary scholar, facilitated a study and published the article “The Role of the ‘Princess’ in Walt Disney’s Animated Films: Reactions of College Students”. In the results from the survey, Bruce found that “When asked to describe a princess, the male subjects focused most consistently on their physical qualities” (10). Bruce claims that “the twenty-five women likewise acknowledged the beauty of princesses but made proportionately fewer comments about their appearance” (11). This part of Bruce’s study shows how male college students who watched Disney princess movies while growing up, have learned to define these characters mostly in a physical way, mirroring the way that masculine figures in the film valued the princesses in terms of physical appearance, and evidencing how males in society have been taught to evaluate and describe females in terms of beauty. Bruce asserts that “In depicting the marital success of subservient, passive females, Disney thereby teaches its audience that women should fulfill that passive role in society, not acting but instead waiting for a man to give them the perfect life” (2). Disney princesses reinforce patriarchal expectations of women that call the female viewer to learn and perform a
“passive role in society” so that they may have an idealistic “perfect life”: a goal that is inevitably unattainable, and therefore problematic.

Moana has a different body type than that of traditional Disney princesses, evidencing how Disney destabilizes their older princess archetype, in a physical way. Moana is shorter and stout in stature, challenging the worthy physicality of a conventional “princess”. Typically, from Disney, we see a princess’s body with long slender legs, a perfect posture in which the shoulders are held in alignment with the ears, long fingers, small feet and calves, hourglass shaped hips, a long neck and soft facial features. Moana has short, muscular and powerful legs, rounded shoulders which shows she likely uses her chest and arm muscles, short fingers and legs, rounded hands, and a short neck. All of these features that Moana has are indicative of more muscle use in comparison to the traditional feminine figure, portraying her as more physically fit and powerful enough to defend herself, therefore not depend on man for protection.

Moana’s character destabilizes the model of a traditional Disney princess, also, through the performance of her independent nature. At the beginning of the film, we see Moana as a toddler listening to a scary story that her grandmother is telling her and all of the children. Moana sits at the very front of the group, some distance away from the rest of the children, with her eyes and mouth open wide in enthusiasm and suspense (3:57). The princess’ placement among the crowd of children indicates her independence and ability to withstand a mysterious and chilling legend, with no support from her peers. In another instance, toddler Moana goes into the ocean alone to respond to a personified calling she hears from the body of water. Her courage to walk out into the water by herself demonstrates the ingrained nature of her need for independence, as if she was born that way. The scene displays a natural fearlessness and autonomy in the lead character. Another example is when Tala, Moana’s grandmother, shows her the sealed cave that holds the truth behind the history of her ancestors. Moana crawls into the cave by herself, beats on a drum to summon the ghosts of her mystical forefathers (23:00). As the truth is revealed to Moana in the cave, she knows she must travel beyond the reef and she quickly runs to her village’s meeting room where everyone is gathered to share the truth with them. In this instance, Moana’s mental independence is delineated because she does not need another person to affirm what she saw. Moana’s ability to lead and be sure of herself breaks down the early Disney princess archetype that is portrayed as vulnerable and reliant on others.

The protagonist’s desire to rule is another trait that works to destabilize the traditional princess archetype. For example, in “Cinderella”, the princess to be does not know what she wants from her life except that she wants to go to the ball and impress the prince. She wants to have the
chance and ability to pick out a dress and make herself beautiful to go to the ball like her evil step sisters. According to the moral of the story in Cinderella, a female must look beautiful in the eyes of masculinity in order to attain the perfect happily-ever-after fairytale life. Moana has the expectation to take the place of her father and rule her kingdom and become part of the group of chiefs that her tribe has had. Moana not only is expected to become chief of her community because she is next in line but desires to as well. Moana’s desire to rule, therefore, is not dependent upon a love affair with a man or impressing him in order to fulfill her fate and make her life one worth living. In this way, Moana gains power through her ambition to rule and follow her heart. The expectation of her community, and her aspiration to become the next chief opens up new thought patterns and possibilities for the female gender as Moana is allowed to achieve, to rule, to make decisions and not be reliant on males to fulfill her happiness.

Moana’s physicality is foiled by that of Maui and also that of chief Tui as both of the men are formed with hyper-masculine features. The physical differences between Moana and Maui signal to the audience that chief-worthy, independent females can have and use small muscles but the heroic man is still bigger, better and stronger. Lead male roles consist of this masculinity that overpower female characters in stature, weight and strength, reflecting a continuation of feminine subordination. Disney chooses Dwayne Johnson as the voice of Maui, “[his] notable height at 605”, renowned musculature, and his moniker, ‘The Rock’, all contribute to his cachet” (Streiff, 2). The fact that Johnson plays the role of Maui allows the character to become more realistic, as Johnson actually looks like Maui in certain ways. The audience has a real person to compare the animated character with, influencing the viewer in an even stronger way to identify with, glorify, and respect the character, thus making the film more valued by society and successful. Maui’s hyper masculinity emphasizes colossal muscles, narcissism, and all-knowing characteristics that are played out alongside Moana, who is much smaller, not as confident, and must learn several skills and pieces of knowledge throughout the film. The character foil insinuates to viewers that females will not be able to attain demi-god status, and the female will never be able to compare to males in a physical and intellectual ways. Chief Tui demonstrates hyper-masculine strength when he picks Moana up off of a raft and drops her on the ground. Moana has just gotten done suggesting that they paddle past the reef to look for fish. Chief Tui delivers authoritative action as he roughly handles his daughter, gnarls his teeth and then says in a growling manner, “Every time I think you’re past this” and then snatches the paddle from Moana’s hand (14:54). Here, the chief uses his strength and large stature to intimidate Moana. Moana’s face is scared
and her shoulders are tense. This scene showcases masculine intimidation and suggests to the audience that using force and showing animalistic anger is acceptable in order to control a female. Chief Tui never apologizes, and Moana goes off to be alone, showing the audience that it truly is acceptable.

The fairytale continues to endorse gender stereotypes in other female characters in the film. Madeline Streiff and Lauren Dundes are social scientists, and published one of the only accessible scholarly articles about gender in the film Moana (2016). The critics write, “Despite the promise of a new, ostensibly modern Disney princess, Moana reinforces gender stereotypes, perpetuating patterns found in other Disney princess films” (Streiff and Dundes, 9). For example, Moana’s mother, Sina, is extremely passive in the film, and does not have a strong part in parenting or disciplining Moana. The only exception to this observation is when her mother is defending her father and discloses a bit of his past to Moana in order for her to understand the rules he has set for her. Her uninvolved and docile behavior, or lack thereof, represents Moana’s mother as the “Good Wife”. Stereotypes often build up to create archetypes. The Good Wife is a classic female archetype that serves as a supporter for her husband, is pure and devoted. In many scenes, we see Moana’s mother and father together but her mother is just taking up space, and has very little to contribute to the dialogue. Her silence insinuates that she no opinion, wisdom, or comment to share, and no voice to be heard. The Good Wife archetype prevents females from learning that their voice is worth being heard and that female commentary should be contributed to society. Another archetypal role in the film is the Village Crazy Lady, and can be compared to the Crazy Cat Lady. At one instance in the film, Tala, Moana’s grandmother, tells her granddaughter “I’m the village crazy lady, that’s my job” (21:01). The Village Crazy Lady archetype reinforces a traditionally paternal lack of respect for and denial of creativity, imagination and intuition, which are all characteristics that Tala displays. Tala, in the beginning of the film, tells the legend of Te Ka, and is quickly shut down by her son, chief Tui, as he cuts her off and explains to the children that nothing she said is real (4:25). In this instance, Chief Tui reflects patriarchal oppression of folklore in the community and the disruption of oral tradition. Creativity, imagination and intuition are qualities that have merit and are worth exploring, and as society perpetuates problematic archetypes, like the Village Crazy Lady, personal identity is appropriated and made into entertainment. These characters, Tala and Sina, align with archetypes that show women as lesser-than, weak, passive, crazy, not worth being taken seriously, and dependent upon a man. Archetypes, such as the Good Wife and the Village Crazy Lady or Crazy Cat Lady, are used by real members of society to categorize real women in society, thus demonstrating the damaging relationship that media and society continue. Does labeling
others as popular archetypes serve as useful in any way to society or does it limit the way society identifies and understands real people?

Archetypes are often used to label and describe people in reality. Models of characters are often played out in reality by society. Disney’s princess characters have served as classic exemplars for females to imitate in reality. Jena Stephens, literary critic, questions whether it is society that causes the evolution of female characters in Disney films or if the Disney films themselves cause the change in female society. The critic states, “The relationship in question is a mechanism effectively described as “reflection projection,” in which media and society inevitably create a symbiotic relationship, in which one influences the other continually, letting neither begin nor end the cycle, but instead always following one another’s progression (Stephens, 105). Reflection projection, as Stephens refers, is clearly at play in dealing with Disney, the media, and the audience, society, as evidenced by archetypical identities.

Reflection projection not only deals with social constructs and ideals that society and media share in their “symbiotic relationship” but can extend to the relationship between industry, marketing and consumerism. Society watches the media, in this case, Disney movies like *Moana* (2016), and then the media make products that society can buy that allow people to absorb and reflect characters and ideals that are invented by the media and that viewers and consumers have grown to love and adore. In the article, by Jennifer Wolff Perrine, “SO YOU want TO BE A princess” published in Cosmopolitan Magazine, the article covers the Disney Princess Weekend and Disney Princess Half Marathon that the Disney Princess franchise holds. Disney Princess fans dress up like their favorite Disney Princess. Some attendees include a PhD scientist, a Victoria’s Secret product manager, a special-education teacher, all wearing tiaras and frilly dresses, raised on princess stories and “finding they want to continue”. A Disney resort manager, Trujillo, is interviewed by Perrine in the article and comments that “There’s an inner part of each of our guests that truly believes she is a princess. . . It’s in her DNA”. This type of marketing make-believe showcases “reflection projection”, as women in society, as well as media and marketing agents, continue to influence each other and “let neither begin nor end the cycle” as Stephens asserted earlier in the paragraph. Disney princesses are models that are continuing to be imitated by real people in society, further evidencing the social vulnerability that females fall prey to and are subjected to by patriarchal codes and beliefs.

More evidence of consumer America’s consumer society buying into media representation, and thus patriarchal representation, can be found in modern societal values and rituals that incorporate Disney princesses and characters such as Halloween princess costumes, Disney dolls and coloring
books, themed party gear and much more. The commodities listed bring to attention the obnoxious level that our society consumes these commodities that Disney produces, not only funding Disney’s powerhouse but showing the company that the consuming society members accept, endear, glorify and agree with the types of characters, stories and values that come along with buying into, literally and metaphorically, Disney’s productions. This shows that the Disney Princess Corporation upholds their longstanding system of patriarchal values not only in their films, but with their marketing techniques, and with the production of purchasable items and experiences, such as dolls, trips to Disney land, princess stationary, princess panties, and every possible thing that can have a Disney stamp on it that female children and adults alike glorify. Perrine writes, “It’s hard to know if the Disney Princess franchise has tapped into a need, created a need, or simply made princesses so ubiquitous that they can symbolize anything to any woman” (3). Perrine’s statement speaks to the Disney princess problem that consumes the viewer’s identity as she suggests that maybe Disney Princesses “can symbolize anything to a woman”. It is as if the princess symbolizes happiness, the female identifies with the princess, and then the female compulsively and desperately buys an item that reflects her ideal self.

According to film studies, a quantifiable measure proves that Disney princesses are taking a step back in terms of gender equality in film. The quantity of time that Disney allots to their princess characters to speak shows that the character is important and has a valuable part to play in which her voice and what she does should be spotlighted. Darlena Cunha, a contributor to TIME magazine, writes about Disney princesses and their speaking time in film. Cunha finds that, “new research showing that the more recent Disney princess films feature men speaking more often than women seems to serve as a searing critique of the treatment of women in films, marking a step back where society thought it was taking a step forward” (3). The study evidences calculable support that patriarchal powers are continuing to dominate Disney princess films.

Patriarchal patterns are evident as Moana is dependent upon Maui, the hyper-masculine demi-god. For example, Moana intellectually depends on Maui to teach her how to sail. Maui refuses to teach her until the literal ocean pricks him with a blow-dart, and renders his body motionless (37:00). It is as if Maui needs to be depended on, therefore insinuating the male need for a female’s codependence. This example evidences that Disney is not reflecting the gender roles that society needs to see in order to rise above the traditional heteronormative conception and expectation of females.

Disney is spreading problematic notions of femininity into play time, as they dominate the children’s princess fairytale product and toy depart-
ment. Disney has monopolized the film industry for decades, therefore the company has been able to have their character's gender types accepted and praised by viewers. It seems as though the majority of society would not buy a ticket to a Disney princess movie that did not have a “beautiful” character in it. It is as if Disney taught women how to be beautiful, submissive, how to please the eye of a man, and now must keep up that notion in the portrayal of Disney princesses, somehow, in order to make money from their production. Meghan Sweeney, literary critic, writes about how successful Disney has become in commodifying the princess image. She writes, with the statistical help of Lisanti, that “The persistent and comprehensive marketing strategy of Disney Corporate Products (DCP) has paid off: their worldwide retail sales of licensed products exceeded thirty billion a few years ago, with the Princess franchise earning around US$4 billion in retail sales a year” (Sweeney, 75). This evidence shows that Disney is focused on capital gain.

Another way in which Disney perpetuates the problematic gender roles is by making archetypes that children mirror and act as in their play time, which entices young children to identify with the princesses in their films. As children identify with a Disney princess, the process in which individual identity is made, is taken hostage. Wohlwend asserts that many researchers that specialize in childhood studies who deal with identity expectations in popular culture, media, and toys have concluded that Disney fairy tales dwindle heroines down to “happy homemakers-in-waiting (Wohlwend, 59). Wohlwend exemplifies the reduction of heroines as he claims that “girls are often portrayed as dependent and innocent (with sexual undertones) ingénues waiting for a royal husband as life’s fulfillment. . . [and] older women are either backgrounded as loving (preferably deceased) mothers. . . or, if powerful and independent, vilified as evil femme fatales or ugly hags” (59). Archetypes are powerful and work to teach a young audience how certain women act, forcing identity to be pushed into archetypal categories.

Disney has created a ubiquitous image of “Princess” and has successfully spread that image across America. There has been a lot of criticism that Disney has had to endure concerning gender and archetype portrayal in the recent years. In Moana (2016), Disney demonstrates “Gender Appeasement” as they create a princess character that is independent, there is no love interest for the protagonist in the film, and Moana’s body is unlike the traditional Disney princess, for a society that has started to criticize the depiction of gender, race and ethnicity. It is as if Disney is responding to the feminist, ethnic and racial criticisms that have threatened the production company’s reputation. Linda Pershing and Lisa Gablehouse author a scholarly article called “Disney’s Enchanted: Patriarhal Backlash and Notalgia in a Fairy Tale Film. “Enchanted” was released in 2007, as
Pershing and Gablehouse claim “in response to social pressure, Disney has made a minimal effort in the recent past to incorporate moderately feminist elements into its fairytale films, but these can be more accurately described as ‘faux feminism’” (153). The film “Enchanted” was released around the same time of the rise of the third wave of feminism. The idea behind “Faux Feminism” and “Gender Appeasement” seem to go hand in hand. Pershing and Gablehouse’s “Faux Feminism” “involves trivializing feminist ideology or compressing the actions of female characters into the conventions of popular romance while maintaining that they are her choice, not actions instilled by patriarchal” (153). “Gender Appeasement” can be described as the media’s creation of a more progressive female character in response to growing values of gender equality and feminist ideals as conciliation in order to retain as many viewers, and buyers of product, as possible.

In Moana, Disney certainly does show that they are trying to have more socially progressive female characters, but patriarchal values are very much still at play. The evidence can be seen in the hyper-masculinity of the lead male characters, Moana’s need of approval from her father and from Maui, subservient expectations, and female archetypes. Patriarchal prescriptions expect females, in some way, to show codependence and act in subordination to male power when the male says so, as evidenced by Chief Tui. Patriarchal values that inspire Disney enterprises and commodification work to strip young women of the chance to make their own identity, which is problematic for a progressive society. Disney’s making of Moana therefore acts with an intent of “gender appeasement”, in order for the powerhouse to show a progressive reputation in a growing feminist era that is fighting against controlling patriarchal powers.

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Primary Sources
Cinderella. Directed by Clyde Geronimi, Hamilton Luske, and Wilfred Jackson, performances by Ilene Woods, Eleanor Audley, Verna Felton, Rhoda Williams, and James MacDonald, Walt Disney, 1950.

Secondary Sources
Dan Harmon’s animated series “Rick and Morty” captivates viewers with an absurdist aesthetic and existential themes, appealing to its target demographic of millennials who constitute 1.7 million viewers on Adult Swim alone—almost doubling Sunday night competitor AMC’s Fear the Walking Dead (Crupi). What is most controversial about this definitively millennial fan-base is that the show refuses to affiliate with a defined political ideology, instead favoring philosophical rationales over political rhetoric, causing a scramble to define the show within the context of a political mythos. Dr. Joshua Masters writes similarly about the early American West as it has its own indigenous ideas, but they do not match the people it now belongs to and thus there is “a collective compulsion to fill up this emptiness and inscribe it with moral, aesthetic, and political values” (Masters, 64). Rick and Morty occupies a philosophical space in between the party divide that simultaneously threatens the cocksure methodology of both liberals and conservatives, and rather attracts a new breed who deny both and primarily perceive the show as a justification for nihilism. Rick and Morty is produced amidst a phase in which everything is deemed partisan, and it is evident that those who are tired of partisanship have retreated to a space that ignores the discourse thereof. Rick is what delegates Rick and Morty as a stomping ground for nihilists, and he does so by sermonizing irregular opinions to the audience through the conduit of other characters. Rick is this show’s portrayal of a messianic or prophetic archetype, which in Joseph Campbell’s groundwork would be most closely related to the archetype of the mentor, who acts as a guide or as guiding principles for the protagonist; the problem therein is that the protagonist doesn’t exist. Thus we have this haphazard tone switching within Rick as he navigates both messianic conversation and heroic performativity within pop culture and within his own television series. The former of which he affects by pon-
tificating ceaselessly, and the latter in which he creates and solves physical problems in the veins of a Nietzschean overman. Rick embodies existentialism as he is aware of his insignificance to the point in which he understands that his life depends on his ability to talk to his audience and affect the outside world—lest he become canceled.

While Rick and Morty is primarily based on both of its titular characters’ exploits and mishaps, it is very clear from episode one that Rick is the patriarch of the show, and everything that is happening is in some way facilitated by him. This is exemplified early in the pilot on multiple occasions in which Rick commands Morty to stow objects in his “taut, yet malleable” anus and kill government workers in cold blood because “they’re bureaucrats, [and] [Rick doesn’t] respect them” (Harmon). This demonstrates Rick’s capacity and willingness to pressure other characters [specifically Morty] to the audience, priming him as a conduit between the show and its audience. Furthermore, after the title sequence, Beth and Jerry ostracize Rick for compelling Morty to labor under him. Rick then defends himself by asserting that Morty’s sleep isn’t particularly important because “night time makes up half of all time,” and this is important because it depicts Rick as someone who is indomitable in his ideology. As this pertains to the audience’s immediate perception of Rick, he has said something humorous that challenges normative thought. While Rick’s claim about night and sleep disregards human limitation, it establishes him as someone with a perspective that is not yet claimed by an opposing political ideology. This is the first time he identifies himself as a free thinker and ultimately someone who is to be followed, compelling others to ideologically align themselves with this character despite the preface of his maligned and genocidal behavior prior to the title sequence. The intellectual superiority one can claim through listening to Rick as a source of wisdom is ultimately superficial. One can observe Rick’s quotes and believe what is said, but identification with the show will never extend beyond superficiality until Rick is no longer deified. Rick is perceived as a deity because he respects his own viewpoint as absolute, and the audience respects him as thus because they agree with the power that he represents. Dr. Don Dombowsky pinpoints this form of strategy as inherently Napoleonic in that it “[subverts] public opinion” in favor of non-traditional parties. It makes sense then as the definitive parties further radicalize themselves, that those who identify as centrists would seek guidance from the non-traditional and non-political.

In Friedrich Nietzsche’s philosophical text Thus Spoke Zarathustra, Zarathustra contends that “man is something to be surpassed,” and compares the human experience as a tightrope walk in between the animalistic and the overman; in which the overman is our desired achievement and the animalistic is what we are distancing ourselves from collectively (Nietzsche,
Nietzsche’s concept of the overman is often linked to the deification of individuals and ethnic groups amongst themselves. This usage rejects external criticism because it believes alien perspectives to be invalid. To understand the concept of the overman correctly the concept must be all-inclusive and not of those whom choose to use it as a pretense for a faux sense of superiority; Zarathustra claims that those who share different beliefs and cultures are part of the larger plan, and that those outside of his own society are equally significant to his own as he says “I love all who are like heavy drops falling one by one out of the dark cloud that hangs over man: they herald the coming of the lightning, and perish as heralds… I am a herald of the lightning, and a heavy drop out of the cloud: the lightning, however, is called overman.” Zarathustra denies a difference between any persons beyond their dedication to the betterment of humanity (16). This character of Zarathustra is ultimately a by-product of the trust that collective society expects from its prophets. Zarathustra is Nietzsche’s proxy to demonstrate to the readers a preference for secondhand information, as the reader perceives that they are the ones absorbing and realizing the information spoken by Zarathustra to the audience who “laugh” and “do not understand [him],”(16). Nietzsche uses a literal fairy-tale to demonstrate how futile it is attempting to “make [them] into the last [men],” (18). The prologue of this philosophical text depicts those whom would seek to become the overman as sheep, which is exactly what Nietzsche’s proxy Zarathustra defines them as in his comparison of the human experience to a tightrope of enlightenment.

Zarathustra here resembles an older version of the archetype that Rick occupies in the contemporary, just as Zarathustra was Nietzsche’s rendition of 5th-century real life prophet Zoroaster with hundreds of literary counterparts in between. The idea of archetypal similarity is by no means new, but it is relevant to state that with this chronological development thus comes a shift in the authenticity of such personas. Zarathustra speaks in absolutism and is perceived by his fictional audiences as transgressive to their simplicity. Nietzsche later criticizes widespread literacy by saying “everyone being allowed to learn to read, ruins in the long run not only writing but also thinking. Once spirit was God, then it became man, and now it even becomes the rabble,” which depicts literary discourse as the basis for understanding morality (36). It also helps to define Nietzsche’s understanding of Zarathustra’s role as a prophet. It is suggested by Nietzsche’s text that the prophet Zarathustra exists to provide morality for those who have chosen nihilism as an excuse to perform pervasively. Nietzsche establishes the overman then, as someone who is not defined by their reverence, but instead as one whom can independently create morality without conceding to the pointlessness of it, he says “once sin against God was the greatest sin; but God died, and with him these sinners,” claiming that each man who could
neither resign to their greater [god], nor independently survive in a world without predisposition to propriety are fundamentally wastes of space (14).

Rick and Morty is intrinsically tied to Nietzsche’s work not simply because they are both synonymous with existentialism, but because they both use the same didactic tactics towards their intended audience. They are misunderstood in that they are inherently academic whilst simultaneously being relevant and accessible to the proletariat. They are picked apart by the academy and understood as theoretical jabs at the notions of truth and being, or they can be viewed broadly whilst an audience trusts their respective spokespersons Rick and Zarathustra to ascertain values for them. For the intended audience here to not understand and simply ignore the cultural addition that these two texts propose is the expected result, but the texts are not ignored they are misinterpreted and read with the confirmation bias that depicts both nihilism, absurdism, and existentialism as inherently homologous. The ideas presented by the texts are amalgamated and allocated a false relationship based on the preconceptions given by the reader’s own base understandings and generalizations of the concepts themselves. Nietzsche justifies this disposition to instantly gratifying oneself intellectually in his book “Human, All Too Human,” by saying

Young people love what is interesting and odd, no matter how true or false it is. More mature minds love what is interesting and odd about truth. Fully mature intellects, finally, love truth, even when it appears plain and simple, boring to the ordinary person; for they have noticed that truth tends to reveal its highest wisdom in the guise of simplicity. (Nietzsche, 193)

When this is applied to the public’s consumption of Rick and Morty, it is not necessarily saying that simplicity is the end all be all, but rather that finite truth when discovered will be simple, whereas misinterpretation of texts such as Rick and Morty may be simple, but lack wisdom because it may or may not be objectively true. The dilemma in this situation is that truth is and has always been relative. That is why Rick appears as an overman to those who believe an individual’s dominance in their niche is what defines them as such; whereas the philosophy founded by Nietzsche insists that such an individual is simply another who “seeks his own down-going” (15).

Rick’s appearance as an inherently superior being within the realm of the show is simply a perceivable truth allowed by the bias that manifested power is the absolute goal of the overman. Truth in existentialism however, as former professor Dale Cannon identifies it in his article “An Existential Theory of Truth” is “keen to point out that how we think of something, how we conceive of it and represent it, always reflects a certain way of taking
up a relationship to the thing in our own person,” so as to say those who value dominion or superiority over others will flock to Rick as their personal savior or envisioned overman (Cannon, 4). The artifice of subjective truth is that it is a lie premised on unnatural notions, such as notions of policy, insurance, salesmanship, war, diplomacy, and gender normativity; these are ideas that are so intrinsic to society that we forget that they are completely arbitrary and unnatural. In a podcast about Nietzsche’s essay “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense” on the “The Partially Examined Life”, Dr. Jessica Berry of the University of Georgia suggests that objective truth has “utilitarian beginnings” and that subversion of communications that were initially deemed helpful, ultimately expose us to tribalism (Berry, 10:30). She goes on to iterate that Nietzsche wonders why we place gargantuan amounts of emphasis on the ascertainment of truth “when it is clear that it is not always good for us” (Berry, 10:40). Rick uses other characters’ normative understanding of truth to take what he wants. In “The Rickshank Redemption” Rick programs a “brainalyzer” to swap his consciousness with that of his interrogator, and proceeds to use this false identity to trick and kill his captors until he can switch minds again with an alternative version of himself. Rick then proceeds to body swap his way up the chain of command in the “Citadel of Ricks” eventually pitting the two most dominant governing bodies in the show’s universe against each other, crippling them both. Rick destroys two major political factions by blending with one aesthetically, but ultimately his goals are harmful to both.

Rick is a test for those who partake in the subjective truth of supremacy because he is functionally impossible to imitate; furthermore, his depression, ego, and drug dependency are red flags that indicate that the person who desires to emulate this character only perceives the character at a surface level. The desire for supremacy is rooted in an existential depression in which the individual or collective understand the futility and seek to make the best for themselves with the resources that they have, and the subjective truths that they buy into. Thus they latch onto an identity that they perceive as a worthy goal and claim that they have reached that goal with no evidence to support such. Within the nihilistic viewership of Rick and Morty several “Shitposting” groups have surfaced on Facebook and other social media sites. On these pages it is common practice to refer to the socially normative as Jerrys. Jerry is a character in Rick and Morty who is Rick’s son-in-law, content with being an underachiever whose pinnacle in life was procreation. By referring to other members of a community as inferior beings based on political identity or statements made in jest about a television show, and having this be a common occurrence within the confines of said group indicates that the base point as a member is as a supremacist who believes that they are superior based on nothing more
than the statement thereof. The starting point is Rick, and you work your way down based on your ability to mold to the social standard.

This form of superiority is warned against by the show itself on numerous occasions. In season two, episode two “Mortynight Run”, Morty saves an astral being named Fart from assassination because Morty is guilty that Rick sold a weapon to the assassin meant to kill it. Morty slowly learns that Fart was a prisoner of the galactic federation because of his immense power to transform particles instantaneously. Morty realizes slowly over time that Fart’s disposition towards carbon-based life is one of superiority, and as he tries to return home through a portal Morty shoots him with the same gun that his grandfather had sold to the assassin. This demonstrates that Morty felt a moral superiority to Rick for not wanting complicity in an assassination, which he suffers for in being chased across the galaxy by the government, learning the hard way that Fart’s intentions were malevolent. Fart’s indoctrination into the belief of non-carbonate supremacy is inherently more dangerous than Morty’s noncommittal attitude towards violence, because it is rooted in philistinism, and a disposition towards violent resolution. The episode criticizes leftist high-ground passivity, but only in the context of its inability to contend with outright supremacy. This demonstrates Nietzsche’s tightrope walker in action in that there are purposefully two failures, but each corrects the other until a correct version is left to walk the tightrope. Amidst these two opposing ideologies sits Rick who contributes nothing apart from physical presence and criticism of both entities. He is perceived as a centrist, but really he does nothing to mediate, he just wants to be at “Blips and Chitz” having fun at others’ expense. In a sense through his disconnection with the turmoil happening around him, he is claiming superiority over those who need to argue their ideology, as he is positive that his is more correct than either.

Rick and Morty corrects and criticizes superiority and supremacy constantly and this is often demonstrated by repositioning the situational power that comes from things as simple as technology or wealth. In the episode “Look Who’s Purging Now.” Rick gives a commoner a super-suit and helps her eradicate her society’s bourgeoisie during a satire of the purge. In “Auto-Erotic Assimilation”, a hive-mind named Unity enslaves a planet of people and Summer feels morally superior to her because of her resistance to conformity; however, when Unity cannot control the people any longer they break out into a race war based on which shape their nipples are. Therefore when the fans denounce someone in their community as a Jerry, it is contingent on a belief external to the world in which their argument pertains to. Existentially Jerry is simply different to Rick, and while Rick may have infinitely more resources and potential to change what is external to him, Jerry will always be happier. Subjectively both Jerry and Rick are superior
to one another, and existentially neither are superior to anything. To quote “Human, All Too Human”, Nietzsche supports this by saying “We behold all things through the human head and cannot cut off this head; while the question nonetheless remains what of the world would still be there if one had cut it off,” (Nietzsche, 15). Objectively speaking Rick can do more than Jerry, but his experience is nonetheless sullied by his limitations as a being in a world defined by empirical frivolity. This is not to say that the televised continuity of Rick and Morty is irrelevant, nor is it to proclaim that nihilism obviates the show beyond Harmon’s intention, but rather to explicate on why supremacy deviates from Zarathustra’s contention of the overman.

Whilst the concept of the overman is intrinsically disparate from the enactment of supremacist behaviors, it is relevant to note that the language used to impart this information is disparate from what is necessary to hold supremacists accountable. Rick and Morty separates itself from a fixed political identity by having its titular characters constantly removed from the society of which is criticized. All criticisms towards political identities are then doctored by disposition, and thus reinforce ideas about supremacy for those who are looking for confirmation for such in traditional media. Whereas in social media the nihilistic movement in millennial culture dominates memetic ideology, rebutting normative intellectualism as an echo chamber, and defining normative attempts to gentrify their space as baseless. This can be compared to the hyper-conservative ideologies held by the Soviets amidst the Cold War and arguably now; Eliot Borenstein argues in his scholarly article “Survival of the Catchiest: Memes and Postmodern Russia”, that:

When viewed from a memetic stand-point, Soviet power was intensely concerned with regulating its “meme pool,” encouraging the proliferation of positive, approved memes through cultural mobilization while fighting against any memetic influence that could be seen as the manifestation of a hostile, foreign culture (from stiliagi to jazz, from rock music to long hair). (Borenstein)

It is ultimately a nihilistic quarantine imposed upon oneself to disregard both study and the studious. If all evidence that pertains to existential thought is intrinsically superficial to a nihilist, then their perception of media, culture, and life should be of absolute objectivity. The absence of objectivity suggests that the nihilist millennial not only perceives submerged meaning in culture, but also defers to their confirmation bias in cases of obscurity. It is simpler for the nihilist millennial to avoid critical thinking if absurdism is the governing body in which they insist upon, and it is easier to support their argument for such if no other point is deemed relevant.
Alternatively to respecting the nihilistic absolutism represented by Rick’s gratuitous explanations for non-normative behavior, one could ask instead what makes statements such as “Weddings are basically just funerals with cake” or “scientifically, traditions are an idiot thing” inarguable (Harmon)? They are subjective but feel familiar because they represent emotions that prevail in the existentialist psyche, that does not make them prophetic but rather cultural. To analyze briefly the feelings within the nihilistic community that Rick enables, and ask how he performs to accept those feelings into social consciousness; we can connect Rick to another character that performs similarly in Jack Zipes’ interpretation of “The Frog Prince”. The Frog Prince like Rick is physically repulsive, but when examined for how they enable their princess and viewer respectively, they are providers. All they want in return is attention, in the frog prince’s case he wants “the princess to have sex with him”, in Rick’s case he influences multi-billion dollar corporation McDonald’s to bring back an obscure “Mulan Mcnugget sauce” from 1999 (Zipes 110) (Harmon). The media excuses the culture; money indirectly buys sex, imitation justifies nihilism. They play the same game and influence the culture similarly, they justify themselves to the text, and they justify themselves to the audience misusing accessibility to transgress social boundaries. In many ways Rick acts similarly to a fairy-tale as he is Dan Harmon’s sarcastic foil to a disembodied idea of what millennial culture is. On his podcast “Harmontown”, Harmon refers to millennials as “bright-eyed and bushy-tailed” with a belief in the possibility of “unity”, but admits within the same podcast that he is out of touch as to what millennials actually are saying that “[they’re] thirteen, and [they’re] twenty-five, and… and I don’t know what I’m talking about” and that what he does know is extrapolated from “comment sections” where he “assume[s] all of those people are twelve” (Harmon). The audience doesn’t want to relate to Morty or Summer, Harmon creates urgency to differentiate oneself from the myth of the idealistic millennial. Harmon criticizes that millennials believe in unity, but creates a character that memetically resonates with a counterculture so unified that within minutes of bringing back the Mulan Szechuan sauce nearly all stores were out of supply. This is in part because of the numbers presented in the fan-base, and partly a signification that the non-millennials that control corporations such as McDonald’s underestimate the number of millennials that exist simply to perpetuate internet phenomenon.6

Ultimately, Rick’s façade as the Nietzschean overman reveals the superiority complex that links him to his avid supporters. The millennial fan-base then takes on this stigmatic nihilism that has remained external to the identity that baby boomers and Generation X have superimposed onto millennials. While it is true that a large portion of millennials represent those idealistic values, it is a blanket statement to suggest that all millennials represent a partisan centric group of social justice warriors and evangelical

Wilson Chancey
conservatives. While nihilism drives the humor of Rick and Morty, it is important to understand that the show has two titular characters, one of which is emblematic of a normative Millennial in Morty, and Rick who unwittingly acts as a prophet mentor to the newly unearthed nihilist culture. The show exhibits its messages through both of them, and reveals over time that Morty ultimately learns more than Rick and develops over the course of the program into a jaded version of his former self, but he doesn’t stoop to nihilism. Morty strives for normativity, whereas Rick simply exists to thrive; this is visible in many episodes, but most prevalently in “The Rickshank Redemption” in which Morty denounces Rick for endangering his family and Rick murders all of his opposition for his “one armed man” the absurd and elusive Szechuan sauce (Harmon).

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NOTES

1. Morty’s parents.

2. Life has no meaning a priori… It is up to you to give it a meaning, and value is nothing but the meaning that you choose. –Jean-Paul Sartre

3. The rejection of all religious and moral principles, often in the belief that life is meaningless.

“The point is there ain’t no point.” –Cormac McCarthy, No Country For Old Men

4. What is the Absurd? It is, as may quite easily be seen, that I, a rational being, must act in a case where my reason, my powers of reflection, tell me: you can just as well do the one thing as the other, that is to say where my reason and reflection say: you cannot act and yet here is where I have to act…. The Absurd, or to act by virtue of the absurd, is to act upon faith … I must act, but reflection has closed the road so I take one of the possibilities and say: This is what I do, I cannot do otherwise because I am brought to a standstill by my powers of reflection –Søren Kierkegaard

5. A person who is guided by materialism and is usually disdainful of intellectual or artistic values.

6. “My lord, there is no such force.” –Grima Wormtongue, Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers
Religion and culture have always played a large role in folklore and fairytales. In the west, heteronormative, Christian principles influence many of Disney’s older films, particularly *Cinderella* (1950). The Brothers Grimm collection of fairytales is based on the oral tradition, or the passing down of stories from generation to generation. People passed these stories on to their children to teach lessons and to relive the magic. Now, they play a role in a society’s entertainment, like cinema. Walt Disney has just about dominated much of the Western fairytale realm with his adaptations of the Brothers Grimm tales. Of course, this is not Disney’s fault. Most of the Grimm fairytales feature women in a subservient way. A woman who is always calm, quiet, and obedient is most desirable. Disney simply takes those tales and molds them into a more child-friendly movie rather than the gory original. In short, culture has shaped these fairytales to fit a specific need. In Jack Zipes’s essay, “Why Fantasy Matters Too Much,” he gives us an idea of why the fantastical, in our case, the fairytale, means so much to us. Fairytales are often times fantastical in the sense that magic, or unexplainable phenomena occur. Zipes says that “[i]t is through fantasy that we have always sought to makes sense of the world” (78), or rather, that it is through fairytale that we find purpose, joy, and meaning. Not only that, these tales also circle back and influence future generations as adults pass them on to their children and relive their own memories. These iconic movies establish gender roles for children who then take those understandings into adulthood as they live vicariously through their own children. According to Henke et al., Disney movies and characters “become
part of a cultural repertoire of ongoing performances and reproductions of gender roles by children and adults [...] [and] these stories present powerful and sustained messages about gender [...] relations” (230). In other words, adults play those gender roles that they witnessed when they were younger and their children, in turn, mimic them. Indeed, since Disney has monopolized the fairytale industry for the West, it has created a role that girls play. In a study of the way girls and women conceptualize themselves, Carol Gilligan says that “women learn to value connections with others” (qtd in Henke et al. 230), or that they see themselves through the eyes of others. In this case, they see themselves in the way that they are represented in movies like Cinderella (1950). Young girls identify themselves as the female protagonist who “[is] portrayed as [a] helpless, passive [victim] who need protection” (234). This can be damaging, as some critics say, especially since, although Cinderella was featured in the 1950’s, it is most likely Disney’s most remade fairytale story, including live-actor films in the A Cinderella Story Series (2004-16) created by Warner Bros. The story of Cinderella is not unique to the Western world; the East also has its own rendition of the tale. The Japanese equivalent to Cinderella, Chūjō-Hime or “Guard-general princess” (Ashkenazi 129), follows a similar beginning. This “Japanese Cinderella” is born into royalty. Her mother dies and her father remarries. The girl’s stepmother hates her and sends her into the woods to be killed. She is saved, however, and brought back to her father, but she becomes disgusted by “the vanity of the world [so she] enter[s] a monastery” (129) where she meditates and eventually becomes a “living Buddha” (129). Even in the transliteration of the name, guard-general, it differs drastically. The story does not end with marriage, but it does end with a kind of “happily ever after.” Their version of happiness, though, encompasses the world as opposed to the self as seen in the Western version of Cinderella. The Western Cinderella rides off into her happily ever after, leaving behind all the creature friends she had before she was swept off her feet by Prince Charming.

When further considering the Eastern equivalent to Disney, the most accomplished animator, artist, and director most people will probably name Hayao Miyazaki. We know many of his films from our youth and even in adulthood and close examination of those films offer a similar contrast to the American and Japanese Cinderellas. Miyazaki’s films were a fresh break from Disney’s rigid fairytale trope: Every girl was in distress and every villain was a maniacal woman obsessed with youth and beauty, at least for Disney’s early adaptations. At the turning point of his career, he created Nausicaä, of the Valley of the Wind (1984), which was a film adaptation of a manga series he had been working on for years. Years after this pivotal movie was featured in Japan, it reached Western theaters. We were able to get a small
glimpse of Eastern culture. We see that Shinto lies at the heart of Japanese culture. It “has given to Japan the consciousness of self-reliance…and has stimulated Japanese mentality ” to become progressive (Mason 15). Its innovative ideas lead to Miyazaki’s creation of unique fairytale princesses that seem to come from his own imagination. That very fact seems to stem from the reality that, according to Joseph Mason, “Shinto man must rely on experience and experiment for self-development and not wait for futile aid from supernatural sources” (16), which is exactly what Nausicaä does. Much of religion and culture of the Western world influences our fairytales, such as Disney’s Cinderella (1950), while the same can be said of Hayao Miyazaki’s Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind (1984). Respectively, they both display characteristics of Christian and Shinto principles. Miyazaki presents us with a new princess, a heroine princess, soldered with and representative of Shinto principles, offering an alternative perspective on the idea of what a princess is and what she does.

Nausicaä’s reverence for the gigantic bugs indicates that the Ohmu and other insects play a Kami or god-like role, which provides an alternate perspective on how a princess interacts with nature at its ugliest. After the Torumekian ship crashes into the cliff in the Valley of the Wind, there is a rogue, flying insect injured on the ground. The male villagers bicker about whether to shoot it or not as it begins to call for help. Nausicaä, after trying to save Rastel, the princess of Pejitei, walks through the group of men and asks one of them to get her glider. She then takes out her insect charm, walks up to it, and speaks to it, saying that it is strong and able to fly (Nausicaä 1984). Not once does she think about killing the insect. This is not because she is afraid to “enrage every insect in the jungle” (1984), but because she has a pure heart with a deep reverence for life. Joseph Warren Mason tells us that the “inherent Shinto belief is that everything, whatever its nature, good or bad, is Kami-like” (58). In Shinto, Kami means “god” or “god-like.” Every thing in nature is divine spirit and divine spirit is every thing, “[f]ire, mountains, seas, every material as well as every living form of the universe is Kami or divine spirit” (62). Shinto does not distinguish between nature and divine spirit, instead “[n]ature is divine spirit” and anything within nature, whether living or not, is divine spirit (62). Nausicaä embodies this Shinto idea with her deep respect for the insects. No matter how disgusting the insect looks, she never tries to kill it. She speaks to it as if it were just another human being, encouraging it to pick itself up and return home to its jungle (Nausicaä 1984). Miyazaki instills bravery in his princess not seen in Disney’s princess, Cinderella.

In another scene, Nausicaä, Kushana, and some hostages from the Valley of the Wind have just landed in an Ohmu nest after their airships went down when a Pejitei survivor attacked them. Nausicaä reprimands Kushana
for shooting her gun and further enraging the swarming insects overhead, calling her a “scared little fox squirrel” (Nausicaä 1984). When the Ohmu emerge from the water, Nausicaä again walks forward and assures the Ohmu they mean them no harm (1984). Gold tentacle-like things engulf her in a cocoon as they examine Nausicaä’s intentions. She offers herself to be examined at the others’ expense without fear and addresses the Ohmu in a respectful manner. The way villagers react to the colossal insects mirrors the way people react to them in the real world: we hire exterminators to be rid of insects just like people in Nausicaä’s world attempt to shoot them. As we have observed before, Nausicaä’s respect represents the Shinto idea that “everybody and everything, high and low, weak and strong, are all Kami” (Mason 63). Princess Nausicaä cares for them and does her best to protect them, even though in her world, they are gigantic creatures that kill people in order to protect the toxic jungle. With this idea in mind, we see that this Miyazaki princess provides an alternative look at how the Disney princess interacts with nature, particularly nature that is cute and fuzzy as opposed to nature that is grotesque and ugly. Disney depicts the nature in Cinderella (1950) as adorable and visually appealing to young female children, while Miyazaki chooses not to mask the potential ugliness of nature. He takes the vilest of creatures and places them in a dignified role. The Ohmu in particular force Nausicaä to act of her own accord in that they do not do anything for her. With the Disney icon, cute, fuzzy animals keep Cinderella in a subservient place because they do things for her, such as helping her escape her dungeon room. This imagery seems to speak to Cinderella’s incapability to save herself from the peril she faces. She becomes even more helpless and almost vegetable-like in that she must have nonhuman beings come to her rescue. Nausicaä, on the other hand, is the one who saves the Ohmu and what is left of humanity by sacrificing herself. For Nausicaä, the nature in her world is not the nicest of places; however, she “takes a scientific and beatific interest in the forest” (Wright 4). Although Cinderella, too, takes an interest in the nature around her—the birds and rodents, the cat, dog, and horse—she takes a much more whimsical approach as opposed to Nausicaä’s reverent approach.

The Miyazaki princess features a well roundedness to her character that we do not see in the Disney counterpart, further exemplifying a different type of princess. Just like a real, female human being, Nausicaä displays a multitude of emotion throughout the film. Peter Y. Paik characterizes her as “courageous, resourceful, gentle, conscientious, and intellectually curious” (97) and explains her personality in relation to the world she was born into. The film itself exudes a tone of seriousness. When the Torumekians invade the Valley of the Wind, soldiers from the airship head straight for the tower where Nausicaä’s father lies bedridden. We see him lying still in his bedroom.
on the floor beside Obaba, a Torumekian commander, and some soldiers after Nausicaä storms in. As her eyes widen in horror and her hair rises in fury, we see a natural reaction to her father’s unjustified murder. What she does next is never seen in any of Disney’s princesses. Nausicaä proceeds to attack and successfully kill her father’s murderers, violently breaking the necks of two of them with only a stick. In this instant, she shows agility, stealth, and physical strength unseen in Cinderella. If it had not been for Lord Yupa, she would have continued to kill the other soldiers in her rage, and it is only because he is a master swordsman and takes her by surprise that he is even able to stop her. Keisha Hoerrner conducts a study on gender roles in Disney films and she has found that “Disney females are portrayed as less active males” (220), but our Miyazaki princess, who is female, is just as active, if not more so than the male villagers. In a portion of his essay on Shinto representations in Miyazaki’s work, Oscar Garza analyzes Lady Eboshi from Princess Mononoke (1999). He says that she is “not just a villain; she is shown as having both positive and negative qualities in the film” (24), just like our antagonist, Princess and Commander Kushana. If Miyazaki provides both positive and negative qualities of our villains, he will do much more for our heroines, which he does. According to Mason, “all men are Kami or divine spirit” (73); therefore, Nausicaä is also divine spirit. However, he says that “[d]ivinity does not mean perfection in Shinto” (73), whether that be physical differences or, in our case with Nausicaä, overwhelming negative emotion that drives her to kill. Nausicaä still displayed Shinto ideas although she seems to fall from grace. She does not realize the great wrong she has done until Lord Yupa steps in and keeps her from stabbing the other soldiers. It is not until Nausicaä sees the blood from Lord Yupa’s arm that she becomes overwhelmed again, but this time with shock over what she has just done. If the meaning of Shinto is “man is Heavenly spirit on earth” (56), then Nausicaä essentially can do no wrong because she is divinity on earth, just like the Ohmu and other insects in her world. Whatever decision they respectively make is justified based on Shinto principles, even taking the lives of other Kami in a blind rage.

If we consider Nausicaä’s actions as a choice, then all Kami or divine spirits have “freedom of choice […] [and] can take the wrong road as well as the right” (61). If we consider her actions to be a mistake made in a fit of blind rage, the same rule still applies. On the other hand, in Disney’s Cinderella (1950), when the cruel stepmother helps her daughters with their singing lessons, she warns them that they should, “above all else, have self control” (1950). Henke et al. quotes Brown and Gilligan as saying that the “girl who speaks quietly, calmly, who is always nice and kind, never mean or bossy” is the girl who is most desirable (qtd 231). For Cinderella, “[h]er gentleness and goodness are defined by her lack of resistance to abuse by
her stepfamily in the film’s world” (235). If that logic were to be applied to Nausicaä then she would never be desirable because she has committed the worst possible thing a woman could do, according to Christian and heteronormative principles; however, Nausicaä is not representative of the arguably Christian, heteronormative laws. As we have acknowledged before, she represents Shinto ideas. The shock and overwhelming emotion she experiences is due to the realization that she has just taken the lives of other divine spirits despite the fact that they were terribly misguided. Even though they took the life of her sick father, she still cares about them as divinity on earth, just like Cinderella continues to do the bidding of her stepmother and stepsisters despite their cruelty toward her. Lucy Wright explains that, “Shinto holds that evil does not stain one’s soul, it only obscures it temporarily.” She likens it to a mirror that is temporarily obscured by dust, which can be cleaned again with a simple wipe (3). We can apply this metaphor to Nausicaä’s behavior as she redeems herself by refusing to kill anyone else. We can also use it as the explanation as to why Miyazaki features a seemingly horrific characteristic in our heroine. By understanding that man is divine being on earth and can make mistakes while still holding on to its divinity, we can safely conclude that our Eastern example seeks to communicate that feeling intense emotion is a part of human nature, that there is no shame in making mistakes because one cannot lose his or her divinity, even if he or she blatantly chooses to do wrong. The direct message, however, that Miyazaki seems to say is that a princess who makes mistakes is still a human. In other words, a princess is a human and all humans make mistakes, but she is still divine spirit. Arguably, they both experience sadness, or rather, they have the ability to experience sadness to the point of shedding tears. However, when Nausicaä cries, it is due to the fact that she has either killed people or her people from the Valley of the Wind are going to be killed by stampeding Ohmu. Cinderella sheds tears out of a desire to go to the ball after her stepmother goes back on her promise to allow her to go. Nausicaä’s selfless emotions differ from Cinderella’s frivolous desires.

Not only does she have the ability to feel incredible rage, she also displays an intelligence that we do not see in our Western princess. After the Torumekian soldiers murder her father, Lord Yupa finds our heroine in an underground chamber full of poisonous plants. He wonders how they could be breathing without masks on when the plants that he sees “are some of the most lethal” from the jungle. He inhales deeply, finding that “the air is pure” in the chamber (Nausicaä 1984). Nausicaä then reveals that she “irrigated the chamber using water from deep underground by the castle windmill, [using] soil drawn from there as well” (1984), explaining that with “clean water and soil […] the fungi and plants do not give off poisonous vapours” (Wright 4). She turns to Lord Yupa and tells him that the topsoil in the
Valley of the Wind is polluted (Nausicaä 1984). When Lord Yupa asks her if she “discovered this all on [her] own” (1984), the question denotes that no one else, or at least Lord Yupa himself, has not discovered this fact. We are left with the only reasonable conclusion that Nausicaä is very intelligent and is capable of thinking for herself. Her motive for collecting the spores and growing the toxic plants is to find a cure for her father’s illness (1984). Nausicaä searches for a way to reverse her father’s disease and ends up figuring out that the polluted soil causes the plants to become poisonous, by far a significant scientific discovery. We find no such display of intelligence in Cinderella besides her knowledge on completing household chores.

However, both Nausicaä and Cinderella have desires for change in their lives, but each one respectively goes about obtaining that change in different ways. Cinderella’s incessant belief that if she has “faith in [her] dreams […] [and that] if [she] keep[s] on believing, a dream that [she] wish[es] will come true” (Cinderella 1950) helps her to push forward each day with a positive outlook, but if we look at this film as a reflection of Christian principles, then “faith without works is dead” (New King James Jam. 2.26), and her dream would never come to fruition since she only does as she is told. However, we are dealing with a fairytale princess whose dreams do not go beyond verbal power, beauty, and wealth. Her dreams are not as big as Nausicaä’s for they are superficial and expected. Nausicaä places others before herself and is self-sacrificing, as she does not care what happens to herself, but what happens to her villagers and the insects. Although both Eastern and Western representations of nature have a human-like conscience, the Eastern places a demand in the protagonist’s desire for change while the Western simply highlights the pitiable circumstance she is in. There is no demand for the Western to act because everything is always done for her, from waking up in the morning to showering and getting dressed. The desire is so strong in the Eastern representation that she becomes active, while the Western remains passive, but that passivity is enabled. Nausicaä’s deep connection with Shinto principles gives her that active desire to find a solution.

Miyazaki seems to subvert the fairytale princess trope brought about by Disney in an overt way. Both Nausicaä and Cinderella’s similar change in wardrobe, in regards to color, seems to highlight the differences between the two princesses. The first time we see Nausicaä change clothes is when she is held prisoner by the remaining Pejiteis. At first, she has on her normal garb: a blue top with khaki-colored pants and boots, but when the Pejitei men lock her away, Rastel’s mother and a girl about Nausicaä’s age help her escape. Nausicaä changes clothing with the girl, donning a pink dress, khaki-colored pants and brown boots. The significance of this change does not make sense unless we look at it in conjunction with Cinderella’s
dress. When a messenger delivers a letter to all the young maidens in the surrounding towns, Cinderella rushes to give it to her stepmother and stepsisters. Cinderella is then allowed to attend the ball if she can finish all of her chores. She begins designing a dress, which her animal friends finish for her, and it is pink. Since “Shinto has given to Japan the consciousness of self-reliance and confidence in action” (Mason 15), Miyazaki seems to have chosen the same color clothing in a way to call attention to the stark differences in both Nausicaä and Cinderella. Miyazaki gives agency to Nausicaä while Disney keeps Cinderella subservient and almost complacent in that she cannot change her plight. Mason claims that “the creative impetus [has never] been absent from Japan’s national life […] and never have they feared to try to making something new grow out of the old” (17), which is evidenced by Miyazaki’s blatant inclusion of this bold change.

He also seems to undermine Cinderella’s predicament in the second wardrobe change. However, Nausicaä’s is not a wardrobe change at all, while Cinderella’s is. After Nausicaä is able to stop the two Pejitei men from using the baby Ohmu as bait, the young, wounded Ohmu tries calling out to the herd of adult Ohmu. When it tries to go to the herd, Nausicaä warns it that the lake it wants to cross is full of acid. She tries to stop the Ohmu with her own body and by doing so, she is soaked with its blood. Ohmu blood is blue and, instead of muddying the color of the dress, it completely overtakes it (Nausicaä 1984). This seems to have been done purposefully because, in Disney’s film, Cinderella’s fairy godmother repairs her torn, pink dress and makes it a beautiful, blue ball gown. This places an emphasis on the way Cinderella looks as she admires her reflection in a fountain. Nausicaä, on the other hand, never once looks into the Acid Lake, not only because it is heavily polluted and probably wouldn’t reflect anything, but mostly because she has never concerned with her appearance, highlighting the differences between the two princesses. At the end of Miyazaki’s film, the Ohmu bring Nausicaä, dressed in all blue, back to life after they halt their stampede. This is not to be mistaken with being saved, however, because Nausicaä’s act of selflessness in her sacrificing her life to save her people in the Valley of the Wind is exactly what stops the Ohmu from continuing their assault. Thus, Nausicaä becomes the savior, as opposed to being saved by the prince in Disney’s film, and the Ohmu uplift her in a physical and literal display of exaltation. Her blue dress looks like new rather than soggy and soiled, signifying an exaltation beyond and subversion of the Eastern counterpart because she saves lives rather than being saved.

This alternative look on Nausicaä as a princess compared to Cinderella provides insight into their lives: Miyazaki gives us a realistic view of life. Although both provide a sense of hope at the end, each have great differences.
WORKS CITED
Problematicizing Heteronormative Gender Roles in *She’s the Man*
by Katie Kirk

Great strides have been made in favor of women’s rights over the course of the past century. However, there are many issues that still remain and work against females such as discrimination based on gender in the workplace, athletics, and media; objectification; sexual harassment; and being perceived as inferiors. While activists and feminists have fought, marched, and labored to call attention to such biases that continue to affect and weaken the female gender, one overlooked, yet effective, medium is found in the media. Filmmakers use their public platform to cast a light on the struggles women encounter and critiques these social issues. One such critique of gender expectations, norms, and stereotypes occur in Andy Fickman’s film *She’s the Man* (2006), a modern day depiction of the well know fairytale that includes the archetype of the disguised female. *She’s the Man* makes use of a female protagonist who undergoes this archetypal disguise, which may also be referred to as “The Woman Warrior,” in order to highlight heteronormative gender expectations and achieve her ultimate goal. The movie uses various approaches to accomplish this critique: satire, humor, romance, and a main character caught up in a dysfunctional family. This movie positions the protagonist, Viola/Sebastian, so that viewers see issues with the way both men and women are treated, and it makes fun of expectations put on both genders. It also pokes fun at the people who place unfair restrictions on genders by humiliating characters with such mindsets throughout the movie. Thus, the film helps the audience to arrive at a place where they critique people who place unrealistic assumptions on heteronormative gender roles based on their gender or sexuality. Andy Fickman’s film *She’s the Man* offers a critique of western heteronormative gender roles established by a society that places higher values on masculine strength, which, in turn, causes women to take extreme measures and reveals the problems men and women are confronted with as a result.
Why do we have fairytales, and where do we get the ideas to create them? Fairytales can be beautiful pieces of art that will inspire young men and women for centuries. These tales are typically presented to people during their childhoods. Fairytales can also be useful tools to confront to a social problem. Many do not realize that *She’s the Man* is actually a very old story that they are familiar with from their childhood. The central idea of this modern movie is directly derived from the famous ancient Asian fairytale that involves the archetype of the woman warrior, which tells the story of a girl who disguises herself as a man. Both of these stories involve the female character disguising herself as a man because of the societal binds that tie her. This archetypal character dates back centuries. Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* provides insight on such characters. Kingston’s text contains stories of five women – Kingston’s late aunt, “No-Name Woman;” a legendary female warrior, Fa Mu Lan; her mother, Brave Orchid; another aunt, Moon Orchid; and Kingston herself – that highlight the difficulties they face as women and measures they had to take in order to overcome their gender-based adversities. The section about Fa Mu Lan is titled “White Tigers” shares a story about a young woman who trains her whole life to fight in battle. When her father and brother are drafted to partake in the war, she chooses to take their spot. However, women are not allowed to join the military under any circumstances. With her warrior skills, male disguise, and beads, she leaves home to go take her father’s place in the fighting (Kingston). San Souci offers another version of this archetypal character through his story that deals more with “a gender issue by portraying a girl who wants to become an idealized ‘woman warrior’” (Hseihi 218). Another well-known woman warrior, who is very similar to Fa Mu Lan and many believe to be inspired by a real person, is Mulan. Disney’s story of the character Mulan originates from China and involves a woman who became an “icon of heroic patriotism […] fueled especially by the powerful tradition of Orthodox Confucian ethics” (Lan 230). Her father, a retired general, had taught her how to use a sword and ride a horse when she was a girl. This was very unusual for a woman to be knowledgeable in such areas because their warriors were exclusively male. When the military leaders demanded that her old, feeble father or young brother report for battle, she disguised herself as a man and went in their places. Mulan fought alongside the men, and she even won medals for her performance and immense bravery. Still, no one discovered her true gender. Mulan is a figure who “enshrines the essential values of Chinese culture” (Lan 229). She displayed outstanding courage, and she committed a selfless act in order to protect the people and country she loved. This kind of mindset is what keeps the harmony running China, and harmony is what the Chinese culture strive to maintain. However, the person who demonstrated such brilliant Chinese values never would
have been given any recognition had she not concealed her true gender. As a woman, she would not have been allowed to step in for her father and brother. She would not have been able to exhibit her strengths and abilities to fight. She would not have been able to serve or protect her country. She would not have been able to accomplish any of this for the sole reason that she was a woman (Jing). With that being said, there has been much debate over whether or not Mulan is simply a character in fairytales or an actual woman whose actions has inspired others for centuries. While there is not a definite answer, I believe the legend of Mulan is derived from legitimate Chinese woman. This idea is based on the fact that women clearly did not have many rights or freedoms. If women were not allowed to serve their nation, I doubt they would have had the abilities to write such stories or that their stories or would carry much weight. The fact that the legend of Mulan has travelled over the globe for countless years points to her authenticity. She fought her way into the military through her impersonation of a man, and therefore fought her way into history. The tale of Mulan has inspired numerous other stories meant to confront the issue of gender inequality for women. These retellings tend to closely relate to the society with which they are produced. This helps the audience connect with the story in general, which makes it easier to acknowledge the concerns within the time period. Awareness and accepting the fact that there is a problem is the first step in making a conscious effort to change, work on, and fix the problems. Andy Fickman’s film, *She’s the Man*, offers a version of Mulan that possesses many of the traits previously described. The film grabs people’s attention because it is presented in digital form. This retelling is directed at a teenage audience, and technology in general stirs feelings of familiarity and excitement for this age group. *She’s the Man* tells the story of Viola Hastings, who is a soccer loving high school girl that gets her passion stripped from her when Cornwall High School cuts the girls’ soccer team. She is rejected and mocked when she asked if she could simply try out for the boys’ team. The coach never even considers this as an option as a result of his extremely sexist attitude. Viola then decides she is going to disguise herself, dress up, and attend a school, Illyria High School, as her twin brother, Sebastian Hastings. Sound familiar? Viola tries out, and she works tirelessly to achieve her goal of playing on the men’s team and defeating Cornwall. This process allows her soccer skills to be appreciated for what they are, and appreciated without any ties to her gender. This experience highlights the measures she must take in order to get any kind of respect or recognition. In the meantime, Hastings must also convince others that she is a man. Her experience provides viewers with the ability to identify ridiculous things men do and say through her over the top, hypermasculine behavior she displays while she is disguised as Sebastian. This, in
turn, also calls attention to the ways men are expected to act and feel they need to perform if they want to be taken seriously or seen as masculine or manly. *She’s the Man* therefore signifies the unreasonable standards set for both men and women through the humorous narrative of Viola Hastings.

This movie came out nearly 10 years ago, but the ideas and issues the film discusses are still very prevalent today. One idea that has not changed is how obsessed our culture is with masculinity. What is “masculinity?” The word itself is defined as “possessing the qualities traditionally associated with man.” This idea of masculinity has progressed into a very problematic issue over the years because it is difficult to pin point exactly what makes a man. However, the topic is not one that has developed over the last 10 years. Masculinity has been a dominant matter since God placed Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden due to the fact that it impacts the way the world views any man. If a man is not tall enough, strong enough, smart enough, or cannot provide for a family, is he really even a man? The film attempts to offer a better solution for how we view men and places them in comparison to women by providing a character who embodies countless stereotypical qualities of society’s expectations of masculinity and another character whose heightens the typically desired masculine traits. In 2007, *People’s Magazine* “Sexiest Man of the Year” was awarded to actor George Clooney, known for his silver fox appearance and striking acting performances in *Batman and Robin*, *Syriana*, and *Ocean’s 11* (Biography). That year, Clooney was the man a majority of males were compared to, and he became the standard by which other men were judged. Men should be protectors, highly skilled with weapons, cunning, and use their brains to obtain their goals even if that means practicing unethical behavior or hurting others in the process. And then they should be praised for their actions. These mindsets still exist today. Society has this absurd obsession with men and how they should function. This not only affects women, but it also causes many men to suffer as well. Various writers work to problematize the pressure men experience in their pursuit of becoming, what others believe, a man. They call attention to a few of the many issues that accompany such mindsets and standards, and they suggest the deeper internal and external troubles it brings upon men. Masculinity is a complex, complicated matter because it attempts to put boundaries on men that tell them who they should be and need to strive to be like. This restricting mindset of what qualities a man should possess has become a very prevalent issue that needs to be discussed explicitly. Reina Green’s article on male figure skating calls attention to such pressures men undergo. Figure skating is popular sport that requires an incredible amount of athletic ability, hard work, and dedication. However, the societal standards of masculinity result in leaders trying to force male figure skaters to perform in ways, which attempt to prevent viewers and
fans from associating the sport with homosexuality. Green says, “National sports organizations and their corporate sponsors want athletes to conform to heteronormative gender roles. Male athletes must appear strong and powerful” (Green, 43). She also states, “Regardless of their sexual orientation, male figure skaters must adopt specifically gendered performances both on and off the ice that emphasize and ‘make belief’ in their masculinity” (Green, 43). This notion of “acting” or “performing” is a result of our society’s obsession with its own ideas of masculinity. A similar scene to the ice skating male athletes is found in She’s the Man once Viola transformed herself to appear like her brother, Sebastian. Viola is overly masculine in order to mimic the accepted actions and conversations of a “man.” In her transformation process, she acquires facial hair, exercises outward anger or frustration, practices a cocky and arrogant “strut,” wears a shorter haired wig, hocks a loogie, and chest bumps companions in an effort to be rough. She’s the Man depicts male and female heteronormative gender roles to critique the arbitrary nature of them through the portrayal of the film’s lead character, Viola Hastings. Hastings’s actions throughout the film help call attention to stereotypes that are commonly associated with men and women. This is often done through humor and satire, which is one of the aspects that set this movie apart from many woman warrior storylines. The character of Viola Hastings first opposes traditional gender roles and is often rejected and seen as abnormal because of how she chooses to live her life. Hastings’s character is immediately presented as a strong female when she breaks up with her boyfriend, Justin, for not supporting her and making her look foolish in front of others. He tries to take retract his earlier statements and contradicts himself in the process by saying girls aren’t better at soccer than boys although he had just told her previously that she was better than half the guys on his team. He says to her, “No Viola. End of discussion,” to which she responds, “FINE. End of relationship.” Justin then says, “Baby, don’t be like that. I… I just don’t want to see you get hurt” (She’s the Man). She refuses to accept this excuse as justifiable because it does not matter what he wants. It is not up to him to decide what is best for her because he is not her master, and Viola’s life and choices belong to her. This type of attitude toward independence is the reason so many others struggle to accept her. This independent demeanor and refusal to allow mistreatment from anyone opposes the stereotypical woman who needs a man to feel complete and will do or say whatever is she must in order to please and keep him. However, Hastings makes it seem like that type of submissive behavior is not even an option. She chooses herself over others because she is not willing to sacrifice her own self-respect in order to please a man. Her outspoken nature makes others feel somewhat awkward because most women are afraid to let their voices be heard. Another seem-
ingly strange quality Viola possesses is her total acceptance and welcoming of roughness. After she is basically pawned off as a prostitute at the kissing booth, her over protective ex-boyfriend Justin and newfound crush Duke, with whom she just finished making out, start to brawl over Viola. In response to this, Viola jumps on the back of one of the boys trying to get them to stop. Her mother attempts to scream with her tiny voice, “Viola! Stop! This isn’t ladylike” (She’s the Man). Viola does not think twice before making her decision to immerse herself in the middle of this scuffle, in a short sundress, because she does not fear aggression or violence. Another example of her acceptance of violence is seen at the Debutante Luncheon. The whole environment makes Viola uneasy because it is over the top with single sided misconceptions for how females are “expected” to conduct themselves. Again, Viola ends up getting into a physical altercation in the bathroom between her, Monique, and Olivia. The coordinator and president of the Stratford Junior League, Cheryl Lancaster says, “When debutantes disagree, they say it with their eyes. Well Hastings, why is it that I always find you in the middle of a tussle?” (She’s the Man). Viola definitely is not applying this traditional, sexist advice to her life. She would much rather fight it out than suppress an issue and let it build up over time to cause an even greater, unfixable problem. This type of behavior is supposed to be uncomfortable for women, so she seems crazy doing it, especially more than once. Other unique qualities that make Viola stand out are also obvious at the Debutante Luncheon. To begin, she shows up late to this seemingly important event and is wearing a blue jean jacket, while a majority of the other girls are donning formal sundresses with a full face of makeup and nicely fixed hair. She is loud, and she is quite noticeably a messy eater. So much so that her mother feels inclined to tell her to “Chew like [she has] a secret” (She’s the Man). Her natural behavior contradicts the heteronormative gender roles for femininity. However, Viola’s presence brings out other’s true colors. Her character gives others permission to be themselves. So while she may make some feel uncomfortable and awkward, this extreme difference also causes her character to stir feelings of awe from viewers and fellow characters.

Viola Hastings chooses to go undercover as a male in order to chase her dreams and reach personal goals, but her constant comparison to boys is one of the driving factors in this decision. Throughout the movie, it becomes apparent that the standard for value and worth is based off of men. This outlook is obvious when Hastings’s high school, Cornwall, cuts the girls soccer team. All Viola and her teammates want to do is play the sport they love. However, the misogynistic boys head coach laughs at the idea of girls playing with boys. He mocks her and claims, “Girls aren’t as fast as boys. It’s not me talking; it’s a scientific fact. Girls can’t beat boys. It’s as simple
as that” (*She’s the Man*). First of all, this generalized statement is false and inaccurate. There are plenty of girls who are physically faster than boys. Regardless of this invalid point, Viola Hastings’s skills are measured upon her gender rather than her physical abilities. Anyone who knows anything about soccer knows that quickness is a factor in the game, but being fast does not automatically equal success. Speed also does not make one player better than another who has labored tirelessly to develop their footwork and the fundamentals soccer requires. Still, these facts are overlooked because the default society has ingrained in our minds involves the idea that the scale for many areas, including athleticism in this case, sees men as the pinnacle of worth and greatness. Susan Cahn’s article offers one reason why men feel as if they are the only ones who should play sports. Cahn states, “The ‘maleness’ of sport derived from a gender ideology which labeled aggression, physicality, competitive spirit, and athletic skill as masculine attributes necessary for achieving true manliness” (Cahn). In other words, sports are stereotypically a man’s domain. The assumption that women are not as “good” as men is a direct result of the fact that they cannot think past the stereotype associated with women. Women are stereotyped as being weak, emotional, small, dependent, and simply inferior to men. In the film, the coach measures female success on their physical traits alone. Hastings’s well deserved position as a player on the team is grounded in the idea that she must play like a guy. Athletic ability should not be centered on whether or not she is as fast as a boy. *She’s the Man* presents this issue through athleticism, but it is pointing to a bigger issue, which is women’s worthiness and value always having to model and mirror men. Along the same lines, in the scene prior to the previously discussed, Justin openly (but in private) tells Viola, “You’re already better than half the guys on my [soccer] team” (*She’s the Man*). While at first this proclamation may seem like a compliment, it is in fact another slap in the face to Viola and women in general. The issue lies in the part of the statement ‘half the guys on my team.’ Justin is judging Viola’s abilities as an athlete and soccer player based on how well she lines up against and compares to boys. He could have easily said, “You’re a really talented soccer player.” Instead, he felt the need to include how she matches up to men because society praises and glorifies men as the standard for success and greatness.

Again, women are compared and insulted while Viola is undergoing her transformation to become “Sebastian.” Viola gets very anxious and starts to doubt herself because she does not think she will be able to pull off the disguise. She is expressing her doubts to Paul, her hairdresser friend who helped Viola create the male version of herself. Viola exclaims, “I just can’t do this!” Paul declares, “Just remember: inside every girl, there’s a boy” (*She’s the Man*). This statement was meant to be humorous, comforting,
and motivating, but it is actually insulting. It implies that the girl must tap into this so-called internal boy in order to be recognized and viewed as good enough. Being a female alone falls short of the standard of being recognized as worthy. It suggests that the solution to this inferiority problem is to find the man inside, which indicates to women that she will never be accepted simply because of her gender. The glorification of men continues to diminish women and their opportunities because of how heavily we focus on men. Women are often overlooked and must work hard to get appreciation for anything other than their physical appearance. This expectation causes women to feel the need to perform according to these expectations.

Another critique She’s the Man highlights is how heavily and frequently women are objectified. The opening frame of the film shows girls frolicking around the beach in tiny bikinis, zeroing in on the stereotypical attractive physical body parts on a woman’s body – her breasts and buttocks – and slowing down the motion of their movements. This immediately calls attention to the idea that women are objects of pleasure for the male gaze to enjoy. It appears to offer viewers with the permission to objectify women and look at them as pieces of meat. Leah Phillips takes a stance against the attention to female bodies and the unfair standards to which they are expected to uphold. Her article Real Women Aren’t Shiny (or Plastic) highlights how an adolescent girl’s “body – discursively produced body often [bears] little resemblance to her flesh-and-blood, material body – is a product of the media and social media culture, […] and this space’s ubiquitous repetition of a particular image – young, fit, and able – that establishes the ideal body” (Phillips 41). She points out how media takes a woman’s body, and projects it as the most important part of a who she is, while highlighting the expectations she is also told to meet.

Later in the film, Viola is talking to her brother, Sebastian, about his controlling, hateful, overbearing girlfriend, and the objectification of women appears again. Viola says, “Monique was looking for you… Why do you even date her, anyway?” Sebastian replies, “She’s hot. It’s a guy thing” (She’s the Man). Her personality and how she treats others does not matter because her physical appearance trumps these poor, less than attractive, qualities. The factor that makes him continue dating his girlfriend rests solely in her appearance. This in itself is objectifying because, yet again, it insinuates that female significance is measured in her ability to provide a man with some type of satisfaction. Not only is this objectifying for women, but it places stereotypes on men as well. When Sebastian claims that this kind of thinking is a guy thing, he is suggesting that all men think about women this way.

In addition to the stereotypes placed upon women in Fickman’s film, there are also stereotypical male gender tropes and accepted standards present through the character of Sebastian’s Illyria High School room-
mate, Duke Orsino. Duke is played by the beloved, fan favorite, Channing Tatum. Duke's character provides the audience with a pristine example of heteronormative masculinity society approves of and desires. He has an incredibly attractive face, and he is physically strong. Orsino exemplifies “tall, dark, and handsome” in *She’s the Man*. He is athletic, and he possesses the stereotypical “dumb jock” mentality in the classroom. Because of all of these factors, Duke sits firmly at the top of the social pyramid. The reason for this is because of society’s value of masculine strength. Duke clearly possesses this strength along with many other desirable “manly” traits. When Sebastian reveals that he has a twin sister, who is really herself, Duke and his posse ask if she's hot. Sebastian, using her respectful senses, tells them, “I guess so. She's got a great personality” (*She’s the Man*). Duke seems less than impressed with her. Describing a girl as having a great personality is associated with the understanding that she has an unattractive face. In other words, the film’s pristine example of masculinity is only concerned with the outer appearance of a girl. Following this scene, Duke’s crush, Olivia Lennox, walks in, and the camera zooms in on her buttocks, reflecting why the group of guys are interested. One of the guys fills Sebastian in on Olivia’s recent breakup, and he says, “I hear she’s a total mess now, really vulnerable. Confidence, self-esteem is way down. In man words, it’s time to pounce” (*She’s the Man*). This kind of talk coming from the movie’s standard of masculinity sheds light on how society believes a “real man” is expected to act and think. Another negative quality found in Duke that is praised by the film occurs during the restaurant scene. Paul stages a scenario in an attempt to make Sebastian look “cooler,” so Duke and his guys will accept him. Paul and Viola get a few of their girl friends to show up at the restaurant and pretend to be super into Sebastian. Then Monique, Viola’s brother’s actual girlfriend, appears, and things get awkward. Sebastian tries to hide, but ends up with her. He (Viola) tells her, “You’re hot, Monique. Smoking hot. But there are plenty of hot girls. And the truth is, you have nothing else to offer. And when my eyes are closed. I see you for what you truly are, which is UGLY! We’re done!” (*She’s the Man*). Immediately after, Duke yells, “That was amazing! You the man!” (*She’s the Man*). This reaction was not a result of the actual words Sebastian said to Monique, but rather the fact that he publicly embarrassed her by breaking up with her. In that moment, Sebastian becomes Dukes idol becomes because the guy they originally thought of as lame is apparently a ladies’ man who is not afraid to publicly humiliate one of those girls.

However, Duke Orsino’s character is later utilized to problematize this exact same thinking. Duke is conflicted between pursuing Viola or Olivia. Sebastian tries to help him work through his thoughts and asks, “What does your heart tell you? I mean, which one would you rather see NAKED?!"
(She’s the Man). Sebastian (Viola) retracts the original question because men are portrayed as beings who are supposed to think this way. Duke counters this idea when he asks, “Why do you…? Why? Why do always do that? Why do you always talk about girls in such graphic terms?” (She’s the Man). This conversation helps call out men who do exactly this – talk about women inappropriately, think about females disrespectfully, and view women as objects for men to gawk after. Establishing Duke as the model for what men should strive to be, it makes utilizing his character easier and allows it to more beneficially highlight a commonly overlooked problem within the male stereotype. This complication of gender expectations is actually making a rise in media. David Buchbinder notes how in many movies and television shows today “individuals may, of course, choose to refuse that pressure [to appear highly masculine] and deliberately to play with gender, thereby challenging […] its regulatory norms” (Buchbinder). This is a step in the right direction because men are beginning to recognize that they do not have to conform to societal expectations of masculinity in order to remain a man. This, in turn, will help women feel less pressure to conceal their feminine side in order to meet the standards of greatness measured by masculinity.

She’s the Man critiques western heteronormative gender roles. Andy Fickman does this by calling attention to the excessive praise and value placed on masculinity, which, in turn, reveals how this kind of attention and fixation negatively affects women. The film uses satirical humor provided from the female protagonist to call attention to and poke fun at gender expectations and people who place them upon women and men. Fickman’s objective is to open the eyes of his audience and encourage them to confront the issues presented in the movie because these issues also exist in real life. The characters in She’s the Man motivate viewers to recognize the glorification of masculinity within society, so that women will no have to fight the battle of being told they are not enough because of they are female. Andy Fickman’s film She’s the Man inspires change.

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The Dark Transformation of Youth and the Deadly power of Betrayal in Leigh Bardugo’s “When Water Sang Fire”  
by Jason McCurry

In *The Language of Thorns* by Leigh Bardugo the story “When Water Sang Fire” conveys the transmogrification of the protagonist, Ulla from Ingénue to Creatrix and, later, to lethal murderer. The juxtaposition of Ulla against Signy, her friend helps the audience to see the intense shift between the stages of Ulla’s character and the ways in which she evolves. The evolution is further highlighted by the text’s use of color and the character’s prejudice against the other. Also the usage of female pain in relation to the mirror helps the reader understand the transformation of pain into pure power. Additionally, beauty and its manipulative use highlight how Ulla is forged.

The stages of Ulla’s evolution ultimately help the reader shift their idea of Ursula from Disney’s *The Little Mermaid* since Ulla is later revealed as a young Ursula. Ursula is gray-skinned and is known for her powerful magic and charming manner. The importance of the various stages of Ulla show the ways in which Ulla transformed from naïve ingénue to vicious murderer, the form Ursula retains in *The Little Mermaid*. Ursula’s character is based upon centuries old legends of sea witches. When the lens of Ursula in *The Little Mermaid* and lore concerning sea witches is applied, the reader further understand the transformation of Ulla and her final form as Ursula.

The ways in which Ulla stands out among her people incite the beginning of her Ingénue phase. In her Ingénue phase she is a child, void of knowledge of the world and naïve. Ulla is a Sildroher, a mermaid who is able to use magic though the use of her voice. Ulla is set apart in this phase of her transformation due to her unusually powerful magic. The Sildroher people take notice of Ulla and her power saying “They had no word for witch. Magic flowed through all of them, a song no mortal could hear, that only
the water folk could reproduce. In some it seemed to rush in and out like a tide, leaving little in its wake. But in others, in girls like Ulla, the current caught on some dark thing in their hearts and eddied there, forming deep pools of power” (194). Such a passage helps to set Ulla apart in regard to her power due to the dark place in which she naively pulls it from. The Sildroher have no word for what she is. In the context of their language she doesn’t exist. Other Sildroher, such as Signy, are like calm waters, unexciting and normal. Ulla is like a deadly storm, quiet at first but containing a power dark and all her own. Whilst others use their magic and nothing more than a tune escapes their lips, Ulla’s magic is pulled from somewhere dark and deep. She is made strong by the depth of her power, it is one of the traits that sets her apart and allows her to later be noticed by Prince Roffe. Tina M. Sutton, of Psychonomic Society discusses the meaning of color, including black “The results revealed that color was often listed as a perceptual feature, and it was usually listed as the first or second feature in the list. The color red was most associated with anger, green with disgust, black with fear, yellow with happiness, blue with sadness, and bright with surprise”. It is as though Ulla’s color knows about her future as a lethal murderess. She is so powerful, it should incite fear. During her Ingénue phase she is unaware of her immense power. It reveals that she is inwardly chaotic and is awaiting the right circumstances to awaken her deadly, dormant form. These early aspects of Ulla’s life reveal to the reader the undeniable inevitability behind her later actions. She doesn’t wish to awaken the dormant Ursula sleeping within the fathoms of her heart, her later circumstances demand them to survive. She has always been set apart in her darkness and is made more powerful by it.

Ulla exists in a magically charged aquatic limbo tinted grey her Ingénue phase. The usage of grey in relation to Ulla colors her with images of the unknown due to black and white being the mixture that makes gray. Black is typically seen as darkness and evil whilst white is connected to purity. As a grey being, Ulla is in-between these distinctions. In her ingénue phase Ulla is a gray tinted possibility “Of course, Signy knew Ulla with her black hair and gray-tinged skin” (194). These varied depictions of Ulla’s color speak to the innate implication of the colors she was born with. In Ulla the grayness of her signals to her instability. Grey serves to “evoke an enigmatic world that is neutral and unstable, an intermediate zone fading from darkness to light, then suddenly back again…. gray is both a beginning and an end, diminution as well as potential, ashes but also fertile –very fragile- gray matter” (103 Enoch). Through Enoch’s analysis the reader better understands the subtleties associated with the color of Ulla. Ulla is a dangerous element in regard to her exponentially strong voice. She is in command of a gift that could do either great good or abhorrent destruction. She can either destroy
or create. These points culminate to amplify an atmosphere of uneasiness around Ulla. She is a danger due to her not knowing the full extent of her power, like a bomb absent of intentions. Waiting for the right trigger to destroy everything. Ulla is only pacified by the opportunistic friendship with Signy.

The redness of Signy warns of her predatory friendship with Ulla. Ulla and Signy are placed together due to the absence of Signy’s partner. Ulla hates the way in which she is seen, Bardugo writes “She hated Signy for being so afraid to be paired with her even briefly, hated her classmates for their stifled giggles and sly eyes, but mostly Ulla wished that she could kill the thing inside herself that still longed for their approval.” (197). During this first phase, Signy, Ulla’s friend, preys upon the nativity of Ulla. Signy is showed as the more powerful social figure. She is in a way, the most popular girl in school, though devoid of extraordinary voice magic. Whilst Ulla is unpopular yet contains powerful voice magic. When viewing the beginning of their friendship from this perspective the audience is able to understand how rare their union is. After Ulla and Signy’s union proves to be the most powerful thing her classmates have seen, only then does Signy accept her “when Signy looked at Ulla and grinned…all of the bitterness dissolved… and Ulla felt nothing but love…from then on, that was the way of things-Signy and Ulla together” (199). Signy is an opportunist preying upon the power of Ulla, acting as the popular girl giving her attention to those who can help her attain her goals. In the beginning when Signy knew nothing of Ulla and her power, Ulla was nothing to her. Signy has been awakened to the potential of Ulla she sees a way to manipulate her. Ulla has always known of Signy and Ulla is aware of the social power Signy holds. Through this lens the reader is able to understand the predatory nature regarding the beginning of their friendship. It allows an insight into the drive to bind them together and why Signy sought her out. It was a power play on the part of Signy and nothing more.

Through the popularity of Signy and her striking red hair, she gains the attention of Ulla. Signy is well known by Ulla saying “Ulla knew Signy because of her hair- vibrant red that flushed like a warning and gave her away wherever she went.” (194). Through this quote the reader understands the alarming nature of Signy. Through this quote by Andrew J. Elliot the text takes on a deeper meaning concerning the color of Signy “Longer-wavelength colors like red are experienced as arousing” (Elliot). Such a quote helps to highlight the ways in which Signy awakens Ulla’s potential. Signy provides the self-confidence through her apparent friendship to Ulla to allow Ulla to unleash her power. The redness of Signy hinges upon the way in which readers are programmed to see red, one such example is following “One source of this red-danger link is presumed to be teachers’
use of red ink to mark students’ mistakes and errors. This specific association is likely grounded in a more general societal association between red and danger where negative possibilities are salient, such as stop signs and warning signals” (Elliot). Ulla’s ignorance regarding the innate danger of Signy regarding her redness hinge upon Ulla’s being in her Ingénue phase. It speaks to the way in which she ignores the warning, just to have a friend. The reader is innately aware of something Ulla is not: that being the danger that Signy represents.

Due to Ulla’s early social isolation in the Ingénue phase, she uses that as her fuel to succeed in regards to the royals. After Ulla and Signy combine their voices to create a living garden, a magical rarity, only then are they noticed by the prince, Roffe. The scene of the citizens and the people are seen differently by the girls. “Ulla gazed at the crowd above her, around her. She could feel their curiosity like a questing tentacle, hear her name like a warbling, hateful melody. Is that the girl? She’s positively gray. Looks nothing like her mother or father. Well, she belongs to someone, unlucky soul” (200).

Ulla is seen as ugly and undesirable due to her gray tint. Ulla is ostracized is the force behind her strong need to succeed. Abrams notes there are two reactions to social isolation, retaliation or reconciliation. He states “Several studies have shown support for the idea that individuals who are ostracized, excluded, or rejected behave in ways that will increase their inclusionary status.” (49 Abrams). “[Researchers] found that rejected individuals retaliated against the rejecters, especially against dyads composed of a male who initiated the rejection on a female who followed suit” (52 Abrams). These varied reactions strengthen the point of Ulla reacting in a way that shows her need for approval. Currently she is seeking the approval of the royals because doing so would vindicate her of the negative association the Sildroher society has placed upon her. She gained the acceptance of her classmates through her friendship with Signy, now she seeks the vindication of the people as a whole, her interaction with Prince Roffe is the personification of these needs. Through him she can be seen how she sees herself, as a worthy and powerful user of magic. Later during the Lethal Murderess form reconciliation morphs into dark retaliation.

Through the success of Signy gaining the attention of the Prince, she is able to help Ulla evolve to Creatrix. Signy sees this as a path to escape her station in life “She had chosen Ulla that day in the nautilus hall, drunk on the power they’d created together, and they had built a secret world for themselves where it did not matter that Signy was poor, or that she was pretty but not pretty enough to rise above her station. Here, before the Sildroher and the royal family, the shelter of that world seemed very far away” (201). Signy is aware of how she is seen in her society. She is poor and the royals represent wealth and power. Ulla is the more powerful of
the two, and Signy is just someone to apply the added power so they may succeed. She is a magical transistor, there to amplify Ulla’s magic. Though Signy has something Ulla lacks, that of beauty.

Through the dichotomy of beauty and lack of it, Ulla stands apart from Signy and becomes the Creatrix. After Ulla and Signy create the living garden Prince Roffe comments on their singing “The sound was so ugly” (204) and later Ulla retorts saying “Magic doesn’t require beauty” She said. Easy magic is pretty. Great magic asks that you trouble the waters, it requires a disruption, something new” (205). Prince Roffe symbolizes the power each woman craves, he is the male personification of the beauty each one lacks. That being the beauty so Ulla can be noticed and the beauty so that Signy can be a princess. Signy stays quiet during the back and forth of Roffe and Ulla. Such a silence shows the nature of Signy, to simply be taken with the current. Whilst Ulla speaks up and challenges the prince and his negative ideals concerning her strange song. In the instant that Ulla challenges ideals of beauty she becomes less. According the Naomi Wolf “When women in culture show character, they are not desirable, as opposed to the desirable artless ingénue…heroism is about individuality, interesting and ever changing, while “beauty” is generic, boring and inert.” (59 Wolf). Ulla finds power in her state of discoloration and shame. It sets Signy as the boring beauty vacant of autonomy and individualistic desires. The earlier argument between Prince Roffe and Ulla concerning beautiful magic being easy help bolster the Ulla’s individuality. Such a separation between Ulla and Signy concerning beauty helps the reader to understand how the girls see themselves. In doing so the reader understands the reason Ulla changes and later highlights the true intent and nature of Signy. In this niche of fiery personality Ulla awakens, she transforms from simple and naïve ingénue to magic personified in her Creatrix form.

The Creatrix phase of Ulla is further signaled through the splitting of her own body and the creation of a human one. Ulla’s painful passage into the Creatrix phase is a new birth of self, due to the pain she endures.

There is no pain like the pain of transformation. A mermaid does not simply shed her skin and find a mortal body beneath. To walk on land is to have your body cleft in two, split into something other….they raised the song of transformation and plunged the knives into their own bodies….blood spilled around her in torrents, staining the sea-foam pink before the tide brought another wave of salt to clean her wounds. (214).

Such a passage sets up the Creatrix transformation as one that alludes to giving birth. Jim Collins remarks on the implications of this “mermaids
acquisition of legs may interest little women because it represents in a very literal fashion their physical attainment of womanhood.” (187) When viewed through that lens, Ulla bloody transformation takes on another meaning. The transformation from mermaid to human symbolizes a birth of self but also a woman’s first period. Ulla is now a fully-fledged woman. Now she has shed her blood allowing her passage into womanhood and in doing so she is able to fully claim her voice and watch her magic thrive.

Ulla’s shift in appearance from the Ingénue phase to Creatrix phase denotes her growing power and her attainment of social acceptance. On land her beauty shifts and the land-dwellers welcome her with warm acceptance. Being on land agrees with Ulla:

Away from the blue depths of the sea, the sallow gray-green tinge of her skin was gone and she glowed burnished bronze as if she had tucked sunlight beneath her tongue. Her hair was black as it had always been, but here in the bright light of the human world, it shone like polished glass. Her eyes were still dark and strange, but dark like a midnight path that might lead somewhere wonderful, strange like the sound of a new language. (225)

This passage shows the shift in social acceptance of Ulla. In the depths of the ocean her form was seen as peculiar. In the human world her form has changed. She glows like the sun and her dark hair and eyes are inviting. Such a point highlights the rarity of Ulla. She is able to form herself to fit the situation. Her transformation on land is also the first indication that Ulla is different due to the fact other sildroher appear the same on land and in the water. The contrast between the glow of her skin and the dark of her hair creates an aura of mystery, one that invites attention, both positive and negative.

Ulla’s desire to help Prince Roffe compete with his brothers to attain the crown starts the ending of her Creatrix phase. Prince Roffe is after a magical gift to give his father. Through this gift he hopes to obtain the favor of the King so he will be chosen over his brothers. His father Rundstrom presented a tiger of immense power that made him king, Roffe speaks of this tiger saying “I need a gift like Rundstrom’s tiger…the tiger was a legendary gift, but it was no simple spell. The creature has to be enchanted to breathe underwater, to endure the cold, and then to obey its master” (234). The Prince promises her protection saying “I would raise you so high, Ulla. No one would gossip about your birth or you wayward mother ever again” (236). Such a promise pulls upon the fears Ulla still has of isolated mermaid in the Ingénue phase, those of being talked about and ostracized. In this pit of fear Ulla tells the Prince of a magic unheard of beneath the
waves, she tells him of the need of fire beneath the waves. Ulla is suggesting a magic unheard of the Sildroher, a flame that can burn underwater, a place devoid of the fuel in which it thrives, the epitome of magic. Prince Roffe obtained this idea from Ulla by exploiting the hierarchy of power within his kingdom. Edwin G. Flemming comments saying, “However, a positive tendency for age to correlate with pleasing personality among the younger children may merely indicate a tendency for the, “younger members of a group to idealize and worship those older persons who seem to be in the limelight and to have more liberties and privileges than they themselves enjoy”. When using Edwin’s findings and conflating them with my own the reader is able to understand the imposed power upon Ulla. Her desire to help the prince stems from her hierarchy of social order. The top of the ladder is Prince Roffe with Ulla on the bottom. In this order, Ulla will always be but a servant to Roffe. Ulla is creating prince Roffe which is indicative of her Creatrix phase. She is molding his future, in the same way Signy helped mold Ulla by singing with her. Only the truth of Ulla’s birth is able to upend this social order.

The girl in the mirror relates to Ulla due to its creation to impress. In Ulla’s early dealing with the apprentice he completely ignores her. When Ulla is looking for the apprentice she encounters a mirror with a woman trapped inside. The apprentice comments on it saying “It’s an illusion, nothing more… a useless one. It’s a frivolous object. My master’s predecessor made it while attempting to find a way to place a soul in the mirror so that the king might live forever” (228). Ulla interacts with mirror and finds the girl inside is able to sing and mimic her in every way, even harmonizing with Ulla when she sang a note. The girl in the mirror appears to be a complete and individual person, at least to Ulla. The apprentice believes she is just an illusion devoid of autonomy, merely a party trick. The inclusion of such an object helps the reader to visualize the role of Ulla as one who breaks molds placed upon her. Ulla and the mirror relate to one another because they both are exploited by royalty. Also much like the mirror’s power, Ulla’s magic is used as a party trick. Never is it used at the center or seen as what it really is, valuable. Ulla and the girl inside the mirror also share hidden pain, the girl in the mirror cannot escape. She is forever trapped inside her two dimensional prison. Whilst in the same regard, Ulla is trapped inside a world that views her as different, becoming her prison. The girl in the mirror and Ulla later receive the freedom they so rightly deserve.

Through the King’s apprentice, Ulla learns a dark truth that changes her path from one of morality to destroyer. Ulla seeks out the apprentice to learn how she can help perform the magic necessary to create the underwater flame yet he reveals more truth than she thought possible. The apprentice tells of Ulla’s unconventional birth, saying “Do you know why your voice is
so strong? Because you were born on land…a few moments later your father emerged in the shallows, his silver tail like a sickle moon beside him, and took you away” (241-242). The apprentice's truths reveal to Ulla why her voice has always been so strong and why she has often been ostracized by the Sildroher people, she is a half-breed. In this instant Ulla goes through her mind and every instance she was left out or gossiped about. She feels they are vindicated in looking at her strangely. Ulla's strength is tied to her difference. If she had been born like the other Sildroher she would be as weak as them. Her voice was molded by air and later adapted to the cold depths of the water. Ulla must be looked at a new species. An offset of humans and Sildroher. The apprentice knows she is the only one capable of the necessary magic to bring about the flame.

Suited with the knowledge of her origins, Ulla understands the dark steps she must take to sing the flame into existence. With the knowledge of her true human lineage, Ulla begins to feel torn; saying:

She could feel herself splitting, dissolving, as if the apprentice’s words had been a spell. It was like the cut of the sykurn knife, being torn apart all over again, knowing that she would never be wholly one thing or another, that the sea would always be strange upon her, that she would always carry the taint of land. Nothing could transform her. Nothing could make her right. If the Sildroher ever learned what she was, that the rumors were not just rumors but true, she would be banished, maybe killed. Unless she was too powerful to abandon. If Roffe became king, if Ulla found a way to give him what he wanted he could protect her. She could make herself unassailable, indispensable.

Through this passage the reader is able to understand the intense fears of Ulla. She fears the news of her actual birth will escape and her being ostracized will turn to fear and later to bloodlust in regards to the Sildroher citizens. The water, the home she has always known is now foreign to her. She compares the sense of pain to being physically split in two. Before the knowledge of her birth she was one entity. Now she is two. Her only chance at survival is Roffe, if she can prove her usefulness then she might be able to survive as a Halfling. These realizations lead Ulla to make grave decisions.

Ulla and Signy’s relationship begins to unravel with the knowledge of the dark magic Ulla must perform. The apprentice tells Ulla of the magic required. Ulla understands what he means and she fearfully pronounces “blood magic” (245) but not just blood, it requires death. The apprentice continues “Not just blood” (245) signaling a divide in ideals that Ulla must choose. Ulla can stick with her convictions and deny the prince the spell
and risk her destruction or she can perform the spell and save herself. At first she refuses to perform the spell saying “Then it cannot be done” she said. She was lost. Roffe was lost. It was that simple” (246). Ulla is able to stick to her beliefs until Signy’s dream of being queen are promised, then she wavers. Prince Roffe says “I could make Signy my queen” (252) and the agreement is made. Ulla will perform the spell if Roffe makes Signy his queen. These events matter because they reveal the bond Ulla feels with Signy. Signy recovered Ulla from the depths of isolation. Signy came to the human world with Ulla. They have been beside each other through all the huge events in each other’s life. Ulla places Signy’s happiness above her own, she has never forgotten her only friend. Ulla feels so close to Signy that she agrees to kill a stranger in order to assure her dreams come true. Such a closeness is needed for the inevitable betrayal. It sets up a relational basis that allows the reader to better empathize with Ulla.

Through Signy ignoring Ulla’s sacrifice, Ulla’s bloodlust is ignited and she transforms into her final and deadliest form, that of Lethal Murderess. After Ulla kills the human man and Roffe obtains the flame in a lantern, Signy is given a choice, she can either stay with Ulla and be exiled or leave with Roffe and claim her throne. Signy says “Ulla. My Fierce Ulla. You know I was never strong” (266) later Signy commits the ultimate betrayal, that of looking to a prince for permission. Ulla asks for her Sykurn knife, a tool of personal power and transformation for Ulla. Signy makes a grave mistake “But Signy did not pick up the knife. Instead she turned her eyes to Roffe-and in the end, this was the thing that doomed all of Sondermane. Ulla could forgive betrayal, another abandonment, even her own death. But not this moment, when after all her sacrifice, she begged for mercy and Signy sought a prince’s permission to grant it (267). The perversion of their relationship is what sets Ulla into the dark and murky waters of revenge. She could fathom abandonment is it signified Signy having a better life, but she could not undertake Signy’s choosing of the prince’s authority over her own. Libe Garcia Zarranz helps to connect this to Ursula in The Little Mermaid saying “it is Disney’s construction of Ursula the sea-witch that introduces subversive readings of the film in terms of sexual and power politics. By means of using her extreme power. Ursula not only manipulates Ariel at will but manages to trick Triton, the symbol of patriarchal law” (Zarranz). When looking at Ulla through her eventual tricking of Triton, the reader is able to understand where the hatred of Triton comes from. The moment Signy chose Roffe it imbued within Ulla a hatred of all things royal. Much later when Ursula obtains Ariel’s voice and has belittled Triton with her power she achieves her goal as Ursula that Ulla promised herself she would make, that she would destroy the royalty beneath the waves. Ulla has always been one who is known for her power and in her later form as
the well-known Ursula this is no different. Through the destruction of the patriarchal system through Triton she is able to achieve a goal she thought impossible, the revenge of Roffe taking Signy from her.

In this final phase, the Lethal Murderess, Ulla becomes the Ursula many know today. Urged on by revenge and the pain caused by creating the flame, Ulla pushes forward:

She slammed her hand into the mirror...she took the largest piece...she held it up to the mirror, finding the right angle. Finding herself in the reflection. There. The two mirrors reflected each other, infinite ruined girls in infinite empty hallways- and infinite voices that grew, one on top of the other, the note building and building. First a chorus, then a flood. (269-70)

In this moment Ulla is no longer alone, she is made powerful by girls ruined just like her. Both Ulla and the girl in the mirror made the mistake of allowing the world to take them to the dark depths. Ulla is tired of this rhetoric and makes her own, beginning with the destruction of the kingdom that sought to extinguish her. She finds her form made foreign by the spell that killed a man and gave Roffe and Signy their dream. In this moment, there are no traces of the naïve girl from the Ingénue phase; she has died just like her need for peace. Instead she created an even stronger magic to destroy this dream and transform herself:

She changed the song, drawing her chorus of ruined girls with her....these broken, betrayed girls were with her....weaving the two melodies together, sea and sky, water and blood. With a crack of lightning, the transformation took hold. Her hair rippled from her scalp...her skin was hard stone and bloomed with lichen, when she looked down, she saw her thighs binding. But the scales were not silver, no, they were not scales at all. Her new tail was black and slick and muscular as an eel. (270-71)

The weaving of destruction and transformation is one that only Ulla would think of and a feat only made a reality with the help of the multitude of ruined girls. Ulla so easily weaves storm magic with blood magic and through this magic she attains a new form, Lethal Murderess. Lightning, a symbol of fear and destruction, is what interjects this shift in her transformation. Such a point helps the reader fathom her power, nature's most destructive element is the one called to change her. Ulla's skin is hard as a stone and covered in lichen, to exemplify how cold she is, since lichen grow near the ocean on rocks and their growth is made possible by the moisture.
from the sea-laden air. Ulla is akin to these rocks, powerful, massive and waiting for someone to latch upon and destroy. Lastly in connection to her slick eel tale, Trites discusses the character of Ursula’s motives saying “Contact with humans has already been established as Ariel’s “forbidden fruit,” and Ursula’s eels evoke the tempting snake in the Garden of Eden. Ursula has the same revenge motive that Satan has” (Trites). The connection to the Garden of Eden allows Ulla to be seen in her full glory. Much like Eve, Ulla started out as naïve. Through the power elicited by the tree of knowledge, Eve doomed all man. In the same way the unnatural power of Ulla’s voice combined with her thirst for revenge against the Sildroher kingdom, doom those on land and create an atmosphere of terror for the Sildroher. Ulla and Ursula have taken on the image that doomed Eve. Much like Ulla harnessed the power of the ruined girl in the mirror, in the same way she harnesses the power of the damning snake and damn she does as “the storm tore the palace and the Sildroher kings from the seabed and wrecked the gardens Ulla and Signy had once built, leaving nothing behind” (272). What Ulla once created she has now destroyed, with her dark new power.

Ulla that arises from the tale of a naïve soul carved cruelly by abandonment. She was an unknowing child in her Ingénue phase, going where the sea currents took her. In her Creatrix form she realized the power she held and used it to craft her and Signy’s future. These forms melded and combined with the betrayal of Signy at the hands of Roffe morphed her into the cruel creature many know from The Little Mermaid known as Ursula. The last lines of the story speak of the prophesy regarding Ariel saying “When Signy gave birth to daughters- six of them, the youngest born with her mother’s bright-ember hair-Ulla rejoiced. She knew they would be cursed as their father to long for what they shouldn’t…she knew they would find their way to her in time…she never waits for long” (273). The last stitches of this story create a landscape for Ariel to thrive and connect Ariel’s fall to her father’s. The downfall of man is to always crave what we can’t have and Ulla preys upon this need in her cave, waiting.

WORKS CITED


Guillermo del Toro’s foreign-language film *Pan’s Labyrinth* (2006) traces dueling spaces: the fairytale and the political. The film follows the spirited, fairytale obsessed Ofelia who becomes displaced from her home with her pregnant mother who has married an evil Francoist officer, Captain Vidal. Ofelia rejects her new stepfather and, while defying he and her mother, meets a faun who claims her as the princess of the Underworld. In traditional fairytale fashion, she is given three tasks that strive to prove her virtue and purity so she may rejoin her true father, the King. Meanwhile, in the real world, her mother dies in childbirth and leaves Ofelia and the new baby alone in the care of Captain Vidal. Ofelia proves herself incapable of following the final task as it involves harming an innocent and, upon her death at the hands of Captain Vidal is restored to the Underworld as Princess Moana. Simultaneously, the film merges the fairytale with political drama, focusing on a local group of guerrilla rebels struggling against the oppressive Francoist regime, represented by Ofelia’s evil stepfather. Using the fairy-tale trope of the evil stepfather, Guillermo del Toro’s *Pan’s Labyrinth* (2006) represents Fascist controlled Spain during the mid-twentieth century by juxtaposing the oppressive, paternal caregiver of Captain Vidal against the consumed, female body of Ofelia thereby becoming an allegorical figure to explore the rebellious anxieties of the unstable, Fascist regime.

The archetype of the evil stepmother is one of the oldest symbols of domestic opposition within fairytale history. While rhetorically they oper-
ate as the opposition to the heroine within the domestic narrative, they also represent real historical economic implications. Del Toro takes the figure of the stepmother and inverts her into a stepfather: transforming her politically by re-gendering her male and expanding her authority from within the home to without. Traditionally, the stepmother enters from outside the home, a place where she has little authority or resources, and moves into a position of relative power and economic security. Economic security, however, threatens the internal stability of the family unit as resources must be dispersed and the interloper must be allocated a share. Marina Warner challenges the universality of the stock character and its effect upon real women in her key work *From the Beast to the Blonde On Fairy Tales and their Tellers* that:

> Our understanding of the stock villain, the wicked stepmother, has been dangerously attenuated and even misunderstood as a result [of focusing on maternal bloodline legitimacy]. In the stories, she may not even be a stepmother, and the evil she does is not intrinsic to her nature, or to the strict maternal relation, or to her particular family position. It cannot and should not be extended to all women, for it arises from the insecurity of her interests in a social and legal context that can be changed, and remedied. (Warner 237)

Indeed, Warner points to the root of the anxiety surrounding the outside female figure integrating herself into a pre-set core family. The realities of the economic sphere cannot be ignored in relation to family politics. Patricia Hannon asserts that intermarriage “symbolized disorder and instability at its worst” and when “indicated, [becomes] the catalyst that disrupts conventional household protocol in so many tales of the Perraldian corpus” (938). The natural family order becomes disrupted and thus an unnatural union takes place. Unnatural household structuring leads to the destabilization of economic resource and cultural marker as the traditional must yield to the nontraditional.

So, too, does the relationship between Captain Vidal and Ofelia’s mother, Carmen. His social status within the Francoist society outranks Ofelia and her mother’s as members of the Proletariat, or worker’s class. Their relationship also fits the state-sanctioned definition of marriage when Franco-Spain re-established archaic familial roles. Ana Vivancos defines these roles, stating: “this traditional patriarchal family was composed of an all-powerful father and a submissive mother. The Spanish mother was first and foremost the wife to her husband. She must attend her husband’s needs and bear as many children as God was willing to provide” (877). The nuclear family established within this model is a decidedly archaic, Catholic one that
privileges patriarchal dominance and demeans women to a womb. Del Toro directly establishes the link between this model and the family at the heart of the tale by his characters adhering strongly to the Francoist definition with the exception of Ofelia.

Francoist control was a period in early modern-Spanish history that began in 1935 and ended in 1965. An unstable political atmosphere following the late dictators demise gave rise to a new, Right dictator: Francisco Franco. Politically identified as a conservative nationalist, Franco became an integral part of the movement to reclaim Spanish rule from the liberal government by aligning itself with the nationalistic sentiment of Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini (Stanley Payne 11). Their nationalist ideologies aligned with Franco’s own and they began an economic and militaristic exchange, at the cost of the freedoms of Spain’s people. In order to keep control over the population, the regime disseminated Anti-Communist and anti-liberal propaganda. Many people during this period were unjustly imprisoned or executed for political reasons, primarily those suspected of being members of the resistance. Supporters of the Popular Front (a coalition of left-supported allies) primarily made up members of the rebellion that used guerilla tactics which del Toro focuses primarily upon within the film. Both Communist and non-Communist rebels fought to liberate and control the country, hoping to move it away from its Fascist dealings. According to Stanley Payne, the reason for their failure fell upon the working classes within the region who had “become disillusioned with politics, and also because rural society in the northern border regions tend to be quite conservative” (117). Although ultimately unsuccessful in overthrowing the regime, the strength of their subversive spirit influenced del Toro in his creation of Pan’s Labyrinth and frames Ofelia as the recipient and propagator of that rebellious spirit.

The movies opening sequence at once displays Ofelia importance to both realms by juxtaposing the silent scroll of cards set only to the sound of Ofelia’s ragged breaths explaining the political state of the current day and the narrated tale of the escaping Princess, of which feature her as the central figure. Critics like Rosemary Jackson argue that this juxtaposition provides a mimetic signaling through “[making] an implicit claim of equivalence between the represented fictional world and the ‘real’ world outside the text” (34). Jennifer Orme similarly focuses on the linkage between these realms, establishing that “neither the mimetic world of fascist Spain nor the magical Underground Realm is more real than the other; this juxtaposition of congruent realities produces critiques of monologic totalitarian discourses and endorses stories of magical transformation as forms of resistance and vehicles of hope” (224). However, del Toro does not create an unbiased, equal opportunity story within these realms. It is notable that the cards
remain unread by a narrator, denying the Franco regime voice and championing the rebellious Moana’s flight. This act of silencing set only to the sound of the dying child’s breaths mimics the regime’s method of weeding out the opposition and physically silencing them through violence. He focuses on her as victim of the monstrous regime and, by reversing the shot so that her blood flows backwards into her nose, indicates his desire to reconstruct her tale. This scene immediately precedes the words of the fairytale narrator, who states: “A long time ago, in the Underground Realm, where there are no lies and no pain, there lived a princess who dreamt of the human world” (del Toro 2006). The pairing of these two starkly different images, one of suffering and violence and one of magical safeguarding, polarizes the two realms into the fairytale binary of evil versus good with the human realm exhibiting traditional fairytale tropes of entrapment in the form of Fascism.

Ofelia faces the threat of entrapment while moving between the two realms. When she is brought to meet Captain Vidal for the first time, she creates a barrier between them with her fairytale books as a shield (del Toro 2006). In this way, fairy tale protects the heroine from the looming threat of evil, albeit in a mundane way. Creating this separation immediately between them allows viewers of the film to operate within known archetypes of heroine and villain. The Captain equally rejects her, disliking her for both her gender and his inability to place her within his nuclear family. She subverts her mother and Captain Vidal’s wishes that she submit to his authority, instead challenging it by verbally denying his patriarchal place within the home: “He’s not my father. The Captain is not my father. My father died in the war” (del Toro 2006). Within this one piece of dialogue, she asserts thrice that he is not her father, each functioning differently. The ‘he’ refers directly to Captain Vidal as family patriarch. She denies his interloping into the matriarchal economic space shared by her and her mother, unable to integrate him into that realm. The second denial functions as the political denial. Within the context of the wider political scale, she is voicing the denial the Opposition feels towards the patriarchal “father” of the Franco regime. Third, the death of her father symbolizes the death and historical trauma propagated by the regime. He represents a missing generation of the working class who disappeared due to their branding as political adversaries. His death is also indicative of pre-War Spain which was destroyed due to the Spanish Civil War. The repetition of three also indicates her anxiety surrounding surrendering to the will of her stepfather and becoming complicit within the repressive household.

The tasks Ofelia undertakes correspond to anxieties surrounding her stepfather and what he more largely represents. The first task the Faun sets to prove her identity is a traditionally based fairytale task: a toad sits in the
base of a tree, cutting its life off. Feed it three magical stones and the toad will be no more. Before she can set out on her quest, in an act influenced by the Cinderella trope, Ofelia’s mother, Carmen, gifts her a beautiful dress she has made to impress the important ranking members of the National party. Roger Clark analyzes the use of these familiar tropes in his own piece, stating: “the film recycles established and familiar tropes from a golden age of children’s literature, creating a new, transnational and transcultural context, at once defamiliarising the tropes and endowing them with new power and relevance.” (Clark 59) Before entering the tree, she discards the dress within the woods (del Toro 2006). While this act may be seen as a preservation, it can also be read as defiance. She puts away finery associated with the ruling oligarchy in favor of the Proletariat clothing—mimicking the simplistic fabrics associated with the rebellion. The familiarity of dressing the heroine in splendor to show her inner worth is here interrupted and given context within the historical setting of the film. Indeed, this is also supported by the cross-cutting between scenes of the Ofelia carrying out her fairytale mission and Captain Vidal riding with troops to confront the rebels hiding within the woods. Once Ofelia enters the woods, the domain of fairytale and rebellion, she casts off the clothing that marks her part of the Francoist realm transforming her into a rebel in form and action as she subverts the regime from within quite literally.

The tree she enters symbolizes the ailing Spain while the toad strangling the roots symbolizes both Captain Vidal and Franco himself. When she sees the toad, she says: “I’m not afraid of you. Aren’t you ashamed living down here […] growing fat while the tree dies” (del Toro 2006). This line is a direct critique of the overconsumption of both economy and violence that pervades the movie. She openly questions how the Francoist government can live with the trauma it disperses upon its own citizens. This line ties in with an earlier scene where Vidal viciously beats and murders a pair of villagers while witch-hunting for Red propaganda. The pair claim they were hunting rabbits whereupon they are killed. Upon searching their persons, Vidal finds the rabbits and claims them for his own table although as a high-ranking officer he is in a position of affluence. His actions underscore the economic disproportions between party members and the common man. Ofelia’s critique speaks directly to the people’s suffering, echoing the message of the opposition and calling attention to consuming nature of the regime.

Consumption and control pose the main anxiety for Ofelia’s second task. The Faun appears to her and gives her instructions to not eat or drink anything while in the fairy realm she is about to enter. This is a standard fairy tale trope that if one eats or drinks while in fairyland, one is not able to come back. However, del Toro increases the danger from captivity to death in the
guise of the Pale Man—a terrifying monster whose own eyes are resting before him on a plate, a dazzling feast spread before him. The shot where Ofelia sees the Pale Man coincides with the shot of the earlier mentioned dinner party for the Oligarchy Captain Vidal hosts. The cinematography of both scenes suggest that they are parallels of each other with the Pale Man representing Captain Vidal. He sits at the head of the table, occupying Captain Vidal’s seat in the coinciding dinner table while the approaching Ofelia stand where her mother sat, beside him in the exact place. The mantel has the same arch as the human realm but it resembles teeth as if ready to consume Ofelia. This task speaks to her fear of consumption both of herself and of food. She fears she will be consumed by the dangerous patriarch whose eyes watch her both literally and figuratively as she aligns herself with the resistance. Although offered food many times in the human realm, there is no evidence that she consumes anything within it. She transgresses and eats grapes while in the fairyland, ignoring the Faun’s warning. Her unwillingness to consume anything within the human world shows a reversal of the entrapment trope. If she partakes in the unhospitable human world, she might become trapped there and unable to return to fairyland. It also implies that Ofelia refuses to be fed by the Franco regime—neither by propaganda nor food.

The act of consumption and economic control over who controls the means of that consumption takes center stage in the scene where the rations are handed out to the villagers. Mercedes and the other women distribute bread down the line while a soldier repeats the line “This is our daily bread in Franco’s Spain kept safe in this mill! The Reds lie because in a united Spain there’s not a single home without fire or bread” (del Toro 2006). This form of propaganda shows perversity as the people wait in line before a storeroom filled with their own food, waiting for a single ration card. The juxtaposition between the dinner party and the bread line displays the hypocrisy of the regime when the evening before the rich and powerful gorged on food stolen from the very people they claim sovereignty over. The food prepared and presented to the group within the servings baskets are round, mimicking the bugs found within the first task. By presenting the food in a similar manner to the toad, the viewer is meant to see the party members as the toad, squeezing the life out of the nation greedily. While gorging on this food, they discuss the ration card allotment with one party member claiming: “if people are careful, it should be plenty” (del Toro 2006). It is notable that the party represents all aspects of Franco controlled life, i.e. church, government, and military, displaying how pervasive the fascist ideology was in mid-Twentieth century Spain. When challenged as to his current post, Captain Vidal replies in a speech that foreshadows the death of Ofelia and, ultimately, the rebellion itself: “Because these people
hold the mistaken belief that we’re all equal. And if we have to kill every one of these vermin then we’ll kill them all” (del Toro 2006). Here, he voices the truth about the ideology of the nation as well as how he views his stepdaughter. By referring to them as “vermin”, he places himself in position as predator or consumer and the opposition as one to be hunted. Ofelia transforms into a sacrificial body to this predatory view as Spain and its people ultimately did to Francisco Franco.

Nearing that final sacrifice, Ofelia solidifies her loyalty to the resistance in the form of her relationship with Mercedes, Captain Vidal’s housekeeper and the opposition’s double agent within the home. After her mother experiences hemorrhaging due to her pregnancy, Ofelia takes comfort with Mercedes by asking her to sing her a lullaby, aptly named ‘Mercedes Lullaby’. Lullabies within the Spanish historical context contains subversive power as well as handling past traumatic experience. Irene Gómez-Castellano explores the role of lullaby within its real historical roots during this time period and applies it to Mercedes’s lullaby, stating: “During the Spanish Postwar Period of Franco repression, several poet-prisoners masterfully used the format of a lullaby addressed to a fellow prisoner or to a baby outside the prison in order to emphasize, by the contrast between the assumed innocence of the genre of the lullaby and the violence of the prison, the lack of hope of political prisoners and their families in the 1940s and 1950s in Spain” (5). Mercedes similarly uses her hummed lullaby to establish a relationship of mutual understanding between she and her fellow prisoner, Ofelia. Both are trapped within their role within the Captain’s home but they both use seek to undermine his patriarchal control from within. Establishing this relationship marks a physical bridge between Ofelia’s own subversive tactics and the resistance sprung from a pseudo-maternal link.

Gómez-Castellano continues to analyze the use of this lullaby in furthering the pair's bond: “The ambiguous format of the lullaby can be manipulated in order to express political dissent and to forge familiar ties and relationships between prisoners and friends” (6). The lullaby comes after Ofelia reveals to Mercedes that she knows she is helping the rebels in the woods but promises not to tell anyone. It acts as a contract between the two, tying them together politically in their mutual desire to escape the Captain and their use of subversive tactics within their sphere of femininity. Using the medium of lullaby, Mercedes and Ofelia not only take comfort within their captivity, but also share their rebelliousness through mutual secrecy and intimacy. When Mercedes plans to leave in the night, she comes to Ofelia to say goodbye whereupon Ofelia demands that she be taken to the safety of the resistance as well. Through this action, she vocally sides against her stepfather and formally joins the rebels outright rather than through subtle action.
The faun appears to Ofelia to begin the third task, beginning with the question: “Will you do everything I tell you without question?” (del Toro 2006). This question echoes the epigraph of this paper where the doctor admonishes Vidal for his unquestioning loyalty to regime and, more largely, to violence. Del Toro uses these words to critique those that blindly followed both the rule of the regime and those innocents who allowed the violence to continue while doing nothing to stop it, becoming complicit within it. The Faun asks Ofelia to become complicit within the cycle of violence and to become like Vidal in his inability to discern wrong-doing from his actions or think for himself. Ofelia escapes captivity with the Faun’s aide, following his instructions to take her brother into the labyrinth. While before her anxiety focused upon symbols of her stepfather and the regime, within her last task she must face reality to accomplish her goal. Ofelia deploys guerilla tactics within the home to liberate her newborn brother from her stepfather’s clutches, mimicking the rebels use of these tactics to attempt to liberate their nation and fellow man. She successfully drugs Vidal but fails to escape without his notice. The threat of consumption becomes real rather than implicit as she flees from him while he wields a gun, intending to kill her. His hunt of her mimics the hunt of the Pale Man as both have the disadvantage of sight, albeit in different ways, and intend to consume her—figuratively in Vidal’s case and physically in the Pale Man’s.

Ofelia cannot complete the final task as it involves likening herself to the regime and spilling innocent blood. Her refusal to spill innocent blood aligns her with the ideology of the rebels with whom she identifies. Captain Vidal shows no hesitation to spill her blood, shooting her and symbolically martyring her to the regimes cruelty. While the rebels successfully overtake and kill Captain Vidal, their success is short-lived as Ofelia is killed before they can help her. The ending shot of the movie mirrors the opening shot: Mercedes holding the dying Ofelia whose own blood transports her to the Underground Realm where it is revealed that she made the right choice to allow her own blood to be spilled rather than an innocent. As she did not consume anything from the mortal realm, be it food or ideology, she is allowed to stay within the realm as Princess Moana, successfully escaping the human realm into the fairy realm.

Within Pan’s Labyrinth, the cycle of consumed and consumer intertwine into a familiar dance as old as time. Reading Ofelia as allegorical Spain provides a glimpse into the trauma and resilience of the nation that is still not ready to unpack its ghosts. Del Toro’s use of a young girl to synthesize these powerful concepts of genocide, loss, and Fascism seems counterintuitive, after all, what would a young girl know of these things? However, he shows that strength and resilience can come from the unlikeliest source. The propaganda disseminated by the Francoist government could easily
be read as a fairytale itself, leading the viewers to wonder what is real and what is fantasy. The anxieties of a country unsure of its political future play out within the fantasy of a young girl struggling to come to terms with familial and economic pressures, amplifying these pressures into the stuff of fairytale. Ofelia cleverly maneuvers in the liminal space between realms, enacting the tropes of the fairy tale realm only to subvert them, creating her own unique narrative as diverse and varied as the tales themselves.

WORKS CITED
Toro del, Guillermo, director. Pan’s Labyrinth. Warner Bros., 2006,

NOTES
1. See Maria Tatar’s essay “From Nags to Witches” for more information on the history of the evil stepmother in fairy tales.
2. For more information on the topic of the Spanish Holocaust, see Paul Preston’s pivotal work The Spanish Holocaust: Inquisition and Extermination in Twentieth-Century Spain.
On Becoming Human: Fairy Tales, Posthumanism, and Individuation in Spielberg’s *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* (2001)

by Anthony Thomason

*All real living is meeting.*

—Martin Buber, *I and Thou*

An age-old philosophical and psychological question central to the human condition is: *What does it mean to be human?* Tied into this question are themes that can be analyzed and expanded upon via the use of theory. Themes such as being-in and functioning in society, belonging and acceptance, and individuation all quickly come to the forefront. Great philosophers and psychoanalysts throughout history like Merleau-Ponty, Mead, Freud, and ohut address and discuss these topics. However, this is not simply some ephemeral abstract question to be pondered in the ivory tower of academia. This question is one we must confront either consciously or unconsciously. Undoubtedly, we phenomenologically live out this question. Therefore, given the ubiquitous nature of this question, it is not difficult to observe the multitude of different mediums in which it arises—ranging from novels to music and film. One such medium is through the narrative of fairy tales and their evolution throughout history. Indeed, fairy tales, and the core-stories found therein, function in such a way that the reader/viewer of the tale is thrust into a world that builds and develops one’s sense of identity and personhood. Likewise, when we engage with these tales we enter a web of myth and the meaning-making of other people, both living and deceased. In fact, the creation and building of humanity’s intersubjective communal experience is found in the sharing of language, stories, and the communication with one another. It is in this philosophical and psychological backdrop that I wish to analyze the Pinocchio archetype—specifi-
cally its re-presentation within Steven Spielberg’s *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* (2001). In this story, the question of what it means to be human resurfaces in the character of David as he seeks to become “a real boy.” While David, like Pinocchio, is not biologically human—a reoccurring environmental prejudice in the film—his journey of becoming-in-the-world through fairy tale, intersubjective experience, and psychodynamics subverts any notion of biological essentialism. Moreover, in witnessing David’s journey, we gain new insight about passionately engaging with the world related to our own process of being and becoming more human through our intersubjective experiences with others.

To understand any fairy tale, it is imperative to trace and provide some context for how the tale is situated in history and how it has given birth to its contemporary offspring. Therefore, to join David on his journey, we first turn to Pinocchio on his. In Collodi’s internationally famous story, *The Adventures of Pinocchio*, Pinocchio, a living, wooden boy-toy, is brought to life by magic. However, informed by the discourse of his social environment, Pinocchio internalizes the idea that he exists in a liminal state between toy and human being. Indeed, it is not until the magical Blue Fairy transforms his wooden body into a biologically human one that he abandons this state of being: “‘Bravo, Pinocchio! In reward for your kind heart, I forgive you for all your old mischief.’ […] Pinocchio awoke and opened wide his eyes. What was his surprise and his joy when, on looking himself over, he saw that he was no longer a Marionette, but that he had become a real live boy!” (126-127) Therefore, Spielberg’s *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* (2001) differs with its predecessor on one point but resonates on a second. The first point, though mostly irrelevant to this analysis, is that Pinocchio differ on their transformation journey in that David’s transformation is not contingent upon him doing good works. Secondly, and more importantly, David, like Pinocchio, is thrown into a world which tells him that he is not human because of what material he is made of. This sets up a central parallel in that David, like Pinocchio, stop at nothing to become human. However, what’s most interesting is that in their journey to become human, this goal is achieved without the use of any magic or the acquisition of a new body. Moreover, in the film, the Pinocchio narrative is explicitly introduced (00:34:45). As Blue Fairy transforms Pinocchio into a real boy, David looks on with excitement and awe as Monica lays with Martin in his bed reading the story (00:35:35). Upon hearing the tale of Pinocchio, David internalizes the possibility to become the object of Monica’s love, as Martin is. Indeed, during the scene of the film in which Monica drops David off in the woods after David accidentally harms Martin, David asks, “If Pinocchio became a real boy and I become a real boy, can I come home?” To which Monica states, “That’s just a story.” And David responds: “But a story tells
what happens” (00:51:00). Here the narrative of the fairy tale transforms in such a way that the boundaries of fiction and reality begin to clearly spill onto one another. David has not only come to trust in and identify with the fairy tale proper, but he has also explained that stories do more than entertain—they have the power to effect and change reality. David “[finds] a fairy tale and inspired by love and fueled by desire [he] set[s] out on a journey to make her real” (01:41:45). It is here in this journey that not only does he seek to make Blue Fairy real, who actually becomes real is no one other than himself.

Therefore, the question of what it means to be human and whether one can become human becomes a central question and subject of analysis for David just as it has been for Pinocchio. Rather than discussing wood and paint, attention is now turned towards wires and circuitry. While the question of what does it mean to be human has existed in philosophy for thousands of years, it has found a new place within the discussion of technology in Posthumanism. The specific question at hand is one of degree: under the assumption of biological essentialism, how much biological enhancement can a human undergo before they are no longer identifiable as human? Wilson and Haslam structure the debate in this way: “Whereas advocates posit that biotechnological enhancement will not degrade the humanity of altered beings and may even make them more than human, opponents argue that it will degrade their humanity and make them less than human” (247). They continue their discussion as they describe the two positions of in the posthumanist argument concerning technological modification of humans. While advocates of modification hold to an idea of human nature rooted in a poststructuralist or dynamic view of what it means to be human, opponents hold to an essentialist understanding of human nature either from a religious or scientific perspective:

[T]here is greater agreement among opponents of modification that humans are imbued with a “given” or “sacred” essence or soul—understood in either a religious or secular sense (Fukuyama, 2002; Kass, 2002; Sandel, 2007; Somerville, 2006). This view represents a sharp rejection of the advocates’ view that human nature is dynamic, improvable and in large measure an artefact of societal and technological context. (253)

It is important to note that while the topic of discussion is with regards to biological humans who undergo technological enhancement, the question at hand in this analysis takes the dynamic view of the advocates a step further in discussing the humanity of David, an artificial life form. If the question of Posthumanism has thus far centered on the degree of humanity before
slipping into inhumanity, we can also ask the inverse and and argue that what is not thought to be human might indeed become human through intersubjective experience and psychodynamic processes. Raya Jones echoes this idea in the essay entitled, “Archaic Man Meets a Marvellous Automaton: Posthumanism, Social Robots, Archetypes,” when he states, “Unlike mirror reflections, social robots are stepping out to enter real-life relationships with people, like mirror reflections that are no longer preceded by the reflected object but engender it” (350).

From the onset of *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* (2001), we are told that the polar ice caps have melted—signifying a kind of rebirth into a new era where legal sanctions exist to strictly license pregnancies in order to deal with scarcity. Because of this, robotic children are created as stand-ins with the ability to feel emotions and desire. In the opening scene, Dr. Hobby states that A.I. Prior to David are “sensory toy[s].” David is qualitatively different. He is one that can love—in juxtaposition to the robot named Shelia who fails to describe love outside of physiological descriptors. However, the most relevant and important question is then asked of Dr. Hobby: “What responsibility does a person hold towards the mecha in return is the robot can love?” (00:06:30) This question is at the heart of both the posthumanist discussion and the core of our analysis. If David is capable of loving, then society has a certain responsibility in how it reacts to A.I. While one would hope that the engagement would be through a returned love, or at least dialogue, what he see in the film is a violent Othering of mecha that destroys and must be overcome. A poignant example of the destructive Othering of mecha, especially love-capable mecha like David, occurs during the “Flesh Fair” scene of the film. In this scene, acid drips onto David while he is tied to a pole to be destroyed for the amusement of an audience. Interestingly, as David becomes afraid for his life, and with the combination of his human looking appearance, the audience begin to throw beanbags, which were meant to be used for hitting a target and spilling the acid above onto the mecha, at the ring leader and demand David’s freedom. The leader responds in saying, “We are only destroying artificiality” (01:16:35) without avail. In this scene we see the manifestation of a brutal bifurcation of the two sides of the posthumanist argument expressed by Wilson and Haslam.

In fact, David’s journey towards becoming human is a constant conversation with the two opposing worlds of conservative biological essentialism and the dynamic understanding of humans as human becomings rather than human beings. On the one side we see David’s constant observation and mimicry at the dinner table, (00:19:50) learning how to be a son and a person just as all children do. On the other, the dinner scene with Martin shows that David cannot eat food, an important human activity, because
he’s mecha and not orga (00:36:00). Additionally, we see this split reality of David’s when Monica says to Henry, “He is only a child” after David is reprimanded for using Monica’s highly-valued perfume. To which Henry responds, “Monica, he’s a toy” (00:25:20). Indeed, it is this framing ideological discourse that is at the forefront of David’s journey of becoming. In this discussion of what it means to be human, what it means to be a real boy, and not a “super-toy” (00:31:30) David relentlessly pushes towards Blue Fairy and towards his own humanity as evidenced by his journey to Rouge City to see Dr. Know to find the location of Blue Fairy and his refusal to believe his companion mecha, Joe, when Joe tells him that “[Monica] does not love you David. She cannot love you. You are neither flesh nor blood” (01:32:10). In spite of the barriers and insistence of others in his lifeworld that he cannot be human because of his material make up, there are a number of instances which run in the face of these false assertions such as David’s need for belonging and socialization, his self-motivated quest for meaning-making, his love for Monica, (00:26:45), and his psychodynamic development.

Standing in stark contrast to any notion that David is anything less than a “real boy” is the overwhelming amount of evidence exemplifying David’s human need for belonging and socialization in his intersubjective lifeworld. Even at the onset of the film, David’s creator, Dr. Hobby, describes David as “A robot that dreams” and one that has “an inner world of metaphor.” Further still, in this same scene, love is what is described as being the key to self-consciousness (00:04:25). This notion of self-consciousness is often cited as what makes human beings human. In fact, “For both Merleau-Ponty and Mead, self is a socially instituted and temporally mediated reflexive process. It involves the subject ‘turning back’ upon themself (through time), to view themself from ‘outside’ or, rather, as another would view them” (Crossley). Drawing from the work of French phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty, Crossley brings attention to a key understanding for this analysis; that is, relating to being human, it is not simply what one is made out of which makes them human, but rather what one can do in relation to others and to themselves. Crossley goes on to say that the whole of society is constituted by a network of these processes: “Society is the culmination of intersubjective praxes, of action and interaction, and of the instituted and shared praxial and material resources which are mobilised in this process. It is the shared rules and resources which are activated in the production of meaning and the modes of ‘being-with’ which institute encounters and sustain relations” (Crossley). It is of no mere coincidence that we hardly ever see David alone in the film. David, like all human beings, is in constant conversation and interaction with the world of people around him whether fictional, i.e. through the fairy tale of Pinocchio and Blue Fairy,
with mecha, i.e., Joe and Teddy, or with other interactive, reflexive, and socially and self-conscious human beings such as Dr. Hobby, Henry, or Monica. A clear-cut example of this “being-with” which sustains relations and assists in individuation can be seen when David inquires into Monica’s mortality: “Mommy, will you die? […] I’ll be alone” (00:26:00). While the question of biological mortality certainly is an instance of true difference between David and humanity, it is important to note that David is still concerned about the mortality of others and the possibility of alienation and no longer feeling a sense of belonging. This construct of belongingness is a well researched and discussed phenomenon: “[Kohut] noted that people seek to confirm a subjective sense of belongingness or “being a part of in order to avoid feelings of loneliness and alienation” (Lee and Robbins 232). Therefore, not only does David’s self-consciousness and intersubjective interaction with the world illustrate his humanity, his seeking belongingness does as well—a critical piece of psychological evidence which we will soon return to.

Moreover, the reality of David’s self-motivated quest for meaning-making cannot be overlooked or disregarded concerning his becoming human. When David travels with Joe to Rouge City to find Dr. Know in his search for Blue Fairy, he notices a church named Our Lady of the Immaculate Heart. Joe comments in saying, “The ones who made us are always looking for the ones who made them” (1:24:55). Just as people come and go to the church, David is also looking for his maker. Unconsciously, David’s search to create meaning in his life further pushes him out of his state of liminality and towards humanity. When David meets Dr. Know, a simulated caricature of Einstein who answers inquiries for a fee, David asks about Blue Fairy with regards to who she is and how to find her. This triggers a shutdown of the Dr. Know program is displayed on the screen, as an answer to David’s question, the following section of the first stanza in W.B. Yeats’ poem, The Stolen Child, appears on the screen and read aloud before David is given instruction to find Dr. Hobby in New York City:

Come away, O human child!
To the waters and the wild
With a faery, hand in hand,
For the world’s more full of weeping than you can understand.
(9-12)

Aside from this being a general call to David to return to Dr. Hobby, there is a great deal that can be said about this being the answer given to David’s inquiry about Blue Fairy and becoming a “real boy.” Before even considering the diction of the poem, it is interesting that rather than simply giving
a straightforward answer to David’s questions, he is instead given a piece of literature steeped in metaphor and the famous, powerful, mysticism of Yeats. If language constitutes the world of a human being in relation to others, it is not a stretch of the imagination to conclude that David’s requirement to do the same and his being spoken to in this manner exemplifies his being human. After all, the first line of the poem addresses the child specifically as a human one who is in the company of those who are not such as Joe. This desire and relentless need for meaning making then appears to be a uniquely human quality which David possesses. Indeed, the alien life form at the end of the film echoes this idea when it says to David: “I often felt a sort of envy of human beings of that thing they call ‘spirit.’ Human beings had created a million explanations of the meaning of life in art, in poetry, in mathematical formulas. Certainly, human beings must be the key to the meaning of existence” (02:08:10). Interestingly enough, it is this notion of ‘spirit,’ of searching and striving for meaning, that the supremely intelligent alien life form discusses in relation to what makes humans unique—not their biological makeup.

In addition to David’s self-reflexive consciousness, interaction with his intersubjective network, and search for meaning through fairy tales, it would be a grave mistake to not include all of the very human psychodynamic processes that David goes through on his journey of becoming. Even from the initial arriving of David to his new home he immediately illustrates a central human psychosocial desire, the desire for belonging. Lee and Robbins, in their study on the construct of belongingness, state the following: “The need for affiliation is commonly referred to as the need for twinship (Kohut, 1984). Affiliation or twinship plays an important role later in childhood during the transition toward adolescence when the child begins to establish peer relationships and function more comfortably alongside those with similar qualities in appearance, opinions, and values” (233). The very beginnings of this can be seen when David is shown looking at pictures of Monica’s family (00:12:30). There is even a name and process for formally initiating this process for David: Imprinting. In describing this notion, the permanence of the process is given special attention. In the event that Monica no longer wants to keep David, he must be returned to Cybertronics, the place of his making, for destruction because he cannot be re-imprinted due to the change that occurs in his hardware (00:22:00). The unique consciousness that the mecha gains at imprintation is akin to the same reason why organic human beings are not encouraged to be destroyed in the event of becoming unwanted. A very clear indication of David’s psychodynamic processes and likeness to human consciousness is seen immediately after his imprinting when David calls Monica mommy for the first time and hugs her (00:23:48).
In what Freud calls the pre-Oedipal phase or in Lacanian terms, the pre-mirror stage, upon imprinting, David is intimately and almost completely attached to Monica like an infant would be. Renée Hoogland in her article, “Fact and Fantasy: The Body of Desire in the Age of Posthumanism,” describes this phase as such:

By imaging and imagining itself to be one and the same as the mother; that is to say, in the at once physical and phantasmatic merger of Self and Other, the infant enters the pre-Oedipal phase, also described as the pre-symbolic dyad. In the imaginary unity of Self and Other, the mother continues to function as primary source of need fulfillment, but additionally forms the subject’s first love-object. (217)

At this time in the film, David has not had anything to strongly cut the unity that he revels in with his identification of Monica as mother; that is, David has not entered into the symbolic and experienced the Oedipal conflict—a psychodynamic process that is often central to human becoming. In Lacanian terms, David does not yet exist as an entirely split subject independent of mother—though possessing the use of language already which work to cut unity, David does appear to be closer to the realm of the real than that of the imaginary or the symbolic. However, as David does appear to have some subjectivity and self-reflexivity, he has already formed his first love-object as Monica. In Kohutian terminology, this is the beginnings of the twinship experience, as illustrated by Amanda Kottler in her article, “Feeling at Home, Belonging, and Being Human: Kohut, Self Psychology, Twinship, and Alienation:” “Whether through empathic immersion, self-disclosure, or other means, the ability for us to find ourselves in another is, according to Togashi [...] one of the hallmarks of a twinship experience” (383). This psychosocial phenomenon, regardless of which psychoanalytic theory is being used as a lens for analysis and elucidation, appears to be a uniquely human one. As illustrated both in the film and earlier in this essay, Sheila, the mecha who describes love physiologically, cannot find herself in another. Whereas, on the other hand, David’s entire subjectivity begins in his twinship experience with Monica as mother.

However, this intimate and blissful connection with Monica does not last forever in the film just as no non-schizophrenic human being continues to exist in this state. While a painful experience, David’s entry into the symbolic via the cut of the Oedipal complex works as an important indicator for his continued human becoming. Rather than one specific instance of what causes the cut between David and Monica, there are many. One of the first significant cuts however is not so much through the character of
Henry as another love-object for Monica’s affection, but rather the introduction of competition through Monica’s actual biological son, Martin. Indeed, as Monica introduces Martin as her son we can see the immediate look of distress on David’s face (00:30:00). As another interesting instance of this cut in subjectivity, we see a literal cut being made as David cuts Monica’s hair while she sleeps due to being told to do so by a malevolent Martin. When asked by Henry why he would cut Monica’s hair, David responds in shock and fear saying, “Henry, I just wanted Mommy to love me” (00:41:00). This incident along with a few other accidents in the film work to bring about a full thrust into the symbolic for David. Hoodgland goes on in describing this phenomenon in the following:

the state of imaginary pre-Oedipal bliss must come to end, which it does, abruptly, through the Father’s intervention. […] No secondary object, however, will ever succeed in restoring the dyadic bliss of pre-Oedipal unity, in making up for the loss of primary self, in healing the wound in the subject’s ego inflicted by the Father’s prohibition. The subject’s desire must remain unfulfilled and is, as a result, endless. (218)

Rather than a literal desire for interest, an extremely common misunderstanding of the Oedipal conflict, what happens here is that the object for the subject’s affection and connection is broken by that of the Other. When this happens, the subject forms an ego which is not the idealized ego he/she once thought she had. The ego then tries to substitute the love-object with another in order to be complete once again, or, as with David, they sadly, and hopelessly, continue to seek their primary love-object, the imaginary or symbolic mother. We see this in the film as David is left in the woods because Monica does not want to destroy him but does not want him. David says to Monica, “I’m sorry I’m not real. If you let me I’ll be so real for you” (00:51:40). David is then shown in the side mirror of car as he is left, (00:52:00) a literal image of the cut of the mirror stage. This psychodynamic process is integral to coming to a full understanding of how David is not merely a robot or “super toy,” but rather a being who shares in the same processes and experiences as organic human beings. Unfortunately, David’s continual cut from Monica does not end here. After venturing on his journey all the way to Manhattan to meet Blue Fairy to become a real boy, David encounters his doppelganger showing that he is not one of kind, but the first of a kind (01:42:50). David, in showing the depths of his human emotions, love, and desire for reunification with Monica, says to his doppelganger, “You can’t have her. She’s mine.” David then proceeds to destroy his doppelganger stating “I’m David! I’m special! I’m unique!
You can’t have her!” until stopped by his creator, Prof. Hobby (01:39:54). David’s mere capacity for desire, love, and in his unique consciousness alone set him apart from an essentialist reduction to wires and silicon.

Following the typical path of human ego development, David then faces the very human existential and psychological question: “Given the reality of the world that I now find myself in post-Oedipal conflict, what am I to do?” While David has already given the answer to this question all throughout the film as he chases his desire of reunification with Monica, the reality of his existential and psychological condition comes to fruition when encountering his doppelganger. Indeed, David even goes as far to verbalizes this when he says, “My brain is falling out” (1:43:00). Interestingly, what might be seen as a strong piece of evidence for how David is not human, quite the opposite is achieved here. While David briefly does give up and internalizes the discourse that he is not human as he attempts suicide, (1:47:20) David sees statues of Pinocchio and Blue Fairy underwater after he falls into the ocean symbolizing a new birth and revitalization of his desire to become real for Monica. While David might not realize that he is a real boy, the audience and important characters have known this all along even as David continues on his journey. Even Prof. Hobby asserts this after previously stating that David is not one of a kind: “Our test was a simple one. Where would your self-motivated reasoning take you? To the logical conclusion that Blue Fairy is part of the great human flaw to wish for things that don’t exist, or to the greatest single human gift—the ability to chase down our dreams” (01:42:10). David possesses self-motivation, the ability to follow dreams, desire. This human desiring is of course at the very heart of all psychoanalytic thought:

Freud traces desire to its origins in primary lack, to the narcissistic wound brought about by the primary split of the mother/child dyad through the intervention of the Law of the Father. By subsequently investing itself in a succession of alternative, secondary objects, the psychoanalytic subject seeks to make up for its primary lack, to recover from the traumatic wound in its ego. (Hoogland 221)

In both Freudian and Lacanian thought, desire always goes back to the lack that is created during the Oedipal conflict by the rules of the world and the world of Others. When David’s attempt on his on life fails as he begins to think that he cannot re-obtain wholeness, David recovers via the hope he has found in the meaning-making process of fairy tales.

Continuing with this newfound hope to fix the lack he feels, after seeing the statue of Blue Fairy underwater, David takes the amphibicopter back
to an underwater Coney Island (01:50:00) and begins asking the statue of Blue Fairy to “Please, please make me into a real, live boy” for 2,000 years as the ocean froze around him (01:53:30). After being resuscitated by the alien visitors, David awakens in a reconstructed model of his home taken from his memories; however, the model of the home is not really a home for David because it is missing the thing that truly makes a place a home: meaningfulness and a sense of belonging. Kottler echoes this in saying, “It is from a place of belonging and feeling at home that we can relax and “be” human among other human beings, who can in turn, “be” themselves” (387). In requiring Monica to be at home, David is presented with an image of Blue Fairy projected by the aliens and an important dialogue occurs beginning with the image of Blue Fairy saying, “You’ve been searching for me haven’t you, David?” David responds in saying, “For my whole life […] I have a wish to make […] Please make me a real boy so my mommy will love me and let me stay with her” (02:03:30). Blue Fairy then tells David that he is, “unique in all the world” (02:04:50) and recreates Monica for just one day for David. This act both cements David’s humanity, the culmination of desire, and the importance of keeping hope in order to achieve your dreams no matter how unrealistic or impossible they may seem to be. The narrator notes this understanding in saying, “There was no Henry, there was no Martin. There was no grief. There was only David” (02:14:30). Directly following this statement, Monica tells David, “I love you David. I do love you. I have always loved you.” David then cries and in a moment of deep-felt resonance and fulfilled desire, the audience cries with him. The narrator speaks last and states, “That was the everlasting moment he had been waiting for. And the moment had passed for Monica was sound asleep. More than just asleep. For should he shake her she should never rouse. So David went to sleep too and for the first time in his life, he went to that place where dreams are born” (02:16:42). The film thus finishes with an illustration of David’s integration back into the real, something for which many humans strive for and rarely are able to do. Not only is David on par with his organic human counterparts, he is an explanatory model of what it means to be a human—one who not only has desires to create a meaningful future, but one who enacts those desires and brings them into fruition.

Therefore, in taking up the question of what it means to be human, *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* (2001) takes up a similar journey of Pinocchio as presented in Collodi’s *The Adventures of Pinocchio*, in the character of David. However, David’s becoming human not only illustrates the false assumptions of biological essentialism, but also argues that what makes human beings truly human is living a human experience rooted in desire, intersubjectivity, narrative myth, meaning making, and psychodynamic
conflicts. In this way, following what Thomas Morrissey, in his article entitled “Growing nowhere: Pinocchio subverted in Spielberg’s A.I. Artificial Intelligence,” says, “The tradition of robots exhibiting behavior that is more humane than that of the humans who made them is common in SF, the most popularly known examples occurring in Isaac Asimov’s robot stories and in the “person” of Lt. Commander Data of Star Trek: the Next Generation,” (Morrissey). David not only proves himself to be human but is more human than many other biological humans. Like the Star Trek fan who observes the inspiring human ideals of kindness, passion, and perseverance in the person of Lt. Commander Data, David too, through his humanity, issues forth a call through his example to relentlessly pursue our desires for belonging, existential purpose, and meaningful interaction with our lifeworld. Because when we take up our lives more seriously, we are able to live more authentically human lives and in turn help others to do so as well.

WORKS CITED


Contributors

Lauren Blastow plans to graduate from the University of West Georgia with a Bachelor's in English. She is interested in British poetry and analyzing film. She plans to attend Georgia State University's School of Law to study intellectual property law, and practice law for an established firm in Atlanta. She dreams of opening up a non-profit company and of writing a confessional poetry later in her life.

Wilson Chancey was born in McDonough, Georgia; raised in Perth, Western Australia, and schooled at the University of West Georgia. Wilson’s influences in literature and life are J.R.R. Tolkien and Adam Duritz. After graduating he plans to teach and write, hopefully to be published as a fiction writer in the young adult genre.

Bianca Holmes is Senior at the University of West Georgia and is currently pursuing a Bachelor of Arts degree in English. Post graduation, she plans to start a business and write short stories for literary magazines. Eventually, she wants to go back to school to obtain a Master of Fine Arts degree in Creative Writing.

Katie Kirk began her education at the University of West Georgia in fall of 2013 and plans to graduate in December 2017 with a degree in English and a concentration in Secondary Education. Kirk currently works at Carrollton Junior High as a Special Education Paraprofessional, and she seeks a teaching position at the school post-graduation. Her dream is to work with kids, ages 12-15. She wants to be a light for students during the challenging transition years and change lives through teaching English and Language Arts.
Jason McCurry graduates with a B.A in English in the Summer of 2018 and intends to attend graduate school for Speech Pathology. His current writing passions are poetry and young adult fiction. Jason plans to develop his writing and merge comedic elements into it. Later, he wishes to write books containing eccentric characters. He plans to emphasize the need for peculiar characters in his writing since such characters stand out amongst the banality of society.

Allison Perrigo will graduate in Spring of 2018 with a Bachelor’s of English from the University of West Georgia. She is interested in feminist discourse related to Modern American writing. Post-graduation, she hopes to enter the Master’s program in English to pursue an academic career teaching at the University level. Her accomplishments include presenting at the Undergraduate Research Conference and working as a Staff Editor of LURE.

Anthony Thomason is a graduating English major. He has earned additional degrees from the University of West Georgia including a B.A. in Psychology with a minor in Philosophy and a M.A. in Psychology. Mr. Thomason currently works with adolescents as a Licensed Associate Professional Counselor. His interests include the crossroads between Psychodynamic Psychotherapy, Phenomenology, and Catholicism. Mr. Thomason plans to enroll in a MAT program in order to pursue teaching in addition to counseling.