

# POPULAR CULTURE REVIEW

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# From the Editor



Editing *Popular Culture Review* for the last 27 years has been a labor of love. I would like to acknowledge the support of UNLV's College of Liberal Arts and Department of English as well as PCA/ACA and, most recently Policy Studies Organization.

Thank you all,  
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## From the Editor's Desk

Perusing several hundred CVs of applicants for new faculty positions in UNLV's English department, I was struck by the preponderance of those listing some form of Popular Culture as, at least, an auxiliary interest. This would have been unheard of twenty-five years ago when *Popular Culture Review* was launched as the organ of the Far West Popular and American Culture Associations, and Popular Culture studies were barely tolerated by the more established disciplines. Clearly we are here to stay and this issue of *PCR* in which *Beowulf*, *Shakespeare*, Jeff Foxworthy, Herodotus, and computer gaming are cheek by jowl illustrates some of that breadth.

Ric Jahna pursues the ambiguities of the redneck persona through the filter of comedian Jeff Foxworthy, while Maura Grady examines June Oldham's *Beowulf* inspired novel *The Raven Waits*, in which Oldham proposes a genesis of the original "by creating an authorial persona who takes an active part in composing observed events into an early oral version of the poem." Amy Green moves the oral tradition into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, sharing her experiences about her TED talk on video games and their "largely untapped resource for narrative and exploration and analysis." In print, Helmut Loeffler argues that Bob Woodward "stands in the tradition of Herodotus," his book *State of Denial* resembling the *Histories*.

Moving on to television, Richard Logsdon explores the Manichean dimensions of the popular television series *Breaking Bad* and its dark influence on its audience, while Robert Miklitsch takes us back to the 50s in "Pink is the New Black: 50s Color Noir, the "Fatal Man" and the "Femme" Detective in *A Kiss Before Dying*. Rebecca Branstetter tackles Christian horror in "Scare the Hell out of Them," a fascinating look at Peretti and Dekker's Christian versions of Halloween haunted houses and their anti-feminist agenda.

Lastly, the tropes of Science Fiction meet funk in David Sandner's "Put a glide in your stride and a dip in your hip/and come up to the Mothership," the only place where we may finally be free.

Felicia

Errata — Don't ask me how we did it, but somehow the cover of Volume 1 of our 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary edition went to press boldly stating the year as 2013 instead of 2014. We have had stickers made to cover our error and are mailing them to libraries and contributors. If you would like to have one, email me at [felicia.campbell@unlv.edu](mailto:felicia.campbell@unlv.edu).

## State of the Redneck in the Early 21<sup>st</sup> Century: The Case of Jeff Foxworthy

The 1993, death of the thirty-two-year-old NASCAR driver Davey Allison sent a shock through the sport's legions of fans. On the day of Allison's funeral, thousands gathered outside St. Aloysius Catholic Church in Bessemer, Alabama to honor the memory of the popular competitor. *People* magazine later ran an article featuring photographs of the crowd of mourners and some of the creative flower arrangements they bore.

It is with these images that American comedian Jeff Foxworthy opens his 1996 autobiography, *No Shirt, No Shoes, No Problem*. Foxworthy remembers considering the photographs one evening in bed: "Black carnations in the shape of a race car, a big wheel, and who knows what else. It wouldn't surprise me if someone had made a set of points and plugs out of rose petals" (1). Foxworthy shares the photographs with his wife, and then wonders aloud: "Since people know me mostly as that *Redneck* guy, I don't even want to *think* about the flowers you'd get if I died now. Rebel flags. Brown carnations shaped like a spit of chewing tobacco juice mid-flight" (2). Pondering the article, Foxworthy finds himself strangely troubled. "It took a while before I understood what was bothering me. I felt a kinship with Davey Allison, a regular guy from the South who became a celebrity just doing what he did best" (2). To his wife, Foxworthy asks, "You know, I'm proud of my Southern roots, but don't you think I should get a little past this Redneck thing before I buy the farm?" (2).

Doing so would seem to represent a tall order for the comedian, since being "that Redneck guy" had been the foundation of his initial rise to fame and remained central to his famous joke series, "You might be a Redneck if..." but was also tied to his own self-styled persona of a simple, unsophisticated, working-class guy, a man who was able to make the jokes he did in part because of his own identification as one speaking from within the redneck community. In the years following his autobiography, Foxworthy has indeed maintained his status as "that redneck guy," and his redneck jokes have continued to proliferate, now numbering well into the hundreds, and pervaded into popular culture. It is not too much to say that since the early 1990s, Foxworthy has become the foremost authority in defining the parameters of the cultural icon that is the American "redneck."

Certainly, the concept of the redneck did not begin with Foxworthy. The figure of a white "Other" has been a staple of American culture, in one form or another and in varying degrees of prominence,

from the nation's beginnings. The term *redneck* dates back only to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and from its inception is steeped in racial and class associations. As Patrick Huber notes, the term seems to have emerged in the area of the southern Mississippi Valley (146). According to *Dictionary of American Regional English*, the first recorded use that clearly evokes its pejorative nature dates to 1893 when Hubert A. Shands describes it as "A name applied by the better class of people to the poorer inhabitants of the rural districts" (qtd in Cassidy and Houston 531). For Shands, "The word explains itself: men who work in the field, as a matter of course, generally have their skin stained red and burnt by the sun, and especially is this true of the back of their necks" (qtd. in Cassidy and Houston 531).

The *idea* of a "redneck," however, predates the term itself and can be traced back into the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Since then, the general parameters of this type have been signaled by dozens of monikers, many of which are still in use today: hillbilly, hick, cracker, bumpkin, yokel, hayseed, peckerwood, white trash, poor-white trash, and trailer trash. One colonial representation of the poor-white Other can be found in Virginian patrician William Byrd's *The History of the Dividing Line* and his description of "lubbers," poor whites that lived along the border of Virginia and North Carolina. He emphasizes the idle laziness of the men near the Virginia-North Carolina border. "Surely," he writes, "There is no place in the world where the inhabitants live with less labor" (92). Later, the figure of the lazy white bumpkin figures prominently throughout Southwestern humor, in characters such as George Washington Harris's prankster, Sut Lovingood. Some critics have located the comedy of Jeff Foxworthy within this same tradition. Michael Dunne and Sara Lewis Dunne argue that "Foxworthy comes closest of all the twentieth-century Southern humorists toward replicating the attitudes of the nineteenth-century Southwest humorists toward the grotesque body" (255).

Of course, as the above examples suggest, the redneck persona cannot be encompassed by a single narrow cliché. Within the scope of the redneck stereotype there exist a number of variations and sometimes contradictory attributes. Even so, throughout the history of terms from *lubber* to *redneck*, the predominant move has been to call up and project pejorative identity markers on a segment of the white population. These attributes consistently include laziness, domestic abuse and other forms of violence, poverty, alcoholism, comic obesity, childlike naiveté, bigotry (racism, sexism, homophobia), and sexual degeneracy (hypersexuality, promiscuity, incest, bestiality). Within this consistency, "rednecks" have been cast both as harmless, laughable buffoons and as

violent and dangerous outsiders. As Jim Goad notes in *The Redneck Manifesto*, “As a fictional stereotype, the poor white originally entered the national consciousness with a hillbilly clown puppet on one hand and a redneck villain puppet on the other, a cultural foreigner with a limited ability to achieve and a massive capacity to destroy. He walked a tightrope between amusing the audience and murdering it” (86). Annalee Newitz also notes the darker side of the poor white stereotype, particularly in film, where “[...] the hillbilly figure designates a white who is racially visible not just because he is poor, but also because he is sometimes monstrously so” (134).

Regardless of any competing notions, the redneck is always cast as something different, as a form of whiteness that refuses to conform to accepted notions of whiteness as the established norm. The redneck may be ridiculed, feared, hated, or even embraced, but it must be accounted for. Far from signaling the invisibility that is so often assumed to accompany whiteness, the idea of “redneck,” with all of its accompanying accoutrements, steps forth imbued with a highly Othered visibility, and as popular monikers like *poor-white trash* suggest, the figure is most often viewed as extraneous, vile, worthless, something to be discarded.

Duane Carr recognizes this phenomenon in *A Question of Class: The Redneck Stereotype in Southern Fiction* (1996). He surveys works by writers from William Byrd in the 18<sup>th</sup> century to Cormac McCarthy in the twentieth, concluding that Southern poor whites “have been most often depicted as simple-minded, shiftless, lazy and violent – a subspecies to be detested and ridiculed or, on rare occasions, felt sorry for”(3).<sup>12</sup> More recently, Matt Wray considers the concept of “white trash” in terms that emphasize the incongruity involved in viewing whiteness and abjection together. For Wray, the concept of *white trash* expresses “fundamental tensions and deep structural antinomies: between the sacred and the profane, purity and impurity, morality and immorality, cleanliness and dirt” (2). He writes:

In conjoining such primal opposites into a single category, *white trash* names a kind of disturbing liminality: a monstrous, transgressive identity of mutually violating boundary terms, a dangerous threshold state of being neither one nor the other. It brings together into a single ontological category that which must be kept apart in order to establish a meaningful and stable symbolic order. (2)

Like Wray, I am interested in exploring the functional nature of such identity projections and their importance in structuring a perceived

reality. In fact, I argue that our deeply engrained ways of categorizing, portraying, understanding, and dismissing the poor white are more than mere examples of a rigid and abiding stereotype. Instead, I submit that this pervasive set of identity markers that infiltrate literature, popular culture, everyday vocabulary, even scholarly writing, represents a group of assumptions and beliefs so firmly entrenched and themselves invisible that they are susceptible to Foucauldian discourse analysis. It is this discursive taken-for-grantedness that allows someone like Jeff Foxworthy to mine the redneck stereotype so successfully.

To invoke Foucault's concept of discourse, as developed in such works as *Madness and Civilization*, *The Birth of the Clinic*, and *The History of Sexuality*, is to imagine the presence of a totalizing semiotic system that makes certain truth statements possible and others impossible. Such an approach recognizes that social, political, or sexual categories are not natural and fixed but rather are constructed within a specific cultural "space" that constitutes an ideological discourse, within which the strictures of meaning dictate what can and cannot be thought.

For Foucault, knowledge is never disinterested and objective but rather is involved in the formation, distribution, and maintenance of power. He writes in *Discipline and Punish*:

We should admit rather that power produces knowledge (and not simply by encouraging it because it serves power or by applying it because it is useful); that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations. (27)

Indeed, when it becomes possible to "know" a group, to "understand" its nature, to make statements about what it *is*, it is also possible to wield power over the group. The data that creates and maintains this power/knowledge does not come simply from official statements but also from cultural artifacts "high" and "low."

Humor, for example, is very much involved in power-knowledge. Mark Twain, one of the nation's early stand-up comedians, once wrote, "Humor must not professedly teach and it must not professedly preach, but it must do both if it would live forever" (qtd. in Neider 20). Twain's comment eloquently illustrates both the pedagogical and moral aspects of jokes, themselves cultural artifacts that may masquerade as innocuous amusements with no deep design on the world. The reality, of course, is quite the contrary. Jokes, perhaps more than most cultural forms, are deeply involved in truth-making, in the

formation of what Foucault calls knowledge-power. Jokes tell us what and who are to be considered funny. They dictate who can laugh at whom and with what level of impunity. Considered collectively, Foxworthy's jokes emerge as an influential body of work, a foremost commentary on what signifies redneck in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. While much of his oeuvre draws on the well-worn stereotypes that construct the poor and working-class white in negative terms, we can also note tensions between these stereotypes and Foxworthy's attempts to situate himself within a strand of redneck identity. Through him, we can witness the hegemonic struggle for meaning that reveals what is at stake for the performer, those he depicts, and the larger society.

As noted, when Jeff Foxworthy expresses a desire to “get past this redneck thing,” we recognize that any attempt he makes to do so would be a positioning of himself against a discourse that he has been actively complicit in maintaining. In purely economic terms, he has long surpassed any link that he might have had to the working classes. As a multi-millionaire celebrity whose distinctions include selling more comedy albums than any other entertainer in history, he is a success by any financial standard. Further, he circulates comfortably among the economic and Hollywood elite, and over the years his cultural appeal has moved closer and closer to the mainstream, perhaps peaking with his hosting of the television game show, *Are You Smarter than a Fifth Grader?* (2007-2009).

Still, the fact remains that for much of the consuming public, Foxworthy remains “that Redneck guy.” Indeed, most of his work from the past decade continues to evoke class-based monikers, including *redneck*, *blue collar*, *hillbilly*, *hick*, and on rare occasions *white trash*. The bedrock, of course, remains his “You might be a Redneck” one-liners. The set-up and punch line of the individual jokes is quite basic. In fact, it is partly the repetitive simplicity that has allowed the jokes to infiltrate popular culture so effectively. Most often they open with the subordinating conjunction “If” and are followed by a clause that describes a particular behavior or personality trait. The joke is then completed by the punch line, “you might be a Redneck.” For example, “If your daddy waves at traffic from the front porch wearing nothing but his underwear, you might be a Redneck” (Foxworthy, *The Redneck* 32).

While Foxworthy's biography contains its fair share of humor, the book is also a vehicle for the author to come to terms with his own origins and later success. He explains that Davey Allison's death “started me thinking about where I'd come from and wondering what had happened to the little boy who grew up three doors down from the end of the old Atlanta airport runway. Believe me, I know I've come a long

way” (3). In the years following his autobiography, Foxworthy has continued to evoke what he views as his humble origins. In a 2012 interview with Tavis Smiley, he asserts, “I grew up by the airport with a dirt yard. Never in my life should I have been a success.” Early in *No Shirt, No Shoes, No Problem*, he jokes, “I grew up so deep blue collar that my mother had to wash my shirts separately, in cold water” (5). Rather than expressing shame toward his roots, he casts them as an ennobling juxtaposition to his later success. Here, Foxworthy evokes the term “Blue Collar,” a more recent category on the social landscape that calls up images of industrial factories and other forms of skilled manual labor, of hardworking fathers coming home covered in sweat and grease to loving wives and children.

This idealized portrait of the working class hero demonstrates one way that bearers of the redneck stigma have sought to recuperate the label for their own purposes and to deploy their economic and social reality in more positive terms. In the specific case of *redneck* (and to lesser degrees terms like *hillbilly* and *white trash*) this refashioning of identity has reached cultural prominence. In “A Short History of Redneck: The Fashioning of a Southern White Masculine Identity,” Patrick Huber traces the term *redneck* from its origins through more contemporary uses, including re-appropriations of the term by those who self-identify as rednecks and who recast the image as an “honest, hard-working workingman who identifies with traditional Southern social and religious values” in contrast to a globalized, amoral, modern world (157).

Evidence of this refashioning can be seen readily in popular culture. Today one can purchase bumper stickers and belt buckles that proclaim “Redneck and Proud of It” or skimpy T-shirts with the words “White Trash” printed across the top. One can sing along to country-western hits like Gretchen Wilson’s “Redneck Woman” (2004), and Blake Shelton’s “Hillbilly Bone” (2010). As is clear, in certain contexts, it has become “hip” to be a white outsider, to flaunt some behavior that flies in the face of the limiting strictures of cultural norms. Self-styled characters like Kurt Cobain, Kid Rock, Britney Spears, and Foxworthy himself are just a few examples of entertainers who have embraced some element of redneck or white trash culture and worn the badge proudly. Foxworthy situates himself within a redneck identity that evokes an honest, working-class, self-sufficient, God-fearing, patriot who espouses traditional “family values.”

However, the degree to which Foxworthy can truly lay claim to authentic working-class roots is debatable. His father, in fact, was a graduate of Georgia Tech and during Jeff’s childhood worked for IBM, eventually rising to the position of manager. Jeff later attended his

father's alma mater, although he eventually left school to go to work for IBM himself. Hence, some have accused Foxworthy of exaggerating his working-class pedigree, and in his autobiography, we can see attempts to recuperate and defend some of that ethos. Foxworthy notes early that his parents divorced when he was young and that he, along with his mother and brother, moved in with his maternal grandparents, James and Mary Camp in Hapeville Georgia, "a small lower-middle-class town eleven miles south of Atlanta" (6). Despite locating the Camp home within a middle-class setting, Foxworthy's next move is to mitigate that distinction with physical markers of the back yard:

Our backyard was mostly dirt, but we filled it with interesting stuff like a beat-up basketball backboard and rim through which I could never sink a shot. [...] The backyard also had a pile of concrete blocks, a barrel to burn trash in, and a double kitchen sink turned upside down. My grandfather kept crickets underneath to use as fish bait. (7)

Hence, in the depiction of his young life, Foxworthy evokes some of the trappings that have traditionally marked individuals as redneck or even white trash. At the same time, absent are any references to any specific economic challenges. The author would seem to suggest that one does not need to be economically disadvantaged or even working class to be a redneck. Perhaps being a redneck, for Foxworthy, depends more on a state of mind, a way of viewing oneself in relation to the outside world. One can be blue collar or a redneck "at heart."

None of this is to suggest that Jeff Foxworthy has never felt the sting of class-based derision. He recalls, "I first heard the term 'Redneck' when I played baseball and football for Hapeville High. When we'd compete against teams from Atlanta's north side – the money side – they'd always call us 'a bunch of Rednecks'" (24). Immediately, after evoking this example of redneck as class slur, Foxworthy counters. "Then, the term was still something of an insult. Now it just means a glorious absence of sophistication. Naturally, we found ways to make the high-society boys pay – with compounded interest" (24). By fashioning himself as blue-collar "at heart" and by redefining "redneck" on his own terms, Foxworthy invokes a redneck identity that is not based on deprivation or depravity and that is not steeped in shame, but rather can be wielded with pride.

This pride runs throughout Foxworthy's autobiography as he relates stories of solid family relationships, idealized male friendships, and praise of southern women. "I'm still proud of where I come from," he writes. "We may have words nobody's heard of, but we also have

strong values. Most everybody goes to church and is pretty family oriented” (19). Whether or not his perceptions of the Atlanta area can be born out in facts is largely irrelevant. What he is evoking is less a specific geographic place and more an imagined community of like-minded individuals that can accommodate Americans across the continent.

Therefore, far from embracing the stereotypical qualities of a redneck, he criticizes those stereotypes that have been employed to denigrate people like him. In fact, he reveals that part of the *raison d’être* of his comedy is as a coping mechanism for negative views of “redneck”: “One reason I make Redneck jokes is, well . . . I have to. Otherwise, having to endure an attitude from the rest of the country that Southerners are stupid and backward would be too depressing” (18).

Foxworthy recasts himself as an honest, Christian, family man with traditional family values that supersede his role as celebrity millionaire. In an interview with CMT before his 2005 hosting of the CMT Country Music awards, Foxworthy says, “I’m a great husband and a great daddy, to the point that I have turned down so many things, work-wise. I just turned down a movie, a chance to do something with Robin Williams because I was going to have to be gone for seven or eight weeks in Vancouver. I was like, ‘I am not going seven or eight weeks without seeing my wife and kids’” (CMT).

Foxworthy’s appearances on CMT, including hosting the CMT Country Music Awards from 2005 to 2007, are part of a larger association he has with country music in general. Early in his standup career, he began opening for country music artists like Garth Brooks and Emmylou Harris. Foxworthy has even stated that he identifies more with the world of country music than he does stand-up comedy. And it is in the context of country music that we encounter Foxworthy’s most articulate commentary on redneck as good, honest, simple, God-fearing, patriotic folk. It comes as his closing monologue to the 2007 CMT Awards:

I started thinking about why I like country music and doing this show so much, and here’s what I came up with, y’all. I like country music because it’s about the things in life that really matter. It ain’t about braggin’ about how you’re gonna mess somebody up, or how somebody ain’t respectin’ ya. It’s about love, family, friends – with a few beers, a cheap woman and a two-timin’ man thrown in for spice. It doesn’t take political sides, even with things as ugly as war. Instead, it celebrates the brave men and women who go to fight

‘em, the price they pay to do it and the longin’ we have for them to return home to the ones that they love. It’s about kids and how there ain’t nothin’ like ‘em. I get tired of hearin’ about how bad kids are today, because there are a lot of great kids out there that just need somebody to love ‘em and believe in ‘em. Country folks love their kids and they will jack you up if you try to mess with ‘em! People in country music don’t forget the people that allow them to do what they do for a livin’. They sign autographs and they take pictures with the fans because they know without ‘em most of us entertainers would be getting’ a lot dirtier in the course of our workday. We are thankful that people want to hear the songs and the jokes that we write. Country music doesn’t have to be politically correct. We sing about God because we believe in Him. We are not trying to offend anybody, but the evidence that we have seen of Him in our small little lives trumps your opinion about whether or not He exists. [...] Country music is about new love and it’s about old love. It’s about getting’ drunk and getting’ sober. It’s about leavin’ and it’s about comin’ home. It’s real music sung by real people for real people, the people that make up the backbone of this country. You can call us rednecks if you want. We’re not offended, ‘cause we know what we’re all about. We get up and go to work, we get up and go to church, and we get up and go to war when necessary. All we ask for is a few songs to carry us along the way, and that’s why I love this show, because it ain’t some self-important Hollywood hype with the winners determined by somebody else. On this show, you decide who goes home with a trophy and you get to dance and sing along with the people that bring you the songs of your life. (CMT)

In a moment that has been lauded as a highly authentic expression of the comedian’s convictions, we see Foxworthy lapse into an unabashed and unironic celebration of country music and an appreciation of its fans, its “rednecks,” not as marginal figures but as the “backbone of this country,” as a patriotic *us* contrasted with a liberal, modern, urban *them* who lack the virtues he has just espoused.

On the surface the monologue is an appreciation of good “country folks” and their ability to focus on “the things that matter.” A

closer consideration of the monologue, however, reveals a more specific set of claims. Although Foxworthy has often taken pains to distance himself from the stereotype of redneck as racist, it is tempting to read in his monologue a coded criticism of hip-hop artists whose lyrics might threaten to “mess somebody up” over being disrespected.

Foxworthy, however, seems to endorse violence in other contexts, in the case that someone were to “mess” with a redneck’s child or in the context of nationally sanctioned war, where the inherit violence would seem to be something to celebrate.

Foxworthy’s *us* reverses the dichotomy that constructs the redneck as marginal. In his configuration it is the *them* who are pushed to the fringe. *We*, the rednecks, are “real people” in contrast to the presumably less real other. *We* are not like *them*, that is, not soft, anti-war liberals, black rappers, or nonbelieving atheists. He has successfully cast the “redneck” as the central subject position and hence marginalized all of the rest. Forget that he has been the beneficiary of the Hollywood celebrity machine or that he sees nothing troubling in his claim that country music foregrounds the subject of kids and family alongside the topics of cheating, casual sex, and alcohol use. In imagined communities, consistency of thought is not a requirement.

Despite Foxworthy’s considerable efforts in constructing a redneck identity that can be lovingly owned and celebrated, some moments in his biography have revealed a less self-assured ownership of stereotypical redneck behaviors, even when it comes to his own actions. In these moments, Foxworthy’s tone shifts sharply to confession and absolution. In *No Shirt, No Shoes, No Problem* he relates one incident with a certain degree of shame and fears that owning his actions may undermine the persona that he has worked hard to cultivate. Still, he presses forward with the confession, explaining “I’d rather you hear it from me than read some inaccurate tabloid version that makes me sound like a hick” (35). The incident involves Foxworthy urinating into the opposing team’s dugout during a major league baseball game and sees him spend the evening in jail. It would seem that the identity of “hick” and the behavior he describes lie somewhere outside of his acceptable “redneck” construction. As we will later see, many of Foxworthy’s redneck jokes deal with elements of the grotesque body, connections with urination, defecation, flatulence, and spitting, all elements of the self that are supposed to be quartered off and hidden in the proper clean white body, but that seem to erupt with outward regularity in the redneck.

Later in *No Shoes, No Shirt, No Problem*, the comedian prepares for another confession: “If any of you still wonder whether I’m a true

Redneck, this long-repressed secret should convince you” (52). Foxworthy will reveal a story that places him at the center of one of the most consistent and negative clichés surrounding constructions of the redneck as backward and depraved. “Believe me,” he writes, “I never thought it could happen to me. A long time ago, *I was attracted to my cousin.*” Unlike bodily functions, which are to be withheld inward, sexual relations are supposed to be projected outward, beyond the self and the kin group. A cultural taboo that evokes disgust in mainstream culture, incest and inbreeding has long been one of the deepest and most penetrating stereotypes of poor whites, especially in the American South. And the topic has been a staple of Foxworthy’s redneck one-liners. When the subject relates to his own life, however, Foxworthy scrambles to explain and contextualize:

We were only fourteen and we had spent the day at a family reunion. You know the routine: swim and hang out all day, and then eat lunch off concrete picnic tables. Afterward, she and I took a walk and pretty soon we were kissing. I don’t know how it happened, but I do know my brain was screaming in my ear, “You idiot. You’re kissing your cousin!” Of course another part of me was also screaming: “Second cousin. C’mon, she’s almost a stranger! Haven’t seen her in six years!” (52)

Within this humorous anecdote, Foxworthy dramatizes the psychomachia between two opposing voices, that of societal taboos and respect for decorous forms of sexual behavior and that of a baser form of desire that defies rules of sexual exogamy.

So too does he dramatize the inherent slipperiness of identity, the fear that with one misstep one can lapse from the good kind of redneck into the wrong kind of redneck, for the balancing act is always a precarious one. Luckily, for Foxworthy, this intra-familial encounter does not come to full consummation. The guilty parties collect themselves and escape with a degree of their respectability intact: “We cooled down short of sin and went back to our families. We didn’t talk about what happened and have never discussed it since” (52). As Foxworthy’s confession illustrates, there are some behavioral traits that do not fit comfortably in his self-styled redneck persona, that require confession and absolution, that must be excised lest one slip into that undesired Other. It is not only Foxworthy who feels this slipperiness. It is often present in his audience. Robert C. Hauhart notes this very phenomenon:

Foxworthy, having steeped himself in a world of Dixie low-rent mannerisms, has emerged from the margins to

share his discriminating observations as an expert lifestyle commentator. His audience, for its part, laughs nervously at one-liners that often strike too close to what was once home – or what some audience members fear might be home once again. Foxworthy’s elevation of himself – and the audience – arises from the mediated distance he creates from the objects of his redneck appreciation. In essence, Foxworthy says, “We’re not them!” while leaving open the possibility that some audience members *could be them* (or become a “redneck” once again). In short, Foxworthy’s humor relies on the nervous laughter inspired by modern status anxiety: it’s fun to laugh at the rubes but it’s embarrassing to recall how closely one avoided being a hick – and how close to the line of middleclass respectability one still clings. (273)

Another episode that foregrounds these tensions takes the form of a “major rite of passage” from his high school years, a late-night venture to a place known as “Shit Creek,” a “two-mile stretch of woods through which ran the drain-off from the sewage treatment plant between Hapeville and Forest Park” (28-29). This site, Foxworthy explains, was reputed to be the home of two peculiar inhabitants: “See, the rumor was that Goat People – half person, half goat – lived in the woods. And Waterhead families: people with *really big* heads. Supposedly entire clans of these freaks existed nowhere else in Georgia but in the woods surrounding Shit Creek” (29). Here again, Foxworthy reveals that there are those individuals (mythical or otherwise) who occupy a space outside the realm of decent “country folks,” sub-human figures subsisting on the margins of society and marked by extreme physical difference. By evoking these figures, he draws on the common white-trash tropes of physical deformity (often imagined to be a result of inbreeding), bestiality, and – again – an association with excrement. In these cases, the depravity of the characters is manifested in the physical bodies of the subjects.

Foxworthy dramatizes his own initiation trip: “We’d driven about a mile into the woods when several guys thought they saw a Goat Man on the edge of the woods. Then suddenly Ricky’s car broke down in the middle of the road” (29). The boys get out of the automobile and prepare to push. “Warily, we all got out on the dirt road. I swore I could hear the Waterhead families doing whatever Waterhead families did in their houses, back in the dark woods. I stood behind the Volkswagen, ready to push, when suddenly Ricky fired the engine. [...] Ricky put it in

gear and took off, leaving me in the middle of Shit Creek” (29). As the frightened Foxworthy runs after the car with a vigor that “would have set a new school speed record,” he recalls “Everything that could possibly happen to me flashed into my head as I raced through the dark. [...] I feared that by the time the Goat People and Waterheads got through with me, there would be nothing left to take home” (29). Luckily, he finds that his friends are waiting for him at the end of the road. “You bastards!” he yells. “Leave me in Shit Creek! The Goat Man was *right behind me!* He was this close to catching me!” (30).

Beyond the concern for his personal safety, Foxworthy deftly illustrates the deeper fear of lapsing into and being caught by that monstrous Other, the white trash abomination, the other self, trailing at one’s heels, always threatening to subsume one’s identity into its own. To find many more such monsters, we need only move into Foxworthy’s redneck one-liners themselves, where we see a marked divergence from the redneck as good honest folk and the slip into the old stereotypical depictions identified by Duane Carr and others.

In his debut comedy album titled, *You might be a redneck if...* the joke series first appears over halfway into the routine. Foxworthy fires a quick volley of twelve jokes, all beginning with the subordinating conjunction “If” and followed by a description of some characterizing behavior, then the warning “you might be a Redneck.”

The first 12 jokes are as follows:

- If you’ve been on television more than five times describing what the tornado sounded like . . . you might be a Redneck.
- If you’ve ever cut your grass and found a car . . . you might be a Redneck.
- If your dad walks you to school . . . because you’re in the same grade . . . you might be a Redneck.
- If you’ve ever been too drunk to fish . . . you might be a Redneck. If someone asks to see your ID and show ‘em your belt buckle . . . you might be a Redneck.
- If you’ve ever had to haul a can of paint to a water tower to defend your sister’s honor . . . you might be a Redneck.
- If your dog and your wallet are both on a chain . . . you might be a Redneck.
- If every day someone comes to your door thinking you’re having a yard sale . . . you might be a Redneck.
- If you’ve ever financed a tattoo . . . you might be a

Redneck.

- If you've ever made change in the offering plate . . . you might be a redneck.
- If you go to the family reunion to meet women . . . you might be a redneck.
- If you see a sign that says "say no to crack" and it reminds you to pull your jeans up . . . you just might be a redneck.

In these twelve jokes, Foxworthy abandons the revered tones that he reserves for other occasions when rednecks are lauded or appreciated. Indeed, it would seem appropriate to do so, as the context has changed. The primary goal of standup comedy is to elicit laughter in the audience, a goal he accomplishes in this instant and in the many to follow it. It is also interesting to note that in this quick succession of twelve jokes Foxworthy has set the basic discursive parameters for the hundreds of redneck jokes he has delivered over the years. As noted, this joke cycle veers sharply away from any notion of rednecks as good honest, religious, hardworking folks. In fact, the contrary is true. What emerges instead is the beginning of a discourse on rednecks that circumscribes their identity as trash.

What can we deduce about rednecks from these twelve jokes? Rednecks are probably stupid and uneducated. They are poor and make unwise spending decisions with the money they do have. They are likely to live in trailer homes and hence are more vulnerable to severe weather such as tornadoes, a vulnerability that, presumably, we are encouraged to find humorous. Rednecks abuse alcohol. They have a tacky sense of fashion and fail to observe unspoken standards of social decorum. Their yards are unkempt, cluttered, and most likely littered with non-functioning automobiles. They seem to have a general confusion over what belongs inside and what outside. They are probably overweight and are more closely than the rest of us defined by bodily abjection. They are prone to sexual licentiousness and, of course, to incest.

Absent in these jokes and the hundreds to follow are any evocations of the patriotic, church-going, war-fighting, hard-working, salt-of-the-earth rednecks he has evoked elsewhere. There are no *If you love your kids and work hard to support them . . . you might be a Redneck* jokes. Absent also is any appreciation of social or economic forces that might contribute to the lifestyle markers. There is no acknowledgment that access to quality and continuous education might be influenced by one's socioeconomic class, that scarcity of means might increase instances of crime or encourage one to hold onto an undrivable vehicle, that lawn maintenance for some may be precluded due to

financial strain. In Foxworthy's redneck jokes, white poverty is portrayed as something to be laughed at and the fact that he can wield such humor with near impunity rests on the societal assumption that if one is poor and white then it is one's own fault, that the poverty must stem not only from mental deficiencies, but moral ones. Indeed, Foxworthy hits this mark over and over again in his jokes: "If your father encourages you to quit school when Larry announces an opening in the lube rack . . . If the primary color of your car is 'Bondo' . . . If your richest relative buys a new house and you have to help take the wheels off . . . If you have more TV channels than dollars in the bank . . . you might be a Redneck." (Foxworthy, *You Might Be a Redneck If . . . This is the Biggest Book You've Ever Read*).

Foxworthy's redneck jokes reveal deep fissures between the conceptions of rednecks that they depict and the conception Foxworthy reserves for himself and others he imagines similar to him. Despite considerable efforts in his biography to "get past" redneck stereotypes and make room for a palatable redneck identity, in his jokes he lapses into the most negatively stereotypical traits available. It's as if the discursive formations that have long constricted poor whites are too much to overcome.

Edward Said, in his book *Orientalism*, draws on Foucault's concept of discourse in order to theorize the relationship between the east and west. Said explains:

Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient – dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: In short Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient. (Said 12)

In a similar way, I am suggesting that separate from the objective existence of a class of impoverished whites in the South we can imagine a discursive field with ready-made images, assumptions, and structures that construct an identity for these figures, an identity establishing a binary between them and mainstream whiteness. This discourse, in fact, offers consistent ways of making what might be seen as deformed whiteness visible by "trashing" it. Foxworthy's "trashing" of whiteness serves to provide explanations for the appearance of a form of white visibility that refuses to conform to mainstream white identity and thereby threatens white hegemony. Privileged whiteness depends on trashed whiteness for its own definition. Somewhat ironically, the

marginalizing of the poor white as “trash,” something to be discarded, can be seen as a strategic move to preserve race and class privilege.

Redneck jokes as they have proliferated over the years are not significant in what new knowledge they have created. Rather, they are remarkable for the degree that they have drawn upon a well of discursive knowledge that allows us to laugh at rednecks because they are so knowable. The effect is really just a repetition of a comparatively small number of redneck stereotypes.

Rednecks are criminals; hence “If your father’s cell number has nothing to do with a telephone . . . you might be a Redneck” (Foxworthy). Similarly, “If you have a favorite judge . . . If you’ve flipped the bird while wearing handcuffs...you might be a Redneck” (Foxworthy). Crime here is not viewed as an offshoot of poverty, but rather born from an inclination present in a particular class of person. Rednecks abuse alcohol. Hence, “If loading the dishwasher means getting your wife drunk . . . if you’re a lite beer drinker, because you start drinking when it gets light . . . If you’ve ever opened a beer while making love . . . or if Jack Daniels makes your list of most admired people . . . you might be a Redneck” (Foxworthy).

In addition, rednecks have a marked tendency to violate boundaries of inside/outside, interior/exterior. Hence, “if you bring your dog to work with you . . . if you have to go outside to get something out of the ‘fridge . . . if you’ve ever used a weed-eater indoors . . . if going to the bathroom at night involves shoes and a flashlight . . . if you see no need to stop at a rest stop ‘cause you have an empty milk jug . . . if you’ve ever raked leaves in your kitchen . . . or if your wife has ever said, ‘Come move this transmission so I can take a bath’ . . . you might be a Redneck” (Foxworthy). Rednecks are incestuous. Hence, “If your family tree does not fork . . . if your brother-in-law is also your uncle . . . if you have to scratch your sister’s name out of the message: ‘for a good time call . . .’ because you feel guilty about putting it there . . . if your gene pool doesn’t have a deep end...you might be a Redneck” (Foxworthy).

The rednecks of Foxworthy’s jokes, being also poor – white trash, grotesque aberrations to be cast off, are closely linked to bodily abjection. Hence, “If you prepare for a bubble bath by eating beans . . . If your divorce papers mention flatulence . . . you think the Food Pyramid is your mother-in-law’s nickname . . . the only thing fresh in your kitchen is the mouse droppings . . . there has ever been crime-scene tape on your bathroom door . . . everyone in the house learns something from the potty training videotape . . . you come home from the garbage dump with more than you went with . . . or your mother says, ‘Ya’ll come in here

and look at this before I flush it'. . . you might be a Redneck" (Foxworthy).

What is a redneck in the United States today, particularly as we see the identity filtered through the work of Jeff Foxworthy? Is it a transgressive social identity with a socio-political solidarity? An honorable title, a proud proclamation of self and of traditional values, positioned against what is perceived as an increasingly secular and immoral modernity? At times, perhaps. However, more than anything else, it remains a pejorative marker, a trashed identity that signals social, biological, and moral inferiority. It is a strategic way of accounting for examples of visible whiteness that do not conform to standard notions of race privilege, a way of trashing these instances of deformed whiteness and of accounting for, circumscribing, and discarding this troublesome figure, thus naturalizing mainstream white privilege.

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#### Note

1. Carr's scope primarily surveys fiction. More nuanced examples of nonfiction studies that consider this figure include Shields McIlwaine's *The Southern Poor-White from Lubberland to Tobacco Road* (1939), Agee and Evans's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), and W.J. Cash's *The Mind of the South* (1941). For an extended review of critical considerations of poor whites, see Smith, Dina. "Cultural Studies' Misfit: White Trash Studies." *Mississippi Quarterly*. 57.3 (2004) 369-87.

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## From Work to Text: Reading *The Raven Waits* as *Beowulf* Fan Fiction

*If we compare fan fiction to mythological and folkloric retellings, we can see how it functions as the cultural equivalent of collective storytelling. Fan fiction often retells the same events and scenes, but from different points of view, with myriad extensions and elaborations. Other versions of the same story may be just as important to the fan artwork as the original source. (The Fan Fiction Studies Reader<sup>3</sup>)*

*Beowulf*, the “Ur-text” of English literature, has been fascinating readers for centuries and has long inspired fictional revisitations as well as scholarship. June Oldham’s *Beowulf*-based 1979 novel *The Raven Waits* has garnered little notice in the United States unlike some other retellings of *Beowulf* (such as Sutcliffe’s *Dragonslayer: The Story of Beowulf*, Gardner’s *Grendel*, and Crichton’s *Eaters of the Dead*<sup>4</sup>) that receive widespread attention and a substantial readership. Nevertheless, people are still reading Oldham’s book more than thirty-five years after its first publication. *The Raven Waits* was reprinted as recently as 2001 by the former Hodder Children’s Books (now Hachette Children’s Books). It is now available in e-book formats through Hachette in the U.K and Australia, and comes recommended on several U.K. websites on books for young readers.<sup>5</sup> *Beowulf* scholars have not historically considered such novels as serious topics for examination. Recently, however, there has been increasing interest in such “Medievalisms,” or “the study of responses to the Middle Ages at all periods since a sense of the mediaeval began to develop.”<sup>6</sup> These responses can include such popular culture representations as film, video games, poster art, comics and mass-market fiction from people who have not formally studied Old English, poetry or the critical history of *Beowulf* but who count themselves as fans of the 1,000-year old poem.

“Fan Fiction” might be broadly defined as “the imaginative interpolations and extrapolations by fans of existing literary worlds” (Busse and Hellekson 6), though a growing body of scholarship discusses much more complex and diverse definitions. Oldham’s novel *The Raven Waits* is a fascinating contribution to the community of *Beowulf* enthusiasts because it imagines a possible genesis for the *Beowulf* story and invents the character of the scop, an authorial persona who takes an active part in composing observed events into an early oral version of the poem. In her description of this persona, Oldham proposes

her own theory of the poem's composition, a combination of what Beowulf scholars commonly refer to as the "author as eyewitness" and "multiple composer" hypotheses.<sup>7</sup>

Using as a theoretical frame French critic Roland Barthes' "From Work to Text" (pub. in French 1971, trans. 1977), I examine the ways in which Oldham engages what Barthes defines as "the Text" of *Beowulf*. Giving the word "Text" a meaning beyond what we might normally understand, Barthes defines "Text" as something surpassing a mere work: a Text is a "methodological field," and "not to be thought of as an object that can be computed" (901). Where a "work" (such as a poem, novel or play) is fixed and concrete, Text is fluid. A "work" cannot be re-written, but a Text can be "played" with. An author like W.B. Yeats who often revised his previously published poems is therefore playing with the Text of those poems, not re-writing his works, since once a work is written, it becomes a fixed and unchangeable object. Barthes says readers should approach the Text with pleasure since it is a space without hierarchies. In other words, the Text is an ideal space in which the usual social divisions between author, reader, and critic do not exist. While there is a certain pleasure in reading "works," the pleasure is that of consumption — one can read these authors but never re-write them since, as Barthes writes, "it is impossible today to write 'like that' and this knowledge, depressing enough, suffices to cut me off from the production of these works, in the very moment their remoteness establishes my modernity" (905). Barthes acknowledges the frustration of being unable to actively interact with older works simply because of the temporal distance between himself and the work's origins.

Barthes' work aligns with more recent work being done on fans who produce fan works, such as fan fiction, in response to or in conversation with source texts, by producing texts of their own which fill in or enrich perceived gaps in the source narrative. In their introduction to the *Fan Fiction Studies Reader* (2014), Busse and Hellekson emphasize the role played by "transformative" fans who (unlike "affirmative" fans who collect, analyze, display, discuss, and critique) are concerned with taking the "creative step to make the worlds and characters their own," presenting an "active audience" rather than the passive audience earlier studies assumed existed (4).

Fan Studies scholars regularly observe that fans reject the notion of an untouchable source text, arguing that fans gravitate toward producing transformative works precisely because they see gaps and fissures in the text that call out for completion or elaboration. In this way, fan scholarship echoes Barthes, who notes that "over against the traditional notion of the *work*, for long — and still — conceived of in a,

so to speak, Newtonian way, there is now the requirement of a new object, obtained by the sliding and overturning of former categories. That object is the Text” (Barthes 905). *Beowulf* is actually a particularly apt work to “play” with since the text is far from fixed. Barthes notes that while the “work is a fragment of substance, occupying a part of the space of books (in a library for example), the Text is a methodological field” (905). In a similar way, *Beowulf* is far from being a single coherent work. Instead, its very nature is that of multiplicity. Though the text as we have it was possibly composed by a single author, the extant manuscript is written in the hands of two different scribes who mix West Saxon and Anglian dialects. As Barthes notes, “the work can be held in the hand, the Text is held in language, [it] only exists in the movement of a discourse . . . [and] cannot stop (for example on a library shelf); its constitutive movement is that of cutting across the work, several works” (905). For modern readers, this disparate Old English language must be translated, which is always a destabilizing enterprise.<sup>8</sup>

In other words, the Text of *Beowulf*, by its own internal linguistic contradictions and variations, disproves the notion of language as something fixed. Parts of the *Beowulf* manuscript are unreadable, which has led scholars to “fill in” segments of the poem; the interpretation of the poem’s meaning, even by the most astute scholars of its (known) historical context, must always be from a modern perspective,<sup>9</sup> but layered within any new interpretation are shades of older readings of the poem. As Barthes argues, “the Text is plural . . . not a co-existence of meanings but a passage, an overcrossing; thus it answers not to an interpretation, even a liberal one, but to an explosion, a dissemination.” So many writers, readers, and artists have engaged with the poem since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when it was translated into modern languages and published widely<sup>10</sup> that “it cannot be contained in a hierarchy, even in a simple division of genres. What constitutes the Text is, on the contrary (or precisely), its subversive force in respect of the old classifications” (905). Engaging with a Text in this way is a hallmark of fan critiques and revisions.

The work, the manuscript of *Beowulf*, is a real document that “can be held in the hand.” Since Oldham cannot re-write the work *Beowulf*, I read her as an enthusiast not re-writing but rather “pre-writing” herself into the poem’s events. Her conduit for re-writing is the character of the scop, a storyteller with several key features in common with a modern British author, who interprets and composes the events of the story into a poem. Oldham indicates the scop will tell the story again in the future, making it part of his repertoire. By projecting herself into this character, Oldham gives herself a central role in the composition of

what we might read as an early version (a “pre-write”) of *Beowulf*. One of the most maddeningly interesting questions for *Beowulf* scholars has been that of authorship, and Oldham constructs a satisfying “answer” with this fictional storyteller.

The distinction between a “work” and a “Text” is particularly applicable to Oldham, for it is clear that she views the “Text” of *Beowulf* as a physical space which *can* be occupied, felt, smelled, seen, and unraveled. Through the scop<sup>11</sup> (pronounced “shope”), Oldham offers us sensory descriptions of the world of *Beowulf*. The Text’s questions and ambiguities can be pulled apart and examined from its interior, from the perspective of a participant in the events. On the inside cover of the novel, Oldham describes her reaction (quoted below) to first reading the *Beowulf* Text as more visceral than intellectual, referring to how her dreams had been haunted by Grendel. According to Barthes, “the text is experienced only in an activity of production” (Barthes 902), and Oldham’s dreams of Grendel can be seen as a mode of unconscious “production,” in a Barthesian sense, but writing the novel also offers her another way to produce the Text by placing herself inside the textual world of *Beowulf*, and engaging in simultaneous reading, writing and production.

The action of *The Raven Waits* begins just before Beowulf arrives at Heorot and ends just after the defeat of Grendel’s mother. The 2001 edition of the book is a slim paperback of one-hundred and seventy pages. The cover displays the book’s title in yellow, fog-like letters. A raven is perched upon the word “The” and a sword is entwined by the final letter “s.” In the background is a drawing of a misty twilight battleground strewn with bones, and a battered helmet and shield in front of a thatched Anglo-Saxon hall. The inside cover page of the book features this statement from Oldham:

I have always considered the story of Beowulf to be one of the best — full of terror and courage, darkness and beauty, loyalty and fellowship, and dramatic, outlandish fights. Deciding to make a novel out of it, I chose to write from the point of view of the young prince, Hrethric. Because I knew exactly how he felt: the man-monster Grendel had long threatened and stalked through my dreams. (*Raven Waits* title page)

Oldham asserts that her novel is told from the point of view of Hrethric, the son of the Danish King Hrothgar, whose hall the monster Grendel attacks. However, Oldham in fact privileges the viewpoint of Angenga, the scop who befriends Hrethric. The scop then observes the key events of the poem and records them in song. Like Dante, Chaucer, Joyce,<sup>12</sup>

Lawrence, and many others before her, Oldham includes a “writer/artist” character in her narrative representing herself. This character has outsider status and artistic talents which enable him to give the audience solid and extensive insight into character and motivation. Moreover, he can comment on the world of *Beowulf*, on the nature of composition in general, and more specifically on the history of the composition of the *Beowulf* poem.

By presenting the poem from a new perspective, that of the boy Hrethric and the Scop Angenga, she can, as Barthes says, “produce the text, open it out, set it going” (904) in a new direction. Since, according to Barthes, one cannot actually re-write a work, Oldham instead “pre-writes” *Beowulf*, going back to the story before it was the “work” as we know it and examining its means of production. In other words, she imagines herself into the world of *Beowulf* in the guise of someone who not only takes an active part in the events recorded in the poem, but who actually himself composes a version of the *Beowulf* poem which pre-dates the one we know.

Crafting an authorial persona for herself in the story differentiates Oldham from the *Beowulf* poet, who takes no active part in the events of the poem, and instead puts her more in line with authors such as Chaucer, who project themselves into the stories. Richard Neuse states:

We do credit a character like “Chaucer the pilgrim” with at least *potential* depth, interiority, mystery, even before the text has had much opportunity to establish its identity or “voice.” (Neuse 9)

By putting himself in the story as a voice with all this potential, Chaucer plays a visible role as a character directly involved in the observation and re-telling of the events depicted in his poetry. By impersonating the “voices” of different pilgrims, Chaucer “ultimately impersonates himself” (Neuse 10). Likewise, Oldham’s scop, embodies who she might be if she were a participant in the *Beowulf* Text. And, like Chaucer, Oldham shares similarities with her literary alter-ego: the scop makes references to geography and history known to modern British schoolchildren, though not known to the historic Geats of the *Beowulf* poem.

Reading Oldham in conjunction with Barthes, I suggest this scop’s interpretation of the story’s events form a pre-version of the *Beowulf* work that we know today. And, through the scop character — the only “writer” in the story — the author herself can take an active part in the composition of a poem that has always fascinated her. The scop is a recorder and singer of tales that he has heard. He tells several stories to

other characters within the narrative, describing events that he has witnessed in the past. Because of this, we can suppose that he will shape the events of *The Raven Waits* into a poem similar to these tales and will tell it to others back in Anglia. Presumably, another poet might hear it and embellish or re-interpret the tale himself before passing it on to others. This all suggests that the *Beowulf* poem that we know will be composed *after* the story told in the novel, *by* the very scop in whom Oldham personifies herself and in this way, she depicts herself as an early, though not the last, author of the poem *Beowulf*.<sup>13</sup> This suggests support for the theory of multiple singer-composers rather than that of the single-composer,<sup>14</sup> and reinforces Barthes' assertion that a Text is a plurality of voices, rather than a unified statement.<sup>15</sup>

*Beowulf* scholar Scott DeGregorio, in discussing the use of irony in the poem, describes the narrative of *Beowulf* as “dynamic and plural,” qualities that allow Oldham room to write her voice into the Text. He notes Elizabeth Liggins’ argument that the “duality of perspective” contributes to “the structure of the poem” (DeGregorio 314). Oldham’s (new) perspective, posed as the first perspective on the events, contributes in a fundamental way to the structure, as she imaginatively re-creates the origins of the composition of *Beowulf*’s story. If we define irony as Daniel O’Hara does as “the power to entertain widely divergent possible interpretations to provoke the reader into seeing that there is a radical uncertainty surrounding the process by which meanings get determined in texts and interpreted by readers,”<sup>16</sup> then we can understand why non-scholar Oldham feels empowered to participate in a re-reading and re-interpretation of *Beowulf*, through the persona of an often ironic narrator. Oldham sees herself simultaneously as a reader and interpreter of the Text, as well as the writer of a version of the text (with a small t). At the end of *The Raven Waits*, she offers the following “Author’s Note”:

As will be clear to readers familiar with the poem *Beowulf*, this novel is not a translation. Sections unrelated to the plot have been omitted and several additions made, notably the exile Angenga as a witness and subsequent recorder. Hrethric is given a central place and Unferth a less admirable one. Hints in the poem of Hrothulf’s ambitions, which are supported by the historical probability of his final seizure of the throne, have been developed within the events of my narrative. (Oldham 170, “Author’s Note,” emphasis mine)

With this note, Oldham claims this *Beowulf* narrative as her own. Not only does she refer to it as “my narrative,” but she also justifies her decision to re-shape the narrative of the poem in order to emphasize what she considers to be the true central storyline of her Text of *Beowulf*.

Like Gardner’s *Grendel*, *The Raven Waits* tells its story from the point of view of a character marginalized in the Old English poem.<sup>17</sup> In this case, the novel’s perspective comes from King Hrothgar’s teenaged son Hrethric, a figure with whom the probable target audience of the book (adolescent boys) might be presumed to identify. Though this choice implies that Hrethric will be the hero of the story, the young prince is in fact no more than a close observer of actions performed by others. The real agency in the novel comes from the exiled Anglian scop who befriends Hrethric and becomes his constant companion. The scop’s name Angenga means “lone-goer,”<sup>18</sup> and he meets Hrethric on the day of Beowulf’s arrival at Heorot, shortly after the story begins. He calls himself a “scop, bard poet, versifier, word-weaver, spell-spinner, myth-maker, string-strummer—there are plenty of names” (Oldham 24) and arrives in the land of the Scyldings armed with stories, including tales of King Arthur, and Beowulf’s watery race with Brecca and battle with the sea monsters. Called simply “the scop” by *Raven*’s other characters, Angenga quickly grasps the significance of Beowulf’s arrival. He also predicts the coming of Grendel’s mother, averts conflict between Hrothulf and Beowulf, and convinces Hrothgar to banish his Thule Unferth, all through the subtle execution of his storytelling technique. This posits the writer/storyteller in a particularly powerful position within this story.

The scop not only uses his role as storyteller to interpret the novel’s action for the other characters, he is also a meta-narrator who mediates between the world of the novel and a modern British Young Adult audience. Though this might seem to align him with the *Beowulf* poet who tells a pagan story from a Christian perspective, we must keep in mind that the *Beowulf* poet does not play a direct role in the tale being told. Moreover, the *Beowulf* poet “controls his two perspectives simply by distinguishing between the natural wisdom possible to pagans and the revealed [Christian] knowledge he shares with” the Anglo-Saxon audience (Osborn TGF:SHSB 978). *Unlike the Beowulf poet*, Oldham’s scop judges that the pagan Scyldings are too primitive to accurately interpret their tragic situation. They need the scop’s intervention and advice, which comes from a Christian as well as a British perspective. Judging other civilizations from one’s own cultural perspective is not unexpected, but is problematic for an author trying to accurately depict the values of the Anglo-Saxon society.

His bardic occupation provides Oldham with a space to theorize on the nature of narrative, and these theories might be read as a kind of layman's interpretation of the *Beowulf* poem and its scholarship. Oldham is a fan, not a scholar, of the poem and therefore offers readers the benefits of an outsider's view of *Beowulf* interpretation. Oldham's narrator is also an outsider. The world of this part of the poem is Denmark, but her scop is not a Dane, nor is he a Geat (Smede) like Beowulf and his men. Instead, this scop comes from pre-modern Anglia, and readers familiar with the geography of England would be able to identify the locations he describes in his stories of King Arthur, thereby providing a small geography-recognition quiz for her adolescent readers. The book therefore offers its readers not only the opportunity to "play" with the Text of *Beowulf* but also to recognize their own national history. The scop uses his knowledge of English history and culture as a means of explaining the values the Germanic tribes of England hold in common with Hrothgar's people and reminding the Danes of the consequences of selfishness. An exile "from misfortune, not dishonour" (Oldham 16), he will use the story of the post-Roman inter-tribal warfare of which he is a veteran as a moral lesson directed at Hrothulf and Unferth:

Those chiefs failed in their obligations as lords; they neglected to reward the warriors for their service; they were niggardly with gifts. Such meanness was justly answered . . . repaid with battles...[in such a fight] my lord fell; his hall was sacked and his treasure taken. So I became a lonely wanderer . . . (111-2)

From this episode, we see not only that the scop understands well the Danish society and what it values, but that he has a wide experience of world, far greater than that of Hrethric. The prologue indicates that Hrethric will be the main character and indeed, he is the first character introduced in the novel and his perspective dominates until the scop enters the scene in Chapter Three. When the scop meets and befriends Hrethric, the reader is relieved to have him replace Hrethric as a narrator, since that boy proves quickly that he is an unreliable observer. An early scene shows Hrethric taking a small and scraggy piglet away from a Danish "churl" who says pleadingly: "My lord, we have little. The winter has been long . . . The corn has mould; the birds we catch have little flesh. Please, my lord, do not take a little pig." Though we later learn he is taking the pig to sacrifice it, he does not explain this and responds callously to this man's plea, "I must have it" (Oldham 13). The fact that Hrethric fails to recognize that this man, his own subject, is impoverished and malnourished establishes his lack of compassion for

others and his inability to interpret correctly the meaning of the signals around him.

The scop, on the other hand, deduces the poverty of that churl simply after seeing the run-down condition of his village. He says: "I have seen the village, but did not ask for meat there . . . I could not take and leave another's belly cold" (Oldham 16). This episode and others like it involving other characters, quickly establish for the reader that the scop is by far the most credible voice in the novel, and they encourage the reader to believe the scop's interpretations over anyone else's. Moreover, the scop himself explicitly affirms that he will be a reliable narrator, despite his personal loyalties and opinions. Speaking of the day on which his lord was defeated and he became an exile, he says: "That day brought me nothing but misery and grief, but I am a scop and must try to see it whole. I must try to see it from all sides, and I should be a mean and dishonest man if I did not sing the praises of the warrior who cut down my lord" (Oldham 112). The scop also uses the pig episode to display his diplomatic talents as well as his deductive powers. When invited to share in eating the little pig, the scop says, "If you, Hrethric, son of Hrothgar, inherit your father's generosity, I am sure you will give [the churl] more than adequate compensation for his loss" (Oldham 18).

Hrethric continues to prove himself a rather weak character, however: ungenerous, hasty, narrow-minded and cowardly. His father is weak and depressed and Beowulf is boastful, arrogant and ignorant of court etiquette, unlike Beowulf in the poem. Indeed we see very few strong characters in *The Raven Waits*, save the Danish queen Wealtheow<sup>19</sup> and the scop himself. I find it hard to believe that it is coincidental that the most admirable and sympathetic characters in this novel by a woman writer are the *woman* and the *writer*. Since Oldham is crafting her own entry into the text here, I find it reasonable to suppose that she does so via the characters that most closely resemble herself. Fan Fiction Theory can help us understand why Oldham might feel free to create a persona to speak for a marginalized perspective in a narrative that focuses on events and leaves room for the fan-writer to focus on interiority.

In choosing a male persona, she may be making a concession to perceived historical accuracy — perhaps she assumes there were few wandering female scopos — but another explanation might be found in Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. Just as Shakespeare's Sister could not have written his plays because of mitigating material and historical circumstances, perhaps Oldham reasons it would have been impossible for a female Beowulf poet to have written the poem. Moreover, Oldham's female gender embodied in a male persona echoes

Virginia Woolf's concept of the "androgynous mind"<sup>20</sup> as the ideal writer's consciousness. Woolf used this to great effect in *Mrs. Dalloway*, for example, with the character of Septimus Smith, whom she frequently acknowledged was based on her own experiences with mental illness. D.H. Lawrence also often preferred a female persona to project wholesomeness and the affirmation of a female point of view.<sup>21</sup> A male persona gives Oldham greater access to the story's male characters, their society and rituals. He can interact with them in settings other than those of the female domestic sphere, and his status as guest also puts him in contact with the women, who offer travelers hospitality (29). The choice of gender therefore gives Oldham the opportunity to depict as large a multiplicity of voices as possible.

The scop wrests control of the story from Hrethric from quite an early point in the novel, when Hrethric, and the reader first encounter Beowulf and his warriors. But from a practical standpoint, Hrethric's companionship gives the scop the opportunity to get the "inside scoop" on the Scylding royal family, and through the questions asked by the eager young prince, the scop slowly reveals his own methods of observation, derived from his experiences as a storyteller, warrior, and traveler, which show he can size up people quickly and understands military structure. "A fine troop of men" remarks Angenga when he sees Beowulf with his Geats, but then he astutely observes that the "retainer on the horse was not one of them." Hrethric is able to explain that this retainer "is the guard on the far most headland." *Beowulf* readers would know that this is the case, since the character Beowulf in the poem gives speech to this guard to gain access to the kingdom, telling him "you are looking at men from the land of the Geats" (Osborn, line 260). Oldham does not recreate that speech in the novel and the scop and Hrethric have not heard it, yet the scop, imbued with great powers of perception, concludes: "Then they come from the eastern sea" (Oldham 23). Inspired by their appearance on the scene, the scop improvises a song on the newly arrived warriors in verse, indented, italicized and complete with caesura!

*On far waters weaving,    the wave-fast vessel  
Bent to the breeze,    beaded with spray  
Skimmed the green flood,    her prow foam-feathered  
Like white gull gliding,    grace on the wing  
(Oldham 23-24)*

After this recitation, the scop self-consciously comments on his work, as "a bit rough" and in need of "some polishing" (Oldham 24). This kind of meta-narrational conceit, an example of Oldham's commentary on her own production of the text, reoccurs throughout the novel, with the scop

critically reviewing his own performance as poet, storyteller, and interpreter.

Moreover, other characters comment on his abilities as well, and this is where the novel is at its most fascinating: on one level the characters are commenting on the work of the scop and the relative effectiveness or accuracy of his composition, and on another level Oldham is herself commenting on the quality of her own work in *The Raven Waits*. But on still another level, I read Oldham as having a debate with herself over the relative merits (again from a layman's perspective) of various aspects of *Beowulf* scholarship and interpretation. As the novelist, Oldham asserts that she is just as qualified to imagine the world of *Beowulf* as any scholar. Though research has been done on the possible appearance and design of *Beowulf's* ship, Oldham seems confident that her description is as good as any, knowing no one has actually seen that particular ship: "After all, their boat cannot be very different from other boats" (25). Hrethric, commenting on the improvised poem says: "It was reasonably convincing . . . when we take into account that you have not seen their ship . . ." (24). The scop replies, "the piece is the usual mixture of fancy, observation and good sense" (25). This mixture allows the scop to muse on events which he has not seen, but which are part of the Heorot narrative and which find their way into the later poem, such as Beowulf's meeting with the coast guard and Grendel's attack of the hall, which the scop only hears about, but does not see. This details a method of production, description and imagination.

I read Oldham as advocating a mode of *Beowulf* scholarship based on observation, comparison, and a studied understanding of human nature — tools available to any writer. However, in the scop's clarification of his narrative strategy, Oldham reveals that though details of things and places, events may be altered or embellished to aid in storytelling, the characters of the tales should remain true to reality. The scop says: "I never tamper with men [in stories]. I set them out as they are. Their nature is the fabric of my craft and if I meddled with that I should lose their trust" (25). With this, Oldham is effectively excusing herself for any scholarly or historic inaccuracies, but the declaration also serves its purpose within her narrative. This is the reason that, even though he has imaginatively described the Geats' ship, he refuses Hrethric's request to describe Beowulf right away, in order to build up tension before we meet the man himself.

After the Geats have passed by on their way to Heorot and the scop has described the ship, Hrethric asks "And what of [the leader]? Can you find any words for him?" The scop replies: "Ah, that is another

matter [apart from the ship]. I would not venture even a line on such a slight acquaintance . . . Men must be studied and understood" (25). Though the scop refuses to give any "words" for Beowulf at first sight, he does say that he sees by Hrethric's eagerness "That the man can fascinate and draw others to him" (25). A careful reading reveals the irony in this compliment, since in the previous scene Hrethric has admitted that for as long as he can remember he has never seen confident warriors in battle gear, so he is presumably quite easily dazzled by the strangers.

The implication then is not that Beowulf is necessarily worthy of great admiration, but rather that he has good timing and knows how to take advantage of an opportunity to impress a depressed and weary people. This Beowulf is immature, boastful, arrogant, rude and ungrateful. He is far more concerned with saving face than with saving the Danes. Oldham presents Beowulf as he might have been before battles and years seasoned his wisdom. Though the author's note implies that the scop, as the "subsequent recorder" will eventually compose the poem of *Beowulf* himself, the fact that the scop is already a world-weary warrior of some years at the occasion of Beowulf's battle with the Grendels makes it impossible to believe that the scop would still be alive to take this part of the story and fashion it into the final poem, which includes Beowulf's dragon fight 50 years later. However, it is possible that Oldham imagines the scop as the recorder of the Grendel episode who leaves the story for another poet to pick up and embellish with the dragon episode added on at a later date.

Strangely, Oldham does *not* recreate the "Finnsburg Fragment" (lines 1068-1159), even though this is an episode with obvious meta-narrational applications, since it depicts a scop telling a story.<sup>22</sup> With it, the *Beowulf* poet gives "us something quite different, related to the theme of the [scop's] song but organized in a way which furthers his own tale" (Osborn *B:AGTS* 83). Because it is "true Anglo-Saxon battle poetry," it would have been a perfect fit with Oldham's battle-scarred bard (84). Moreover, scholars such as Arthur G. Brodeur have argued for "revenge" as the fragment's central theme, and this theme is also the driving force in the plot of *The Raven Waits*:

If anyone dared with audacious speech  
To remind the Danes of that deadly hatred  
Then the sword's edge would settle it! (1104-6)<sup>23</sup>

Echoing Oldham's regret at the cost of violence, the story tells how "gashes burst open and the blood sprang out/ through bitter wounds" (1121) and how "soon the blaze, greediest of spirits, had swallowed the dead/of both peoples; their powers had vanished" (1122-4).

Oldham does recreate some of the poem's "digressions" or "episodes" in her novel. The Brecca/Sea Monster tale (lines 505-589) is one of these, which Oldham duplicates as a digression or episode in her novel, and she substantially revises the manner in which it is told and the purpose it serves in the narrative, so it is useful in an examination of Oldham's view of the *Beowulf* poet's own meta-narrational practices. In both the novel and the poem, Unferth introduces the story of Beowulf and Brecca's watery race. Unferth's motive is to demonstrate Beowulf's worthiness to take on the task of killing Grendel. Beowulf offers a retort in both texts, but the exchange in the novel is far more contentious and includes an additional voice: that of the scop. He offers to tell a version of the story which (as we later learn) favors Beowulf and which he has heard from a Swedish trader in Uppsala. The Brecca episode gives Beowulf the opportunity to tell his tale of bravery, and to introduce the accusation of fratricide against Unferth. The structure in the *Beowulf* poem is as follows: in lines 499-529, Unferth tells a story of Brecca defeating Beowulf, accuses Beowulf of foolhardiness, and suggests that Beowulf has promised more than he can deliver in pledging to kill Grendel. In lines 529-86, Beowulf counters with his version of the story, and explains that though Brecca was a fast swimmer, he (Beowulf) had to contend with sea monsters. Following his account and defense of his bravery, he rebuts his accuser Unferth by accusing him of fratricide, and of bringing Grendel's attack on the Geats as a result. What Beowulf says pleases Hrothgar: "The gray-haired war-famed giver of gold/Was happy then . . ." (lines 607-8), and Unferth finds no response. Therefore, it seems that the *Beowulf* poet smoothes over the accusation against Unferth so that the reader will have no reason to doubt it. The lack of a counterclaim on Unferth's part leaves it unchallenged and unquestioned and as a result, the accusation stands as if a statement of fact.

In Oldham's novel, however, the tension around Beowulf's accusation of Unferth is one of the driving forces of the narrative. In the novel, Unferth introduces the Brecca tale, the importance of which Beowulf quickly belittles, until the scop offers to tell the story himself: "I have heard the story of the occasion that Beowulf and Brecca swam together. It is very suitable for a feast which honours your present guest' [...] The hurry and tension of the assembly slackened and his audience smiled as they anticipated pleasure. Grendel was forgotten" (Oldham 44). But the scop is only just beginning his tale when Unferth interrupts, accusing the scop of confusing "fairy stories with fact" (45). The scop's response points again to Oldham's self-conscious meta-narrative strategy as he says, "I do not deal in lies. My duty is to discover

what rests in the heart; my purpose to reveal what I have found, by any means I can employ” (45).

The *Beowulf* poet may use the convention of the scop to achieve the same ends that Oldham discusses. By including within the poem the telling of a story which the poem’s internal characters are listening and responding to, he encourages the audience to also listen and respond to those reactions. Because no one reinforces Unferth’s misgivings, and Beowulf responds reasonably and logically to them, the audience both in Heorot and in our world must be left with the impression that Beowulf is the one who tells the truth in this exchange. Oldham, on the other hand, has Beowulf and Unferth engage in a heated debate, at the end of which Beowulf loudly and emotionally accuses Unferth of fratricide, more as an act of childish retribution than as a calm statement of fact. The way in which the fratricide is introduced does not guarantee its veracity or Beowulf’s superiority:

“You, Unferth, were wrong to introduce this story and compel me to compare my power and courage with that of my friend, for I have heard stories about you which no malice can falsify. I know, Unferth, that you slew a kinsman...yet you are allowed to walk freely in this court.” Shocked,<sup>24</sup> his listeners rustled and the scop rose as if to stay further accusation, but Beowulf ignored them all and the anger that had been contained now burst out and beat upon their heads.

(Oldham 49)

At this point, Beowulf loses his temper completely, shouting at and insulting his audience and host, and explicitly denouncing the Scyldings for being unable to subdue Grendel on their own! Again, had this been what the scop witnessed, the *Beowulf* poet would have ample motivation for restructuring the scene before presenting it. It would not be advisable to undermine the integrity, tact and bravery of the hero so early in the poem. For Oldham, however, the same confrontation does establish the driving force of her narrative, namely Unferth’s treachery and fratricide and the eventual denunciation of it by the Scyldings.

In his 1957 article “*Beowulf* and the Beasts of Battle,” Adrien Bonjour explains that the raven as symbol of foreboding is a widely used theme in Anglo-Saxon poetry but not, significantly, in *Beowulf*. The raven and the wolf are used as “beasts attendant on a scene of carnage” and “used by scops in order to add a harsh and realistic note to the descriptions of battles and their sequels” (565) and to signal to the audience that another battle will be coming in the story. Bonjour speculates:

The idea may have struck some scop to refer to the carrion beasts just before the actual outbreak of the battle . . . the beasts thus being endowed with a kind of prescience which can be compared to that of rats leaving a vessel on the verge of sinking. (Bonjour 565)

The *Beowulf* poet however, goes beyond this basic symbolism, saving that poem's raven until the end and then using it as a larger symbol foretelling the "bondage and death" of a people:

In *Beowulf*, on the other hand, the theme is never used in connection with any of the numerous battle scenes which come into focus throughout the poem; and when it appears, there is only a passing reference to warfare, and a future warfare at that, still hidden in the haze and dream of things to come . . . This formal difference, by itself alone, might speak in favor of a certain originality on the part of the *Beowulf* scop. (Bonjour 569)

Oldham uses her raven in the Anglo-Saxon vein (as a sign indicating a forthcoming battle sequel) and quite appropriately. The character who describes the behavior of the raven in the story is an old Scylding servant and seer of the king named Stuff, so it is reasonable that he would choose a more "traditional" interpretation of the sign. It is he who warns the king that the violence is not over simply because Beowulf has cut off Grendel's arm, "the signs tell of danger, my lord . . . The raven waits. It no longer feeds upon the arm [of Grendel]. It waits for fresh carrion. There will be a death." Hrothgar asks whether it will be a natural death and Stuff replies, "no, my lord. It nestles in flesh violently ripped from the body. This death will also be violent" (127). Oldham has already introduced the raven and wolf as carrion animals during an argument about blood feuds so her use of the bird later as a sign of foreboding is logically established and in line with the beliefs available to the Scyldings in the story.

Blood spilt for blood spilt: a carcass whitening as the blood drains from hacked limbs, stripped of its armour, left naked for the raven and the wolf to desecrate until only the bones lie under the sun. (57)

By giving her book the title, *The Raven Waits*, Oldham suggests that the dramatic climax or center of the story is that night of fear after Grendel's fight with Beowulf and before the attack of Grendel's mother.

What is often called the moral center of the poem, Hrothgar's long speech to Beowulf following the defeat of Grendel's mother (lines 1700-1784), does not appear in Oldham's novel. Some of the themes within it (shunning and banishing) do appear near this point in the plot,

but they issue from the mouth of the scop, who tells the story of Cain and Abel<sup>25</sup> at the edge of Grendel's mother's horrible swamp just after everyone fears that Beowulf is dead. The scop theorizes a connection between Grendel and stories from Christian mythology, and though this short tale is ostensibly a theory of Grendel's origins, the scop makes such obvious parallels between it and Unferth, that as a result Hrothgar banishes Unferth from his kingdom. The scop says:

“[Cain's] act is not unknown to you. It is one you have witnessed. Cain's act went unavenged, as the one known to you is unavenged. Because of that wickedness, evil stalks freely among you, and men who believe themselves to be the sons of deities, and warriors whose selflessness and courage is beyond our valuation continue to sacrifice themselves to save us. The act and the sacrifice are repeated.<sup>26</sup> My friends, you have already guessed the evil that Cain committed. He took his brother and slew him in the face of his lord.” Exhausted, the scop slumped against his horse's neck.

(Oldham 160-1)

This statement establishes the importance of Beowulf's earlier outburst and accusation. Had Beowulf not publicly denounced Unferth as a kin-murderer, the scop might have had no knowledge of that crime and he would have been unable to tell this pointed tale. Here the scop consciously recognizes and plays upon the effect of the narrative. He does not explicitly ask that Unferth be condemned, but constructs his story with such pointed references that his audience will have no choice but to make the connection between Cain's deed and Unferth's. On another level of meta-narrative, he “produces” the Cain “Text” for his audience with a specific purpose in mind, and because this narrative proves so effective, he will place it at the beginning of his retelling of the Beowulf story, to both serve as an explanation of Grendel's lineage and to establish immediately that the poem will contain a warning against fratricide.<sup>27</sup> Oldham's emphasis of fratricide in the story is supported by several *Beowulf* scholars. David Williams interprets the poem as attributing all violence and evil to Cain's legacy and Edward B. Irving, recognizes that the Christian elements seem to be clustered in the first part of the poem, on which Oldham's scop would presumably have the most influence. Edward Irving, Jr. argues that while there is general consensus that the poem contains many Christian elements, there is disagreement on just how Christian or how pagan the poet or the audience was likely to be. Oldham subscribes to the school of thought begun by Klaeber, who in 1911 and 1912 studied and detailed the

Christian elements in the poem. Irving notes that Klaeber “made the indisputable claim that the so-called Christian coloring was not laid late and lightly on the surface, but was worked deeply into the very tissue of the poem at every point” (Irving 180).

The scop, however he may be compelled to tell his story truthfully from his own religious perspective, nonetheless seems burdened that its effect on a fellow man is so severe. Following the scop’s recitation, Unferth turns on him angrily and is about to strike, when the shocked cries of the warriors arrest him and blood rises to the surface of the stagnant pool. Unferth’s attack and the seeming finality the blood represents prompts Hrothgar to action: he banishes Unferth. Those loyal to Unferth are apparently so moved by the narrative that they do not offer him support, and he leaves alone. Hrethric thanks the scop for ridding the Danes of Unferth: “Your story reminded Unferth’s men of what he is. It showed them their own conduct.”

Still troubled, the scop replies, “Do you not understand? I told a story and because of that a man is exiled . . . I was the cause . . . I have abused my craft.” Hrethric, displaying some newly acquired intellectual maturity asks, “Have you not said that a poet reveals men to themselves? That he offers them knowledge?” (Oldham 166), and in so asking, he reinforces Barthes’ theory that it is the “writing” or “producing” of a text which creates meaning. The scop has “played” with multiple narratives — both the tale which Beowulf tells of Unferth’s crimes and that of Cain and Abel — grafting together a new one, with its own meaning which responds to the “social space” in which it is created (Barthes 905).

As I theorized earlier, within this imagined Textual world, Oldham’s scop would represent merely the first generation of tellers of the *Beowulf* poem, but nonetheless in Oldham’s imagined scheme he seems to have had a lasting impact. The subsequent poet might be a Geat or at least someone who reveres Beowulf the hero, since the scop of *The Raven Waits* gives us quite an unflattering depiction of him, unless we can assume that the scop will suppress his personal feelings to give Beowulf his due for deeds performed.

Oldham’s “pre-writing” of *Beowulf* deconstructs the story by giving us a “backstage view” of how it came to contain many of the ingredients found in its Old English version. Unlike Hrethric, who is both immature and ungenerous; or Wealtheow, whose thoughts are taken up by her children<sup>28</sup> and by her caution to neither spurn nor fully encourage the sexual advances of the ambitious Hrothulf; or Hrothgar, who seems to live in a fog of depression about the state of his kingdom and his people, the scop, Oldham seems to suggest, is the only one who has the critical distance necessary to render the details of events

accurately. And since the Scyldings are not only not Christian (the scop meets Hrethic as the prince is sacrificing a pig to his “deity”), but are also totally unaware of Christianity, we can assume that it is the scop who “adds in” many of the poem’s Christian elements or who gives a later *Beowulf* poet the idea to fuse the pagan story with Christian ideology.<sup>29</sup> The scop tells a story that explains the concept of Christianity to the Scyldings and Geats, and it is he who suggests, at the very end of the novel, that Grendel was spawned by the race of Cain.

Along with other *Beowulf*-based stories, Oldham’s novel, which she says stems from her own long-term interest in the poem, corresponds with Barthes’ imperative for readers to engage actively with or “play” with Texts. According to Barthes, the goal is active reading, to “ask of the reader a practical collaboration” (Barthes 904). Barthes makes a distinction between this kind of play with the text, in which the audience of readers produce the text themselves, and the way in which the critic “executes the work (accepting the play on words)” (904). Some may argue there are dangers inherent in this kind of play, since readers of these books who have not read the poem may come away believing this retelling to be a definitive version. They may sympathize overmuch with Grendel after reading Gardner or they may buy into a Poe-ian prejudice against ravens after reading Oldham. But despite these possible risks, perhaps it is the kind of play in which Oldham, Gardner, and Sutcliffe engage which will keep the text of *Beowulf* vibrant and relevant, as “the reduction of reading to consumption” *without* play is responsible for the boredom experienced when one cannot “produce the text, open it out, [and] *set it going*” (Barthes 904, author’s italics). Barthes’ words suggest how fan fiction can invite all of us to play joyfully with even the most ancient and complex texts in the history of English literature.

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## Notes

1 Busse and Hellekson, 19.

2 All are easily obtained in paperback, *Grendel* is often used in high school classrooms and *Eaters of the Dead* was made into Hollywood film *The 13<sup>th</sup> Warrior*.

3 The target audience for this book, readers in primary school, is younger than that for the other texts listed.

4 <http://www.medievalism.net/>

5 Debates about the origins, authorship and composition of *Beowulf* begin with the foundation of the field of *Beowulf* scholarship. The first editor of the poem,

Thorkelin, suggested the poet must have been an eyewitness to the events in the poem, and this is one of the theories Oldham seems to support, along with the theory by other critics (including Muellenhoff, Krueger) that the poem had multiple composers. For a timeline of dates and theories, see *A Beowulf Handbook* pp. 13-17.

6 “Translation is . . . a kind of metaphorical displacement of a text from one language to another . . . to translate a text from one language to another is to transform its material identity...No act of translation takes place in an entirely neutral space of absolute equality [since]...languages, like classes and nations, exist in a hierarchy.” Robert J.C.Young, *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003: (139-140).

7 “We are ignorant of the reception the poem had among the Anglo-Saxons, how widely it was known or how highly it was regarded. Those modern readers who see in Beowulf the personification of the Anglo-Saxon heroic ideal may be surprised that, as far as our evidence goes, only a couple of Anglo-Saxons bore his name.” E.G. Stanley, “Beowulf” in *Beowulf: Basic Readings*. Edited by Peter S. Baker. New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1995: (3).

8 Marijane Osborn, “Annotated List of Beowulf Translations.” <https://acmrs.org/academic-programs/online-resources/beowulf-list>.

9 A scop was an Old English poet, specializing in Epic poetry, which would be sung recited to entertain groups of listeners, usually during times of feasting or celebration. More than just a storyteller, a scop defined the values of the society by praising worthy deeds and condemning unworthy ones (Dr. Kelly S. Taylor, <http://www.comm.unt.edu/~ktaylor/scop/>).

10 Joyce is well known for basing several works around the life and development of the autobiographical character Stephen Dedalus, whose very name signifies “artist,” by its reference to the Greek Legend of the artisan Dedalus who manufactures artificial wings and the notorious Labyrinth of Crete.

11 Keven Kiernan in *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript* argues that there were no “earlier” versions, but instead the manuscript is an 11<sup>th</sup> century transcription of an 11<sup>th</sup> century work (5).

12 See Bonjour, Adrien. “Beowulf and the Beasts of Battle” *PMLA* Vol. 72 (1957), 563-73: “the text [is] one version (which happened to be fixed by writing) of an unfixed or broadly outlined narrative, improvised by one or a succession of singers” (564).

13 Interestingly, this contrasts with Mikhail Bahktin’s notion that the modern novel and not the Epic Poem is the site for heteroglossia, or an expression of conflict through different voices.

14 Daniel O’Hara, review of Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, in *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 36 (1977): 362, quoted by Alan Wilde, *Horizon of Assent: Modernism, Postmodernism and the Ironic Imagination* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987), 6-7, quoted by Scott DeGregorio, “Theorizing Irony in Beowulf” in *Critical Interpretations: Beowulf* (ed. Harold Bloom).

15 Along with *Grendel*, similar point-of-view adjustments can be seen in other reimaginings such as Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon*, and Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*. These narratives illustrate how much of a story's meaning is dependent upon the perspective of its narrator.

16 Though it is uncertain whether Oldham knows it, the name Angenga (meaning lone-traveller) has also been used to refer to Grendel, a "lone-goer" without a people (Marijane Osborn). Angenga, though he travels alone, does have people and describes his own lineage as "son of Aethelfrid, son of Aelle" (Oldham 29).

17 Though I don't take the space to discuss her here, Oldham presents an intriguing characterization of Wealtheow, fashioning her as a powerful woman behind a weak man. The queen takes up the responsibilities of caring for the Danish people's needs in response to the weakness and fear which Hrothgar develops during Grendel's years of terror. She welcomes strangers, such as the scop, giving gifts and extending what hospitality is still at the Danes' disposal. Intelligent, determined and deeply concerned for her children, she plots and schemes to ensure their safety, parrying Hrothulf's sexual advances, and plotting to gain Beowulf's favor as a further means of securing some protection for them.

18 Woolf, Virginia, "A Room of One's Own." Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc. 1929.

Web.

<http://www.haverford.edu/psych/ddavis/psych214/woolf.room.html>. She also wonders whether a purely male or purely female mind can be truly creative.

19 See Siegel, Carol. *Lawrence Among the Women: Wavering Boundaries in Women's Literary Traditions*. Charlottesville and London, University Press of Virginia, 1991: (10).

20 The scop in *Beowulf* does not comment directly on the action of the poem. Instead, he recites a poem about another time and place.

21 Translation by Marijane Osborn in *Beowulf: A Verse Translation with Treasures of the Ancient North*.

22 As I will explain in a subsequent paragraph, this shock seems more a reaction to Beowulf's rudeness and anger than a reaction of surprise at hearing that Unferth has slain a kinsman.

23 This rather late occurrence is the first time that the Cain and Abel story appears in Oldham's novel.

24 This language also echoes an explanation of Christ's sacrifice, which the scop had recently given to the assembly.

25 This accords with scholars such as David Williams, who holds that all violence and evil can be attributed to Cain's legacy, and Edward B. Irving, who recognized that the Christian elements seem to be clustered in the first part of the poem, or that part on which Oldham's scop would be presumed to have the most influence. See *A Beowulf Handbook*, edited by Robert E. Bjork and John D. Niles. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997: (177).

26 Oldham writes that Wealtheow and Hrothgar have three children. One child (Hrethric) is hotheaded and a ripe target for Hrothulf's murderous ambition; one (Freawaru) is promised as a peaceweaver to an enemy tribe; and one

(Hrothmund) is “cursed” or mentally handicapped because he was born on the first night Grendel came to Heorot).

27 Larry D. Benson writes: “The old theory that *Beowulf* is an essentially pagan work only slightly colored with the Christianity of a later scribe has now been dead for many years” in “The Pagan Coloring of *Beowulf*” in *Beowulf: Basic Readings*. Edited by Peter S. Baker. New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1995: (35).

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## Confessions of a Thirty-Something English Professor and Gamer: TEDx and the Importance of Video Games

The opportunity to present a talk for TED, whose mission is to spread “Ideas worth sharing,” is a great honor. TED Talk organizers seek out speakers from celebrities to entrepreneurs, educators, innovators, and more to share in their goal of opening up audiences to new ideas and new ways of thinking about the world. In a maximum of about eighteen minutes, TED speakers share their own unique perspectives on the world, on topics ranging from cutting edge technology, to education, to personal stories of triumph over adversity. TEDx Talks, a series of independently produced TED Talks primarily centered on university campuses around the world and sharing TED’s vision and message, loomed before me as a profound professional opportunity, but one which would find me, publicly, revealing something I feared might bring me scorn.<sup>29</sup> Bluntly, I’m a gamer. I have played video games for nearly as long as I can remember. My first game console was a Coleco Vision, that ancient dinosaur of a gaming console, home to such titles as *Mr. Do*. From there, I’ve moved ever onward and upward to where I stand now, with a Playstation 4 and a host of games whose graphics are a marvel in which to be immersed. Gaming has been my one consistent hobby over all these many years and something into which I can lose myself, even today. I play what interests me, what is fun, what scares me, and especially, what moves me. Many of my friends know that I am a gamer, but it is not otherwise something that I had previously spoken of much in other arenas, even as I knew that video games remained and remain an untapped resource for narrative exploration and analysis. I kept gaming to myself for so long for one simple reason: the fear of professional ridicule. But no more. Recent events have led me to become a very public academic gamer.

When I saw the call for TEDxUNLV presentation proposals in late 2013, my immediate thought was to speak about what I had been doing, steadily more and more, in my classroom: using video game narratives as a means to help my students explore the themes they study in literature. Not only do I find that this connects my students more strongly to the material we are covering, as they see an immediate modern relevance to what they otherwise might discard as stuff having been written by long ago dead folks, but students, then, also become better consumers of digital media. Many video game titles, from small independent work to AAA releases — an AAA title has the budget and marketing oftentimes of a major studio film — are telling profound, deep, and provocative stories, stories meriting academic focus and a place in the classroom alongside other storytelling modes, from print to digital. They incorporate the same sorts of thematic and symbolic elements of their other narrative counterparts, but are frequently on the receiving end of mockery, ridicule, and dismissal.

When I received word in January that I had been chosen as one of the presenters at UNLV’s TEDx event in April of 2014, I was both thrilled and nervous. A major part of my presentation is the personal element: my own

identity as a gamer and my own experiences exploring video game narratives both inside and outside of the classroom. This was part of the reason why I began the presentation with humor and a bit of self-deprecation. “I admit it,” I say, “I’m a thirty-something English Professor who loves to play video games as often as I can.” As expected, that not only drew some chuckles from the crowd, but also a few curious glances and looks of disbelief. But no, I wasn’t lying. I just wasn’t what was expected of a mainstream audience when the word “gamer” gets thrown around. Yet after that introduction, I knew I had the audience’s attention. I wasn’t what they had expected and there I was, telling them that video games were important and worthy of serious consideration.

What follows in the rest of this paper is an expansion of the ideas I raised in my TEDx talk, “Changing Expectations: Video Games and Big Ideas” through an overview of some of the critical issues concerning video games as they stand in relation to academia and how they continue to evolve as an innovative narrative form. Right now, although the field of study is beginning to open up more significantly, video games tend to remain on the sidelines, misunderstood at best, sneered at at worst. As a result, compelling and immersive narratives go unstudied and are often overlooked in courses that include film and literature as appropriate narrative modes. As a part of the conversation about why academia, the humanities specifically in which video games should find an easy home, ignores them at its own peril, this discussion of video games focuses first on the noise often surrounding any reporting about video games in both printed and media forms. Such discussions, one-note treatises on violence in video games, likely prevent many researchers from taking a closer look. Many of the readers of this article may not have much of a grounding in video games, although the statistics concerning numbers of gamers and demographics would indicate that many might. For those of you that have never really considered video games as powerful storytelling vehicles, perhaps the following might convince you to reconsider. I focus here on keeping the argument as jargon-free as possible and I explain all relevant terms related to gaming as they appear. I begin by attempting to put to rest the media’s obsessive focus on violence in video games and then transition into why a scholarly consideration of gaming is so critical.

When many people think of video games, they may well envision something loud — a digital creation full of color and noise, but no substance. For some, the consideration of video games stops right there, without further thought given to what is contained within a video game’s storyline. Although gameplay times certainly vary widely, many titles out there promote deeply immersive plots that can take twenty, thirty, forty hours or more to complete. These are fully realized worlds with architecture, artwork, history, and the like, all adding to an over-arching narrative purpose. Forty hours of gameplay time proves profound when compared with other forms of narrative. Some novels might take forty hours to read, but even some of the great masterworks of world literature might take far less reading time to present stories that can change perspective or move a reader to tears, or to outrage, or to joy. Films do the same

in even shorter spans of time, with three hours tending to be the maximum length of most releases. Even television, enjoying a resurgence in popularity with cutting edge series, tends to have shows with, at most, 22 episodes in a standard season. That is drastically less story than a forty hour video game, or even a thirty hour one. There are many video games “that recreate human experiences normally reserved for stage, print, or cinema [and they] raise questions about the relationship between videogames and traditional media” (Bogost 66). That statement, when taken alongside Claude Bremond’s assertion that narratives contain “events of human interest” (63), begs for the content of video games — their myriad stories — to be carefully considered.

One of the major stumbling blocks preventing a more rational and compelling analysis of the narratological elements of video games is the fixation on violence in video games. This, especially in popular news media outlets, gets immediately extrapolated into a cause/effect scenario wherein video games cause violent behavior in gamers. This argument is old, tired and as of recent research, has been debunked as a reasonable point of argument that seeks to blame video games for what are otherwise very complex social problems leading to violence. These studies tend to look for a very simple causal chain — video game violence A causes violence in the real world B. They do not take into account any other factors or any other causal chains in trying to make the argument. One immediate flaw in such an argument presents itself in the form of the hypothetical gamer who is also a clinical sociopath. This hypothetical gamer enjoys and seeks out violent video games and also acts out violently in the world. The knee-jerk reaction of many research studies looking for a simple causal chain would declare that this gamer *became* violent as a result of violent video games. Yet the diagnosis of sociopathy lends itself to the opposite argument, that this gamer would seek out violent material as a result of an already existing pathology. These arguments decrying video games due solely to violence also fail to seek out any other violent influences in the lives of gamers. For example, how would the causal chain be determined if a gamer plays a violent video game, like any in the *Call of Duty* series, then also watches a number of violent films and violent television shows? What if that gamer witnesses domestic violence in his or her home, or has been the victim of abuse him or herself, or lives in a neighborhood where violence is commonplace? The simple answer is that the web would be nearly impossible to entangle in terms of what violent content caused what violent behavior.

Another major gap in the argument is simply one of numbers. The video game industry brings in billions of dollars, and according to the industry’s own reporting on sales figures and demographics, some 51% of American households own at least one gaming console and the average gamer is not a child, but an adult who has been playing, on average, for some fourteen years (“Essential Facts” 2–3). Further still, a majority of the top selling titles of 2013 are rated M for Mature (the equivalent of the R rating for films) often due to violent content, with the much reviled, and heavily violent, *Grand Theft Auto V* at the top of the list (Ibid 11). Given those statistics and following an argument

with an overarching insistence on finding a causal link between violence, that logic would have to lead to the conclusion that violence would have reached near chaos levels by now. While the world, and our country, can be very dangerous and violent places, such a conclusion is simply and completely untrue. Worse still, such reductive thinking avoids a more fruitful discussion about the root cause of such horrors as school shootings and street violence.

Two major studies, the first published in 2009 and the second in 2011, prove with definitive authority that violence in video games itself is not any sort of predictor that can be used to determine violent tendencies outside of the virtual world. The 2009 study, entitled “The Motivating Role of Violence in Video Games” was conducted by University of Rochester professors Andrew K. Przybylski and Richard M. Ryan. They do not set aside other research that has been done in an attempt to correlate violent behavior and loss of empathy due to playing violent video games. Instead, they seek to uncover what motivates gamers to play a violent game and whether the violent content is the sole or even the major driver of this motivation. As the authors posit, “Indeed, games involving war, combat, or adventures may provide opportunities for psychological satisfaction that are irrespective of the violent elements within the games” (244). While they concede that some players might be motivated just by violence, they point out that this does not explain gamers who are motivated by and find satisfaction in playing non-violent titles. Their research findings lead them to conclude that a gamer’s sense of mastery over the game’s mechanics and competence in playing was an overriding motivating factor in violent games, not the pursuit of violence itself (246-249).

The 2011 study, entitled “The Effect of Video Game Competition and Violence on Aggressive Behavior: Which Characteristic Has the Greatest Influence?” was conducted by professors Paul J. C. Adachi and Teena Willoughby. They seek to determine whether it is the violent content of video games that explains increases in aggression in some gamers, or the competitive nature of some games in and of itself. Other studies have wrongly concluded that any increase in aggression was only explainable as a direct result of the violence. Adachi and Willoughby instead find “that when isolating specific video game characteristics, competitiveness had a much larger impact on aggressive behavior than the violent content” (272). Gamers, therefore, most often play to win, either against other gamers in a multiplayer environment or against the game’s own obstacles. This is no different than the competitive nature fostered by everything from team sports to spelling bees, to the business world. Yet in other realms, competitive behavior and the aggression it can bring out are hailed as hallmarks of our culture and much needed traits of the successful.

The better and more provocative question to ask in relation to the issue of violent content in video games centers first on their ratings. As was mentioned briefly earlier, video games are all rated through the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB). The ESRB has ratings very similar to those used by the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) to rate films, from

an E for Everyone rating all the way to an A for Adults Only, the equivalent of an NC-17. Many video games called out for their violent content, including *Grand Theft Auto*, are rated M for Mature, essentially an R rating. That being said, an R rated game cannot be purchased by a minor under the age of 18 without the presence of a parent or a guardian. In my own experience, it is the policy of my local video game store not only to check ID, but to also verbally confirm with the customer that he or she knows that a rated M for Mature game is being purchased. Those safeguards are in place to keep violent content out of the hands of those who may be too young to be exposed to it. The problem lies in how these young people, then, are getting access to violent titles. My own experience again proves useful. A few weeks ago, I was waiting in line to checkout and in front of me was a mother with her teenage son — he was perhaps 14 or 15. The clerk asked her whether or not she understood that the titles she had were rated M for Mature. She gave her son a look, he gave her a look that said “I want these games,” and she bought them. The overall point here centers on simple economics: video games are expensive. First run releases of popular console titles often cost around \$60.00 apiece. Most teens and tweens simply do not have that sort of disposable income of their own. The first line of responsibility in determining whether or not a violent video game should be in the hands of a particular teen or tween lies, then, with the parent.

Both academics and the public miss out on the larger richness of materials found in video games by focusing on the violence in some of them. That the analytical lens focused on video games should more completely shift to other aspects does not serve as an argument to sidestep the fact that some video games are, indeed, quite violent. However, the argument about violence in video games, aside from being wholly unproven as a predictor of violent behavior in the real world, becomes unproductively oversimplified. Violence exists in many iterations in video games, as it does in other story forms including film and literature. For example, two highly rated, Oscar winning, and critically lauded films, *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) and *12 Years a Slave* (2013), are both marked by their use of graphic physical violence. In both stories, the violence is an essential means by which to convey the emotional gravity of the narratives. Viewers have to experience the visceral horror of the landing on Normandy Beach in order to connect to the film’s core story: a moral exploration of the value of one human life. *12 Years a Slave* must depict the utter depravity of slavery, including the horror of Patsey’s whipping, without flinching or making it less horrible than it was. However, the conversation pertaining to these films, or others like them, does not focus on how their violence will cause the decay and breakdown of society. Violence in novels can range from murder in a hard-boiled detective novel, to the depiction of rape in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and on into myriad examples, most of which are completely different from one another in form, intent, and relevance to storyline. While some groups regularly call for the banning of books such as *Beloved*, this represents a small minority voice easily overwhelmed by those who take a work in its totality before looking at any violent content extracted from the whole.

Violence in video games does not present in a homogenous form. While some games certainly are guilty of gratuitous violence, many game developers consider the use and purpose of their violent content much more carefully and place decisions as to how violent the game becomes squarely in the hands of gamers. A prime example of this is the 2012 stealth game *Dishonored*. A stealth game is one in which the gameplay mechanics allow the player to avoid enemy confrontations and to disable enemies rather than killing them. The player can also, in some stealth games, with a measure of care and forethought, avoid being detected by enemies altogether. *Dishonored* offers the player a choice of paths: combat or stealth. As the gamer powers up protagonist Corvo Attano, he or she can choose whether to focus on upgrades that relate to killing or to stealth. While the player can choose either mode, the game rewards the strategy and care needed to play the game with stealth instead of violence. The game's setting is the plague-ridden industrial city Dunwall. The plague spreads through vermin and the more corpses of victims there are, the worse the plague becomes. Therefore, if the player chooses a violent play-through, this creates more bodies and more overall chaos in the city. The plague spreads more broadly and each successive mission in the game features more corpses, more infected, and more human misery. The game is also made more dangerous, as the infected lash out violently and will rove in packs as their numbers build, as do feral rats drawn to and responsible for helping to spread the plague. The choice to use stealth and non-lethal takedowns of enemies also changes the game's ending. This positive ending finds the young Emily Caldwell, crowned empress after her mother's assassination, learning from Corvo's example and ruling well and wisely. A very violent play-through ends with Emily learning to rule with cruelty and violence as the plague continues to rage unchecked. Gamers create the world they want to inhabit while in this virtual space.

*InFamous: Second Son* (2014) takes a similar approach. The gamer, playing as Delsin Rowe, has recently awakened what are essentially latent superpowers. Many Americans have been displaying these same powers, which are varied and akin to the types of powers the X-Men display. Those without powers lash out with bigotry and hatred toward those with powers, called Conduits by those with powers, Bio-Terrorists by the government. The government has gone so far as to round up any known Conduits into concentration camps, for their own safety, of course. As Delsin Rowe, the gamer can choose to use non-lethal means to subdue these government forces and in several major places in the narrative, can choose to either corrupt other Conduits by encouraging violence and resentment, or help them by encouraging them not to lash out at those who hate them. If the player chooses the darker path, Delsin's appearance begins to change. His face hardens and he looks, frankly, evil. The everyday citizens he encounters on his missions in Seattle are terrified and will call the authorities, leading to even more conflict. If the player instead chooses the path using the least amount of violence and helping citizens along the way, the game transforms. Citizens cheer the once outcast Delsin as he tries to save his fellow Conduits and they will often interfere with government forces,

helping him. In both *Dishonored* and *InFamous: Second Son*, the gamer can certainly choose a violent play-through. Yet both games encourage thought and consideration before any lives are taken in-game by the player and these are only two brief examples of games encouraging forethought before blindly shooting.

Once the issue of violence can be set aside, narrative analysis becomes the logical next iteration of the video game discussion both inside of and outside of the academy. Although mainstream publications like *Forbes* and *The New York Times* routinely include video game reviews for the AAA titles, the release of *BioShock Infinite* (2013) heralded a more significant shift in the tone of these reviews, one taking video game narratives seriously. A few academic journals dedicated to the study of video games exist. However, the field of video game studies proves vast, as video games are too varied in form and content to be likened together under any one theory that will do all of them analytic justice. This is also what makes the field so exciting.

The issue of immersion is one that often comes up in discussions about gaming, yet the reasons for it prove complex “when discussing the appeal of videogames” (Waggoner 33). Gamers play for different reasons and not all might be looking for a deeper narrative, that is certain. Yet the enduring popularity of gaming and the types of titles gaining critical attention speak to the recognition that the immersive nature of these narratives adds depth to the overall experience. The gamer has to manipulate the environment, or open the locked door to the horror beyond it, or witness racism, or cruelty, or violence against the innocent, often from a first-person perspective. Celestino Deleyto’s statement “A film narrative does not need the existence of an explicit narrator” (219) can easily be applied to video games, which vary in terms of point of view. Film is static, however, in that its choices are already made. What is foregrounded in a shot by the director is that way forever in the final artifact. The gamer, however, can actively manipulate the game world, even sometimes being able to choose the order in which major narrative points are encountered.

Ian Bogost argues, “game engines regulate individual videogames’ artistic, cultural, and narrative expression” (56); however, the ludological aspects of gameplay are only one facet, and sometimes a minor one, depending on the individual video game in question. Video games contain what Roland Barthes describes as “cardinal functions” — interlocking plot events and “catalysers,” complementary events (51). For example, in all of the *BioShock* games, the background material, propaganda, found objects like audio recordings, and encounters with non-player characters (NPCs) all provide the catalysers critical to the full development of the cardinal functions. The very act of playing a game gives it its meaning and this meaning is unique in that it may not ever be the same, consistent experience for every gamer. Many games feature what is called an “open world” environment, where gamers, while ultimately following a main storyline, can make choices to take on side-quests and explore the environment. In *InFamous: Second Son*, the player can choose to destroy surveillance cameras the government uses to surreptitiously spy on

citizens in public places throughout Seattle. Destroying them is not a requirement, but doing so provides a catalyzer in the form of a less oppressed city. More citizens will be out speaking freely, which in turns transforms the gaming world that particular player chooses to inhabit.

The issue of immersion also leads to another major area of investigation in current video game studies. Put simply, researchers explore whether or not video games can teach empathy or morality. As a whole, the answer is probably not. While the question is intriguing, it might be the wrong one to explore. The question itself is inherently unfair and it is not one that would be asked of other forms of narrative. For example, one does not ask if literature teaches empathy or morality — as in all of them, as a whole. Indeed, some certainly might. Yet others are merely read for pleasure, with stories that are not intended to do more than provide entertainment, or a bit of an escape. Others might connect a reader to some greater understanding of what it means to be human, but without teaching or compelling that reader to become morally different.

Scholars around the globe study literature in large part because of what it has to say about our common humanity. A reader may not learn to be *like* a character and he or she may not pick up traits of heroism, or altruism, or kindness beyond what he or she already possesses of these traits. Yet that does not preclude any reader from at least seeing how life is lived through the eyes and experiences of a fictional character. While there has been a concerted effort to undermine the study of the humanities in higher education, those calls have primarily come from those who assert that these sorts of explorations have no practical monetary value in the marketplace — they do not translate, the argument says, into jobs. Setting that unfortunate argument aside, the more telling point is perhaps that it does not focus on a call to do away with reading or to diminish the importance of stories to how humans frame their own lives.

Even though video games may not reasonably be expected to teach morality or other major strengths of character any more than literature, the genre is forging ahead with new ways to connect human beings to one another through the sharing of grief and pain. “Empathy games,” as they have been dubbed, are the newest genre of games to begin to receive a lot of critical interest and attention and they reflect an exciting new trend in gaming. As Kimberly Wallace explains, “More and more developers are using games to convey their personal stories, tackling heavy issues like depression, alcoholism, and cancer to make players experience what it’s like to be put in an unsettling situation” (23). That does not mean that there are not video games that already tell stories tackling these issues, but these new empathy games seem to be striving for a more intimate gaming experience, as opposed to the broad, sprawling worlds encountered in many titles. Two games currently in development and nearing release illustrate the possibilities of this new genre.

*That Dragon, Cancer*, currently in development, chronicles the battle Ryan and Amy Green’s son Joel fought against aggressive cancer. Unfortunately, Joel, barely four years old, succumbed to his illness earlier in

2014. The game, with its simple shapes and forms, seeks to connect players to the journey of this one family through treatment, suffering, and hope. As Ryan Green describes on the game's website, "It is a video game composed of pain and hope. It is a story of my son. It is a script written day by day. It is life that moves us space by space propelled by a mystery we call grace" (n.p.). The game does not have huge action set pieces or deep thematic plot elements. Instead, the player, controlling the parents, is responsible for the daily care of Joel. This can mean something as simple as holding him during chemotherapy treatments. The game itself, as it is unfolding during development, seeks to use the video game medium, as opposed to autobiography or documentary, to tell one personal and human story. The video game form allows for the player to have direct investment in the characters and story due to actions he or she performs. The experience of the game derives solely from its ability to share the experience of one family seeking to save the life of one child.

The second example, *This War of Mine*, is completely different in storyline, while sharing the idea of a deeply intimate experience of what it means to be human under the most trying of circumstances. This game, also in development, appears poised for release in the latter part of 2014 or perhaps the first quarter of 2015. On the official website for the game, the premise is simply described as "a group of citizens trying to survive in a besieged city" ([www.11bitstudios.com](http://www.11bitstudios.com)). The gamer has to make decisions that affect the entire group of survivors, including whether or not and where to scavenge for supplies, and whether or not to allow a new member into the group, or to leave that individual to fend for him or herself. Survivors die from lack of simple medicines, as they would in real life. The screencaps of the game on 11 Bit Studios's website speak to the horror of war as waged upon everyday citizens. Dazed survivors, some seriously injured, try to eke out survival in the burnt-out husks of buildings. The gamer is thus thrown into a different world than that found in many war-based video game titles. He or she is not a super soldier who dispatches the enemy left and right. Instead, the gamer is a survivor, barely holding on, who must make life or death decisions that cannot be taken back. Stories of war in faraway places permeate Western news outlets. This game personalizes those accounts and asks the gamer, especially the gamer far removed from war, to consider the human faces behind all of those news stories.

The video game genre, as technology expands, continues to find innovative new inroads in the creation of narratives, from big-budget AAA titles, to small, personally felt, independent games. As video game developers continue to create involved, immersive, and expansive narratives, "text" expands to incorporate the digital as well as the written. What if great stories could just be that — great stories — without the politics and power plays between various branches of academic study? Professors of English might team up, for example, with professors of Computer Science or Game Design. A resulting course could explore video games from two critical fronts: their narratological importance and the technological skills needed to create them. Such a collaboration, alone, might ensure that video game designers and developers enter the creative world

of game design with a grounding in literary study and the fundamentals of what makes for a good story. This is just one of so many possibilities that I hope will become reality over time. Taking the step to move my research much more fully into video game study came with the fear that I would face the scorn of my colleagues. Yet the response to my TEDx talk has been positive and I have encountered many others like me: educators who see video game narratives as another form of storytelling. That was what let led me to literary study in the first place: the love of a great story. Video games beg to be more broadly considered for the stories they are telling.

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## The Manichean Dimension of Vince Gilligan's *Breaking Bad*

*Breaking Bad* has been hailed as one of the best TV series of all time, and perhaps rightly so. The six-year series was brilliantly conceived and brilliantly acted, and many in the TV audience cheered Walt White as he left his position as a high school chemistry teacher to become the creator of the purest crystal meth in the American Southwest. His initial motivation seems clear: diagnosed with inoperable lung cancer, he channels his oft-overlooked brilliance into the production and sale of a drug, the income from which, upon his death, will provide his family with a very comfortable nest-egg to live on.

Other motivations, not so praiseworthy, emerge as Walt White becomes a kind of hero, one who proves to be adept at using the free enterprise system to rise to the top of the drug underworld while providing for his family. Conversely, his wife Skyler becomes a villain. There are suggestions that Skyler has already sexually compromised herself before the actual story begins, but in the first three seasons her attempts to hold the family and marriage together become a barrier to Walt, who resorts to lying to explain the lengthy absences that he devotes to cooking meth with his assistant and partner Jesse Pinkman. After she learns how her husband has been using his time away from her, Skyler again compromises herself: she has another affair with Ted, her former employer; she “cooks the books” for him; and she agrees to run a car wash business to launder the money that her husband is making from making and selling meth. Regardless of what she does, family and marriage continue to crumble while Walt is sucked into Albuquerque’s drug underworld as manufacturer of the purest meth in the area. As Walt achieves fame and then power in this drug underworld, he loses the trust of Jesse, who finally realizes that his former chemistry teacher will not hesitate to sacrifice him as well if that’s what it takes for Walt to achieve his dark ends. In the final episode of the series, everything seems to come together: having achieved his goals, Walt White dies, almost gloriously, after a bloody and violent crescendo intended to free his partner by killing those who have captured and caged Jesse, using him only for making meth.

In an interview conducted by Conan O’Brien, director Vince Gilligan and some of the series actors confessed that, when they began *Breaking Bad*, they had no design in mind apart from turning Mr. Chips into Scarface (Kowano) — that is, in taking Walt White through a stunning metamorphosis. Accordingly, Walt rejects his old self — a

mEEK high school chemistry teacher and part-time car-wash assistant — to become a cold, ruthless individual. It is this transformation — the result of his purposed descent into the drug underworld — that holds *Breaking Bad* together, giving it an almost perfect unity and revealing a shaping vision (quite accidentally, it seems) that borders on the Manichean.<sup>29</sup>

Manicheanism, a second century movement out of ancient Persia, was deemed heretical and demonic by the early Christian church. According to the Manichaeen world view, the ongoing cosmic struggle between good and evil, or light and darkness, has resulted in the universal triumph of evil. *Theopedia* provides an explanation:

[The movement's founder] Mani postulated two natures that existed from the beginning: light and darkness. The realm of light lived in peace, while the realm of darkness was in constant conflict with itself. The universe is the temporary result of an attack of the realm of darkness on the realm of light, and was created by the Living Spirit, an emanation of the light realm, out of the mixture of light and darkness . . . A key belief in Manicheanism is that there is no omnipotent good power. This claim addresses a theoretical part of the problem of evil by denying the infinite perfection of God and postulating the two equal and opposite powers mentioned previously. The human person is seen as a battleground for these powers: the good part is the soul (which is composed of light) and the bad part is the body (composed of dark earth). The soul defines the person and is incorruptible, but it is under the domination of a foreign [and demonic] power.

According to *The Encyclopedia of Classical Philosophy*, the Manichaeen war between “darkness and light and the battles of various heavenly and demonic beings” have caused “the seeds of light, which [Mani] called the ‘suffering Jesus’ . . . to be entrapped in living entities, men, animals, and plants.” Darkness, the victor, slowly but surely extinguishes the light — it’s a phenomenon that is fully realized with the concluding episode of the series.

Certainly, season one contains a few events that foreshadow darkness’ eventual victory, but the world of the first season is one that

may still seem familiar to us: nothing more than an extension of the quasi-existential, often violent wasteland of American cinema and TV. But this is the world in which Walt White decides to recreate himself, and one can hardly blame him. For one thing, he knows that his brilliance is wasted on a career as a high school chemistry teacher. For another, he has allowed himself to be somewhat emasculated by his wife and by his bullying brother in law (“Pilot” 1.10). In fact, he really has nothing to lose in a world in which God, be He Judeo-Christian or Manichaeian, has apparently either disappeared or never existed in the first place. One episode that powerfully reinforces the impression that God may have simply disappeared comes in season three, as students and teachers gather in an assembly to share feelings concerning the mid-air crash and one of the students asks, “Where is God in all this?” (“No Mas” 3.01).

The question concerning the seeming absence of God in *Breaking Bad* is of enormous significance, for it immediately pushes our discussion into the metaphysical. From beginning to end, God does seem to be absent from *Breaking Bad* — a phenomenon that may have contributed to the series’ popularity. Indeed, the question of the absence of God, an ongoing crisis in Western Civilization, is one that Richard Friedman, professor of comparative literature at UC–San Diego, addresses in his book *The Hidden Face of God*. Friedman makes the point that, for the past two thousand years, the God of the Bible has slowly withdrawn Himself so that He is never present as He was, for instance, when He bargained with Abraham over Sodom and Gomorrah. Throughout the centuries, a number of writers have responded to this spiritual crisis, among them Montagne, Fyodor Dostoevsky, the French symbolists, Matthew Arnold, T.S. Eliot, Graham Greene, Samuel Beckett, Albert Camus, and most recently Dana Gioia. According to Friedman, however, the most significant voice to call attention to this phenomenon belongs to Frederic Nietzsche, whose proclamation that “God is dead” should be understood as his own response to the seeming absence of the divine (144). With the death of God, at least as far as Nietzsche is concerned, traditional Christian morality must crumble. It is probably with this in mind that Nietzsche asserts in *The Gay Science* that “Nothing is true; all is permitted” (Friedman 161) — a statement, by the way, that is surely intended as an ironic play on and a rejection of the Apostle Paul’s statement that, “‘Everything is permissible’ — but not everything is beneficial” (1 Corinthians 10:23).

According to Friedman, Nietzsche’s writings have played a central role in creating, in the minds of many Western intellectuals, a

spiritual (or existential) vacuum in which God is simply absent. It is within this spiritual vacuum that nineteenth century naturalism arose and helped push Christianity aside. Unquestionably, it is this vacuum that contributed to the rise of the Third Reich and the Communist states. This vacuum helped set the stage for existential philosophers like Martin Heidegger, who argues that within the context of a universe without order, meaning, or God, one can live a truly meaningful life only when one recognizes that all life moves toward annihilation. Dr. Viktor E. Frankel, Holocaust survivor and author of *Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning*, certainly has this existential wasteland in mind when he comments,

[T]he fact remains that in America the existential vacuum is more manifest than in Europe. As I see it, this is due to the exposure of the average American student to an indoctrination along the lines of reductionism. To cite an instance, there is a book in which man is defined as “nothing but a complex bio-chemical mechanism powered by a combustion system which energizes computers with prodigious storage facilities for retaining encoded information” (96-97).

And it is this vacuum in which the characters of *Breaking Bad* seem to be living.

Consider the implications of living in a world in which the human being has been reduced to nothing more than a bio-chemical mixture and a world in which God is absent. In the apparent absence of the moral absolutes and eventual Judgment associated with God, why shouldn't Walt White allow Jesse's heroine-shooting girlfriend Jane Margolis to choke to death on her own vomit — particularly if Jane stands in the way of Walt's continued partnership with Jesse? The after-effects, most notably the mid-air collision that rains human debris down on his own house (including two bodies), may occasion Walt some grief and a twinge of guilt, but if there is no God, if heaven and hell do not exist, then surely Walt is right when he assures the school assembly that things could have been worse and that the best thing anyone can do is simply move on (“No Mas” 3.01). And if there is no God, if there is no meaning or order to the universe, why shouldn't Walt White use any means at his disposal — and this, of course, includes living a lie to the fullest and killing almost anyone who stands in his way — to build a rather short-lived empire that the series' writers compare to the world of Ozymandius, the ancient king who built his kingdom oblivious to the fact that both he and his empire must perish and be forgotten?

But the world created by the writers of *Breaking Bad* is not really a place where anything goes, damn the consequences. In the world of Walt White, bad choices do ultimately have bad consequences. In fact, the notion that there is no absolute truth, that the universe is without order and meaning, is called into question by at least two episodes from the series.

The first is episode three of season one. Here, Walt and Jesse are scrubbing the hallway floor of Jesse's house, removing the blood stains and whatever else is left of Crazy Eight's brother Emilio. Jesse's attempt to dissolve Emilio's corpse in a bathtub of muriatic acid has failed miserably. It is then that Walt remembers standing at a blackboard years ago in college and breaking the human being down into its chemical components. His lab partner is behind him, watching him work. The calculation does not add up, as it should, to 100%. In fact, Walt's calculations are .111958% short. Surprised by this oversight, Walt comments, "There's got to be more to a human being than that." As the lab partner later mentions, this missing element is the soul ("And the Bag's in the River" 1:03).

The question concerning the existence of the soul poses a dilemma, the full significance of which is quickly fading in a culture whose college educators, at least according to Richard Asma, professor of philosophy at Columbia College Chicago, hesitate to initiate classroom discussions about something for which there seems to be virtually no empirical evidence. If there is no soul (as Asma contends), if there is nothing beyond death, if the human being is no more than a mixture of chemicals in a random universe — as Count Leo Tolstoy thought before his conversion — then surely the world we inhabit and the lives that we live are without any order or meaning — or our lives take on meaning only by virtue of our own choices. Moral systems become no more than social constructs built not upon absolutes but upon the beliefs and values of that particular culture. Thus, an act strictly condemned in one culture may elicit little more than a "So what?" in another.

Let's take it a step further: if there is no absolute morality, if there is no God-centered design behind the creation and the very existence of our universe, then why not do away with all such systems since, after all, such systems can have no enduring foundation and particularly since, as one moral abolitionist has proposed, all these systems really do is lead to unending conflict (Garner 503)? In fact, why not take the route of Flannery O'Connor's Misfit, a serial killer, and get away with whatever meanness one can commit? Why not, like Kurtz in

Conrad's famous *Heart of Darkness*, simply commit an act of moral abdication and give in to the practices of a cannibalistic tribe living deep in the Congo? Why not cast aside a profession as a high school chemistry teacher, where Walt's talents are clearly wasted, and become a maker of the finest crystal meth in the region and, along the way, become a powerful and feared underworld figure? Why not eliminate everyone, or almost everyone, who stands in the way? In the long run, what could it possibly matter — just so long as you don't get caught? Why not adopt a thoroughly nihilistic position, acknowledge that there's no meaning to anything, and take as much as you can get away with and say to hell with everyone else?

But if the soul exists, even in a universe that bears a resemblance to the Manichaeism, one must acknowledge the possibility that, in the end, one may be judged for one's actions. Traditionally, in both the Christian and Manichean world views, the soul is regarded as that part of the human being that lives on after death. (The fact that our scientific community may have found no empirical basis for the existence of the soul is far less important in this discussion, than the fact that mention is made of the soul and that, in our culture, and according to a study conducted by UC-Riverside Professor, Rebekah A. Richert and Harvard University Professor, Paul L. Harris, most people do believe in the existence of a soul, which is distinct from mind and body). Indeed, the very use of the term "soul," in a series that rose to popular heights in countries once considered part of Western Civilization, may for many of us recall the entire Christian/Judaic world view upon which that civilization was built and which many in academia long ago rejected. It is a world view which maintains that following death one must face Judgment and be held accountable for one's actions (see Matthew 25: 31–46). An explanation of the connection between one's actions, or works, and Judgment, as presented in Matthew 25, can be found in Sigurd Grindheim's excellent article, "Ignorance Is Bliss: Attitudinal Aspects of the Judgment According to Works in Matthew 25:31-46".<sup>29</sup> Suffice it to say that the Christian view of the Final Judgment, largely predicated upon Matthew 25, persisted in Western Civilization well into the nineteenth century.

And if there is a judgment — and by season five Walt White has apparently come to grips with the fact that he will be judged for his crimes and sent to hell ("Blood Money" 5.09) — then Walt risks suffering the tortures of the eternally damned because, in his rise in the drug underworld, he has hidden his actions behind a series of fabrications and killed virtually everyone who has stood in his way. Or, from a purely

Manichean perspective, Walt faces an eternity of “wander[ing] about in torment and anguish, surrounded by demons, and condemned by the angels, till the end of the world, when they are, body and soul, thrown into hell”(Arendzen). In fact, Walt’s proclamation that “Hellfire rained down on my house” — early in season three as a police officer is ticketing him for a broken headlight — suggests his brief awareness that he may have already come under judgment for the key role he played in the mid-air airplane crash caused by air controller Dan Margolis’ failure to ward off a collision (“Caballo Sin Nombre” 3.02).

The episode that most forcibly calls into question Walt’s belief in a universe without order, meaning, or God, occurs in season three and is titled, “The Fly” (3.10.15:15). It is toward the end of this episode, after drinking a cup of coffee that Jesse has filled with a sleeping medication, that Walt confesses to his partner that the randomness theory — the belief that the universe is purely chaotic, made of randomly colliding subatomic particles — may have no validity, particularly considering the series of events that seems to have culminated in the mid-air collision: going to the store to get diapers, stopping off at a bar to get a drink (something Walt never does), meeting and sitting with Jane’s father, being told by Jane’s father to never give up on family, allowing Jane to choke on her own vomit, sitting outside by his pool as the airplane disaster occurs right over his house, and watching as the debris from the wreckage rains down on his house just as manna from God rained down on the Jews wandering in the wilderness. What are the odds of this happening — and in this particular order? Walt asks himself as Jessie listens. What does it mean that Jane’s father told him that family is everything? This is perhaps one of the most significant moments of the entire series, for Walt realizes that if he had stayed at home and not gone over to Jesse’ apartment, then the events leading up to the midair crash as well as the crash itself would never have happened. And if this remarkable string of events had not occurred, Walt silently reasons, then he may have been able to turn his back upon the dark career he has chosen.

The episode titled “Fly” does add another, quite unseen dimension to our understanding of the development of Walt’s character. That is, while Walt seems fairly confident that he can “redefine” himself, his epiphany suggests that his stunning metamorphosis cannot be totally self-willed. In fact, Walt allows himself to be so totally absorbed by an underworld that is controlled by sociopathic drug lords and governed by the demonic that his few attempts to reverse his new course in life and return to the old Walt White fail miserably. The presence of the demonic,

clearly linked to Walt's rise in the drug underworld, is strongly implied in a couple of unforgettable scenes. In the first episode of season three, penitents crawl along a dirt road leading to a shrine built to Santa Muerte, a Mexican deity representing death, leaving little doubt that the two cousins sent by the cartel to kill Walter have pledged their lives to the deity that rules their world ("No Mas" 3.10); that a drawing of Walt White has been placed next to the altar suggests not only that Walt has temporarily become the focus of assassins but that Walt will rise to a point equivalent to that of deity worshiped by the villagers and the cousins. In another episode of season three, after dropping Walter off at his house, Mike drives away and his tires roll over a chalk drawing of a scythe, a clear symbol of the presence of Santa Muerte ("Green Light" 3.04). Again, a couple episodes later, one of the Los Pollos employees responds to the presence of the Cousins in the restaurant by telling Gus, the manager and meth dealer, "They're back" ("Sunset" 3.06), the very words an allusion to a scene from the 1982 movie *Poltergeist*. In a later episode of the same season, demonic undertones again emerge as we see the two sociopathic cousins using an Ouija Board with the former drug lord Tio to learn the identity of the man responsible for the death of Tio's son, Tuco (3).

However, the presence of the demonic in the world of *Breaking Bad* becomes the most obvious in the linking of Walt to Satan. And, here, Frederic Nietzsche again has some bearing, particularly if we consider that, according to Nietzsche, in the absence of God, Man in the future will become his own god (Friedman 157–158). And so it is: Walt briefly becomes a kind of evil deity in *Breaking Bad* as he spins a web of devilish deceit that leaves most everyone else behind — or dead. In his metamorphosis, he becomes the counterpart of the devil — or, in the absence of this figure, the devil himself, the Father of Lies. In the last two seasons, some of the characters even recognize Walt as such. During a family get-together to celebrate Walt's fifty-first birthday, Marie humorously remarks to Walt, "You're the devil" ("51" 5.04). Hank's expression, once he realizes who and what Walt actually is, conveys a disgust, a loathing, a hatred that signals his recognition of the evil standing before him. At one point, Jesse labels Walt as the devil ("Rabid Dog" 5.12). And Walt's willingness to accept his own damnation as the price for his rise in the drug underworld suggests a man who, somewhere along the way, has sold his soul to the devil.

The identification of Walt White with Satan is important not simply because it emphasizes a demonic dimension that the scriptwriters may not have originally intended as a factor in the protagonist's radical

transformation. The identification also reflects an American obsession that began with our Puritan forefathers of the sixteenth century and that may even have contributed to the series' popularity in a culture in which "[t]he devil has become an essential part" (xviii). In brief, Walter's stunning transformation reinforces a cultural obsession that is as American as apple pie and Chevrolet. Of this, W. Scott Poole writes,

In the latter half of the twentieth century [and certainly in the first fourteen years of the twenty-first century], American fascination with the Prince of Darkness grew to epic proportions in a society that was, arguably, becoming less secular with each passing decade. While fascination with Satan and his work grew among large swaths of American society, the public culture of the United States continued to insist on American innocence and basic goodness (xx).

*Breaking Bad* is a drama wrapped in a twisted darkness of almost Manichean proportion. It is perhaps worth mentioning that the world of *Breaking Bad* is one in which the darkness that grips the characters also seems to have infected some in the viewing audience. I am thinking here of the man from the state of Washington who, inspired by Walt White, tried to dissolve the body of his murdered girlfriend in a tub of acid. I am thinking of the high school teacher from Texas, who was arrested for manufacturing and selling meth and of the math tutor from Boston who was arrested for receiving 480 grams of meth in middle school (Bard). And I am thinking of fans' bizarre reactions to Skyler White, who became the villain of the series. First, there were the Facebook pages, apparently titled "Kill off Skyler" and "Kill Skyler White," that revealed hatred for a fictional character but that became a death-threat that at least one viewer intended for Anna Gunn, the actress who played Skyler White. The death-threat frightened and bewildered Anna Gunn, who will likely never come to grips with fans' hatred of her and the character she played:

At some point on the message boards [she writes], the character of Skyler seemed to drop out of the conversation, and people transferred their negative feelings directly to me. The already harsh online comments became outright personal attacks. One such post read: "Could somebody tell me where I can find Anna Gunn so I can kill her?" Besides being frightened (and taking steps to ensure my safety), I was also

astonished: how had disliking a character spiraled into homicidal rage at the actress playing her? (qtd. In Ryan)

To write this phenomenon off as simply a manifestation of “attitudes toward gender,” overlooks the larger and far more serious problem: the existence of an underlying cultural sickness that surfaced as some viewers were drawn into, and became part of, the series’ own mad darkness. Let’s be more to the point: the reaction, “homicidal rage,” reveals a psychotic, possibly even demonic mind-set that certainly plays a role in *Breaking Bad* and that may have similarly manifested itself in our culture’s “existential vacuum” in the Newtown killings and other school shootings, in several mall shootings, and in the character of Miranda Barbour, the “Satan-worshipping” woman from Pennsylvania, who admitted to police that her killing spree included less than 100 and most recently involved a man she located in a sex-ad on Craig’s list (“Craigslist Killer”).<sup>29</sup>

Discussions of the demonic, and of other matters related to the spiritual, are no longer fashionable, it seems. Yet, the demonic is a necessary component of the Manichean universe —and it is an undeniable component of *Breaking Bad*. Walt’s early reference to the soul, his brief acknowledgment of the operation of some kind of cosmic design, the penitents’ crawling to the altar of their own dark deity, the sociopathic cousins’ use of the Ouija board, and the identification of the main character with the devil all contribute to creating a series framed in an almost Manichean darkness that seems to have consumed, however temporarily, not only Walt himself, but also the souls of a few of Walt White’s most ardent fans. When all is said and done, we can say that *Breaking Bad* is a disturbing though extraordinarily powerful series, conceived out of the darkness, be it psychological or spiritual, that seems to be slowly poisoning our society. The appeal of the series thus may have as much to do with our own culture’s loss of its spiritual and ethical center<sup>29</sup> as it does with the fact that the series was brilliantly conceived, brilliantly written, and brilliantly performed.

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## Notes

<sup>29</sup> I acknowledge that my thesis leaps from the empirical to the metaphysical dimension, an understanding of which can only deepen our appreciation of the series and its larger cultural significance. Thus, the Manichean.

<sup>29</sup> Grindheim comments, “The judgment scene in Matt 25:31-46 is a fitting conclusion to the teaching on judgment throughout the Gospel of Matthew. Those who are completely dependent on Christ for their salvation will come to him and learn from his mind-set of generosity. Their attitudes and works will correspond. Freely receiving their salvation from the grace of Christ, they are not concerned with justifying themselves. Instead, they are preoccupied with emulating the generosity and boundary-breaking acts of mercy that Jesus has modeled” (331).

<sup>29</sup> While it is not a dimension that I can fully discuss in this paper, the actual presence of the demonic, or of what seems to be the demonic, does seem to possess some empirical validity. It is within the past ten years or so that a portion of the scientific/medical community has begun to address a rather disturbing phenomenon, and it is this: that certain patients, confined to psychiatric wards, respond positively and only to exorcism. In fact, Dr. Patrick McNamara, former head of neurology at Boston University Medical School, acknowledges the existence of “unholy spirits” that have an existence separate from the individual, that can and do invade the dreams of certain patients, that can and do at times inflict terrible harm on these individuals, and that can only be explained as a kind of free-floating image associated with the human genome and therefore grounded in the natural world. Finally, popular writer and psychiatrist M. Scott Peck has written several books in which he documents several actual exorcisms, among them *People of the Lie* and *Glimpses of the Devil*.

<sup>29</sup> Recall that in his novel *The Possessed* (titled *Demons* in a 1995 edition), Fyodor Dostoevsky addresses the role of the demonic in shaping the thought of the pre-Modern Russian intellectual and ruling class. In his own *Dr. Faustus*, Nobel Prize winner Thomas Mann addresses the role of the demonic in the rise of the Third Reich in Germany.

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## Herodotus and Bob Woodward: A Comparison

Cicero first described Herodotus as the father of history.<sup>29</sup> More recently Herodotus is seen as a reporter, journalist, and ardent observer of facts.<sup>29</sup> The topics he discussed, the motives he identified in the historical process and the method he chose to describe them, are still relevant today. Bob Woodward stands in the tradition of Herodotus. On many levels Woodward's book *State of Denial* resembles the *Histories*.

Both authors use direct speeches and anecdotes to characterize their protagonists. These help inform the reader about the motives and values of the protagonists. Therefore the account of the war begins years before the outbreak of fighting. While Herodotus, after disregarding what seemed to him unreliable accounts of earlier events, starts with the Lydian king Croisus, that is around 70 years before Xerxes' invasion of Greece (480 BCE), Woodward begins his account in the fall of 1997, long (in modern terms) before the chosen war against Iraq. The motives and interests of George W. Bush become evident in certain passages. For example, Bush says: "I will defend the American people against missiles and terror, . . . I will begin creating the military of the next century" (Speech Sep. 23, 1999). According to Woodward, Bush cited the "threat of biological, chemical and nuclear terrorism . . . Every group or nation must know, if they sponsor such attacks, our response will be devastating." The "pre-emption" doctrine speech, delivered at West Point in June 2002, particularly conveys the fundamental strategy of the Bush administration: "The war on terror will not be won on the defensive" (342). With these direct speeches Woodward suggests that former president Bush was driven by self-interest, and he shows his preference for pre-emptive war.

In Herodotus we find a similar pattern. Croisus decides to attack Cyrus and the Persians. Before Croisus starts the battle with Cyrus, Herodotus describes Croisus' actions culminating in his thinking about how to destroy the growing Persian Empire before it would become too mighty (1.46). Croisus' values determine his actions against the Persians. Direct speeches reveal that Croisus is actively pursuing an expansionist policy and that he is open to manipulated information.<sup>29</sup> His interest in not only preserving but expanding his kingdom through a pre-emptive attack against the Persians is evident (1.54). The anecdote of Croisus and his false interpretation of the oracle at Delphi also reveal the motivation and values of the Lydian king. The great empire that is going to fall if he were to attack the Persians has to be the Persian one since he is so eager to expand his own empire.

In *State of Denial*, Woodward uses anecdotes to inform readers about Bush's determining factors in decision making. He describes for example how Barbara Bush delivers a speech in Washington at a dinner party (113-114). She tells a story about Bush as a young child playing in his cowboy outfit and entertain himself for hours fighting the bad guys, or as he called them, "The Axis of Evil." This anecdote portrays a leader who is shown as a virtuous man fighting evil, implying that a morally good character knows good from evil by an early age.

Woodward's use of stories going back to the childhood of his protagonist stands in the tradition of Herodotus. The ancient historiographer explains certain characteristics of Cyrus by going back to his early years (1.95ff). Here Herodotus describes Cyrus' strategic skills and strength as a decision maker while showing the Persian leader in play with his friends (1.114). Both authors use these stories to emphasize certain character traits that are foreshadowed in childhood and later influence decisions on the political level.

Another aspect of Bush's decision making according to Woodward is the irrational. The emotional or rather irrational element in decision-making is treated by Herodotus prominently when he tells us how dreams influence Xerxes' decision to attack Greece. (7.12ff) The Persian king at first decides not to take action against the Greeks; he changes his mind because of a dream of his uncle and advisor Artabanus. In Herodotus' description, the Persian king relies on irrational categories while making a decision. The Persian king says to Artabanus (7.15.2) referring to his earlier decision to not attack the Greeks: "Yet, though I desire to, I cannot do it; ever since I turned back and repented, a vision keeps coming to haunt my sight, and it will not allow me to do as you advise; just now it has threatened me and gone." The account of Xerxes and his dreams can be interpreted as an allusion to metaphysical powers whose influence on decision-making cannot be explained.<sup>29</sup> In *State of Denial*, Woodward writes, "Bush had no problem trusting his instincts. It was almost his second religion. In an interview with me several years later, on August 20, 2002, he referred a dozen times to his 'instincts' or his 'instinctive' reactions as the guide for his decisions. At one point he said, 'I'm not a textbook player, I'm a gut player'" (11). Another time Woodward states: "The president made it clear that he felt no doubt that a higher authority was looking after him and guiding him. 'I get guidance from God in prayer,' he said, and mentioned a number of times that he had asked for, prayed for, and received such guidance" (334). Woodward thus conveys to his readers the irrational influence on decision making.

Of particular importance in Herodotus' account of the political process are advisors, especially when they issue warnings.<sup>29</sup> Woodward focuses on the contributions of advisors as well. Among the most important ones are Cheney, Rumsfeld, Prince Bandar (Saudi ambassador to the U.S.), Powell, Rice, Tenet and others. Woodward reports decisions which precede the Iraq-war to identify certain patterns underlying the decision making processes. Woodward analyzes Tenet's advisory position. By July 2001 the CIA director had information concerning a future attack of bin Laden. He tried to convey his intelligence to Rice, but: "Rice had seemed focused on other administration priorities . . . She was in a different place" (51). And about Bush, Woodward adds in this matter: "Bush had said he didn't want to swat at flies" (51). The difficulty of talking openly with the decision-maker is also described by Herodotus. Christopher Pelling for example writes: "Croesus is a man of untrammelled power. No one, especially no wise person, will tell a man like this that he is likely to behave badly, and to bring himself as well as others down."<sup>29</sup> Woodward mentions a meeting in which the CIA tried to warn about Iraq's exercise of democracy. "After one CIA briefer presented another warning, Bush chimed in, 'Is this Baghdad Bob?' referring to Saddam's propagandist. It was a stunning insult" (382).

In another example of the use of contributions of advisors in the decision making process in order to detect and discern reasons of unsuccessful decision making, Woodward refers to the decision of Clinton to go to war about Kosovo. Admiral Vern Clark, who attended the White House meetings in 1999 when Clinton decided to deal with Milosevic's ethnic cleansing, told Cheney: "Make sure you have people around that will tell the president exactly what the facts are and not like we did in Kosovo" (60). And Woodward continues: "Whether it was a miscalculation or simply sugar coating, President Clinton's advisers first told him that Milosevic would fold if he were threatened. When he didn't fold, Clinton was told bombing would do the trick" (61). Clark remembers how a "deep optimism" led to a 72 hour strike plan, but he is very critical that there was nothing planned to follow it. Clark obviously had the right idea of the position as first adviser to the president (chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff). However, he did not get this job. Clark and Rumsfeld disagreed because under the law, the chairman "would have to give independent military advice to the president" (69). The selection of another adviser had consequences: "The selection meant that when it came to the hardest of decisions there would be no one in the uniformed military positioned and supported by law to provide alternative advice to the president and stand up to Rumsfeld" (70).

Objective advice is not welcome. In the *Histories*, Polycrates is warned by his daughter, but he forces her to keep silent (3,124), sticks to his chosen option, and gets killed (3,125).

Woodward describes Rumsfeld's feelings which led him to support the war on Iraq. Rumsfeld felt that Bush's father "had screwed up in the Gulf-war "by not taking out Saddam" (77). Rumsfeld was humiliated after 9/11 because the CIA carried out the attack on Afghanistan. Thus Rumsfeld focused on Iraq. "Rumsfeld made it his personal project. This would be his" (79). When we look at the *Histories* we find in Xerxes' decision to attack Greece how Mardonius, the highest general of the Persian army and the number one military adviser to the king, advises Xerxes to go to war out of self-interest: He wants to be governor of Greece after a Persian victory (7, 5).

The manipulation of information is a major factor in decision making for the Bush administration, according to Woodward. He refers for example to August 26, 2002, when Cheney delivered a speech in which he claimed that "there is no doubt that Saddam Hussein now has weapons of mass destruction" (92). This speech must have been cleared by US intelligence, but the intelligence was very weak. Woodward speaks about the "continuing problem: real absence of convincing intelligence" (102) about weapons of mass destruction. But "weapons of mass destruction are the most often cited reason for war" (103). Bush used the WMD-information in a radio address on Feb. 8, 2003: "We have sources that tell us that Saddam Hussein recently authorized Iraqi field commanders to use chemical weapons — the very weapons the dictator tells us he does not have" (139). The administration repeatedly used manipulated information to influence the public: "But the real evidence of just how badly things were going — the data and trends on the violence, the number and the effectiveness of the enemy-initiated attacks — was all kept classified, hidden away from the voting public" (337).

In the *Histories*, Mardonius manipulates information in emphasizing the wealth of Greece, the fame which Xerxes could achieve (7,5), and the weakness of the Greek soldiers (7,9). The last argument also occurs in Woodward's report. Jay Garner, in charge of a post-war office, realized that "the president, Rice and others were being told how easy the war was going to be — perhaps even a cakewalk" (138). The problem of dealing with a post war Iraq becomes evident according to Woodward when Bush, Powell, Rumsfeld, and others were in a meeting. They were briefed by Garner about post war operations. Nobody seemed to listen carefully (132-134). When Darius in the *Histories* is confronted with information about the difficulty to fight the Scythians (they are

nomads and it is difficult to get a hold of them), he neglects the information and fails (4, 83). Also Darius does not gather information about his enemy before he carries out the war. But as Herodotus delivers the information (4,2-82), the reader understands why Darius must fail. Woodward conveys a similar idea. He writes:

Most tragic, Scowcroft (a friend of Bush senior) felt that the administration had believed Saddam was running a modern, efficient state, and thought that when he was toppled there would be an operating society left behind . . . But the administration wouldn't re-examine or re-evaluate its policy. As he (Scowcroft) often said, 'I just don't know how you operate unless you continually challenge your own assumptions.' (420)

That a decision maker sticks to his chosen option although information is available which suggests to abandon the option is according to Woodward the major problem in Bush's decision-making: "Alternative courses of action were rarely considered" (455). This is the same problem which Herodotus described as being responsible for unsuccessful decision making roughly 2500 years ago.

After thousands of years certain motives, patterns and methods are still valid. Evidently the mental infrastructure in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE in parts of the Greek world was similar to ours in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Inquiries<sup>29</sup> are essentially still carried out along the same principles. This makes Herodotus more the father of journalism and reporting, than of history.

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## Notes

1 Cicero de legibus 1.5.

2 See for example West, pp. 80-81. "An assurance and a confident use of detail suggesting an eye-witness are part of his stock-in-trade, his approach to his subject matter being generally nearer to a modern journalist's than we judge appropriate to a serious historian."

3 See Herodotus 1.27. Bias manipulates information to make Croisus decide in a certain way.

4 See Pohlenz 1937 (<sup>3</sup>1973).

5 See Bischoff 1932 (1982).

6 Pelling 2006, p. 106.

7 The Greek word *Historia* originally means *Inquiry*.

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**“Put a glide in your stride and a dip in your hip/ and come up to the Mothership”:**

**P.Funk’s “Mothership Connection (Starchild)” and the Tropes of Science Fiction**

“Guess what?” George Clinton said, breaking the news to an old friend. “I’ve got a spaceship.”<sup>1</sup> The 1976 P-Funk Earth Tour would be the band’s “first sold-out headlining tour,” backing their bust-out album *Mothership Connection*.<sup>2</sup> Along with the spaceship, the show would feature “a Rolls Royce, a pyramid, and a mass of pyrotechnic devices.” Vocalist Glen Goins would stand alone onstage saying: “I think I hear the Mothership coming, I think I see the Mothership coming.” The spaceship lands, a door opens and there is “Clinton, a behemoth in silver . . . in the open hatch. Except it wasn’t Clinton any more. It was Dr. Funkenstein” (Thompson 90). Clinton, an African-American artist, claims his identity as an alien who has come down from the stars to deliver the funk, the future of music.

Like science fiction, funk is notoriously difficult to define. It is dance music with a heavy bass beat; it has roots in the 1960s but becomes a recognized phenomenon only in the mid-70s; it uses synthesizers and heavy production but emphasizes individual virtuosity. Never as popular as the pre-packaged disco that would elbow it aside on the music scene, it would, however, be abducted en masse as samples to feed the heavy beats of hip-hop. Sometimes its roots seem to lie in its complex layering of complementary sounds and emphasis on musicianship and improvisation, in jazz experimentation. Sometimes it seems, in its heavy beats and emphasis on simple feeling, a rock version of soul. Or a soul version of rock. DJ Rickey Vincent tries to explain the phenomenon, saying: “Funk is high, but it is also down at the bottom, the low-down earthy essence, the bass elements. Funk is at the extremes of everything” (3). More specifically, he notes, funk turns “rhythmic structure on its head, emphasizing the downbeat — the ‘one’ in a four-beat bar” (8), as opposed to the usual two and four of much dance-oriented music. George Clinton would have few major hits compared to other artists as influential as he is, but his innovations would make P.Funk the most heavily sampled sound by hip-hop artists from the 1980’s through the 2000s, second — maybe — only to Soul Brother Number One, James Brown, the progenitor of the funk sound. P.Funk, in other words, is nowhere and everywhere on the music scene. In response to interviewers trying to pin down his sound and achievement, Clinton

often comments: “Funk is whatever it needs to be, at the time that it is” (Clinton, interview 4). In 1976, funk needed to be science fiction. Why?

Here’s an origin story: in 1975, Clinton and super-funky bassist Bootsy Collins were driving home from Toronto to Detroit after a gig when things got strange, or, you know, stranger. As Clinton told interviewer Abe Peck:

We saw this light bouncing from one side of the street to the other. It happened a few times and I made a comment that “the Mothership was angry with us for giving up the funk without permission.” Just then the light hit the car. All the street lights went out, and there weren’t any cars around . . . I said, “Bootsy, you think you can step on it?” (Vincent 240)

This close encounter draws on 1970s-style alien abduction narratives. (Just in 1975, one of the first popular “docu-dramas” on alien abduction appeared: the popular made for TV movie, *The UFO Incident*, starring James Earl Jones and Estelle Parsons, based on the “real” 1961, Betty and Barney Hill abductions.) But Clinton makes a crucial transformation of his position in the narrative from being a near abductee in the original event to the presentation of himself as a powerful alien for his tour.

The change from the apprehension of the origin story — “Bootsy, you think you can step on it” — to the foot-stomping, booty-shaking party of the concert is so radical that the connection between these moments may seem to be nothing more than the word “Mothership” slipping out for the first time in the origin-event. But the anger Clinton wonders about in that car with Bootsy is, though muted, part of the mythology fostered not only in the songs, but also in the show, on the album covers, liner notes, and in supplementary materials like comic books. The basic story remains that we have given “up the funk without permission” (Vincent, 240). Like the original Dr. Frankenstein, Dr. Funkenstein, the good doctor, has come to operate because of what we have lost, to raise our corpses up and make them move again, to bring us back to life, to return something to us. But we are also going to pay a price, for Funkenstein, like Frankenstein, is a body-snatcher, taking us, seizing up the dead matter that is left of us to fuse something new, to shock us into a new understanding, to steal us beyond the bounds of the merely human.

“Well, all right,” Clinton begins “Mothership Connection (Star Child)” the title song of the album. He introduces himself as “Star Child,” and the band as “Citizens of the Universe,” that is, as space aliens, and also claims them all to be “Recording Angels” (Parliament).

“Recording Angels” means, by a kind of echo, the heavenly sweetness of their work as “recording artists,” but the older reference is an Islamic concept of angels who watch over each of us and record our deeds, good and bad. They are judges of our righteousness. The Mothership arrives as a party but also as a time of reckoning: toward the end of the song, Star Child says of “Getting’ it on, partying on the Mothership./ When Gabriel’s horn blows, you’d better be ready to go.” Good times await, Star Child tells us, but to enter the Mothership will require some reflection of our shortcomings, a conversion and a turn to uprightness.

Our “unfunkiness” is on trial — a parody “everyman” figure would appear on the 1977 *Funkentelechey vs. the Placebo Syndrome* album, slinking through both the songs and other materials, named “Sir Nose D’Voidoffunk.” He is an avatar of, among other things, drug misuse with the nose as synecdoche for cocaine abuse, but also connoting square America in its “honky” whiteness, whose salvation would come with his realization of the funk. By the next album, though, he would be back — a representation of an eternal conflict.

This story — like being abducted by aliens or being an alien come to save us, like being Dr. Frankenstein or Dr. Funkenstein, are all stories about power: who has it, who is inside and who outside looking in, who is above who, who is controlled, who is tied on the table, and who can make your body move. In America, the question of power is tied up with color — first, green, the color not of Martians, but of money, money, money; but, not far behind is the color of race — in particular here, of course, the bold relief of black and white. Here’s how Toni Morrison, in *The Bluest Eye*, comments on white Americans and the concept of funk:

They learn . . . how to behave. The careful development of thrift, patience, high morals, and good manners. In short, how to get rid of funkiness. The dreadful funkiness of passion, the funkiness of nature, the funkiness of the wide range of human emotion. Wherever it erupts, this funk, they wipe it away; where it crests, they dissolve it, wherever it drips, flowers or clings, they find it and fight it until it dies. They fight this battle all the way to the grave. (83)

A “funk” is a depression, and so funk music, like the name “blues,” is about suffering, in the African-American experience specifically here, but in life generally. A “funk” is also a strange smell, an earthy spunk, and so funk music, like the name “jazz,” is about some of those essential materials of life — what drives the orgasm, including passion, nature,

human emotion at its most basic. Borrowing from gospel, a religious music with roots deep in African-American aspirations for freedom, Mothership Connection repeats the refrain: "Swing low, sweet chariot, stop, and let me ride." In funk, the moment has finally come to get out, an opportunity hoped-for, but not to be expected, to be seized immediately. "Once upon a time called right now," as Clinton sings in another crucial P. Funk jam from the *Mothership* album. In the sf-inspired music of P. Funk, the fairy tale is right now, the future is right now, once upon a time and the dream of the stars have arrived to carry you away from everything that ties you down and away from the realization of the real and yourself.

What is alien is not alien, P. Funk comes to tell us, but is embedded deep in our world and its meaning. That's why the stage show includes a Rolls-Royce and Clinton sometimes wears, along with the silver lamé of any respectable 1970's alien-type spacesuit, a long ermine "pimp" style coat and hat. "Let me put on my sunglasses so I can see what I'm doing," Starchild sings. Or, as he says in another song from the album: "Let me put my sunglasses on./ That's the law around here, you got to wear your sunglasses./ So you can feel cool./ Gangster lean." Wear your sunglasses always, even at night, especially at night, because it is more essential to make a statement of hipness than to see. Because hipness is style, what you want to show, what you want to be; as the mirrorshades of cyberpunk in science fiction make clear, hip is a representation of what the future needs to be.<sup>3</sup> Dr. Funkenstein stitches together the iconography of the ghetto gangster with that of the space alien to create a modern outlaw figure of alienation and unutterable cool — something deeper than the TV-numbed existence of most Americans, an immediacy supposed to be found on the streets or in the pulsing stars.

Hear the beat, and you should give up everything and go with the feeling, with the real, with the cool: "Free your mind, and come fly/ With me/ It's hip/ On the Mothership/ Groovin." "Light year groovin'" far away from the quotidian world. P. Funk appeals to the aesthetic, to what feels right, to what was once called our sense of beauty, what SF called, before it forgot, a sense of wonder. "You gotta hit with the band," the song repeats over and over. You must find the one, the beat so crucial to funk, hitting on the one of a four-beat bar, but also a one-ness: "I am the Mothership Connection," Starchild sings, the being and symbol of interconnection between us and the alien, between this world and the universe, a rightness between the now and should be — something like the transubstantiation. "You have overcome," Starchild says, "for I am here."

“We have returned to claim the pyramids,” Starchild says. Not to take them, notice. The Earth Tour is not an invasion but a celebration. Something desired but lost is found. The pyramid in the song and stage show stands in for the ancient and timeless achievements of black culture; it also references, as does the gospel-inspired “chariot” refrain, the popular 1968 book, *Chariots of the Gods?* which suggests, pseudo-scientifically, that the marvelous engineering feats represented by the pyramids are evidence that aliens must have once landed among us long ago. The argument is tinged (at least) by racism. Clinton comes to say, we are those wondrous aliens you admire, we are that history you discount, we have come to return to you the “lost secrets” of the pyramids, lost secrets that are our legacy and birthright. “Are you hip to Easter Island? The Bermuda Triangle?” Starchild asks as the music fades — are you ready to know the secret of everything, for it has come for you.

The cheesy silver flying saucer that lands in the P.Funk stage show, references popular 1950’s-era sci-fi movies that image hostile alien invasions. Cold War paranoia of the seemingly inhuman Soviet Union and the fear of McCarthy red scares lent such sf representations of otherness and oppression power. But more relevant to Clinton’s 1970s is the way such narratives also represent the more-pervasive regressive fear of the powerful for the powerless, the latent realization by the white majority citizens of an ascendant post-World War II America that the rest of the country, and the world, especially the non-white world, might have just reason for resentment, for a “superpower” status maintained at others’ expense and to their dire impoverishment. If aliens dropped out of the sky and attacked, well then, American xenophobia would be justified instead of being just convenient for maintaining the status quo. So, wouldn’t that be grand — in the movie theater, anyway, for an hour or two, as we sit in the dark with our shadows, and as long as we win in the end.

The fear of the future in science fiction is as old as the literature itself. The text directly referenced by Clinton, Mary Shelley’s early 19<sup>th</sup>-century *Frankenstein*, is, among other things, a cautionary tale of the monsters we make using science to hasten progress. H.G. Wells’ *War of the Worlds* (1897) provides the paradigmatic example of alien invasion. When Orson Welles made his famous broadcast of the story in 1938, fears brought on by the rise of Hitler made an alien invasion credible, at least emotionally, and set off a panic. SF aliens stand in, easily, for our fear of each other. But sf also offers a very different vision of alien encounters that seems relevant to Clinton’s transformation of his first,

frightening near-close encounter with something potentially extraterrestrial to the coming of the Mothership as a powerful salvation.

Stanley Kubrick's 1968 movie, *2001* with its ending image of a cosmic child born from the cross-fertilization of humanity and aliens is important as a popular culture representation of the positive, if painful, transformation of humanity by aliens who know better. Arthur Clarke's fiction stands behind Kubrick's movie, of course, and also relevant here is Clarke's earlier novel, *Childhood's End* (1953), in which the Overlords come, their great silver ships poised above the major cities of the world, to take over, but only to help humanity on its way to joining the Overmind, a disembodied, transcendent state that represents humanity's best destiny. The Overlords, in other words, come to take us over to reveal to us who we really are or, more to the point, what we really should be. Apparently, nothing else, in our hard-headedness and determined backwardness, will do to help us forward to realize not the alien outside but the alien as ourselves.

Octavia Butler comments that the alien has so often meant, "the human alien from another culture, country, gender, race, ethnicity. This is the tangible alien who can be hurt and killed" (415). As to the concept of the truly alien — the encounter with the extra-terrestrial alien — Butler doubts we can conceive of it at all.

Perhaps someday we will have truly alien company . . .  
 How will we be able to endure such a slight? . . . Perhaps  
 for a moment, only a moment, this affront will bring us  
 together, all human, all much more alike than different,  
 all much more alike than is good for our prickly pride . . .  
 . What will be born of that brief, strange, and ironic  
 union? (416)

Butler's last question points to the further impossibility of our conceiving of our alike-ness. The alien is deeply embedded, not in our concept of extra-terrestrials, but in our self-concept, in our self-definition though our divisions with each other. Butler indicates that we are "all much more alike than different," but also that the realization of such a world, a world without racism, is itself strange, impossible. More impossible even than an encounter with extraterrestrials.

Butler's powerful fictions speak to what an artistic meditation on the alien can mean. As the dangerous word (in an American context, at least) "Overlord" from Clarke's novel indicates, SF's fictional representations can hardly avoid the outrageous functions of power in the real world, especially, for our American context, the history of slavery. Butler's powerful, *Dawn* (1987), for example, presents an as-always

careful consideration of the ethics of power, assimilation, survival, and change when alien colonizers claim humanity itself, even beyond taking the world, as its ground for colonization. But this isn't Clinton's strategy.

Clinton seeks to step over the traps of the American black-white paradigm. What comes out of the spaceship in its ermine-coated, silver shining audacity, "looking," as one commentator put it, "like a cross between Star Trek and Sanford and Son" (Peck, 13 E), is a remarkably generous outpouring of abundance: a rich, loud, layered music, an imaginative, colorful, expensive stage-show and a remarkable forgiveness. Instead of reacting to oppression and taking what seems a necessarily oppositional position, Clinton claims a higher space and comes back to our world to save it from itself. As Walter Mosley notes about the lack of black sf writers in America:

If black writers want . . . to branch out past the realism of racism and race, they [are] . . . curtailed by their own desire to document the crimes of America. A further deterrent [is] . . . the white literary establishment's desire for blacks to write about being black in a white world, a limitation imposed upon a limitation. (406)

Clinton moves past this by inventing a black universe that trumps the white world: the subject is, America's being alien in a "black" universe. Though including the iconography of the gangster in his hip alien, Clinton's vision is remarkably inclusive, in a way only the fearless can be. In interviews, Clinton revels in the reality that funk has "a cross-generational and multicultural appeal" ("Foreword," xiii). That appeal is based on Clinton's determination not to push us down in our all-too-apparent "unfunkiness," but to "give up the funk" to us in our need.

P. Funk's SF narrative does more than simply turn the sci-fi alien invasion story on its head and make the aliens good; instead, evil is tossed out as a useful category. There are those who get with the funk, and those like Sir Nose who must be lifted up. That's all. Either you're on the bus or you're off the bus — or, in this case, you're on the spaceship or you're off the spaceship. The aliens come to save us from ourselves by inviting us to the galactic party. Notice that Toni Morrison didn't simply make funkiness black, but instead something white dominant culture has refused, and must continue to refuse "to the grave." They and we, human and alien, black and white, are one since the beginning, but we have forgotten and become backward and provincial in our divisions. "Even your memory banks have forgotten this funk," Star Child sings; beyond our powerful machines, beyond our dreams of progress, beyond our memory, beyond known history, beyond

consciousness itself, the funk returns to us. We thought we were only human; P. Funk comes to claim us as “citizens of the universe” if we will “put a glide in our stride and a dip in our hip/ And come up to the Mothership.” Remember the beat, follow your desire, dance.<sup>4</sup>

Like the reggae of Bob Marley, born of hardship, funk is a music of love, the things that bring us together. Both Marley and Clinton draw on Biblical prophecy but neither is content to wait for a better world to come at some other time, in some other world; both demand realization through action, though dance, now. Clinton brings some other time, other place, the alien from the future, from outer space, to us in the impossible now.<sup>5</sup> When we step on the Mothership, we meet the avatar of the ancient timeless past that shapes us, we meet the hopeful joy of the future; we move, finally, at last, away from the stasis that binds us, away from the paradigms of the now, of present culture, present power structures and strictures: “Time to move on,” Star Child urges. “Light years in time/ ahead of our time.” Only there, in the future, in science fiction’s promise fulfilled, miraculously, will we find ourselves at last, free at last.

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## Notes

1. This is how Clinton’s one-time co-writer Sidney Barnes remembers Clinton announcing the science fiction concept behind the upcoming tour to back their breakthrough (#13 on the charts) 1976 album *Mothership Connection*.

2. The album *Mothership Connection*, was released February, 1976 (Thompson, 8).

3. For the connection between sunglasses and science fiction’s cyberpunk, see the groundbreaking anthology *Mirrorshades: The Cyberpunk Anthology* (1976), edited by Bruce Sterling, which defined cyberpunk, not least by its title’s direct reference to the iconographic eyewear of the bluesmen, the jazz artist, the funkateer.

On this connection between sf and funk via cyberpunk, however, please also consider the following testimony by the sf great, Samuel Delaney, who is also African-American, on some of the disturbing meanings of his perceived relationship by the literary establishment to cyberpunk and to race:

In the days of cyberpunk, I was often cited by both the writers involved and the critics writing about them as an influence. As a critic, several times I wrote about the cyberpunk writers...With all the attention that has come on her in the last years, [Octavia] Butler has been careful (and accurate) in not claiming that I am any sort of influence on her. I have never written specifically about her work...

Nevertheless: Throughout all of cyberpunk's active history, I only recall being asked to sit on one cyberpunk panel with [William] Gibson . . . In the last ten years, however, I have been invited to appear with Octavia at least six times, with another appearance scheduled in a few months and a joint interview with both us scheduled for a national magazine. All the comparison points out is the pure and unmitigated strength of the discourse of race in our country vis-à-vis any other. In a society such as ours, the discourse of race is so involved and embraided with the discourse of racism that I would defy anyone ultimately and authoritatively to distinguish them in any absolute manner once and for all. (395-6)

4. As George Clinton also put it: "Funk is something that one feels, and everybody has the ability to feel it" (xiii).

5. How does one achieve the funk? Clinton remarks: "The irony is: the more one thinks about it, the harder it is to get the feel of the Funk. It's just done" (xiii). We have no way out of the present, but we go there anyway. We just do.

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**Appendix: Selected P.Funk's sf-related Discography:**

MOTHERSHIP CONNECTION (Casablanca, 1975), #13 on the charts, #4 R&B chart, the Original Album, Platinum selling, that launched the P.Funk Earth Tour. Singles on the charts include: "P.Funk (Wants to get Funked Up)"/"Night of the Thumpasorus Peoples," #33 R&B; "Give Up the Funk (Tear the Roof Off the Sucker)"/"P.Funk," #5 R&B, #15 pop; and "Star Child (Mothership Connection)"/"Supergroovalisticprofunkstication," #26 R&B.

THE CLONES OF DR. FUNKENSTEIN (Casablanca, 1977), #20 on the charts, #3 R&B, follow up to Mothership Connection. Major single: "Dr. Funkenstein"/"Children of Production," #43 R&B, #102 pop.

FUNKENTELECHY VS. THE PLACEBO SYNDROME (Casablanca, 1977), #13 charts, #2 R&B. Platinum selling. Major singles: "Flashlight," #1 R&B hit, #16 on the charts, and Funkentelechy, Part 1, #27 R&B.

LIVE//P-FUNK EARTH TOUR (Casablanca, 1977)

Single: "Fantasy is Reality"/"The Landing of the Holy Mothership," #54 R&B.

THE MOTHERSHIP CONNECTION LIVE FROM HOUSTON (Capitol, 1987)

One side has a 1976 Houston show from the P.Funk Earth Tour.

PARLIAMENT & FUNKADELIC LIVE 1976-93 (Essential—UK, 1994)

Shows from 1976 in Denver, San Diego and Oakland.

T.A.P.O.A.F.O.M. (MJJ-Epic, 1996)

Title translates as The Awesome Power Of A Fully Operational Mothership.

## Scare the Hell Out of Them: Christian Horror in Frank Peretti and Ted Dekker's *House*

Every October, a number of American churches construct "Hell Houses," intended to scare the hell out of visitors while also filling them with an understanding of redemption, the Judeo-Christian God, and most importantly, sin. Brandishing the popular Bible verse, "The wages of sin is death," Hell Houses incorporate abortion, sexual abuse, rape, homosexuality, school shootings, and a variety of other supposed sins into violent scenes that demonstrate the punishment for those who partake in these activities and refuse the redemption of the Christian Jesus. Closely resembling common haunted houses, visitors are lead through Hell Houses by a Christian guide, visiting various rooms depicting scenes of salvation and damnation. By the end of their journey, guests have visited heaven and hell and are asked to give their lives to the Christian God. The author of the essay "Fear Appeals in American Evangelism," Brian Jackson, appropriately describes Hell Houses as "a modern morality play" intended to educate youth about the "inexpressible horrors" that await them in the afterlife should they reject salvation (52). Dating back to the early 1990s, Hell Houses demonstrate a notable regensis of the scare tactic in American Christianity which is germane not only to early Puritanism, but also an emerging genre of Christian appeal otherwise labeled Christian Horror. Over time, new depictions of "sinners" are derived, revealing ideologies and Biblical interpretations that are representative of contemporary Christian beliefs.

Although the methodologies incorporated into the Hell Houses may seem overly zealous, evangelical scare tactics have been consistently present throughout American history. Throughout his essay, Jackson specifically addresses the incorporation of fear during the Great Awakening, identifying Jonathan Edward's (1703-1758) sermons as prominent examples of the religious scare tactic, which blatantly appears throughout his sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" (45). Edwards's sermon focuses on the hopelessness and excruciating pain that awaits the unbeliever stating, "[t]he wrath of God burns against them, their damnation does not slumber; the pit is prepared, the fire is made ready, the furnace is now hot, ready to receive them" (476). The violent denouncement of unbelievers persists throughout the entirety of the sermon, exemplifying the incorporation of fear utilized during the Great Awakening. Likewise, Thomas Adams (1818-1905) is highly acclaimed

as the “Shakespeare of Puritan Theologians,” and often reiterates Edwards’s sentiments towards sinners. In his sermon, “Gods Bounty,” Adams violently delves into the transgressions of the wealthy, claiming that the devil will carry those who are “besotted on money and riches” to hell with him as easily “as the chariot drew Pharaoh into the Red Sea” (76). Both Edwards and Adams are early proponents of compounding fear and religion, resulting in a violent yet persuasive rhetorical appeal often utilized in the Christian conversion process.

Parting from the norm, twentieth-century sermons began to focus upon “divine redemption and Bible living” rather than “damnation and hell’s torments,” marking a significant retreat of the scare-tactic (Jackson 51). Though the incorporation of the fear tactic has diminished over the years, the author of *Religion of Fear: The Politics of Horror in Conservative Evangelicalism*, Jason Bivins, argues that the Christian culture still “resound[s] in a lingering Gothic echo” (30). “Puritanism and its Impact upon American Values” by Ning Kang explores the Puritanical beginnings of America, which often resonates throughout the literature and media of current American society. As an example, the concepts of “inherent sinful[ness]” and predestination are often attributed to the Puritanical belief system and continue to be issues of debate in current religious settings (149). Furthermore, Puritanical beliefs continue to psychologically impact American society. A recent study conducted by Uhlmann et al. regarding the cognitive influence of early American Puritanism concluded that America’s Puritanical roots have significantly influenced American ideologies concerning both sex and work (1). The coercive religious appeal that appeared in early Puritanism and Christianity continue to appear in current facets of religious works, including Christian music, Hell Houses, and most important to this essay, a selection of Christian Fiction.

Though mainly consisting of innocent romances, Christian fiction often exhibits remnants of the scare-tactic, creating a unique genre categorized as Christian Horror. Christian Horror employs the conservative components of Christian Fiction, adding violence, gore, and fear to the formula. As a result, Christian Horror presents a controversial genre characterized by its heavy Biblical influence and moral message delivered through the means of terror. Bivins characterizes Christian Horror as literature that “[t]hrough blood, shock, death, and destruction . . . ushers into being a world whose very terror announces its redemption” (40). Parallel to ghost stories, horror movies, and fairy tales, Christian Horror condemns “bad behavior or bad beliefs” (Bivins 33). In contrast to more general moralistic ideologies presented in secular horror,

Christian Horror attempts to promote specifically Biblical morals and commandments. Inevitably, the violence contained in Christian Horror is often directed towards characters that embody traits the author believes are undesirable to the Christian community. “Vilifying the Enemy” by J.R. Howard further explores the tendency for prominent authors of Christian Horror to malign those who exemplify traits that the Christian faith finds undesirable. Conversely, the good characters throughout Christian horror are classified as those who call upon the salvation of Jesus and ultimately survive as a result. Both good and evil characters play a significant role in the promotion of Biblical beliefs upheld by the Christian community.

Frank Peretti and Ted Dekker are often labeled as major benefactors of the Christian Horror genre. In addition to both authors coming from a strong Christian background, Peretti and Dekker direct their works towards a similar audience. In *Prophet in the Wasteland: A Critical Biography of Frank Peretti*, Arden Jansen specifies Peretti and Dekker’s main consumers as “conservative mainstream evangelicals and fundamentalists” (14) who are “marked by their devotion to the Word of the Bible” (2). As a result of focusing his writing upon this specific audience, “Peretti indirectly establishes who Christians are and their interpretation of the world in which they live” through the characters that he incorporates into his novels (Jansen 195). Furthermore, Jansen states that Peretti himself has cited the Bible as one of the greatest influences upon his works (167). Dekker is also renowned for his reliance upon the Bible, promoting his beliefs through his personal website, teddekker.com. Both Peretti and Dekker integrate the concept of spiritual warfare into many of their novels, rendering the spiritual realm as the perpetrator of the violence in their novels.

In 2006, Peretti and Dekker collaborated upon the popular Christian Horror novel, *House*. The novel follows the struggles of two couples as they attempt to escape a house haunted not only by three inbreds and a sadistic serial killer named Barsidious White, but also, more importantly, their own personal “sins.” Employing what Philip L. Simpson, author of *Psycho Paths: Tracking the Serial Killer*, terms “the fifth face” of the serial killer, Barsidious White’s mission is “that of the demonic messenger and punisher” (25). White creates a game that punishes the guilty, exposing the vices of each character as the game progresses. The experiences of each character thus demonstrate prominent Christian values. Peretti and Dekker create guilty characters that embody traits rejected by the Christian community and are doomed as a result. On the other hand, the characters who survive Peretti and

Dekker's House are able to accept the salvation offered by the Christian Jesus and are therefore forgiven. *House* incorporates the doctrinal elements of Christian Fiction in order to create a clear depiction of the implicit and explicit Christian views of right and wrong.

Throughout Peretti and Dekker's novel, one of the two main female characters, Leslie, is repeatedly reprimanded and ultimately suffers eternal damnation. Through the depiction of Leslie, Peretti and Dekker construct what they believe is a biblically-based representation of an ungodly and punishable woman. Leslie's character is presented as an assertive and powerful woman whose past is marked by a variety of tribulations that she has yet to overcome. Among the trials that Leslie has faced lays child molestation. Peretti and Dekker utilize Leslie's position as a sexual abuse victim to psychologically torture her throughout the novel, commonly referencing her past and building settings which evoke powerful memories pertaining to the abuse. Moreover, Leslie's educational background and career as a psychologist are also emphasized as an influencing factor in her afflictions and eternal damnation. Throughout *House*, Peretti and Dekker blatantly accentuate Leslie's past sexual abuse and career-orientated mindset, communicating salient Christian beliefs concerning women.

### **An Abused Woman is a Sinful Woman**

According to Christian beliefs, those who do not believe in Jesus will suffer eternal damnation. Though Leslie's refusal of Jesus plays a significant role in her damnation, Peretti and Dekker also insinuate that one of Leslie's foremost "sins" derives from the sexual abuse that she endured as a child. Though blaming sexual abuse victim seems unreasonable, this particular sentiment, similar to a majority of Christian beliefs, is founded in the Bible. Though child molestation is never directly discussed in the Bible, sexual abuse is often permitted and occasionally encouraged throughout the Old Testament. Two cases of rape are addressed in the Bible, both existing in the Old Testament. In the case of Tamar, the consequences of the sexual abuse are placed upon the victim instead of the offender. In 2 Samuel, Tamar is raped by her brother, Amnon. As a result, Tamar spends her remaining days "in her brother Absalom's house, a desolate woman" (2 Sam. 13.20). Furthermore, Judges 21 tells of a battle against the Jabesh-gilead, in which 400 virgins were captured and distributed to the men of the Israelites (Judg. 21:10-12). When it is discovered that there are not enough virgins for every man, the people of Benjamin are commanded to ambush the daughters of Shiloh and take those they like as their wives

(Judg. 21:16-24). These instances of rape by the Israelites, often labeled God's chosen people, go unpunished. Additionally, according to the law delivered to the Israelites by Moses, rape victims who are both betrothed and sexually pure must be stoned along with the man who raped her (Deut. 22:23-24). In the case of Deuteronomy, rape is punishable by death, placing direct blame upon the victim's failure to cry for help. The Bible exhibits little sympathy towards sexual assault victims.

The treatment of sexual abuse throughout the Bible may contribute to Peretti and Dekker's treatment of Leslie's character, who was sexually abused as a child. Peretti and Dekker's personal beliefs pertaining to the issue of sexual abuse seem to emerge through the narrator's voice. As far as the two authors are concerned, the abuse that Leslie experienced is a simple issue with a plain solution. The novel states, "What was abuse, except the bending of something that doesn't want to be bent? Any psychologist could attest to the fact that circumstances are subject to the participant caught within the circumstance" (325). This particular framing of abuse suggests that sexual abuse is only as damaging as the victim intends it to be and that Leslie, as the victim, is guilty of viewing the abuse as detrimental. Peretti and Dekker also propose that the detrimental consequences of sexual abuse are merely subjective to the victim, minimizing the reaction range for those who have been abused. The authors seem to suggest that Leslie's approach to her past should be to simply alter her mindset concerning the sexual abuse. Instead, Leslie is unwilling to accept the sexual abuse and remains angry towards her abuser, an erroneous manner of approaching the issue according to Peretti and Dekker.

Throughout *House*, Peretti and Dekker continually identify undesirable consequences that surface as the result of the sexual abuse Leslie experienced. Peretti and Dekker state, "She'd been abused as a child, but as an adult she'd embraced that abuse by becoming an active participant" (325). Though the role of "an active participant" is not further explored, it can be assumed that Peretti and Dekker are specifying Leslie's sexual indulgence as a result of the sexual abuse. As the novel progresses, Leslie readily admits that she is a "whore" and that she is "powerless to stop it" (288). The novel proceeds to reassert the claim that the past abuse bolstered Leslie's "promiscuous and inviting" behavior, and fostered a need to hold power over the men involved in her life (325). Leslie's power over men is exemplified by the relationship that she shares with Randy. Randy acknowledges Leslie as "the woman who had tried to control him without knowing how much he resented it" (336). By the end of the novel, Randy reclaims power of Leslie, killing

her with the ultimate phallic symbol: a knife. The authors make an effort to repeatedly link the sexual abuse Leslie experienced to behaviors that they perceive as sexually deviant, such as promiscuity and power play.

In *House*, Peretti and Dekker create an atmosphere that directly reflects the transgressions of each character. The house in which the majority of the plot occurs is described as “mirroring [their] hearts . . . [and] drawing its power from the evil in [the characters]” (329). In Leslie’s case, the house creates a simulation of the room in which Leslie’s sexual abuse occurred (120). The symbolic representation of Leslie’s sin is manifested through the room that the house generates, thus equating the sexual abuse that Leslie experienced to her inner “evil.” Leslie openly acknowledges the similarities between the room and her childhood abuse, making the parallel apparent (120). Within this room, one of the three inbreds, Pete, straps Leslie to a board, ties “her wrists tight. Then her ankles, spread-eagle” (140). After tying her to the board, Pete proceeds to throw darts at her, striking her twice: once in the thigh and once in the bicep (163). In the midst of Pete’s abuse, Leslie’s need for sexual intimacy as a result of her previous sexual abuse is exposed as Leslie proceeds to enamor Pete in an attempt to “cling to someone. To find herself in anything but her own shattered soul” (163). In her attempt, Leslie strokes Pete and offers him compliments, expressing both repulsion and pleasure at her actions (163). Leslie’s sexual desires are deliberately depicted as perverse needs fostered as a result of the sexual abuse. The environment Peretti and Dekker create utilizes Leslie’s sexual abuse to not only remind her of her past but also punish her for her sin.

Peretti and Dekker also critique Leslie’s inability to prosecute her abuser. Leslie’s significant other, Randy, states that Leslie “never did take down,” her abuser: Uncle Robby (190). Randy goes on to assert, “[T]he whole world thinks their uncle violated them. It gives us all an excuse to live like victims” (190). Though not necessarily reflective of the author’s beliefs, Randy’s opinion stifles the victim in sexual abuse situations and insinuates that sexual abuse is only a minor issue of concern (190). Though the concept of “living like victims” is not directly described, the character’s sexual deviance and indulgence in power play emerge as the insinuated traits of living as a victim (190). Randy’s comment implies that women who do not step forward about their abuse should be held at fault for their actions and should be expected to simply overcome any negative emotions towards their abusers.

Though Leslie’s disbelief in the Christian God contributes to her ultimate punishment, both the sexual abuse and the consequences of the abuse emerge as the main sin for which Leslie must suffer. The

implications surrounding Peretti and Dekker's characterization of Leslie are emblematic of broader Christian mentalities pertaining to sexual abuse. The negative portrayal of sexual abuse victims also appears throughout the documentary, *Hell House*, which explores Christian Hell Houses across the nation. The documentary depicts a Hell House in which the victim of a gang rape is committing suicide and being graphically dragged into hell (*Hell House*). The depiction of the rape victim in *Hell House* communicates a message similar to *House*: rape victims are deemed punishable by the Christian community. The popular Christian rehabilitation center, Mercy Ministries, also adopts an interesting approach to sexual abuse. *Violated*, written by the founder of the rehabilitation center, Nancy Alcorn, states that healing after sexual abuse must "involve telling someone what happened and accepting the truth that God will restore . . . purity, so that one day she can be the virgin bride she dreamed of being" (4). Alcorn goes on to state that Christian victims "have a God who loves [them] enough to help [them] put the shattered pieces of [their] heart and life back together," insinuating that, without the Christian God, true recovery is impossible (9). Alcorn also addresses the victim mentality that Randy discusses throughout her recovery book, noting that those who continue to experience the feeling of victimization after abuse believe they are "justified in their hate, bitterness and unforgiveness" (9). Alcorn reiterates Randy's concept of victim mentality, admonishing victims for feeling anger towards their abusers. The negative message concerning sexual abuse that Peretti and Dekker support throughout their novel seems to resurface in many other areas of Christianity, upholding popular Biblical beliefs while also reinforcing unfavorable views towards sexual abuse victims.

### **A Working Woman is a Sinful Woman**

Though Leslie's main sin may be traced to her sexual abuse, the fact that Leslie's career as a psychologist is another influencing factor in her damnation. Women's role in the workforce versus their role in the home is of continuous debate amongst the Christian community. Biblically, "noble" women are often characterized as homemakers whose main role is to care for their husbands and children (Titus 2:4-5). Correspondingly, women are forbidden from exerting authority over men, as well as acting as the primary educators of men (1 Tim. 2.12-13). The chapter goes on to demand that women be both modest and submissive in order to prove their dedication to Christ. 1 Timothy goes on to emphasize the necessity of women in the home, stating that, to be

truly forgiven by God, women must bear children (1 Tim. 2.14-15). First Corinthians reiterates the message of 1 Timothy, stating, “[a]nd if [women] will learn anything, let them ask their husbands at home” (1 Cor. 14.34-35). Throughout his essay “Thy Name is Grace/Thy Name is Shame: Christian Fundamentalism and the Oppression of Women,” Michael Jones addresses the topic of women in the workforce through the eyes of the Baptist Church. Jones proposes that the tendency to blame Eve for the fall of mankind leads to the oppression of women throughout religious communities, while also marking women as unfit for the work force. The Bible continually emphasizes the woman’s role in the home, making it clear that the ideal Christian woman would embody prominent traits of the classic homemaker.

Though little is known about Dekker’s personal beliefs concerning women, Howard notes that Peretti often targets “assertive, professional women,” while presenting admirable women “in very traditional gender roles, supporting their husbands through thick or thin” (204). According to Peretti’s formula, Leslie fits the cast for a punishable female: single, educated in psychology, professional, and overall unconventional. Howard also discusses Peretti’s tendency to view academics, specifically psychologists, with suspicion, placing Leslie directly within Peretti’s line of fire (197). While analyzing the common fears and issues that Peretti explores throughout his novels, Jansen identifies Peretti’s frequent distaste for Psychology, labeling the field as an “anti-Christian force” (257). Additionally, Leslie’s decision to enter the field of psychology is heavily influenced by the sexual abuse she endured, as she states her “fascination with the human mind [and] began with her own need to understand how she could possibly suffer what she had suffered as a young girl and rise above it” (121). Though there is no Biblical basis for a fear of the field of psychology, the anxiety may originate from the belief that healing must be attained through spiritual means in contrast to psychological means, which is exemplified through Leslie’s reliance upon Psychology instead of God during her recovery process. Leslie’s development as an unsavory character is furthered by her depiction as a well-educated psychologist, communicating anxieties of the Christian community concerning educated and professional females.

Leslie’s educational background and career choice are accentuated throughout *House*, emerging as a contributing factor to her damnation. Leslie is depicted as a woman who “rode the crests of reason and logic as a way to make sense of her world” (123). Peretti and Dekker see Leslie’s tendency to base her life upon logic and reason as a factor

that ultimately leads her away from the Christian Jesus. Leslie is often cited making blatant claims against religion, such as “[t]here is no God” (289) and “religion should be banned in civilized countries” (234). The claims against religion further emphasize Leslie’s refusal of the Christian God. Moreover, Leslie often references evolutionary psychology, a facet of psychology that supports the theory of evolution, which is highly contested by the Christian church. Leslie’s education and career choice are determining factors in her damnation, building the foundation upon which she rejects the Christian belief and embraces an educational perspective instead.

Through the construction of Leslie’s character, Peretti and Dekker create a character who reflects a damnable female according to the Christian community, specifying career-oriented women as those who lie outside of God’s grace. Though working women are a common feature of present society, females’ role in the Christian community is still one of submission and obedience. Throughout his article, Jones affirms that women are discouraged from fulfilling or even applying to leadership positions, including any station in which they would be in charge of the instruction of men (4). Women are unable to fulfill this position due to their ranking as the more fragile sex; as Jones states, “[w]oman, as the weaker vessel, could not be trusted with “matters of doctrine”” (4). Throughout *House*, Peretti and Dekker perpetuate a long standing bias against women, supporting the concept of “noble” women being those who are submissive, while educated and empowered women, such as Leslie, are portrayed as a threat and ultimately depraved.

## **Conclusion**

Leslie exemplifies traits deemed undesirable by the Christian community, allowing insight into the explicit and implicit moral process behind the religion. The depiction of Leslie contributes to a pertinent social issue: the treatment of abuse within the Christian community. Peretti and Dekker’s negative portrayal of sexual abuse victims is highly problematic, though possibly indicative of the mentality of various Christian communities. As demonstrated by Mercy Ministry’s sexual abuse recovery plan, the Christian approach involves admonishing those who feel anger towards their abusers while also denying victims the opportunity to overcome the abuse without the intervention of the Christian God. The treatment of sexual abuse survivors through Peretti and Dekker’s novel may reflect Christian ideologies towards the issue of abuse, denoting an underlying hostility towards the survivors.

The characterization of Leslie as a career oriented woman may also represent a common Christian concern with the growing number of women joining the work force. As a result, such women may be met with consternation from sectors of the Christian community. Additionally, the gender-based selection of church leaders that Jones explores throughout his essay is indicative of underlying gender bias that influences Christian perspectives. The inability to successfully emerge as leaders within the church setting stifles the voices of women in religious communities. The perception and imposed role of the female throughout the Christian community may become of particular concern as the number of working women continues to expand.

Though ostensibly following the formulaic outline of any secular Horror story, Christian Horror displays moral convictions and societal expectations held by the Christian community. The expectations and morals communicated through Peretti and Dekker's *House* and the Hell Houses scattered throughout America each October also manifest themselves through other facets of Christian Horror, such as Christian rock music and film. As a result, dangerous biases and stereotypes emerge, all of which may play an influencing factor in the progress and treatment of women within the Christian community.

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**Pink is the New Black: 50s Color Noir, the “Fatal Man,” and the  
“Femme” Detective in *A Kiss Before Dying***

When the writer pulls it off, certain scenes explode into technicolor images in the mind and linger long after the book has been finished and returned to the shelf (Penzler ix). In “Noir in Color?” (the question mark is illustrative), Alex Ballinger and Danny Graydon write that “dramatic contrasts of light and shade are such a defining feature of film noir, especially of those films made in the 1940s and 1950s, that the idea of noir filmed in color . . . sounds like an oxymoron” (131).

The grand exception in the classic period has always been *Leave Her to Heaven* (1945). About John Stahl’s picture and its desert landscape the “color of dried blood,” Raymond Borde and Étienne Chaumeton in *A Panorama of American Film Noir* (1955) write that “this was the first time Technicolor [had] been used in a crime film” (47). If the exceptional status of color noir tends to hold true for the 1940s (but see, in addition to *Leave Her to Heaven*, *Rope* (1948) and *Desert Fury* (1947)), this becomes rather less so in the 1950s, as the examples of *Black Widow* (1954), *Slightly Scarlet* (1956), *A Kiss Before Dying* (1956), and *Vertigo* (1958) demonstrate.<sup>29</sup>

*A Kiss Before Dying* is especially interesting in the context of classic noir because it graphically illustrates the way in which 50s noirs utilize color in conjunction with lighting, mise-en-scène, and, in particular, costuming to dramatize the genre’s formal and thematic components. Rather, more specifically, *A Kiss Before Dying* is able to translate prototypical noir character-types such as the “good bad girl,” the *homme fatal* (“fatal man”), and the female or “femme” detective into the medium of color via, among other things, hue, value (light versus dark), and temperature (cool versus warm).

*A Kiss Before Dying*, like *Slightly Scarlet*, features two sisters, but unlike the Lyons sisters in the latter film, one of whom is “good” and one is “bad,” the Kingship sisters, Dorothy (Joanne Woodward) and Ellen (Virginia Leith), are both “good girls [...] daughters and sole heirs of a copper magnate” (Christopher 225). While the femme fatale is a staple of classic noir, the absence of a “bad girl” in *A Kiss Before Dying* is more than made up for by the presence of the lethally charming Bud Corliss (Robert Wagner), who romances “Dorrie,” then, after giving her the big kiss off (in a startling sequence that foreshadows *Vertigo*), ensnares Ellen.

In *American Film Noir* (1981), Robert Ottoson asserts that *A Kiss Before Dying* employs a “familiar noir device — the unscrupulous

male who will marry and/or kill for wealth” and it is therefore a “film noir by virtue of its theme, more than its stylistics” (96). Bud Corliss is a true, classic *homme fatal*, but the character’s charisma has everything to do with the film’s ravishing array of warm and cool colors (Bud, of course, is associated with aquamarine blues). Moreover, as overseen by Lucian Ballard, the cinematography — the widescreen CinemaScope format as well as the film’s “prevailing aesthetic” of “detached, medium-length two-shots”—all but preclude “viewer identification” and “emotional investment” (Crawford), a perspective that aligns us with Bud’s “cool,” acquisitive point of view.

Shot in Twentieth Century-Fox Deluxe color on and around Tucson, Arizona (which doubles as the fictional town of Lupton), the desert setting of *A Kiss Before Dying* also contributes, as in *Leave Her to Heaven*, to the film’s chromaticism, so that the oranges and reds “appear even more infernal than they might in a metropolitan setting” (Christopher 226). The key “hue” or color, however, is not orange or red, but copper with the net result that the look of *A Kiss Before Dying* can be said to conspire with Bud’s scheme to marry his way by hook or crook into the Kingship copper fortune. In *A Kiss Before Dying*, Bud Corliss is the real deal, the spider-man at the center of a copper-colored web of his own deviously ingenious making. The only person standing in Bud’s way is Ellen Kingship, whom he derisively calls the “girl detective,” but who, despite her “femme” appearance, turns out to be a worthy adversary.

### Copper

*A Kiss Before Dying* is based, like *Black Widow* and *Slightly Scarlet*, on a literary property — in this case, Ira Levin’s novel, which received a “certain kind of tabloid notoriety” when it first appeared in 1953: “a murdered young woman was found with a copy of the book in her hand, and a little while later Levin won the Edgar Allan Poe Award from the Mystery Writers of America” (Penzler ix).

The title card for *A Kiss Before Dying* is at once mimetic and evocative: a pair of red lips floats to the right of the title, all of the letters of which are aquamarine except for the letter “K,” which is orange or, more precisely, copper. Although Ottoson asserts that the “film’s use of color and CinemaScope negates some of the sordidness of the story” (96), the film in fact represents a synthesis of 40s and 50s noir, one that anticipates neo-noir. Color as opposed to black-and-white film stock is, as the title card indicates, one element of this new, “synthetic” look.

*A Kiss Before Dying*, like *Leave Her to Heaven* and *Slightly Scarlet*, “is awash in oranges and reds” (Christopher 226). The color red, the color of the lipsticked lips in the title sequence, is a key component of *Black Widow*, *Slightly Scarlet*, and *A Kiss Before Dying*. As for orange, the classical noir precedent is *Leave Her to Heaven*. “The warm amber glow of *Leave Her to Heaven*,” Lee Sanders and Meredith Brody write in their entry on the film for *Film Noir*, “occurs in many of the most prominent photographers of this pre-1954 Technicolor period,” producing a “distinctive tone” that, pace Ottoson, “can be as ominous as the grays and blacks of standard film noir” (224). In *The Rough Guide to Film Noir*, Ballinger and Graydon elaborate on this insight, noting that Shamroy’s cinematography “saturates the frame with a sickly, amber patina which lends it the same degree of foreboding that is found in the black-and-white noirs of the period” (129). In other words, the orange or “amber” hue of *Leave Her to Heaven* not only chromatically reflects femme fatale Ellen Berent’s (Gene Tierney) “sickness,” her unhealthy romantic possessiveness, but also insinuates that the natural beauty of Arizona and its red-desert landscapes may only be a veneer. One thinks immediately of Tierney’s classically beautiful face: “not content with restricting the application of an orange gel light to the backlight, Shamroy emblazons Tierney’s face with an orange cross light, flagging off the top to keep her forehead in shadow” (Keating 220). One consequence of this “mannerist” lighting is that there are “two color temperatures on Tierney’s face” (Keating 220). The issue of temperature is critical to the chromatic economy of *A Kiss before Dying*. For instance, in the film’s title sequence, the “cool” aquamarine letters — again, with the exception of the copper letter “K” — contrasts with the “hot” red lips. The beginning of the narrative proper offers additional chromatic clues, the film cutting from the title sequence to a “cool” blue-tinted, diffuse-shadowed shot of a framed newspaper article that features a black-and-white photo of Bud Corliss.

As a subdued version of Lionel Newman’s jazzy theme plays on the sound track, the camera pans across a red-and-white STODDARD pennant imprinted with Venetian-blind shadows and then down again pass a typewriter to a bed. Off-screen, a woman is softly crying. Dressed in a pink shirt and red skirt, Dorothy “Dorrie” Kingship is crying because she’s pregnant and unmarried. With her “poodle” blonde hair and fair complexion, she could be a twin sister of femme fatale Nancy Ordway (Peggy Ann Garner) in *Black Widow*.

When Dorrie asks Bud, the young man in the white shirt sitting next to her on the bed, “What are we gonna do?” he offers her a drag of

his cigarette before pledging his undying love, “I wanna marry you more than anything else in the world only . . .” Dorrie says. “It doesn’t matter,” but Bud is quietly adamant, “He’s your father . . . What he thinks is important.” Although it’s not immediately clear why Bud cares so much about what Dorrie’s father thinks, it’s obvious from the framed high-school article — the headline reads “Taft HS’s Triple Threat/Best Dancer/Most Ambitious/Most Likely to Succeed” — that, unlike the red-jacketed Jim Stark (James Dean) in *Rebel without a Cause* (1955), Bud’s no rebel — he’s a go-getter.

Later, when Bud returns home, he tells his mother, who’s busy ironing, that he doesn’t want any dinner before picking up a piece of mail and going straight to his room. Mrs. Corliss — played by Mary Astor, the treacherous femme fatale to Bogart’s private detective Sam Spade in *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) — is a redhead like June (Rhonda Fleming) and Dorothy Lyons (Arlene Dahl) in *Slightly Scarlet* and her skirt is copper, the same color as the convertible Dorrie drove off in at the end of the previous sequence. (Bud and Dorrie stopped by a drugstore to get some pills for her upset stomach). Mrs. Corliss’ skirt is also the same color as the pamphlet that Bud, once safely inside the sanctuary of his bedroom, eagerly slips from an envelope. In the novel Levin writes:

[He] was reading *Rebecca* and pretending to love it because it was Dorothy’s book [when] the pamphlets arrived. They proved wonderful — *Technical Information on Kingship Copper and Copper Alloys* and *Kingship Copper, Pioneer in Peace and War* . . . and they were crammed with photographs: mines and furnaces, reversing mills, rolling mills, concentrators and converters, rod mills and tube mills. He read them a hundred times and knew every caption by heart . . . He returned to them at odd moments, a musing smile on his lips, like a woman with a love letter. (15)

In the film, Bud’s mother brings him dinner while he’s “musing,” so he hides the “pamphlets whose supple covers gleamed with a copper finish” (15) behind his back before blurting out, “Where am I? No place. I don’t want to wind up like Dad with holes in my shoes.” Mrs. Corliss, whose faith in her son knows no bounds, bucks him up, “You’re not like him. Not at all. Anything you decide to do, you’ll do it, I know.”

### Something Blue

What Bud decides to do is poison Dorrie. First, sporting a checked dark-blue jacket (blue being Bud’s default color in the first part

of the film), he goes to the library and takes out a gold-embossed book bound in red leather — it's not *Rebecca* — Then to the School of Pharmacy where a brightly-painted red sprinkler marks the entrance to the Chemistry Supplies. He's about to trail a female student into the supply room when the *mise-en-scène* pops again: two fire-engine red valves to Bud's right and in the rear of the frame rhyme with the red book in his hand, *Toxicology: Poisons and Their Antidotes*. Levin provides the chromatic link: "Each bottle had a white label with black lettering. A few bore an additional label that glared POISON in red" (27). Here, the color red, which is initially associated with Dorrie, is transferred to Bud.

At the conclusion of the second bedroom scene Bud's mother refers to her son as a "genius," and while Bud may not be Einstein, his plan is ingenious, as is director Gerd Oswald's staging of the first part of his scheme.<sup>29</sup> The setting is a classroom and chalked on the blackboard is a diagram of the philosophical antipodes of nineteenth-century American literature:

Puritans	Rationalism
Predestination	Optimism
Edwards	Franklin
Mather	

As the professor drones on about Jonathan Edwards ("a man trying to reconcile predestination with free will and not succeeding"), Bud, who is wearing a dark blue cardigan over a white shirt, passes a red-covered book to Dorothy, who is dressed, true to her patrimony, in a copper-colored skirt. Bud may have been "predestined" to become a failure like his father, but he's determined to make something of himself, even if it means killing off his pregnant girlfriend in order to ingratiate himself with his surrogate father, Leo Kingship.

Inside the book is a sheet of paper with a passage in Spanish Bud wants her to translate: *Querido, Espero que me perdonares por la infelicidad que causaré. No hay ninguna otra cosa que puedo hacer*. After Dorothy translates the passage ("Darling, I hope you will forgive me for the unhappiness that I will cause. There is nothing else that I can do"), Bud deposits the enveloped note into a mailbox that stands next to a bright-red fire box. By the time Dorrie's sister Ellen receives the letter, Bud reasons, Dorrie will be dead from the poisoned "high-potency" vitamins he'll have persuaded her to take for the "baby."

In the meantime, Bud happily goes about the business of his life. A meticulous dresser, he is in his bedroom getting ready for class when his mother brings him a glass of orange juice. He asks her to pick out a

tie for him, “Hey, you know, I’ve got an idea. Why don’t you quit work early tonight and we’ll go out to dinner and catch an early show.” Although his mother begs off, “Oh, you don’t want to go out with me,” Bud gallantly insists, “You tell Mr. Muller that you want to leave early tonight, that you’ve got a date . . . with your son” (The Oedipal subtext is manifest). Then Bud leaves for school, but not before looking in the mirror one more time and changing the tie that his mother has just picked out for him.

Bud gets the shock of his life — the camera zooming in on his startled face — when Dorrie strolls into English class not only alive, but lovely as ever in a lavender dress, an unusually “cool” color for her character that suggests she may not be quite as passive or pliable as Bud thinks. Now Bud’s fate appears to be sealed. It’s too late to retrieve the “suicide” letter he sent Ellen. However, when he walks out of the post office past the poster of a serviceman and young woman walking happily arm-in-arm (“There’s something about a soldier”), his eyes gravitate to the top of the Municipal Building located kitty-corner across the street in downtown Lupton. Framed against a brilliant cloud-scalloped blue sky, it houses the marriage license bureau and, as the camera pans swiftly to the ground, Bud’s prayers are answered. (This POV shot and the succeeding rooftop sequence foreshadow Hitchcock’s *Vertigo*.)

Since the marriage bureau is conveniently closed when Bud brings Dorrie there at noon, he suggests that they go up to the roof to kill some time before it opens again. While both Bud and Dorrie are wearing light-colored suits, Dorrie is also wearing a “borrowed” brown belt, “new” white gloves, and an “old” green blouse. “Look at that sky!” Bud exclaims, looking down at the wide expanse of red tile. Calculating that a body might get lodged among the tiles, he proceeds to maneuver Dorrie to another part of the roof, ostensibly for a better view of the campus in the distance, the film cutting to a steep, vertiginously-angled overhead shot. Bud: “Are you gonna write your sister or phone her?” Dorrie: “Oh, phone, who can wait for letters? You’ll like Ellen, you’ll see.” Bud: “I’m sure I will.”

Standing with his back against the waist-high parapet, Bud shares a cigarette with Dorrie (this is his signature move), pressing her body close to him. When she confesses that she never actually took the “vitamin” pills he gave her for the baby, Bud turns her around and sits her down on the parapet (“Don’t look down”), their bodies silhouetted against a blue sky limpid as the background in the title sequence. “The thing is, you’ll never really know how much I love you. No one can really understand the way the other loves,” Bud reflects, then, after

kissing her, pushes her off the ledge. Dorrie's purse sits on the suddenly empty parapet, a handkerchief —“something blue” — fluttering in the breeze.

### “Girl Detective”

Cut to Ellen lying face-down in the sun in a black one-piece bathing suit next to an aquamarine-blue pool at her father's house in Tucson. Cut again to a long shot. In the background, framed by a red-brick wall, Ellen dives into the pool; in the foreground, a black servant in a brilliant white jacket is carrying a phone, “Miss Ellen, a Mr. Corliss is calling!” Birds chirp in the crystalline, sun-stunned air as Ellen, drying herself off with a yellow towel, takes the receiver of the copper-colored phone from the servant, “Hello, Bud, you're coming here for Thanksgiving.”

The use of color in this scene is subtly expressive and epitomizes the way in which a 50s noir like *Kiss Me Deadly* recollects the genre in the process of reinventing it. For example, if the “cool” deep-blue sky and pool in the first part of the scene echo the preceding “murder” sequence, Ellen's black bathing suit indicates that she's still mourning her sister's death even as it evokes, since she's wearing a white bathing cap when she drives into the pool, the dominant, black-and-white palette of classic noir. The second part of the scene has a slightly different tonality: while the “warm” yellow towel reflects, like the sunshine, her happiness, the “cool” copper-colored telephone underscores her privileged status as a Kingship heiress and, more ominously, the prize she represents for Bud.

In Levin's novel, Bud refers to Ellen as the “girl detective,” taunting her right before he shoots her, “No, you had to be the girl detective! Well, this is what happens to girl detectives!” (156). In the film, the dive symbolically links the two Kingship sisters, but Ellen, unlike Dorrie, ultimately refuses to take the dive when push comes to shove. Instead, she actively pursues her sister's case, which has been ruled a suicide, when both the police and her father have long since given up. The turning point occurs when, after talking to Bud about their “ballet” date that night, she opens a package that the servant has just brought to her. The camera slowly tracks in to a medium shot of Ellen as she sits in the right foreground in her black bathing suit, her back against a yellow cotton robe. In the left background, there's a red and white umbrella (an echo of Dorrie in the first sequence); in the left foreground, the phone sits on the table. Inside the package is a box that contains a brown leather belt and note:

Dear Ellen,

You may recognize this as the belt of the suit that Dorothy wore last. We were sorority sisters and, on her last day just before she went out, she borrowed one of my belts. It was a cheap leather belt and we both knew it didn't go with her suit at all. Still, she wanted it and left this one in its place. I hope I was right waiting these many months before sending it.

Sincerely, Annabel Koch

After reading this letter, Ellen breaks her date with Bud to enlist the help of Dorrie's former tutor, Gordon Grant (Jeffrey Hunter), the nephew of the police chief who investigated her sister's death. The "cotton dress" that she decides to wear is pink, a "warm" color associated in the film with Dorrie and, more generally, conventional femininity. Although Gordon is initially skeptical (he writes off her investigative impulse to an over-active "imagination"), he eventually relents and Ellen sets out on her own, arranging to meet one of Dorrie's former boyfriends, a DJ who works at KBRI, which happens to be located at the top of the Municipal Building.

The sequence — a classic set-piece and one of the most striking in all of 50s color noir — begins with a cut from Ellen talking on the phone to a canted high-angle shot of her approaching the Esquire Club. It's late in the evening (the hands on a clock are clearly visible), a jazzed-up burlesque number is playing in the background, and light spills out of the club's open door onto the sidewalk. A red neon sign spelling COCKTAIL LOUNGE flashes on and off like a semaphore. In the ensuing high-angle shot, Ellen strides into a dark alley — she's dressed all in white except for her black purse — as the camera cranes up and out to the midnight blue street where a sedan pulls up, the film cutting on action to Ellen as she turns to listen. Footsteps echo on the pavement. As she backs deeper into the alley, a woman bangs open a blind, "What are you doing out there, it's too late for you!" Ellen suddenly sees a man at the other end of the alley and starts to run, but the man, who looks just like Bud in his checked dark-blue jacket, starts to run after her. Ellen, her face slashed with shadow, violently struggles with the man, "Don't touch me, let me go!"

Surprisingly, the man lets her go. His name is Dwight Powell (Robert Quarry), and as Ellen learns at a tiki bar called Pago Pago, he briefly dated Dorrie after meeting her in "English Lit." However, since he still has the address of her last boyfriend, Ellen agrees to return with him to his apartment building. There, while she patiently waits in the

lobby, Bud — dressed in a dark red sports jacket — makes short work of Dwight, shooting the DJ point-blank in the head as he sits in front of a typewriter on which Bud's just typed another suicide note, "I've lived with Dorrie's killing on my conscience for far too long. Now that her sister suspects, I know there's no other way. Please forgive me for everything."

Later, when the police discover the note, the chief solemnly pronounces, "Case opened again, case closed again," then pays Ellen a back-handed compliment for her "police work," "You did it all, and if I had known you were doing it, I'd have stopped you." The chief's not-so-subtle message is that "girls" shouldn't try to be detectives, that — to quote James Brown — "It's a man's world," a sentiment that aligns the law not only with Ellen's callous father, whom the film intimates was responsible for his wife's death, but also the psychopathic Bud, whose masculinity is murderously utilitarian.

Although Ellen promptly returns home in a chauffeured black limousine, the long, cypress shadows on the gravel driveway outside her father's house hint it's not quite over yet. And sure enough, as soon as Ellen walks in the door, her father tells her someone's waiting for her in the den and — cue the stinger on the sound track — it's Bud, dressed in a cream-colored sports jacket and cornflower-yellow shirt, smiling as if he's just swallowed the canary. The character's costuming may seem anomalous here, but given Bud's deceptive, chameleon-like nature, it's entirely à propos: just as the yellow shirt rhymes with Ellen's towel and bathrobe in the "diving" sequence, so the light-colored sports jacket remembers the summer suit he was wearing when he murdered Dorrie.

The subsequent sequence in which Bud and Ellen ride in long shot across a desert trail directly references *Leave Her to Heaven* and, in particular, the celebrated passage where another Ellen on horseback wildly strews her father's ashes across a landscape the color of "dried blood." In a *Kiss Before Dying*, though, it's not Ellen but Bud who's in love with her father or, at least, her father's money. In the muted ochre and umber landscape, it is Bud, dressed in tight matching denim-blue pants and jacket — not Ellen, wearing a checked light-blue shirt over khaki riding pants — who stands out. In this scene, Bud's character exhibits the sort of arresting color-accented costuming typically reserved for the female star. In fact, Bud reverts to form here, wearing the "cool" color he's most associated with: sky-blue.

In the intervening time since the discovery of Dwight's body, Ellen has changed perceptibly. She's not only finally reconciled herself to her sister's death but reached a rapprochement with her father. Bud

inquires whether he had something to do with it — her happiness, that is — and she says “everything,” attributing it to his “diabolic spell.” Bud, whose mind never strays far from her father’s mines, attributes it to something else, “Our relationship is a simple matter of chemistry. Like attracts like. It happens with minerals, it happens with people.”

Bud then offers Ellen a drag from his cigarette, but when she politely declines, he tosses it to the ground, reflecting “No good if you really don’t know what the other’s thinking.” The audience, remembering Bud’s final words to Dorrie before he pushed her off the roof, has a pretty good idea what he’s thinking. Ellen jokingly alludes to Bud’s “dark past” and he reluctantly admits to a “shameful, sinister secret,” “I’ve never really been in love before.” In the reverse shot, a tall cactus plant stands silent as a totem. Kiss, kiss. Fade to black.

In the concluding, climactic sequence of *A Kiss Before Dying*, Ellen drives Bud out to her father’s smelter in a white convertible whose red-trim interior is the same color as the lipstick in the film’s title card. In this scene, Bud is sporting his usual post-Dorrie look, a light-colored shirt and jacket, though in a sartorial twist that speaks volumes (since it’s the first time in the film that Ellen reprises an outfit), she’s dressed in the same “pink cotton dress” she donned when she decided to act on her suspicions that her sister’s death was not a suicide.

Admiring a fleet of trucks, Bud caresses a lamp guard, absolutely entranced by what he sees, “Two million dollars on wheels!” Later, he gazes longingly into an enormous pit which he describes as the “center of creation,” and it’s as if he’s been reborn. This is the moment he’s dreamt about all his life — about to marry into the Kingship fortune, about to meet his fate like, as Levin writes, “a lover going to a long-awaited tryst” (127). However, when Bud reflexively corrects Ellen about how long her father’s company has been mining the pit and she responds, “Darling, you sound like you knew the Kingship mine long before the Kingship girl,” his masquerade begins to crumble. Luring him on (Bud claims that he met Dorrie), Ellen mentions her sister’s favorite composer, Debussy — “How were the concerts in Lupton?” — and Bud swallows the bait hook, line, and sinker, “Not bad for a town . . . .” Outed yet placidly unapologetic (“Your father and I, we’ll grieve”), Bud tries to shove Ellen over the edge, but a truck appears out of the blue, slamming into his body and sending it hurtling into the abyss.

### **Coda: Pink Is the New Black**

In Levin’s *A Kiss Before Dying*, Bud is even more avariciously cold-blooded than he is in the film. After he manages to knock off Dorrie

and Ellen, he's working on the third sister, Marion (he thinks to himself, "Faith, Hope . . . and Charity"), when Kingship *père* corners him high on a catwalk above a vat of smoking copper from which he falls to his death:

The scream, which had knifed through the sudden stillness of the smelter, ended in a viscous splash. From the other side of the vat, a sheet of green leaped up. Arcing, it sheared down to the floor where it splattered into a million pools of droplets. They hissed softly on the cement and slowly dawned from green to copper. (Levin 241)

Bud's spectacular "dive" recollects Dorrie's fall to her death from the top of the Municipal Building; it also comments on his obsession with wealth in the form of copper, the color of the penny, the color of money.

In both the novel and the film, Bud Corliss is a young man on the make and waspy women are his prey. In fact, in his own perverse fashion, he's the optimistic, Franklinian embodiment of the Protestant work ethic, using his boyish, Prince-Valiant good looks and the Puritans' whipping boy, sex, to push back against his lower-class station in life, what the professor in the American "lit" class calls the "pain" of predestination. With his relentless social climbing, he's reminiscent of the multi-talented, super-self-composed protagonist of Patricia Highsmith's 1955 novel, *The Talented Mr. Ripley*.

But whereas Tom Ripley is a genuinely queer character, ambivalent about both men and women ("I can't make up my mind whether I like men or women, so I'm thinking of giving *both* up" (Highsmith 81)), Bud is catnip for the opposite sex: a double or mirror-image of the black widow, he's that rare noir type, a *homme fatal*. Like the reborn Ripley (Matt Damon) in Anthony Minghella's 1999 adaptation of Highsmith's novel, he's also something of a clothes horse.<sup>29</sup> In *A Kiss Before Dying*, clothes make the man. Bud's clothing — dark in the first part of the film, lighter after he kills Dorrie and begins to court Ellen — is a kind of mask.

Woe to the woman who becomes the object of Bud's heart's desire — unless, of course, she's that equally rare type in 50s noir, not a *femme fatale* but a woman with a real nose for detection. Pink has traditionally been associated with femininity — with the accent on the word "femme" — but it's also a mixture of red and white, "danger" and "purity." Ellen's "pink cotton dress" therefore codes her not simply as a potential victim but, since it marks the moment when she becomes a "private eye," an agent in her own right.<sup>29</sup> In Levin's novel, Ellen

Kingship falls prey to the kiss of the spider-man and pays for it, like Dorrie, with her life. However, in Gerd Oswald's *noir en couleur*, it's the "girl detective" — pretty in pink, not black — who masters the man who would be king.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The reasons are cultural and historical, political and technological, and include the "1948 consent decree that separated distribution from exhibition; an antitrust suit against Technicolor that accused them of monopolizing the color field; the introduction of Eastmancolor negative; and competition from a new medium, television" (Haines 149).

<sup>2</sup> For a critical synopsis of Oswald's film noirs, including *A Kiss before Dying*, see Ursini.

<sup>3</sup> See Street, "*The Talented Mr. Ripley: Costuming Identity.*"

<sup>4</sup> On the female detective in film noir, see, for example, Hanson and Gates.

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## Soul of the Dark Knight: Batman as Mythic Figure in Comics and Film

Alex M. Wainer

McFarland & Company, 2014

In *Soul of the Dark Knight*, Alex Wainer provides an in-depth study of the mythic essence of the world's most famous cowl'd crusader, Batman. Celebrating his 75th anniversary this year, the Dark Knight has been represented in a myriad of different mediums and undergone numerous transformations during his ageless battle against the forces of evil in Gotham City. Now, with the critical and commercial success of the Christopher Nolan-directed trilogy, a plethora of critical works have popped up on the bookshelves, all exploring Batman's essential attraction on the masses.

Taking a humanist approach, *Soul of the Dark Knight* argues that the fascination Batman holds is not only based on his "flamboyant costume and his thrilling adventures and hairbreadth escapes," but also on the appeal of the mythopoeic (18). While calling Batman a mythic figure, Wainer notes that he is not saying that the "Batman figure is a myth, but like Greek myths, has qualities that are like them" (10). According to Wainer, Batman most closely resembles a Homeric hero, an incarnation of an "avenging spirit of justice," a figure who takes on the aspects of darkness and is able to use the darkness to defeat criminals (9).

This study focuses on Batman's mythic qualities; however, Wainer takes some time to build up to the payoff. While the reader is given a taste of Batman in the introduction, Chapter 1 reads more like a primer on myth than a study of the Dark Knight, as Weiner fills this chapter with discussions of several competing views of myth, such as the scientific/sociological, the literary/classical, and the philosophical. With this background in place, Chapter 2 gives a short history of the Batman from Bob Kane's creation of "the Bat-Man," up to the present era. While this chapter will interest readers new to the Batman universe, veteran fans will find little new material.

For readers interested in the distinct enduring qualities of the Dark Knight's mystique, Chapters 3 and 4 discuss his unique mythical aspects examining how this essence is uniquely expressed in the comic's medium which is "his duality and his symbolic appeal as a hero figure" (55). According to Wainer, the success of Batman's character and long-term survival is due to the principles and techniques that govern his main medium, sequential art. Going into great detail, he argues that Batman's

enduring success lies in the fact that the “content of the mythic is enabled through the iconic abstractions of sequential art” (80).

The second half of this study focuses on the challenges of capturing the mythic elements of Batman in different mediums from the 1940’s movie serials to the 1966 TV version, animated series, and contemporary films. Wainer spends a great deal of this time discussing the Christopher Nolan-directed trilogy. While lukewarm in his discussion of earlier adaptations of the Dark Knight, Wainer spends Chapter 7 waxed enthusiastic over the Nolan adaptation, which he sums up as, “creating a total history of Batman, a beginning, a middle, and an end, as with so many of the figures of myth and legend” (159).

While Wainer’s study occasionally loses focus and becomes repetitive, there is a lot to love here. Despite the implication of the title, this work is more than a study of the mythic nature of Batman. Instead, it is a primer on the different aspects of the study of myth, an introduction to the history of the Dark Knight, a reader on comics as a medium and art form, and a discussion on the theory of adaptation. Weaved within this plethora of topics, not ever-present in the forefront, but always lurking in the shadows, is the Batman. This alone is well worth the price of admission.

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## Contributors Page

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**Amy M. Green** received her PhD in Literature from UNLV in 2009. She specialized in Shakespeare and 19th Century American Literature. Today, her work has evolved and she focuses on popular culture studies, especially with regards to literature, film, and video game analyses. She believes that more traditional analyses and interrogations, which are the hallmark of the liberal arts more generally, should also encompass our popular culture. She is especially interested in the expanding presence of video games as a compelling source of narrative, one that is necessarily participatory by nature. Most of all, she loves her time in the classroom, sharing readings and thoughts with students from all backgrounds.

**Ric Jahna** is professor of English at Arizona Western College in Yuma, Arizona where he directs the creative writing program and the visiting writer lecture series. He received his PhD in literature from the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. He is the author of the short story collection *True Kin*, published by Ohio State University Press in 2008. His critical interests include nineteenth-century

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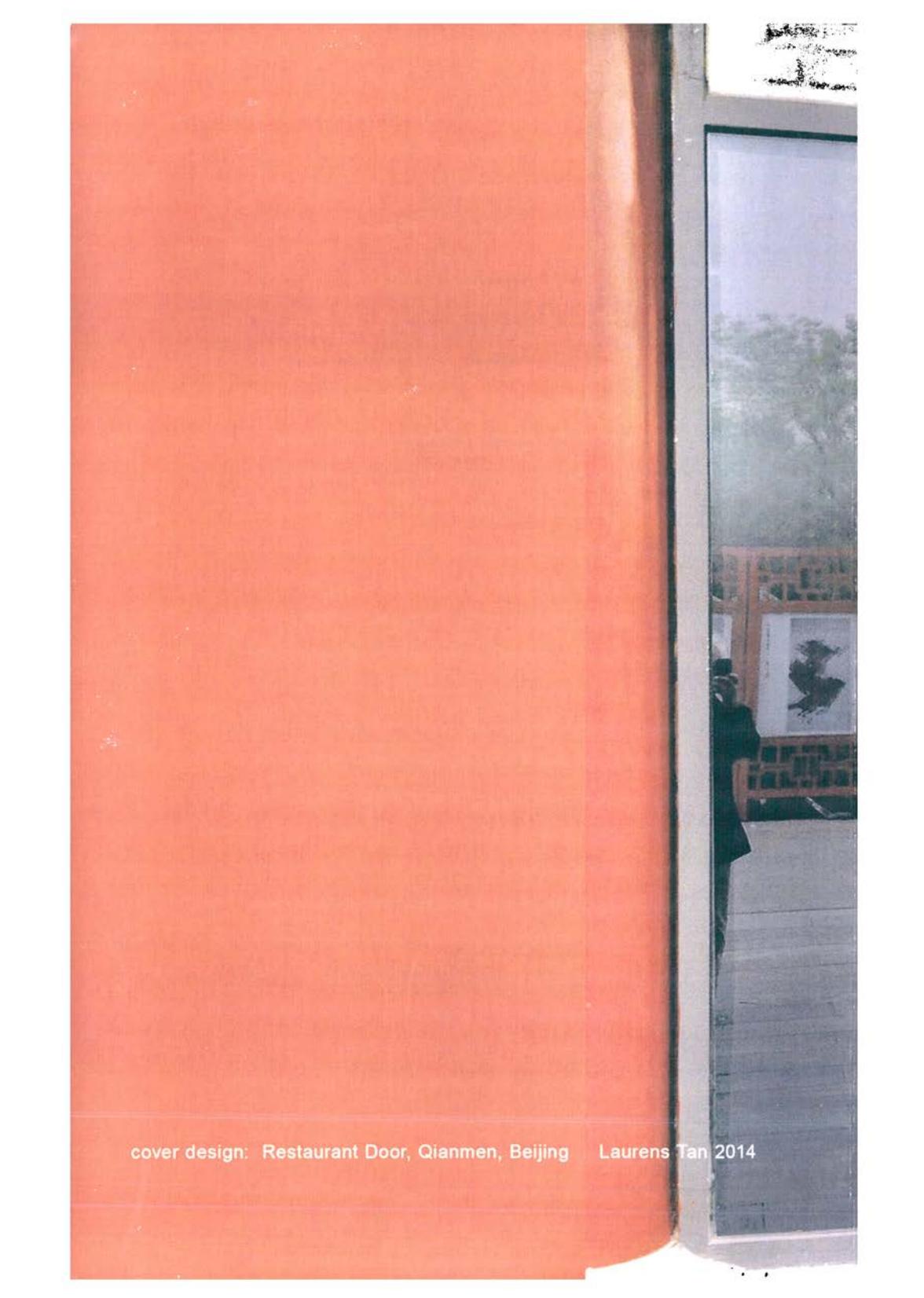
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**David Sandner** is Professor of English at California State University, Fullerton. His most recent work, *Critical Discourses of the Fantastic, 1712-1831* (Ashgate), is currently a Finalist for the 2014 Mythopoeic Award for scholarship on fantastic literature; his edited collection, *The Treasury of the Fantastic*, co-edited with Jacob Weisman, has been

reissued by Tachyon Publications. Along with another scholarly book and edited collection, he has published numerous scholarly essays as well. He also publishes fiction, including a story, co-written with Jacob Weisman, "Egyptian Motherlode," about the strange adventures of a funk music pioneer named The Prophet. He hopes the story will one day be a novel. He doesn't play any instruments worth a damn, though.



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