The
Ashen
Egg

A Journal of Undergraduate English Scholarship

The Ashen Egg

Call For Papers: *The Ashen Egg* Vol. 11 (2023)
Submission guidelines: *The Ashen Egg* is an annual journal publishing essays on literature, rhetoric, linguistics, film, and popular culture. Any current Western Kentucky University undergraduate student may submit work for consideration. Submissions must be endorsed by an English Department faculty member who confirms the

submission as a piece produced for one of the faculty member's courses and approves it as worthy for publication. Manuscripts may range from 750 to 3000 words, though exceptions may be made for submissions of stellar quality. Literature, film, and pop culture essays must follow the Modern Language Association style guidelines as defined in the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* (latest edition); essays on linguistics or professional writing topics may use APA (latest edition). Submissions must be received in CH 135 no later than November 1 and must be accompanied by the cover sheet and endorsement form to be considered.

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NOTE ON CONTRIBUTORS

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Joseph Shoulders is a fifth-year junior at WKU originally from Adairville, Ky. He was a Gatton Academy student when he discovered his love for analyzing literature and the value within his own writing, and he decided to major in Literature and minor in Creative Writing and American Sign Language Studies. He is immensely grateful for the community of support and the opportunities for development he found in the English Department, and he enjoys sharing these experiences with others and tutoring in the Writing Center. Through his studies, he hopes to direct his writing towards emboldening queer and disabled peoples.

Sarah Stevens is a senior Literature major from Westmoreland, Tenn. After graduating from WKU in December 2022, she hopes to continue her education and would someday like to teach college literature classes herself. Currently, she works as a tutor in the WKU Writing Center and serves as the Vice President for Messages in a Bottle. When she isn't watching cartoons or reading children's books (ostensibly for her thesis), she enjoys hiking, taking absurdly long naps, making up poems about her cats, and

listening to terrible music. She would like to thank Dr. Endres for his support in writing her essay.

Adam Woodard is a 37-year-old, nontraditional student at Western Kentucky University. Some may ask, why would a 37-year-old return to college? That's easy! He hopes to show his children that, if they apply themselves, there's nothing they can't achieve. Returning to school at 35 was a terrifying decision, but Adam wants to ensure the second half of his life is better than the first. Along with returning to school, Adam also recently received a late-life autism diagnosis. In the future, Adam hopes to earn his MFA and continue to spread autism awareness.

SILENCE BEFORE THE MIRROR: CREATIVE CRITICISM AND POETRY RESPONSE

by Olivia Alsup

Le Roman de Silence (The Romance of Silence) is a thirteenth-century, Old French poem that follows the hero, Silence, who was born a woman but was raised to present as a man in order to receive their father's inheritance in a kingdom that has outlawed women from becoming heirs. Written by Heldris de Cornuälle, this poem highlights the societal differences between the upbringing in young men and women in early medieval England. As Sherley Kersey points out, "girls learned household management skills in preparation for the supervisory duties that would fall to them in their husband's absence" (Kersey 189). The constraints surrounding femininity in the poem showcase the role that gender played in predetermining the way of life for young women. Throughout the poem, Silence refers to themself using both male and female pronouns but rejects the ideas of femininity at the time and is outspoken about identifying more with men's clothing and activities. For this analysis, I will be using they/them pronouns in reference to the character. Silence is torn between the personified characters of Nature and Nurture throughout the poem to determine the gender with which they most identify. Nature tells Silence she made them into a woman, and Nurture says they were raised to be a man. At the end of the poem, Silence's "truth" is revealed to the court, and they are forced to stop presenting as a man, give up their knighthood, and marry the king that ruled women could not become heirs in the first place. Once married, we never hear from Silence again.

Because we don't hear from Silence after they are married at the end of the original poem, I wanted to write a poem that would give

Silence a voice to show how they feel now that they are forced to live as a woman and marry the king. In my poem, Silence is standing in front of a mirror looking at their body after Nature has "recovered her rights" and "spent three days refinishing Silence's entire body" (Heldris of Cornwall, line 6670). While looking, they think about the beauty placed upon them by Nature compared to the way they felt when they lived as a man. My poem gives insight into Silence's thoughts and feelings after their "true" gender is discovered, which gives the reader a clearer view of Silence's attitude towards their new life performing female habits and gender roles.

Silence Before the Mirror

Are these the thighs that Nature bore me?
The thighs called soft and shapely
Yet nurtured to seek and to journey and to battle.
I was not the masterpiece she intended yet the Master of my own
   peace.   5

Are these the straight arms, the small hands, the long fingers
Nature crafted from the finest material?
These arms which have swung the hammer,
These hands which have grasped the infinite power due only to
   men,   10
These fingers which have clawed my space in this kingdom
Only now to lie empty save only the marriage ring that binds me to
A savage remnant of the power I once beheld.

Are these the hairs her steady hand placed on my head?
Combed perfectly straight, designed and drawn neatly   15
Fashioned evenly for her to swear by?
Is this her power over my destiny while mine lies slain?

My well-turned visage mocks me,
She scorns me. This beauty that promised delighted
Has turned to bitterness.   20

My lords, I was a girl. I was a man. I am a woman

Yet my body betrays me.
Nature betrayed me.

This is an original poem titled "Silence Before the Mirror," in which we hear Silence's point of view after they are discovered by the king and get married at the end of the original poem. Silence has very little agency over their gender presentation at this point because they cannot go back to presenting as a man at the end of the original poem. My adaptation draws from this interpretation and looks at Silence's thoughts about their gender using similar language expressed by the narrator when Nature created Silence at their birth. For example, the narrator tells us Nature traced Silence's "well-turned visage" during their creation, directly paralleling the language Silence uses to describe their own face in my adaptation, only now saying that the beauty mocks them because it reflects a person different from who they feel they are inside (1925). While discussing their gender presentation with Reason in the forest, Silence notes that they have "a mouth too hard for kisses and arms too rough for embraces" (2646-7). We see further evidence of Silence's difficulty accepting their more feminine form after Nature changed them at the end of the poem through language that parallels the narrator during Silence's creation. "Are these the straight arms, the small hands, the long fingers / Nature crafted from the finest material?" pulls directly from the narrator telling us that Nature "makes the arms very straight / the hands small, the fingers long" when creating Silence (1937-8). Here again, Silence is mocking the language used in their creation to show their confusion and feelings of betrayal towards Nature's creation. Silence continues this parallel by looking at the habits and actions they performed as a man, such as hunting, showing how Silence judges their gender presentation based upon the actions associated with male and female identities. We see evidence of this through Nature's assertion that Silence has "no business going off into the forest…shooting off arrows" and that they should learn to sew instead (2525). This is paralleled in my poem through Silence's acknowledgment that the arms Nature made are the same arms they used to perform hobbies associated with men in the line "These arms which have swung the hammer." This shows how Silence feels as the body Nature made is wrong because the

masculine habits they enjoy do not align with the form they were given.

In my poem, Silence addresses the work put into becoming a knight and the power that they gained through presenting as male in the lines "These hands which have grasped the infinite power due only to men, / These fingers which have clawed my space in this kingdom / Only now to lie empty save only the marriage ring that binds me." With this, I wanted to give more insight into how I believe Silence feels about their marriage to King Evan, although we are not given an explicit understanding of Silence's thoughts at the end of the text. After their marriage, we only hear the narrator's thoughts on how a good woman should act, but we don't hear from Silence again. While outspoken throughout the poem when presenting as a man, Silence is silenced when forced back into the constraints of femininity. The final stanzas conclude with Silence's assertion that "My lords, I was a girl. I was a man. I am a woman / Yet my body betrays me." This statement reflects the words spoken by the narrator after Silence's birth saying, "My lords, it was a girl!" (1798). Through Silence's words, we learn the journey they have gone through and where they have ended up with the recognition that, although Silence is forced to present as a woman, Nature betrayed her. I wanted to create this piece because I loved looking at Silence's journey and felt betrayed, in a similar fashion, by the ending of the poem never letting us hear their thoughts about a seemingly very out-of-character decision that was made. I would still argue that Silence is forced into presenting as a woman at the end of the poem out of necessity, but I think they know it will not make them happy.

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Engagements for Change: How Nonprofit Organizations Should Utilize Social Media to Achieve Their Goals

by Macy Kitchens

One of the most revolutionary inventions of the past century is the internet, and alongside it shortly came social media. Social media has (almost quite literally) taken over the world. Over half of the worldwide population uses social media, with 4.2 billion users, and this number continues to rise. There were 490 million new social media users in the past year, and there are 15 new users every second, with the average person spending around two-and-a-half hours a day on social media ("Global Social Media Stats"). With the number of people and time spent on social media, social media has quickly become one of the most important and influential advertising tools for businesses, including nonprofit organizations (NPOs). NPOs rely on supporters for donations to achieve their goals, and in today's society, one of the most effective ways to gain support is through social media. However, many NPOs are not fully utilizing or prioritizing social media. Social media can be a great tool for NPOs to gain support and donations if they start to utilize it by paying attention to how much they post and what they post.

This study analyzes different empirical studies published in scholarly journals between 2014 and 2020. These studies look specifically at NPOs and their relationship with social media—

whether it be how often NPOs use social media or what types of posts they make. While there are plenty of studies that look at how NPOs use social media and the impact of certain social media practices, there is no current study that looks at these aspects together or their relationship with each other. In order to create a holistic view of how NPOs use social media and how they should utilize social media, I synthesized research from multiple sources. The purpose of this method and of this research was to emphasize the importance of using social media and to recommend the most effective practices to those who work for NPOs. People who work for NPOs may not have the time or resources to find this information themselves, so I evaluated and analyzed the research to create one document NPOs could easily use. From this research, NPOs will be able to adapt their social media use to be more effective at gaining donations and creating and maintaining a constituency through the use of frequent posts as well as the appropriate allocation of information posts, community posts, and action posts.

As the personal use of social media increases, social media platforms offer NPOs the opportunity to create strong communities, gain support and resources, and easily distribute information. However, many NPOs are not taking advantage of this free and relatively simple opportunity. For starters, many NPOs do not use any social media platforms. In a study conducted by Fordham University, 20% of the organizations in the sample did not use social media for their organization (Goldkind 389). By not having a social media account, these organizations may be losing potential supporters and donors. In many cases, if NPOs do use social media, they are not active on those accounts. In Kristen Lovejoy and Gregory Saxton's revolutionary study of NPOs' use of social media, only 60% of participants were considered "active" on social media, making at least three posts per week (347). Additionally, 74% of NPOs post zero to two posts a day (Young 51), and 50% of NPOs are considered beginner (or sporadic) users of

social media, meaning they use one platform in an intermittent and unscheduled fashion (Goldkind 389). Many NPOs are not posting consistently or making enough posts, which may be preventing them from obtaining all of the benefits that social media has to offer.

In addition to not posting enough, many NPOs are not spending enough time on social media. California State University conducted a study of 125 NPOs to examine how these NPOs use social media. They found that the average NPO spent less than six hours a week on social media. However, other NPOs spent up to 40 hours a week on social media (Young 50-51). These NPOs have more time to develop a community, interact with supporters, and promote their organization than NPOs that only spend a few hours a week on social media. These differences in hours could be the difference between which organization a person donates to.

While many NPOs do not properly utilize social media, there are steps that NPOs can take in order to get the most out of social media. One of the main benefits that social media offers is the ability to attract supporters more easily. Since NPOs rely on donations, this is arguably the most important aspect. There are many ways for NPOs to increase their support and donations through reforming their social media use. One way is by obtaining more likes on their Facebook page. According to a 2020 study, an increase of 10% in the number of likes of an NPO's Facebook page will result in a 1.1% increase in donations (Bhati and McDonnell 84). This may not seem like a large increase, but to an organization that relies on donations, this increase could be significant. Additionally, supporters who like an organization's Facebook page are more likely to donate than supporters who do not like their Facebook page (Sisson). The number of likes an NPO's Facebook page receives can significantly impact the organization, so NPOs must focus on this aspect.

As mentioned, many NPOs do not post enough on social media, but if these organizations were to post more often, there would be several benefits. One benefit is increased donations. Donations will

increase by 2.6% if the number of posts increases by 10% (Bhati and McDonnell 84). This is more than twice the increase in donations than that caused by increasing the number of Facebook page likes, so it is imperative that NPOs spend more time on social media and create more posts. Posting more often can also increase the number of likes a NPOs gets. An analysis of 109 advocacy groups found that "increasing the average number of…posts per week results in a substantial increase in the average number of likes a group receives per week" (Smith 307). This may be because if an organization posts sporadically, their post may get lost in their followers' feeds, so their followers may not see it. However, if an organization posts often and regularly, their followers have a greater chance of seeing one of their posts. Obtaining donations is one of the main goals of NPOs, so it is important that NPOs do what is necessary to increase donations, including posting more often.

In addition to how often an NPO posts, the types of posts NPOs make can also impact their engagements. It is generally accepted that there are three types of posts that NPOs use: information, community, and action. As explained by Lovejoy and Saxton, information posts are simply posts that disseminate information related to the organization. Community posts are posts that attempt to create a community and foster relationships between constituents and the organizations. The third type of post, action posts, has the goal of getting their constituents to take action. This can include donating and attending events (Lovejoy and Saxton). Each of these types of posts results in different engagements. Engagements of a post are an important measure because this can show that there is not only interest in what is being said but also support in who is saying it. Information posts result in the most amount of likes. If an organization increases their amount of information posts by 10%, the number of likes will increase by 8.7% (Wai and Lin 120). Community posts get more comments than information posts, and action posts tend to receive more shares than information posts (Smith). These results make sense when you look

at the types of posts. Community posts are created to develop a dialogue among constituents and between constituents and the organization. The NPO wants people to comment and typically prompts them to do so in these posts. Action posts typically have information regarding things people can do to help, and followers of the NPO will share these posts as a virtual form of word of mouth in hopes that their followers will also take action. These types of posts create different types of engagements, so NPOs should strategically use these posts in order to obtain the necessary type and amount of engagements.

The type of post can also affect donations. As mentioned, action posts result in more shares than other types of posts. An analysis of 427 NPOs in Hong Kong found that an increase of 10% of action posts results in a 6% increase of shares (Wai and Lin 120). An increase of 10% in the number of shares results in a 2.6% increase in donations (Bhati and McDonnell 84), meaning an increase in action posts results in more donations. Information posts and community posts can also indirectly increase donations. According to a study looking at different NPO social media strategies, dissemination and interactivity positively affect trust (Feng et al. 1783). That is, as a constituent's perception of dissemination and interactivity increases, their trust in the NPO increases. While the study uses the terms "dissemination" and "interactivity," these concepts are very similar to what would be included in information and community posts. Information posts disseminate information. According to the researchers, "interactivity is defined as the extent to which an organization's social media offer consumers the ability to interact with the organization and other consumers" (Feng et al. 777). This is precisely what community posts are trying to achieve. The researchers go on to say that the more a constituent trusts an organization, the more likely they are to donate to that organization (Feng et al. 1783). Information and community posts, therefore, can increase donations. All three types of posts increase donations. This

could be why, as previously mentioned, organizations get more donations when they post more frequently. Since NPOs almost always use one of the three types of posts when posting on social media, if they increase any one of these categories (which will automatically happen when posting more often), the donations will increase.

Even though each type of post can increase donations and engagements, it might be a useful strategy for NPOs to strategically use each type of post. One strategy that might be effective is following the pyramid-shaped, hierarchical model developed by Chao Guo and Gregory Saxton. This model consists of three stages and corresponds with the different types of posts: reaching out to people (information), keeping the flame alive (community), and stepping up to action (action). Guo and Saxton go on to to say that NPOs should first focus on bringing awareness to their cause. This stage's goal is to create a constituency. The next stage focuses on sustaining that constituency. The final stage is to call for action and mobilize the constituents. However, all three stages can happen simultaneously (Guo and Saxton 70). The first stage is at the bottom of the pyramid and should be the basis for the majority of an organization's posts. Since this stage is focused on disseminating information to current and potential supporters, the audience is largest for this category. Additionally, NPOs want to continue to attract new supporters. Therefore, most posts should fall under this category. The next two stages are directed towards current supporters and are less focused on expanding an organization's support. The final stage, stepping up to action, is at the top of the pyramid. This stage should consist of the least amount of posts. Guo and Saxton warn organizations from having too many of these posts, stating, "too many 'calls to action' might make the organization's follower base turn away" (Guo and Saxton 73). Ideally, an organization's social media posts should follow this model, and for the most part, this is the case. In an analysis of post type of 188 NPOs, 69% of posts were information, 20% were community, and

11% were action (Guo and Saxton 66). While NPOs tend to follow this model—whether they realize it or not—some might argue that NPOs should be making more community posts. There is a big difference between the number of information posts and the number of community posts NPOs currently produce. A researcher at the University of Oklahoma warns NPOs that "a handful of community posts in a sea of information posts may not be successful at creating dialogue or fostering user engagement" (Smith 306). The purpose of community posts is to foster relationships and create a community; however, these efforts might be ineffective if there are too few community posts. So while the Guo and Saxton model is roughly followed, NPOs should create more community posts in order to effectively create, maintain, and mobilize their constituency.

Nonprofit organizations are one of the backbones of change. At the heart of movements like BLM, gun reform, climate change reform, and COVID-19 relief are nonprofit organizations that are relying on donors to achieve their goals. With the number of people who use social media, it should be easy for NPOs to gain constituents and donors. However, many NPOs are not utilizing social media. As a result, they are struggling to get the support needed. Nonprofit organizations must start utilizing social media; they must start opening social media accounts and spending a substantial amount of time on them. They must start to make more posts, specifically the right type of posts. If not, then these organizations will continue to struggle to raise the money necessary to make the much-needed change they are trying to achieve.

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Bad Communication and Failing Marriages in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*

by Ellie Schueler

Jhumpa Lahiri interweaves similar themes regarding communication and its role in marriages within her collection of short stories in *Interpreter of Maladies.* The couples in her various short stories have failing marriages because they fail to communicate well with one another. In a sense, the characters need an interpreter of maladies to bridge their individual communication gaps. Lahiri shows readers the importance of effective communication through characters who experience ineffective communication that influences the state of their marriages. Three stories in particular—"Sexy," "A Temporary Matter," and "Interpreter of Maladies"—reveal the connection between unhappy marriages and communication.

From the beginning of "Sexy," communication plays an important role in influencing subsequent events in Miranda's life. Miranda's coworker, Laxmi, tells her that her cousin's husband left her for another woman after a "conversation that had changed his life" (Lahiri 48). This conversation with her coworker proves to play into her personal experience as the "other woman." While Laxmi tries to console her cousin, Miranda is "on the phone herself, with Dev" (48). Essentially, Miranda is involved in a love affair like Laxmi's cousin, but as the "younger woman seduced by an older married man" (Apap 61). Words are so important in her relationship with Dev because, as in Laxmi's cousin's failed marriage, words and

conversation have a bonding power. The title of the story, "Sexy," is based on this word that Dev calls her. Despite his romantic words, Miranda "gradually comes to interpret the title of her story" and the meaning true meaning of "sexy" (Brada-William 455).

A significant factor in Miranda's interest in a relationship with Dev is his power to make her feel transformed. She "latches on to Dev's proclamation that she is 'sexy' as the core of her power" (Apap 63). This is the first time Miranda had been called sexy, so, to her, there is a lot of power within this single word. Her "first time as a sexual being" causes her "new self-construction as 'mistress'" (Apap 63). However, Miranda does not seem to understand the entirety of the role of mistress for much of the story. This can be attributed to her lack of understanding and her misconception of the meaning of words, especially those regarding Dev's Indian culture. She tries to memorize words at the bottom of Indian menus, only to find that they "didn't stick in her mind" (54). Miranda also fantasizes about her Indian name, Mira. Her quest to learn Indian culture and her fascination with her other name reflects how her relationship with Dev transforms her perception of herself.

The more time Miranda and Dev spend together, the more she learns about his culture. She is attracted to everything that makes him exotic to her—his status as her first lover, his maturity, and his foreign culture. Perhaps her attempts to integrate into his culture reflect her desire to understand him as an individual, as well as herself. Her "ensuing attempts to understand India, and by extension Dev, turn out to be stereotypically and comically flawed" (Apap 59). Lahiri comments on Miranda's cultural ignorance about India through such failed attempts. Miranda's "experiences in Boston suggest a protagonist who is deeply alienated from both her career and her locale" (Apap 59). The only people she really communicates with and befriends are her Indian coworker and Dev. She does not fully understand who she is as a woman, and this shows in her lack of deep relationships and lack of cultural understanding.

Though Miranda and Dev engage in intimate experiences, there is not much depth in their relationship. She may be "sexy," but does he see her as anything other than a mistress? Correspondingly, does she see him as anything other than an exotic man? The two are connected through sexual acts, yet their communication lacks depth. Thus, they are both physically and literally distant from one another. Yet, there are "connections between geographically and culturally distant individuals" (Apap 69). Miranda often stares at her phone because she does not hear from Dev frequently, and she worries when it "ha[s] been four days since their last conversation" (55). When they are together, their conversations are shallow—typically about their plans or culture.

Miranda eventually realizes that her relationship with Dev is not as real as she had believed. He sees her as a "sexy" woman and that is about it. Miranda "thought she knew what his words meant" (59). Yet, she must ask Rohin, a child, what words actually mean. He tells her that sexy means "loving someone you don't know" (59). Her heart sinks when she realizes that she is like the woman who ruined Laxmi's cousin's marriage. Miranda and Dev really do not know one another. Even though she attempts to understand him and his culture, this is not enough to connect the two vastly different individuals. Dev does not even remember what Miranda says to him at the Mapparium when they "whispered to each other" (60). He quickly moves the conversation on to asking her to "go back to [her] place" (60). It is at this point that Miranda realizes that their relationship is based on sex and desire rather than actual connection.

It is her conversation with young Rohin that causes her to question the meaning of "sexy" and her relation to the word. The "communication between Rohin and Miranda is so powerful and vitalizing that she determines to take" a "new direction in her life" (Shanthi 1068). Lahiri uses Miranda to show that the "process" of self-creation means "confronting the ideas that contain and restrain us" (Apap 720). Miranda does not realize the role of mistress that

she willingly plays. She buys sexy outfits and waits for Dev to be available to her. Rohin's personal understanding of "sexy" shows her that her relationship is based on fantasy. This realization marks her "own self-actualization as an ethical human being" (Apap 70). Through her conversation with Rohin, Miranda realizes she is destroying a marriage. She then makes an effort to cut off her unhealthy connection with Dev, who is more of a stranger than a lover.

Lahiri "constructs a conversation among her pieces" (Brada-Williams 453). The short story, "A Temporary Matter," furthers this conversation of the role of communication in marital conflict. The story begins with little dialogue between the husband and wife. The first piece of dialogue between Shukumar and Shoba is when she reads the notice about the electricity being shut down temporarily. Even this was "more for her own benefit than Shukumar's" (9). The couple does not converse with one another frequently, which readers later find out is because they are still mourning the death of their baby. Since that tragic moment, they "became experts at avoiding each other" (Zi-ying 1093). They each have separate rooms in the house and keep to themselves, trying to grieve separately. Lahiri writes, "the more Shoba stayed out...the more he wanted to stay in" (9). Shoba and Shukumar try to avoid one another, but the power outage forces them to reconnect.

Shukumar had "learned not to mind the silence" between them (14). But when they start playing Shoba's game during the outage, their nights are no longer filled with silence. They "use the blackout to spill all the negative stuff they never bothered to reveal before" (Zi-ying 1095). Shoba finds out that Shukumar was not attracted to her during her pregnancy and even carried around a magazine picture of another woman. Shoba reveals that she got martinis with a friend when his mother visited. They go back and forth revealing information that they have never shared with one another. Even though most of it is negative, it allows them to listen and understand

one another better than they had before. It is ironic that the literal darkness allows them to "see each other in better light" (Sandeep 1618). The outage was enough interruption to their daily avoidance of each other that they decide to communicate with each other. It "turned into an exchange of confessions," that deepens their connection (16). Eventually, they "come so close that they make love to each other with a desperation they had forgotten" (Sandeep 1617). They had been physically and mentally distant with one another for so long that they forgot the pleasure of making love. Their love and communication had been put on hold after the baby's death.

The baby's death "badly affected their relationship and their capacity and urge to have any significant communication with each other" (Sandeep 1616). Just like the short-lived power outage, their communication through confessions does not last long, either. Lahiri makes readers assume that their love has been rekindled, but the very next day Shoba announces that she is moving out. Shukumar realizes that "she had been trying to tell him this all along" (Sandeep 1618). With this now out in the open, Shukumar decides to reveal a final confession—that he knew the sex of their dead baby. Though this information brings Shoba pain, it also reminds her that he loved her enough to keep this information to himself because he knew that she did not want to know. In this moment, "doubt about the absence of Shukumar during the worst crisis of her life is dispelled and their faith in each other is restored" (Sandeep 1618). The couple then turns the lights off and mourns their loss together.

Shoba and Shukumar strengthen their listening and verbal communication skills during the power outage; though it is a temporary inconvenience, it has lasting effects on the couple's marriage. The ending of the story provides hope for further communication and restoration within their relationship. Lahiri leaves the ending open to interpretation, but there is a glimmer of hope as they now "weep together" (19). Even though Shoba announces that she needs time to herself, she stays and weeps with

her husband. Perhaps their communication about their shared loss is enough to save their marriage. The "coldness and isolation" they previously experienced "proves to be a temporary matter" (Sandeep 1618). They had held their grief in for so long that it strained their marriage. Once they begin communicating again, they allow their hurt to surface and become a shared time of mourning—for their dead baby and suffering marriage.

Lahiri's story, "Interpreter of Maladies," also reveals "the importance of communication within a marriage" (Zi-ying 1094). The story begins with dialogue between Mr. and Mrs. Das. However, their communication is negative because they "bickered about who should take Tina to the toilet" (29). The couple converses with one another, unlike Shoba and Shukumar, because of their children. The presence of children forces them to communicate, whereas Shoba and Shukumar's absence of children increases their feelings of isolation and lowers their need to converse. Though Mr. and Mrs. Das communicate, they are not actually connecting with one another. Words are spoken, but only out of necessity. Mr. and Mrs. Das "do not talk a great deal" but "argue like children" (Shanthi 1065). The couple communicates only to take care of their children. This type of communication does not grow their intimacy, as healthy communication should in a marriage.

Their lack of healthy communication results in their marital conflict within the story. The two individuals have different modes of communication that serve as barriers to their intimacy. Mrs. Das seems to be a visual communicator. She wears "nail polish to enhance her appearance" and "communicates femininity" through her outfits (Shanthi 1066). She also communicates through her eyes when they meet Mr. Kapasi's "through the rear view mirror" (Shanthi 1066). Mr. Das communicates, instead, "through pictures and text" (Shanthi 1066). On the trip, he constantly takes pictures and sees the world through his camera. He uses his guidebook to point out information and relies on it to guide him. When Bobby is

being attacked by a monkey, he asks, "what are we supposed to do? What if they start attacking?" (40). His lack of knowledge causes Mrs. Das to cry for help from Mr. Kapasi instead of her own husband. Mr. And Mrs. Das have a "conflict in form of communication" (Shanthi 1066).

Mrs. Das decides to converse with Mr. Kapasi because she feels she cannot do so effectively with her husband. When Mr. Das and the children leave to look at the monkeys, Mrs. Das asks Mr. Kapasi to "stay a minute" (37). Mrs. Das assumes that Mr. Kapasi, having worked at a doctor's office, is an interpreter of maladies. She reveals to him that Mr. Das is not actually Bobby's father. He realizes that he must "choose his words with care" in his response to this information (38). He is not expecting to hear such secretive information that even Mr. Das is unaware of. She goes on to explain to him that she "had no one to confide in about him [Mr. Das] at the end of a difficult day" (38). Her parents lived across the world at that time and these communication barriers ultimately led to her affair with Mr. Das' friend. Likewise, Mr. Kapasi is in an unhappy marriage of his own because of deficient communication. He "lost the ability to communicate with his wife" and now has a "loveless marriage" (Banu 64). In both marriages, the security and trust that is formed through communication is nonexistent. Lahiri believes that a "harmonious relationship is rooted upon mutual understanding and trusts" (Shanthi 1065). Both Mr. Kapasi and Mrs. Das become vulnerable by trying to find someone to understand and trust, as Mrs. Das does in this scene.

Though Mrs. Das hopes for her conversation with Mr. Kapasi to relieve her conflict, it does not because he tells her what she does not want to hear. Mr. Kapasi initially thinks that he should advise her to tell Mr. Das the truth. After all, Shukumar and Shoba were able to "regain their marital bliss through communicating the unspoken truth" (Shanthi 1065). Though the same would likely help Mrs. Das' marriage, or at least her guilty conscience, Mr. Kapasi tries

to help her see the root of the issue. He asks, "is it really pain you feel Mrs. Das, or is it guilt?" (39). She glares at him and storms off, not wanting her motives to be questioned. She was looking to confide in him, "searching for human connection" that she lacks with her husband (1067). It seems that she has not learned the mistake that caused her guilt—trying to physically connect with another man to make up for a lack of connection with her husband. She sees Mr. Kapasi as a literal doctor that can relieve her pain, whether through intimacy or a solution. But his answer is not what she wants to hear. People often want their problems to be solved without communication, but this is simply unrealistic. While Shoba and Shukumar's conflict is a temporary matter, "the Das couple failed to maintain the harmony in their life that led Mrs. Das to utter despair" (Shanthi 1065). Mr. Kapasi watches his address flutter away, probably glad to not be continuing his communication with Mrs. Das. He already has an unhappy marriage of his own and this same image of the Das family will "forever" be "in his mind" (41). Perhaps the whole collection is named after this short story because "the characters in the stories are tormented by maladies which forces the need for communication" (Shanthi 1063). Yet, the Das couple decides not to relieve their maladies through communication as Miranda, Shoba, and Shukumar do.

Lahiri's collection of short stories in *Interpreter of Maladies* all have a similar theme regarding the devastating impact that bad communication has on marriages. In the short story "Sexy," Miranda discovers that her communication with Dev is shallow and based on lust. She becomes a mistress and does not realize the reality of her affair until Rohin explains to her what the word "sexy" means. In "A Temporary Matter," Shoba and Shukumar avoid each other after the death of their baby. When they begin to communicate once again, they discover truths about each other that have been kept hidden. These truths build up to confronting the issue of their grief, allowing them to connect again and mourn their loss together. In "Interpreter of Maladies," Mrs. Das confesses to Mr. Kapasi that

Bobby is not the son of Mr. Das. He asks her about her guilt, but she resolves to continue avoiding it, rather than communicating. In each of these short stories, Lahiri shows how ineffective communication can determine the success, or failure, of marriages. There are often communication barriers—misunderstanding, isolation, or guilt—that stand in the way of effective communication. The characters in *Interpreter of Maladies* are prime examples of the influence that communication, or the lack thereof, has in marriages.

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PROTO-HOMOSEXUALITY IN *THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH*

by Joseph Shoulders

Many readers of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* respond to Gilgamesh and Enkidu's relationship as an example of a romantic love between two men, which reaffirms the notion that homosexuality is not a new development. Critics of that interpretation, however, argue that we are applying our modern perceptions of sexuality too heavily on an ancient text written without those perceptions, and many try to deny or underplay the same-sex relations portrayed in the epic. These deniers ignore the many implications of Gilgamesh and Enkidu's sexual relationship and comparisons of it to marriage that are present in the text. Moreover, the critics fail to acknowledge nuanced representation. True, we cannot conclude that the Sumerian writers envisioned Gilgamesh and Enkidu in a homosexual relationship as we think of one today, and we may conclude that the relationship was not how the Sumerians envisioned homosexuality either, but that should not devalue the fact that ancient people created a deep bond between two men that is now recognized as love and referred to it in terms of sexual activity and marriage.

The first implication that Gilgamesh and Enkidu's relationship is sexual is placed at the beginning of the epic by establishing the role Enkidu is to fulfill. The events of the epic begin with Gilgamesh oppressing Uruk. His violence is often characterized by his incessant raping of women, but the Sumerian text primarily focuses on his

oppression of the men and contains erotic language of animal copulation and phallic symbols, suggesting that his insatiable lust is not limited to women (Cooper 80). In response to Gilgamesh's actions, the gods create an equal to Gilgamesh and say, "Let them contend together and leave Uruk in quiet" (Sandars 62). The text suggests, then, that Gilgamesh is meant to redirect his violent lust onto Enkidu, and since they are equals, the lust will be neutralized. This sets up their relationship as sexual.

Enkidu's role of neutralizing Gilgamesh also places him in comparison to Shamhat. At first, Enkidu, too, is wild and cannot be stopped. Shamhat is sent to tame Enkidu by having sex with him, and she is told, "Teach him, the savage man, your woman's art" (Sandars 64). Notably, the verb used to describe Enkidu's vigorous sex with Shamhat (*tebīma*) is the same verb used to describe Gilgamesh's violence on Uruk (Cooper 80), which further supports the notion that Enkidu can and will neutralize Gilgamesh. The purpose of taming Enkidu is to bring him to Gilgamesh, who also needs to be tamed because "like a bull he lords it over men" (Sandars 65). There is a resulting interpretation that Shamhat is teaching Enkidu *how to use* the "woman's art" so that he may use it on Gilgamesh. That purpose is hinted at when Shamhat tells Enkidu, "You who love life, I will show you Gilgamesh, a man of many moods; you shall look at him well in his radiant manhood" (Sandars 65-66). The language focuses on Gilgamesh's body and how Enkidu will know it well. Evidentially, as Shamhat had sex with Enkidu to tame him, Enkidu must have sex with Gilgamesh to tame him.

The text further eroticizes Gilgamesh and Enkidu's relationship in the visionary dreams of Enkidu's arrival. Gilgamesh first dreams that a meteor falls to Uruk, and to him "its attraction was like the love of a woman" (Sandars 66). The meteor is representative of Enkidu and indicates an attraction between them akin to heterosexuality. While this statement could merely express a strong, non-erotic connection, the second dream is expressly sexual. In it,

Gilgamesh comes across an axe—representing Enkidu—and, according to N.K. Sandars' translation, he "loved it like a woman and wore it at [his] side" (67). However, Jerrold Cooper argues that a more accurate translation would be that Gilgamesh loves the axe like a wife and embraces it, and he states, "The verb *ḫabābu* ['embraces'] when used for human activity always denotes sexual intercourse" (80). Through the symbols of the meteor and the axe, Enkidu is characterized as a sexual companion to Gilgamesh comparable to a heterosexual one.

Beyond sexual implications, the text also compares Gilgamesh and Enkidu's relationship to a marriage, which is framed by the context of their first meeting. Beforehand, Enkidu's appearance is described as "like a bridegroom" (Sandars 67). Shortly after that allusion to a wedding, the text reveals that Gilgamesh is about to enter a marriage that the people disapprove of (Sandars 68). Enkidu intercepts the consummation of the marriage by confronting and fighting Gilgamesh. The fight seems eroticized given the precedent of both men being violent in sexual activity and because of the language of "bulls locked together" (Sandars 69). The fight is further coded as sexual because the event is what satiates Gilgamesh's previously insatiable lust. The detail of Enkidu appearing like a bridegroom sets up the idea that Enkidu serves as an alternative spouse for Gilgamesh and that the "fight" is a consummation of the marriage, which would explain why their embracing afterward seals their relationship. After this, the epic also uses the language of marriage for Gilgamesh and Enkidu. The most explicit examples are when Gilgamesh is mourning Enkidu's death. Gilgamesh says, "I weep for Enkidu, my friend, / Bitterly moaning like a woman mourning" (Sandars 94). He compares himself to a widow and takes on that role as he grows out his hair and mourns for a week. Additionally, when he lays the veil over Enkidu, he does so "as one veils the bride" (Sandars 93). This language clearly identifies Enkidu as like a spouse to Gilgamesh.

To most modern readers, these erotic and marital implications are supported by the intensity of the bond between the characters that, to us, goes beyond a typical platonic relationship. Most affecting our perception is the common idea of soulmates—people who are created to be together, usually in a romantic relationship. Since Enkidu is explicitly created to be with Gilgamesh, we immediately consider them with this framework. This preconception is then reinforced by Gilgamesh's insistence that Enkidu be by his side. Once they meet, the two characters remain in close proximity to each other, as they hold hands (Sandars 74, 77) and sleep beside each other (Sandars 91) until Enkidu dies. Even then, Gilgamesh refuses to accept the separation, and he holds onto Enkidu's body for seven days until "the worm feasted upon him" (Sandars 96). He says, "I would not give up his body for burial, I thought my friend would come back because of my weeping" (Sandars 98). Gilgamesh's refusal to let Enkidu go and his belief that his grief could overpower death reveal a love so great that in more modern literature is only evoked in examples of romance. The loss of that love is portrayed as unsurmountable. When Gilgamesh is told that "the lot of man" is also to rejoice and embrace others, he replies, "How can I rest when Enkidu whom I love is dust?" (Sandars 102). The response expresses that Gilgamesh feels it impossible to find joy without the one he loved and impossible to love someone else. Gilgamesh and Enkidu being together had become a fact of life, and with Enkidu gone, life became unimaginable. Because of this intensity, their bond aligns with our views on soulmates and, thus, reads as romantic.

The critics of this reading argue that we are imposing modern ideas of romance onto an ancient text. The deep affection between two men was likely more standard in a highly patriarchal society and would thus be platonic. Moreover, they argue that since most surviving Sumerian literature is explicit about sexual activity, the sexual relationship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu, if present, would not have been only present in subtext. As exampled by Martti

Nissinen, a prevailing viewpoint is that if a text has no explicitly stated sexual activity that is unrelated to social power dynamics, there is no homosexuality represented (76). I find this line of thinking to hold a double standard against homosexuality that is not applied when considering heterosexuality. There are several examples of Sumerian literature that discuss heterosexual relationships in terms of love rather than just sexual activity (Lapinkivi 20-21), but no one argues that they are not romantic relationships. Apparently, then, in Sumerian literature, there is a concept of romance—a bond beyond friendship that could include but is not *defined by* sexual activity. The idea that a romance is not defined by sex is presented by the character of Gilgamesh himself. After seeing how attractive Gilgamesh has become, Ishtar tells him to marry her and asks, "Grant me seed of your body" (Sandars 85). She only views the relationship in terms of sexual attraction and superficial matters of gifts. In Gilgamesh's scathing rejection, he stresses, "Which of your lovers did you ever love for ever?" (Sandars 86). His response conveys that Gilgamesh desires a marriage based on a dedicated love rather than sexual or material rewards—perhaps a love as fated and eternal as his and Enkidu's.

I will assent that there is a provocative question of why the suggestions of Gilgamesh and Enkidu's sexual actions are subtextual rather than explicit, and I do agree to the answer lying in the different way ancient Mesopotamians viewed homosexuality. Contrary to what many people assume, homosexuality was not uncommon in ancient Mesopotamia, and the act of anal intercourse was not always taboo, as indicated by surviving writings (Bullough 191). While they did accept the acts, Sumerians viewed them under heterosexual roles—they envisioned one man being dominating and one man as effeminate. An overt example of the feminization is how the male devotees of Ishtar, who would often serve as prostitutes for men, were referred to as "men who were changed into women" (Teppo 75-76). Based on the surviving records, there were no examples of homosexual relations in which both men retained the social status of

a man; the act of anal sex automatically gendered the participants—and there were seemingly no other options since no texts reference oral sex, and masturbation was believed to make a man unclean (Bullough 191-192). Given those perceptions, there was no space for homosexuality if both men wanted to continue living in male social roles, which limited the dynamics of relationships. If sexual activity between Gilgamesh and Enkidu had been explicit, one of them would have taken on the "female" role, which would push them into the societal roles of a woman, and thus the extent of their companionship would be limited.

By circumventing sexual activity, however, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* is able to depict a same-sex relationship where neither man is completely feminized. This allows an exploration of what a relationship between two men living in male roles could look like. Gilgamesh and Enkidu have equal influence when making decisions together, they can protect and aid one another in battle, and they can understand each other on all levels. Romantic partners in ancient Mesopotamia would not have been able to experience this togetherness given the very limiting female gender roles. Thus, it is true that the epic does not present homosexuality as the Sumerians understood it, nor can we claim it under our own understandings, but that does not erase the erotic and romantic nature of Gilgamesh and Enkidu's relationship. The presence of those implications indicates that a sexual and romantic love between two men was not unimaginable to ancient people and perhaps argues for its existence through one of the first works of literature in human history.

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COMICS, QUEERNESS, AND THE SAPPHIC WONDER WOMAN

by Sarah Stevens

Historically, comic books, comix, zines, and newspaper strips have not been considered paragons of Western literary culture—at least, not by the Western world's heterosexual majority. In queer communities, however, these media have been a source of lightheartedness, communication, relatability, and connectedness across decades and miles of physical distance. These functions are especially important for modern youth, as comics "articulate a space of queer play" wherein they might explore or discover a connection to the queer community in themselves (Peters 2). Among adults, comics may take a similar cultural precedence as a means of emotional expression or as vehicles of social commentary. This timelessness and the cross-generational nature of comics can be seen with special clarity in portrayals of same-sex female desire: the exemplary *Wonder Woman* series encourages modern queer authors to tie themselves to the distant past with invocations of Sappho and the ancient myths of the Amazons, who are often regarded as icons of lesbianism and transgender expression. Although her character debuted in a blaze of 1941 patriotic glory, a number of factors—including the queer nature of comics themselves, the complex romantic relationships of her creator, and the queer subtext in her own origin—bind Wonder Woman to both LGBTQ+ culture and the historical and literary figure of Sappho.

To begin with, the comic book genre itself is fundamentally and overtly queer. Even the basic format of a comic book is a deviation from the literary norm: they are not often read linearly, and comics media as a whole forces readers to grapple with a wider array of visual and narrative variables than most forms of canonical literature. A partial result of this nonconformity is that comics resist such canonization—in his essay "A Queer Sequence: Comics as a Disruptive Medium," Ramzi Fawaz notes that the field of literary studies has "tended to shore up its disciplinary boundaries by willfully misrecognizing the complexity of comics" (589). Some of this misrecognition is done with good intentions in an attempt to assimilate comics into the field of literary studies by viewing them as an alternate format for the novel. However, these good intentions have resulted in the unnecessary formation of a hierarchy, thereby demeaning the vast body of comics not deemed "literary enough" for study. The strict standards of content that must be met in order for a comic to be canonized creates what Fawaz calls a "homogenous talent pool" in which the artists are "white and straight and their work autobiographical, the creation of an individual auteur rather than a team" (589). This closing off of "comics canon" therefore seems antithetical to the queer nature of comics, especially considering the purpose of comics as a media of open expression in which anything that can be drawn can be believed.

This multiplicity of both content and interpretation is another part of what makes comics queer. As mentioned above, comics require the audience to read along several axes of both visual and narrative formatting, taking into consideration "words, images, aesthetic styles, characters, panels, colors, textures, formats, and page layouts—in lots of different sequences, patterns, and juxtapositions: in a single panel, on a full page, between and across pages in a narrative arc" (Fawaz 589). This variability of content and formatting creates a space where time can be blurred or subverted; identities changed, shifted, or discarded; and entire worlds diverted from the standards that we hold in our own society. Additionally,

the serial nature of comics invites ambiguous or open endings, depending on where or whether the reader wants to continue engaging with the content. Even the panels themselves are not required to be related or sequential, meaning that any series of panels may "accommodate numerous expressions of identity and desire" while the white space between them invokes the idea of reinvention, creative space, or generative absence that is crucial when considering non-normative genders and forms of sexual expression (Fawaz 593).

Of course, format is not the only aspect of comics to suggest a connection with queer culture. Many themes popular in mainstream comics—especially superhero comics like *Wonder Woman*—have been interpreted through a queer lens for decades. Perhaps the most overt of these themes is that of the alter ego, the civilian identity, or the secret second life. The struggle to balance the outward, social image with a hushed and private inner world is inextricably entwined, at least for queer audiences, with the state of being closeted. Similarly, the role of Diana Prince/Wonder Woman comes across as a "Plain Jane/Mad Molly split" (Peters 3), wherein Wonder Woman represents both a conventional woman in her everyday life and a figure of feminine power poised to fight against crime and oppression.

Other notable queer themes in comics exist in direct relation to their audiences. In independent comics, this may manifest as the way in which comics are sometimes perceived by those unfamiliar with the medium: namely, as "marginal, juvenile, and outcast from "proper" art"—an echo of the common queer experience (Scott and Fawaz 197). Scott and Fawaz also note that comics have a history as the reading choice of "queer" individuals, including "sexual deviants, juvenile delinquents, dropouts, the working class, and minorities of all stripes" (197). These groups and the comics themselves have considerable influence on each other. As media representation and portrayals create a pull for some individuals and push others away,

audience feedback in the form of buying (or not buying) comics is in turn reflected in their content.

Part of this pull or attraction for queer audiences of the *Wonder Woman* comics doubtlessly stems from the creator himself, who both engaged in unconventional relationships and consciously included queer and feminist themes in his writing. Dr. William Moulton Marston, who was described as having a notably "flamboyant personality" (Bunn), was well-known as the inventor of the lie-detector and as a prominent feminist psychologist before ever creating the character of Wonder Woman. His belief in the "growth of the power of women" (cited in Bunn) coincided with his certainty in the emergence of a matriarchal society in America, guided not by the "destructive and masculine notion of unconstrained liberty" but by "freedom based on feminine 'love allure' and submission to 'loving authority'" (Bunn). Perhaps unsurprisingly, his interest in submission and liberty in a sociological sense translated to a fascination with desire and a "curiously avant-garde romantic life" (Peters 3) that likely formed the basis for the recurring motif of bondage in the *Wonder Woman* comics.

While bondage and kink have their own places in the queer community and in Pride spaces, Marston's most direct link to the queer community was kept secret during his tenure as a major contributor for the *Wonder Woman* comics. As far as his superiors knew, Marston was a married man; this was true, but his marriage constituted a relationship between himself, his first partner Elizabeth Holloway, and their partner Olive Byrne (Lepore). The polyamorous group told census officials that Olive, who lived with Marston and Holloway, was Marston's widowed sister-in-law in order to avoid controversy and possible legal action. [Olive herself was notably androgynous—in her writings, she often adopted the masculine pen name of Olive Richard (Lepore).] Marston, perhaps recognizing the queer nature of his relationship with his partners, wrote in a 1939 essay that people would benefit from ridding themselves from

prejudices that held them back; of the six prejudices he described, the most notably queer was a "Prejudice against unconventional people and non-conformists" (Lepore).

Marston's conception of a queer Wonder Woman was based on Greek mythical models just as much as it was founded on mid-twentieth-century feminism. Specifically, Marston drew his inspiration from the Amazons, a society of female warriors who were simultaneously considered taboo within a patriarchal culture and symbolic of legitimate "Athenian rule and Greek superiority" (Stanley 145). In her canon heritage as created by Marston, Wonder Woman represents a fascinating mix of masculine and feminine divinity, having the "wisdom of Athena and the beauty of Aphrodite" along with the speed of Mercury and the strength of Hercules (Stanley 144). Wonder Woman combines facets of male power with female strength, the female gaze with the male gaze, and stereotypes of both genders in order to form an "ideal woman-hero" (Peters 4). This intentional male/female dichotomy is reflective of her popularity among cis women, lesbians, and gay men, the latter of whom often associate Wonder Woman's character with masquerade and drag (Peters 4).

Like the Amazons, Wonder Woman hails from an all-female society—and, as such, she is not born of the traditional heterosexual union between a man and a woman. Although the 2017 movie adaptation of Wonder Woman imagined Diana to be the offspring of Queen Hippolyta and the god Zeus, Wonder Woman was originally created by Hippolyta from clay and given life by the goddess Aphrodite—a union of two women, not in a physical sense, but in an emotional and nonetheless generative manner (Stanley 144). Diana then proceeds to leave the safety of Paradise Island (later renamed Themyscira) and enter the world of man in order to restore peace in the time of World War II.

The conflation of love and war, especially evident in Marston's earliest comics, is central to both Wonder Woman's origins and to

Sappho's poetry. Contextually, Wonder Woman was introduced just before America's entry into World War II, and her original design— a red bustier, a starry blue skirt or underwear, and tall red boots— reflected the patriotic zeal that swept the country at that time. Now, even after her post-WWII costume changes, she continues to carry tools that represent Marston's interest in discerning truth (her magic lasso) and in bondage (her bracelet cuffs); these weapons also connect Wonder Woman to both conflict resolution and the goddess Aphrodite, as explained below. While Maxwell Charles Gaines, founder of All-American Comics, believed that Wonder Woman represented "good, clean, superpatriotic fun" (Lepore), Marston's ideas for the character were more complex:

> What the woman lacks is the dominance or self assertive power to put over and enforce her love desires. I have given Wonder Woman this dominant force but have kept her loving, tender, maternal and feminine in every other way. Her bracelets, with which she repels bullets and other murderous weapons, represent the Amazon Princess' submission to Aphrodite, Goddess of Love and Beauty. Her magic lasso, which compels anyone bound by it to obey Wonder Woman and which was given to her by Aphrodite herself, represents woman's love charm and allure by which she compels men and women to do her bidding. (Daniels 23)

Wonder Woman, in Marston's view, is able to overcome her Nazi foes not because of her physical strength or supernatural powers, but because of her capacity to love and her connections to the goddess Aphrodite. In order to participate in and end the war, Diana uses love as a weapon against the world of man in a manner reminiscent of Sappho's depiction of love as a conflict or struggle. This convergence of love and conflict is perhaps most overt in Sappho's seventeenth fragment, in which she implores Aphrodite to make the object of her affections return her love:

Undying Aphrodite on your caparisoned throne,

Daughter of Zeus and weaver of ruses—

Now I address you:

…

Let me go loose from this merciless craving.

Do what I long to have done: be my own

    Helper in Battle. (Sappho 59)

The yearning that Sappho feels for her unnamed female lover in this poem takes on a desperate tone as she describes her failed pursuit and the goddess' willingness to come to her defense, metaphorically taking up arms on Sappho's behalf. In her introduction to Sappho's poems, Page duBois describes this particular fragment as a reconfiguration of Homer's focus on the elements of flight and pursuit, two essential facets of the Trojan War. Sappho, in her poems, thus "takes a crucial motif of the battlefield, this situation which epitomizes enmity, the establishing of hierarchy that is martial domination, and uses it to speak of love" (duBois 16). Similarly, Wonder Woman uses tools given to her by the same goddess to either repel violence on the battlefield or invoke woman's "love charm," which Marston says leads both men and women to do her bidding. Although Aphrodite does not make direct appearances in the *Wonder Woman* comics, her power and presence is manifested in Diana, who seems to take on the role of a love goddess herself. For both Sappho and Wonder Woman, Aphrodite becomes a "Helper in Battle"—whether that battle is the pain of unrequited love or a physical conflict.

Another notable parallel between Sappho's poetry and Wonder Woman's origins lies in the community of women that they surround themselves with. Although Sappho's history remains largely unknown or unconfirmed due to a lack of historical records, some scholars theorize that Sappho's role among the women of Lesbos was that of a mentor or schoolmistress, preparing girls for marriage

before sending them off with their husbands (duBois 19). Others contend that the relationships described in her poetry may be interpreted romantically or sexually. Regardless of the true nature of these interactions, Sappho's descriptions of female companionship on Lesbos show that she and the women she spent her time with shared a deep affection for one another. In fragment 27, for example, the speaker feels a deep envy for her friend's male partner (Sappho 63); in fragment 53, she addresses the loss of one of her recurring muses, Anactoria (Sappho 81); and the majority of Book IV describes how the women of Lesbos come together for a bride at her wedding (Sappho 98-110). The presence of a close community of women with possible romantic bonds is echoed in early issues of *Wonder Woman*, in which Wonder Woman has close friendships with her sidekicks Etta Candy and the sorority girls of Holliday College (Stanley 147). Although there are no celebrations of marriage and no overt romantic overtures between these *Wonder Woman* characters, they are able to communicate with Diana telepathically, and they form a network of support for the hero as she endeavors to rescue both Western democracy and her "perfunctory boyfriend" Steve Trevor (Stanley 148).

Unfortunately, both Sappho and Wonder Woman have faced a high degree of censorship for their depictions of female desire. Although the ancient Greeks seemed to have no substantial objections to Sappho's work, subsequent generations of Christian readers were scandalized by her open admiration of other women— so much so that some zealots attempted to eradicate her works from libraries entirely (Roche 25). Others, acknowledging her poetic merit but not her sexuality, invented "reassuring narratives of teaching, motherhood, heterosexuality" (duBois 11). These attempts to bury Sappho's attraction to women were ultimately unsuccessful, but they reflect society's pervasive tendency to silence same-sex desire that persists even in the modern day.

Wonder Woman has faced similar censorship at several stages of her existence, but the first and most comprehensive condemnation of her character was published by Dr. Fredric Wertham in 1954. In his book *Seduction of the Innocent*, Wertham envisions the entire genre of comics as a depraved form of media, commenting not only on Wonder Woman's sapphic undertones but on the nature of all women in comics, casting them either as "ferocious, frightening, and deviant" or dolls to be manipulated, pushed around, and abused (Tilley 355). Wertham was primarily concerned with unusual or nontraditional expressions of gender, referring mostly to women's departure from the domestic sphere, but he also took note of what he described as "lesbian overtones" in Marston's work. He charged the aforementioned Holliday sorority girls as "gay party girls" (Daniels 103) and noted that Wonder Woman's female following and tendency to "torture men" made her into an undesirable and misleading ideal for young women (Tilley 360). Given that Marston didn't make any initial attempts to hide Wonder Woman's sapphic origins—one of her most famous exclamations was "Suffering Sappho!"—at least some of Wertham's later accusations against her character struck readers as true (Peters 3). The worries that rose up around comic books in later decades led to many subsequent evolutions of Wonder Woman's character, from the forced male love interests of the 50's, to the campy revision of the 60's, the feminist revival of the 70's, and her eventual demotion to an 80's sex symbol. Fortunately, modern audiences have reclaimed her Sapphic origins, and even her writers publicly acknowledge her queerness in interviews and in officially released comics (Tilley 354).

Eighty years after her creation, Wonder Woman continues to be a character of complex origin and a symbol of liberty for various underrepresented groups—especially the LGBTQ+ community. The queer nature of comics themselves, combined with the niche romantic interests of her creator and his inclusion of sapphic themes in her story, combine to form a character strong enough to resist

decades of heterosexual backlash and revision. Wonder Woman's strongest historical connections, however, predate Marston's feminism, the genre of comics, and even the conception of queer as an identity. Wonder Woman's sapphic roots are literal, and her parallels with the poet tie her character even more strongly to the existence of lesbian desire. Though one woman is fictional and the other historical, they parallel each other in their power: with Aphrodite as the source of their strength, both Sappho and Wonder Woman utilize the power of love in "battle," whether the conflict exists on the field or in the heart. In addition, each woman draws strength and companionship from a supportive community of women, and each has faced (and overcome) religious and social censorship for her involvement in portraying love between women. Bound together across time, Wonder Woman and Sappho together represent a continuation and evolution of queer women, providing a cross-generational link that fills a gap in a quiet, often-silenced timeline. For women who love other women, who don't fit in their own skin, or who reject the social conventions that bind society in place, these mythical origins of Wonder Woman are emblematic of the enduring nature of sapphic desire.

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THE MAIN PLOT OF SUBPLOTS:
USING SUBPLOTS TO INJECT LIFE INTO YOUR SCRIPT

by Adam Woodard

I guess I should start this little essay with a definition. It does help if everyone knows exactly what we're talking about, after all. This essay is about subplots. What is a subplot? A subplot is a secondary story that weaves its way throughout a larger narrative that either supports or advances the main plot. Subplots are also the place in a story where themes are often explored. Do you like that definition? Good! It's an Adam original. Why am I writing about subplots? The idea for this essay started with a question: "How many subplots does the average screenplay have?" Seems simple enough, right? Well, not exactly. It turns out that many books on screenwriting only mention subplots in passing. Some do not mention them at all. It seems many of the people who write about the craft of screenwriting get so caught up in fleshing out the main storyline that they forget to discuss any potential supporting storylines. Subplots add depth to a story by making the world the story is building feel more complex. Subplots introduce us to the thoughts and ideas of characters other than the protagonist. By including these details, a writer's script becomes more complex. If you were to think of the main plot as a story's heart, then subplots would be the story's veins. Even though the heart pumps blood, it still needs a delivery system for transport. The veins take the blood pumped by the heart throughout the body, giving life to a person's extremities, torso, and head. That's what

subplots do for the main plot. In this essay, I will explain why the ideal number of subplots is three, why subplots should be introduced at the beginning of Act II, and what each subplot should accomplish.

So, what exactly do subplots do? In a sense, subplots open up the world the writer is building. In their book *Writing Movies*, the Gotham Writers' Workshop quotes *Blade Runner* screenwriter Hampton Fancher saying, "When producers say, 'Make my movie bigger, better, bolder, the themes more resonant, the characters more complex,' here's what they're really trying to say," Hampton told us. 'Work on the subplots'" (248). How does a subplot make a movie bigger, better, and bolder with a more resonant theme and more complex characters? By opening up the movie's world. While there are some movies, mainly horror, where one plot works, most movies need more than one plot, or the story comes off as flat. Without subplots, a movie only contains the perspective of the protagonist. Only having one point of view causes the story to have a linear focus as opposed to a nuanced focus. By incorporating subplots, a writer makes the world they are creating come to life.

There are new viewpoints and other characters gain depth by having desires of their own. Script consultant Danny Manus writes in his article "Ask the Expert," "Your subplots and B stories are what add new dimensions to your script and flesh out your concept and story." The world we live in is complex. Different people have different motivations for their actions. Two people can watch the same event unfold and give two completely different recountings of what they saw. This gives the event depth. Similarly, adding different viewpoints gives a writer's screenplay depth. As Laura Schellhardt says in *Screenwriting for Dummies*, "Subplots are plots involving secondary characters included to provide depth and dimension. Movies without them tend to be dull and self-indulgent" (435). What Schellhardt means by *self-indulgent* is movies without a subplot tend to present as a lecture instead of a discussion because there are no

alternate viewpoints. The audience is only presented with the protagonist's view, and we don't know how reliable that point of view is because we have nothing to compare it with.

David Howard builds upon this idea in his book *How to Build a Great Screenplay*: "Just as a good protagonist deserves a worthy antagonist—and an antagonist's subplot may well fulfill the function of creating worthiness—a protagonist also needs and deserves others around him who rise to the level of 'life'" (409). Howard continues, "A character with a subplot is more likely to come alive than one whose life we don't enter and in which we never become involved" (410). Think of the recent Netflix hit *Cobra Kai*. It is a sequel to the 1984 movie *The Karate Kid*. In *The Karate Kid*, Daniel LaRusso (Ralph Macchio) moves to a new town where he immediately finds himself in contention with a group of bullies led by Johnny Lawrence (William Zabka). *The Karate Kid* presents Daniel as the new kid who is ganged up on by a bunch of bullies. *Cobra Kai*, however, shows the events of Johnny, the antagonist of *The Karate Kid*. In *Cobra Kai*, Johnny views Daniel as the bully. The viewer is shown flashbacks of footage from *The Karate Kid* from Johnny's perspective. Daniel no longer is the poor, browbeaten new kid. Instead, he is the hotshot who just strolled into town, stole Johnny's girl, pulled pranks on Johnny and his friends, then beat him up!

By building a subplot around the antagonist, the screenwriter gives the audience an opposing view. The difference in how Daniel LaRusso is presented in *The Karate Kid* compared to how he is presented in *Cobra Kai* is substantial. That's because the viewer now has the perspective of the antagonist as well as the protagonist. Showing characters from multiple perspectives reveals more of the world in which Daniel and Johnny's story is set. Every character in a writer's screenplay should think they are the protagonist. Johnny certainly thinks he's the protagonist in *Cobra Kai*. Although everyone thinks they are the "good guy," every character should have shades of grey. No one in the real world is without character flaws, so no

characters should be either. When a subplot is introduced for the antagonist, the hero is now presented in shades of grey—just as Daniel is suddenly shown in a less sympathetic way in *Cobra Kai.* Additionally, the antagonist is now presented in a more positive light. He is no longer a flat, black shadow—just as Johnny Lawrence becomes more complex when events are shown from his perspective. Now that both characters have depth, they can be viewed as two people in a struggle who disagree over the correct course of action. This raises the stakes for both sides and makes the world they inhabit more realistic.

By adding subplots for other secondary characters, the screenwriter can make the world even more vivid. Now the audience has multiple lenses through which to view the story instead of one or two. Keep in mind, however, that secondary character subplots should connect to the main plot of the movie somehow. The Gotham Writers' Workshop warns, "Though subplots are somewhat separate from the main plot, they shouldn't career off to a parallel universe" (248). What they mean here is a subplot should connect to the main plot in some way. If a screenwriter is writing a new episode of *Cobra Kai*, it's not a good idea to include a subplot where a secondary character like Daniel's daughter Samantha dashes off to London to track Jack the Ripper. The Gotham Writers' Worship continues, "The best subplots connect to the main plot in all three regards—character, plot, and theme. The more a subplot meshes with the story, the more the movie feels like Aristotle's 'organic whole'" (249). The goal of every screenwriter should be to make their script feel like an organic, complete world. By connecting every subplot to the established characters (especially the protagonist), the main plot, and the theme, screenwriters can create a world that feels real.

One of a subplot's most important jobs is to establish the theme of a movie. As the Gotham Writers' Workshop points out, "Subplots can help support the theme because they don't have the burden of

carrying the main action" (327). The main plot is usually so focused on advancing a screenplay's story that little is contributed to the script concerning the theme. If a screenwriter uses the main plot to focus on the theme instead of driving the story, they run the risk of having their script present as a lecture instead of a story. When Rocky Balboa is training to fight Apollo Creed in the movie *Rocky*, there is no time for him to talk about how poor he is, thus establishing himself as an underdog. *Rocky*'s theme of a man working hard to overcome poverty is explored in the subplot featuring his romance with Adrian. Because of *Rocky*'s subplot, the world he inhabits becomes richer. The subplot also makes Rocky more relatable by establishing the theme of perseverance. Schellhardt comments on how subplots relate to themes, saying, "In fact, themes don't make great foundation for a story; they tend to produce theoretical discussion in place of goal-orientated interaction. Yet every story needs one. For this reason, most screenwriters rely on subplots to carry their theme" (435).

By using the subplot to create a theme, however, a screenwriter must be careful not to give more weight to the subplot than the main plot. Because the theme is what the writer wants to say, writers must walk carefully between exploring their theme and telling their story. Remember, a theme is NOT the story, and the story should always drive the direction of the script. Schellhardt warns, "As subplots tend to carry the movie's theme, they often threaten to overshadow the main plot" (368). Movies where the subplot overshadows the central arc are often clunky and difficult to watch. The Unknown Screenwriter summarizes the best way to use subplots, saying, "Subplots can ENHANCE the main plot story: Subplots do this by introducing new characters, creating theme, and revealing subtext and backstory of your main plot." The Unknown Screenwriter has done the heavy lifting for the reader by capitalizing the key word. A subplot should enhance the main plot, not overshadow it. It's important to note sometimes a character would be less interesting if they had a subplot. Think of the Terminator or Jaws. Would anyone

want a version of their films from their points of view? Not every character needs a subplot.

If every character doesn't need a subplot, then how many subplots should a movie have? Ahhh, now we've come to the meat and potatoes of this essay. The reason for the writing. As I said, there is a surprising void of information on exactly how many subplots should be in a screenplay. I've done enough digging, however, that I feel confident I've found a solid answer. The Gotham Writers' Workshop warns, "It's easy to create too many subplots. This can lead to a confusing and overly busy screenplay" (267). It's true that too many subplots can lead to a confusing screenplay, but it can also lead to something else—an ensemble script with no clear protagonist or central storyline. Howard suggests caution when creating subplots:

> You want the subplots to be in support of the protagonist and his story, not detracting or distracting from them. If you push the limits and create five subplots or six, meaning a total of six or seven stories in the screenplay, you may well have pushed into the realm of an ensemble story and out of the realm of a story with a clearly defined central character. (419)

Remember, screenwriters want their central story to drive their script, not their subplots. If there are too many subplots, the script becomes muddy and it's hard to tell what the main focus of the story is supposed to be. That's fine if the screenwriter is intentionally creating an ensemble story, but doing so by mistake could make their script unreadable and the resulting movie unwatchable. So how many subplots are needed to make a film interesting but not muddied? The Gotham Writers' Workshop says, "most films have two or three subplots, and that's not a bad number to aim for" (249). Most scripts require at least two subplots. Three seems to be the ideal number of subplots needed to flesh out the world a screenwriter is creating while still allowing the main focus to be on

the protagonist, however. As always, there is an exception—horror movies.

Most horror movies have one plot—the main plot. The Gotham Writers' Workshop does suggest an instance when one subplot is sufficient. The Gotham Writers' Workshop points out, "Suspense and horror films may not require subplots because the tension of the main plot must be kept taut" (270). Along with creating a more realistic world and creating complex characters, subplots are used to break the tension in a movie by allowing the viewer to switch focus for a moment to digest what they've just seen. Breaking the tension is something one wants to avoid in suspense or horror films. Once tension is broken by moving to a subplot, it must be rebuilt when the script returns to the main plot. Rebuilding tension is an arduous task. In horror and suspense movies, the writer wants the viewer to focus entirely on the ghastly events occurring in the main plot. There is a scene in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* where Leatherface (Gunnar Hansen), wielding a chainsaw, chases Sally (Marily Burns) after she escapes from his family's house of horrors. Imagine if screenwriters Tobe Hooper and Kim Henkel had decided to cut to a flashback of Sally on vacation as a little girl. Sure, the scene would help develop Sally's character, but the viewer would be too concerned with what they'd just witnessed to pay attention to Sally's backstory. Furthermore, by the time the story returned to the main plot, the tension Hooper and Henkel had worked so hard to build would be gone.

The Gotham Writers' Workshop does suggest another instance where it's acceptable to omit subplots: "If your main plot is especially complex, one subplot is probably enough" (267). Unfortunately, they do not give an example of when a plot is especially complex, and I can't think of one. So, unless you're writing suspense or horror, it's best to have at least one subplot.

Howard dives more deeply into subplots than any other author I've found. According to him, "Two or three subplots are quite

common; even having four subplots isn't too distracting from the main story. But if you try to stretch much past that in a normal-scale film the subplots will start to steal time from each other" (247). By "normal-scale film" Howard means a script between 110 and 120 pages. "Truly important characters—such as the second character in an essentially two-character story—generally need subplots of their own" (Howard 245). The two most important characters of any screenplay are the antagonist and protagonist. So, at minimum, a screenwriter needs to have two plots—the central plot and the antagonist's plot. It's important to note that some antagonists do not need plots of their own, such as the Terminator or Jaws. Think of Leatherface from my previous example. Does it matter what his motivations are? He has a chainsaw, and he is trying to kill Sally. To break away from his action and explore his backstory would break any tension that has been built. In general, however, a script should reveal the "bad guy's" motivation.

Ideally, a script contains at least four plots, including three subplots. The first plot, of course, is the main plot—this is the driving force of a screenplay. The first subplot should establish theme and focus either on the protagonist's life outside of the main plot or feature a secondary character close to the protagonist such as a love interest or close friend. The second subplot should follow the movie's antagonist, revealing their motivation. The third subplot should reveal the backstory of the script's world or give some sort of exposition to set up the movie. In other words, the third subplot should introduce the viewer to the world the screenwriter has created. The third subplot can also be used to tie certain elements of the story together or to plug any plot holes a screenwriter finds in their script. Of course, if the screenwriter needs to introduce a world and plug plot holes, they always have the option of adding a fourth subplot. Although some successful movies have as many as five subplots, such as *Pulp Fiction*, it's best not to tempt fate. Three or

four is the ideal number of plots needed to tell a story in 110–120 pages.

It's imperative for a screenwriter to structure their subplots just as they would their main plot. What I mean by that is that a subplot must have a beginning, middle, and end. Characters in subplots must also be fully developed. A character who is the focus of a subplot does not realize their plot isn't the main focus of the script. For that character, they are in the central story. They are the protagonist of their own story, and their goal is the focus of their narrative. For them, the protagonist's quest is the subplot. Howard points out, "a subplot does have three parts; it has a beginning, middle, and end, just like the overall story and sequences. Anytime a tension is created, there will be three parts—creating the tension, elaborating on it, and ending it. So, a subplot, as a tension-based organism, has three parts" (419). Subplots are not throwaway segments meant to serve as a momentary detour away from the central plot. Every scene should build towards the resolution of the story, subplots included. The characters in subplots must evolve and change just as the protagonist in the central plot. Remember, subplot characters also go through a dramatic arc.

At the end of a story, a character has experienced change, and what is a subplot but a mini-story contained in a larger story? Schellhardt points out that because subplots are entwined with the central plot, "Rising action affects both your main plot and subplot simultaneously" (179). Nothing happens in a void. If something happens in the central plot, it should be felt in the subplot. Similarly, if something happens in the subplot, it should affect the main plot. It's best that all subplots are resolved prior to the resolution of the script's main plot. Howard explains, "By resolving the subplots now (before the main resolution), the deck is cleared for a total focus of the protagonist and his final dilemma, his final test" (489). Howard goes on to explain that there are rare exceptions to this rule. "In *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, the resolution comes not with

McMurphy's death, but with the resolution of Chief's subplot—his flight from the cuckoo's nest—that follows McMurphy's resolution. Here we have the subplot completing the mission of the protagonist when his resolution is failure" (425). Because R.P. McMurphy wasn't able to complete his quest, the subplot character Chief took McMurphy's quest on as his own and completed it for him. This is brilliantly set up earlier in the script when McMurphy tries unsuccessfully to rip a sink from the wall and throw it through a window, thus escaping the mental hospital where the characters reside. Once McMurphy is lobotomized, Chief realizes McMurphy's quest is over. Chief then smothers McMurphy, rips the sink from the wall, and throws it through the window as McMurphy was unable to earlier in the story. This is an exception rather than the rule, however. For the average screenwriter, subplots should be concluded first.

Just as a screenwriter should wrap their subplots before focusing on the conclusion of the main plot, the main plot should be developed before introducing subplots. Most subplots do not appear until Act II in a standard script. As Manus explains in his article "Ask the Expert," "The first 8–10 pages of the second act is where your main character will face their first major test or challenge and take the first step on their arc. But these pages are also where you should begin introducing and developing your subplots and B stories, somewhere around pages 30–40-ish." Here, Manus makes a distinction between subplots and B stories. For Manus, a subplot does not directly involve the protagonist, while a B story does. No one else makes this distinction, and I think it's splitting hairs. A subplot is a subplot. The reason that most people give for introducing subplots in Act II is something called the second-act sag. This is a point in the script where the story begins to drag. The audience has been hyper-focused on the main plot for one-third of the runtime by this point, and they need a break. Introducing subplots allows a screenwriter to ease tension. According to Howard, "After the midpoint, there is a tendency for the story to

suffer what is known as the second-act sag…The best way to overcome second-act sag is to let the major subplot take over for a while" (453). A helpful hint for screenwriters is if they experience a lull in writing or writer's block, that may be a good place to explore a subplot for a while. If the writer is bored, the viewer/reader will also be bored. Schellhardt addresses writer's block, saying, "Your creative block may be fueled by that subplot, tugging at your sleeve for attention" (368). Schellhardt also warns of focusing too closely on subplots. "If your story has subplots, scatter the information, albeit briefly, for those characters and situations throughout [your script]" (346-347). Ideally, a script will introduce subplots at the beginning of the second act, then conclude them before the main plot's resolution.

Although most writers tend to focus on a script's main plot, subplots are indispensable to storytelling and world building. Without subplots, the worlds contained in movie scripts wouldn't feel real. They would lack dimension. Their characters would lack depth. By allowing the viewer to glimpse the ideas of other characters, subplots open the universe around the protagonist. Including other viewpoints allows subplots to make the characters who inhabit the protagonist's universe more complex. Subplots are the tools with which a writer can develop heroes and lore that allow people to connect with their stories. The Gotham Writers' Workshop describes subplots:

> Subplots are the side dishes, the seasonings and the spice that perfectly compliment the main dish. Imagine having a burger without fries. Or eating sushi without wasabi, soy sauce, and ginger. And that's how it goes with subplots; they add [the] dash of dimension and diversity that give a film its ineffable kick. (247-248)

They're right. Without subplots, scripts are bland. Subplots inject the flavor into a script that makes a person want just one more bite. They are the difference between a meal and a snack. Watching a movie

without a subplot is like eating Cheetos alone on our couch. Watching a movie with subplots is like having a home-cooked Sunday dinner with your family. To put it simply, subplots are what make a story worth telling.

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PARATEXT FOR *THE FRIEND*: HOW AUDIENCE PERSPECTIVE SHAPES LITERARY VALUE

by Bailey Alexander

Before a reader even begins to read an author's words, they often will have already developed a certain impression of the text. This impression comes from paratext—forwards, reviews, cover art, etc.—and it establishes a reader's opinion of a text through the cultural lens and ideas that exist outside of the work. In this essay, I provide three layers of paratext to surround Sigrid Nunez's novel *The Friend* written in three different styles: a customer review, a traditional journalistic book review, and an abbreviated scholarly analysis. Two primary elements of the novel that contribute to my understanding of *The Friend* are the narrator's relationship with Apollo and her journey through grief and healing. Unlike a scholarly essay, in which I only could describe how paratext impacts a text like *The Friend*, my alternative essay style allows me to demonstrate the different ways paratext shapes a reader's interpretation of the novel. In the following reviews, I focus on these two elements and shape them to fit each review style's different purpose. I crafted my thought processes and language to fit each unique style, and I incorporated writing elements that contribute to the complicated distinctions between writer and narrator. For example, I use "he" to refer to the dog at least once in each review to highlight my own act of anthropomorphism as a reader and critic. Through writing these different reviews, I demonstrate the subjective value of literary texts

and how varying audiences can determine this value within a literary environment.

Customer Review

Don't let the cover fool you.

★★★★★

When I first picked up this book, the front cover image of a spotted Great Dane and the back cover blurb about a grieving writer's relationship with her dead friend's dog excited me. I now know why they tell you not to judge books by their covers. While the dog plays a major part in this book, he is not the central figure. *The Friend* is not a bad book by any means, but I wouldn't advise you to read it if you're looking for a heartfelt dog story. For writers and thoughtful readers, this book offers a deeply personal perspective on grief and a witty reflection on the woes of writing. However, the author's intimate depiction of the aftermath of suicide and of human grief has the power to shake readers in ways they may not want to be shaken. If you're not a professional reader or writer, it's easy to get lost in the frequent allusions and writer commentary. Despite the long passages about writing, the narrator's dry sense of humor and honest reflections can keep most readers engaged. Don't grab this book if you want a quick beach read, but you will probably enjoy it if you come in prepared to think.

Traditional Journalistic Review

Sigrid Nunez's *The Friend* is not another dying dog story.

A captivating novel written in the form of a memoir, Nunez's *The Friend* offers a contemplative reflection on the human experience with life, death, and friendship. Through the perspective of a writer dealing with the loss of a dear friend, Nunez offers an intimate scope

on the complicated processes of grief and the unexpected ways we may find healing. The unnamed narrator brings her lifelong friend's Great Dane home to her 500-square-foot apartment after her friend dies by suicide. Through an upfront tone and witty sense of humor, the narrator shares her journey of recovery and growing companionship with the aging dog.

Nunez's ability to connect a wide array of allusions to various pieces of literature and art within the story make this novel exceptional in multiple fields. More than just another story about a dying dog, *The Friend* blends literary commentary with a moving narrative to make this short novel equal parts emotionally captivating and intellectually intriguing. The narrator's profession as a writer and professor gives Nunez the opportunity to weave in words from other great writers about humanity's experience with life and death, and Nunez's authentic depiction of human companionship with animals gives almost any reader the ability to relate to the novel.

While Nunez succeeds in providing an in-depth reflection on grief, the way she writes about depression and suicide may be too intimate for some readers. Nunez's writing about the narrator's battle with grief can be described as blunt at best and insensitive at worst, and the narrator's depressive thoughts in the final parts of the novel carry the ability to trigger similar thoughts in vulnerable readers. While this novel offers many enlightening gifts, those who choose to read it should be prepared to join the narrator in her raw, mournful journey of healing.

Scholarly Analysis

Not Another Dying Dog Story: The Redefinition of Anthropomorphism in Nunez's *The Friend*

In Sigrid Nunez's novel, *The Friend*, the narrator grieves the loss of her friend to suicide and finds healing through her newfound companionship with her friend's aging Great Dane. While

anthropomorphism (attributing human characteristics to animals or objects) is typically thought of in a negative light, Nunez uses it to depict an authentic human process of grief.

The narrator does not disagree with Wife One when she says it is fraud to register the dog, Apollo, as an emotional support animal; however, several times in the novel Apollo performs the duties of an emotional support animal for the narrator. The narrator shares, "When you're lying in bed full of night thoughts, such as why did your friend have to die and how much longer will it be before you lose the roof over your head, having a huge warm body pressed along the length of your spine is an amazing comfort" (126). In moments such as this one, Apollo serves as a companion for the narrator and guides her in coming to terms with her friend's death. The narrator admits that she feels a sense of guilt for her friend's death, and she provides the care she thought she should have given to him in his depression to the dog as he grows older. In order to cope, the narrator personifies the dog in her mind, giving him the ability to receive this care in the way a human would.

As the narrator continues to care for Apollo, her relationship with the dog grows more and more personal. While at the beginning of the novel, the narrator admits her embarrassment of her anthropomorphism toward the dog, she later writes, "Anthropomorphism, I've decided, is inescapable, and though I may try to hide it I no longer fight it" (167). The narrator does not hide it very well because we read after this passage that even strangers recognize her as "the one who's in love with a dog" (175). The narrator obsesses over the dog's needs and wonders about his thoughts all the while reminding both the readers and herself that something bad may happen to the dog. Through Nunez's repeated insertion of this thought, she compels us to form a similar connection to the dog. We wonder about Apollo in between parts questioning whether or not he is alright, and we read in between the lines to search for any clues about the dog's fate. Giving the readers

their own personal stake how the novel concludes further establishes Nunez's authentic depiction of human grief. It is difficult to depict grief accurately without arousing emotion in your audience, and there are few better ways to arouse emotion that through humans' relationships with animals. Nunez allows readers to build a relationship with Apollo alongside of the narrator, so that we, too, can experience some level of friendship with the dog and perhaps even a hint of the grief the narrator carries with her.

Conclusion

Through these layers of paratext, I examine the qualities of Nunez's novel and how they are judged from three different perspectives. While each review carries a similar set of core opinions about *The Friend*, they express distinct differences in language and values. For instance, the customer review is more concerned about a "heartfelt dog story" while the scholarly review examines the ways in which Nunez uses the narrator's relationship with the dog to describe human grief. Depending on the environment for a specific piece of paratext, a work's value can increase or decrease, and, as the reviews demonstrate, *The Friend* carries different levels of value depending on the audiences the paratext is intending to reach. Value, therefore, is a subjective term dependent on the readers' own beliefs and curiosities, and paratext is a way in which readers interpret and contribute to a work's value within a specific culture or environment. Understanding value in this dynamic way guides our ability as readers to consider nuanced perspectives as we analyze literary texts.

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BELOVED CRITICAL ANALYSIS: LOVE IN THE TRAUMA OF SLAVERY

by Sage Osborn

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is a critically acclaimed, Pulitzer Prize-receiving work that has shaped literature in the United States. The novel tells an engrossing and moving story of a woman, Sethe, who has escaped slavery and attempted to kill her children to protect them from the same horrors she has faced. Sethe succeeds in killing one of her children, Beloved, while the others survive. Among the surviving children is Denver, the only child who remains in Sethe's care. In *Beloved*, the audience is dropped into the lives of the characters, leaving readers to navigate their experiences and feelings. Through the telling of this narrative, as it is based on a real woman's story, heartbreaking topics are discussed as a way of communicating the importance of how traumatizing these events truly were. In *Beloved,* Morrison depicts the horrors of slavery and the trauma that it leaves behind within the ideas of love and self. She does this through a connection between her writing and PTSD symptoms of flashbacks, emotional detachment, and social isolation in order to gradually build toward the ideas of freedom, redemption, and healing.

Morrison uses flashbacks to highlight the characters' pasts with slavery and trauma. This form of presenting the events to the reader mimics symptoms of PTSD. Individuals who have PTSD experience symptoms such as flashbacks, emotional detachment, and social

isolation. Morrison's way of presenting the traumatic events that the characters experience alludes to these symptoms, as she utilizes each of these ideas for each character. Sethe's story is told primarily through these flashbacks throughout the novel, beginning when she discusses Sweet Home by saying, "suddenly there was Sweet Home rolling, rolling, rolling, rolling out before her eyes… it made her wonder if hell was a pretty place too" (Morrison 7). This use of flashbacks mimics the flashback symptom of PTSD because Sethe is unable to come to terms with the reality that those events happened in the present, so she refers back to them in pieces when she is reminded of them.

Additionally, Morrison has Paul D represent the emotional detachment symptom of PTSD, as he frequently mentions how his traumatic experiences caused him to shut away his emotions. Morrison writes

> It was some time before he could put Alfred, Georgia, Sixo, schoolteacher, Halle, his brothers, Sethe, Mister, the taste of iron, the sight of butter, the smell of hickory, notebook paper, one by one, into the tobacco tin lodged in his chest. By the time he got to 124 nothing in this world could pry it open. (133)

Throughout the novel, Paul D is also seen running away from every potential attachment that he could form out of his fear of past events, such as when he leaves Sethe after finding out about her killing Beloved. This moment is described by Sethe in the novel as she says, "Paul D dug it up, gave her back her body, kissed her divided back, stirred her rememory and brought her more news: of clabber, or iron, of roosters' smiling, but when he heard *her* news, he counted her feet and didn't even say goodbye" (Morrison 222). This displays Paul D's emotional escape from trauma by showing how he loved Sethe and would do anything for her; however, when past trauma came back to the present, he couldn't stand to face it and left.

Morrison also portrays the idea of social isolation within the novel through Denver, as she has always been stuck in 124 with her mother. One of the few times Denver is shown leaving the house, she experiences her own trauma when her classmates question her about her past. The text states, "Murder, Nelson Lord had said, 'Didn't your mother get locked away for murder? Wasn't you in there with her when she went?'" (Morrison 123). This concept of Morrison's writing mimicking PTSD symptoms allows the reader to develop a deeper emotional connection with the story. The intensity of this experience allows readers to fully grasp the breadth of trauma that Morrison was intending to depict.

Repercussions from the traumatic events that the characters experience persist throughout the novel as they have a lack of freedom within themselves; however, Morrison also includes a story of hope and peace within the road to freedom to show that trauma is not all-consuming forever. The character that Morrison chooses to represent her main idea of freedom is Denver, who has been stuck in isolation due to her mother's traumatic past. While Sethe was at Sweet Home, their schoolteacher traumatized her along with Halle, Paul D, and Paul A, causing her to fear ever leaving her home so as to not be taken back. This trauma is described through the quote, "But what he did broke three more Sweet Home men and punched the glittering iron out of Sethe's eyes, leaving two open wells that did not reflect firelight" (Morrison 11). After Sethe's experience with this hardship and that of later losing the rest of her children, her daughter Denver is stuck as the only child in a house that is haunted by fear and loneliness. In an article by Linda Krumholz, she says, "In her lonely withdrawal from the world, due in part to Sethe's isolation, Denver is as trapped by Sethe's past and Sethe's inability to find psychological freedom as Sethe herself is" (Krumholz 11). Morrison utilizes this character as a way of creating an idea of repossession of self at the end of the novel. After being isolated for so long, Denver decides to go visit her old schoolteacher, who teaches her what it is

to be her own person. An article by Barbara Shapiro describes this encounter by saying, "With this recognition, Denver for the first time begins to experience the contours of her own separate self" (Shapiro 14). This gives the audience a feeling of redemption after learning of the tragic and heartbreaking lack of freedom that the characters have experienced. This deeply emotional experience is described by Krumholz as she says, "The reader is led through a painful, emotional healing process, leaving him or her with a haunting sense of the depth of pain and shame suffered in slavery" (Krumholz 14). Overall, the emphasis on freedom throughout the novel is an important addition to Morrison's portrayal of the trauma of slavery as it shows a display of possibility and hope within trauma and heartache.

Morrison also represents how the characters' inability to feel freedom for themselves impacts their concepts of love throughout the novel. After experiencing the trauma of losing the people that they love over and over again, they are hesitant with where they place their love and how much they allow themselves to feel it. Both Sethe and Paul D explain this idea frequently throughout the book, as they are the most accustomed to experiencing loss, but they experience it in different ways. Paul D is the first to illustrate this idea, as Morrison writes, "The best thing, he knew, was to love just a little bit; everything, just a little bit, so when they broke its back, or shoved it in a croaker sack, well, maybe you'd have a little left over for the next one" (54). This idea is what later causes Paul D to hide his feelings within what he calls the tobacco tin within his chest. Not having a firm concept of love and being unable to commit to feeling it causes Paul D to run from everything that he encounters throughout the novel because he is unable to comprehend being happy in a loving situation. It is not until the end of the novel when he understands that Sethe needs him that he allows this tobacco tin to burst so that he can commit to loving and protecting her.

Sethe's concept of love contrasts with Paul D's because she has also experienced a lot of loss and has been told that she should not love too much or she will be hurt again. However, Sethe always shows love to a great capacity, even to the point of loving too much. When Paul D finds out that Sethe tried to kill her children to keep them from being taken into slavery, she explains that she did it out of love, saying, "Love is or it ain't. Thin love ain't love at all" (Morrison 194). Later in the novel, this same concept is addressed when Sethe loves Beloved to a point where she is consumed by her. When Beloved leaves, Sethe understands why she was told not to love with everything that she had.

The ideas represented in Morrison's *Beloved* show a devastating and upsetting account of traumatic events and their effects on people's concepts of love and self. By connecting her writing to symptoms of PTSD, Morrison shows the audience the true horrors of slavery as if readers are experiencing symptoms of trauma themselves through the flashbacks that disrupt the characters' fight towards freedom. Her inclusion of redemption shows the slow road to freedom and brings a sense of hope and peace to the novel, allowing the perception of trauma to be seen as redeemable rather than stagnant. Finally, her use of juxtaposition creates a contrast between the characters' ideas of love, displaying the multiple outcomes of this emotional trauma on individuals' lives. Through these captivating techniques, Morrison creates a timeless account of the horrors of slavery.

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Are Podcasts a Return to Oral Storytelling? Exploring the Survival of the Epic of Sundiata

by Joseph Shoulders

As soon as humankind could speak, we were telling stories to each other as a way to build a community with shared values and histories. For millennia, the primary method of telling stories was an oral practice. Then, many cultures developed a written language and began valuing the authorship of the written word over the oral tradition (Weedon 47). When the printing press was invented, sharing stories through text became easier than ever, and thus, print became the primary storytelling method (Weedon 47). Meanwhile, oral storytelling became a secondary, alternative method that had to evolve to the changing societies (Weedon 47). These evolutions include theatrical performances, radio shows, and the most recent and extremely popular medium—podcasts. Because podcasts tell stories orally, we might assume that they are effectively the same as the oral tradition but now recorded digitally. The digital record might also give the impression that podcasts are more permanent. However, when we compare the memories of podcasts to the memories of stories in the oral tradition, we see a stark difference. Most people cannot remember much of a podcast they listened to last month, yet the stories in the oral tradition have survived hundreds of years in the public's memory.

One of the most notable surviving stories in the oral tradition is the epic of Sundiata Keita, the great emperor of Mali who lived in the thirteenth century. People in today's westernized world may wonder: how can this almost-800-year-old story survive through word of mouth when podcasts are easily forgotten? To answer this, we must understand exactly how the story is passed down, considering the cultural importance of the oral tradition and of the story itself. Comparing that tradition to podcasts, we will find that podcasts are in fact performatively different from traditional oral storytelling.

Sundiata/Sunjata/The Lion King has taken on many names and renditions over the years, but I will focus on the revised edition of *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali* recorded by D.T. Niane. Sundiata Keita was born a crippled prince to Maghan Kon Fatta, king of Mali, and Sogolon Kedjou, who had the spirit of a buffalo. A hunter and a blacksmith foresaw Sundiata becoming a king of kings, so Maghan named Sundiata his successor. Maghan's first son, who felt the throne was rightfully his, did not think a lame boy could be king, so he took power instead. When Sundiata overcame his childhood disability, his half-brother felt threatened and banished him. During his banishment, Sundiata learned about the neighboring kingdoms and how to lead an army. When he heard Mali had been overthrown by conquering sorcerer Soumaoro, Sundiata rallied the kingdoms' troops and led them to battle. Sundiata defeated the tyrant and became the emperor of the West African kingdoms and brought peace and prosperity. His story was passed down by Balla Fasséké of the Kouyaté family, Sundiata's griot.

What is a Griot?

Historically, griots counseled West African kings by relaying the actions of previous kings. They knew the complete history of the kingdom, passed from the previous generation to the next. Balla Fasséké traveled throughout Mali and listened to older griots to learn

the history of Sundiata's ancestors. He educated Sundiata on the past to advise him, acting like a "guardian angel" (Kouyaté 24). Balla Fasséké described his role in a speech to Sundiata encouraging him before battle. He spoke,

> Griots are men of the spoken word, and by the spoken word we give life to the gestures of kings…tomorrow, on the plain of Krina, show me what you would have me recount to coming generations. Tomorrow allow me to sing the "Song of the Vultures" over the bodies of the thousands of Sossos of whom your sword will have laid low before evening. (Kouyaté 63)

In recognition of Balla Fasséké's work, Sundiata declared the royal Keita family's griots would always be chosen from Balla's family, the Kouyaté. In modern practice, all griots share the tales of Sundiata, but Niane's version was told by a Kouyaté—Mamoudou. In these times without kings, griots continue to pass down their land's history, but now they serve to advise the public and to keep tradition alive. Mamoudou best explains his role himself:

> Since time immemorial the Kouyatés have been in the service of the Keita princes of Mali; we are vessels of speech, we are the repositories which harbour secrets many centuries old. The art of eloquence has no secrets for us; without us the names of kings would vanish into oblivion, we are the memory of mankind; by the spoken word we bring to life the deeds and exploits of kings for younger generations. (Kouyaté 1)

How Griots Differ from Podcasts

The additional material in the revised edition of Niane's text gives insight into what distinguishes the griot tradition from podcasts. The "Oral Tradition, Pronunciation, and Spelling" section explains, "Griots perform their stories musically in public, thereby

making the tale a communal, shared experience that is relived repeatedly" (Kouyaté xvi). These practices record stories into a collective memory, which is more reliable than individual memory. Experiencing a story together makes people more likely to talk about the story. If someone forgets or misses information, they can draw on others to fill the gaps. These conversations keep the story circulating.

Watching a performance in public also allows the audience to connect the story to a place. Place is deeply rooted in the griot tradition. Mamoudou reveals at the end of the story, "To acquire my knowledge I have journeyed all round Mali" (Kouyaté 84). He lists several locations throughout West Africa where events in Sundiata's story took place (Kouyaté 83). To griots, places hold memories, and being in a certain place is the key to learning its stories. When the story of Sundiata is shared in person, it does not float in memory: it is locked in the place of sharing.

The repetitive telling in oral tradition is also unique. As more people share the story of Sundiata over time, elements of the story change. Thus, a specific performance of Sundiata becomes locked in time, too. Despite the story's variations and magical elements, Mamoudou swears, "My word is pure and free of all untruth" (Kouyaté 1). To address this apparent paradox, the editors suggest, "Historical accuracy or a definitive literary (written down) 'text' may not be particularly important in African oral traditions" (Kouyaté xv). In this case, the truth Mamoudou swears by is not absolute fact; it is the belief in Sundiata's lasting memory. Perhaps Sundiata could not have lifted and replanted a grown baobab tree, but the belief that he could represents that he was extremely strong and gracious to his mother. As different times call for different messages, the memory of Sundiata will evolve as will the representation of his deeds. This personal, temporal connection can only occur in live performances.

In contrast with these elements, podcasts are experienced alone, digitally, and once. People may share a podcast with their friends,

but they rarely sit together through it and discuss the details of an episode together. Individual listeners do not connect their experiences into a collective memory. As for place, since podcasts are digital, people can listen to them anywhere. It's one of the appeals of podcasts. However, when a podcast exists everywhere, in truth it exists nowhere. Unless the podcast episode talks about a specific place, there is nowhere you can go to reconnect with the story. Similarly, since podcasts can be listened to at any time, they do not belong to the present. The information can become outdated in a day unable to adapt to the needs of those listening today. Moreover, as soon as someone finishes an episode, they rarely replay it, so it becomes an experience of the past. Ultimately, although podcasts are audio stories, they lack the crucial elements of traditional oral storytelling.

Why Sundiata?

A major factor in the survival of Sundiata's story is the story itself. While podcasts have their disadvantages in the preservation of memory, a podcast about Sundiata may survive all the same because people want to remember his story. Sundiata's story is the narrative of a disadvantaged and disrespected person rising into benevolent power. Sundiata is an example of an African triumphing against a conqueror. His story appeals to the oppressed, the ones painted always as the losing side of history. It is not a coincidence that in the preface to the epic of Sundiata, Niane asks his African brothers to stop seeing themselves from a white perspective (Kouyaté xxiv).

The story of Sundiata is not a slave narrative; it is an emperor's epic, one that gives Africa hope. In the climax of the epic, when Sundiata comes to lead the armies of West Africa, Sundiata declares, "I have come back, and as long as I breathe Mali will never be in thrall—rather death than slavery. We will live free because our ancestors lived free. I am going to avenge the indignity that Mali has undergone" (Kouyaté 56).

Unfortunately, the people of Mali underwent many more indignities after Sundiata died, but his undying story tells them that they can overcome them against all odds. Mali will not be defeated because Sundiata still breathes. As Mamoudou says, "His spirit lives on" (Kouyaté 84). Sundiata's eternal triumph lasts as long as people remember his story, and the tradition of oral storytelling keeps it flowing through the community's consciousness.

As for Podcasts

Now, not all podcasts will tell stories of great importance for a whole culture like Sundiata's epic, and not all creators wish for their content to be remembered in that light. For most people, the temporality of podcasts is an appealing aspect in times when people need instant entertainment. If the purposes of these mediums differ, we must then make a distinction between stories told orally and oral storytelling because the traditional method provides more than our society gives it credit for. The difference is that between a fading and a lasting memory. If you do wish for your podcast to be memorable, however, consider the functionality of the oral storytelling tradition. How will you engage with the audience to create a story that lives amongst them? More importantly, what stories do people need to remember?

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