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Essence & Critique: Journal of Literature and Drama Studies is a an open access, peer-reviewed, academic e-journal aiming to publish original and international research articles that bring solutions to issues and examines scientific issues and problems in all subfields of literatures, theatre, drama and performance studies, and cultural studies. Each submitted article is evaluated by at least two referees of the field expert and the final result is reported to the authors within three months. The journal is published twice a year in June and December.

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Editor's Preface[*]

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Guest Editor

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Myths, Archetypes and the Literary Arts

I have been fascinated with stories ever since my childhood, more so with the recurring nature of certain tropes and motifs that transcend geographical, temporal and cultural barriers and surface in the unlikeliest of places. Our oldest tales hold compelling power, for not only are they timeless enough to be remembered down the ages, they continue to give us meaning, purpose, guidance and solace till the present day in the form of oral tales, songs, cinema, theatre, comic books, video games, and literature.

When Dr. Önder Çakırtaş and Marietta Kosma asked me to edit a themed issue of the journal, I succumbed to my fondness for stories and proposed that we bring together an issue that examines how myths and archetypes, originating from our collective unconscious, in turn shape our collective consciousness and with it our collective knowledge, and leave imprints in our creative expression such as literature, theatre, film, graphic novels and comics, music, video games, and more. I had hoped for this issue to be eclectic in its scope, and so it turned out as we received fine contributions that delve into the study of myths and archetypes in many forms of literary expression—film, fiction and non-fiction, drama, poetry, comic books, and stand-up comedy.

Michael Filas reads the protagonist Carol from Todd Haynes' 1995 film *Safe* as a tragic archetype, and aligns the indices of COVID-19 pandemic life (face masks and social isolation for safety) with Carol's similar response to her illness. Soham Mukherjee and Dr. Madhumita Roy analyse how Albanian writer Ismail Kadare uses myths to make sense of the national condition of Albania from the beginning of World War II until the early 2000s when Albania began its process of recuperating from the Balkan Wars in the 1990s. Shuvam Das, towards his aim to examine the superhero myth in manga, performs a poststructuralist reading of *One-Punch Man* and *My Hero*

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Academia to draw parallels between Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus* and Japanese superhero manga, examining how these works deal with the existential question about the meaning of life. Continuing the theme of superheroes is Kelvin Ke Jinde as he draws upon Plato's idea of the auxiliary class and Joseph Campbell's monomyth to read the superhero in the Marvel Cinematic Universe as a modern version of the auxiliary class and shows how the MCU re-mythologises Plato's auxiliary class for contemporary culture. Riccardo Gramantieri studies Henrik Ibsen's *Ghosts* with the aim to use the character Osvald Alving as a model and offer a different interpretation of the literary work in which Osvald moves. Towards this end, Gramantieri interprets the plot of the play and lends support to the schizophrenic theory of Osvald's illness using Carl Jung's archetypal theory. Bhishma Kumar and Sovan Chakraborty apply concepts of primitive mythology to discuss Mary Oliver's fictional and non-fictional works, concentrating on how a sense of place and nature can be felt and treated respectively by going beyond the ego-centric attitude of human beings. Hampton D. Harmon, in an effort to holistically understand the influence of stand-up comedy on American culture, identifies the religious nature of comedian Bill Hicks' work and self-presentation through the Judeo-Christian concepts of "messiah" and "prophet." Harmon presents a case study and close reading of Bill Hicks' televised special *Revelations*, evaluating the latter's comedy as a fulfilment of the prophetic archetype. Stella Chitralekha Biswas reviews *Ahalya*, the first novel in the Sati series by Koral Dasgupta, which is a retelling of the well-known mythological account of a hapless woman and her plight under the brunt of a patriarchal social order. In her review, Biswas stresses that *Ahalya* can also be read as celebrating what it means to be a "woman" rather than emphatically laying claims on the erasure of gender differences.

I would like to thank the contributors who trusted the journal with their fine writing. I am also immensely grateful to Dr. Önder Çakırtaş, Marietta Kosma, the esteemed editorial board, the

learned referees and the skilled technical team for helping me bring the issue to life.

As we enter a new year with hopes for a pandemic-free era and fears that the virus may not be gone altogether, I pray this year brings health, happiness and fulfilment to all.

Todd Haynes's *Safe* and the Covid-19 Pandemic Mirror on the Wall

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ABSTRACT

Todd Haynes's 1995 film *Safe* depicts the demise of protagonist Carol White as she suffers headaches, bloody noses, insomnia, asthma, and seizures from environmental illness, which leads to her social and marital demise and her taking refuge at Wrenwood, a sanitarium retreat in the Albuquerque foothills. This article reads Carol as a tragic archetype, and aligns the indices of COVID-19 pandemic life (face masks and social isolation for safety) with Carol's similar response to her illness. While the film has previously been critiqued and interpreted from perspectives including feminism, consumerism, environmentalism, suburbia, race, heteronormativity, melodrama, plague, Whiteness, and AIDS politics, this article performs a close reading based on Northrop Frye's archetypal definition of Aristotelian tragedy, and then analyzes the differences in late-pandemic middle class American perspectives from that of Carol White as she navigates her situation. Late-pandemic middle class perspectives provide an optimistic and alternate fate to the tragic pathos depicted in Carol's story.

KEYWORDS

Safe (1995), Todd Haynes, Northrop Frye, tragedy, COVID-19, pandemic, great resignation, environmental illness

Fig. 1. Carol White (Julianne Moore) attempts self-love at the mirror inside her isolation dome. *Safe* Blu-ray DVD. Criterion Collection. 2014.

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Todd Haynes's 1995 masterpiece *Safe* reminds me of the contemporary relationship, in 2022, with the waning of pandemic quarantines and mask mandates. Previous critics have read the film as consumerist and feminist satire[1], as commentary on cultural whiteness, as critique of suburbia[2], and as commentary on the 1980s AIDS pandemic[3]. *Safe*, in 2022, can be read as a cautionary tale, an unfinished tragedy. There are noticeable indices of contemporary pandemic life in protagonist Carol White's story, such as face masks and self-isolation for safety. These similarities bring her ruin closer to pandemic experiences. The plot concerns her hobbled struggle for healthfulness, and her unsuccessful quest for self-discovery. However, while the film ends as a truncated tragedy, in the late-pandemic era some in the middle class are having success with self-discovery.

Carol's story has not come to a hard stop at the end of *Safe*, but there is little doubt that she has failed to obtain healthfulness and self-love. When looking closely at Carol's tragedy there is an opportunity to distance her doomed fate from the emerging post-pandemic outlook, which is empowered and reflective—decidedly not tragic. That's not to say the 6.4 million deaths

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[1] See Bouchard in particular, but most critiques cited in the article recognize Haynes's for thematic feminism and Queercore aspects in his work.

[2] See Burke, also Tougaw.

[3] See Bersani; Tougaw; also Stuber.

and millions of infirm patients have not been tragic, but there's an alternate narrative for some. For certain columns of the middle class, relationships with home, with nature, with family, and with work have transformed in varying degrees. The "great resignation"[4], shifting attitudes about remote work, and a 20% uptick in both pet adoptions[5] and outdoor recreation[6] collectively reflect an altered relationship with the former sense of self, of home, and with the sense of where and how one fits in the world.

I read *Safe* as tragedy, and compare late-pandemic perspectives to Carol's experiences and fate. *Safe* has been read as horror[7], as melodrama[8], as an AIDS parable, and as a critique of capitalist environmental destruction[9]—all of which are true readings in different contexts—but I'm reading it as a cautionary tale about failing to desire a meaningful life, and failing to achieve true self-love. Despite the shared signifiers of pandemic life and Carol's odyssey into environmental illness, late-pandemic trends of thoughtful life decisions among the middle class reflect an optimistic alternative to the tragic fate of Carol White in *Safe*.

Reading *Safe* as Tragedy

In 2020, during the first wave of the pandemic in the US, critics in *Vanity Fair* and *The New Yorker* revisited *Safe* via COVID-19 themes for the similarities between 2020 pandemic life and the film's depiction of environmental illness, Carol's physical reaction to fumes, chemicals, and industrial elements in her posh suburban world. Like us, she wears a face mask, and shelters at home. The film's long takes and long shots suggest that Carol's illness, from headaches to nosebleeds to coughing fits, panic attacks, and seizures are also, in part, a reaction to her vacuous daily routines in a world that engulfs her. Austin K. Collins writes, "her life does seem to be almost entirely composed of errands: organizing and overseeing house repairs, attending to the dry cleaning, keeping tabs on the help, all while keeping fit and maintaining some vague shell of a social life. First-world problems, yes, and that is the point." Carol's bland life, even her non-life -threatening maladies make for soft tragedy, but it is the absence of an inner person that really drives this tragedy. David Roth writes, "Even before she contracts the mysterious illness that will send her reeling and shrinking away from this life, Carol floats through her days—and, in a white silken robe on sleepless nights, through her icy, Kubrickian home—like a ghost." "Ghost," however, doesn't capture the full spectrum of Carol's empty soul. It's as if her *hamartia*, or

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[4] See Richter; also Tappe.

[5] See Bogage.

[6] See Wagner.

[7] Wes Craven notoriously called *Safe* "the scariest film of the year so far" as noted by Haynes in Blu-ray commentary.

[8] See Jacobowitz and Lippe; see also Zarzosa.

[9] See Hosey.

tragic fatal flaw, is implicit in her emotional makeup, or, as Brian Marks wrote in 2020, "Carol is a woman who doesn't know how to desire." Haynes himself, in an interview with Scott Tobias, refers to Carol's lack of interiority, and how Julianne Moore portrayed the character, nonetheless, with believable humanity: "[This] role was so transparent. And I was impressed with how she could make somebody who is that much of a cipher into somebody who you believe is a real person, but not over imbuing it with too much editorializing or second guessing, or kind of winking to the audience." The subtle earnestness in Moore's portrayal, and in Haynes's leveraging Carol in every scene as part of the mise en scène, are key to reading *Safe* as tragedy, rather than satire or irony, where the heroine would register differently.

Northrop Frye provides a definition of tragedy as a genre, as he described it in *Anatomy of Criticism*, a mid-twentieth century structuralist reading of canonical texts. Frye begins by leveraging Aristotle's definition of tragic *mimesis*, representation, primarily through plot elements such as *peripetia*—a sudden reversal of circumstances—usually accompanied by recognition, and *pathos*, which is an act involving destruction or pain. He locates the source of tragic effect in plot, or *mythos*, which revolves around an extremely visible hero, a character superior in degree to others, but not to her environment. When the tragic heroine falls, she falls from a high place, the top of the wheel of fortune, and in falling becomes isolated from the society over which she once reigned in some capacity. When *peripetia*, or a turn of events occurs, it is accompanied by a self-recognition of some fatal error that the tragic hero has made to bring this turnabout. The error involves a flaw or violation of moral law, but it's an act made of the hero's free will. As the hero falls, she inspires in the audience a catharsis affected as pity or fear. From Hamlet to Willie Loman to even Jesus Christ, the tragic hero, as a varied cultural agent, inspires audience emotional response and reactions through tradition-tempered pathways.

Starting with the heroine herself, Carol White is indeed extremely visible—Julianne Moore is in virtually every scene, and when she is briefly not on camera we are in her point of view. While focusing on the cinematography of the film—long takes, long shots, relatively few close ups—Roddey Reid argues that:

> Haynes, far from attempting to put viewers at a "safe" remove from the temptations of facile audience identification, draws on our own willingness to be fascinated by [Carol White] and *to identify with* even the most contrived, artificial, or flat characters and environments while at the same time denying us the privilege of ever understanding them. (32-33, emphasis mine)

And this identification is key to a tragic narrative, even if there's a gap in our understanding of her motives. Her wealth and ensconced life situate Carol in a high place. In the scenes featuring a drive up to her suburban home, we pass new construction of Spanish-style McMansions, and

then, on her street, several posh homes. Hers is the largest and the only one we see with an automated gated driveway—she has the fanciest house. Austin Collins has commented that her social position, however, makes her even more vulnerable: "Her entire lifestyle fails her. A veritable jungle of greenery surrounds the Whites' home; every room in their house feels both alienatingly spacious and as safe and secure as bubble wrap. . . . [You] get a real feel for the ways this upper-class life of Carol's feels cordoned off. A violation of the norms of her life has that much more impact." Carol is superior to others in her socioeconomic station, she will be falling from the top of the wheel of fortune. Additionally, her individuation from her community as a lightning rod is reinforced by her physical attributes as a trophy wife. Although she is often among her cohort of well-kept fellow homemakers, Carol stands out from them as particularly striking in her plastic appearance, as well as in other nuanced ways. Although her friends look and live similarly to her, they are thoughtful about their lives in ways Carol cannot achieve. At the gym after aerobics class, she listens as two of her friends, Anita and Barbara, converse:

> Anita: I just eventually found the whole twelve-step thing was like another form of addiction that I was—-
>
> Barbara: That's exactly what this book is saying . . .
>
> Anita: Yeah?
>
> Barbara: Yeah. It's about how to own your own life, you know, 'cause it's like, what he says is that we don't own our own lives. We're told what to do, what to think, but emotionally we're not really in charge.
>
> Anita: But I think that with exercise and diet and healthy foods you can really—-
>
> Barbara: —-I just think he's very good on certain things . . .
>
> Anita: Yeah . . .
>
> Barbara: (To Carol) Have you read him, Carol?
>
> Carol: No . . .
>
> Barbara: He's very good on certain things, emotional maintenance, stress management. (She stops for a moment, looking at Carol.) You know, Carol, you do not sweat.
>
> Anita: Oh, I hate you.
>
> Carol: (slightly embarrassed) I know, it's true. (Haynes, *Safe*, 107)

Beyond Haynes's clever metacommentary via the self-help message Barbara shares, we see here how Carol is not a full participant in a thoughtful or reflective life the way her friends are. And they bring her into the conversation only by enviously noticing how she is different, physically more "feminine" per the sexist codes that stigmatize sweaty women. In a later scene among her peers, at a baby shower when Carol is further along in her illness, they talk about her health while she is in the bathroom. That is the only shot in the entire film where Carol is not present,

but her health and looks are the topic of her peers' gossipy conversation. As the baby shower continues after Carol's return from the bathroom, they gather to watch the mom-to-be open the big present. Carol sits apart from the group, back a couple yards with a friend's young daughter, Elise, on her lap. Carol has a severe asthma attack that causes panic at the party. Her best friend Linda and another of the women run to her side and attempt to comfort her, but there's a strange lack of connection there, which reflects her isolation. In the Criterion Blu-ray commentary, Haynes says of this scene, speaking to Julianne Moore, "I wanted them to be, like, touching you, but not really touching you." Moore replies, "Yeah, they couldn't. Just barely making any contact." Haynes finishes by observing, "You're just so alone." Isolation from her society is Carol's *peripetia*, her reversal of fortune.

The slow-burn plot of *Safe* revolves around Carol's coming to an understanding of environmental illness while she falls into increasingly severe reactions to the toxins in her environment. Her quest shifts from maintaining the status quo in her materialistic but unsatisfying life, to seeking a solution for her mysterious illness, until she takes up residence at Wrenwood, a remote New Age retreat for environmental illness patients. As she proceeds she becomes more marginalized and separated from her society, from her family, and symbolically even from her fellow retreat residents. And a tragic plot must involve the tragic heroine being isolated, removed from society. Frye describes the tragic hero as "exceptional and isolated at the same time, giving us that curious blend of the inevitable and the incongruous that is peculiar to tragedy" (38). Carol is exceptional in her lack of desire, in her blankness, and this makes her perfectly adapted to her subservient role to the domineering men in her story. Her husband Greg (Xander Berkeley) loses his temper when her headaches get in the way of their sex life, or as he puts it, "No one has a fucking headache every night of the fucking week!" Her paternalistic and condescending family doctor (Steven Gilborn) loses his patience when she persists in her symptoms despite his failure to diagnose anything he understands through his tests and examinations. He recommends a psychiatrist, male, who stares her down like a cold-blooded interrogator. Even her stepson Rory (Chauncey Leopardi) treats her most often with a sort of casual irritation, but never with warmth or deference. She is exceptional in her emptiness, and incongruous in how profoundly well she fits into her assigned role as suburban wife and homemaker.

Carol fits in with the men in her story by virtue of her blankness, by their ability to inscribe on her the meaning and understanding that fits their world view. Frye writes that this sort of tragic hero experiences pathos primarily through exclusion:

> The root idea of pathos is the exclusion of an individual on our own level from a social
> group to which he is trying to belong. Hence the central tradition of sophisticated pathos

> is the study of the isolated mind, the story of how someone recognizably like ourselves is broken by a conflict between the inner and outer world, between imaginative reality and the sort of reality which is established by social consensus. (39)

The imagined reality is that Carol, having achieved the American consumerist dream, should be satisfied, but her emptiness, and her sickness, belie a different inner world. Because she does not know how to desire, and has not learned how to love herself (which is her *hamartia*, her fatal flaw), she cannot avoid the tragic fall, the terminal pathos that awaits her just beyond the final frames of the movie.

After dead ends with conventional medicine, Carol takes matters into her own hands by following up on a flyer she sees on her gym bulletin board that reads: "Do you smell fumes? Are you allergic to the 20th century? Do you have trouble breathing? Do you suffer from skin irritations? Are you always tired?" She attends a seminar about environmental illness and learns there about the concept of managing her "load," the level of exposure to the toxins in her environment and diet. Joining the masked and damaged fellow sufferers of environmental illness, (see Fig. 2), Carol is encouraged by having found others who suffer from headaches, blackouts, nausea, and even seizures from toxins in the environment. At another meeting she learns about the need to create an aluminum foil-lined ventilated space in her home, without carpet, with minimal textiles, and with no chemicals. In the vernacular of this subculture, by eliminating exposure to toxins Carol will "clear", will reduce her load to zero, from which she can build back up her tolerance to chemicals and reenter her former society. But during a harrowing seizure at the dry cleaners, where exterminators are spraying for bugs, Carol is taken by ambulance to the hospital, where, again, conventional medicine denies her any useful diagnosis or treatment. She eventually ends up at Wrenwood, which is advertised in an infomercial she sees on the hospital room TV: "Safe bodies need safe environments in which to live. Nestled in the foothills of Albuquerque, the Wrenwood center describes itself as a nonprofit communal settlement dedicated to the healing individual." While validating her environmental illness as a real condition and providing a toxin free space for Carol's recovery, Wrenwood also provides a community of fellow residents in search of recovery.

Fig. 2. Mask wearers at environmental illness seminar. *Safe* Blu-ray DVD. Criterion Collection. 2014.

Carol's Wrenwood residency takes up the second half of the film. Here, she follows the cult-like dictums of modesty in dress, silent daytime meals where the men and women eat separately, communal sermons from the founder and leader Peter Dunning (Peter Friedman), group therapy sessions, and abstinence from sex, drink and drugs. Carol swallows the philosophical self-help pablum of the retreat's resident guru, Peter, with earnest conviction, or as much as she can muster from her hollowed soul. He preaches a New Age message that his followers' psychosomatic immune system weaknesses are related to their own world view, and that if they cultivate a positive outlook the world will be less toxic to their systems. Even here, in an environment removed from the post-industrial suburbs of the San Fernando Valley, Carol's condition worsens, and she ends up further isolated at Wrenwood. She moves into a windowless porcelain lined igloo and breathes from an oxygen tank that she drags with her wherever she goes on the compound. As she undertakes to fully participate in Wrenwood's self-love program, she continues in a spiral of unhealthy weight loss, and develops a lesion on her forehead, an index of her persistent physical demise. The last scene of *Safe* shows a depleted Carol, entombed in her solitary and spartan igloo, feebly speaking into the mirror as she has been advised to do by the director of Wrenwood, Claire (Kate McGregor-Stewart). Carol says to her reflection, a close up into the camera, "I love you. I really love you. I love you" (Fig. 1). Then, the shot lingers on her lost expression in the mirror, her forehead sullied by the lesion, her eyes puffy and red, and, after 20 long silent seconds, the film cuts to black and is over. All indications to this point are that her plot is a tragedy, her pathos evident in her worsening physical decay, her self-love affirmations

unconvincing. But unlike a completed tragedy, Carol's story doesn't reach its implied conclusion.

At film's end, Carol is still in a sort of unfinished physical and spiritual death spiral. Leo Bersani characterizes it like this:

> Carol enacts a shedding of identities that is also a shedding of the film's subjects: the strongly legitimized identity of a middle-class female homemaker, her identity as a victim of industrial waste, her symbolic identity as an immune-damaged carrier of a fatal infection [AIDS], and finally, her particular (and particularly thin) psychic identity as a person. Paradoxically, it is Carol's stammering words of self-love at the end of the film that signal the shedding of a person who might be loved. There is no one there. (35)

So, while Aristotle and Frye map the tradition in tragedy as featuring pathos, most often death of the protagonist, for Carol the closing pathos is the death of her subjectivity.[10]

In his discussion of high mimetic tragedy Frye writes that it is "expressed in the traditional conception of catharsis. The words pity and fear may be taken as referring to two general directions in which emotion moves, whether towards an object or away from it" (37). And in the case of Carol White, audiences respond with fear more than pity. We want to put distance between ourselves and her—we are not her. But *Safe* refuses to provide catharsis. Frye continues, "pity and fear become, respectively, favorable and adverse moral judgement [. . .] In low mimetic tragedy, pity and fear are neither purged nor absorbed into pleasures, but are communicated externally, as sensations" (38). In *Safe*, each of Carol's episodes of environmental illness are communicated as sensations, be they asthma attacks, lapses of consciousness, bloody noses, a seizure—these inspire unpurged fear. If pity were the cathartic response to the singular scene in which Carol cries, on her first night in her cabin at Wrenwood, this is undermined by Ed Tomney's haunting score accompanying her solitary walk to her cabin. Once inside, an extreme long shot shows her standing in her screened in cabin from far enough away that even the roofline and scrub brush surrounds are in the frame. The music stops and Carol lurches into a standing, sobbing, cry, for a full thirty seconds, before she is interrupted by the Wrenwood director, Claire, from just outside the screen door. Carol stops her crying immediately and Claire enters the cabin, talking her through the moment by telling how she overcame her own environmental illness by repeating to herself hourly in the mirror, "I love you. I really love you." Carol's crying provides no catharsis and inspires no pity, but rather the scene leaves us with suspicion of the ethos of Wrenwood and Claire's domineering succor. Laura Christian has written that the film elicits "viewer sympathy without pity, criticism without facile

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[10] Mary Ann Doane writes about the lack of cathartic affect, "Pathos is not so much used as a tactic within the films of Todd Haynes ... as it is signified, without cynicism" (Doane 5).

condemnation" (112). Even if the catharsis we expect from tragedy is withheld, and if the mimesis of pathos stops short of portraying Carol's ultimate demise, the tragedy remains nearly fully formed.

Haynes, in an interview with Nick Davis, speaks to that implied tragic ending, which he calls "false Sirkian" in reference to Douglas Sirk's antecedent use of unconvincing happy endings in his films:

> [That] false Sirkian ending. It just goes for a more sincerely compromised and sad ending, and an obvious sense of loss. But *Safe* does have one. It follows through with narrative expectations of Carol seeming to get better, but by the time the film ends, you have accrued so much information about Carol's sad acquiescence to the laws of identity, and even the new rules of identity that she accepts at Wrenwood. For her to say "I love you" in the mirror should feel like something has resolved, but all the film language in *Safe* should be telling you that nothing is resolved.

That supports the tragic interpretation. "[The] tragic hero has normally had an extraordinary, often a nearly divine, destiny almost within his grasp, and the glory of that original vision never quite fades out of tragedy. ... The other reductive theory of tragedy is that the act which sets the tragic process going must be primarily a violation of moral law, whether human or divine" (Frye 210). The divine destiny might be Carol's belief in an impossible formula for suburban bliss, her mistaken insistence that she's "fine." Based as it is on a sexist platform of banal subservience and empty consumerist triviality, Carol's life has hollowed her soul and left her without the ability to desire anything different. This, of course, belies societal violation of several moral laws around worshipping the false god of material wealth, as well as the grotesque gender inequality portrayed in the film.

The depiction of Carol's marriage to Greg illuminates the domestic arc of her tragic fall. Carol's relationship with her husband begins in the first frame after the credits when they exit their parked Mercedes. Carol sneezes, Greg says "bless you," and Carol says, "It's freezing in here." The film takes a beat looking at the empty parked car in the garage, then hard cuts to Greg and Carol in mid-missionary coitus, the overhead shot is a medium close up so that we can see Carol's unsuffering but dispassionate expression throughout Greg's silent convulsive climax. We learn here, less than three minutes into the film, that Carol's marriage is not providing her sexual pleasure or romantic intensity. In the next scene Greg is leaving for work while Carol prunes roses in her front garden. He says affectionately, "look at that green thumb"—the roses are a bit droopy—and Carol says, "I wish." He gives her a perfunctory kiss goodbye and reminds her to check on the sod delivery, which she says she'll do. A delivery van pulls up and Carol says it may be the new couch. The mundane dialogue undercuts the imagery of the extravagantly

planted front gardens and ornate architecture of their house. In another scene Carol wakes up on the couch, alone, with a documentary on "deep ecology" playing on the television in the otherwise dark room. She goes upstairs and takes a pill in her bathroom, then sits on the edge of the expansive bed, turning to look at Greg's sleeping body, curled up with his back to her. She goes outside then to her poolside garden. A haunting passive loneliness permeates these scenes.

A few scenes later, Carol and Greg sit at a restaurant dinner with his clients from work, where one of the clients tells a misogynistic joke about a woman getting a vibrator stuck in her vagina and going to the ER to have it removed. Carol is portrayed here as separated from her society: first, her hair, makeup, dress, and relative youth are mannequin-perfect compared to the other two wives at the dinner; second, Carol is spaced out, distant, while the other two, older wives at the table titter and bray at every pause in the piggish jokester's crude story. When one of the clients' wives notices Carol's lack of a response to the joke's punchline, she says, "Somebody doesn't seem to like your joke, Ted." And at this Greg utters a concerned, "Carol?" Carol looks both absent and panicked even though her hair, makeup, posture and dress are in perfect Stepfordian order. As she and Greg leave the restaurant, she apologizes and Greg is disappointed but understanding, saying, "Just, you're overexerted I guess." They walk from the restaurant slowly, arm in arm as one would with a sickly person, not with romantic heat. This scene with his clients is the beginning of Greg's supportive but hangdog disappointment with Carol's condition.

Among the many reasons *Safe* has gained wide recognition as a masterpiece is that Haynes refused to let his characters become clichés. Dennis Lim, writing about the film for *Criterion* in 2014 observed, "The film's signal attribute is its deadpan ambiguity." Greg is far from a model husband, but neither is he monstrous or unfeeling about Carol's plight. As they walk from the restaurant he says, "Maybe the doctor can give you something for it." The doctor is dismissive, gives Carol some ointment for a rash, tells her to stop the fruit diet she's doing with a friend, and to lay off dairy. To stop eating dairy is severe advice because Carol is a self-proclaimed "milkacholic" who doesn't even drink coffee, but takes milk as her singular indulgent comfort food[11]. Even her most mundane comforts, then, are violated by paternalistic authority. But Greg, though he is a benefactor of paternalistic norms, remains loyal and understanding to Carol as she navigates her illness, despite his frustration.

Carol herself is oblivious to her second-class status in her marriage, and in her society. Her life is grotesquely unexamined, so much so that she fails to recognize the demise that her increasingly frequent episodes of asthma, panic attacks, headaches, and rashes portend. Northrop

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[11] In "Health and safety in the home: Todd Haynes's clinical white world," Glynn Davis reads *Safe* as a critique of whiteness, whereby Carol's milk addiction is aligned with her Wrenwood wardrobe (white), her last name, and her white igloo as the thematic chassis of the film.

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Frye speaks to this lack of recognition as important to tragedy:

> Tragedy seems to move up to an *Augenblick* or crucial moment from which point the road to what might have been and the road to what will be can be simultaneously seen. Seen by the audience, that is: it cannot be seen by the hero if he is in a state of hybris, for in that case the crucial moment is for him a moment of dizziness, when the wheel of fortune begins its inevitable cyclical movement downward. (213)

While we can see Carol develop a "dizziness" that seems unrelenting through the end of the film, her hubris is less apparent. It is not arrogance that prevents Carol from recognizing that an alternate life is possible for her. It is her lack of desire for any life particularly different from the one she is in. And perhaps this lack of desire is a way into a reading of Carol's fatal flaw as hubris. If she is surrounded by characters who are trying, however morally lost they may be, to hold their socioeconomic station and she herself is merely going through the motions: is that hubris? Perhaps that is a forced reading. Instead, I would read Carol White as *pharmakos*, a scapegoat of sorts. Frye writes:

> Irony isolates from the tragic situation the sense of arbitrariness, of the victim's having been unlucky, selected at random or by lot, and no more deserving of what happens to him than anyone else would be. If there is a reason for choosing him for catastrophe, it is an inadequate reason, and raises more objections than it answers. Thus the figure of a typical or random victim begins to crystallize in domestic tragedy as it deepens in ironic tone. We may call this typical victim the *pharmakos* or scapegoat. . . . The *pharmakos* is neither innocent nor guilty. He is innocent in the sense that what happens to him is far greater than anything he has done provokes, like the mountaineer whose shout brings down an avalanche. He is guilty in the sense that he is a member of a guilty society, or living in a world where such injustices are an inescapable part of existence. (41)

While Carol is empty of desire, and markedly unaccomplished in self-love, she can also be read as a representation of a perfectly suited bourgeois wife who defers to her husband and who takes for granted her position in society, a guilty society. But her bourgeois suitability and deference to Greg stumble when her environmental illness interrupts their sex life. At bedtime, Greg stops recounting a story from his workday to comment on Carol's newly permed hair, saying he likes it, and Carol says in a flat voice, "I'm glad honey," and gets into bed but makes no eye contact. Greg, off camera says "sexy," then paces around to the end of the bed, his body language reflecting that he's figuring out that they won't be having sex that evening. "How're you feeling? Huh?" he asks. Carol looks up from her magazine and touches her temple, wincing. "I still have this, uhm, this head thing." And Greg says, "Oh boy." He turns and removes his watch. "Holy cow, what is going on here?" "Nothing." "Nobody has a fucking headache every night of the

fucking week!" Greg says as he throws his watch into his pillow. He sits down on his edge of the bed, defeated, with his back to her (see Figure 4). From the initial coitus scene at the start of the film through this muted argument in bed, *Safe* depicts the absence of a truly romantic relationship in Carol and Greg's marriage. Haynes's staging of this story, with the long shots in particular, imply that the context is all important. These libidinous mismatches are a byproduct of the guilty society, an inescapable part of existence when the woman must live subserviently to her husband, when consumerist desire and a bedroom decorated in mirrors and showroom pastels have displaced physical chemistry.

Consumerist desire is just part of the guilty society in *Safe.* Her condition, environmental illness/multiple chemical sensitivity, is caused by various types of pollution, byproducts of runaway capitalism, the poisonous evidence of societal guilt. Roger Ebert located these themes in the film's soundtrack:

> You don't always notice it, but during a lot of the scenes in *Safe* there's a low-level hum on the soundtrack. This is not an audio flaw but a subtle effect: It suggests that malevolent machinery of some sort is always at work somewhere nearby. Air conditioning, perhaps, or electrical motors, or idling engines, sending gases and waste products into the air. The effect is to make the movie's environment quietly menacing.

And the film also features a steady rattle of noise pollution from electronic media. Whenever Carol is at home or in the car there is always AM talk radio, television infomercials, or pop music on the radio[12]. If Carol is empty inside, there are always voices and noises of the guilty society trying to fill that void, and the sounds are often toxic.

Carol's marriage is further portrayed as a toxin in her life in the scene that picks up the morning after her bedtime quarrel with Greg. It begins by showing him finishing his morning bathroom routine by spraying on aerosol underarm deodorant and hairspray while he listens to a daunting traffic report about the clogged L.A. freeways (and scenes of freeway traffic are featured as haunting transitions elsewhere in the film, implying the guilty society). In her bedroom, aural and chemical toxins abound. After his toilet, Greg stands at the foot of the bed and Carol says, "I'm sorry honey," and he says, "me too." She stands and they embrace, then Carol begins to heave in what appears to be convulsive crying. Greg utters, "It's okay," but after a few seconds the heaves become more violent, and she pushes him away brusquely and vomits on the carpet. On the one hand we understand she may be responding to the film of routine chemicals Greg has applied to his body, but on the other hand her nauseous reaction to his embrace symbolizes her marriage's foundational demise (see Fig. 3).

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[12] See Christian for a deeper discussion of polyvocal soundtrack.

Fig. 3. Carol vomits during a hug from her husband. *Safe* Blu-ray DVD. Criterion Collection. 2014.

The scenes that follow portray the widening separation between Carol and Greg, and between Carol and her society. Sitting up in her bed one day, Carol is penning an inquiry letter to one of these groups when Greg comes in frustrated because he'd been calling to her and she had not responded. When he asks her what she is doing, Carol has a total lapse of comprehension and panicked confusion. Blubbering, she says, "Oh God what is this? Where am I? Right now?" And Greg, standing now in stupefied shock with his arms hanging limply at his sides, says gently, "We're in our house. Greg and Carol's house." This scene reflects the "dizziness" Frye refers to when the tragic hero fails to understand the wheel of fortune turning downwards. It may also be Greg's point of recognition that Carol's situation is more serious than he surmised, but it does not change his approach much. Greg is consistently an unquestioning agent of the patriarchy, as many feminist critiques have argued, and he infantilizes Carol in small habitual ways even as he supports her quest for a cure. However, Carol's descent into her illness and search for a cure intensifies her separation from Greg and her society. She sets up a safe space in her home where the carpet is covered with foil-lined panels, and she has an oxygen tank. Her illness becomes her singular focus, and when she meets her friend Linda for lunch that is all she can talk about. Her appearance changes as she becomes a full-time patient, no longer able to wear makeup, and at home she listens to a self-help environmental illness cassette on her Walkman™ while she takes a battery of vitamin supplements. Carol lives under the same roof as Greg but no longer shares a bed or bedroom.

Once Carol settles in at Wrenwood her separation from her family ossifies, as does her

separation from nature and society at large. She takes a solo walk on a nature path while she narrates a voice over of a simple letter she is writing to Greg and Rory, reporting that she'll be staying the "full amount" because she's doing a bit better, and the desert landscape is beautiful there. When Greg and Rory make a visit to Wrenwood they attend one of Peter's sermons where he speaks about how he no longer reads the newspapers or watches the news on TV because that negative energy can affect his immune system, and his flock should also not partake of the news, "Because if I really believe that life is really that devastating, that destructive, I'm afraid that my immune system will believe it too. And I can't afford to take that risk. Neither can you." He then leads the assembled group in his closing prayer, "We are one with the power that created us. We are safe, and all is well in our world." The congregants repeat the prayer in churchlike conformity. Greg and Rory sit quietly during this session, but their sidelong looks reflect cynical doubt at the message. This scene creates a sense of dread that the New Age dogma of Wrenwood is misguided, even if, as a viewer, I don't want to identify with Greg or Rory's perspective. Afterwards, the family walks back to her cabin. Greg carries her oxygen tank, the nostril tube strapped to her face, and he asks her if she thinks Wrenwood is working. She says she does, although we can see she is looking even thinner and unhealthier. The next day Carol approaches her new more isolated igloo quarters, walking arm in arm with Greg, then she stumbles in a near faint and takes several definitive steps away from him. He stops and asks if she's alright. Pausing a minute to get her balance, she says, "I think it might be your cologne." Hands on his hips and agitated, Greg says he's not wearing any. Maybe it's on his shirt, she says, and he sniffs his collar, shrugs, and kicks a small rock away in disgust. At this point, Greg himself is clearly among the toxins Carol's system can't withstand. He says, "Well, I guess we better get moving if we're gonna catch a plane. You gonna be okay?" And Carol says, "I'll be fine. It's just for a short time. I'm fine." Carol's denial is never more apparent than here, where she fails to recognize, as any tragic hero eventually does, her inevitable demise. Greg asks permission to hug her, and does so while her arms hang limply at her sides, one holding up her oxygen tank. In tragedy, after the fall, the hero normally has a moment of *augenblick*, recognition of what could have been but is now lost forever. But Carol's insistence that she's fine belies her inability to recognize that her former life, however undesirable, is nevermore. Her story ends before she ever recognizes that she's really not going to be fine, but the audience sees that she's doomed.

That is the last we see of Greg and Rory, and the next act of the film depicts Carol bonding, to a degree, with her Wrenwood cohort. She gets cajoled into making an awkward birthday speech during a particularly joyous evening meal that she had cooked with a fellow resident with whom she has a platonic flirtation going, Chris (James LeGros). Her speech reveals that she is learning the vernacular of Wrenwood, of Peter's preaching, but the unspoken and

obvious message is that interiority eludes her. It is after this evening that Carol speaks to the mirror, attempting to learn self-love, but a cipher cannot know love. Her marriage with Greg, despite their mutual loyalty, is fatally flawed, irretrievably mired in disempowerment and her washed out desire. In the Blu-ray commentary, Haynes says of Carol in the early scenes of the film that "She's not connected to anybody," that "she's squished out of the frame," that "she's on the margins." And on the same commentary, Julianne Moore says of the voice she used for Carol that she "wasn't making any contact with my vocal cords." Carol has been created as an empty presence in the suburban environment, a feminist nightmare of total capitulation to the demands of a rigged patriarchal society. In an interview with Oren Moverman, Moore speaks to how Carol has been formed by her society: "It's about a person who is completely and utterly defined by her environment. Carol has been taught who she is supposed to be by what surrounds her. So when each item in her life starts to make her sick, she no longer knows who she is" (217). Building on this theme, critic Gaye Naismith reads *Safe*'s depiction of upper middle class White suburban society as guilty, and Carol's lost perspective as inextricable from it.

> The film investigates the extent to which we depend on distinctions between inside and outside and between self and other, both as a society and as individuals, in creating a sense of order and control and in maintaining coherent belief systems. While Haynes shows us how such distinctions are sustained, he is perhaps even more interested in situations and circumstances where these rule-of-thumb distinctions become muddied or can no longer be applied. *[Safe]* presents a number of "sites of confusion" where exteriority and interiority can no longer be clearly circumscribed. (Naismith 364)

This interior-exterior confusion is perhaps most profoundly portrayed via the well-documented feminist critique depicted through Carol's remarkable passivity. To read Carol White's story as tragedy, then, we must see her lost marriage and absence of a useful role in society as a catastrophic loss set in a guilty society. Carol hasn't the capability to desire anything but the situation she has, so her dying or dead marriage reads as tragedy, or at least as ironic tragedy. She is hollow in her marriage, hollow among others, and hollow when she is alone making futile efforts at self-love.

Safe as a Late-Pandemic Looking Glass

Fig. 4. Bedroom mirrors reflecting a hollow marriage. *Safe* Blu-ray DVD. Criterion Collection. 2014.

Like many critics and film festival curators this decade, my interest in *Safe* derives from the parallels I see in pandemic life and the signifiers of Carol's quest for achieving a healthy distance from the environment that makes her sick. In the years since the pandemic began, there have been phases, particularly in the earlier months in 2020, when agoraphobic quarantine, suddenly quiet streets, and closed shops and restaurants found vast numbers of Americans sheltering at home, afraid of contact with others, fearful of contracting a mysterious and potentially deadly disease. The way families retreated into their "bubbles" reminds me, in some ways, of the way Carol seeks to manage her "load" and to establish a toxin free "safe space" where she can "clear." In the early pandemic bubbles people managed exposure, deciding which outsiders were good and necessary risks, figuring out who was cautious enough in their quarantine, masking, and hand washing practices to enter their bubbles. The 2020 critical reconsiderations of *Safe,* as inspired by the culture of fear, also came from a political time when Donald Trump was president. David Roth wrote in the *New Yorker* of Trump's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic and its parallels with Ronald Reagan's negligent approach to the AIDS crisis in the 1980s, when *Safe* is set. The political climate during and since the Trump years has marked the pandemic era with an intensified culture of division, where all politics have been identity politics, and everything from vaccination to complying with masking rules has been mired in polarized tension. From within that fraught vacuum prognosticators predicted a

collective letting go of restraint and tension when the pandemic ended.

As the first wave of coronavirus began to recede, the press was emphasizing how ready Americans were for a post-pandemic release. For example, in January 2021 Nicholas Christakis of the Yale Human Nature Lab, discussed a hedonistic new "roaring 20s" on CNN:

> We're gonna enter a post-pandemic period, which, if history is a guide, all of us who have been cooped-up, have been saving our money, ... people become more religious, more abstemious, more risk averse—all of these trends will unwind. And people will relentlessly seek out social opportunities in night clubs, and bars, and political rallies, and sporting events, and musical concerts and so on. There might [be] sexual licentiousness. People with a lot of pent up desire for social, that includes, of course, sexual interactions. More liberal spending, for example. [The] economy will boom and so on. So all of these sort of experiences that are now being constrained by the germ will reverse.

Of course, Christakis did not forecast the Delta or Omicron variants, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, or the global economic impacts of that situation, nor did he anticipate the deeper reflection that many people are doing in response to the pandemic going on for more than two years. Looking back, the discussions of a hedonistic "roaring 20s[13]" fizzled and the conversation has moved towards deeper, more constructive and introspective post-pandemic changes, not hedonism but rather a reconsideration of foundational aspects of life like work, home, nature, and community[14].

While Carol's affliction makes her an isolated exception, while the world continues around her as she falls into intensified symptoms of environmental illness, Americans have experienced the COVID-19 virus as a community—isolated from society together, collectively. Having been through a few iterations of premature optimism that the pandemic was nearly over, the last two years and counting of pandemic life allowed many to re-evaluate their pre-pandemic lives, reflecting on what they've valued and appreciated during that time. In February 2020, Pew Research Center reported that a small majority of all Americans were typically trying to do two things at once, and 60% of adults said they sometimes felt too busy to enjoy life, even more so for parents with kids under 18 years-old[15]. The pandemic years have slowed things down. In February 2022, Pew reported that 64% of those working from home during the pandemic said that it made it easier to achieve a work-life balance and 78% said they'd like to continue working from home all or most of the time[16]. Although 60% of Americans have jobs that cannot be done from home, the change among those who have been able to do so reflects an awakening. The

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[13] See also Coyle, and Arnold-Forster.
[14] See Stanton.
[15] See Van Kessel.
[16] See Parker.

"great resignation" reveals a broad rethinking of U.S. citizens' relationship with their jobs, and the staying power of remote work is showing a changed relationship with home as a hybrid space where professional life can occur alongside domestic life. Carol, on the other hand, lost her community and left her home because of her peculiar illness, and found only cultish community among fellow environmentally ill sufferers at Wrenwood.

The state of marriages provides another point of entry in considering *Safe* as a pandemic looking glass. If Carol and Greg's marriage is a casualty of her tragic illness, then, how does that compare with the pandemic's effect on contemporary marriages? By contrast, a 2020 study conducted by the American Family Survey, reported that the share of married people ages 18-55 saying their marriage is in trouble declined from 40% in 2019 to 29% in 2020. Further, for most, the post-pandemic marriage is stronger than it was previously with a majority reporting both a deepened commitment to the marriage, and an even larger majority reporting that the coronavirus pandemic made them appreciate their partner more[17]. In general, more marriages in America have gotten stronger through the pandemic, not weaker. In another study, this one from sociology journal, *Socius*, the rate of both marriage and divorce within the five states sampled, were down during the pandemic[18]. This can possibly be taken as cause for comparative optimism, as another way of putting distance between Carol White's marital demise and late-pandemic survival.

Contemporary members of the laptop class may not be saying "I love you" into the affirmation looking glass, but they might be reflecting like Carol at an earlier moment, when she asked, "Oh God, what is this? Where am I? Right now?" And although Carol's question came to her in a moment of flustered and confused panic, evidence is showing that Americans are approaching the late pandemic as a time not for panic, but to thoughtfully reevaluate life choices—and options—around work, home, and desires for happiness. A *New York Times* focus group about the pandemic experience[19], reported of millennials that, "Several said they quickly realized what they valued most in life when they found themselves working from home," and they found that in general the younger professional constituency in the workforce feel empowered by the great resignation, that it empowered them to require a positive work environment, fair pay, and a stimulating environment for professional growth. In her *Washington Post* column, "'Zero Regrets.' Six months after quitting, these workers are thriving,[20]" Karla Miller spoke with workers who left their jobs six months ago as part of the great resignation and found that most are happier in new positions or not working. Their situations have improved with better working hours, the ability to work at home, and more healthful lifestyles with exercise and

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[17] See Seifman.
[18] See Manning and Payne.
[19] See Rivera and Healy.
[20] See Miller.

family time as big factors. In a study published in December 2020, a large majority of adults were spending more time walking and gardening, and a smaller majority were spending more time watching wildlife and being alone outdoors.[21] By comparison, in the singular scene where Carol is experiencing nature, walking alone on a trail at Wrenwood, her peaceful experience gets abruptly interrupted when she inadvertently walks too close to the road and a large truck careens past. This startles her and she runs away as best she can, but the incident triggers a setback for having been momentarily exposed to the exhaust. It's after this that Carol arranges to move into the porcelain-lined igloo. Her relationship with nature, like her relationship with suburban life, is a dead end.

I want to close this essay by considering a tertiary spectral character in *Safe* who haunts the margins of the Wrenwood retreat. Seen though the film's default extreme long shot, Lester walks in the distance across the open spaces of the compound in only two scenes. He is dressed in white pants and sweater, covered head to toe, his face beneath a balaclava hat and mask, his hands in black gloves. Lester's odd tiptoe gait makes him especially strange and mysterious, raising his knees very high with each step as if navigating muck in a sideways sort of locomotion, although he is moving across hardpan desert terrain. Carol first sees him while penning a letter home on the deck of her cabin. When she pauses to watch him pass in the distance, Peter approaches from behind and asks, "Is that Lester you're watching?" and when she asks after him, Peter says, "Lester is just. . . very, very afraid. Afraid to eat, afraid to breathe." The only other time we see Lester is after a subtly disturbing outdoor group therapy session at which Peter has gone around the group asking each individual to share how they are responsible for their ailment, how their attitude and perspective are what made them sick, and the scene closes with Lester shambling past in the distance.

If Lester represents the crippling distortions that fear can have on an individual, it seems Carol, before her fall, embodies a sort of delusional fantasy of being protected from risk. Agustín Zarzosa looks at Carol's sense of security, of safety, as a fantasy, a delusion:

> [T]his fantasy does not result from a traumatic event in her life but lies at the foundation of what little life Carol has. As a result of this fantasy, her life becomes devoted to the creation of safe spaces, to the maintenance of privilege and contentment, to the exchange of pleasantries, and to the rule of triviality. The source of her illness cannot be localized because the fantasy of safety has become sutured into life, becoming almost synonymous with it. (60)

Zarzosa's read on safety as fantasy provides a provocative way of seeing the late-pandemic moment as one of possible reckoning. Those who have the option to do so are reevaluating their

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[21] See Morse.

life habits, even their relationship with coronavirus safeguards. As each citizen lets down their guard and navigates increasing their "load," letting down masks in this space or that, and re-entering a changed society, they are being realistic. The sense of safety from coronavirus infection, at this point, is no longer sustainable as a fantasy nor as an easily achievable way of life. Americans are learning to live with pandemic risks in their midst instead of relying on a false sense of security. Rather than embracing a short-sighted fantasy of a new "roaring '20s," they are rethinking the sense of home, and how that space is also a place for work. Rethinking the sense of community, of travel, and even of marriage and relationships. In short, the pandemic has trampled the fantasy of safety and provoked reconsideration of the idea of safety and of how lives can be shaped. Haynes too was thinking about incorrectly shaped lives when he conceived *Safe*, as he told Rob White in interview: "What interested me in *Safe* was how somebody could reach an ultimate place and [be] brought to a sense of consciousness, when they found themselves completely at odds with—constitutionally just in opposition to—that environment and who they thought they were supposed to be" (145-6).

In reading *Safe* as a cautionary tragedy for this late-pandemic time, I see Carol and Lester as two possibilities. Following Carol's path, citizens fail to conceive for themselves a satisfying life connected to desires based on individual needs and goals. Continuing in the work-a-day go-go perspective that had engulfed so many in pre-pandemic times leads to Carol-like emptiness. Now, in late-pandemic times, as mask mandates lift and American society begins to discover what post-pandemic lives will look like, few want to be like Lester and remain fixated on the threat of infection to a point of social paralysis. There is a path forward, ideally one that retains some of the silver lining of quarantine life, some of the advantages of remote work, some of the connections with nature, and some of strengthening of committed partnerships, while rediscovering the pleasures of social life when risk of infection is not the focal point. Perhaps the point is not to indulge in a hedonistic roaring '20s where Americans party to forget themselves, but rather to savor the awakened, thoughtful, deeper satisfaction of being connected to their station in life and to appreciate the re-emerging communities they've been missing.

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BIO

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Ismail Kadare's Usage of Myth in Comprehending Albania's National Condition

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ABSTRACT

Albania is a small country located in the Balkan peninsula on the Adriatic coast. Its complicated political history and a cultural identity that straddles European and Asian makes the nation an interesting subject for analysis based on national identity structures. Additionally, the nation has a rich oral tradition and often claims to have been the birthplace of Homeric poetry. Literature from this nation, however, is neither widely read nor available. The only Albanian literary export of note is Ismail Kadare who was awarded the inaugural Man Booker International Prize for his entire body of work and his efforts to bring Albanian culture to the global masses. Kadare's writing style involves creating alternate historical timelines, extensive usage of allegory and, most significantly for this collection, the usage, re-usage and, sometimes, reconstruction of Balkan myths.

This essay will analyse how Kadare uses myths in order to make sense of the national condition of Albania from the beginning of World War II until the early 2000s when Albania began its process of recuperating from the Balkan Wars in the 1990s. Indeed, this is not Kadare's only motivation for writing. He also intends to develop a new Albanian identity that is separate from its Ottoman history. Albania was an Ottoman colony for over four centuries and was subsequently occupied and influenced – culturally and economically – by new geopolitical powers in Eastern Europe such as Yugoslavia and Soviet Russia. In his novels, Kadare re-contextualises myths to allegorically critique these foreign powers as well as native politicians. In doing so, he attempts to show the purity and nobility of authentic Albanian culture despite its inherent atavism.

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A Brief History of Albania

Albanians trace their identity back to the "Illyrian tribesmen" who lived in a similar geographical region. They were occupied consecutively by the Greeks, the Romans and the Byzantines. Indeed, the region was conquered by the Ottomans in 1478 along with most of the Balkans. The Albanians remained colonised by the Ottomans for over a century and only achieved independence in 1912. This was followed by a period of turbulent autonomy as a republic and then as a sort of kingdom under the stewardship of the self-styled King Zog I. After this came occupation by Fascist Italy during the Second World War. Then, following a brief civil war, communist partisans established the People's Republic of Albania and placed the would-be dictator Enver Hoxha at the head of the nation. The next few decades Albania spent as satellites of Yugoslavia, the Soviet Union and Maoist China. After breaking off relations with China in

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1978, Hoxha plunged Albania into a decade of isolation until his death and the eventual collapse of European communism in the 1990s (Cameron).

As mentioned above, Albania began the twentieth century as a colony of the Ottoman Empire; Consequently, in 1913, much as would happen with the former colonies of European maritime empires throughout the early to mid-twentieth century, external "major powers drew blunt pencil lines over a map of the Balkans…[which]…left as many Albanians outside the new country's borders as within them" (Hall 161). In 1918, some parts of Macedonia and all of Kosovo became part of the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes which was later to become Yugoslavia. During this time, the largely Muslim Albanians in these territories were not recognised as a separate nation and there were efforts to Slavicize the Albanian Islamic institutions. These efforts were to essentially de-Islamicise the Albanians not with the intention to eliminate the effects of Ottoman colonisation but to assimilate them into the distinctly Christian Yugoslav Kingdom despite significant opposition (Babuna 68).

At the same time, Albania became a monarchy in 1928 when the tribal chieftain Ahmet Zogu declared himself king (Ahmetaj 208). He, however, disappeared seeking refuge in Britain and other Western nations as soon as Fascist Italy invaded at the beginning of the Second World War (Hall 161-2). Albania remained part of the Italian Empire nominally under Victor Emmanuel III till the end of the war when it became a dependency of Yugoslavia. By this time, Enver Hoxha was already Prime Minister of Albania after the victory of the communist partisans in the Albanian civil war. As Tito and Stalin differed in their ideas of socialism, Hoxha sided with the latter and paved the way for Albania to become a Soviet satellite which it remained so until 1961. Khrushchev's attempt to bring Tito back on side threatened to undermine Hoxha's position in Albania and, therefore, Hoxha sought new patrons in Maoist China. However, as China's policy towards the United States changed and it became more open, Hoxha decided once again to break relations with Albania's more powerful ally. This time, with no other options left, Hoxha chose to isolate Albania from the rest of the world and pursue a programme of staunch Stalinism (Larrabee 62; Hall 162-3).

The Importance of Myth in Nation-building

Among ethnic communities and socio-cultural groups created after cataclysmic events such as the World Wars there is an almost Oedipus-like desire to locate and establish their origins. Often these origins are established through myth or mythologization of history. Myths of ancestry and national foundation are common in Africa and Asia. The story of the foundation of Rome also falls into this category. However, when it comes to modern mythmaking, nationalism became a central trope. National ethnic identities are established through myths of descent.

> By placing the present in the context of the past and of the community, the myth of descent interprets present social changes and collective endeavours in a manner that satisfies the drive for meaning by providing new identities that seem to be also very old, and restoring locations, social and territorial, that allegedly were the crucibles of those identities. (Smith 62)

A 20th century champion of the *Rilindja* Movement or the Albanian National Awakening, Ismail Kadare promotes the idea that Albania was "an initial ground of Western European civilization" (Sulstarova 395). This is a continuation of the long-established concept of Albanianism which purportedly defines Albanian culture above all its linguistic, geographical and religious divisions.

The aforementioned concept of Albanianism was propounded by Pashko Vasa, an Albanian functionary of the Ottoman Empire, who was also an ethnographer, folklorist and nationalist. His sole purpose, and that of Kadare, in constructing such an origin story was to establish the Albanians as a people who should be recognised within Europe. Vasa places the Albanians into a category of people "whose origin goes back to mythological times" (Bayraktar 3), more specifically the times of the Pelasgians, who were the predecessors of the Ancient Greeks, and the Illyrians, who were contemporaries of the Ancient Greeks. Although his brand of nationalism mostly called for more autonomy for Albania but within the Ottoman Empire (Bayraktar 3), he paved the way for the Albanian revival or reawakening and influenced contemporary and later Albanian nationalists who pioneered the *Rilindja* movement. From among them, Sami Frasheri, and, perhaps more so, his brother, Naim, were significant influences on Kadare.

Ismail Kadare is well aware of the power that literature possesses in influencing collective memory. This is why he chooses to write historical novels mythologising and mythifying the past where necessary. Indeed, he makes extensive use of Albanian myths and folklore in his novels as plot points as well as to amplify Albania's ancient culture. This is a not uncommon practice among nationalists attempting to reconstruct their nation's identities by "sacralising the land as national territory" (Abrahams 4). "Both the lore and the folk became useful to those who sought to augment the cultural value of the land" (Weiner, qtd. in Abrahams 4). Nationalism is thus directly linked to the land it grows on and requires its physical existence to continue to strengthen. This is where folklore becomes important.

Mythification of the nation, its people and its culture is a way of "organising history so as to make sense of it for that particular community" (Schopflin qtd. in Bayraktar 5). This organisation of history is exactly what Keith Jenkins was referring to when he wrote: "History is never for itself; it is always for someone" (21). Vasa was doing this to specifically give Albania

an identity of its own separate from the Greeks and the Serbs. However, this recourse to myth is significant for this thesis as "a pervasive concern with the myths of identity and authenticity are a feature common to all post-colonial literatures in english" (Ashcroft et al 9).

Myth and mythmaking in Kadare's Novels

Ismail Kadare first began writing in the 1950s just as a new Albanian literary scene began to emerge after the post-War Communist reprisals. Hoxha can be given some credit in nurturing this scene although soon he would be imposing severe restrictions on its freedoms. Having lived through the Second World War as a child in Gjirokaster, the hometown he shared with his country's dictator Hoxha, Kadare only knew an Albania that was either occupied by or under the strong influence of a foreign power (Morgan 36-37). Yet, he was also acutely aware of Albania's own rich culture as is evidenced by the importance it is given in almost all of his novels but especially the three chosen for analysis in this essay. Incidentally, Kadare was chosen to study at the Gorky Institute in Moscow where he spent two years between 1958 and 1960. There he was taught the tenets of socialist realism but he refused to be indoctrinated and, in fact, outright stated that the experience only taught him "how not to write" (Bellos vii).

All of these factors – cultural, social, political, historical and, even, academic – were actively influencing Kadare as he began his writing career (Morgan 108). For a writer of his ability, the ground was thus fertile to develop a writing style that was unique yet, as the Man Booker International prize ratified, universal and relevant. Indeed, it is in order to make his writing more accessible to and easier to identify with for the Albanian public Kadare makes extensive use of Balkan mythology in his novels. The novels chosen for this paper as mentioned earlier are *The General of the Dead Army* (1963), *The Three-arched Bridge* (1978) and *Spring Flowers, Spring Frost* (2000). The first of these novels shows how Kadare mythifies the Albanian people and culture; the second shows how native myths influence the population and how they can be manipulated to meet the nefarious ends of hostile foreign powers; and the third shows how these myths are incongruous with Albania's march towards modernity and yet still define Albanian national and cultural identity.

The General of the Dead Army is Kadare's "first major prose work" and is a process of "re-cuperation of history in the service of national identity itself" (Weitzman 283). The title itself gives us a sense of unreality and opens up the realms of myth and myth-making. The plot is a fictional depiction of the repatriation of the corpses of Italian soldiers who had lost their lives on Albanian soil during the Second World War. These missions took place in the 1960s and later. This novel follows a nameless Italian general and an equally nameless Italian priest who travel around the Albanian countryside looking for the graves of Italian soldiers, exhuming and

identifying them, so that they can be taken back to their homelands and given a proper, perhaps more respectful, burial. Through the general's interaction with the natives and posthumous testimonies of Italian soldiers found in their diaries, the true impact of the war on Albanian lives is laid bare.

Kadare establishes the atmosphere of this novel very early. The rain and the mud that will dominate the story are present in the first paragraph itself. Indeed, the impenetrable and hostile nature of the "foreign soil" is established right at the beginning (*The General* 3). This immediately exoticises Albania. The descriptions of the weather, the mountains, the people, etc. place the nation at par with the Orient of imperial Europe. The urban modernity of Tirana that is occasionally visible in the novel seems out of place. The Albanian rural landscape is omnipresent and its hostility constantly restated. The hostility of the Albanians themselves is also ever present. Although, for the most part, everyone is co-operative, there is ample evidence that the general and the priest were seen with suspicion.

Since the novel is told from the perspective of the Italians, the mythification is laced with orientalism. Discussing the fighting ability of the Albanians, the general says they are "[m]en just like anyone else. You would never believe that in battle they would turn into wild beasts" (Kadare, *The General* 23). The priest later remarks that this savagery was "ingrained in their psychology" (Kadare, *The General* 27). He explains that the Albanians possess "an atavistic instinct [which] drives them into war" and once they have begun fighting "there is no limit to how far they are prepared to go." Indeed, he further suggests that the Albanian nature "requires war" and that, during peacetime, "the Albanian becomes sluggish and only half alive, like a snake in winter" (Kadare, *The General* 28).

The most significant aspect of Albanian culture, and one that dominates much of Kadare's novels, which is used to mythify the people is the ancient code of honour known as the Kanun. The priest becomes a vessel for Kadare's own musings regarding the feasibility of the Kanun and its ancient traditions in the modern world. The priest discusses the concept of the vendetta with near academic rigour. He invokes an Oscar Wilde epigram which states that "the lower classes feel a need to commit crimes in order to experience the strong emotions that we can derive from art." He suggests that "crimes" could be substituted for "war" or "vengeance" as he understands that "the Albanians are not criminals in the common law sense." All of their murders are in conformity with the Kanun and, therefore, entirely legal. He envisions the Albanian highlanders as living out roles in a tragic play set in the inhospitable environment of "the plateaux or the mountains" where death comes to them inevitably if not brought by the harsh conditions, then by "an imprudent remark, a joke that went a little too far, or a covetous glance at a woman." He also asserts that often vendettas have no passion attached but are simply the

results of "obeying a clause of unwritten law" (Kadare, *The General* 134-5). The general muses that perhaps the psychotic desire for violence among the Albanians might be a result of their history of invasion, occupation and oppression. Once again, he likens them to animals. This time it is one which when threatened goes into "a state of immobility in a state of extreme tension, muscles coiled, every sense on the alert" before retaliating (Kadare, *The General* 136).

Although these comparisons are, superficially, demeaning to the Albanians, the reader cannot help but be attracted to them. The condescending and brash tones of the priest and the general respectively ensure that sympathy for the Albanians is aroused. The comparisons to animals are intended to remove the Albanians from the realm of the human. Furthermore, the discussion of the Kanun paints a picture of an ancient peoples living under a similarly ancient legal framework and nobly remaining faithful to it even as it leaves a trail of blood in its wake. This is only one half of the mythifying process. Having removed the Albanians from the realm of humanity, he then seeks to elevate them above it.

This is done by the story of Nik Martini who tried to defend an entire beachhead by himself. Nik Martini was merely a "peasant from the mountains" yet his exploits had become stuff of legend. "He fought in four different places that day, until he had no strength in him left to fight." This lone sniper had become endowed with nearly magical powers as he moved swiftly from outcrop to outcrop and even escaped shelling from a mortar. Only when his ammunition had run out and "lorryloads of soldiers [were] still driving past towards Tirana" did he begin to "howl with grief", was heard by the Italian soldiers who "tore him to pieces with their daggers." Yet, this hero has no grave but "only a song to keep his memory alive." Thus, Nik becomes a mythical figure representing the thousands of Albanian peasants who fought against extreme odds and were killed during the Italian invasion. He is almost an avatar of the great Albanian mytho-historical hero, Skanderbeg, who tried to re-establish the nation of Albania by single-handedly rebelling against the Ottomans in the 15th century. Much like Skanderbeg, Nik Martini is a folk hero. It is possible that the story is older or, perhaps, the exploits of multiple men put together, as some of the locals argued. However, the core of the myth is ancient: "the trunk goes back a long way" (Kadare, *The General* 154-55).

Essentially, the myth of the lone hero has been transformed to make sense of the contemporary condition and also to inspire others to commit similar heroic deeds. This type of myth formation is important for the nation as it helps in building a community. Kali Tal in her book *Words of Hurt: Reading the Literature of Trauma* (1996), states that individual memories of trauma when told and re-told in various manifestations "enter the vocabulary of the larger culture where they become tools for the construction of national myths" (Radstone 142). Furthermore, myths allow for a "rejection of historicity" and a creation of the "past in the

present" through rituals and cultural symbols (Wawrzyniak and Lewis 23). In this case, the cultural symbol is the image of the Albanian mountaineer defending his land with only his rifle and his honour. This sense of honour is significant in engendering a unified national identity. It had driven Albanian men from their mountainous homes to the coast to fight the invading forces. "They came from considerable distances, without anyone having organised them." It was as if "something very ancient…like an instinct" drove them towards the sea. These men were "not even concerned to know what country it was now assailing them." They were united through this ancient instinct into one national body and were simply aware they needed to fight (Kadare, *The General* 156-7). It is to facilitate such unified action that national myths exist, especially myths about lone fighters such as Nik Martini.

In *The Three-arched Bridge*, Kadare reconstructs an already existing Albanian myth to create the central plot point. He reuses the myth of Rozafa's Castle but changes some key points to adapt it to his story. In the original myth, three brothers were building a castle at Shkoder, in northwest Albania. One of the walls would be destroyed overnight. No matter how many times they re-built it, the wall kept on collapsing. They were made aware that this was the work of angered spirits of the land from whom permission had not been sought before beginning construction. The only solution was to immure someone within the wall and build it around them. It had to be one of the wives of the three brothers. They decide that whoever's wife brings their lunch the next morning will be the chosen victim. They swear not to tell their wives about this pact. But the two elder brothers do while only the youngest one does not. So, the next day, the wives of the elder brothers feign discomfort and refuse to take lunch to the man. Rozafa, the youngest brother's wife, happily volunteers and is walled up. There would be no more issues with construction and the castle stands to this day (Gould 211).

For Albanians, this tale teaches the lesson of the *besa*, the given word of honour, which must never be broken and "that all labour, and every major task, requires some kind of sacrifice" (Kadare, *The Three-arched Bridge* 84, 89). Rozafa's ultimate acceptance of her victimhood and the resulting success of the construction bears out the second lesson. The first lesson, however, is slightly tenuous. The castle was being built to protect the city of Shkoder and, being close to the northern border, to protect the rest of Albania as well. While the youngest brother remained true to his word, the elder brothers did not wish to make such an extreme sacrifice and were willing to betray their country to protect their wives (Raymond 63). In the novel, Kadare replaces the castle with a bridge which would be the site of the first incursion of the imminent Ottoman invasion of Albania (Kadare, *The Three-arched Bridge* 165).

The story is set sometime in the 14th century. With the Ottoman invasion imminent, a foreign company, ostensibly named "Roads and Bridges" sends envoys to the local count with a

proposal to build a bridge over the *Ujana e Keqe,* the dangerous river that flows through the area (Kadare, *The Three-arched Bridge* 11-12). However, some of the locals are not in favour of building the bridge and one man named Murrash Zenebisha single-handedly attempts to destroy the bridge. Here, we again have the motif of the lone folk hero trying to defend his home and culture. Every night Murrash would swim underwater and cause tremendous damage to the bridge. He wants to put the fear of the supernatural in the hearts of the builders. Just as he manipulates the Rozafa myth for his own ends, the construction company uses the same myth to turn the tables against him.

"Roads and Bridges" claimed that "Ferries and Rafts", the company whose ferry service the bridge would render obsolete had "[w]ith the help of paid bards, …spread the myth that the spirits of the water will not tolerate the bridge and that it must be destroyed" (Kadare, *The Three-arched Bridge* 73). In retaliation, "Roads and Bridges" sent out bards of their own who sang the ballad of the three masons essentially reminding people that the problem of spirits damaging the bridge could easily be solved through a foundation sacrifice or immurement. Indeed, they even offer a reward for anyone willing to be voluntarily sacrificed (Kadare, *The Three-arched Bridge* 96, 100). Murrash is identified as the culprit and is punished by being sacrificed as the ostensible victim. Therefore, Murrash, who was playing the role of the spirits of the water, the supernatural representatives of local culture, is himself sacrificed. Thus, this sacrifice becomes an abomination. The death of Murrash was a result of the struggle between two foreign powers to impose their dominance on Albanian soil and, in the midst of it, it was Albania itself that was unfairly sacrificed.

This is an even bigger tragedy for Kadare who maintains that Albania, along with Greece, is the birthplace of Western civilisation. Jonathan Friedman writes that "the formation of Greek national identity consists in the internalization of the way in which Western European intellectuals, in constructing their own 'civilized' origins, identified Greece" (196). By equating Albania with the Greeks and, indeed, superseding them, Kadare wishes to establish his nation as *the* origin of Western civilisation. He does this in *The Three-arched Bridge* by way of a conversation between his narrator, the monk Gjon, and another monk named Brockhardt. The narrator claims that the Albanians' language was older than Greek and it "was proved by the words the Greek had borrowed from [their] tongue." Indeed, it was "the names of gods and heroes" such as "'Zeus', 'Dhemetra', 'Teris', and 'Odhise', and 'Kaos', according to [their] monks, stemmed from the Albanian words *zë*, for 'voice', *dhe* for 'earth', *det* for 'sea', *udhë* for 'journey', and *haes* for 'eater'" (Kadare, *The Three-arched Bridge* 66).

"Mythical incidents constitute archetypal situations" (Sahlins 14). Therefore, they provide a framework for those in the real world to comprehend similar situations. The great catalogue of

Albanian myths available to Kadare provides him with the best avenue to help his nation come to terms with its reality. Kadare wrote *The Three-arched Bridge* as the relations between Albania and China had begun to worsen, 1976-78, leaving Albania on the cusp of being without any significant political and financial backing to facilitate its development. This is the major cause of the palpable anxiety that pervades the novel. The walling up of Murrash is an allegory for the impending isolation of Albania. It is "a perverse pregnancy" and quite contrary to the *Rilindja* claims of civilisational origin this walling up will not give birth to anything fruitful. If anything, it will work in reverse and cause the decay of the national foetus. Within the novel, it is the story of Rozafa that helps to comprehend the events of the fictional reality. In Kadare's contemporary world, his reconstruction of the myth was meant to help his readers comprehend what was about to happen to them. Soviet Russia – "Ferries and Rafts" – had been a familiar exploitative foreign agent while Maoist China – "Roads and Bridges" – brought with it greater modernisation but was also a far more sinister and inscrutable force to reckon with. Now that this latter force was distancing itself from Albania, the nation would be left at the mercy of its Ottoman legacy and ancient customs.

Through this reconstruction of the original myth, Kadare reaches the heart of the instability that has plagued Albania for centuries. The novel, and the original myth, "celebrate the self-sacrificial patriotism of Rozafa, Murrash and Gjon [the novel's narrator who feels he must sacrifice himself in chronicling the events], they also expose the self-serving lies that compromise the integrity of their castles, walls and country" (Raymond 65). Kadare has a character, ostensibly an agent of "Roads and Bridges", remark that "all great building works resemble crimes" (Kadare, *The Three-arched Bridge* 87). This includes building of nations and in such cases the "call of duty to a higher ideal … is of such urgency murder and even the murder of kin by one's own hand become acceptable." The woman's death "precludes the death of innocent children" whom the castle will protect from invaders (Aleksic 3). Thus, Kadare portrays the nobility of Albanians in their willingness to make sacrifices for the supposedly greater good. At the same time, the readers are reminded of the fallibility of human nature and the particular propensity for breaking the *besa*.

This dual Albanian nature is further explored in *Spring Flowers, Spring Frost* which, being written long after the end of Communism, allowed Kadare greater room to write more critically about the Albanian people, culture and history. This novel explores the relevance of the myth of the snake husband. A woman is married off to a snake as a punishment for an offence "the girl's family or clan had committed" which "no one could remember." Yet, she shows no signs of unhappiness. It is revealed that the snake is actually a man who would appear every night, make love to his bride and as soon as morning came would climb back into his snake-suit

and resume a reptilian life. However, one night, wanting make her husband's metamorphosis permanent, the young woman burns the snake suit. This causes "the young man [to fade] away before his bride's eyes, and then [to vanish] entirely, and for ever." The husband explains that he had been "sentenced to spending three-quarters of [his] life in the form of a snake." This means he could only "live as a man for only one-quarter of the time" and that he shall faithfully return to his reptilian form afterwards, without fail. The destruction of the snake suit amounts to a breaking of this faith and, therefore, destroys him completely (Kadare, *Spring Flowers* 13-31).

Kadare chooses this myth as a counterfoil to the socio-cultural conditions of post-communism Albania. This was a time when Albania was once again struggling to find its identity that did not include its former Stalinist isolationism. This post-Hoxha search for a new identity led to a renewed enthusiasm for religious identity and a resurgence of the Kanun with its accompanying honour killings (de Rapper 31; Voell 85). The metamorphic snake-man is a representation of what Kadare believes is Albania's inherent European identity which is hidden behind the violent connotations of a snake suit. The man that emerges out of the snake suit "was a handsome young man, with fair hair cut in the fashion of the times" (Kadare, *Spring Flowers* 24). Thus, he is a representation of modernity which is bound by the curse of ancient tradition. His fair hair and complexion clearly denote his European ethnicity.

The importance of the *Kanun* as a cultural framework that has maintained its relevance and influence on 21st century Albania is evident in *Spring Flowers, Spring Frost*. When the young generation is unable to identify with post-communist modernity moving towards capitalism, they look toward Albania's ancient cultural frameworks such as the *Kanun*. In Benedict Anderson's words, "The idea of a sociological organism moving calendrically through homogeneous, empty time is a precise analogue of the idea of the nation" (26). It is the *Kanun* that had existed in the ancient past and has survived into the present time. It had briefly been on hiatus during the dictatorship as Hoxha had banned it. The revival of the *Kanun* came despite the dormancy of religious practice as "the Kanun was both a practical legal code and 'source of moral authority', which survived in a way that formal religion did not" (Morgan 10). Therefore, it became the unifying framework of self and cultural identity for the disenchanted modern youth. At the same time, this meant the machinery of the *Kanun* was at odds with the machinery of the State whose laws maintained that all murder was illegal.

Since Kadare is a proponent of the *Rilindja* movement, Albania's European identity is a significant issue in his political worldview and the anxiety over how much this identity may have been dented because of Ottoman and, later, Soviet and Chinese influence is often represented in his novels. This particular myth allows Kadare to explore this crisis of identity. There is a great desire among those who had experienced the years of the dictatorship to envision a modern

future away from ancient bloodthirsty traditions. At the same time, he also discusses the growing discontent among the youth over the lack of a sense of purpose which modernity had imposed upon them. These latter seemed to be looking back to the "old ways" to discover some sort of identity (Kadare, *Spring Flowers* 74, 92, 164-5). Thus, through the myth, Kadare is clearly depicting the bind in which Albanians found themselves as a truly free and independent nation desperate to march towards modernity without fully having come to terms with its past.

Conclusion

Albania wields little influence and is often orientalised by foreign observers (Rieff 24). However, according to Erica Weitzman, Albania is "what one might call a 'major' culture" despite its peripheral and, indeed, marginal position on the socio-political map of modern Europe. This is because the nation is "endowed with strong national myths, heroic figures, folkloric practices, and cultural touchstones that for better or for worse allow Albanians to obscure internal differences and historical complexities in favor of a clear master narrative" (Weitzman 285). This is the kernel of Albanianism that Pashko Vasa had propounded. Myths have always been important in developing national consciousness. Often in Western Europe, "nationalist historians [have constructed] 'golden ages' for their communities using sagas like the *Edda* and *Kalevala* and the lays of 'Ossian' and the Nibelunglied." In such cases, the line between myth and history is often blurred as "for the sophisticated 'myth' signified a poetic form of history" (Smith 66). The Arthurian legends in the British Isles are a good example. Kadare is trying to create a similar bank of myths and legends, reusing and reconstructing them to suit his contemporary society, on which a new Albanian identity can be constructed.

Each novel examined in this paper has a specific agenda. *The General of the Dead Army* explores Albania in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. In it, Kadare mythologises the Albanians and the Albanian terrain where "the country itself never really emerges as anything more than a grimly mysterious, inhospitable, unknowable place" (Weitzman 288). The ancient customs only glanced over in this novel are given their due significance in *The Three-arched Bridge* where Kadare seeks to establish Albania's mythical origin story and, despite its Eastern influences, the nation's inherent place in Western European civilisation. The final novel examined, *Spring Flowers, Spring Frost*, explores Albania's reckoning with its past as it enters the 21st century as it finds itself caught between an unfamiliar Western modernity and the unifying effects of the ancient *Kanun*.

"Despite the depredations of vendetta and the Kanun, Albanian culture exists in language and song" as Kadare himself writes in his poem "What are these mountains thinking about?"

Thus, for Kadare, Albania's cultural identity lies not in its multiple foreign occupations, invasions or influences but in "the mythological existence which pre-dates all invaders and which exists at the deepest levels of the collective unconscious" (Morgan 60). Thus, However, the stories that Kadare tells are distinctly Albanian. He represents the aforementioned ancient but distinctly Albanian phenomena such as the *Kanun*, the ancient cultural code that had governed the highlands for centuries, the numerous blood feuds that ravaged families and the various myths that upheld the code of honour. Kadare uses these various myths to different extents within his novels but all with the purpose of mythifying the characters and giving them an exotic and oriental tinge. He also intends to show the diversity and strength of Albanian culture by highlighting the nation's oral tradition.

All of these create a culture that is wildly different from any in the West. This self-orientalisation, otherisation from the Western civilisational ideals alongside a desire to be represented as the original germ of the same, is specifically aimed at creating a uniquely Albanian national identity. Kadare is not promoting a reintroduction of the *Kanun* in all its forms. His main aim is to preserve these customs and ways of life for future generations and to show his contemporaries, in Albania and abroad, the richness of Albanian culture and the importance of honour in governance and social coexistence. He intends to reconstruct the Albanian national identity in a way that did not correspond to Ottoman or Soviet modernity but neither does it fully adhere to Western models of civilisation.

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BIO

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The Symbol of Peace as a Myth: Deconstructing the Existential Problem in *One-Punch Man* and *My Hero Academia*

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ABSTRACT

My Hero Academia and *One-Punch Man* are popular manga series that have amassed a global fanbase. This paper, uses a post-structuralist reading to draw parallels between Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus* and Japanese superhero manga, examining how these works deal with the existential question about the meaning of life. It observes that the superhero myth functions with the help of several signs that construct a superhero's identity and that these identity markers define their take on the existential problem. Furthermore, the paper examines the role played by the crowd—the in-text audience of the myth—in the process of mythologization, where they serve as a medium between the superheroes and the actual reader.

Introduction

What is the point of living? In *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), Albert Camus argues that this question lies at the heart of philosophy. In the past, human life was guided by traditional value systems, with questions of purpose answered by religion. With the advent of modernity, science and philosophy replaced religious dogma in defining the world, but the scientific method functions in a series of assumptions and hypotheses; there are no solid answers. Yet the question remains, creating a human nostalgia for an understanding of the meaning of life (Camus 11-23).

How, then, does the popular culture of the 21st century respond to this question in literature? We turn to hero manga, a Japanese literary genre that has taken the world by storm in recent years. *My Hero Academia*, written by Horikoshi Kouhei, and *One-Punch Man*, written by ONE and illustrated by Murata Yuusuke, are both manga series that started serialization in the 2010s. A semiotic reading of the superhero myth found in these series would reveal its parallels with Sisyphus in representing humanity's existential struggle through an allegory. By studying individual signs crucial to the idea of the hero from across *My Hero Academia* and *One-Punch Man*, we can further study how these relate to the existential problem of the myth of Sisyphus.

It is important to clarify some of the terms and methodologies behind such a semiotic reading. According to the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, a sign is a link between a sound pattern (the signifier) and a concept (the signified) (Saussure 75-78). For example, the word "flag" refers to the physical object we take for a flag. Roland Barthes argues that any sign that implies an additional concept beyond the first signified could be regarded as a myth. These are not individual interpretations, but culturally agreed-upon conventions. For instance, he looks at a picture of a black soldier saluting the French flag. This sign implies that the allegations of colonialism against France are unfounded and that all subjects of France faithfully revere the nation. For a reader unfamiliar with the colonial history of Algeria, it would be difficult to grasp the rationale behind this piece of French imperial propaganda. The signification of a myth, in this view, therefore depends on an understanding of the socio-political factors surrounding it (Barthes 107-115).

Sisyphus and Superheroes

Now, we return to Camus' original question: what is the meaning of life? A child is assured that they would know when they are old enough, and like all other lies adults tell them, they believe in it until one day they realize that they have grown up and still have no answer. Camus uses the Greek myth of Sisyphus as an allegory for this. Sisyphus was a man infatuated with life and tricked the Olympian gods by escaping death. After a long life of playing catch with death, he was cursed in the underworld to push a boulder to the top of a mountain. But whenever

Sisyphus nears the peak, the boulder rolls down, thus making him repeat the action ad infinitum. After an average adult realizes the lack of inherent meaning in life, their existence becomes a loop of struggling throughout the work week and then getting a day off on the weekend. This day of rest is the time when existential questions emerge. Throughout the day, Sisyphus goes through enormous physical toil to push the boulder. It is only when it rolls off that he has a moment to think (Camus 107-111).

The narrative situations that emerge in *My Hero Academia* and *One-Punch Man* broadly revolve around physical confrontations; but this is not my object of inquiry. The fights themselves, like Sisyphus' boulder, serve an allegorical function. We should be concerned with Sisyphus' reaction to his ordeal, and likewise, how heroes respond to conflict. If Sisyphus is the stand-in for the everyman, the hero represents the ideal human. Although the Japanese word used in these works is "hero", it refers to the archetype more commonly called "superhero" in Western comics. This is a common phenomenon in Japanese, where katakana words (vocabulary loaned from foreign languages) are shortened and modified to suit the Japanese phonetic system. Both words share a link with the notion of the Greek hero (heros, literally meaning protector). This act of protection remains the dominant meaning in the contemporary usage of the word.

For example, when we first meet Saitama, the protagonist of *One-Punch Man*, he is a suited job seeker walking down the street. He comes across a tall humanoid crab monster who introduces himself as Crablante. While the surrounding people scram, Saitama couldn't be bothered to escape. He just got rejected from a job, so he doesn't care about what happens to him. Crablante, out of sympathy, lets him off, and Saitama heads on with his life. Later, when Crablante attacks a child in a playground (someone Saitama has never seen before and has no reason to care for), he jumps to the rescue without a thought. Herein lies his origin story (ONE Ch 2: 2-16).

Similarly, in *My Hero Academia*, when a sludge villain tries to take control of Bakugo's body, Midoriya jumps to the rescue on an impulse, although he is weaker than Bakugo himself, and bullied by Bakugo throughout his entire childhood for his weakness (Horikoshi Ch 2: 40-48). This action of jumping to the rescue lies at the core of both these origin stories, and therefore the act of protection remains dominant. Peter Coogan argues that the three most important components of the superhero are their mission, powers, and identity (Coogan 6). To protect others, as we have discussed, broadly serves as the mission. Both Midoriya and Saitama lack powers and identity in their origin story.

In *My Hero Academia*, a genetic mutation occurred a few generations ago, and now a majority of humans develop supernatural quirks by the age of four. While some use these for nefarious means and others to stop them from doing so, most treat it like any other accidental

feature in their bodies and move on with their lives. Midoriya is one of the few who isn't born with a power.

A combination of multiple elements makes up the identity of a superhero, but in this section, we can examine the role played by their name and their costume. Bakugo bullied Midoriya throughout his childhood, calling him Deku, which signifies meanings such as useless. Midoriya later appropriates this as his hero name. Meanwhile, Saitama is assigned the hero name "Caped Baldy".

In terms of costume in their origin stories, these characters are defined by uniforms: Deku is a schoolboy in a uniform, while Saitama is a job seeker in a suit. It is only later that they acquire their hero jumpsuits. The three components of the superhero (their mission, powers, and identity) spell out the specifics of their individual parallels to the myth of Sisyphus. Their mission is to push the boulder, their powers define how much they struggle to reach the top of the hill, and their identity defines how they react to the struggle. The third is the component we are most concerned with. How do we define the identity of the hero in superhero manga?

In the world of *My Hero Academia*, All Might is not simply a protector, but a symbol of peace.

Nietzsche's idea of the ubermensch, often translated as superman, is an ideal being—above the grasp of man, yet an object of pursuit (Nietzsche "Zarathustra's Prologue"). All Might functions as an ubermensch when we look at him through the gaze of other characters such as Deku, Bakugo, and Endeavor—all of whom strive to become as strong as him but fall short. However, he is not literally invincible, and therefore, we can relate only his social identity to that of ubermensch. All Might's Sisyphian struggle is to protect this identity so that he can maintain the symbol of peace—something that is instrumental in keeping down crime rates in his world.

Saitama, much like All Might, is the strongest being in his universe. As the title suggests, he can defeat any enemy with a single punch, leaving him bored because of the lack of an actual challenge. His Sisyphean task thus becomes to find purpose in life. *One-Punch Man*'s interpretation of the myth of Sisyphus is unique. Although the curse remains the same, here we find a Sisyphus who has become so strong through daily toil that the task has become too easy to fulfill. In Camus' interpretation, the journey uphill is one of physical toil, while the descent makes Sisyphus reflect on the purpose. Here, we find Sisyphus plagued by ennui throughout the day.

Ryan Johnson reads *One-Punch Man* as a critique of the concept of ubermensch. Saitama reaches the status of what Nietzsche deems beyond humanity, and is still unhappy. He reaches this through a simple training regimen: a hundred push-ups, sit-ups, and squats, along with a ten-kilometer jog, every single day of the week. Although this is not an easy routine, it is certainly one that professional athletes can perform (Johnson 151).

However, Saitama is not literally comparable to the ubermensch, because although he possesses superhuman strength, that is not a sufficient condition for him to be considered ubermensch. Because of his strength, he struggles with a sense of meaninglessness, thus bringing him closer to the same existential crisis as Sisyphus.

Smiles and Catchphrases

Now that we have seen how the myth of Sisyphus and that of the ubermensch relate to the hero myth on a broader level, we must investigate individual signs that play a part in the process of signification to substantiate this link. To do so, I will explore two signs that can be related to the identity of the hero, since, as we have discussed, this can help us understand their reaction to the Sisyphian struggle.

To understand the relevance of the smile of a hero, let us first examine a character who lacks it. While Deku and Bakugo are young students, Endeavor is a grown adult at the peak of his career, and although he is the number two hero, he pales compared to All Might. Despite all of his endeavors, the general populace doesn't view him as a symbol of peace like All Might. This is not a result of his relative weakness. While none of the top heroes match up to All Might's strength, the public adores them simply because of their individual contributions. Why is this not the case for the number two hero? Yoarashi Inasa was a fan of Endeavor as a child, impressed by his flames. In "Chapter 111", we see a flashback, in which Inasa tries to get an autograph from Endeavor. But Endeavor shoves him aside and walks forward with hatred in his eyes. Since then, the former fan of Endeavor started hating him. The reason behind Endeavor's eyes, however, is not hatred. It signifies his ambition of surpassing All Might and becoming the number one hero. He is frustrated because even after spending his entire life trying to get stronger, he cannot grasp All Might's position. In the following chapter, Inasa further describes Endeavor's eyes as fixated on something far into the distance, and cites them as his reason for hating him. In other words, his eyes reflect his obsession with moving forward, and his endeavor to get stronger, a characteristic that gives him his hero name.

Camus describes a Sisyphus who descends in sorrow as such: "I see that man going back down with a heavy yet measured step towards the torment of which he will never know the end" (Camus 108). This matches the description of Endeavor after he wins a battle. Like Sisyphus, he is tormented by the fate of pushing the boulder without hope of success. Thus, we have an unhappy hero.

Lawrence Frolov claims that Endeavor's lack of happiness comes from the spirit of eudaimonia, and the incompatibility of the eudaimonic view of happiness with human nature. Eudaimonism seeks to find happiness in the greater good, while hedonism seeks to maximize

gross pleasure. For eudaimonia to fulfill self-actualization, Endeavor would have to uphold the three pillars that support this system: autonomy, relatedness, and competence. Frolov points out how, by inflicting his dreams on his family and thereby abusing them, Endeavor hampers his relatedness. Similarly, by not acknowledging public sentiment, Endeavor hampers his relatedness with the public. Other than hurting his family, he hurts his own chance at finding happiness by isolating himself in a solitary pursuit. Endeavor is competent as a hero, being ranked number two, but it is his lack of autonomy that makes him disbelieve his competence. Endeavor lives in All Might's shadow, and since he constantly compares himself to him, he perceives himself as weak (Frolov 32-38).

However, this reading of Endeavor's pursuit comes with a flaw: he doesn't strive for the greater good but seeks the prestige of being the number one hero. Frolov argues that Endeavor isn't hedonistic because he doesn't take a moment to celebrate his victories, while many other heroes do. However, many heroes who do rejoice in their victories do so because they were able to save lives, something that reflects the greater good. Although these heroes receive immediate gratification, it would be odd to label them hedonistic. Meanwhile, Endeavor doesn't save lives simply because he wants to, but as a means to an end. And since this end is not that of the greater good, but personal gain, we cannot see eudaimonia as the driving force behind Endeavor.

I would like to argue that Endeavor's failure lies in his misunderstanding of the myth of the hero. He has always seen the symbol of peace as simply the strongest hero and hoped that by becoming the strongest hero, he could become that symbol. However, even after All Might retires, leaving Endeavor the new number one hero, he fails to embody the symbol of peace. In "Chapter 164", he remarks that crime rates have risen since the time All Might retired, although Endeavor has resolved more incidents than anyone. It is not a matter of strength or competence, since, for all his might, All Might isn't omnipresent. He couldn't have been responsible for single -handedly stopping crime on such a massive scale. The reason crime rates were so low during his time was that All Might functioned as a myth, a symbol holding back villains.

How, then, does the symbol of peace function? We turn to the sign of a smile. A four-year-old Deku sits at his computer and re-watches a video obsessively: it is All Might's debut as a hero, in the wake of a major disaster. We see images of victims in tears and the figure of a single muscular man carrying them all on his back with a smile on his face. This highlights that the hero not only saves lives but also assures them that there is nothing to fear. The symbol of peace is a myth, that of a hero who smiles in the face of crisis. This myth holds immense power in the world of *My Hero Academia*. Even after Deku finds out that he will never develop a quirk, he is obsessed with the video clip. He is in awe looking at how All Might saves people with a smile no matter what kind of trouble they are in. When he tells his mother that he wants to be that

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kind of a hero, his eyes are full of tears, but he maintains a smile on his face (Horikoshi, Ch 1: 18 -21).

Deku embodies both the sign of a victim and that of a hero. He is Quirkless (born without superpowers), and thus a victim of fate: something that denies him his dreams. But this is not enough to kill his dreams of becoming a hero. Such is the power of the symbol of peace. Deku forces himself to smile, seizing an essential signifier of the hero's identity even when he lacks the strength to be one.

Camus argues that Sisyphus' descent should take place in joy, as a revolt against the cruel fate that has subjected him to such a curse. The smile on the face of a hero in the middle of a disaster reflects the joy of Sisyphus. This is the myth that All Might tries to protect, and Deku tries to embody. Faced with a curse that one cannot remove, the only way to show defiance is to smile at the ordeal.

We now turn to the second sign intrinsic to the hero's identity: a catchphrase. This is a line that the hero shouts out loud when they arrive at the scene, inspiring hope in the distressed. All Might's catchphrase has been iconic ever since his debut: "Fear not! Why, you ask? (Because…) I am here!!" (Horikoshi Ch 1: 18). And since he delivers upon the promise of safety, he becomes the symbol of peace in his world.

But what would the reassuring catchphrase be worth if the concerned character cannot live up to the promise? Let us turn to *One-Punch Man* for an example. A creature of superhuman strength from the ocean, the Deep Sea King attacks City J, and when many of the strongest heroes are dispatched to defend the city, he decimates them. Hundreds of civilians hide at a shelter, and the only person remaining to protect them is Mumen rider, a hero several classes below those who lie fallen at the Deep Sea King's feet. He takes up a fighting stance and repeats his catchphrase: "I am the bicyclist for justice known as Mumen Rider!" (ONE Ch 26: 13). The crowd is in a state of despair after seeing so many stronger heroes fall, so they don't believe he can save them. Mumen Rider jumps into the fight and is immediately beaten. He is fully aware of his weakness, but his idea of being a hero is not to win but simply stand and protect, regardless of whether he is capable of defeating the enemy. And as soon as he stands back up to face the Deep Sea King again, the crowd erupts in a burst of hope, cheering for him till the moment he falls unconscious (ONE Ch 26: 10-26).

Mumen Rider is the perfect example of a hero who successfully gives hope to the public, even when he lacks the competence to save them physically. Perhaps more than any other element of the hero's identity, it is the catchphrase that directly appeals to the audience, both textual and real. Herein lies its power.

Mythologization and the Collective

As Barthes stresses in *Mythologies*, the signification of a myth is not an individual interpretation of it but something generally understood. The myth of the hero, therefore, depends on the people within the crowd, the textual audience. This makes it important to inspect the role played by the crowd in the reception of the myth.

The crowd, in hero manga, functions as a parallel to that of the chorus in Greek tragedy. Aristotle, in his *Poetics*, regards the chorus as one of the actors, citing Sophocles as an example (Aristotle 30).

Let us examine a couple of sections where the chorus plays a role in *Oedipus the King*. Oedipus, suspecting that Creon has conspired against him, has decided to have him executed, but Creon pleads innocent. At this point, the chorus pleads with Oedipus to see reason for the sake of the city. Here, the chorus acts as a voice of reason, commenting upon the irrationality of the tragic hero's behavior while also impacting the actions that unfold in the scene, since Oedipus responds to their pleas (Sophocles 197-199).

For a parallel to this function of the chorus within *My Hero Academia*, let us look at the Provisional License Test, an examination all hero aspirants must pass to act as a hero legally. During the test, Deku is tasked with saving a crowd of set-up victims. When he finds a hurt child, his empathy kicks in. He forgets that it is a simulation and exclaims that it looks bad. The child, a member of the evaluation process, takes points off Deku for not considering the panicked situation of the crowd. Paralyzed by terror, if they see the hero panic, their hopes would be crushed. It is in this moment that Deku fully comprehends the importance of All Might's smile and catchphrase in the middle of a tragedy. The symbol of peace is a myth that must be protected for the sake of the public, to reassure the ones suffering. Deku snaps out of his panic, puts up a smile, and announces that it will be okay, finally embodying the myth of the hero (Horikoshi Ch 109: 10-17).

The child, here a member of the crowd, has a voice to speak to the hero. Without this interaction with the child, Deku's understanding of what it means to be a hero would be limited, and he would only focus on training to become stronger, thus taking the same road as heroes like Endeavor and losing sight of the true symbol of peace. This section also reveals the crowd's vested interest in the maintenance of the hero myth, since here we have the child directly describing the rationale behind it.

In other sections of *Oedipus the King*, such as the last chorus of the tragedy, there is no element of interaction with other characters. Here, the chorus addresses the audience directly and asks them to look upon Oedipus as an example of a great man who lived a remarkable life but had tragedy befall him unexpectedly. This is the role played by the chorus in mediating a

message for the audience to take away from the tragedy (Sophocles 251).

Therefore, the chorus acts as an intermediary, on one hand responding to the situation and interacting with the actors, and on the other influencing the real audience's reactions to what happens on the page.

The interface of the crowd with the reader can be found in many of the sections we have previously examined. The reactions of awe or hope evoked in the crowd when a hero like All Might appears, influences the reader's perception of these characters.

For an example of a section where interactions with the crowd influence the audience's engagement with the hero myth, let us turn to Chapter 27 of *One-Punch Man*. Because of Mumen Rider's perseverance, the Deep Sea King couldn't deliver the final blow to kill many of the heroes present at the scene, and Saitama arrives to defeat him in a single punch. The crowd is in awe. A member questions the ability of the heroes who fell before the Deep Sea King. Saitama paints himself as a fraud, pretending that the others had already weakened the enemy and that he only delivered the final blow.

Joe Yang picks this scene to claim that Saitama embodies "salaryman masculinity". In other words, Saitama discredits himself so that he could preserve the image of the Hero Association, a company that he serves, thus reflecting upon the corporate-driven ethos of Japan (Yang 67-77).

I would like to argue that this scene better represents Saitama as a protector of the hero myth and not that of corporatism. The question raised within the crowd was primarily concerning the myth of the hero, not the institution administering said heroes. The venom was aimed, not at an institution, but at the signification of the hero, since all the heroes before Saitama promised to defeat the Deep Sea King and failed. It is only when another member of the crowd holds this man by the collar that he shifts his focus to the Hero Association. His expression in this panel makes it clear that he uses this as an excuse. This is a member of the crowd, therefore questioning the ideology behind the myth of the hero. Saitama's selfless act, along with a montage of pictures of heroes who have collapsed saving the crowd, incites the reader to further believe in the myth.

Yet we must listen to the voice of the skeptic. What is the point of a myth founded upon irrational reassurance? After all, that the hero can arrive at any moment to save everyone is simply an overestimation of their capabilities. This issue is grave in *My Hero Academia*. The first time Deku meets All Might, he witnesses his true form, a shriveled-up man with a bony frame. The superman physique that he puts up in front of the public is a front he can only maintain for a few hours a day. He has grown weak ever since an enemy injured him five years ago, but he held this from the public to maintain the symbol of peace (Horikoshi Ch 1: 32-34). Unlike in *One-Punch Man*, where Saitama can ultimately defeat any threat to humanity, the symbol of peace in

My Hero Academia is a hero whose strength is diminishing by the day. What, then, is the purpose of such a myth?

Conclusion

The answer lies in the original subjects of Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus*, not the allegorical Sisyphus, but the average human in their daily lives. We noted that the child is constantly reassured that one day they would find out the meaning of life and that it was only when they grew older that they realized that there was none. The adults telling the child that they would find out, in other words, know that this is a lie. They too were children who were lied to, grew up, and faced the full weight of Sisyphus' existential boulder.

The purpose of the hero myth thus serves a similar purpose of reassurance, one no doubt founded upon a lie, but one that gives the crowd hope to live on. Oedipus, raised by foster parents, unknowingly killed his biological father and wed his biological mother, because fate cursed him to do so. And yet, after he finds out, he defies fate by blinding himself and announcing that all is well. Oedipus' proclamation is sacred because it empowers humanity: "It makes of fate a human matter, which must be settled among men. All Sisyphus' silent joy is contained therein. His fate belongs to him" (Camus 110).

If the symbol of peace was abandoned, it would not put an end to the villains threatening human life. Were Sisyphus to frown, the boulder wouldn't get any lighter. In all the battles we have explored, physical danger is only half the picture. What lies at stake is the myth of the hero: the only weapon humanity possesses to fight back against fate. The hero uses signs such as the smile and the catchphrase to signify that the danger has passed, in many cases, not believing in the myth but fully aware of their weakness. Yet, by upholding the myth, they defy fate, like Sisyphus smiling during his descent.

Hero manga, much like Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, finds purpose in simply pushing the boulder for one more day. This is reflected in characters like Mumen Rider and Deku in terms of external conflict, where they cannot cope physically with the weight of the boulder but muster the courage to keep pushing it, while Saitama's boulder is the loneliness back home awaiting him after a long day of saving lives. But as Camus says about Sisyphus, and because the crowd teaches us to do so, one must imagine the hero happy.

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BIO

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The Superhero Archetype as an Auxiliary Class in Marvel's Avengers Movies

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ABSTRACT

The superhero is a much-maligned figure in contemporary culture. In what follows, I draw upon Plato's idea of the auxiliary class and Joseph Campbell's monomyth to read the superhero as a modern version of the auxiliary class. Focusing on the superhero archetype that is found in the MCU or Marvel Cinematic Universe movies, I argue that the superhero-auxiliary is underpinned by an ethos that privileges values like public service, teamwork, social cohesion, and self-sacrifice. The significance of this reading lies in showing how the MCU re-mythologizes Plato's auxiliary class for contemporary culture. As a corollary to that, I hope that the reading will ameliorate some of the negative reception that has plagued the superhero archetype in literary and media discourses.

Introduction

The superhero film has become a staple of modern cinema since the turn of the century. The superhero itself has become a cultural meme. In fact, five of the top ten grossing films of all time are movies that revolve around superheroes. Despite its popularity and dominance in pop culture, many still hate the idea of a superhero movie. That is largely because critics feel that the superhero movie "speaks to nothing but its own kinetic effectiveness" (Bukatman 120). Importantly, they feel that "every visit to the cinema leaves me, against all my vigilance, stupider and worse" (Adorno 5). David Graber suggests that the superhero impedes progress because the superhero is a reactionary character who acts as if "there's nothing inappropriate if police respond by smashing protestors' heads repeatedly against the concrete" (The New Inquiry para 48).

In general, people hate superhero movies for the following seven reasons. The first is that superhero movies are for kids and that they do nothing to advance intellectual or artistic excellence. The second reason is that superhero movies glorify the use of violence to solve problems. Third, superhero movies, particularly Hollywood superhero movies, privilege the depiction of certain racial groups perpetrating violence against other groups. Menaka Philips notes that violence "is a resource differentially distributed within a caste system that polices how violence is deployed in constructions of the hero/villain, friend/enemy, patriot/seditionist" (472). Specifically, the straight white male is given more space and leeway to do violence to other people.

The fourth reason is that superhero movies perpetrate and reinforce gender and sexual prejudices and discrimination. Tim Hanley writes that "one clear constant across all of these superhero comics was the elevation of male fantasy [...] the men were male power fantasies [...] the women were male sexual fantasies, objects of desire for their heroes or for the creator themselves" (12). As a result, superhero movies reproduce and normalize a hierarchical relationship where physically powerful and muscled males dominate females, other kinds of masculinities and genders. The fifth reason is that superheroes valorize the concept of American exceptionalism and nationalism, which in turn valorize authoritarianism and militarism. Indeed, David Graber points that superhero movies normalize "a world in which fascism is the only political possibility" (The New Inquiry para. 26).

The sixth reason is that superhero movies are only concerned with visual spectacle. It is considered that this emphasis on the spectacle lowers the value of art and cinema as a whole. Celebrated graphic novelists like Alan Moore claim that superhero movies have "blighted" culture and cinema (Moore). Even filmmakers have called superhero movies "stupid" (Noe), "childish" (Pegg), and "ridiculous" (Campion). Martin Scorsese expresses what most critics

probably feel about superhero films when he says that they are merely "theme park" movies (Scorsese). Lastly, critics hate superheroes movies because they are movies that flaunt American power through cinema.

But not everyone is that pessimistic about the cultural value of superheroes or superhero movies. Annika Hagley and Michael Harrison note that the Avengers movies "are representative of the melding of various nationalist identities for a common cause and highlight the resilience of the American people after the September 11 attacks" (124). Indeed, Comic Con and other comic related events offer evidence of the communal experience and friendship that can be found amongst comic book fans and followers. To be sure, superhero movies are escapist fun and entertainment. But they also tap into what Carl Jung says about the collective unconscious - the idea that certain mythic archetypes are not only present in the stories of many human cultures and societies but "have universal meanings across cultures and may show up in dreams, literature, art or religion" (Mcleod para 18).

It is here that I argue that superhero movies do offer people more than just escapist fun. Indeed, I contend that they do two or three things to and for people. Firstly, they offer people a vision of possibilities and potentials, the possibility and potential of everyone to be more than what they are, to overcome their own conditions, and more importantly, to do something of value for other people, such as protecting and defending them from the evils of the world. The second thing is that superheroes tap into our innate sense of justice, of the idea that it is not okay for the strong to bully the weak, and at the same time, that the weak are deserving of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness on this Earth. The third and last thing that superheroes do offer people is the hope that there is, however slight, someone or some people looking out for the well-being of the community. In other words, superheroes speak to an innate and communal idea of the auxiliary type.

This idea, as spiritual and religious as it may sometimes be construed by critics to be, nonetheless speaks loudly and close to our collective world soul. In what follows, I argue that the superhero archetype is important because it is a modern version of the auxiliary class. And it represents societal desires of hoping and wanting to be protected by a group of people who exist to serve and protect the well-being, safety, and security of everyone in their community and/or society. To make my case, I examine the superhero archetype that is found in the MCU or Marvel Cinematic Universe movies. The objective of doing so is twofold. The first is because the subject of superheroes is too big and diverse a subject to talk about without getting lost in the literature. Hence, the focus on the superhero archetype as seen in the MCU. The second reason is that the superhero archetype as seen in the MCU exemplifies how Plato's auxiliary class is repackaged and re-mythologized for contemporary society through popular culture.

The auxiliary archetype and the superhero

The superhero is a heroic archetype that is a modern take on the idea of the auxiliary class in society. An auxiliary class is a class of people that protects and regulates the everyday functioning of a society. This idea is particularly prominent in Plato's *The Republic* where the Greek philosopher divided society into three classes. They are the philosopher-kings or guardians, the auxiliaries (warriors), and the producers (artisans). Auxiliaries are warriors who are responsible for defending the city from invaders, keeping peace at home, enforcing the guardians' will, and keeping the producers in check. So, if we were to extrapolate this idea and put it into a modern context, auxiliaries are basically people who work as security guards, police officers, and soldiers in real life. And while some might not find security guards, police officers, or military personnel particularly attractive as heroic figures, the fact is that they are fundamentally auxiliaries of the state. A superhero is just a flashier variant.

Now, it is true to say that the superhero figure, as we know it, was made popular by American comic books and Hollywood movies. But this phenomenon does not mean that the superhero is uniquely an American thing. To be sure, the way in which superheroes are presented, such as Superman or Batman, are American creations. But the story pattern of the superhero can be found across and amongst the stories and myths of different cultures and societies. Indeed, the monomythic nature of the superhero archetype closely follows Joseph Campbell's notion of the monomyth and the mythic story patterns of what he calls the hero's journey. Joseph Campbell describes the classical monomyth as follows: "a hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man" (30).

While Campbell's work on the monomyth and the hero's journey centers on religious and spiritual myths and stories, we, nonetheless, can find parallels in the narrative journey of the superhero as well. Specifically, we can see how superheroes are often compelled to leave the comfort of their previous lives (departure), and enter into a situation where they use their special powers to stop crime, terrorism, or other atrocities from happening (initiation), and they usually return to their own lives as a changed person. But the superhero myth, although sharing some principles of Campbell's monomyth, has additional narrative features.

These narrative features are (a) a protagonist struggling with two identities (one real-life and the other an alter-ego or costumed persona), (b) the struggle between hiding their real and fake identities (c) the struggle of using their powers to benefit other people or themselves, (d) the struggle to overcome doubts about their place in the world, and (e) the struggle to convince others that they have good intentions. Adapting Joseph Campbell's monomyth to elucidate the

American monomyth and the America-centric superhero, John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett suggest that while the classical monomyth reflects rites of passage or initiation, the "American monomyth derives from tales of redemption" (6). Specifically, the American monomyth is about restoring "paradise":

> A community in a harmonious paradise is threatened by evil; normal institutions fail to contend with this threat; a selfless superhero emerges to renounce temptations and carry out the redemptive task; aided by fate, his decisive victory restores the community to its paradisiacal condition; the superhero then recedes into obscurity." (Lawrence and Jewett 6)

Indeed, this redemption myth plays a big role in the story of the American superhero. It is about trying to recover "paradise" or in less romantic terms, to return to the status quo. While Lawrence and Jewett's idea of the monomyth of the American superhero seems to be grounded more by religious undertones, I argue that this idea of "recovery" or redemptive power of the American-centric superhero translates nicely to the function of auxiliaries (that is to say, the function to protect, defend, and regulate everyday life). As a result, the superhero, inasmuch as they have a hero's journey and that they seek to recover paradise, are people who live and exist to perform auxiliary duties.

But the superhero is not just someone who is merely doing a job. Instead, the superhero archetype is fundamentally a moral and prosocial person who wants to serve humanity in whatever capacity they are allowed to serve it. According to Peter Coogan, the superhero is someone whose "mission is to fight evil and protect the innocent; this fight is universal, prosocial, and selfless. The superhero's mission must fit in with the existing, professed mores of society, and it must not be intended to benefit or further the superhero" (3). Indeed, Chris Yogerst argues that superheroes are fundamentally people who are underpinned by moral agency and people who exercise qualities such as "courage, humility, righteous indignation, sacrifice, responsibility, and perseverance" (27).

Now, of course, some might say that superheroes are not a homogenous bunch. But there are generally five types of superheroes. The first type is aliens with special powers (e.g. Thor). The second type is humans who somehow are imbued with superpowers through either accident, endowments, or acquired skills (e.g. Spider-Man, Captain America, or Doctor Strange). The third type is ordinary humans with high intellect and resources (e.g. Black Panther or Iron Man). The fourth type is supernatural or magical figures (e.g. Shazam). The fifth type is robots and artificial intelligence (e.g. Vision). But while they might be different in terms of their powers, race, or

even origins, it is actually more accurate to say that they are different only in terms of being different variants of the same archetype.

Indeed, all of them, despite their different powers or origins, are fundamentally people who seek to protect other people from harm. In relation to the idea of superheroes as being a prosocial and moral group of beings, I shall apply this framework to the superhero group that is the Avengers. Specifically, I argue that the grouping that is the Avengers re-orientates our view to seeing superheroes as being an auxiliary class of people as opposed to vigilantes or "freaks". To be sure, superheroes do operate outside the law. But they do so because, usually, the police or military are unable to defeat or apprehend the super-powered villains. Hence, they need someone who is their match to recover or restore the status quo.

Now, what this means is that we can say that superheroes are, in a way, working for the police or military. But that is not really true in the sense that while we can say that superheroes, for example, like the Avengers are a "militarized" group (Pardy 110), they are not a part of any recognizable wing of the police or military. In that sense, the Avengers are not a state instrument. Rather, they are a pro-government militia. The term pro-government militia or PGM refers to "armed groups" that are "loosely and informally linked to the government, operate with relative autonomy, and perform irregular tasks such as intimidation" (Böhmelt and Clayton 199).

These functions are actually alluded to in Nick Fury's words when he said: "[t]here was an idea called the Avengers initiative. The idea was to bring together a group of remarkable people. To see if they can become something more. To see if they can work together when we need them to fight the battle we never could." Indeed, superheroes are independent contractors who can choose what to do with their powers. They are heroes because they choose to use their powers for the betterment of humanity. But choosing to regulate and advance the security and safety of humanity comes with other choices as well. This includes choosing to put aside their own pride and arrogance to work in a team and to work in such a way that privileges the health and safety of humanity over their own.

Teamwork, work ethic, and multilateralism

Working well with others or teamwork is one of the greatest values that is promoted by the Avengers. In *The Avengers* (2012), Nick Fury unites the discrete members of The Avengers to fight not only Loki but also his army from outer space. In *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015), the Avengers fight as a team to defeat Ultron, an artificial intelligence. In *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018) and *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), the Avengers put aside their differences to defeat Thanos and undo his cosmic genocide. In all four films, the Avengers choose to give up their own selfish ways and learn to work together for the sake of the common good. The importance of teamwork

is demonstrated with the death of Agent Coulson. The reason is that Coulson died because the team was busy quarreling amongst themselves when they could have actually used their energies to work together and to protect the people around them. Granted, they were under the spell of the mind stone, but Coulson's death highlights the importance of what can go wrong when team unity is undermined by self-interests and narcissism.

Work ethic is a value that underpins the ethos of the Avengers. In fact, superheroes have to be on standby, twenty-four hours, seven days a week. This is evidenced by how conflicted each character feels in terms of balancing their personal and professional lives in such a way that does not destroy their well-being. For example, Tony Stark's obsession with finding new ways to protect Earth is a constant source of tension between him and Pepper Potts. Indeed, Steve Rogers' sense of duty causes him to give up the idea of romance and marriage. It was only later that Rogers decided to go back in time to spend his life with his true love Peggy Carter. Even Thor's sense of self-worth is tied to work. As shown in *Endgame*, Frigga had to tell Thor not to let the label of "superhero" limit him. But the Avengers are not workaholics who have nothing better to do with their lives. Instead, they serve because they feel that it is their responsibility and duty to serve and to ensure that people are safe and protected from evil forces.

Multilateralism is a concept from international relations. But it is something that is highly valued in the stories of the Avengers. Multilateralism prioritizes consensus, compromise, and community above self. This concept is perhaps embodied by the work done by the United Nations in fostering dialogue and cooperation between nations around the globe. According to Josep Borrell, the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, "global cooperation based on agreed rules" lowers the risk for "the law of the jungle, where problems don't get solved" (Security Council para 2). Indeed, UN Secretary-General António Guterres "underscored that the world requires a multilateralism that is more effective, more networked, and more inclusive, saying "we need to combine the strengths of existing institutions to deliver together on humanity's most pressing challenges" (Guterres para 22).

Multilateralism can be seen by how the Avengers submit themselves to the authority of S.H.I.E.L.D. By doing so, the Avengers show that super heroing is not some ego-trip but a job that is about how to serve society in the best possible way. The events of *Captain America: Civil War* (2016) encapsulate the dangers of unilateralism and the benefits of multilateralism. The following scene expresses this point.

Tony Stark: There's no decision-making process here. We need to be put in check! Whatever form that takes, I'm game. If we can't accept limitations, if we're boundary-less, we're no better than the bad guys.

Steve Rogers:	Tony, someone dies on your watch, you don't give up.
Tony Stark:	Who said we're giving up?
Steve Rogers:	We are if we're not taking responsibility for our actions. This document just shifts the blames.
James Rhodes:	I'm sorry. Steve. That - that is dangerously arrogant. This is the United Nations we're talking about. It's not the World Security Council, it's not S.H.I.E.L.D., it's not HYDRA.
Steve Rogers:	No, but it's run by people with agendas, and agendas change.
Tony Stark:	That's good. That's why I'm here. When I realized what my weapons were capable of in the wrong hands, I shut it down and stopped manufacturing.
Steve Rogers:	Tony, you chose to do that. If we sign this, we surrender our right to choose. What if this panel sends us somewhere we don't think we should go? What if there is somewhere we need to go, and they don't let us? We may not be perfect, but the safest hands are still our own.

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It is notable that while Steve Rogers disagrees with the Sokovia Accords, he does not seek to undermine, change or overthrow the government. Rather, he chose to respect the decision and chose to go into self-exile. But choosing to do so does not mean that Rogers is blindly loyal to or naive about the government. As Del M. N. Bharath argues, "Captain America's loyalty does not lie with the government; instead, he puts his faith in the people" (397). Indeed, Steve Rogers chose to accept the decision of the elected officials of the people, and chose to step down and step aside, leaving politics and policy to the officials elected by the people. This is important because it shows the difference between villains and heroes; the former who sees themselves as above or beside society and the latter who sees themselves as serving the desires of society.

Superheroes are public servants

Superheroes are often criticized for being one-dimensional characters. Specifically, they are criticized for being only interested in fighting bad guys and nothing else. But we have to remember that superheroes do not actually have to do such things in the first place. The fact that super heroes choose to use their powers to help people says a lot about their character. By choosing to help people with their powers, superheroes show that serving the greater good is not about self-gratification or seeking material rewards. Instead, they show public service is about serving the interest of the people. To be sure, there are many examples of corrupt politicians or public servants and egregious cases of corruption in politics and government. But not all

government officials and not all government agents are corrupted or are involved in corruption. There exist many hardworking and honest officials and agents doing their best to serve the public. The concept of superheroes is thus a reminder that there are good people in the world who are constantly trying to do right by the people.

To be sure, superheroes are not perfect beings. They have their own flaws and weaknesses. But they are heroes because they choose to serve the public interests even though they are not paid and even though they usually have to risk their own personal well-being for the sake of the greater good. This particular quality can be seen in the way in which Steve Rogers and Tony Stark settle their arguments and differences in *Civil War*. While many enjoy the sport-like rivalry between Team Captain America and Team Iron Man in *Civil War*, we must remember that their fight was not about subversion or revolution. Rather, their argument was about what is the best way to serve humanity. For Rogers, the best to serve humanity was to be an independent force that could act according to their own conscience and not because of political agendas. For Stark, it was about obeying the mandate of the United Nations.

But no matter who we might support in that argument, *Civil War* show that bad things can happen when superheroes choose to do things in their own way. Indeed, in the film, you can see that, even though they kept their fighting amongst themselves, damage was done not only to each other but to public property as well. It is thus a curious note that critics of superhero movies seldom raise this point whenever they suggest that superheroes should use their powers to usher in revolutionary or radical changes to society. Umberto Eco, for example, seems to suggest that it is frustrating that instead of "exercising good on a cosmic level, or a galactic level" and enacting "the most bewildering political, economic, and technological upheavals in the world," superheroes are "forever employed in parochial performances" and "obliged to continue [their] activities in the sphere of small and infinitesimal modifications of the immediately visible" (Eco 22).

But I argue that it is precisely because superheroes only concern themselves with security and safety matters and not with societal, economic, or political problems that makes them heroic characters. Otherwise, they are just people who are activists or politicians. To be sure, socio-political and economic issues are important topics. But the job of an auxiliary is not to get involved such matters. That is because their job as auxiliary is simply to make sure that the people are safe and secure from external or internal threats. At the same time, superheroes, like most auxiliaries, are not really qualified, be it training, education, or job experiences, to deal with socio-political issues and problems. In fact, to ask or expect superheroes to interfere or solve complex socio-political problems is the equivalent of asking athletes to debate fiscal policies or asking mathematicians to win the World Series.

Superheroes have a job to do and it is best that they stick to it and let others do theirs. As a corollary, Steve Rogers objects whenever S.H.I.E.L.D. or any members of the Avengers appear to be transgressing and going beyond their remit as a security force. Indeed Steve Rogers constantly resists the idea of unelected officials meddling with policy and politics. This resistance can be seen in two moments in the movies. The first occurs when Rogers argues with Tony when it is discovered that he had created Ultron. The second instance is when Rogers argues with Nick Fury about the dangers of using predictive technologies to target perceived enemies of the state.

Thanos' actions in *Infinity War* and *Endgame* encapsulate the horrors that can occur when super-beings decide that they know best and that they are the only ones who can solve complex problems that are plaguing society. To be sure, Thanos' goals of protecting the environment and enhancing living standards are laudable goals. But his actions or policies are totally irrational, abhorrent and misanthropic. The reason is because his solutions are predicated upon death and destruction. And if one's solution to any problem is simply to just kill people and destroy families, societies, and civilizations, then by logic, one should always just resort to death and destruction to solve any kind of problems.

Thanos' plan is not only immoral but it is also illogical. The reason is because life itself is filled with all sorts of problems. And if one keeps thinking that death or destruction is the solution, then the most logical solution is to simply not to have life in the first place. In fact, Thanos should just totally wiped out life itself. Then there wouldn't be any problems in the first place. But the more important point is that both *Infinity War* and *Endgame*s how that having good intentions, while commendable, is not enough. One must also have proper and relevant solutions to problems. The story of Thanos is thus a cautionary tale of what can happen when a super-being decides to make unilateral decisions for the rest of us. Thanos is also a cautionary tale of the horrors that can ensue when tyrants or super-beings make decisions on behalf of society without going through consulting and working with the people.

But the Avengers movies, on the whole, are also cautionary tales of what can go wrong when people who are successful in one field of work think that their success can be transferred or is relevant to another field. This idea is best encapsulated by the Dunning Kruger effect. It is a cognitive bias whereby people with low ability, experience or expertise overestimate the ability, experience and expertise involved to do things. The consequence of this can result in negative or fatal consequences. In Thanos' case, he not only overestimated his ability and intelligence to solve something as complex as overpopulation and resource exhaustion, he also underestimated the ability and intelligence of people to solve complex problems. And this is what differentiates a superhero and a villain, which is the idea that the former knows what he or she is good at and

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they stick to it (namely, security and safety), whereas the latter often think that they know best and thus seek to overturn, subvert or radically change the status quo.

The Monomyth of the Superhero as an Auxiliary Class in the MCU

It is here that I turn to a particular member of the Avengers, Tony Stark a.k.a. Iron Man. It is with him that we see the ideas of Plato's auxiliary, Campbell's monomyth, Lawrence and Jewett's American monomyth, and Coogan's idea of a superhero combine and come to life. Tony Stark was a fairly narcissistic and self-indulgent "billionaire, genius, playboy, philanthropist" who had no qualms designing, manufacturing, and selling weapons for money (Ordinary World; Campbell's monomyth stages are mentioned here and henceforth in this manner). But after he was captured and forced to use his skills and knowledge to escape from his captors, Stark realized the harm his weapons were causing the world and decided to use them to protect and defend society from harm (Call to Action).

He was initially aided by Ho Yinsen, a fellow scientist and prisoner, who encouraged him to build the original prototype Iron Man suit (Mentor). After escaping and surviving the ordeal, Stark's decision to save the world then turned into a dangerous obsession after Thanos' attack on New York (Great Ordeal). The attack drove him to develop more and more sophisticated weapons (Crossing the threshold). But his obsession then led to Ultron, a genocidal artificial intelligence which caused great harm to the world. Later Stark found himself fighting against an equally obsessive Thanos who wanted to end half of the population in the universe (Challenge). These events and antagonists test not only Stark's abilities, skills, and knowledge but they also test his determination, resolve, and moral strength.

While many question and doubt his commitment to the cause, and in spite of his many personal flaws and mistakes in life, Stark ultimately chose to give his life to save the universe. As he puts it, "every journey must have an end" (source?). Tony Stark's journey started with him stepping away from his "old world" of weapons manufacturing and into a "new world" of super heroism. He then became the unofficial leader of the Avengers. That is, he uses his wealth and scientific knowledge to arm the Avengers, including helping out with the building of the Heli-carriers. In fact, while Doctor Strange was the one who came up with a plan to defeat Thanos, Stark was the one who chose to give up his life to do so.

At the end, Stark showed his true colors as a prosocial and moral person by giving the fullest measure of himself to protect and defend humanity as he chose to place the safety and security needs of society over his own. Tony Stark exemplifies the idea and ideal of a superhero; one who puts his own needs below the needs of society. The key takeaway from the superhero archetype is that while it is true that superheroes and comic-books were made initially for kids

(they are usually depicted as wearing bright costumes, frequently stress the spectacle of superpowers, and use violence to solve problems), the superhero archetype is fundamentally underpinned by adult themes of societal and community security, safety, and protection. And these themes are embedded within their roles as auxiliaries. But the superhero-auxiliary is not someone just doing a job. Rather, they are fundamentally prosocial and moral people who embody and practice an ethos of public service, teamwork, moral rectitude, and multilateralism.

Whither the superhero archetype

It has been argued here that the Avengers is an auxiliary and security force that is underpinned by values of public service, teamwork, and social cohesion. But critics tend to ignore these aspects of the Avengers. Instead, they chose to focus on the superficiality of the superhero archetype such as their origins, commercialism, and visuality. Indeed, this resistance towards superheroes as a whole can also be found in discussions regarding Marvel movies. Specifically, critics argue that the MCU reflects the greed of filmmakers "racing to find the next comparable big-budget blockbuster home run" (Katz) and that it "masks the need for cathartic discussion about complex problems facing the United States, such as economic challenges eroding the middle class" (Frantzman). From a sociological perspective, critics feel that superhero movies promote not only violence (Muller et al. 1-10), racism (Hunt 86-103), sexism (May), martial culture and fascism (Weldon), but they also normalize the desire for surveillance "at the expense of individual privacy" (Schänzel 259).

But other scholars have pointed out that movies like *Black Panther* (2018) have helped to subvert "stereotypes found in Hollywood movies by "presenting characters that embody complex intersectional identities" (Bucciferro 169). Additionally, the MCU movies show that heroism is less about vigilantism and vanity and more about "the ability to contribute through one's affiliations meaningfully" (Acu 197). While superhero movies are certainly not bastions of cinematic, cultural, or moral excellence, they nonetheless show that heroism is more than just about superpowers or using violence to solve problems. Instead, the MCU movies show that heroism is about protecting and upholding the safety and security of society.

While critics will continue to criticize superheroes, one is compelled to say that superhero fans watch superhero movies not because they are fascists or sociopaths. Rather they watch superhero stories because they allow us to celebrate values such as duty, public service, self-sacrifice, and the work done by the auxiliary class. It is perhaps a sign of troubled times that superhero movies are popular with audiences around the world. But unlike critics who hold that audiences are passive and undiscerning; I argue that audiences are actually actively voting with their money and time by supporting superhero movies. But their support comes from an innate desire and appreciation for the auxiliary class and the good that such a class of people do for society.

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Archetypal Elements in Henrik Ibsen's *Ghosts*

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ABSTRACT

Ghosts is one of Henrik Ibsen's best-known dramas. The reason can also be found in the central theme of the play that caused a scandal to its appearance: the luetic disease transmitted from father to son. Ibsen does not explicitly declare the pathological component but that critics have identified as hereditary neurosyphilis. Some critics such as Derek R. Davis in the Sixties and Russel E. Brown in the Nineties, proposed a pathology other than the luetic one. Starting from the symptoms described by Ibsen, they proposed that Osvald was suffering from schizophrenia.

It is difficult to expect a literary character to behave exactly like a person. It often represents for the author a symbol or an idea to be developed. Therefore, it is not possible to subject a fictitious character to a psycho-pathological analysis as if he were a real person. However, it is possible to use him as a model and offer a different interpretation of the literary work in which he moves. That being said, the purpose of this work is to provide further support to the schizophrenic theory of Osvald's illness proposed by Davis and Brown, using Jung's archetypal theory. A psychological interpretation can be provided here of what happens on stage to the characters in *Ghosts* and highlight the psychological symbol of the emerging Self.

KEYWORDS

Archetypes, Ghosts, Henrik Ibsen, Carl Gustav Jung, schizophrenia

Introduction

The characters that animate the works of playwright Henrik Ibsen, which are so complex and tormented, are particularly suitable to be analyzed psychologically. Many psychiatrists and psychoanalysts have been doing so in considerable detail since the late nineteenth century.[1] Conversely, Carl Gustav Jung only gave brief reference to the play *The Lady from the Sea*, by pointing out the archetypal nature of Ellida Wangel's[2] behavior, and leaving out the rest of the extensive, though symbol-laden, Ibsen production.

Ghosts is among Henrik Ibsen's best-known dramas and has not gone without psychoanalytic interpretations, mostly Freudian and post-Freudian[3] in nature. The reason for using the Freudian model is primarily due to the problematic relationship between Osvald (son) and his mother Helene Alving during the play and, retrospectively, between Osvald and Chamberlain Alving (father). On this last tie there is a pathological component that Ibsen does not explicitly declare but that critics have identified as hereditary neurosyphilis. Some critics, such as Derek R. Davis in the Sixties and Russel E. Brown in the Nineties, proposed a pathology other than the luetic one. Starting from the symptoms described by Ibsen, they proposed that Osvald was suffering from a serious mental illness, schizophrenia.

It is difficult to expect a literary character to behave exactly like a person. It often represents for the author a symbol or an idea to be developed. Therefore, it is not possible to subject a fictitious character to a psycho-pathological analysis as if he were a real person. However, it is possible to use him as a model and offer a different interpretation of the literary work in which he moves. That being said, the purpose of this work is to interpret the plot of *Ghosts* and to provide further support to the schizophrenic theory of Osvald's illness proposed by Davis and Brown, using Jung's archetypal theory. A psychological interpretation can be provided here of what happens on stage to the characters in *Ghosts* and highlight the psychological symbol of the emerging Self.

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[1] We can here remember the most important writings from the end of 19th century to the first decades of the past century: Nordau (1892); Lombroso (1893); Rank (1912); Freud (1916); Reich W. (1920); Vogt R. (1930).

It is to be noted that Otto Rank was born as Otto Rosenfeld and in 1909 he changed his surname to Rank to distinguish himself from an alcoholic and violent father: "Apparently Otto Rosenfled took the pen name Rank from a character in Ibsen's A Doll's House"(Lieberman 4).

[2] This does not mean that analytical psychology cannot be applied to the interpretation of the symbols present in Ibsen's works. Some literary critics close to Jung's theory identified archetypal complexes at the base of the behaviors of the characters that animate Ibsen's dramas: think for example of "Archetypal Criticism: Theory of Myths" (1957) by Northrop Frye and *Mythic Patterns in Ibsen's Last Plays* (1970) by Orley I. Holtan, just to mention the now classic critical works that are analytical in nature.

[3] It may be referred to the interesting interpretation made on the basis of Freud's death drive by Erik Østerud (1996) "Tableau and Thanatos in Henrik Ibsen's *Gengangere*". *Scandinavian Studies*, 68, 4:473-489; and the Lacanian interpretation of Anne Marie Rekdal (2005) "The Freedom of Perversion", *Ibsen Studies*, 5:2, 121-47.

Ghosts by Henrik Ibsen

The drama *Ghosts* (*Gengångare*) was published in December 1881 and did not fail to generate scandal. Ibsen's previous play, *A Doll's House* (1879), had also sparked great debate, but the stir that followed rewarded the play and the performance with success. This time, however, the play raised a scandal, especially because of the disgust that the implied theme of degeneration due to a sexual disease aroused.[4] To give an idea of the enormous scandal raised by the text, it can be said that, following the reviews, many copies remained unsold, and it took more than ten years to sell out the first edition. This was unusual for Ibsen whose dramas were, and would later be, always not only awaited and read in Scandinavia, but promptly translated into the main European languages. Such an unusual theme caused the first performance to take place not in Scandinavia but in the United States at the Aurora Turner Hall in Chicago on May 20, 1882, staged by a nearly amateur theatre company; other amateur actors staged it in Copenhagen and only the following year was it represented by professionals in Scandinavia: August 22 at Stadsteater in Helsingborg and August 28 at the Folketeatret in Copenhagen.

The plot of *Ghosts* is as follows. The young Osvald, aged twenty-seven, returns to his family's house on the occasion of the inauguration of a kindergarten dedicated to his deceased father, Chamberlain Alving. Helene, Osvald's mother and Chamberlain's wife, built it to rehabilitate the name of the man who, though being dead for ten years, was the source of rumors due to his vicious conduct. It was this very conduct that led Helene to give up her son when he was seven years old, the latter leaving home at sixteen, to live in Paris where he became a painter.

Osvald, now back home, is attracted to the maid Regina and attempts to seduce her. This relationship, however, is promptly interrupted by his mother who reveals to her son that Regina is actually his half-sister. As a matter of fact, she is the daughter of Chamberlain Alving and Johanna, a maid who had served him many years before (the episode of the maid's seduction was the one that led Mrs. Alving to give up Osvald). This revelation, and the outbreak of a fire that destroys the kindergarten before its opening, breaks the balance that was thought to be solid in the house: Mrs. Alving sends Regina away from the house; and Regina, on her part, decides to go to work in the brothel for sailors that her stepfather wants to open near the docks. Finally, Osvald confesses to his mother that he has a fatal disease, probably transmitted to him by his father and

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[4] "The real shock must have been the actual experience of being confronted by a world suffused with the ugly, the degenerate and the hopeless, and one conjured by the exercise of a complete mastery of dramatic means. In particular, the portrayal of the dying Osvald must have seemed like a mockery of all human dignity – this 'repulsive mollusk in human form'. Unease at the character of Osvald was heightened by a scientific determinism that mercilessly propels the characters in the play towards this ruin. At a time when the theory of evolution was emerging as a threat to the prevailing view of the world and of human beings, it was difficult to see the syphilis theme as just a simple parallel to the mental determinism involved in the power of 'dead thoughts' over people" (Figueiredo 429-30).

now in the final stage. The drama ends with Osvald being catatonic, in full hallucinatory delirium in his mother's arms.

To this main plot, Ibsen adds subplots and retrospective explanations. This is a usual technique for the writer. In his dramas he always describes a past that clarifies what happens in the present and whose function is to send forward the stage action.[5] This technique makes sure that the protagonists of Ibsen's dramas are always forced to relive their past.

Helene Alving in the past was a religious woman who now opens up to the innovative ideas of the time. In retrospect, it is said that she resented the licentious life that Chamberlain Alving used to lead. However, this impatience remained within the domestic walls, so as to maintain a respectable appearance in the eyes of the people.

This behavior prompted her in the first year of her marriage to estrange herself from her husband and seek help from the family friend, Pastor Manders. Unfortunately, Manders proved to advocate an outward respectability and objected to Helene's escape. Therefore, Helene had no choice but to return home to her husband and go along with him in order to maintain the appearance of a respectable family. However, she managed to give her son a better chance for honesty, by sending him far from home so that he would not imitate his father's behavior.

Regina was born when Osvald was seven or eight years old. She is a young girl, little more than a teenager, in love with Osvald, whom she met when he occasionally came home from Paris to visit his mother. The woman kept Regina in the house as a maid and secured her a job in the kindergarten. His mother had been a serving maid in service at the Alving home nearly twenty years earlier and had become pregnant by Chamberlain, who managed to convince Jacob Engstrand, for a fee, to take her as his wife and therefore to be considered as the father of the future child. Engstrand is the carpenter who is building the kindergarten and who would like, at the same time, to open a club for sailors, actually a brothel, in which he would like Regina to play the role of *entraineuse*.

Pastor Manders is a sort of director of what is happening: he is the one who persuades Helene not to insure the kindergarten; it is probably the one who set out the fire, and the one who will help Engstrand to open his brothel, using the funds that, now that the kindergarten is destroyed, are no longer usable. In the past he was a friend of Mrs. Helene, who was probably in love with him.

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[5] As early as in 1895 Scalinger described with insight the structure of Ibsen's dramas, although he considered it a flaw because he judged it "not very useful": "throughout its course, the drama proceeds swiftly, rapidly, without unnecessary detours, without dangerous delays; but it never sets out from its beginning, it never begins naturally. The causes that generated it are unknown, along with the conditions of the characters' souls that produced it. It is always an antecedent that must be demonstrated, a precedent that must be considered as clearly developed and that some characters are obliged to recount in the first scenes of the drama, so that the reader or the listener participates in an indirect way" (Scalinger 84-5). It is almost a structure of the modern detective novel.

Osvald's illness

Osvald's illness initially comes on as a headache when he is a teenager. There are also other physical symptoms such as neck pain and difficulty concentrating. The symptoms are repeated in Paris and there the young man sees a doctor who tells him that, probably, since his childhood, Osvald must have had something like "vermoulu". Back home the degeneration is striking. At the end of the third act Osvald collapses, the body becomes flaccid and the behavior (posture, language, etc.) catatonic.

The symptoms are unquestionably psychiatric (headaches, difficulty concentrating, speech disorders, catatonia). The term "vermoulu" refers to the micro-lesions that are typical of syphilis, which appear to be caused by the bite of a woodworm (it means worm-eaten; Hoenig 2018). Evidence of syphilis would be strengthened by the prognosis of cerebral softening, one of the symptoms stated in Alfred Fournier's manual *La Syphilis du cerveau. Lecons cliniques recuillies par E. Brissaud* (1879), probably consulted by Ibsen, who had also used it two years earlier to describe the symptoms of the end-stage disease of Dr. Rank, Nora's confidant in *Doll's House*. Ibsen did not explicitly define the disease for at least two reasons: firstly, because he wanted to only represent symbolically the passage of blame within the bourgeois family; secondly, because "in those days it could not be mentioned in print in any journal that a woman might read or in any play that a woman might see. The word was banned [...]" (Sprinchorn 2004, 191-2).[6]

Back at the time of publication, there were critics who agreed with the luetic hypothesis. There were, however, those who, even at that time, contested it:[7] Max S. Nordau complained about Ibsen's scientific unreliability in the medical field. He cited several examples, but the one he most emphasized was that of Osvald's cerebral softening. Nordau pointed out that a person suffering from congenital syphilis would not have the strong build that is described by Ibsen. For this reason, he believed paralytic dementia to be a more plausible cause, considering symptoms such as excitability and mood swings as described in the play.[8]

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[6] Sprinchorn adds that syphilis in the late nineteenth century was widespread in Scandinavia to the point that sixteen to twenty percent of young men had venereal disease, one in eight had gonorrhea, and one in fifty had syphilis.

[7] James Joyce imagined, albeit ironically, that Osvald's father was actually Manders, and therefore there would be no syphilis. In his Epilogue to Ibsen's 'Ghosts' (1934) he wrote that Osvald could be the pastor's son. The epilogue is written as if narrated by Chamberlain Alving's ghost who points out: "My spouse bore me a blighted boy, / Our slavery pupped a bouncing bitch. / Paternity thy name is joy / When the wise sire knows which is which" "The more I dither on and drink / My midnight bowl of spirit punch / The firmlier I feel and think / Friend Manders came too oft to lunch" (Joyce 384).

The clue to Manders' paternity would be found in the scene in which Osvald comes down the stairs and, while Manders sees in the young man the image of old Alving, his mother Helene sees in him the face of a priest: "No, it's nothing like him, not at all. To me, Osvald has more of a minister's look about the mouth" (Ibsen 221).

[8] Nordau also adds that "The poet has naturally no need to understand anything of pathology. But when he pretends to describe real life, he ought to be honest. He should not get out of his depth in scientific observation and precision simply because these are demanded or preferred by the age" (Nordau 346).

In the Sixties, the hypothesis of mental illness re-emerged thanks to Derek Russell Davis (1963) and was also recovered years later by Russell E. Brown (1992). According to Davis, Osvald is not affected by syphilis but by schizophrenia. The diagnosis is made partly by ruling out syphilis infection and partly by deciphering Osvald's behavior. First of all, Davis clarifies the definition he uses: "dementia, i.e., loss of mental powers" (Davis 370) emphasizing that Ibsen speaks of "degeneration or softening – of the brain" (370). The critic points out that Paris, the city where Osvald lived for ten years, was at the time the city of modern psychiatry with Bénédict-Auguste Morel and Valentin Magnan studying various forms of dementia; the physician to whom Osvald turned could follow that new paradigm for brain disorders. According to Davis, therefore, Osvald's disease is what was called secondary dementia" (373) in England at that time, a chronic, hereditary form of dementia. This last factor would make it possible to keep valid what was important to Ibsen, that is, the passing of the blame of the fathers onto the children. Moreover, in the "Addendum" of 1969 Davis mentions precisely "disorder of the communication between them [parent and child]" (383). In this case he refers, even if not explicitly, to the theory of the Double Bind, developed in Palo Alto in the 1960s, according to which schizophrenia would be caused by the conflict that the child observes in the behavior of the parents; in this case between his lustful father and his mother fully devoted to the family.

Other critics examined the issue of syphilis: Brown pointed out that if Osvald had inherited the disease from his father, then he should have contracted it when he was still in his mother's womb. If that were the case, then his mother should have been affected, too. Helene confesses to Pastor Manders that she was forced "to keep him home in the evenings–and nights, I had to become his drinking companion as he got sodden over his bottle, holed up in his room. There I had to sit alone with him, forcing myself through his jokes and toasts and all his maundering, abusive talk, and then fight him bare-handed to drag him into bed" (Ibsen 230), therefore she could be sick herself, but this is not stated. Regina too, who is Alving's daughter as well, should be syphilitic, but she is not. Conversely, if syphilis was not contracted in the womb but afterwards, the only contact between Osvald and his father occurred when the latter made him smoke a pipe: the contagion is now considered highly unlikely, but when Ibsen wrote the play, "in Scandinavia it was assumed the disease could be transmitted through oral contact, a drinking glass or a pipe" (Sprinchorn 313).

Another theory is the one proposed by Roberto Alonge (1988): Osvald is not the innocent person he wants to appear and possibly contracted syphilis while living a *bohemian* life in Paris.

This is ambiguous: on the one hand, we see that when the mother says her son is innocent, he minimizes[9] it as if he were indeed guilty of having led a dissolute life. On the other hand, however, if this were the case, the symbolism of guilt being transmitted from father to son that Ibsen was interested in would be lost.[10]

Nordau would then be right when he wrote as early as in 1892 that Ibsen was wrong in representing the disease, even though the author was interested in symbolizing a family illness.[11] If the schizophrenic theory is assumed, not only can it retain the hereditary character Ibsen was interested in, but it can also be corroborated from the standpoint of psychiatry and analytical psychology. Davis and Brown posit a psychiatric etiology.[12] What we want to assume here is a similar diagnosis starting from the archetypal symbols that Ibsen distributes throughout the text, symbols that, interpreted according to Jung's way of thinking, would confirm the schizophrenic hypothesis.

At the end of the nineteenth century, neurosyphilis was a frequent diagnosis for certain degenerative states leading to catatonia and dementia. Mental illnesses only constituted the subject of a small branch of medicine, and their etiology was still considered degenerative, especially in the German school of psychiatry. Psychoses, as conceived by the French school, were not considered the result of degeneration of brain tissues. Carl Gustav Jung, who was Swiss, borrowed from this school his own ideas about brain diseases. His main area of study was *dementia praecox*, the term used at the time to refer to schizophrenia, and therefore his theory of

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[9] MRS. ALVING (beaming with pleasure). I know one who's kept both his inner and outer selves incorruptible. You only have to look at him, Mr. Manders.
  OSVALD (pacing about the room). Yes, all right, Mother dear-that's enough. (Ibsen 220)

[10] Many physicians of the beginning of the past century wrote on heredity. For example, Leo Loeb took Ibsen's play as an example for hereditary diseases; according to the pathologist, it was Ibsen's play that made the concept of hereditary disease widely known to the public: "the influence of a modern writer, Henrik Ibsen, who very powerfully, although from a scientific point of view incorrectly, first presented on the stage the tragic consequences of the heredity of disease" (Loeb 574). Lombroso was also interested in Ibsen and reviewed *Ghosts*: Ibsen's geometries (repeated words, characters' gestures) in *Ghosts*, as famous Cesare Lombroso wrote: "are more than defects, symbolic caricatures, to better fix in the spectator and reader the true and most correct idea that the defects and diseases of the fathers are inherited as doubled or even tripled in the children, until the race is extinguished" (Lombroso 17). Lombroso agrees that a father devoted to vice generates "a girl who, as soon as the opportunity is offered, will subject herself to prostitution, and a boy who, even if taken away from his father when still a child so as not to be affected by the paternal vice and environment, will still fall ill with cerebral congestion and then paralytic dementia, abruptly subject himself to Venus and die early" (17).

[11] Regarding proposals that emerged a few years after the publication of the drama, it should be noted that Paolo Rindler and Enrico Polese Santarnecchi, in their first Italian edition (Milan: Max Kantorowicz, 1892) translated as atavism the disease of Osvald in the first Italian edition (70). Another Italian critic, Scipio Slataper, pointed out in 1916 that the question of syphilis should be considered symbolic, and that which Chamberlain Alving transmitted to his son closely resembled the Christian original sin, which is passed on from father to child (209).

[12] The schizophrenic theory, besides being plausible from the point of view of diagnosis, also has another element to its advantage: as Brown himself states, "With my analysis *Ghosts* becomes more pessimistic than Greek drama, which isolated evil in a single individual or constellation, leaving society in general without guilt, able to regenerate after the fall of the great ones" (Brown 102).

the collective unconscious is particularly suited to making a psychological interpretation of what happens on stage to the characters in *Ghosts*.

Carl Gustav Jung's psychiatric and archetypal theories

It is true that by conducting a psychological analysis we would risk treating characters as if they were real people; it is equally true, however, that the imaginary characters of a drama can provide examples of patterns of behavior that are typical of a given disease. In the play we see that Osvald says he experiences a "damnable fatigue, you know" (Ibsen 224). Later, he tells his mother: "Mother, it's my mind that's broken down" (249), as if to say that it is divided into pieces, split, that is, schizophrenic.

Osvald's illness initially shows up as a headache when he is a teenager. Then a doctor tells him that, surely, he had been "*vermoulu*" (250) since his childhood. However, Osvald does not seem to give credence to the hereditary evil received from his father, whom he considers virtuous, but thinks he himself is the source of the problem, unable to believe "Oh, that the beautiful freedom of that life–could be made so foul!" (224), a life he imagined his father to lead out of home. Indeed, from an early age he was to have absorbed the gloomy family environment that lay before his eyes and from which he was removed. The dismal atmosphere at home and in the country where he lives allegedly contributed to the development of the mental disorder: "Yes, the joy of life, Mother–you don't know much about that here at home. I never feel it here" (256); and on: "And this interminable rain. Week after week it can go on; whole months at a time. In all my visits home, I never once remember seeing the sunshine" (252). Additionally, consider what Osvald confesses to his mother at the end of the third act: his inability to work stems from anguish, a term Osvald uses over and over in the second act: "and the great deathly fear. Oh, this hideous fear!" (254); at the beginning of the third act: "And shut all the doors! This racking fear!" (265); and at the end, before falling into a catatonic state, on addressing his mother: "Have you no mother-love for me at all–to see me suffer this unbearable fear!" (274). Finally, also in Act III, a delirious beginning foreshadows the tragic end of both himself and the kindergarten: "It'll burn up like all this here. […] Everything will burn. There'll be nothing left in memory of Father. And here I'm burning up, too" (265).

Time and again does Osvald say that the harm he has received is not his father's illness but is "that's seated here" (272) and then touches his forehead, as if to say that it is a psychological problem. To remedy this malaise, the young man gives his mother morphine so she may administer it to him and make him lose consciousness and not suffer. In the final scene, Osvald is catatonic and hallucinates the sun, a word he repeats at length. It is precisely this hallucination that is enlightening in understanding the diagnosis of schizophrenia.

Jung states that during an individual's maturation process, which he calls the individuation process, atavistic tendencies may happen to exert excessive dominance and "drag the relationship down to a primitive level" (Jung, *Transference* § 448). This regression can be seen in the delusions of the schizophrenic person. Jung extensively studied schizophrenia, which was then called *dementia praecox*, during his apprenticeship years and later, during his profession at Burghölzli, the psychiatric clinic of the University of Zurich. He saw that this psychosis is characterized by an associative tension disorder, i.e., difficulty in associating words during tests, and by the splitting of basic mental function. With regard to its etiology, schizophrenia would not depend on a weak consciousness but on the strength of the unconscious that leads to the splitting of psychic complexes which, no longer linked to the ego (which is the preeminent complex) acquire dominance over it; it could also be associated with a biological etiology, i.e., a toxin that could cause the disease.[13]

The psychic split is revealed by the surfacing of images that can be traced back to archetypal complexes of the unconscious. These are visible to the physician through the narration of hallucinations experienced by the patient. The symbols that emerge can be related to archetypes of the individual unconscious (closer to consciousness) or the collective unconscious (on a deeper level). The former ones are experienced by neurotics, who are less severe patients; the latter by psychotics and schizophrenics.

It is of importance here to report on a hallucination that Jung identified in a psychotic patient. It is very similar to Osvald's:[14] "I once came across the following hallucination in a schizophrenic patient: he told me he could see an erect phallus on the sun. When he moved his head from side to side, he said, the sun 's phallus moved with it, and *that was where the wind came from*" (Jung, *Symbols* § 151).

Jung's patient was a schizophrenic in his early thirties (thus, about Osvald's age), suffering from a paranoid form of *dementia praecox* since his early twenties. He spent a modest life, as he

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[13] Even the physiological degeneration of the brain is not entirely alien to Jungian thought: he always thought that among the causes that justify the severity of schizophrenia, the psychological causes also went along with the use of some toxic substance. In his letter to Freud of April 18, 1908, Jung writes: "But I won't go on philosophizing. You yourself will have thought out the logical consequences long ago. The whole question of etiology is extremely obscure to me. The secret of the constitution will hardly be unveiled from the psychological side alone" (Jung, *Letter* 83J). This is because he does not know whether it is the toxin that enhances the strength of the archetypal complex, or whether it is the complex that induces the release of the toxin into the organism.

[14] That very hallucination convinced Jung of the existence of a collective unconscious. The observation of the patient took place in 1906. A few years later, in 1910, Jung came across the so-called *Paris magic papyrus*, a papyrus reporting a ritual of the cult of Mithras, which describes a reed, the origin of the beneficial wind, hanging from the sun disk. The patient's vision was dated 1906 and the Greek text was edited in 1910; therefore, any assumed case of cryptomnesia on the part of the patient could be ruled out. Besides being a publication for specialists, the article was also recent and therefore his patient would be unable to have come across it. Therefore, it had to be the symbol of the solar phallus in the unconscious of every man; it had to be a collective symbol. The famous hallucination of the solar phallus has been attributed to Johann Jakob Honegger, a young and brilliant psychiatrist and Jung's assistant at Burgholzli who had had psychological crises and committed suicide on March 28 (Noll).

was suffering from hallucinations. Once Jung saw him standing at the window while watching the sun. As he looked out, he moved his head in a strange way and said that he was seeing the sun's penis. One can interpret the symbol of the sun as the father. The sun, but also the rays and the flames are the symbols of the paternal figure, one of the archetypes of the collective unconscious. In the book, the flames that destroy the kindergarten, the attempt to redeem it in the eyes of the community but also of the family, are the rays of this symbolic image. Osvald's deification of his father, whom he always seeks to justify by minimizing his faults, generally results in an increase in the importance and power of the individual who performs it.

However, Osvald has a weak Ego and introverts his own libido; that is, using classic psychoanalytic terminology, he removes his libido from the external object, and reverts it to the past, to the paternal image. The slightest difficulty is enough to reawaken and reactivate the ancestral image of the sun, which precisely represents the paternal figure. This psychic activation annihilates consciousness, that is the word.

According to Jung, in psychosis a private world emerges that is characterized by non-individual images, which have nothing to do with consciousness (Forrester), and therefore have nothing to do with the word (*logos*). Thus, in the end, Osvald, in his mother's arms, can only utter a few words, and those words are "The sun– the sun" (Ibsen 276).

Conclusion

Among the many dramas by Ibsen that are liable to psychological interpretation, *Ghosts* is the most exemplary one, so much so that Halvdan Koht defined it as "*hospital literature*" (Koht 328), that is, a clinical case in which a pathological behavior unfolds as in an extremely precise theatrical mechanism: Helene, who had given little Osvald in foster care, at the end can have him back physically and mentally regressed to a child-like state, in her arms.

The interpretation given of Osvald's hallucination does not conclude the issue of *Ghosts* and Jung's psychology. Jan Knott notices the correlation between the onset of psychoanalysis and Ibsen's modern dramas (Knott). Here we want to further highlight how Ibsen had posited that there were older thoughts and ideas in people's minds than those learned from their parents. This concept calls to mind that of Jung's collective unconscious: at a certain point Osvald tells his mother that the idea of the father as a figure to admire is "one of these ideas that materialize in the world for a while" (Ibsen 270), as if to say that a collective idea can exist. This statement is just one of the ideas that Ibsen introduces here and there in the text regarding the functioning of the mind and the symbols it uses in mental processes. The playwright can be said to have had his own theory on how the mind works. This is what Mrs. Alving tells Manders at one point:

But I almost believe we *are* ghosts, all of us, Pastor. It's not only what we inherit from our fathers and mothers that keeps on returning in us. It's all kinds of old dead doctrines and opinions and beliefs, that sort of thing. They aren't alive in us; but they hang on all the same, and we can't get rid of them. I just have to pick up a newspaper, and it's as if I could see the ghosts slipping between the lines. They must be haunting our whole country, ghosts everywhere–so many and thick, they're like grains of sand. And there we are, the lot of us, so miserably afraid of the light. (Ibsen 238)

Ghosts can therefore be understood as patterns of behavior that return from the world of the dead; and the dead are those who, through the memories of their existence, created the collective memory to which each person links his or her own existence.

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BIO

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Whiffing the Sense of Place: Breaking the Anthropocene Narrative through Myth in Mary Oliver's Select Works

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we have strived to decode the sense of place in Mary Oliver's select works through the optics of primitive mythology. Primitive mythology unveils the primordial human culture and human relationship with the non-human world. It silently advocates posthumanism, immersive installation, intercorporeality, and resists the dyadic approaches of human culture as well as the model of two worlds – the human and the non-human. In the context of Oliver, we find that she has given primitive myths an apt place in her poetry and non-fictional works and has talked of how these myths connect human culture to that of nature by striking out ego-centric attitudes of Renaissance Humanism. The poet has rejected such beliefs that promulgate the schools of anthropocentrism, ego-centrism, pseudo-spiritualism/centralism and the notion of Self/Other binary. She has rather favored the concepts of posthumanism and eco-centrism, which deny any privileges given to human beings. We have used the mythological concepts of Joseph Campbell, Steven B. Harris and David Leeming in this paper.

KEYWORDS

Mythology, sense of place, anthropocentrism, self/other

Introduction

We have applied concepts of primitive mythology[1] in this paper to discuss Mary Oliver's fictional and non-fictional works, concentrating on how sense of place and nature can be felt and treated respectively by going beyond the ego-centric attitude of human beings. Mythology is a body of theories that deny the anthropocentric mindset of human beings, pseudo-spiritualism and pseudo-centralism, and propose intercorporeality through immersive installation, i.e. the dissolution of human world within nature as one primitive and porous body. This implies a hypothetical stand against any such idea that considers the human psyche as the center of all of existence. One thing that we cannot fail to notice here is that we, the human beings, cannot be separated from the influence of myth, and neither can Oliver. The influence of myth on her can be seen in her literary works which deny any hierarchical attitude of the human world.

Born in Ohio, Mary Oliver has secured many literary awards including the Pulitzer Prize in 1984 for her outstanding anthology, *American Primitive*, and the National Book Award in 1992 for *New and Selected Poems Volume 1*. Having published over thirty books, Oliver has earned an invaluable place among literary figures.

Oliver's poetry and essays expose masked facts of her private life as well as human culture. She does not draw a line between human and non-human worlds; rather she makes efforts to fill the gap between the two without any presumptive bias or prejudice. In the poem "The Chance to Love Everything" which appears in her anthology *The Truro Bear and Other Adventures*, she writes, "All summer I made friends / with the creatures nearby" (1). Oliver words uncover her psychosomatic sense of love towards the natural world. Her admiration for every object of non-human life reveals her wild connectedness with it. Maxine Kumin in the book *Women's Review of Books* writes, "She was an indefatigable guide to the natural world, particularly to its lesser-known aspects" (16).

For Oliver, the vegetal and the animal bodies are not separate entities. In her opinion, every particle of the cosmos is interconnected to each other through their porous body. In her poem "White Flowers" (anthologized in her book *New and Selected Poems, Vol. 1*), she writes,

> Never in my life
> had I felt myself so near
> that porous line
> where my own body was done with
> and the roots and the stems and the flowers

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[1] By primitive mythology, we mean the pre-Christian and non-Western mythologies which operate not on the Judeo-Christian belief of "man" having been created by God as superior to all other species. Primitive mythologies, on the other hand, deem the human as just another part of the planet (neither superior nor inferior to non-human species), and promulgate a harmonious coexistence among humans and nature. We use the terms "myth" and "mythology" here and henceforth in the article to mean "primitive mythology".

began. (59)

Everything on the Earth or beyond has its own unique and significant value in regard to each other because their existence rests on their common bonding.

In another poem, "Have You Ever Tried to Enter the Long Black Branches?" (which appears in *Devotions*), Mary Oliver has made an outstanding effort to feel the sense of place secluding her physical existence entirely from human culture. She writes,

Have You Tried to Enter the Long Black

Branches of other lives –

tried to imagine what the crisp fringes (245)

For her, human beings are not separate entities; instead, they are part of their outer phenomena. We have observed in the above poems good evidence of the profound influence of mythology upon the poet, wherein we find that the human and the non-human worlds are connected.

The current body of secondary literature on Mary Oliver's works focusses primarily on the poet's works in connection with ecological ethics. We find this in the paper titled "'An Attitude of Noticing': Mary Oliver's Ecological Ethics" by Kristin Hotelling Zona, and the convention of writing Romantic poetry in general in the paper "Mary Oliver and the Tradition of Romantic Nature Poetry" by Janet McNew. The paper "Nature, Spirit, and Imagination in the Poetry of Mary Oliver" by Douglas Burton-Christie also, to a great extent, discusses the trend of writing poetry following the Romantic tradition. "The Language of Nature in the Poetry of Mary Oliver" by Diane S. Bonds predominantly deals with the language of nature. The paper titled "Generative Tension between 'God' and 'Earth' in Mary Oliver's 'Thirst'" by Paul T. Corrigan deals with the religious undertone in Oliver's poetry. The paper "To Live in This World: An Eco-feminist Study of the Poetry of Mary Oliver" by Irina Ishrat, and the research thesis *Bride of Amazement: A Buddhist Perspective on Mary Oliver's Poetry* by G. Ullyatt explore Oliver's poetry from the perspectives of eco-feminism and Buddhism respectively. In this article, we, instead, have tried to look into Mary Oliver's poetic and non-fictional works placing them under the lens of the theoretical model of mythology and related concepts like intercorporeality and immersive installation.

Mary Oliver, in this context, has attempted to negate the concepts of ego-centrism, pseudo-spiritualism/centralism and anthropocentrism in her works by giving a mythological touch to them. Through the mythical narratives, the poet has made an attempt to feel the sense of place and to bridge the rift between the human and non-human worlds.

Myth and the Anti-Anthropocene

John P. Rafferty in his paper titled "Anthropocene Epoch" writes: "Anthropocence is

derived from Greek and means the 'recent age of man'" (1). It is clear from the term that humans have put themselves into the center of the entire existence and have started treating themselves as superior to others. This attitude is seen first, and most notably, in Renaissance Humanism. This superiority of the "man" over the rest of creation fueled the ideology of egoism into humans, which later proved to be of disturbing consequence to ecological balance.

Yadvinder Malhi, in his paper titled "The Concept of the Anthropocene," defines the anthropocene in the following words:

> "The core concept that the term is trying to capture is that human activity is having a dominating presence on multiple aspects of the natural world and the functioning of the Earth system, and that this has consequences for how we view and interact with the natural world – and perceive our place in it. (78)

In Malhi's words, human activity is governing non-human activity. This means that humans have placed themselves at the center of the Earth, and they are looking into natural resources as meant for their exclusive use. This attitude of humans towards the non-human world has brought about ecological disturbance and environmental degradation.

Eckart Ehlers and Thomas Kraft, in their edited book *Earth System Science in the Anthropocene*, define anthropocene in this way: "… the term Anthropocene has been suggested to mark an era in which the human impact on the Earth system has become a recognizable force" (3). They are also of the view that the anthropocene gives privilege to the human beings over the non-human entities. In the definition of anthropoecene given above, it becomes explicit that they all talk of human-centered earth. Mythology does not favor such ideology of human beings, and goes against what the anthropocene proposes.

In this paper, we have considered mythology and the anthropocene as opposites to each other. Whereas mythology promulgates to connect the human body to the other-than human body, the anthropocene comes forward to refute such notions. The analyses of myth by the theorists we have studied in this article advocate the concept of breaking up the narrative of anthropocence by demolishing the Self/Other binary. In this article, we strive to demolish the anthropocene through the use of myth in the works of Mary Oliver.

By now, we have seen that myth discards the notion of anthropocentrism, ego-centrism and ego-logical attitude of human beings. It denies any dyadic views of Self/Other in the context of human-nature relationship. It is one of the best and primary data for carrying out the history of the entire existence even if it has been with the human beings in the form of oral narratives. Whatever is known about our culture, our way of living and so on, it is not wrong to assume that it is mostly due to the mythological accounts we have in the form of fables, folklores and other forms of oral narration. Myth uncovers many of the untouched facts related to human culture

which are beyond the reach of historically written documents. Myth does not propose any hierarchal model in human society, which probably later became one of its major parts.

‘Myth’ is not just a simple word as we consider it today; rather it is a comprehensive term with inclusive meanings. Myth is someone else's religion. Religion signifies every activity of a community within, not secluding itself from the influence of its outer phenomenon. And to make it clear, “community” signifies not just the different human communities, but also the community of the natural world.

Myth reveals the history of the entire existence, and unveils how the whole body of the human and the non-human community is interconnected. During primordial times, there was no concept of two worlds. There was no demarcation in antiquity between them. Stevens in his book titled *Ariadne's Clue: The Symbols of Human Kind* gives an example of a story taken from Hindu mythology which supports the above statement. He writes,

> The thread (sutra) is described as linking this world to the other world and all beings. The thread is both atman (self) and prana (breath) and is linked to the central point in the cosmos, the sun. It is written that the thread must in all things be followed back to its source. . . . The thread, therefore, may be understood as an archetypal symbol of the life principle stretching through time as a means of conscious orientation and a guide to understanding. (4)

The excerpt of the myth given above is one of the best examples that makes it clear that the living and non-living things on the earth or beyond are not separated. They are linked to each other in every aspect. And thus, it can be affirmed that the actions the human beings carry out affect their surroundings. They affect each other abstractly as well as physically, and in two ways. Firstly, the effect of our actions on the sense of place where we live, and on the things including the human beings themselves due to the extreme ecological disturbance and vice versa, and secondly**,** the effect on our inner sense of self because of the reactions supplied by the outer world, especially the world other-than-human in response to our movements. It happens not only because of our inherent relationship with the non-human world, but also because of our intense attachment with it through our spiritual inner sense of self, which demolishes the human's anthropocentric attitude towards the natural world. Myth provides this information related to the bonding between the human and the non-human kingdoms. Myth does not allow any notion of separation between the things or ‘Self’ or ‘I’ and the ‘Other.’

We know that the concept of ‘Self’ or ‘I’ entered human civilization for the first time during the period of Renaissance Humanism. During this time, human beings began to be considered superior to the others, and putting themselves at the center of the organic and inorganic world. This ‘egoism’ of the humans led to nature being considered as the ‘Other,’

which further proved to be a major cause of environmental crisis.

In this article, as we have already made it clear in the abstract, we would be using the concepts on mythology as studied by Stevens B. Harris, Joseph Campbell and David Leeming. Harris, in his paper titled "Immortality Quests in Story and Life: Cryonics, Resuscitation, Science Fiction, and Mythology," has defined myth as follows:

> Myth is not only religion, of course, but something more inclusive. Myth might broadly encompass such things as rituals and beliefs, but most especially myth is the collection of primitive stories that we tell ourselves in order to have a narrative psychological framework with which to deal with the world. (1)

Myth is, in fact, a good source of information about the primitive culture wherein we see how the human and the non-human worlds were tied to each other. Mythological stories reveal to us that human civilization is not a distinct body in itself; instead, it is a part of the whole existence. Harris talks of "narrative psychological framework" to deal with the world that clearly unveils the essence of myth, which rejects any notion of dualism between the beings. They all have a common bonding and a common sense.

Joseph Campbell, in his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, writes about myth:

> It would not be too much to say that myth is the secret opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into human cultural manifestation. Religions, philosophies, arts, the social forms of primitive and historic man, prime discoveries in science and technology, the very dreams that blister sleep, boil up from the basic, magic ring of myth. (xl)

Campbell makes it clear in his definition of myth that the human and the natural worlds are interlinked. There are no dualistic approaches between them. It can be sensed here how the human and the non-human kingdoms are merged with each other without any distinct line between them. Campbell's statement that "myth is the secret opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into human cultural manifestation" makes it explicit. According to Campbell, whatever is in the human domain is because of myth: development in science and technology, the existence of different religions, philosophies, arts, and the social forms of primitive and historic man.

David Leeming, in his book titled *The Oxford Companion to World Mythology*, defines myth in the following words:

> Myths are for the most part religious narratives that transcend the possibilities of common experience and that express any given culture's literal or metaphorical understanding of various aspects of reality. . . . mythic narratives are the sacred stories that are central to cultural identity because, for the cultures to

which they belong, these religious myths convey some significant truth about the relationship between human beings and the source of being. (xi)

Leeming, in this definition, has observed of the myths that they are the source of cultural identities of different cultures, and these myths according to him convey those truths, which are beyond the reach of historically documented documents, as even these documents are because of these myths. These myths tell us that the human and the non-human worlds are not a separate existence; instead, they are one body of the entire existence.

Observing the definitions or the opinions on myth proposed by the above scholars, we find it common in all of them that myth reveals our primitive relations with the non-human world, that myth unveils our past history, that myth expresses any given culture's literal or metaphorical understanding of various aspects of reality, and that myth is the secret opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into human cultural manifestation.

Mary Oliver throughout her works has tried to bring the human consciousness close to the non-human life by adopting mythology in her poetry and non-fictional works. She has not demarcated any boundary between these two kingdoms. Rather, she has proposed that they should be treated as one by undermining any dyadic ideologies in the human culture against the world other-than human.

Critiquing Mary Oliver's Poetry through Myth

In contrast to the pseudo-spiritual involvement of the human beings with the non-human life, Oliver is very much inclined spiritually to it. She is, of course, a divine soul in her physical body. In the poem "Six Recognitions of the Lord," which is one of the best poems of her book *Devotions,* she writes, "Lord God, mercy is in your hands, pour / me a little" (125-128). She has never distinguished herself as superior to "Other". Instead, she has found herself invisible "in the family of things" (110). She writes this in the poem "Wild Geese," which has appeared in *New and Selected Poems, Vol. 1*. She admits that the human beings by birth are an integral part of their surroundings. There is an intrinsic relationship of the human beings with the place where they reside. In the same poem, she writes,

> You only have to let the soft animal
>
> of your body
>
> love what it loves (110).

Oliver had spent most part of her life with the natural world. The world other-than-human was for her a place for getting mental peace and developing a spiritual sense of self for the place wherever in the natural world she moves to. Her spiritual adherence to the sense of place is explicit in the poem "Yes! No!" that has appeared in *Devotions*. She writes, "To pay attention,

this is our endless and proper work" (264).

Mary Oliver mocks the current structure of the present world and the steps taken by it against the other-than-human life. She denies the human-centered culture as well as the self/other binary. She endorses the ideology of immersive installation and intercorporeality (immersive installation represents an image of the non-human kingdom wherein the human finds entirely dissolved with it without any demarcation between them, and intercorporeality has the concept of being one in the entire organic and non-organic whole through the permeability of the human bodies).

Maxine Kumin, in the book *Women's Review of Books*, says that Oliver is an "indefatigable guide to the natural world" (16). Oliver's dissolvement with the natural world tirelessly goes beyond the ego-centric mindset of the human beings. She does not favor pseudo-spiritualism that she has found in human society. Oliver is not like those persons who treat nature and its entities as resources for their use. Rather, she looks into them as the primary source of the entire existence.

In the poem "Black Oaks," which is one of the best poems of her anthology *Devotions*, Oliver writes, "I don't want to sell my life for money" (253). This reveals the poet's spiritual attitude and rejection of worldly desires. She is spiritually connected with the other-than human world, as the mythological stories of different cultures expose how and in what way the primitive human system breathed with nature in harmony in antiquity. For Oliver, nature resides in her heart. This character of the poet we can find in the poem titled "The Mangroves" (in her anthology *Blue Horse*), wherein she writes, "The black oaks and pines / of my northern home are in my heart" (35).

Mary Oliver loves equally all the things that exist in the physical world. To her, nothing is superior or inferior. In "Hum" (from her anthology *Devotions*), she writes, "I think there isn't anything in this world I don't admire. / If there is, I don't know what it is" (145).

Going beyond the modern practice of the human community of overlooking nature, Oliver has excellently touched and felt the emotions of the natural world with her spiritually conscious mind and heart. She has been to a great extent able to feel the sense of place with her primitive mind. For her, the houses decorated and filled with modern equipment do not supply spiritual satisfaction and perpetual harmony to the mind and the body. In its place, she admits that they give her psychological pain. In the poem "The World I Live in" that has appeared in *Devotions,* Oliver unveils her inner disappointments against the modern pace of living. She writes,

> I have refused to live
> locked in the orderly house of

reasons and profits. (5)

Mary Oliver transcends the ideology of Self/Other, and brings humans' souls nearer to the souls of vegetal and animal body. Her eco-spiritual sense of self exposes this ideology, and allows the human to immerse entirely with the non-human world transcending the Self/Other binary. Oliver talks of immersive installation with the other-than-human inhabitants. In the poem "When Death Comes" (collected in *Devotions*), she writes,

> When it's over, I want to say: all my life
>
> I was a bride married to amazement.
>
> I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms. (285-86)

Oliver has observed life in everything. She treats the non-human inhabitants not as others but as one of the important parts of her life. Her body, she acknowledges, is not a separate object. It is a part of a bigger whole. She puts it in the same poem, "When Death Comes." She writes, "And therefore I look upon everything / as a brotherhood and sisterhood" (285-86).

In the poem "The Fish" (part of her collection of poems *American Primitive*), Oliver has dissolved herself completely in the sea, and her becoming fish in this poem reveals the poet's departure from the human world to the world of nature. She has removed the notion of the Self and the Other. She writes,

> Now the sea
>
> is in me: I am the fish, the fish
>
> glitters in me
>
> tangled together. (56)

The non-humans are not speechless or dead, as we perceive them. They are, in fact, living organisms. Mary Oliver, through her fictional and non-fictional works, has proved it. In her opinion, non-humans feel the pathos and pleasures in the specific codes of their language, even if we can decipher it or not. But as a poet, she has gained this ability to decode the codes of their language. She can communicate with them in her own poetic way. In "Aunt Leaf" which appears in *Devotion*, she says that the non-humans "whisper in a language only the two of us knew" (421).

In Mary Oliver's view, human beings have demolished their primordial and spiritual relationship with the other-than-human world, and created a rift between the two worlds because of the development in science and technology. This destruction of the relation of the two worlds led to anthropocentrism. Oliver writes in the poem "Lines Written in the Days of Growing Darkness,"

> Every year we have been
>
> witness to it: how the

> world descends
>
> into a rich mash, in order that
>
> it may resume. (*Devotions* 49)

Oliver, in her works, has discarded the ideology of "Self" or "I" in order to propagate the posthumanistic and eco-centric thoughts to the human culture that incite the readers to consider nature not as Other, but as an integral part of their social structure. It rejects the humanist approach and appraises posthumanism that promulgates for the elimination of any such notion from the social discourse which comes in support of anthropocentric and ego-centric mindset of humans. Ankit Raj and Nagendra Kumar, in their paper titled "Dissecting the Doubtful Darwin: Kurt Vonnegut's Humanist Posthumanism in *Galapagos*," observe this about posthumanism: "Among the many ideologies seeking to refute and replace humanist thought for good, posthumanism has emerged as the most comprehensive and inclusive" (79). They are clear and certain to propose that posthumanism is the most "comprehensive and inclusive" ideology that can see the two worlds coming at a place for their immersion. And the poet, Mary Oliver, can be seen following the same posthumanistic doctrines. She is trying to be part of the non-human life in the poem "It was Early," included in her anthology *Devotions.* She writes, "Little mink let me watch you. / Little mice, run and run" (71-72).

Oliver's poetry is against the worldly comforts brought about by the new technologies that have awarded human beings more mental predicaments than happiness in life. She denies these momentary pleasures. In the poem "With Thanks to the Field Sparrow, Whose Voice is So Delicate and Humble" (from *Devotions*), she writes "I do not live happily or comfortably / with the cleverness of our times" (73). She makes an argument over the development in science and technology and reveals her disappointments along with the disastrous outcomes of the former. In the same poem she writes, "The talk is all about computers, / the news is all about bombs and blood" (73).

Oliver dislikes skyscrapers and highways, which the humans think are symbols of power and progress. According to her, skyscrapers and highways are nothing but the deception of our minds that give way to the dualistic approach of Self/Other along with ecological disturbance. The poet affirms that these objects have fueled the human-centered ideology and destroyed the tranquility of human minds. One of her poems, titled "The World I Live in" (anthologized in *Devotions*), discloses Oliver's distaste over all these things. She writes, "The World I live in and believe in / is wider than that" (5).

"The Bleeding Heart" (anthologized in *New and Selected Poems, Volume 2*) divulges Oliver's psychology that shows her divine mindset towards the other-than-human world where she looks into the pains of the natural world through her own. She compares herself in the poem

to a bleeding-heart plant, which reveals many things about her inner sense of self as well as the outer world. This metaphor also uncovers her sad childhood days.

"A bleeding-heart plant" exposes the bitter grief that she had experienced as a child. This "plant" is not anyone else but the poet herself. Autobiographical in nature, the poem tells how Oliver had devoted all her life into the lap of nature in search of redemption andenlightenment. And beyond doubt, she finds these later in her life when she makes the whole world of nature her friend. In "In Black Water Woods" (*Devotions*), she hails the natural world "[w]hose other side / is salvation" (389-90).

Oliver never missed experiencing the spring. She was much dedicated to it, as is quoted in the poem "The Bleeding Heart": "For sixty years if not more, and has never / Missed a spring" (61). Moreover, She, in this poem, speaks also about the cycle of life and death when she wishes to be like her grandmother in her long life. Long life here is a metaphor for rebirth. In fact, Mary Oliver wants in her every birth to be like her grandmother: "And more than / once, in my long life, I have wished to be her" (61). The influence of myth and nature over Oliver's inner sense of self is quite explicit in this poem. With the help of nature's divine beauty, she is able to come over the twinges of her life given not only by her family, but also by the outer materialistic world.

In "Of What Surrounds Me" (*New and Selected Poems, Volume 2*), Oliver uncovers the humans helplessness to utter anything without the aid of nature. This is clear in the following lines:

> Whatever it is I am saying, I always
> need a leaf or a flower, if not an
> entire field. (33)

This shows her deep connectedness with the non-human world, which strengthens her belief of denying the Self/Other binary.

'Water', 'a creek,' 'well,' 'river' or 'an ocean' help bring ideas of her inner spirituality that transcends the ideology of Self/Other. All these elements of nature indicate Oliver to be a wild lover of the world other-than-human. She writes, "[f]or the heart to be there" and "[f]or the idea to come" (33).

The way Mary Oliver has opted for transcending the concept of Self/Other is remarkably astonishing. This is overt from her fictional and non-fictional works. The natural world has influenced the poet so much that she is unable to set herself aside from it even for a short moment. If by chance it happens to her, it begins to enter into her dream. It shows how widely she had merged with it. In "The Faces of Deer," she writes,

> When for too long I don't go deep enough

into the woods to see them, they begin to

enter my dreams. (44)

"Them" in the lines signifies all the living and non-living organisms of nature. Oliver has portrayed a live picture of the natural world where nothing is wrong, and where there is always movement. She has entirely devoted her life to the service of observing and touching nature's mysterious divine beauty. She writes in the same poem: "Each hoof of each / animal makes the sign of a heart" (44).

For Mary Oliver, the natural world is like a heaven where everything is arranged in the proper way. For her, nature is a priceless medicine for all kinds of sorrows and distress. We can come over them, as the poet indicates in this prose poem, if we open our spiritual and divine eyes for accumulating the fragrance of the natural world she has found, and so, she has released all her sorrows, and everything which would disturb her. She has found salvation in nature. In "Of What Surrounds Me" (in *New and Selected Poems, Volume 2*), she writes: "Unless you / believe that heaven is very near," and "to swim away through the door of the world" (33). Oliver's closeness with the non-human world has molded her inner sense of self deeply, and felt pleasures in nature. She has been able to get over all her personal calamities when closer to the natural world.

Oliver's Non-fiction in Relation to the Posthuman

Mary Oliver has represented vegetative and animal bodies in her non-fictional works in an appropriate manner breaking up the convention of looking at them as commodities for human use. Without any prejudices, the poet has opened the door of her heart for all non-human entities. In this way she has presented a good example of the primitive human culture. "Bird" is one of her best essays (in *Upstream: Selected Essays*) which is based on her subterranean inclination towards the non-human world. The essay tells the story of a young injured black-backed gull, and how with Mr. M., Mary Oliver brought the injured bird back to health. Mary Oliver had found the innocent bird lying wounded on the sea beach. Surprisingly, the gull does not make protest when she comes close to lift her: "[…] it made no protest when I picked it up, the eyes were half shut, the body so starved it seemed to hold nothing but air" (127).

The actions being performed by these two people indicate their eco-centric mindset going beyond the psyche of human culture. In this essay, Oliver has crossed the limit of the humans' almost statutory convention of becoming cruel to the animal world. She has demolished the wall and filled the rift between the human and non-human kingdoms with her deep compassion. She brings the gull home and looks after it extensively. She provides it a bathtub. She treats it in accordance with the level of her medical knowledge. Later she finds some improvements in the gull. She writes: "But the next morning, its eyes were open and it sat, though clumsily, erect. It

lifted its head and drank from a cup of water, little sips" (127). In this way, we can affirm that her benevolent attitude towards the helpless natural world brings the poet very close to the characters of the mythical tales.

The treatment of nature as 'Other' by the human beings due to their egoistic sense of self that separated them from the rest of the world and created a binary of Self/Other surely hurts her too much. In her view, not only has it separated humans from the vegetative and animal bodies, but also brought about an anthropocentric attitude into the humans' unconscious mind.

"Upstream" is another of her essays, included in *Upstream: Selected Essays*, and it presents a true picture of nature and the live bustle of living organisms. In Oliver's opinion, nature has power to cure a person's abstract distress as well as physical calamities. She acknowledges that the remedy for this type of difficulty lies in nature, not in the medical sciences. She believes that nature has the capacity to make one happy and healthy. She has put an example of a "fierce-furred bear" in this essay. She adds that when the bear becomes sick, he "travels the mountainsides and the fields, searching for certain grasses, flowers, leaves and herbs that hold within themselves the power of healing. He eats, he grows stronger" (4).

Mary Oliver resists dogmas that prevent human beings from being a part of the outer world. She rejects the materialistic comforts which she thinks are nothing but the illusion of the human minds. In her view, these comforts cannot equate with those provided by the other-than-human world. She takes a deep dive into the world of nature and finds herself satisfied and full of joy. She likes playing with the natural world, so she has detached herself entirely from the modern human culture. In "Upstream," she gives a short but beautiful account of her conversation with the bear. She writes: "Could you, oh clever one, do this? Do you know anything about where you live, what it offers?" (6).

In "Waste Land: An Elegy," (in *Long Life*), Oliver describes a waste land taking shape into the sewage of her town. She wants to talk about flowers, rejecting the city life, which is supposed to be full of joys and comforts. She does not favor this development that harms the non-human system. She writes:

> On the few acres of land, and more, will be established the heartland of our town's sewage, where the buried pipes will converge with the waste of our lives. What a sad hilarity! I want to talk about flowers, but the necessity has become, for our visitor-rich town, how to deal with the daily sewage of, it may me, sixty thousand souls. (36)

Mary Oliver further adds that she is distressed by this transformation because she is worried about the lives that live there. She apologizes to the lives whom the system has driven from their abodes. She writes: "I apologize to the hummingbird. I hope the snakes have found a new

home" (40).

"Staying Alive," which appears in *Upstream: Selected Poems*, narrates her life's story in brief. She likes writing and the natural world. For her, these are the ways of redemption. For her, these are the ways to remove all her worldly and internal pains. Oliver makes it clear that she has got over her troubles through her engrossment in the natural world, and with her writings based on her vivid experiences with it. She writes in this essay: "I quickly found for myself two such blessings – the natural world, and the world of writing: literature. These were the gates through which I vanished from a difficult place" (14). The difficult place for her is the non-human world, which she undoubtedly wants to escape. She wants to merge herself with the other-than-human inhabitants. And to a great extent she had been successful. The poet's profound proclivity towards the natural world is very clear from the consequent lines when she, by hiding herself from her parents, used to go to the woods by day or darkness: "I thought about perfectibility, and deism, and adjectives, and clouds, and the foxes. I locked my door, from the inside, and leaped from the roof and went to the woods, by day or darkness" (15).

Mary Oliver had been a very kind and generous person since her childhood. She felt the torture and blow of an unspeakable life. She tells a story in this essay about her childhood days when she was only twelve or thirteen years old, and went to her cousins' house where she sees a fox chained. Oliver feels the fox's helplessness and pains, and becomes much disappointed. She narrates: A summer day – I was twelve or thirteen- at my cousins' house, in the country. They had a fox, collared and on a chain, in a little yard beside the house. All afternoon all afternoon all afternoon [...] it kept running back and forth, trembling and chattering (17).

She was an unfortunate child and had met with nothing but calamities in life. Her father did not like her much. It is explicit when she narrates an incident when she was left alone intentionally by him on an ice-skating trip:

> Once my father took me ice-skating, then forgot me, and went home. He was of course reminded that I had been with him, and sent back, but this was hours later. I had been found wandering over the ice and taken to the home of a kind, young woman, who knew my family slightly; she had phoned them to say where I was. When my father came through the door. [...] He had simply, he said, forgotten that I existed. (17-18)

Mary Oliver in this essay has drawn a picture of the mourning of her past days. She has not only done this, but has also tried to show us how she had been able to come to terms with her distress with the help of her extreme connectedness and experiences with divine nature, and writing them in her prose and poetry. Oliver's interview with Krista Tippett is a fine example of how she acknowledges the power of healing in nature: "[A]nd I got saved by the beauty of the

world" ("Mary Oliver: Listening to the World").

Kumin in *Women's Review of Books* has noted that Oliver "stands quite comfortably on the margins of things, on the line between earth and sky" (19). This is a good statement observed by Kumin on Oliver's personality that denies any boundary between the two worlds – the human and the non-human.

Mary Oliver denies human-centered concept of today's world. She admits it in one of her interviews with Maria Shriver.

> Mary Oliver: Probably walking in the woods, because I do feel like vanish and become part of the natural world, which for whatever reason has always self safe to me. ("Shriver Interviews the Poet Mary Oliver")

Conclusion

Through the optics of the mythological paradigm applied to this paper, we observe that Mary Oliver has rejected the concept of the existence of two separate worlds – the human and the non-human. She has not demarcated any boundary between them. She has, instead, talked of the significance of the world other-than human that we often find in most of the primitive mythological narratives. The poet has transcended the belief of any dyadic thoughts prevailing in the human society by bringing out thoughts of posthumanism and eco-centrism. She has moved backward to look into the primordial structure of human culture wherein the entire existence was one in the organic and inorganic whole without any dividing line between. She has searched for redemption and enlightenment in nature by overcoming all her miseries and calamities awarded by the present world. During the discussion, we have found that she has not considered nature as Other. Instead, she unquestionably has demanded a built-in value in nature and a return to a monistic, primal recognition of humans and the ecosphere. She has called for the shift from a human-centered to a nature-centered system.

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BIO

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Laughing Towards Bethlehem: A Critical Reading of Bill Hicks as Prophetic Archetype

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ABSTRACT

The performative value of standup comedy is in its inclusion of the audience in the communicative moment; the audience member, at-home and live, exists as a witness to the presentation of the comedian in the involuntary response of laughter, an active and realized part of the comedic event. While there has been a burgeoning amount of scholarly work surrounding the cultural significance of standup comics and the literary implications of their work, there has been very little scholarship assessing the work of comedian Bill Hicks, and none regarding the final special filmed before his death, *Revelations*. In a world where a standup comic has become the most popular interviewer of all time, and seven of the most downloaded twenty-five podcasts in America are hosted by current or former standup comedians, the link between the actual comedic event and the larger scope of the comic's influence is clear. Although scholars have correctly identified standup comedy as a new literary and rhetorical form directing consumers toward cultural and social change, and heterodoxic formulations of thought, I will argue that this framework is incomplete. In order to wholistically understand the influence of standup comedy on American culture, one must correctly identify the religious nature of the comedian's work and self-presentation, specifically through the Judeo-Christian concepts of "messiah" and "prophet." Such a framework provides a language for the ritualistic response within the prophetic moment, as well as the dual nature or reverence and revulsion that consumers have for comedians. These concepts are archetypes, and provide new language for interpreting both the work of Bill Hicks and the standup comic in general. The comic claims to bear witness to the truth, and the member of the audience participates in the prophetic moment by bearing witness to the comedian, acting with him in ritualized movement. I will present a case study and close reading of Bill Hicks' televised special *Revelations*, evaluating his comedy as a fulfillment of the prophetic archetype. When the standup comic is understood prophetically, and the material understood through the lens of the prophetic message, the consumer and the scholar are able to grasp the foundations of the larger movement centered around the cultural figure of the standup comic beyond the performative work; the larger movements amount to a form of religious devotion, and the comic's social commentary ceases to be performative, but transformative. The devotion of acolytes to the extra-performative catalogue of comics like Dave Chapelle, Joe Rogan, and Hannah Gadsby form a larger cultural moment, for which Bill Hicks presented himself as a forerunner and prototype.

Introduction

In an article published in The Guardian twenty years following the death of Bill Hicks, an admirer and fellow standup comedian Brendon Burns described his relationship to Hicks in this way, "And after he died, I did what I think a lot of people have done – I turned Hicks into a replacement messiah. Quoting his jokes as if they were gospel, quoting his routines to answer any of life's questions as if they were a self-help programme."[1] Burns speaks colloquially to indicate his love for an idol and pioneer in his field, but the specific words he uses tell us something about Hicks' own identity. On examining Hick's presentation in his final special, *Revelations*, it becomes clear that this conception of the comic as messianic transcends the colloquial, and functions as a signifier of his personal self-image. Hicks intentionally makes use of the characteristics of codified prophetic figures found in religious texts, and in the common versions of these figures parodied in popular culture. What the prophet does for the purpose of moving a religious people to worship and repentance, Hicks does in order to drive an audience seeking to be entertained to transformative action. Hicks recognized before Burns and other fans and peers that the standup comedian is engaged in a form of religious identity-making, namely, that of the prophet or messiah. Hicks' presentation is not the assumption of a persona, but an acknowledgement of a larger transformative moment within standup comedy.

The existing scholarship recognizing the cultural influence of standup comedy, especially in terms of psychological studies of response and laughter, and in literary or socio-linguistic constructions of humor and the joke, while valuable, has not adequately addressed the form of the communicative event and the presentation of the self for the comic. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate an additional and necessary interpretive element in understanding the form. By understanding standup comedians through the lens of the theological concepts of prophet and messiah scholars are provided with a language for the ritualistic response within the prophetic moment, as well as the dual nature of reverence and revulsion that consumers have for comedians. Scholars have already used this idea of an archetypal prophet to interpret literature,[2] music,[3] and history.[4] The comic communicates a message through both the live performance medium and audio or televised documentation. The audience participates in a collective response by listening to the material, watching the performance, and responding with laughter, disgust, or

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[1] Burns, Brendan. (2014, February 19). *Brendon Burns on Bill Hicks: 'I felt like he was speaking directly to me'*. The Guardian. Retrieved November 9, 2021. https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2014/feb/19/brendon-burns-on-bill-hicks.

[2] Wu, Zhi-fang, and Wen-li Pi. "Prophet of Doom Analysis of Archetype of Raven in Allan Poe's" The Raven "Through Mythological and Archetypal Approach [J]." *Journal of Chongqing Jiaotong University (Social Sciences Edition)* 4 (2009).

[3] Kravchenko, Nataliia, and Valentyna Snitsar. "Cultural Archetypes in the Construction of "Possible Worlds" of Modern African American Rap (Based on Kendrick Lamar's Texts)." *Euromentor* 10.4 (2019).

[4] Smylie, James H. "The President as Republican Prophet and King: Clerical Reflections on the Death of Washington." *Journal of Church and State* 18.2 (1976): 233-252.

an array of other emotions. If the comic does indeed fulfill the prophetic archetype then the audience by consequence participates in the prophetic moment through response.

There is almost no scholarship assessing the work of comedian Bill Hicks, and none analyzing his special *Revelations*. This comedy special features Hicks presenting a bevy of transgressive comedic material, particularly around the subjects of religion, political discourse, war, and consumerism, all of which were taboos of the early 1990s in Hicks' home country of America. Hicks does not only present jokes associated with the form of standup comedy, but packages the material within an artistic framework featured on religious themes from scriptural texts and popular culture. This is especially true of Hicks' persona and attire, the cold open to the special, and the closing remarks and montage of the project. I will present a case study and close reading of Bill Hicks' televised version of the special, evaluating his comedy as an essentially religious self-presentation akin to the delivering of the prophetic word. If Bill Hicks positions himself as prophet in acknowledgment of the nature of the form, then the performance of the standup comic as a general entertainment figure ceases to be performative, but transformative.

Obvious Prophetic Imagery of *Revelations*

Before coming to a broader understanding of the nature of both the Judeo-Christian understanding of the Hebrew *Old Testament* prophet and the *New Testament* Messiah, as well as the hallmarks of the prophetic message and how it relates to the form of standup comedy, one must understand the way in which Bill Hicks intentionally takes up the mantle of the prophetic. Bill Hicks uses obvious biblical imagery designed to evoke a shared imagination in the audience in the form of a series of images that revolve around the persona Hicks creates in signifying the theological concepts. He crafts his own self-presentation, one that elevates the ideas he intends to communicate and the shift toward transformation in the closing moments of the special.

The title of his work, *Revelations*, signifies the explicit relationship of the special to the final book of the *New Testament*, the *Revelation of John the Apostle*, which is thought in Christian theology to be a prophetic and apocalyptic vision of the end of the world. Hicks, in taking *Revelations* as the title, directs the audience to his own version of the religious notions of the end of the world and the vanquishing of evil, the main themes of the biblical text. Hicks also manages to position himself as the prophet, the one who reveals, in the same way John the Apostle positions himself in his own *Revelation*. This adoption of the collective consciousness of prophetic vision serves to elevate Hicks in relation to his audience; while in some sense this creates a power dynamic, it also creates a system of reciprocity in which the audience member is involved in the moment of revelation. It should be noted that the biblical text refers to the singular Revelation of John, denoting a situated moment of revealed truth, and a certain amount

of continuity in the larger textual process.[5] Hicks, on the other hand, uses the title *Revelations* in the plural, acknowledging his own disjointed style and varied subject matter to indicate the nature of his message. His title indicates that in his prophetic apocalypse, many things are revealed through communication of his worldview and experience.

In addition to the special's title, the image of the opening scene consists exclusively of the Judeo-Christian apocalyptic imagery. The opening image is that of a white horse galloping, the whole image tinted red and accompanied by the sound of a lightning strike. The moon appears also tinted red, and pans to include both the horse and its rider, Hicks himself, galloping first through a wooded area followed by a city landscape. A flashing image of a monolith with a red glow behind it and fire appears in the sequence, a replica of the monolith from *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Hicks dismounts his horse in a ruined and burning segment of the city, and walks to a burn-proof barrel where he lights a fire as the camera pans away and fades into the lone image of the moon. As the screen fades into the final image of the moon as a backdrop, another *2001* monolith appears, and Hicks comes into view, cloaked in black with a black hat to obscure his face, first in the shadows and then emerging onto a stage to the cheering of the crowd.

In the biblical text of John's revelation, many of the same images are repeated. The blood moon is a prophesied sign of the end of the world in chapter six, accompanied by an earthquake, as is the pale horse and its rider: "I looked, and before me was a pale horse! And its rider was named Death and Hades followed close behind him." The destruction of the city, and in particular its burning, is the sole subject of chapter eighteen, referring to Babylon, often thought to be symbolic of the wicked cities throughout the world. Various sections of the chapter offer prophecies about the hypothetical Babylon, "The angel shouted with a powerful voice, 'She is destroyed! The great city of Babylon is destroyed! She has become a home for demons… She will be destroyed by fire, because the Lord who judges her is powerful." Chapter eight of John's vision produces familiarity again in the Hicks text, detailing an angel of God who fills a censer with fire from the altar of God and throws it on the earth, leading to thunder and lightning and trembling. While the exact meaning of the book of Revelation is debated even among Christian theologians, the images do convey an apocalypse, and a vast landscape of destruction.[6]

A voice-over accompanies the special's opening montage, the voice of Bill Hicks briefly detailing, or announcing, his birth and the corruption of what he calls the American dream, a familiar theme for the working class. The voiceover itself plays an important role in devloping a collective consciousness and prophetic archetype. The first words Hicks speaks in the opening

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[5] Rowland, Christopher. "Revelation." *The Oxford handbook of the reception history of the Bible*. 1993.

[6] Collins, Adela Yarbro. "Reading the Book of Revelation in the twentieth century." *Interpretation* 40.3 (1986): 229-242.

montage and in the comedy special as a whole, is an announcement of his birth. He says, "On December 16, 1961, the world turned upside down and inside out, and I was born screaming, in America."[7] The announcement of the birth is an image in its own right, following the prophetic tradition of the annunciation of the prophet. Samson, religious and military leader in Israel, is announced at his birth by an angel. In Hebrew tradition, Isaac, the son of Abraham, is foretold as the religious father of Israel after Abraham. In addition, Ishmael is announced to Hagar, Abraham's slave and concubine, as the father of a different people revered in both Christianity and Islam. The *New Testament* prophet John the Baptist, was announced, as well as Jesus of Nazareth, thought to be the Messiah. In announcing his own birth, Hicks engages in forming the wholistic image of the prophetic and messianic figure in the collective consciousness, which is marked by an announcement of the birth of the religious figure under special circumstances.

It is his stated desire, in particular, that strikes the note of the prophetic; "I always wanted to be the cowboy hero. That lone voice in the wilderness fighting corruption and evil wherever I found it, and standing for freedom, truth and justice. And I still track the remnants of that dream, wherever I go, on my never-ending ride into the setting sun." These images, again, invoke a particular set of images in both the consciousness of popular culture and in the religious consciousness of his Western audience. The voice in the wilderness refers to prophet, John the Baptist, whom the *New Testament* refers to as "the voice crying out in the wilderness," while references to the "cowboy hero," "freedom, truth, and justice," and a ride into the setting sun, play on Americanized ideals on the Western hero who is an archetype of religious proportion as well.[8]

Hicks embodies the prophetic, apocalyptic vision of the biblical text of the Revelation with obvious intent, using direct images lifted from the text and titling his work after the recording of the vision. This is not to say Hicks is making a statement from the ingroup of religious adherents, but that he is intentionally playing a role that allows him to speak to concepts that indicate a kind of higher knowledge. In order to communicate the prophetic word one must resemble the archetypal prophet. Hicks plays into the archetype familiar to religious imagery, but these are not the only images he makes obvious. The opening scenes also evoke familiar images of the noble outlaw featured in Western novels and movies, in and of itself an extension of the biblical pale horse and its rider. Embedded in Hicks' own confessed desire to be a cowboy is his intention to be the lone rider facing the horizon, riding away after the gunfight which is a kind of

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[7] Hicks, Bill. "Revelations." 1994, London, England.

[8] Fitch III, John. "Archetypes on screen: Odysseus, St. Paul, Christ and the American cinematic hero and anti-hero." *Journal of Religion & Film* 9.1 (2005): 1.

apocalypse. This narrative vision often results in the destruction of the city as a means of justice.[9] In addition, his employ of the monoliths of the movie *2001: A Space Odyssey* point towards his swath of comedic material to follow on aliens and other worlds, but also towards the larger meaning of the stone projections in the film, namely the symbol of transcendent and foreign knowledge and progress unable to be fully grasped by humanity.[10]

The Prophetic Role

It is not enough to say simply that Hicks embodies the archetypal prophet or messiah through his intentional use of imagery. He embodies the biblical manifestations of the concepts themselves beyond imageries. The prophet in the *Old Testament* is defined primarily by the actions they perform. The *Old Testament* scholar David L. Peterson writes,

> "An Israelite prophet did, among other things, communicate Yahweh's words to various segments of Israelite society. The prophet did this not because he has an inherent personality predilection to speak Yahweh's words but rather because he was doing what prophets normally do. Were that person to cease functioning as a prophet, we would not expect him to communicate Yahweh's words."[11]

An *Old Testament* prophet is definitionally a person who communicates a message that is thought to be the truth of the Jewish God, Yahweh. Functionally, Yahweh can be conceived of as the highest ideal or concept, and a transcendent morality in himself. This is evidenced by the Hebrew tradition in biblical texts to write "YHWH," the tetragrammaton, to refer to the Jewish God. The Hebrew God was thought to be so holy or set apart that his name could not be printed on paper by human hands. To write of a God that is transcendent is not to understand him, but to communicate parts of the truth that could be found in him, both literally and figuratively. To speak on his behalf is to reveal a higher truth to those who have not yet understood him, and a prophet necessarily functions as a moral and social authority to those who hear his message, but have not received it themselves. The authority of the prophet is not born from hierarchical power structures per se, but exists only within the ability to perceive and understand the higher truths of the transcendent world, the knowledge of Yahweh, the highest of thoughts.

Hicks, then, fulfills the function of a prophet not in the religious sense, but in a general one based in culture. He seeks to communicate the higher truths to a people awaiting the message. Hicks hints toward this purpose throughout the special, taking an adversarial view

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[9] Seesengood, Robert Paul. "11. Western Text(s): The Bible and the Movies of the Wild, Wild West". *The Bible in Motion: A Handbook of the Bible and Its Reception in Film*, edited by Rhonda Burnette-Bletsch, Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2016, pp. 193-208. https://doi.org/10.1515/9781614513261-016

[10] Hoch, David G. "Mythic Patterns in" 2001: A Space Odyssey". *Journal of Popular Culture* 4.4 (1971): 961-965.

[11] Petersen, D. L. (1981). *The Roles of Israel's Prophets*. JSOT Press.

against the status quo. He rails against the first Bush regime, wars in the Middle East, and the prevailing narratives about psychedelic drugs. Hicks spends a considerable amount of time and material dissecting theories of the Kennedy assassination as both inadequate and in service of power structures, He becomes a paragon of rebellion against prevailing ideas. This attitude culminates in Hicks' final verbal movement of the special, which begins with a statement of purpose directly to the audience. He asks, "Is there a point to my act? I would say there is. I have to. The world is like a ride in an amusement park…Some people have been on the ride for a long time and they begin to question, is this real, or is this just a ride? And other people have remembered, and they come back to us, they say, 'hey – don't worry, don't be afraid, ever, because, this is just a ride…' And we kill those people."[12] Hicks positions himself theologically as the one who knows the higher truth, or the illusory nature of existence. He is the one who recognizes the concerted effort by those in power to keep people from finding a meaning that transcends society as it has been constructed. He has "come back" to people through the form of standup comedy in order to tell that truth, fulfilling the essential tenet of the prophetic archetype.

While this function is essential to prophethood, it does not encapsulate all that constitutes prophethood. Scholars have identified several ways in which a prophet's message is constituted in the *Old Testament*, provided that the prophet attached to the message fulfills his or her larger functional purpose of communicating on Yahweh's behalf. The prophet's message is inherently critical of social and political hierarchy. Corrine L. Patton, in her dissection of both the biblical text and person of Ezekiel, defines the prophet as both an advocate of a new binary between the elevated role of "priest" or "prophet" and that of the lower class. The prophet is raised from the lower class as an opponent of corruption and cruelty of existing human power structures.[13] Other scholars have described the prophetic message in terms of "liberation" from the hierarchical system of Israel, though the same scholars view the message as ineffective in establishing a new system free from any power imbalance.[14] This push against existing hierarchies and the creation of new hierarchical systems produces another hallmark of the prophetic word.

The prophetic word is always resisted either by the prophet himself, as in the case of Jonah and Moses, or by the people it is meant to help, as in the case of the Israelites in response to the system of judicial authority, or by the authorities who may be deposed because of it, as in the case of Herod in response to the messianic prophecies. Bill Hicks imitates the prophetic word in his criticism of the prevailing hierarchies at play in America: the first Bush presidency, the

[12] Hicks, Bill. "Revelations." 1994, London, England.

[13] Patton, Corrine L. "Priest, prophet, and exile: Ezekiel as a literary construct." *Ezekiel's Hierarchical World: Wrestling with a Tiered Reality* (2000): 73-89.

[14] Dempsey, Carol J. *The prophets: A liberation-critical reading*. Fortress Press, 2000.

political landscape, war in the middle east, and even media and marketing. Hicks' message is one that rejects any hierarchy in favor of a restructuring that positions him as a new kind of leader that liberates consumers of his comedy from an ideological prison. This emphasis on liberation and rejection of traditional hierarchy is pursuant to the prophetic message.

Another wave of scholarship defines the prophetic word as inherently futuristic[15] and apocalyptic.[16] In fact, two of the three words translated as "prophet" in the ancient Hebrew of the *Old Testament*, *ro'eh* and *hozeh*, are derived from the root that means "to see." From this version of the word comes the signified concept of the English term, "seer."[17] A prophet's message is often one that denotes future and connotes the apocalyptic catastrophe. The prophetic word, because it is futuristic and apocalyptic, is also directed toward action. The third and most common Hebrew word for prophet is *navi*, which is used over 300 times in the *Old Testament*, and comes from a root which means "to call out." It has also been translated as "to call," "to proclaim," or "to summon." The use of this word indicates an action in the communicator who does the "calling" pr "summoning," and in those who receive the word who move to answer the call or summons. One scholar interprets the biblical text of Micah in the framework of Greek theater due to the action it implies in the particularities of Micah's prophetic message; Micah details the future actions of Yahweh in judgment and of the rebellious people who worship idols.[18] Not only does prophecy naturally include futuristic action as a predictive feature, but also demands action from its subjects as a means of reformulating the predictive future. This has been called conditional futurism by theologians, the conflict of predictive prophecy paired with the actionable mandate for the people who receive the prophecy, which in turn could alter that predicted future. As the communicator demands action from the people, the future becomes dependent on the fulfillment of that mandate.[19]

In his work on linguistic and historical implications of the form of standup comedy, Oliver Double defines the form as happening in the present-tense, not only in the performance event but also in the larger comedic moment; the comedian makes observations and jokes about things as the currently are.[20] This is certainly true of Hicks. Most of his movements in *Revelations* center around absurdities he perceives in the world, which lead him to the futuristic.

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[15] Maller, Allen S. "Prophecy and progress: Biblical prophets as futurists." *The Futurist* 29.1 (1995): 39.

[16] Hays, J. Daniel. *The message of the Prophets: A survey of the prophetic and apocalyptic books of the Old Testament*. Zondervan Academic, 2010.

[17] Strong, James. *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible: With Dictionaries of the Hebrew and Greek Words of the Original with References to the English Words*. Christian Heritage Pub. Co., 1988.

[18] Wood, Joyce Rilett. "Speech and action in Micah's prophecy." *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 62.4 (2000): 645-662.

[19] Goetz, James. *Conditional Futurism: New Perspective of End-Time Prophecy*. Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2012.

[20] Double, Oliver. *Getting the joke: The inner workings of stand-up comedy*. A&C Black, 2013.

He does not discuss the absurdities of the world in a vacuum, but uses them in order to make a final point about what the world could be if the people receiving the comedic and prophetic word took the appropriate actions in understanding of the apocalyptic moment of the special. He is not only entertaining his audience or eliciting laughter, but is calling the audience to action and response by directing his ire and attention to the power structures at play in social narratives. This is the essence of his discussion of the Kennedy assassination and psychedelic drug use, as well as marketing and the consumerism of America.

Marianna Keisalo defines the standup comic as "both a sign and sign-maker." She argues that the comedian defines both the perspective and the context of their material, while also functioning as a kind of material in their presented self. The audience must not only interpret the words of the comic, but the comic himself as a contextual presentation.[21] This essentially describes the active ambition of the prophetic archetype. The prophecy calls for the action of the people in the presence, but the prophecy itself predicts the apocalypse. Hicks spends the entirety of his special detailing the evils of the world, which in turn highlights the coming apocalypse, a crisis of meaning and originality.

He demands action from his adherents. While one of the hallmarks of the traditional format of a standup comedy setlist is to end with the most effective or profound joke, one that ties the material together, Hicks makes a different transition in his final moments. Hicks abandons comedic intent wholesale, choosing instead to remind viewers again that, from his perspective, life is only a ride that can be abandoned for the sake of social change. He chooses to end *Revelations* with these lines:

> Here's what we can do to change the world, right now, to a better ride. Take all that money that we spend on weapons and defenses each year and instead spend it feeding and clothing and educating the poor of the world, which it would many times over, not one human being excluded, and we could explore space, together, both inner and outer, forever, in peace.[22]

Hicks makes himself an archetype of theological ideas. He has predicted the future throughout his standup special, a psychological consequence within his viewers as a result of pointing out the absurd in the current societal norms. He offers that same audience a way out of the future he has predicted, or to use his own language, a way off the ride. This means the audience must first realize the existence of power dynamics that create hierarchical systems in which the audience participates. Then the audience must make the necessary changes to rectify these imbalances,

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[21] Keisalo, Marianna. "Perspectives of (and on) a Comedic Self: A Semiotics of Subjectivity in Stand-up Comedy." *Social Analysis* 62.1 (2018): 116-135.
[22] Hicks, Bill. "Revelations." 1994, London, England.

which Hicks identifies as decisions regarding voting patterns and national expenditures, in order to change the felt reality of society. This is the conditional futurism of religious prophecy at work.

Masochism as an Undercurrent of Prophecy and Comedy

Perhaps the most important facet of the prophetic message is that it is inherently masochistic. In a study on religious experience and masochism, Stuart L. Charme identifies six categories that demonstrate masochistic tendencies: "1) a distortion of love, 2) a need for punishment, 3) a payment for future rewards, 4) a strategy of the weak or powerless, 5) a flight from selfhood, or 6) an effort to be an object for others. In each case, religious analogies can be found exhibiting the same dynamics."[23] The prophetic experience fulfills these categories as the personhood of the prophet and the message are entwined in the masochistic expression. This form of masochism, however, is engaged in order to derive meaning rather than sexual or psychological gratification. The prophet engages in the act which produces pain as a means of obtaining the approval of God or the repentance and action of the people. This is the end result of the masochistic endeavor of prophecy. One notable example from the biblical text is Ezekiel eating food cooked on hot dung. In this episode, the prophet masochistically involves the self in the prophetic word to signal the higher truth of Yahweh, resulting in spiritual gratification. Ezekiel communicates that the people of Israel, if unrepentant, will eat their food in the same way as a result of being conquered and enslaved by a stronger nation. Similarly, Hosea is told by God to marry a prostitute, Gomer, thus delivering her from the necessities of her profession. Hosea later finds that she has returned to the profession of prostitution. Yahweh tells Hosea through a revelation of prophetic word to go back and find his wife in her prostitution, symbolic of the continual rebellious relationship of Israel to God, who is aggrieved at his chosen people's adultery.

This idea of masochism is especially poignant in the concept of the "messiah" as elaborated in the *New Testament*. *Messiah* is the Hebrew word for "anointed one" and is translated to *Christ* in the Greek version of the *New Testament*. The messiah is anointed, chosen, for several purposes, among them "to bring good news to the poor," that is, to engage in the prophetic word. But the messiah is also the primary *New Testament* vehicle for masochism. The prophet Isaiah, himself this similar kind of "meaning-masochist," writes that the Christ figure "was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities, the punishment that brought us peace was on him, by his wounds we are healed." It is interesting that this passage occurs in the past tense. The figure of the messiah undergoes immense pain for the apparent

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[23] Charme, Stuart L. "Religion and the theory of masochism." *Journal of religion and health* 22.3 (1983): 221-233.

purpose of securing a spiritual or higher reality for the good of others. Isaiah use of the past tense solidifies the actions of the Christ as singular and actualized. The messiah, then, can be thought of as a prophet whose masochism transcends the symbolic. The messiah is himself the ultimate meaning-masochist, one who suffers and dies in reality rather than the realm of the symbolic, for the purpose of demonstrating a higher plane of truth in fulfillment of the hallmarks of masochism in religious experience.

Standup comedy itself, can be accurately conceptualized as an exercise in masochism. In work formulating the standup comedian as its own archetype, Rikki Tremblay employs common stereotypes that contribute to the figure. The "comic" archetypally perceives themselves as deeply flawed and incapable of normality, deals with negativity and depression, and has deep trauma that leads to introversion and social anxiety. This kind of formation of archetype dictates that the comedic moment, the actual performance, functions as one defined by masochism. If the archetypal comic is defined by these characteristics, the performance becomes a display of those characteristics for the pleasure of the audience and the comedian alike. The audience laughs and roots itself in the persona of the comedian, participating in the moment through the hearing and acceptance of the joke and the message within. The comic feels the pressure of "being funny" and through the exposure of the "darkness" within himself or the heterodoxy of their message, according to Tremblay's formation, finds relief. In this way, the comic sees the performance as "therapeutic" or "intimate." Like the prophet, some sort of social or internal pleasure is derived from the moment of revelation, which involves pain and the tragic figure of the comedic archetype.[24] Hicks. then, most accurately fits this archetype of the prophet, the messianic figure. It should be noted that the form of standup comedy shares many traits of the form utilized in the message of the archetypal prophet and messiah. Hicks takes this comparison a step further by embodying both the standup comic and the religious imagery of the apocalyptic, blending the prophetic and the messianic in the final movement of his special.

In the final visual sequence of the standup special, Hicks thanks his audience as is typical of the comic performer. As he takes his final bow, an image of a pistol flashes on the screen and three shots ring out. The viewer sees the comedian, clothed in black with his face obscured by the western hat, falling to the ground as the screen fades out and the audience cheers. There are many layers to this final shot sequence. Hicks, in archetypical messianic fashion, makes the ultimate sacrifice. Among the central aspects of his final monologue is his acknowledgement of the tendency of society to kill the bearers of those voices who tell the truth. He chooses to embody that moment in order to fully embrace the prophetic role to its furthest extent, into the messianic.

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[24] Tremblay, Rikki. *Just kidding: A phenomenological investigation of standup comedy and the standup comedian from a communicative perspective*. California State University, Fullerton, 2014.

He does not simply note the symbolic in his standup material, but attempts to transcend the symbolic by miming death on screen and involving the audience in the moment. By ingratiating himself to the audience using religious imagery, and enlisting them in a larger culture war against the power elites of the system Hicks find himself in opposition to, he takes their adulation of him as a comic and transforms it into devotion to social cause. He indicts the audience in this final sequence, making them complicit in his death. His warning, that society always kills the people that tell them the truth, ultimately serves no purpose, as the audience cheers his death on without mourning. The comedic moment serves as an entry into the celebration that occurs at Hicks' collapse. What viewers are left with is an embodiment of the Messiah, a prophet who comes to give good news, whose death is no longer preempted by discussion and humor in Hick's closing remarks, but is actually pantomimed on stage. This act by Hicks necessarily involves the very people the prophetic word is meant to transform. It is as if Hicks desires the audience to be transformed by the experience, especially in his final monologue and shot sequence, and yet he acknowledges their limitations in seeing his comic routine as entirely performative. By acting out the very thing he just told them society is prone to do, and then luring them into applause and excitement over that very thing, he absolves and indicts them of their sin in the same moment. This is the ultimate function of both the religious and "replacement Messiah," the prophet and comedian. By conscripting the audience in the revelry surrounding his death, making them complicit, and then using the moment of death in the framework of sacrifice to lend weight to the social cause, he upends the power hierarchy.

Standup Comedy as Transformation and the Falsifying of Prophets

An astute observer should ask, "is Hicks' intentional presentation in the special as a prophetic archetype a recognition of larger thematic movements in standup comedy as a whole, or is his performance a singular feature in which he takes on the theological components to make a point?" In other words, is he presenting himself as a prophet because he sees the nature of standup comedy as prophetic, or does he embody the archetype to lend credence to his worldview apart from his artistic endeavor?

The two are not mutually exclusive Hicks certainly demonstrates a purposeful presentation of himself as a servant to a higher truth and evokes the religious apocalyptic imagery culminating in his simulated death in order to produce a desired impact on the audience, especially in the final movement of the piece. More importantly, it seems that Hicks' presentation indicates a response in the observer that presents him as an exemplar of all standup comedians. Hicks' imagery and religious ideation works for the audience because it creates a verisimilitude that is indicative of the art form. Returning to Brendon Burns' original thoughts on

Hicks, it must be noted that it is not *Revelations* that produces the religious language in his admirer, but Bill Hicks as a larger cultural figure. Hicks was not a "replacement messiah" because of that singular routine, but because he understood the power of standup comedy as an art form, and utilized that power to produce a prophetic word.

The form of standup comedy inherently involves all of the traits of the prophet and prophetic message: the service of higher truth and public communication, proclamation, of that message. At the very least, the standup comedian is critical of hierarchies in general, though not necessarily bound to the traditional idea of "punching up." The history of standup comedy stands in opposition to language purity laws as a place where hierarchy breaks down. Standup comedy makes fun of social norms and accepted ideas from a place of humor, but also from a place of frustration with the status quo and truth claims of the social structure. The standup comedian moves an audience to laugh or groan or heckle based on the content of his message, demonstrating the communicative imperative toward action; laughter becomes a ritual response of a worshipful devotee. Finally, Standup comedy is a famously masochistic art form as a whole, one in which its practitioners bear themselves to a room full of onlookers by sharing their perspective and pain, as well as their self-image and self-ridicule.[25] In short, the essential formulation and function are nearly indistinguishable from the prophetic word.

Hicks' role in the social landscape creates reverence because of his fulfillment of the comedic and prophetic archetypes, and this kind of reverence is not limited to him alone. Among the most relevant evidence for standup comedy's prophetic nature is the rise of a social system that allows for standup comedians to become cultural icons. Joe Rogan is the most popular interviewer of all time, based on studies from Edison Research, with a reach extending far beyond comedy and into health policy, science, politics, criminal justice reform, and entertainment at large.[26] While Joe Rogan is certainly revered by some, he and his podcasts have also been the subject of much disdain because of his political and cultural positions and those of his guests. Joe Rogan's standup comedy does not happen in a vacuum, but serves to drive people to his podcast, where his message produces simultaneous revulsion and reverence. What began as a standup comedy career grounded in the performative act became transformative for acolytes and critics alike.

The same is true of both Dave Chapelle and Hannah Gadsby, both of whom received praise and derision for their most recent televised specials. The derision adds a dimension to the prophetic nature of the comic. Each comedic figure subject to the ridicule of some subset of the

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[25] Limon, John. *Stand-up comedy in theory, or, abjection in America*. Duke University Press, 2000.

[26] Research, Edison. "The Top 30 U.S. Podcasts According to The Podcast Consumer Tracker - Edison Research". *Edison Research*, 2022, https://www.edisonresearch.com/the-top-30-u-s-podcasts-according-to-the-podcast-consumer-tracker/.

hypothetical audience is falsified as a prophet by that audience. It is not that Dave Chappelle becomes irrelevant when certain factions consider his words out of bounds. Instead, it seems that he has fulfilled the prophetic role in a different way. His message has been deemed to be untrue and dangerous, worthy of resisting; he is declared by his critics to be a false prophet. This archetypal framework gives room for falsification, or the rejection, of the archetypal figure. The public discourse surrounding the comic's performative material, and the extra-performative words and actions of others like Louis C.K., Kevin Hart, and Cathy Griffin indicate to the astute observer and scholar that there is more to the presentation of the comic than mere words or performance. The prophet is not confined to his message, but to the larger archetypal components of prophethood.

The fact that our social structures seem to hold and evaluate the standup comedian's words in public consciousness, even those intended and acknowledged as performative, demonstrates the existence of a profound participatory experience for the audience, akin to a kind of religious devotion. Using Bill Hicks' standup special *Revelations*, we understand not only Hicks' assumption of the prophetic role, but also the underlying implications of standup comedy as a whole. While there is a difference between Hicks' intentional presentation and that which is essential to the art form, the two are interconnected. Hicks is playing into the larger form, which he acknowledges through his own characterization as essentially marking standup comedy in general. A deeper and more accurate understanding of Hicks' presentation of the self gives insight into the larger cultural moment, and helps us formulate a framework for societal, even individual, reaction to the standup comic as the prophet of the current cultural moment.

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BIO

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Ahalya
by Koral Dasgupta, Pan Macmillan, 2020, 204 pages

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Book Review

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"Go woman, find your world yourself. The joy
you seek deserves to be discovered." (Dasgupta loc. 37)

Ahalya, the first book of the Sati-series by Koral Dasgupta, claims to be a re-telling of the well-known mythological account of a hapless woman and her plight under the brunt of a patriarchal social order. Instead of reiterating the familiar tale of Ahalya's seduction and her consequent cursed fate, the writer chooses to focus on the standpoint of the woman who relates the story of her own journey towards self-discovery. Elements of memory, history, myth and bildungsroman intersect to create an intricately detailed narrative that ruptures the demureness and over-emphasis on docile chastity associated with the traditional image of the Hindu woman. In her attempt to prioritize the voice of the woman, Dasgupta almost re-interprets the popular notions of virginity and virtue accorded to the five women or *panchkanyas* of Hindu mythology–Ahalya, Draupadi, Kunti, Tara and Mandodari. It is believed that Ahalya, the most beautiful creation of Brahma, was punished for no fault of her own, with no scope given to her to assert any degree of agency. In Dasgupta's narrative, however, she tries to unravel such a monolithic reading of Ahalya's story, delving into the inner recesses of her mind and making her responsible for taking certain conscious decisions which steer the

course of her life. It is important to note that Dasgupta interferes minimum with the main plot, instead devoting greater attention towards upholding the first-person narratorial voice of her heroine.

Ahalya is constructed as a highly conscious being who revels in her own existence as well as her sensual perceptions of the world and its wonders since her creation by Brahma. Even when she is initially described as a formless entity, floating about the clouds with her mother, the Mist, her consciousness is quite active. Her precocity towards knowing more about "the ever insatiable" (Dasgupta loc. 17) Indra during her conversations with the Mist makes it evident that she is unabashed about her own sexual passions, so much so that she fantasizes about a personal encounter with the mighty god. She even goes on to wonder if she would be able to "pose before him the most impossible challenge of the cosmos. Would the lustful King of Devas, desirous of and desired by the universe, like to explore the faceless? Can he touch in the absence of skin? Can he pleasure the one without a body? Would the greatest lover known for his rugged energies make love with this soul?" (loc. 17). Interestingly enough, this heightened consciousness plays a crucial role inher maturation as she reaches adolescence and a greater sexual awakening in her bodily form. She is ecstatic on becoming a human, celebrating her physical charms while wondering "if it were made to spark a revolution!" (loc. 17). It is this revolutionary quest towards self-actualization that is narrated by Dasgupta in highly poetic and lucid language, evocative imagery and meaningful symbolism, all the while making certain that the focus remains on Ahalya's thoughts and emotions. Ahalya goes on to develop a natural attraction for her sage-husband, Gautam despite having been given away in marriage to him at a tender age by Brahma. The initial lack of agency in expressing consent gradually mutates into a strong sexual passion for her very able-bodied partner whom she decides to seduce. Seduction and sexuality are thus not associated with any kind of negative connotation in the narrative (for instance, social taboos), but rather perceived as the cement of a legitimate marital relationship. Ahalya's passion humanizes Gautam and helps him evolve "from a hermit to a husband" (Roy n.p.) just as she herself appears to blend the notions of idealized femininity and lived womanhood in the course of her diverse experiences, both physical and psychological.

While this man and wife relationship forms the bulk of the narrative, but there are several other relationships that Ahalya has to negotiate and that significantly inform her journey towards self-actualization. Her relationships with her father and creator, Brahma, her mother, the Mist and her sister/confidante, the river Mandakini sustain her throughout. In particular, the bond she shares with her mother is given a greater complexity– the Mist plays a crucial role in mentoring her, "guiding, persuading, and warning Ahalya, by turns" (Roy n.p.) as she embarks upon the pursuit of selfhood. The mother, not a conventional figure of authority, is recast here as the prime

source of strength and knowledge. In fact, Brahma himself acknowledges:

> "A mother is another name for unyielding, aggressive power. She is the embodiment of indulgence and restraint. She is the keeper, the protector. She restricts to keep all harm away. She beholds the baby with her softness, yet forms a tough cast around it to keep intruders at bay. She is the first teacher starting the learning process in confinement, by sharing the system of body and life even before the baby is born. She is the form of knowledge that results from reflex." (Dasgupta loc. 5)

This reframing of traditional feminine roles celebrates the agency of women despite having been subject to various restrictions imposed upon them by societal expectations. That deeper attention is called to such alternative perceptions of womanhood underlines the revisionist historiographic approach consciously adopted by the writer. It is also interesting to note the lavish descriptions of nature incorporated within the narrative that are perhaps intimately connected with the celebration of unrestrained femininity. Nature is traditionally ascribed to the idea of woman and through the intricate, elaborate passages devoted towards detailing the landscape, the writer reminds the readers of an ancient, moral connection shared between humanity and Nature. This idea of the 'sacred feminine' however is not to reinstate certain gendered roles of women in society but rather to evoke a sense of solidarity amidst the oppression meted out by a gender-disparate societal set-up.

In an interview, Dasgupta explains her understanding of the term *sati* as it applied to women like Ahalya in the mythological texts: "Today in our feminist debate we're talking about fertility of the mind over virginity of the body. It's about your consent. So, the same thing was being said in this ancient text…That's the reason they're called virgins. Because their mind is pure, they had reasons for the decisions they took, and they win against their society" (Agrawal n.p.). In her re-telling, Ahalya is not a defeated woman at the mercy of patriarchy, but an agentive being with higher sentience who is answerable only to her own self for her actions. In Dasgupta's imagination, the concepts of the *panch-kanya* and *panch-sati*, albeit belonging to different traditions of thought in Indian mythology, merge together to represent an alternative model of womanhood. Ahalya herself proclaims: "Sanctity, I learnt from the Mist later, is a metaphysical way of remaining pure, godly. Pure at heart, pure in means and ends, pure by body, pure by faith. She called it 'Sati'" (Dasgupta loc. 20). In a society trying to curb her flowering sexuality and youthful passions, she takes it upon herself to explore her own curious desires, all the while keeping a firm hold on her own mind rather than faltering under the pressure to remain 'chaste'. When Brahma send her to earth, asking her to "explore [her]self…. Find that magnificence within the mundane … [and discover the] science of life" (loc. 21), she exactly does so without any inhibition. Her initial feel of desperation and defeat at being unable to

comprehend the reason behind the strange manner of her creation gradually transforms into a spirit of initiative in order to let her "virtues be explored, [her] beauty appreciated, [her] seduction gratified" (loc. 7). Even when she is cursed, it does not deter her from desiring to experience life to the fullest, but instead encourages her to display small but significant acts of resistance towards the onslaught of patriarchal tyranny. It is undoubtable that *Ahalya* bears significant affinity with the expanding line of postfeminist thought. By emphasizing upon the heroine's sexuality and questioning existing notions of femininity, it complicates the way we understand gender differences and relations. Borrowing upon Ann Brooks' theory of postfeminism (1997), *Ahalya* can also be read as celebrating what it is to be a 'woman' rather than emphatically laying claims on the erasure of gender differences. Dasgupta tactfully draws upon a wealth of diverse experiences that would perhaps be relatable to a larger group of women, thereby subtly politicizing and provoking a host of collective responses towards injustices inflictedupon womankind.

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BIO

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