

Samantha Gunning

Michele Leavitt

Honors English 102

10/27/10

### Middleton: 1.8 Square Miles of Boring

Welcome to Middleton, Idaho! Never heard of it? No worries, not many people have. According to Middleton's Wikipedia page, it consists of 1.8 square miles, 2,978 people (as of 2000), and a male to female ratio of 97.9 to 100. The Middleton Chamber of Commerce website lists a fire department, five restaurants (though there are several that exist in Middleton which are not represented), and a veterinary hospital—among other things. Unless one enjoys arson, eating, or animals there really is nothing to do in Middleton.

Alright, I'll be fair. Middleton has a library, video rental stores, and a grocery store as well. It also has a shady bar—but that is an establishment to enter at one's own risk. It really is a stereotypical small town, but it is growing rather quickly; up to 9,672 in 2010 (Best Places to Live & Retire). The problem is that the population is growing much faster than the accommodations of Middleton. This has led to total boredom for most of the residents of Middleton, especially those who are too young to leave very often to find more interesting things to do.

With the lack of things to do in Middleton, an epidemic has swept the town. Rather than doing something productive, the teens of the community spend their time wandering the streets, generally creating mischief. While the teens who run amuck do not cause a huge amount of

issues, they are a nuisance to the town. What is it, then, that Middleton needs? I say that Middleton needs to muster up an army and conquer its neighbors: Nampa and Caldwell.

Some small-minded folks may claim that all Middleton needs is to become a place worth respecting. The citizens of Middleton would love their town if they made it worth loving by helping to develop it. There is currently a program in place to rebuild the sidewalks of Middleton. The idea is that Middleton will become a place to walk about, and enjoy the sights. The Public Library has also been working hard to bring prestige to Middleton. It has been working for years to expand their building and their collection, and has encouraged ordinary citizens to get involved. All Middleton needs is to take the time and effort to complete, and complete well, these projects. Once community members get involved, then pride will grow, and everyone can take satisfaction in having built their town up. These types of solutions, however, are laughable. Respect is to be earned in one fell swoop, not gradually built up. Before Middleton's citizens can be happy with their town, their town must do something worth respecting on a grand scale. Once Middleton has earned the respect of its citizens, it can earn the respect of the world.

Conquering Nampa and Caldwell would bring such respect to Middleton. It would show the world that Middleton is more than just a rural town in Idaho. Having a compulsory army would also give us somewhere to put those annoying teens. Some would argue that taking this sort of action is needlessly harsh. However, military action is the only way to give Middleton the opportunities it deserves.

Everyone needs, in one way or another, to make him-or-herself heard in the world. In a funny way, towns need to do the same thing. Most of the people who live in New York City are totally proud of that; they take pride in living in one of the most recognized cities in the world.

The same goes for someone living in San Francisco, London, Paris, or Venice. However, living in Middleton brings no prestige. It is only through the military might of Middleton's army that we could possibly gain that prestige. Showing the world that little old Middleton could overthrow two bigger cities would bring pride to all the citizens of Middleton.

Armies are great in theory, but one needs warm bodies to create an army. Thankfully, Middleton has a plethora of rogue teenagers wandering the streets at all hours. All one needs to do is conscript them into mandatory military service for the town. The physical training involved would ward off obesity in our teens, and also give them a sense of duty and discipline (Hedt). Middleton's army would provide a "structured environment," a place for wild teenagers to grow into decent members of society (Bright). In Sparta, boys started their education at the age of seven years-old—education that consisted mostly of military study (Sparta). Sparta was nearly undefeatable for most of its time as a military power, and consequently was one of the most powerful city-states in Greek history (Sparta). Middleton could easily become an equally strong military city, leading only to benefits. Of course, becoming as brutal as Sparta was would be inadvisable. Tossing out imperfect infants as they did in Sparta is inhuman—but gently asking the beaten citizens of the new annexes of Middleton to perform simple duties for the good of everyone certainly is not.

Another benefit of having soldiers who are young is that no one wants to harm a child. This is especially true with girls, which is why Middleton's Special Forces would consist mainly of girls aged 14 to 16. Despite the protective instinct many people have for children, girls at this age are the most vicious creatures on Earth—with the possible exception of wolverines. According to Family First Aid, a website dedicated to helping parents of troubled teens, teens who are bullied by their peers have problems that last long into adulthood. Teens have begun

killing themselves with horrifying frequency, often as a result of bullying. What we need to do is charter this need to destroy other people into something productive: the conquering of Nampa and Caldwell. As no school administrator has been able to come up with a better way to get rid of bullying, this would lead to solving that problem as well! Not only would there no longer be bullying, but there would be no way to stop such a cruel army.

One problem with attempting to conquer Nampa and Caldwell is that the denizens of those two towns outnumber Middleton greatly. While some surely won't care about being overthrown, a large majority may object. Caldwell had a population of 43,281 as of July, 2009 (Caldwell Idaho). In addition, Nampa had a population of 81,241 in July of 2009 (Nampa, Idaho). Together, they are nearly triple Middleton's population. This doesn't give Middleton much of a chance in a fair fight.

Luckily for Middleton, the fight would not be fair. Neither Nampa nor Caldwell has a standing army. Therefore, neither city would be prepared for the attack. As long as Middleton had a large enough army and attacked quickly, overthrowing the main infrastructures, both cities could quickly fall into chaos. By targeting police and fire stations first, Middleton's army could take out the first line of defense for protecting citizens and property. After the police and fire stations, the Middleton army would round up the citizens of Nampa and Caldwell. Political leaders would be separated from the rest of the group. Once everyone was gathered in a central location, such as the Middleton High School football field, the political leaders would be publicly humiliated to destroy any credibility as leaders they had left. Middleton would break out the Special Forces for that job. After using the girls' skills at targeting any weakness and getting others to agree with and join in such bullying, very few people would reject the new leadership

of Middleton. After all, they couldn't be expected to be content with a mayor who dresses like a total, like, tramp.

After the majority of Nampa and Caldwell had agreed to become a part of Middleton, elections would be held for new leadership. The citizens of both cities would have a choice of any member of Middleton's political system. Anyone who did not like the takeover would be relocated to live in a small section of Middleton, where they would be allowed jobs as laborers. Those who choose to cooperate would be allowed to return to their homes and jobs. However, they would own 30% of any income they make to Middleton. These funds would be used to create great monuments to military leaders, build up the Public Library and City Hall, and maintain the sidewalks to give Middleton the solemn and mighty look that it deserves, but does not currently have.

Once Middleton has conquered Nampa and Caldwell, all its problems would be solved. Middleton would no longer be ignored, but would be a power to contend with. The citizens of Middleton, indeed the citizens of Idaho, would look up to and respect our town; Middleton would be worth looking up to. Teens would no longer wander about causing trouble, but instead would make up a military force to be reckoned with. Once Middleton had outgrown Nampa and Caldwell, it would have added many new soldiers to its army, and could move on to conquer other cities. Soon, Middleton would rule the entire state of Idaho, and be moving on to subdue Oregon. With enough strategy, we could soon all be living in the United State of Middleton. Wouldn't that be worthy of respect?

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Jeremiah Akin

David Thacker

English 215-02

Assignment 3

9 November 2010

Hitchcock and Oates: Building Suspense in “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?”

Joyce Carol Oates’ “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” has been analyzed in terms of music, use of space, use of foreshadowing, characterization of victim, characterization of villain, and its ambiguous ending. Authors seem to clash on which of these ideas are the most important. I propose that all of these ideas are literary devices being used to create a suspenseful tale, which is similar to the films of Alfred Hitchcock. That is not to say that Oates intentionally imitates Hitchcock, but the tools they use to make the audience feel suspense bear a striking resemblance to one another. By analyzing “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” in terms of Alfred Hitchcock’s films, one can get a better understanding of the suspense built in the story.

To begin with, both Oates and Hitchcock make prominent use of foreshadowing in their opening scenes to create in the audience an anticipation of danger that lasts throughout the story. In *Vertigo*, the very first scene begins with a black screen and racing minor key string music. The black screen fades in on a metal bar and two sweaty hands quickly reach up and grab it. There is a metallic clinking sound, and as the camera zooms out a man’s face appears. The viewer can see he is scaling a fire escape ladder to a rooftop, and he is being chased by a police officer and Detective John Ferguson. The subject of the chase leaps to the next roof. The officer follows close behind. He barely makes the jump, but manages to scramble up the sloping roof of the next



building. Ferguson is not so lucky. He hits the roof and slides down clawing the shingles for something to hold only to grab the gutter and the last moment. It bows downward with the weight. He looks down and the ground seems to move farther away. The officer comes to help, but bends too far and falls to the pavement below. The scene ends and cuts to Ferguson recovering months later and going about his day as usual.

The suspended imagery in this scene (i.e. the ladder, the rooftop, the gutter, and the fall of the officer) set the viewer up for two of the most important scenes later in the movie. About halfway through, Ferguson unsuccessfully tries to chase the woman he loves up the winding stairs of an old bell tower to keep her from killing herself. He finds himself unable to reach the top and save her because of the vertigo he developed as a result of the prior incident. In the end the suspicious Ferguson forces a woman to climb up the stairs of the same bell tower and—after an intense monologue in which she reveals to Ferguson that she is the same woman he thinks is dead—she is startled by something, falls out the window, and actually dies.

In a similar way, Joyce Carol Oates uses the first three paragraphs of “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” to discreetly outline the plot of her story. The very first line, “Her name was Connie,” is written in past tense, which hints at the idea that Connie is dead. She is also concerned about her looks (25,26,27,30,31), which makes her the perfect target for seduction by flattery. Arnold Friend picks up on this right away (“You’re cute...Don’tcha believe me, or what?”[32]). The second half of the first paragraph points out that the victim suspects her mother of having “a shadowy vision” of her; that she is “always after Connie.” Already the language has indicated to the reader that Connie is a victim (25).

Also in the first three paragraphs the author shows the strained state of Connie’s relationships within her family. She feels as though her mother is jealous of her, she is jealous of

the respect and privileges granted to her older sister, and her father never talks to anyone else in the family. Connie seems to resent him for not sticking up for her. The text indicates this by stating that “around his bent head Connie’s mother kept picking at her...” (26). The separation felt by Connie leads to her physically distancing herself later in the story by staying home while the rest of the family goes to a barbecue.

The same sentence that informs the reader of Connie’s resentment towards her father makes an important point in foreshadowing by stating, “Connie wished her mother was dead and she herself was dead and it was all over” (26). Because the word “dead” is used two times and the statement ends with “it was all over,” the point is far too strong to be forgotten by the reader. This indicates that the death wish is an important problem that must be solved by the end of the story. Solution by reconciliation would be unsatisfying in context of the ominous language used in the previous paragraphs, so the only possible solution is death.

The story continues by drawing attention to what Joyce M. Wegs calls Connie’s “moral poverty.” Wegs points out that Connie typically spends her evenings making a “grotesquely parodied religious pilgrimage” to a drive-in restaurant which is “a grotesque parody of a church” (100). Similarly, in *Psycho* Hitchcock leads his first victim to the slaughter in a scene underscoring her “moral poverty.” Entrusted by her boss with the duty of making a large cash deposit to the bank, Marion Crane tells him that she is making the deposit and then heading home for the day because she is sick. Instead she decides to keep the money and skip town. She ends up at the Bates motel.

Here again is a similarity in the introduction to the villain. Bates appears to be a charming enough man at first glance, but there is something strange in his demeanor. After inviting Marion to supper, he has a disturbing argument with Mother. During supper, Marion tries to suggest that

Bates should seek help for Mother. The suggestion arouses in him a suspicious defensiveness leaving the audience to wonder whether the Bates motel is a safe place.

In the same way, Connie first sees Arnold Friend at the location associated with her transgression: the restaurant. He too is attractive, but suspicious. Even at first glance, Friend gives the reader a chill. Connie seems to notice him with a start, and his face is only a few feet away. It feels as though he has been following Connie at an uncomfortably close distance and absorbing every detail he can. He is pictured with black hair which suggests that he is a dark character, and his gold convertible reminds the reader of the golden arrows used by Cupid to make people fall in love. Furthermore, the reader knows that Connie is somewhat aware of his intentions because she scowls at him to show that she is not interested. The unwelcome glance has no effect on Friend's confidence, and he slyly responds by making an X in the air and simply stating, "Gonna get you, baby." This whole exchange happens without Connie's date even noticing, informing the reader that Friend is discreet and effective (28).

After the authors have characterized the victims in their respective stories, they must isolate the victim before the villain strikes. The emotional distance that the victim has put between herself and her acquaintances leads to the victim physically distancing herself from all the people who would otherwise be in a position to protect her. In *Psycho*, the isolation has already taken place by the time Marion meets Norman Bates. By taking the money and skipping town, Marion has decided that her future is more important than integrity and her working relationship with her boss. Another Hitchcock character, Alice, also distances herself from would-be protectors in a film called *Blackmail*. Alice White has decided that she is tired of her boyfriend. She is supposed to go out on a date with him, but has simultaneously made plans with

another man, so she distances herself by acting so cold towards her boyfriend that he leaves before dinner is over.

In “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” Connie distances herself from her family because she feels that being around them restricts her self-expression. As the author stated earlier in the story, “Everything about her had two sides to it, one for home and one for anywhere that was not home” (27). The “home” side of Connie is the side that tries to keep her mother from picking on her. It is the side that Connie uses as a façade to show her mother there is a distinction between herself and other girls her mother despises (28). The “anywhere that [is] not home” side doesn’t have to worry about what her mother thinks. This side has all the privileges of an older girl and that doesn’t need her father to protect her from her mother. By choosing not to go to a barbecue with her family (at the expense of her safety), Connie is able to find the distance she needs to express the “anywhere that [is] not home” side of her personality.

Unfortunately, withdrawal is often an invitation to trouble. Alice in *Blackmail* does not realize that the other man she has made plans with is potentially dangerous; Marion has not only isolated herself with a killer at a motel in a remote location, but she has agreed to have supper with him. Like the victims of Hitchcock who unknowingly agree to a date with death, Connie naively and innocently invites Friend by giving him the desired response. Instead of being suspicious of the strange car coming up the driveway and taking precautions such as locking the door, Connie nervously fixes her hair and goes to the door to greet Arnold Friend. She may not sound pleased with him at first because he is a stranger showing up unannounced, but her body language gives her away. Flattered, she “smirk[s] and let[s] her hair fall loose over one shoulder” when he offers her a ride. “She pretend[s] to fidget” when he tells her she’s cute (32). Then she stays at the door and continues the conversation by asking about the words on his car (33).

The story continues to build towards the dramatic incident by describing the villain in further detail. In *Blackmail*, Mr. Crewe (the villain) is, oddly enough, wearing more makeup than the other male actors. He appears to be painted or fake. There is a conversation outside the door in which Mr. Crewe invites Alice to see the inside of his flat. It starts in a friendly manner and then becomes almost uncomfortable to watch as he insists that she should go inside with him. Nevertheless, Alice agrees and follows him up to his art studio where they paint a picture together. Alice begins by painting a face and Crewe helps her to “complete the masterpiece” by guiding Alice’s hand in the painting of a nude female body to go with the face, and then she signs the picture. Feminist film critic and USC English professor Tania Modleski suggests in *The Women Who Knew Too Much: Hitchcock and Feminist Theory* that, with her signature, Alice authorizes Crewe’s view of her and the silence of her own idea (20).

Like Crewe, Arnold Friend appears to be painted. Like Norman Bates who dresses up like his mother, Friend is in costume. His shoes are stuffed, he is wearing what appears to be a wig, and he is masquerading as an eighteen-year-old. Like Mr. Crewe, he extends what would sound like a friendly invitation on the surface level, but refuses to take no for an answer, which makes the audience suspicious. Also like Mr. Crewe, Arnold Friend gives Connie a new definition of herself. First he tells her that she’s cute and he asserts his position by saying, “Don’tcha believe me, or what?” Then Friend tells her what her opinion of radio personality Bobby King should be by insisting that he’s not just “kind of great” as stated by Connie, but definitively “*great*” and that “he knows where the action is” (32,33). Friend is sure that everything he says is the truth, even down to the fact that he is Connie’s lover, and she just doesn’t know it yet (40).

Another item important to both Oates and Hitchcock is music. In the studio scene in *Blackmail* just before the attempted rape Mr. Crewe uses a song called “Miss Up-to-Date” to get Alice to change into a revealing outfit, then turns around when she is finished and says, “And that’s a song about you, my dear.” Friend uses music in a very similar way to lure Connie, who could also be referred to as “Miss Up-to-Date” with the way she is always checking her appearance (Oates 25, 27, 31). One critic has gone so far as to say, “Friend understands that music is sexual currency” (Urbanski 77). Friend brings up the radio almost immediately as a point of conversation (32), and it keeps playing in the background as part of his disguise (37, 39). He even steals words from pop songs to lure Connie out of the house (42).

The climactic moment in “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” is Connie’s scream. In one paragraph packed with emotion she runs to the back room stumbling over furniture and picks up the phone but is “too weak” to dial for help, and she screams into the receiver. Her spastic breathing is like “something Arnold Friend [is] stabbing her with again and again with no tenderness,” which is an ambiguous phrase that leaves the reader wondering if Friend has entered the house and is raping Connie or if the author is just trying to tell the reader that Connie’s breathing was painful as a result of the terror caused by Friend (45). Friend promises earlier in the story not to enter unless Connie picks up the phone (42). In this paragraph Connie has broken that rule. By such violation she has given Arnold Friend what would appear to him as open invitation to the house, so there could be a violent interaction taking place. Connie also does not speak at all after the scream, which could suggest that the phrase “stabbing ...again and again” is literal and she has in fact been stabbed repeatedly with a knife and is dead or dying. Her shirt is wet, which could mean that she is bloody from being stabbed. It could also mean that Arnold’s body fluids are on her clothes and/or that her shirt has somehow gotten wet

with blood from the breaking of her hymen. On the other hand, she may just be so afraid that she is sweating profusely. The author leaves the reader to fill in the gap here by never explicitly stating any of these things (46).

Like Connie's scream, Marion's takes place when she is stabbed (although this stabbing is obviously literal) again and again in the legendary shower scene. The "Mother" side of Norman Bates' personality will not allow him to feel sexual attraction, so Bates associates sex with violence just like Friend who makes his violent tendencies known by his threatening tone.

Hitchcock ends *Psycho* with a curious monologue by Norman Bates, and ends *Blackmail* with the reconciliation of Alice to her boyfriend followed by her suspiciously looking around as though someone is still coming after her. Like Hitchcock, Oates leaves the reader with an ambiguous ending. All Oates clearly says is that Connie leaves the house, and the rest of the ending is left up to the reader to determine based on assumptions and what the author has revealed about the characters. In the end, although all the questions presented in the beginning of the story have been answered, the audience is left speculating about specifics, and, of course, wondering what happens next.

## Works Cited

- Blackmail*. Dir. Alfred Hitchcock. Perf. Anny Ondra, John Longden and Sara Allgood. British International Pictures, 1929. DVD. The seduction in this film is very similar to the seduction of Connie in "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" The seducer is abrasive, uses music to achieve his goals including a song called "Miss Up-to-Date," and he wears more make-up than any of the other male characters in the film.
- Modleski, Tania. *The Women Who Knew Too Much: Hitchcock and Feminist Theory*. New York: Methuen, 1988. Print. Analysis of Hitchcock from feminist standpoint. Includes the formation of the female victim's character by the male seducer (Blackmail). Use of song "Miss Up-to-Date" in Blackmail to seduce victim (obsession w/ fashion). Ambiguous implications for women.
- Oates, Joyce C. "'Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?'" *Joyce Carol Oates, "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?"* Ed. Elaine Showalter. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers UP, 1994. 25-48. Print. Oates builds suspense in a manner similar to Hitchcock in her short story. The victim and villain, the foreshadowing, the sexual nature of the crime, the climactic moment of the scream, and many other devices are very similar.
- Psycho*. Dir. Alfred Hitchcock. Screenplay by Joseph Stefano. Perf. Anthony Perkins, Vera Miles, John Gavin, Martin Balsam, John McIntire. Paramount, 1960. DVD. The suspense created by foreshadowing, characterization of villain and victim, scream, victim's isolation, sexual nature of the crime, the space in which it happens, and the ambiguous ending are all very similar between "WAYG" and this film.



Urbanski, Marie MO. "Existential Allegory: Joyce Carol Oates's "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?"" *Joyce Carol Oates, "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?"*

Ed. Elaine Showalter. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers UP, 1994. 75-79. Print.

Talks about music in "WAYG"

*Vertigo*. Dir. Alfred Hitchcock. Perf. James Stewart, Kim Novak. Universal, 1958. DVD.

Hitchcock uses audio, visual, and storytelling for foreshadowing.

Wegs, Joyce M. "'Don't You Know Who I Am?' The Grotesque in Oates's "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?"" 1975. *Joyce Carol Oates, "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?"* Ed. Elaine Showalter. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers UP, 1994. 99-107. Print. Wegs points out some details of "WAYG" that make it feel suspenseful and horrific.

Sophie Kopp

Grandfather, Clock

The Clock

made the coals

stop smoking,

the toys in the box

collect dust.

The clock

made the tired

stop hoping,

the ones running late

feel rushed.

The clock

made the journey

go farther,

the pants in the closet

ill-fitting.

The clock

made the wounds

turn to scars,

the wrinkles it caused  
by ticking.

The clock  
made memories  
disappear.

It made the grudge  
a forgiver.

The clock  
made the reason  
become something clear,  
the shudder from your loss  
a mere shiver.

Tim Anderson

5/29/2012

ENGL 342

### Synthesis of Loss and Gain: Mechanics of Epiphany in James Joyce's "The Dead"

The secular word "depression" is our age's closest approximation to the spiritual word "despair", and as one is a state of mind and the other a state of the soul, we are perhaps relieved to find our depressions lifted through various means even while the pall of despair looms ever-present, though at a distance just far enough away for us to be able to forget about it. One is tempted to characterize James Joyce's story, "The Dead"—and the entire collection in which it occurs—as "depressing" and, as a consequence, to go out and buy a new set of clothes. Indeed, it could be said that despair is the thread common to all the tales in *Dubliners*. It is most keenly felt in the final story only because Gabriel Conroy, in his insecurity and hyperawareness, is the one character in *Dubliners* most capable of the inward gaze generally awarded to the reader—the result being that the reader is invited to look inside Gabriel as he looks inside himself, finding much less than he anticipated, to his great misfortune. But I maintain that this is only one way to read "The Dead." It follows not from a misreading of the text, but from a certain understanding of the Joycean epiphany—a predominately "masculinist-imperialist" understanding (to borrow the term from Gayatri Spivak) and one which has at its root (to borrow a definition of the term from Vincent J. Cheng) "the conjoined dynamics of empire and sexual colonization" (Cheng, 348). I distinguish my reading this way: While Cheng combs the text of "The Dead" from a

particular angle and with a particular set of tools, I will be applying this set of tools to better understand the concept of epiphany around which the text is framed. Only then can this complex short story's ending be teased out from its classic interpretation: that what Gabriel experiences is complete despair, and the reader a momentary or prolonged depression (depending on how much one ruminates), and that this is somehow *truth*, as is implicated within the word "epiphany." Though I risk sounding overly relativistic, I do believe that the truth in Joyce's story depends upon the perspective from which we look. The epiphany may indeed encourage a subjective gaze, and one that comes *outside* Gabriel's actual perception. Following this premise, my focused target of attack is the idea that, by the story's conclusion, Gabriel *loses*.

The Joycean epiphany, while talked about often and located in several stories, defies a very succinct understanding. It is elusive and malleable, somehow able to justify several critics' usage and yet still leave something to be desired. It is the product of just the sort of perspicacious writer who provides academics with enough clarity to get them excited and enough ambiguity to make them doubt what they have seen. Simply put, the Joycean epiphany could have several meanings and, depending on how it's used, alter one's understanding of what it does within any of Joyce's stories. Joyce himself may have conceived of the epiphany this way:

By epiphany he meant a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself. He believed that it was for the man of letters to record these epiphanies with extreme care, seeing that they themselves are the most delicate and evanescent of moments...The moment the focus is reached the effect is epiphanized. It is just in this epiphany that I find the tried, the supreme quality of beauty. (Stephen Hero, 211)

The problem with this definition is that it belongs to Stephen Dedalus; as Zack Bowen points out, “Joyce critics have tended to discount the idea that Stephen’s aesthetic theory in *A Portrait of the Artist* was necessarily that of James Joyce when he was writing the book,” (Bowen, 104). Though several of Joyce’s explorations into aesthetic theory, worked out in detail in his notebook, found their way into *A Portrait of the Artist*, it becomes impossible to tell whether or not Joyce holds the same ideas as Stephen once he writes them into a fiction. It becomes impossible to tell whether one of Stephen’s great epiphanies might even be the epiphany concerning the failure of his theory of epiphanies. It should also be noted that this definition remains obscure, and for our purposes, gives us little with which to understand “The Dead.” In quoting Robert Scholes, Bowen suggests that we could see epiphanies “as a mere stage in the developing thought of Stephen Dedalus” (Bowen, 103). In this case we can only wonder what exactly they are doing in *Dubliners*; the existence of epiphanies begins to seem dubitable.

Another complication to the matter involves the element of spiritual truth associated with the epiphany. If they (epiphanies) are a character’s illumination and revelation of his own inadequacy, as is generally assumed within Aristotelian recognition, they deal “with points of observable fact rather than psychological insight” (Bowen, 105). The gaining of self-knowledge which we like to call an epiphany must come from a character’s ability to weigh himself against some external standard which as always been present. This may help us understand Gabriel from “The Dead,” as he is certainly capable of this (perhaps this is all he does throughout the story), but it is doubtful that *all* of the characters found in *Dubliners* have the mental acuity to do so. Even more vexing is that the acquisition of “truth” is an epistemic concern and a problem of knowing, a problem of knowing that one knows the truth—it is doubtful that a character can know whatever spiritual truth has been imparted is actually true; it is a problem for readers to

know that the insight which the character has gained about himself is true about the character. A good deal of *assuming* goes on about what has descended from on high. This, I think, is why the question of what Gabriel learns through epiphany has so many varying interpretations.

Now I have briefly covered the debate of what an epiphany is in order find an entryway for my own theory. I'm sure I have one, though I can't be sure where it came from or whether or not it is correct. In a preliminary form it could be named the "masculinist-imperialist epiphany," though in its true state it ceases to be fettered by these terms. First I will attempt to explain what it is; afterwards, how exactly it could be viewed as "masculinist-imperialist," and finally, how it works within "The Dead."

My conception of epiphany stems out of Joyce's own aesthetic writes from his Paris Notebook:

Desire is the feeling which urges us to go to something and loathing is the feeling which urges us to go from something: and that art is improper which aims at exciting these feelings in us whether by comedy or tragedy. Of comedy later. But tragedy aims at exciting in us feelings of pity and terror. Now terror is the feeling which arrests us before whatever is grave in human fortunes and unites us with its secret cause and pity is the feeling which arrests us before whatever is grave in human fortunes and unites us with the human sufferer.

Loathing...urges us from rest because it urges us to go from something, but terror and pity hold us in rest, as it were by fascination... [An art is not] properly tragic which would move me to prevent human suffering any more than an art is properly tragic which would move me in anger against some manifest cause of human suffering. Terror and pity, finally, are aspects of sorrow comprehended in sorrow—the feeling which the privation of some good excites in us.

Desire, as I have said, is the feeling which urges us to go to something but joy is the feeling which the possession of some good excites in us...For desire urges us

from rest that we might possess something but joy holds us in rest so long as we possess something. (*Critical Writings*, 144)

An aspect of the epiphany is that it holds us within terror, pity, or joy, as Joyce defines above. But this is not what I would call a full epiphany—this must come later. Now what is most notable about Joyce’s aesthetics is that it is hinged upon possession and loss. When held at rest within terror, pity, or joy we are held at rest within loss and possession; but both have the other close at hand—what is terrifying or pitiable about the moment of loss is the understanding of what had previously been gained. The moment of possession is likewise haunted by the threat of loss. A work of art, to Joyce, must hold us at rest in one of these, but an epiphany, to me, must hold us in all three.

The language of this epiphany theory has masculinist-imperialist anxieties written all over it. The ideas of loss and possession, specifically, have endured many years of feminist criticism and many more years of reification into the collective consciousness which compel us to understand “The Dead” and the epiphany in these stark terms, unnecessarily. It happens to be particularly male-oriented. And this is a problem.

“The Dead” moves through a series of escalating challenges to Gabriel Conroy’s manhood. Cheng writes that Gabriel is a “well-meaning patriarch who is almost a domestic tyrant” (Cheng, 349). While sympathetic, Gabriel patronizes women to a degree that “suggests...an essentializing of the female in a form of infantilization” (Cheng, 349). In his interaction with Lily, the caretaker’s daughter, Gabriel alludes to her sexuality, inquiring whether he would “be going to [her] wedding one of these fine days...” (*Dubliners*, 144)—which is perhaps a question he has no business asking; indeed, he is embarrassed by her assertive response, blushes, and realizing his transgression, attempts to make up for it with the gold coin,



“buying her off by imposing his dominance in a different field of mastery in which he can still hold sovereignty, that of relative wealth and power” (Cheng, 352). It is important, however, to point out that Gabriel runs away. After putting the coin in Lily’s hand he ascends the stairs, leaving her unable to refuse him a second time. Here his self-concept remains intact, having only been shaken, and for the time being he turns his thoughts towards the dinner speech, thereby reminding himself of the qualities he finds so admirable about himself: his literariness, his education. He wrestles with which English author to quote in his speech “for he feared [Robert Browning] would be over the heads of his hearers” (*D*, 155). And it is not mere coincidence that Miss Ivors attacks these very qualities inexorably during the dancing scene. By accusing Gabriel of being a “West Briton” (*D*, 165), Miss Ivors comments on Gabriel’s lack of conviction to Ireland and his allegiance with England—his allegiance, basically, with imperialism. But that this backlash comes from a woman intensifies the nature of the attack. To assert himself in the quarrel between England and Ireland, Gabriel must assert himself over Miss Ivors—she becomes the space over which the battle is fought. Gabriel’s speech, in which he criticizes the younger, “very serious and hyper-educated generation” (*D*, 167), contains not only his response to Ivors’s accusations, but his response to Miss Ivors herself who, being a woman, must be returned to subservience before Gabriel’s manhood can be reaffirmed.

Mostly because I find her theories to be both accurate and fair, I choose to elucidate this matter using Simone de Beauvoir’s writings. In *The Second Sex* she writes, “In woman is incarnated in positive form the lack that the existent carries in his heart, and it is in seeking to be made whole through her that the man hopes to attain self-realization (*The Second Sex*, 142). Her perhaps one of the founding motivations of masculinist-imperialist ideology can be found: the attempt to be made whole by acquiring the Other. Beauvoir highlights the intention of the

existent to “fulfill himself by reducing the Other to slavery” and the true cost of renouncing all possession”: the loss he might feel, “unable to fulfill himself in solitude” (140).

The theoretical scaffolding on which the epiphany is contingent directly involves the loss and gain of the object Other; and it is fascinating when such a framework is applied to a story like “The Dead,” in which the content mirrors the device used to investigate it.

The narrative builds toward the epiphany scene at the story’s end, where, having endured a night filled with affronts to his masculinity, Gabriel encounters the one affront from which he can’t escape: the loss of his wife to her dead lover from the gasworks. The epiphany scene *could* be as follows:

While he had been full of...tenderness and joy and desire, she had been comparing him in her mind with another. A shameful consciousness of his own person assailed him. He saw himself as a ludicrous figure, acting as a pennyboy for his aunts, a nervous wellmeaning sentimentalist, orating to vulgarians and idealizing his own clownish lusts, the pitiable fatuous fellow he had caught a glimpse of in the mirror. Instinctively he turned his back to the light lest she might see the shame that burned upon his forehead. (*D*, 191)

As insight into his own failures this could be considered the epiphany; Gabriel suffers the great loss of himself with the simultaneous loss of Gretta, the object Other who, in a Beauvoir-ian sense, he needed to possess and own in order to be fulfilled. By following Joyce’s own art theory this could be considered a tragedy—we are held in a moment of pity for Gabriel (as he is a sympathetic character, we recognize ourselves in him) and terror (for we are implicated along with him, his loss is our own). Here is where many a reader comes off feeling depressed from

“The Dead,” and where many get off by labeling Gabriel a loser, no doubt in an attempt to increase the distance between the reader and tragic loss.

But consider the perspective from which Gabriel sees: unlike Aristotle’s recognition, he is not merely looking inside himself objectively, but rather, he is seeing himself as Gretta sees him. In his looking at Gretta, Gabriel sees her as an object, but in looking at himself, he sees himself as the object of Gretta’s look. The result of such a process is Gabriel’s recognition of Gretta’s status as a subject—as J.M. Coetzee writes, “Before the subjecthood of the Other-who-looks can be realized, however, one must have the experience of being the object of the Other’s look. This realization arrives not as an abstract, logical deduction, but in an unbidden moment of transition...with shame” (*Giving Offense*, 70). The epiphany here is the realization of the subjecthood of the Other—in seeing oneself through the gaze of the Other it is not the objective truth of the self which one sees, but the being of oneself through another’s eyes. The epiphany cannot, as a rule, fail to introduce to one the Other-as-subject nor can the self remain ensconced within its own perspective—it must see itself from an external point of view. This has been the narrative drive all along, and for readers, the greatest interpretive struggle consists in explaining the significance of this turn—those who see the epiphany primarily as loss perhaps mourn the stripping of a masculinist gaze—a delusion, a desperate clinging to the self.

But “generous tears fill Gabriel’s eyes” (*D*, 149); in recognizing his complete loss of Gretta, he also gains a new insight into who she might really be, and this is in fact Gabriel’s *triumph*.

“It is possible,” Beauvoir writes, “to rise above this conflict if each individual freely recognizes the other, each regarding himself and the other as simultaneously object and subject in a reciprocal manner...it requires man to outdo himself at every moment” (*The Second Sex*,

140). Gabriel's loss allows him the deepest vision, perhaps an opportunity for redemption. This is in full what I consider the Joycean epiphany to be: the synthesis of one's complete loss and the possession of loss, the deepening of understanding that only comes when the self is stripped bare.

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Ross Clifford

Night

*We will immerse ourselves in the darkness and there discover*

*its own particular beauty—Junichiro Tanazaki, “In Praise of Shadows”*

due to the moon

the dark twin of the oak tree

sways indoors

each gust of wind

through leaves

makes the rug ripple

a reading lamp

melts like candle wax

onto a table

but soon

a grapefruit blush

will color the floor

branches grasp

for each other

in the grass

when dawn

streams from the horizon

over the lawn

a part of everyone

will dart across the ground

away from the sun

# Razburry Lacquer

Zachary M. Cook

Joy Passanante

English 393

9 May 2011



August 2008: 18 years

I stare at the flickering black forms. How peculiar they look, I think, as they trickle down over the loose dirt. Dad's storage shed looms above me, casting a shadow on the rock and dirt that lay underneath. He built it last summer, perching the rear end over the steep hill behind our house. Stilts—cedar posts jutting from the sky—support the back end of the shed. It defies gravity, jutting from the rocky earth like a miracle. It never even creaks. The hill under the shed is dry, shielded from the rain, and the dirt is more like powder than soil. The ant's legs send tiny specks of dirt cascading down, collecting more tiny particles as they fall. Each step it takes creates a miniature avalanche.

I watch as one of them slides and collapses into a cylindrical cone dug into the dirt. The dirt on the depression's slope is as fine as dust, and in the middle of the hole a small bump rises, barely visible—a tiny depression the shape of a megaphone. As the ant squirms in the middle of the cone, something undulates from beneath the dirt. The ant is flung against the side, twitching and sliding back into the center, covered with dust. It struggles to upright itself, black legs groping the air. From beneath the sand, two scythe shaped jaws slowly emerge. The head of the ant lion flicks, and a spray of dirt hits the ant, covering it with another layer of dust. The ant lion is brown and massive, moving in flickering lunges. It approaches the ant and poises its jaws at the sand where the head is, still struggling to uncover itself from the dust. The two scythes close as garage doors would: slow and mechanical.

I lose my footing in the loose sand and slide down the hill a couple of feet. I turn and slide on my butt to stop myself. A cloud of dust roils around me as I regain my footing and, squinting in the sun, begin to make my way back up the steep slope.

“What are you doing?” My brother said.

“Looking at the ant lions,” I said, grabbing a handful of weeds, pulling myself up the slope. I give a quick tug on each handful of the greasy, white stems to test their strength.

“Why?”

I look up the hill, grabbing for more weeds. Wyatt stands at the top, peering down at me. His face is round and red, topped with dark brown hair that springs from his scalp in fibrous tufts. His nose looks crooked, and one of his nostrils, through some defection of child birth, has an extra bump of skin near the webbing at its bridge. The black hoodie hangs from his arms and neck baggily, draping over his skin like a poncho. As I grasp for the last clump of weeds, I think of how the deformed nostril affects him—ruins him. He never seems to take a full breath.

“They’re cool,” I said.

Wyatt watches me quizzically, hands stuffed into his pockets, eyes wide. Bugs aren’t his thing, but I’m leaving for work in a week and won’t be back for six months. He seems to want to talk, or at least be around.

“Do they eat ants like lions eat zebras?”

“No,” I said, “they eat ants like koalas eat eucalyptus. It’s all they can eat—specialized diet,” I said, gasping for breath and heaving myself to the top of the hill. “If a ladybug or an earwig falls into its trap, it flings it out. Very impressive neck muscles for something the size of an eraser on a pencil.” I sit at the top of the hill and look down. It’s the last time I’ll be home for a while. It’s the last time I’ll see my brother, make fun of his puffy hair, the way he wears a hoodie with no shirt underneath.

“Did you see an ant get ate?”

“She got her ant,” I said.

I had followed that ant for the last hour or so, trying to keep the ash from the cigarettes I smoked away from its path so as not to burn or disturb it. It made its way over twigs and under tires. It chugged along, stopping to greet some ants along the way, lurching quickly away from others. Down the hill it went, snaking through the tall weeds and the stems of cherries devoured by plump robins chirping noisily above. I plucked large obstacles from its way and lifted leaves to keep sight of the tiny, black living dozer. By the time it reached the shed, my tongue was numb from the smoke and my throat burned. From a neighbor's radio played a lowing country song. His voice crackled and sputtered a low, skipping hopelessness.

And there it was, that slick cone—the lump and the jaws frozen beneath the dust, and my ant. *My ant*, for I had connected with it. I had experienced what the ant had. I moved from its cozy nest, high atop the hill that was shaded below the willows and nestled betwixt lush ragweed, down these slick slopes looking for something. We both wanted something. This hour long trip into the perilous sands under the stilted shed was for something. For the ant? Food. He wanted a cherry, succulent and heavy with sugar. How the other ants would welcome him if he brought back a cherry! And at least this ant existed here with me, quietly consoling whatever emptiness I felt by merely existing. I exulted in its simplicity. Exist and seek food. It chugged along through time and space making tiny avalanches.

And down he went, sliding on the dusty slope like a drop of water through the air. In a blink of an eye, everything was for nothing. I watched the jaws split him in half while clinging to that slope with a cigarette pursed in my lips and the smoke and dust sucking in my nose and my heart beating—the vibrations of the country music still bouncing off the air into my ears.

I have seen this before. I have increasingly encountered moments where the world stops making sense. How different am I? What am I doing with my life besides looking for cherries?

Here I am, fat and tired, huffing air and staring under the shed at that tiny grave. After the lion is done, it will fling the dried-up ant out of the cone. There, microbes and bacteria will finish the job of decomposition. The lion will pupate, salivating around its dusted cone to create a shell. The ant gives the lion energy to fly. Wings grow. The queen, back at the ant's nest, will starve and die.

I stand up, collecting a handful of cherries, plucking their stems, and make my way back up the hill. The cherries are alive with the ants, crawling and biting into the skin. She will live. "I'm sorry," I say, watching them cut small chunks of the cherry away, disappearing into the hole in the ground. They don't hear, but keep working away at the cherry, oblivious to their sterile sister dead under the shed.

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December 1998: 8 years

"What color do you see?" I said. Wyatt stares at the paper. His face is young, eyes red and puffy. It's a Wednesday, and the teachers at school would have tried to force him to swish the pink fluoride between his teeth. He would have looked at the plastic cup, quivering his lips and squinting as tears rolled down his cheeks. *No, you must swish this*, they had said. And he did. A quick gag and, retching, stumbling across the room, he vomits in the trash bin.

"Blue."

"And now what color do you see?" I said. I put the blue paper behind my back and present him with the purple paper.

"Purple."

"If I look at this blue paper, I will tell you it is blue. Do you know why?" I said, setting both sheets on the bed.

“Because it is blue.”

“Because I was told it was blue. Mom or Dad or someone else told us that what we see when we look at this is called blue. So we call it blue.”

Wyatt stares at the blue paper absently. His shoulders slouch and his nostril whistles quietly.

“But it’s blue.”

“What if, when I looked at this paper, I saw orange?” I pick up the blue paper and shake it in front of his face. “What you see when you look at orange is what I see when I look at blue. You see blue. I see orange. We both call it blue. Who’s right?”

“I’m right, because it’s blue. If you are seeing orange then something’s wrong with you.”

“What if you’re seeing orange?”

Wyatt shakes his head and shoves past me. He has apparently grown tired of my presentation. I promised him enlightenment of some sort; I specify *of some sort* because I’m not enlightened. I’ve merely been exposed to subjectivity and sunk. My crude attempt to show him that nothing made sense and life was a sham has failed. He went back to watching television and I went back to my room.

I remember getting onto my knees as a kid, clasping my hands together like I had seen Mom do after Grandpa died of brain cancer. Her whole body shook and convulsed, quiet shivers and whimpers for a man whom she later told me tried to kill her as a child. For insurance money. Because he was drunk. *Set fire to the house and watch it burn. We’ll save the oldest. Start again.* She clasped fingers together and mumbled unintelligible words to God. So I looked through my window and prayed for death. *Kill him and I can be happy. Kill the kids who call me fat and ugly. Kill them like you killed Lot’s wife. Like the people of Sodom. Like my Grandpa.* I got up

off my knees, unclasped my hands and felt a little better. Maybe God heard me. He'd take action. He listens to everyone. He loves everyone but my enemies. He favors those who listen and talk. You just need a little faith.

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7 January 2011: 20 years

The sun's in the window. Outside, down the hill and past the stilted shed, logging trucks rumble through town, bellowing jake brakes and dragging tire chains. I open my eyes and my brain droops like frozen honey. It lasts only a few moments every morning, but as I emerge from sleep and see my arm and hand dangling limp from the side of the bed, everything seems alien. Cognition fails, reality with no filter blinds every sense, and I experience everything anew. The sun in the window doesn't mean it's another day, but that light exists in my window. It has been flung from the sun as energy and allows me to see my arm. *And I can move those*. Fingers, as I would call them if I were of this moment, exist only as light and vision. Perception calls them fingers, but all I see now are pink appendages. Skin and nail on meat and bone. And with each moment, something akin to terror settles in my belly. It's not a moment of realization. It's not the confrontation of chaos, but an understanding of my own idiocy. How silly we all are. How stupid I am. *Shake it off*. "What a drug," I'll say. What a waste of a moment. Slowly, surely, the sickness of experience will emerge from my brain and the honey will thaw. These shaky whispers will fade, and I'll be able to exist. But not right now. I curl my hand into a fist and sit up, straddling the mound of blankets, feeling the heat from the window warm my shoulders. Melt it away.

And, after the sickness wears off and the world starts to make sense, I leave for work. I leave my family and that sickness and continue on, completing mundane tasks to feed myself.

Standing and watching lumber sliding across steel and brass, I begin to drift away. I try not to focus on the absurdity of the process. I watch the wood before it meets the saw. Thin, dark lines permeate the length of the board and we call them wood grain. Every line is another year, dark and light shades of amber marking the journey from seed to siding. Each dapple of color and splotch has to be accounted for. And the correct mark must be given according to the quality of each board. Wind break marks the board down two grades. It's a structural issue. *Rot is no good.* Rotted wood has lost its aesthetic value as well as its structural integrity. Examine the board. Look twenty feet ahead and spot the small imperfection at its end. *Wind break.* Somewhere in this board's history, it was a tree. The tree grew in the forest's soil. It grew so tall and thin that a gust of wind bent the tree so wildly that the cellular structures on the wood split across the width of the log. A gust of wind left a light scar across the board that makes it unusable. Atmosphere and wind doomed it. This board will never be nailed to the side of a house. I shake the tiredness from my muscles and heave the board from the table. *Wind break goes in the scrap pile.* This board is not fit for construction. This board is garbage.

"Zac, come on down here for a second." I turn and see my boss standing below me. His hard hat rests awkwardly atop his head and a grey beard protrudes from beneath his wide nose. I give the board a final shake, and it falls into place on the garbage pile. I press my palm against the button to my left and the chains, once funneling the boards that still needed inspection down the line, creaks and jostles to a stop.

"What's up?" I said.

"Charlo wants to talk to you," he said. His eyes look odd and cool. Something about how the neon lamps glare off his glasses, or maybe the cedar dust in the air, makes his eyes look grey—stony and distant. I twist my leather leg chaps around and unhinge the belt buckle.

“Do you know what it’s about?”

“I’m just supposed to have you go to Charlo’s office. He needs to talk to you,” he said and, turning, retreats back towards his office. I hang the chaps on a screw twisted into a support beam by the stop button and step down from the grader’s station. I exit the giant, tin production building and make my way across the forklift alley to the supervisor’s office. Behind me, the roar of machinery dies away behind the closing door. The sun is just beginning to rise over the mountains that line the valley. A cool breeze drags its way from the Snake River, swirling between production buildings and cooling the skin on my face and hands. Something feels wrong. Something about my boss’s coldness felt wrong. Something about his eyes.

“Mr. Charlo?” I said, entering the supervisor’s office. It is the first time I have seen Charlo. He is big—a mass of skin, glasses, short hair and t-shirt. He fills his office chair and then some, his legs spread wide to allow room for each thigh. He looks up at me with a thick smile and motions me in with a quick flick of the wrist.

“Zac, it’s nice to see you.”

“Yeah, you wanted to talk to me? Sorry, I’m not sure if Roger has anyone covering me on the Re-Man. I don’t really want a pile—”

“Don’t worry about that. Your dad called. He wants you to go up to St. Joseph’s. He said to take his truck, the keys are in it.” His eyes shift between me and his desk. I put some of his words together and work them over. Someone is hurt. Someone is in the hospital. “Now I want you to get right up there. Buckle up and drive safe. Promise me you’ll drive safe,” he said. He pulls his glasses down to the tip of his nose and gives me a look so weary that I feel a pang of shame. Wyatt or Dad is dead. Wyatt has wrecked his four-wheeler or Dad his car. Wyatt has gone out and hit a rock and went into the river. He was drowning in the river and I was at work



staring at lumber. *Rot is no good*. No, Dad is dead or, wait, perhaps it's Mom. I promise that I'll drive safe and start to walk towards the parking lot. Wyatt isn't dead. Dad is fine. It's Mom. My gut starts to churn. I stop registering anything but the wet stench of cedar. Everything is about to change. Mom is dead, I am sure, because she had a heart attack or a stroke like her mom did. Mom is lying on a cold steel table, and I am going to walk up to it, and there would be Dad and Wyatt and Mia, all cold and stern and numb like I am right now. Nobody would be crying. None of us would cry. We never did. We will get over it. We'll help each other out. We'll sit around a campfire, years from now, and tell stories about her good moments, drinking beer and laughing because this life is wonderful and she had her time with it. I clamor up into the tall pickup and leave the lumber mill behind me. All the production and inspection fades away and disappears with the landscape that bore it. I follow the river, driving into the rising sun, headed to the hospital where everything would be fine, eventually.

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A bitter whisper of cold air slides in through the open window. My fingers curl around the leather of the steering wheel cover, and I squeeze hard. I collapse into the motion of the green and yellow grasses as they go by. I brake for a corner and wipe my left hand across my thigh. The denim feels hot under my sweaty palm.

To my right, a dike follows the slow spin of the river as it passes this town and flows on ahead. I watch the people that rose with the sun. They dance their way in the morning light, cotton sweatpants clinging to their legs and iPod cords nipping at the napes of their necks. Their breath broils out into the low sunlight. Wisps of hot smoke linger behind skin and bone locomotives.

My hand is shaky, so I roll down the window and stick it out into the wind. The air is cold enough to bite against skin and nail, all red and cold. I round the last corner before I have to turn away from the river and head up the hill to the hospital. I look at my phone. It is black and lifeless, lying in the passenger's seat. Nothing blinks. No one will call me back. The street light down the road turns red and I press the brake slowly. All the land stops its quivering and comes to a stop outside the windows. I curl my wrist in slow circles and wait for a man to cross the road.

His nose shoves its way against the zipper of his coat, and his hands thrust deep into his pockets. He lurches forward, angled to the ground as if he were falling. His feet catch the ground beneath him, clapping against the pavement and, as he crosses in front of my car, his torso breaks the outline of the rising sun. He becomes a black flicker, flashed against a plucked cherry stain of light. And when I shut my eyes I can see him still, fluttering amidst that instant orb. I turn away from the river and it dies away behind me and I blink again and again. The circle of light, its broken shape—the outline of a man stricken across it—remains burnt on my eyelids.

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12 July 2010: 20 years

My sister is nine months pregnant with her second child. His name will be Rowen James Cook. James is my grandfather's name. He worked his whole life cutting down trees. His father before him ran moonshine through Alabama. His family was told to never come back, but he had. In the top shelves of his woodshed, glowing dimly in the cold, pine scented air of the mountains, are a row of orange mason jars. Peaches older than my father hover at the bottom of each. On the lid, etched in old marker, are notes from his brother. *Special Blend—1947. Cooley's distillery—1932. Pa's favorite: razburry lacquer—1907.* "razburry lacquer" is by far the most

prized in the collection. On occasion I would ask to see it, and Grandpa would make his way out to the shed and reach way up on his tip toes and grab it. It was red, unlike the others, which shined a dark gold like the setting sun. I never met my grandfather's brother; he wasn't even ever spoken of. I inspected his handwriting. It didn't look gay, the jagged, Appalachian scribbles fading away on the copper lid. Grandpa would wait a second, letting my eyes pour over the glass treasure, ready to catch it if I let it slip. Then, after he felt I had seen enough, he replaced it high on the shelf.

Logging in Northern Idaho made Grandpa strong as nails. Time made him old. I watched his face when my sister told him that her son would be named after him. I'd never seen naked happiness before. Every wrinkle and blotch of skin about his mouth and eyes exuded his happiness. Teegen will be Rowen's brother. He is two years old. I've seen him take his first steps. His sixth word was "uncle."

Rowen's father is a piece of shit. Her words. He threw my pregnant sister against a wall and threatened to kill her. Because he was drunk. Because he wanted to. He won't be there when Mia goes into labor. She wants me to be there, in the room with her.

"Can you do it?" she said.

"I guess I can, if you want me to be there," I said.

"I want you to be there." My sister's voice broke. She has been crying.

"I'll be there, Mia. I've got to go back to work," I said.

I hung up and slid the phone into my pocket. Old men in jeans and boots with beards and big bellies shuffled out of the brake room. I sat there for another moment, squeezing the small piece of foam that goes in my ear to block the noise of the saw. An odd arrangement, I thought, shoving the yellow foam into my left ear. A brother in the delivery room.

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I'm with my brother and father. Stagnant, sweet air blows around the open doors in a whisper. The woman in white rounds a corner pushing a tray piled with shiny, sharp instruments. Plastic and sanitary and so sweet. Sickly. I leave Dad and Wyatt in the waiting area, Spongebob on the television, and enter the delivery room.

Skin. That's all I see, but it's my sister and her eyes haven't acclimated to mine. They keep darting my way, but I'm past modesty. On to life! On with you, sweet little animal—human, they'll call it. I'll show you how to move. Teach you how to hold a gun like grandpa showed me. Eventually, I'll walk beside you, the blistering cold of the mountain stinging your cheeks, but I've got you wrapped up tight. You'll blow air through your throat and make what we call words. I'll hear them, kneel down and make sure the coat is zipped up enough. The sky will be pink, burning the cold clouds with a callous beauty that even our eyes couldn't miss. Everything might be white, it might be snowing, but you'll be warm and safe and I can answer whatever you ask me. We all start to miss what we know we'll never have. Time might be one of them. So on to life. Real, quick humanity. Dirty life.

I thumb through songs on my phone, looking for something worthy of this kind of moment. Into the classics. Bach? Too dry. Too fluttering to christen a warrior—violent, anxious to scream. Everything in the blink of an eye. Symphony no. 5 in C minor andante starts to play, and Mia and I know right away that's the sound. That's the ticket. That's the vibration that we need to ride. Beethoven could spill on to the table and melt the walls. Everything open and transparent. There it is.

So we listen to the whole damn thing. In and out come the nurses, checking and sending me into the hall to probe or whatever—quick smiles from the nurses and receptionists who think

me daddy. I look pale. That's justified. Back in, and her legs are hoisted into the air and draped with a cloth. The doctor's bent over and peering into the nethers of modesty with shiny eyes.

"Another try?" he said.

She heaves, twisting her cheeks and eyes in a furious grimace. There's a container between the doctor's and my sister's torsos. He bends down again, agonizingly concentrated at staring into the birthing fort. I hear flesh and fluid drop, splash.

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And for a moment the world is drugged, and I can see the whole of it stumble, glimmering in the flecks of light that skim through the blinds. Colors and shapes become a vibration, and a low note catches me in its rhythm. I watch my hands dance, *thick as honey*, and they reach out—a pair of odd scissors poised between my fingers. Drops of blood spill as I cut life's cord, and that low note keeps playing, the sickly smell subsiding, the air still vibrating. Mia stoops and kisses her own skin, wet and warm. And that violin of bone and blood begins its own song—drowning the tenor from the world. A quiet, fluttering space emerges within everyone who hears. I felt each note move as a bird hops, flits among a stand of grass, searching for a seed that has fallen from the stalk, blind to its ability to grow itself, oblivious of its own wings, destined to the dirt where roots suckle and feed.

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7 January 2011: 21 years

I open the door of the pickup and take one last deep breath. The air is still cold and the sun has risen over the river. My boots aren't made for running, and I catch the heavy steel toe on a curb as I run across the parking lot. The pain in my knee doesn't slow me down, but I'm

bleeding enough to feel the blood run down my leg and soak into my sock. I push through the doors and, immediately, I know that it is not Mom. I'd never seen Dad cry before.

“Zac,” he says, gripping my shoulder in his massive hand. I know my mouth is open, tongue dry, knee aching. I know this is wrong. This isn't what I thought of. There will be no campfire, no nodding consolation at a life lived and gone. “It's Rowen. He's dead.”

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“How can you be against God?” I'm asked. I look into my sister's eyes—the eyes of a believer, someone forced into belief by unrelenting sorrow. How could she go on without God?

They weep here

For how the world goes, and our life that passes

Touches their heart<sup>1</sup>

*I'm not against God*, I want to say. I'm against those who believe. I'm against those who give themselves a reason to think irrationally. I'm against those who accept something above and outside the power of the only thing they have to make sense of the universe: reason. I'm against you, Mia, because you must want to die immediately. Die and find out. Die and ascend to the chosen throne of believers to be reunited with Rowen, the son stolen from you by the God you so unwittingly believe in. You can't wait to get out of this meaningless moment we have. That's all we have and some people get shorted. Some things suffer. Some colors deceive and some ants fall into holes in the sand. Some things have all the hope in the world and are struck down with the righteous hammer of chaos too soon. *Rot is no good*. A gust of fucking wind, instability in the atmosphere, drunkards and murderers all plotting against us, and we're the ones lying there, flayed open on that cold steel table. But that's no reason to give up reason. That's no excuse. I

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<sup>1</sup> Translated from Virgil's “The Aeneid,” when Aeneas cries “sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt,” while gazing upon a mural found in a Carthaginian temple. The mural depicts a scene of the Trojan War and many of his friends and countrymen dead.

want to tell her that, but looking into the eyes of a believer, one who has been crippled by this life, her son fallen into his own hole in the sand, something stops me. I can only do harm. I can only breed sorrow. All this reason only destroys. So let her believe. That's what I'll do. I'll let her live this delusion. It's becoming a burden to accept reason. She should admire me for that.

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8 April 2011: 21 Years

It's cold outside, but Grandpa's woodshed is even colder. Dad and Wyatt drink beer outside, talking to Grandma and Grandpa; their voices drag out to a mumbled hush through the door. I set the hammer down on a block of pine. All day, up and down ladders, the booming of hammers driving nails into wood, the work has drug on, but the warm kiss of coffee seems to make it all feel distant. Something about the smell of the woodshed makes me remember. The cool must of the wood and the smell of mice pluck the chord of a memory, and I turn and look up at the rafters. There they are. Dusty, glowing jars line the space between the wall and roof. I set the mug on the freezer, steam rising like a silk ribbon into the still air, and roll a chopping block to the far wall. It makes a thud as it drops against the hard, frozen ground. The light from my phone glares eerily off the glass of the mason jars as I scour them. Each is similar: orange, gold, yellow—the orbs of peaches dead and still at the bottom—one after the other another hue of sunlight. And, at the end of the row, an empty jar. I reach, leaning across the stack of wood, and grab it. *Pa's Favorite: Razburry lacquer—1907* shows clearly through a clearing in the dust, Grandpa's fingerprints still visible on the copper lid. I wonder, replacing the jar with the others, how good it must have tasted.

## **Avuncular**

At night my uncle ran  
through the barefoot streets,  
like a blind man, speaking  
the words of the dead:

“I ate the unconscious  
apple of boredom,

warmed my hands  
by the body’s glow,

learned the secret  
history of anger,

saw the sun paint  
the smoke over our heads  
an imperial violet.”

In the morning I would wash  
the blood from his feet and lips,  
and hold his hands until sight  
returned to his human eyes.



Morrison's *Paradise* as a Western

Of all of Morrison's novels, *Paradise* is set the farthest west, in the panhandle of Oklahoma, or as she puts it, "in the muzzle of a state shaped like a gun" (16), a location which abuts Kansas, Texas, New Mexico, and Colorado. It's the study of an isolated all-black town called Ruby founded by the descendents of freedmen. And though *Paradise* is set in 1976, more than eighty years after Frederick Jackson Turner wrote of closing of the American frontier, in many ways it reverberates with profoundly Western themes of migration, violence, and opposition between civilization and wilderness and law and order.

Many critical authors have already considered *Paradise* as an exploration of the American pattern of settlement, of westward expansion encouraged by divine right. Less has been done to place the novel in respect to art of the American West and the frontier. It is my goal to establish these connections between *Paradise* and critical work pertaining to frontier history and Western mythologies in hopes that it will reveal a helpful way of examining the text.

The critic who has furthest established the Western motif is Holly Flint in her essay "Toni Morrison's *Paradise*: Black Cultural Citizenship in the American Empire." She argues the novel is in part a New Western history, aiming to recount the presence of non-European-Americans in the West. Flint describes in detail the Southern emigration on which Morrison's Oklahoma settlement is based. Morrison's pioneers are "modeled after black Americans who participated in the Exoduster movement" from 1877 to 1879, primarily settling in Kansas. They were named Exodusters because of their similarity to the Israelites who fled from Egypt. While

her research is illuminating, Flint suggests that the New Western approach provides a limited lens. She writes, “one must move beyond New Western history’s regionalist methodology.” She suggests that homesteading and the black exodus are indicative of the larger pattern of American colonial settlement and of the country’s imperialism. Though Flint’s further commentary is insightful, I’d like to linger on Morrison’s chosen setting. Beyond discourse on American empire, how does the Western motif add to the novel?

I’ll begin by looking at setting, how the post-frontier period allows for commentary on the persistence of community myth and how Indian claims to the country undermine Ruby’s exceptionalist history and characterize the Convent. Character archetypes also serve to depict the novel’s conflicts: the struggle between civil and savage, oppressors and victims, and men and women. Lastly, the Western legacy of violence will be considered with respect to the mythic qualities of *Paradise*’s conclusion.

### **Is *Paradise* really a Western?**

#### **Setting**

In his survey of Western literature and film *The Six-Gun Mystique Sequel*, a follow-up to a seminal critical work, John Cawelti establishes criteria for identifying a popular Western. His primary criteria are setting and characters. While *Paradise* clearly falls outside of what can be considered popular genre, I find the criteria a useful guide for determining the Western elements of the novel. Of setting, Cawelti writes, “the Western is a story which takes place on or near a frontier and consequently the Western is generally set at a particular moment in the past” (20). This is a problematic definition for *Paradise*. On one hand, as Holly Flint has noted, *Paradise* clearly reflects the history of the black homesteaders of the Exoduster movement. But the front story takes place primarily in the 1970s. Ruby’s residents, though isolated, have access to

modern conveniences and can drive to the nearby town of Demby for what they can't find.

However, the frontier community of Ruby's Old Fathers remains alive in the minds of the New.

Much of the history Morrison gives us on the Old Fathers westward migration comes via the reflection of Ruby's reining twin brothers, two bankers named Steward and Deek Morgan. Steward likes to roam his show ranch outside of town on horseback in the pre-dawn hours. Morrison writes, "Saddled on [his horse, Steward] rediscovered every time the fresh wonder of knowing that on one's own land you could never be lost the way Big Papa and Big Daddy and all seventy-nine were after leaving Fairly, Oklahoma" (95). Here Morrison is careful to show the recurring nature of this event by noting Steward's recollection of the past occurs "every time" he rides his horse in the early morning and also how his action permits "rediscovery." By riding his horse, Steward reenacts the migration of the Old Fathers and in so doing imparts a sense of their spirit of exploration in a new world.

At the same time Steward rides his horse, his brother Deek is out hunting for quail. Morrison doesn't show Deek hunting. Instead we learn of it through his wife Soane as she waits for him to return with his bag. Like Steward's riding, Deek's hunting is an activity which reconnects him with the Old Fathers. He too is moving about the land, and by hunting he reenacts the Old Fathers' search for food as they made their way to Oklahoma. When Deek does return the house and brings his quail into the kitchen, Soane is critical of him for not using his power as a banker to help out the needier residents of Ruby. Morrison writes, Soane "didn't understand why he wasn't worried enough by their friends' money problems to help them out. Why, for instance, couldn't Menus [Jury] have kept the house he bought?" (107). We can assume here that Deek and Steward have foreclosed Menus's home due to his failure to make payments. But Deek's hunting, although more of a hobby than a means of survival, has temporarily allowed

him to recreate the communal ethic of the Old Fathers. When he returns home, we learn that he's already given half his quail to another resident, "enough to take care of two suppers" (105). In spite of her criticism of Deek's greed, Soane senses that after his hunt something is right with him. After studying his satisfied face, she thinks "shooting well that morning had settled him and returned things to the way they ought to be" (107). So in spite of the fact that Ruby's New Fathers live in a time and place of relative privilege, their ritual reenactments keep them in touch with frontier lifestyle.

Steward's and Deek's looking back on traditions becomes a commentary in keeping with the contemporary subgenre Cawelti refers to as the post-western. Some such contemporary westerns depict "the West as pastoral tradition threatened by modernity" (113). In the twins' pre-dawn movements, their luxury is on display. Steward reflects on his own privilege in light of the Old Fathers' trials, that his ownership allows him to live without threat. Also, due to gas drilling, his ranch has been greatly reduced from its prior state: "In 1962 the natural gas drilled to ten thousand feet on the ranch filled his pockets but shrunk [his] land to a toy ranch, and he lost the trees that had made it so beautiful" (82). Not only has his land been diminished, but in losing its trees, it has lost its pastoral aesthetic value. Riding on his dwindling show ranch, the heroic figure Steward cuts is clearly ironic. Likewise, Soane considers Deek's hunting in light of its break from the past: "Unlike at Haven's beginning, when Ruby was founded hunting game was a game" (103). In each case, as much as the twins' reenactments of tradition put them in touch with the past, they also display their modern separation from the frontier history which defines them.

Morrison also incorporates the Western motif by placing her communities on land once part of Indian Territory. In "Tribal Paradise Lost but Where Did It Go?" Craig Womack

criticizes the limited presence of American Indians in the novel, noting that much is lost in such oversight. Womack is correct in noting the dearth of complex Indian characters, voices, and communities which would have certainly been present near Haven and Ruby. He further notes that the Old Fathers displaced of tribal peoples throws a monkey wrench into “the pot of African-American self-determination” (23). Yet he engages in his own oversight critically. When he writes that, “federal Indian policy in relation to allotment is almost never mentioned in the novel” (37), Womack passes over a significant, albeit brief moment in the text. When the Old Fathers do arrive at the spot where they’ll found Haven, Big Papa leans down to the grass and says, “Here. This is our place” (98). Yet Morrison is quick to undercut his surety. She continues, “Well, it wasn’t, of course. Not yet anyway. It belonged to a family of State Indians, and it took a year and four months of negotiation, of labor for land, to finally have it free and clear.” While Morrison fails to detail Indian displacement, she manages to position it at the fore by joining it with Big Papa’s resounding claim. She is both undermining the Old Fathers’ exceptionalism and suggesting that their settlement, like that of white pioneers, comes at a cost to prior residents.

While the Convent’s history as an Indian school is similarly brief, it works to align the Convent women with Native Americans, conventional frontier characters. Morrison sets out the objective of the Indian school as

an opportunity to intervene at the heart of the problem: to bring God and language to natives who were assumed to have neither; to alter their diets, their clothes, their minds; to help them despise everything that had once made their lives worthwhile and to offer them instead the privilege of knowing the one and only God and a chance, thereby, for redemption. (227)

While the effects of the Indian school (as with entire Indian school movement) are clearly destructive to Native tradition, the passage sets up parallels between Indian school students and Consolata and the Convent women. Like the students, Connie was displaced as a child (238) and comes to learn a new language (242). The Convent women too come from disparate places (though they're not taken) and go through a similar transformation in the school's building. Once Connie assumes control, she teaches the women a new way of living in the world. She alters their diets by preparing food grown at the Convent. She alters their clothing by giving them handed-down dresses and allowing them to go nude. She eventually alters their minds by helping them come to terms with their selves and harmful pasts, which is part of teaching them a new religion. In helping to strengthen them spiritually, she encourages them to relearn their native language. This is most pronounced in the case of Pallas who enters the Convent unable to speak, but eventually recovers. So although the building has its origins in a grim part of Western history, Morrison uses the history to align the Convent women with characters from Western mythology. She also inverts the transformative aspects of the two varied educations. The traditional Indian-school education was meant to separate Native students from their culture, arguably to genocidal effect. When the Convent women undergo retraining, they are separated from oppressive male-dominated environments in which they are victims. Morrison transforms a historically grim sort of schooling into a restorative one. In the former Indian school, she manages to further build upon and invert a traditional Western setting.

### **Characters**

The second criterion of the genre Western is its cast of characters. John Cawelti writes,

three central character roles dominate the Western: the townspeople or agents of civilization, the savages or outlaws who threaten this first group, and the heroes who are

above all “men in the middle,” possessing many qualities and skills of the savages but fundamentally committed to the townspeople. (29)

Superficially, *Paradise* has the first two roles sewn up. The Western’s archetypal townspeople are the citizens of Ruby and in the eyes of their protectors the outlaws are the women of the Convent. As with all Morrison’s work however, binary oppositions of good and evil never truly exist, except perhaps in the minds of her dimmest characters. The massacre recasts the New Fathers as outlaws and the Convent women as innocents. The women pose no bodily threat to Ruby. At worst they threaten the patriarchal traditions of the New Fathers, yet even that threat is trumped by the town’s generational unrest. By villainizing the Convent women, the New Fathers find a defenseless target outside the community to serve as a scapegoat for unrest within. By relying on a perspective so inherently flawed, Morrison depicts the problems of such dualistic thinking. If *Paradise* is a Western, it is one which subverts the traditional construct that there is a simple civilized goodness worth killing for. Such a subversive message is another aspect of contemporary post-Westerns as defined by Cawelti, of those which seek to show Natives (archetypal “others” such as the Convent women, I’m arguing) as sympathetic protagonists and settlers as brutes. Cawelti further clarifies that ambivalence towards Native Americans is nothing new, but the efforts to revise the history of settlement are.

As far as determining an archetypal hero, that too becomes muddy territory, which is no surprise considering Morrison’s resistance to supplying obvious protagonists. Deek Morgan may be the likeliest candidate from Ruby. Although he participates in the massacre, it is probably he who tries to stay his twin’s gun to prevent him from shooting the Convent’s matriarch, Connie. Deek had an affair with her, so he has intimate sympathies for an “outlaw” despite being committed to Ruby. And it is Deek who by the novel’s end sits down with Reverend Misner in

what appears to be the first of many confessions. Deek seems poised on the brink of learning to wrestle with the devil within, much as the Convent women had, instead of pointing his finger at other devils.

Yet the women represent settlers as well. They, unlike the Rubyites who have resided on the panhandle since 1949, perhaps better embody American pioneers. In their migrations to the Convent, the women seem imbued with the spirit of westering. In running from Maryland to California, Mavis takes pleasure in the act: “As more and more of the East was behind her, the happier she became” (33). By separating herself from the East, Mavis is akin to frontierspeople, who in going West separated themselves from secure and civilized lands. And she is not alone in her journey. On the way, she picks up many young female hitchhikers. Apparently they head her way too for “all of them told her about the world before California ... The world they described was just like her own—sad, scary, all wrong.” In their desire to make it to the Pacific, Mavis and these girls embody the migratory spirit of westersers.

The other Convent women follow a similar pattern. Gigi too is a wanderer, searching initially for a storied place in the desert. What attracts her to the fabled figure of coupling lovers there is its “moving, moving all the time,” and it makes her aware that something deeper than “she had known all her life existed ... somewhere” (64). She mirrors the figure’s desirable movement as she meanders towards the Convent. Initially, Seneca also takes to the road in pursuit of motion itself: “She preferred traveling resolutely nowhere” (138). Eventually though she too is led to her final destination by the apparently crying Sweetie, who reminds her of a heartbreaking woman from her past (126). Pallas similarly lacks direction. Her way is a “blind drive on roads without destinations” (169). When she’s later picked up and asked “Where you



headed?" she fails to respond, realizing that her vocal cords don't work (173); through this question of destination, we learn she's temporarily dumbstruck.

To put the Convent women's migrations in perspective, I'll turn to William R. Handley's discussion of post-frontier Western work of Joan Didion. Although Handley finds her critical of the contemporary West's ailing "geography of hope" (191), his analysis is helpful in understanding the modern westering that occurs in *Paradise*. He writes, "The 'quintessentially romantic' impulse behind westering and other social movements, 'the kind that recurs in times of real social crisis,' provides the thematic bridge between the 1960s and the era of the pioneer" (192). The Convent women appear to travel Didion's thematic bridge. Their migrations in part stem from the cultural unrest of the 1960s. Gigi is haunted by a disastrous political demonstration in Oakland and Seneca is a housing-project orphan. Also, the women are unwittingly in league with the feminist movement. Their escapes can be taken as active fights for equality through self-protection. Mavis flees an abusive husband, Pallas a traitorous boyfriend and a truck full of rapists, Seneca an unpleasant boyfriend and a woman who makes her a masochistic sex toy. Even overly sexualized Gigi is disdainful of the young men of Ruby for their similarity to those from her hometown, of how they share the "same haircuts, same stares, same loose hick smiles" (67). Her sexuality seems rooted less in finding a man to marry than one with which to reenact the desert Eros.

Further discussing the essay "Slouching Towards Bethlehem," Handley notes that "the teleology of Manifest Destiny has become an edgy, nameless desire without an object" (193). This same "edgy, nameless desire" could be at the heart of each Convent woman: California-bound Mavis, motion-craved Gigi, nowhere-traveling Seneca, and tongue-tied Pallas. And yet unlike the drifting hippies Didion offers as examples of doomed Western romantics, Morrison's

characters originate from dangerous places. While spurred by similar romance, the Convent women are sympathetic figures moving towards a destination of greater self-preservation. While Morrison's portrayal avoids sentimentality—the women are murdered in the end—her contemporary female pioneers are heroines to Didion's fallen societal dropouts.

To push the pioneer comparison further, it stands that the Convent women serve as archetypal Western heroes according to Cawelti, even though they have been cast as Ruby's savages and outlaws throughout the novel. They are from different places, live apart from Ruby, and worship in untraditional ways. But in the coda their ghosts reappear, some bearing arms and all returning to the communities from which they came. This suggests that through the massacre, the women have been transformed from distant "other" to the liminal role of the Western hero. They have learned from the townspeople's attack the importance of using weapons as self-protection, and their return to their homes is a kind of embrace of civilization. (I will return to the novel's conclusion in greater depth at the end of my analysis.)

Another critical lens with which to view Western character in *Paradise* is Handley's discussion of archetypal antagonists in *Marriage, Violence, and the Nation in the American Literary West*. Handley notes that Western literature shifted from a depiction of "Indian-as-Other" to "familiar-as-Other." One source of the shift can be found in the ethnic violence of American conquest turning inward on community and family (19). His theory resonates with Ruby's conflicts. On one hand, *Paradise* charts the destructive nature of racial exceptionalism. The Old Fathers flee the prejudiced American Southeast, only to be turned away from the black community of Fairly, Oklahoma due to the deep hue of their skin. In founding Haven, they reverse the bigotry, barring integrated marriage and disfavoring their own light-skinned residents. The New Fathers' vilification of the Convent can be taken in part as a response to the

integrated community that threatens their borders. Morrison's first line indicates a white woman resides there and Connie is of Brazilian origin.

Handley further suggests that the shift to "familiar-as-Other" carries over to marriages. Illegitimate conquest of other ethnicities develops into marital conquest in which one spouse enters the relationship without consent (20). While nonconsensual marriages do not play a major role in *Paradise*, the opposition between women and men does, so it serves to adapt Handley's construct as "woman-as-Other." Ruby is a male-dominated town. Men control political, religious, and economic affairs. In spite of their relative security, they defend Ruby and its women by carrying all the guns. In part, Ruby's developing dissonance arises from this gender inequality. One relationship in which to observe such inequality is that of Steward Morgan and his wife. While thinking of the Old Fathers expulsion from Fairly, Steward imagines a similar fate befalling Dovey:

How would he have felt if some highfalutin men in collars and good shoes had told her, "Get away from here," and he couldn't do a thing about it? Even now, in 1973, riding his own land with the free wind blowing [his horse's] mane, the thought of that level of helplessness made him want to shoot somebody. (96)

This previously noted scene is already tinged with the irony of Steward revisiting the frontier history of the Old Fathers on his toy ranch, in a pre-dawn ride that feels as unnecessarily protective as it is ruminative. Yet here the irony is increased as Steward moves himself to thoughts of violence simply by imagining a distant, storied past. His desire to "shoot somebody" foreshadows his eventual role in the Convent massacre. Steward's defense of Dovey is not limited to the recesses of his mind however. Earlier, we learn that he's installed a lock on the home she stays at in town, which she thinks to be the only door-lock in Ruby (90).

While Dovey doesn't threaten Steward, she does serve as a source of vulnerability which keeps him on guard, vulnerability that's further threatened by the presence of the Convent. After the women interrupt K.D.'s and Arnette's wedding, Lone overhears the organizing posse's litany. The women are said to have powers, are called witches, and are said to draw out the Rubyites only to return them maimed, seeping the Convent mess back into their homes and families. A repeated danger is that the women manage to survive without men. Lone sums up the posse's thinking: "The fangs and the tail are somewhere else ... in a house full of women. Not women locked safely away from men; but worse, women who chose themselves for company" (275-6). In addition to showing the men's hyperbolic vilification of the women, the scene also depicts the men's greatest fear, that women could survive without them. Such a place undermines their belief that community relies upon male-guardianship, a key component of their storied past.

### **Violence and Self-defense**

In *Regeneration Through Violence*, his landmark study of literature of the American frontier, Richard Slotkin examines how "the myth of regeneration through violence became the structuring metaphor of the American experience" (5). He charts the evolution of the frontier hero as it arises from European-American settlers struggling to gain foothold in the New World and fighting with Natives to do so. Because the theme of frontier is so strong in *Paradise* and goes hand in hand with its central act of violence, I'll conclude by considering how Slotkin's paradigm informs the novel. Is Morrison subverting Western mythology or is the violence truly regenerative? Is she in some way embracing or rewriting the myth by supplanting the archetypal frontier hero with the ghost heroines of the coda?

In one sense, *Paradise* charts a succession of attempts to re-found community. The first wave begins in 1890 with the Old Fathers' exodus from the Reconstruction-era south to establish Haven (16). The second migration, to found Ruby in 1949, is recounted collectively by Deek and Steward, both World War Two veterans:

Young and newly married, they were anything but fools. Long before the war, Haven residents were leaving and those who had not packed up were planning to. The twins stared at their dwindling postwar future and it was not hard to persuade other home boys to repeat what the Old Fathers had done.

The twins and the families who go with them in turn experience their own heyday. Though these two migrations are regenerative, they are not marked by violence. However, the seeds of violence can be found in the second migration's beginning. Morrison is careful to note that these descendents of ex-slaves are now ex-soldiers who have learned lessons about how to protect a town. One may assume that Ruby and its protection are in part built upon the New Fathers' temporary indoctrination into the American empire through their military service.

Can the Convent massacre be viewed as the beginning of a third migration? For the people of Ruby it seems not. As mentioned earlier, it does seem a transformative moment for Deek Morgan. Prior he had "never consulted with or taken into his confidence any man. All of his intimate conversation had been wordless ones with his brother or brandishing ones with male companions ... None had required him to translate into speech the raw matter he exposed to Reverend Misner" (301). Deek's new confidence in Misner suggests the town is beginning to retreat from its hard-line segregationist ways and perhaps turning toward the reverend's humanist ethic. Yet more so Deek's admissions reflect the town's realization of its vulnerability. Morrison has already clued us in to Ruby's dissolution. Homes are abandoned, residents have fallen on

hard times, the younger generation has begun to move away. The massacre at the Convent has merely hurried the process. For after the massacre, the town which hasn't experienced a single death in all its twenty-six years witnesses its first. If there can be no death in paradise, then Ruby's fall from self-entitled divinity is assured.

On the other hand, if we consider the Convent, Morrison provides hope for a regenerative outcome from the violence. It's unlikely any of the women have survived. Their fate seems sealed in the novel's first chapter when the New Fathers, having searched the building, see them running away in clear view and take aim. Yet Morrison does not indicate that they have surely died. Their bodies are never found. The last we hear of them from a citizen of Ruby is from the young woman Billie Delia. "When will they return?" she wonders. "When will they reappear, with blazing eyes, war paint and huge hands to rip up and stomp down this prison called a town? ... She hoped with all her heart that the women were out there, darkly burnished, biding their time, brass-metaling their nails, filing their incisors, but out there" (308). Billie Delia's imaginings invoke Western archetypes. First she imagines the women residing "out there." It's the same term the Old Fathers used to describe the deadly prejudiced "wilderness" from and through which they migrated and in which they sought to form a safe community (16). Second she imagines the women as being of the wilderness by dressing them with war paint. Her wish that they will return to destroy Ruby recalls an Indian attack on a pioneer town. Here the women are cast as archetypal Western antagonists.

The coda however does not depict the Convent women descending upon Ruby. Rather than concentrating on a single place, each of them returns to her home, scattering throughout the nation, into the great "out there." Two of them do appear in warrior fashion. Grace is wearing army fatigues and her old boyfriend believes she's packing heat. Pallas is carrying a sword. A

third, Mavis, praises her abusive husband's new wife for carrying a gun. It seems these Convent women have been reborn as stronger martial versions of their old selves, that the massacre has imparted a new means for their survival. It's a re-visioning or inversion of the archetypal Western hero. Just as the frontier hero uses his savage violence to protect an enclave of settlers, Grace, Pallas, and Mavis return to the dangerous communities from which they fled with a new understanding of the necessity of self-defense. They are poised not to protect one town or a whole nation but simply their and other women's singular roles in it. By describing the Oklahoma panhandle as gun muzzle and the Convent as cartridge (71), Morrison suggests that the massacre propels the Convent women on this new trajectory.

In *Paradise*, Morrison reworks old literary territory of the American West, adapting archetypal conflicts between civilization and savage in a contemporary setting steeped in frontier tradition. She applies a genre often relegated to cowboys and Indians squaring off in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century to a fresh cast of African-Americans and oppressed drifting women tied to the counterculture of the late 20<sup>th</sup>. In doing so, Morrison shows the flaws of a mythology that elevates one skin hue, one gender, one creed, or even one way of living in the world by relying on isolation and violence. But in the end, she manages to both destroy the frontier myth and re-create it, by resurrecting fabled Western heroines from the mistaken acts of terribly fallen and bygone heroes.

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