CURRENTS

A Journal of Young English Philology Thought and Review

Vol. 10: Politics and Poetics of Difference

2024

Edited by

Edyta Lorek-Jezińska, Nelly Strehlau, Joanna Antoniak & Bernadetta Jankowska

Toruń 2024

CURRENTS. A Journal of Young English Philology Thought and Review
Vol. 10: **Politics and Poetics of Difference**/2024

Edited by Edyta Lorek-Jezińska, Nelly Strehlau, Joanna Antoniak & Bernadetta Jankowska
Editors-in-Chief: Edyta Lorek-Jezińska & Nelly Strehlau

This online version of the journal is a referential version.

www.currents.umk.pl currents.journal.umk@gmail.com
ISSN 2449-8769

Cover designed by: Olga Markiewicz; **photo** by Joanna Antoniak
Logo designed by: Zachary Larysz

Publisher: Academic Association for Doctoral Students of English Philology, Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, Poland / Doktoranckie Koło Naukowe Filologii Angielskiej, Uniwersytet Mikołaja Kopernika w Toruniu, ul. Bojarskiego 1, 87-100 Toruń

Proofreading: Edgar James Ælred Jephcote, Bernadetta Jankowska, Agata Rupińska, Agnieszka Staszak, Edyta Lorek-Jezińska, Nelly Strehlau, Joanna Antoniak

Typesetting: Edyta Lorek-Jezińska with Bernadetta Jankowska

CURRENTS. A Journal of Young English Philology Thought and Review, based in Toruń, is a yearly interdisciplinary journal addressed to young researchers in the field of English studies. It was founded in 2013 by the Academic Association for Doctoral Students of English Philology, Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń and its first issue was released in 2015. The journal is dedicated to all aspects of English studies, including linguistics, literary and cultural studies, translation, book editing and ESL teaching. It seeks to explore interconnections and differences between various sub-disciplines and approaches within English philology, providing a platform for debate to young scholars. *Currents* invites contributions from students of English departments in Poland and abroad, pursuing BA, MA and PhD degree programmes. The major part of each issue consists of academic articles related to the key themes described in call for papers published in the latest issue or on the journal website. A separate section is devoted to book reviews, conference reports and students' creative projects. The journal applies a double-blind review procedure; each article is reviewed by one or two academic referees. All submissions and queries should be sent to the journal address: currents.journal.umk@gmail.com.

Editors-in-chief

Edyta Lorek-Jezińska and Nelly Strehlau

TABLE OF CONTENTS

STUDENTS' CORNER

Acknowledgements

Had it not been for the great involvement of many people, the publication of this issue of CURRENTS would not have been possible. We intend to express our gratitude to all researchers and lecturers teaching English Studies at Nicolaus Copernicus University for their kind support. We greatly appreciate invaluable comments provided by our Reviewers. Their attention to detail helped to inspire our young scholars and substantially contributed to the quality of this edition. We would like to thank the supervisors of BA and MA theses, which formed the bases of some of the articles included in this volume, as well as doctoral students' advisors for their useful comments and suggestions. Last but not least, we wish to extend our thanks to our students, graduates and colleagues, who contributed to the volume and helped us with proof-reading and other editing tasks.

CURRENTS
The tenth issue editors

CURRENTS EDITORIAL
POLITICS AND POETICS OF DIFFERENCE: AN INTRODUCTION

CURRENTS. A Journal of Young English Philology Thought and Review. Vol. 10/2024
Ed. E. Lorek-Jezińska, N. Strehlau, J. Antoniak & B. Jankowska, www. currents.umk.pl
ISSN 2449-8769 ||

Bernadetta Jankowska, Edyta Lorek-Jezińska, Nelly Strehlau & Joanna Antoniak
with Natalia Jaworańska & Edgar J. A. Jephcote
Nicolaus Copernicus University

POLITICS AND POETICS OF DIFFERENCE: AN INTRODUCTION

Keywords: difference, politics, poetics, otherness

> "it is not those differences between us that are separating us. It is rather our refusal to recognize those differences …"
> (Audre Lorde)

It is our great pleasure to deliver the tenth issue of *CURRENTS. A Journal of Young English Philology Thought and Review*. The central concern of this year's issue of *Currents* is the poetics and politics of difference and their conceptualisations, representations and manifestations in Anglophone literature, culture, and linguistics.

Difference and diversity have a profound impact on every aspect of human activity. However, society's response to them can be varied, ranging from outright elimination to assimilation and affirmation. Differences can spark new trends, inspire innovative research, and bring fresh perspectives to the arts and sciences. Politics of difference highlights, among many other issues, social inequities that give rise to movements for change. Feminism, for example, emerged as a response to gender inequalities and the exploitation of women.

Postcolonial studies, in turn, arose from the tensions between European and Indigenous cultures. Even collective experiences of nationhood, community, and cultural values originate, as Homi Bhabha argues, from "the overlap and displacement of the domains of difference" (2). Poetics of difference denotes strategies and modes of expression used for communicating diversity and otherness. It might, for example, include subversive and disruptive forms, experimental styles or deconstructive discourses. Poetics of difference can also involve embracing a multiplicity of voices as polyphony (Bakhtin), where "a variety of conflicting ideological positions" are presented as equally important without being subjected to authoritative judgment (Lodge 86). The examples in which different perspectives on social and cultural issues changed our thinking are diverse. In this volume, we explore the ways in which difference shapes our world and try to understand the challenges and opportunities it presents.

The articles gathered in this volume examine various aspects of politics and poetics of difference in the areas of linguistics and literary and cultural studies, from the metaphorical conceptualisations of conflict, to technological and posthuman otherness, to racial, cultural, mental and class distinctions.

Politics and poetics of difference in linguistics

In the opening article "Metaphorical enhancements of the us/them asymmetry in war speeches of American presidents in the years 1917–1972," **Barbara Chmielewska** examines the use of metaphors in presidential speeches during times of conflict (World War I, World War II, and the Vietnam War). Building upon the theories developed by George Lakoff and Esra Sandikcioglu in reference to the Gulf War, the author argues that similar strategies were employed by American presidents in these earlier military conflicts and that they largely consisted in increasing the antagonisms between the opposing sides.

Politics and poetics of difference in literary and cultural studies

The article entitled "Through the eyes of the machine: rethinking humanity, language, and the societal status quo in *The Murderbot Diaries*" opens the literary/cultural section. Its author places Martha Wells's award-winning series of novellas in the tradition of science fiction literature that uses the trappings of this genre to question social assumptions about gender and sexuality. **Anna Temel**'s queer reading sees in the series a means of critique of not only heteronormativity, but also binary gender and amatonormativity, enabled by its first-person point of view of a non-human, agender and asexual protagonist.

In "Technoapocalypse: the effects of the technological disaster on the human subject in Don DeLillo's *The Silence*," **Barbara Pawlak** discusses the profound impact of technology on contemporary people's lives. Kevin Warwick's concept of *Homo Technologicus*, used by the author in her article, serves to reveal the novel's representation of the deep connections between technology and basic human skills like perception and communication.

In "Redefining boundaries between human and nonhuman in *The Stone Gods* by Jeanette Winterson," **Agnieszka Jagła** discusses the depiction of the human-nonhuman relationships through the transhumanist and posthumanist lens. The author argues that, through blurring the boundary between human and technological nonhuman, Winterson showcases how such encounters influence and transform the understanding of the concept of the human.

Wiktoria Rogalska's article "From Necromancer to Mother: the analysis of a cyborgian female in *Raised by Wolves*" draws upon Rosi Braidotti's analysis of maternal monstrosity and Donna Haraway's figure of the cyborg to examine the representation of posthuman motherhood in a recent television series. The author draws attention to the intrinsic connection between mothering and death, highlighted by the fact that the cyborgian mother of the series is a reprogrammed Necromancer, a death-bringing machine of war, and contemplates the ways in which even the figure of a cyborg, seen as liberatory by Haraway, becomes entangled in gendered stereotypes of victimization.

Hanna Stelmaszczyk's "Queer Gothic Otherness of Truman Capote's *Other Voices, Other Rooms* and Rendall Kenan's *A Visitation of Spirits*" examines the motif of otherness in two Southern Gothic novels. The article explores how the motif in question is used in the analysed texts to describe the feelings and experiences of queer characters and the way other members of their communities react to their otherness.

"American literature in the eyes of African students" by **Merci Robbie Onyango** provides a glimpse into feelings and reactions of African students to American literary texts they are asked to read as a part of their curriculum, often at the expense of their own literary traditions. The author argues that the complex mix of emotions experienced by African students stirred by American literature can be seen as one of the long-lasting impacts of colonialism on Africa as diverse literatures of the continent are replaced by mainstream American fiction.

In "'There ought to be a place for people without ambition': the American Dream as a divisive force in Charles Bukowski's *Factotum*," **Piotr Matczak** discusses the problematic nature of the American Dream in the 1940s and its role in increasing social divisions. Against this historical background, the author develops his analysis of the main character in Bukowski's novel, focusing on the depiction of Henry Chinaski's troubled mind and his failure to accept—and thus reconcile with—the social reality of the war period.

The last article in this section—"Trauma and literature: Virginia Woolf's contribution to the study of PTSD" by **Daniela Anisiei** and **Mihaela Culea**—revisits Woolf's oeuvre to comment on the significance of its autobiographical content. Beginning with a critical discussion of trauma literature and theory and their significance after World War I, the authors identify several ways in which Woolf's writing, described here as scriptotherapy, contributed to the study of trauma—her own, war veterans' and other survivors'.

Students' corner

The students' corner in this issue of *Currents* features two artistic projects by NCU students, devised for the courses in: "Intertextuality and Adaptation" taught by Edyta Lorek-Jezińska and "Introduction to Literary Theory" taught by Katarzyna Więckowska (both part of English Studies, BA programme, 2nd year). The intertextuality projects are the effect of the students' engagement with the circulation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in contemporary culture, presenting a variety of forms and themes, from a comic strip to transformative fiction, with photos and pictures in between. The literary theory project is a collection of haiku—a very disciplined and highly evocative form of Japanese poetry—written in English by the course participants.

References

Bakhtin, M. 1984. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota.

Bhabha, H. K. 2004. *The Location of Culture*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Lodge, D. 1990. *After Bakhtin: Essays on Fiction and Criticism.* London: Routledge.

Lorde, A. 1984. "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 114–123.

POLITICS AND POETICS OF DIFFERENCE IN LINGUISTICS

CURRENTS. A Journal of Young English Philology Thought and Review. Vol. 10/2024
Ed. E. Lorek-Jezińska, N. Strehlau, J. Antoniak & B. Jankowska, www. currents.umk.pl
ISSN 2449-8769 ||

Barbara Chmielewska
University of Warmia and Mazury, Olsztyn

METAPHORICAL ENHANCEMENTS OF THE US/THEM ASYMMETRY IN WAR SPEECHES OF AMERICAN PRESIDENTS IN THE YEARS 1917–1972

Keywords: Us/Them asymmetry, metaphorical conceptualizations, war, presidential speeches

Introduction

This paper analyses the metaphorical conceptualizations that highlight the antagonism between countries and people in the service of political agendas. The objective of this study is to investigate how and why American Presidents exploited the *Us/Them* asymmetry in their speeches on wars. The paper indicates that the metaphor system and frameworks identified by George Lakoff (1991) and Esra Sandikcioglu (2000) in the narrative of the Gulf War had been previously employed in World War I, World War II, and the Vietnam War. In addition, this study proposes an extension to the metaphor systems described by both researchers by incorporating the WAR IS A JOURNEY metaphor, which serves the same objectives, namely, justifying involvement in war and evading responsibility for war actions.[1]

The paper employs the methodological framework of the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), which originates from Lakoff and Johnson's book *Metaphors We Live By* (1980). Their fundamental assumption, crucial for my analysis, is that people think and communicate using conceptual metaphors, which involve correspondences or mappings between a source and a target

domain. What is more, how a concept is understood can be influenced and manipulated by a particular source domain used to conceptualize it (Lakoff 1986, 1987, 1993). Various scholars have modified and challenged Lakoff and Johnson's original ideas (for more recent studies and critique see: Deignan 2010; Gibbs 2009, 2011; Keysar et al. 2000; Steen 2011; Kövecses 2002, 2015, 2020). However, for the purpose of comparing the coverage of the Gulf War with that of the WWI, WWII, and the Vietnam War, I chose to use the same methodology as Lakoff and Sandikcioglu.

The article examines speeches delivered by American Presidents[2]. The analysis is structured as follows: First, George Lakoff's and Esra Sandikcioglu's remarks on the application of figurative language in war discourse are presented. Next, the metaphorical conceptualizations that highlight the *Us/Them* asymmetry in the speeches related to World War I, World War II and the Vietnam War are identified and analysed. The study concludes with a presentation of the observations and conclusions.

Lakoff's and Sandikcioglu's on the Application of Metaphorical Language in News Coverage of the Gulf War

This section presents a detailed account of Lakoff's (1991) paper "Metaphor and War: The Metaphor System Used to Justify War in the Gulf" and Sandikcioglu's (2000) extension of his findings in "More Metaphorical Warfare in the Gulf; Orientalist Frames in News Coverage." Both researchers demonstrate the role of the *Us/Them* polarity in the conceptualization of war and the significance of metaphorization in highlighting it. In his paper, Lakoff (1991) analyses various conceptual metaphors employed during the Gulf War. Here, I present only his metaphorical conceptualizations that emphasize the *Us/Them* asymmetry, whose exploitation influenced people's understanding and evaluation of the Gulf War.

The first metaphorical conceptualization to be discussed is the fairy tale scenario. Lakoff (1991) offers two types of the scenario: the Rescue Scenario

and the Self-Defense Scenario. The former involves a crime committed by an unreasonable, evil, and irrational villain, and an innocent victim who is saved by a hero. In the Self-Defense Scenario, there is no hero as such, and instead a victim is forced into military action by a villain. It should be noted that the fairy tale scenario may be very manipulative as it can be applied to almost any situation. In Lakoff's (1991) view, we just have to answer the following questions: Who is the victim? Who is the villain? Who is the hero? And what is the crime? Furthermore, Lakoff (1991: 8) points out that the fairy tale scenario does not contain an objective evaluation of an event but rather provides a pattern in which a hero "rescues an innocent victim" and "defeats and punishes a guilty and inherently evil villain (…) for moral rather than venal reasons."

Lakoff (1991) concludes that the image of war created by the fairy tale scenario is extremely biased, distorted, and one-sided. Moreover, the scenario can easily obscure inconvenient facts, as people typically do not scrutinize the facts closely and tend to believe in the narration offered by politicians and media. In Lakoff's (1991) view, casting countries or people in different roles affects the way they are perceived because the roles evoke particular connotations. The archetypal hero is morally upright and courageous, whereas the villain is typically associated with amorality and viciousness. Despite its superficial nature and possible biases in role selection, the fairy tale scenario effectively emphasizes the *Us/Them* dichotomy, influencing the perception of both a hero and a villain (Lakoff 1991: 4).

Lakoff (1991) argues that the exploitation of the *Us/Them* asymmetry is an effective way of demonizing the enemy and providing moral justification for entering war. He points out that the metaphor WAR IS VIOLENT CRIME: MURDER, ASSAULT, KIDNAPPING, ARSON, RAPE, AND THEFT is another way of highlighting the polarity. According to Lakoff (1991: 12), "here, war is understood only in terms of its moral dimension, and not, say, its political or economic dimension. The metaphor highlights those aspects of war that would otherwise be seen as major crimes." It should be observed that the *Us/Them*

asymmetry is highlighted by naming only the actions of the enemy without acknowledging our own. Turning to Lakoff's (1991: 12) account one can read that "the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait was reported on in terms of murder, theft and rape. The American invasion was never discussed in terms of murder, assault, and arson (...) We portrayed Us as rational, moral, and courageous and Them as criminal and insane."

Lakoff's analysis indicates that the fairy tale scenario and the metaphor WAR IS VIOLENT CRIME: MURDER, ASSAULT, KIDNAPPING, ARSON, RAPE, AND THEFT were employed to highlight the *Us/Them* asymmetry. Both metaphorical conceptualizations aimed at justifying the US involvement in the war, demonizing the enemy and establishing a convenient narrative for the American cabinet. However, Sandikcioglu (299) claims that the metaphor systems identified by Lakoff "merely prove to be part of a much broader conceptual framework," and that the news coverage of the Gulf War was closely linked to Orientalism.

According to Sandikcioglu (301), the narration employed during the Gulf War conceptualized Iraqis as "prototypical instantiations of the Western concept of Orientals (…) and American as Westerners." The author (302) notes that these conceptualizations were created by the "Western mind" and stem from the "prejudiced East-West relationship." Furthermore, Sandikcioglu emphasizes the dependence between power and metaphor, concluding that more powerful countries have more dominant and persuasive metaphors. This dependence was evident during the Gulf War when the metaphors "of the West proved to be far superior" than those of the Iraqis (301).

Analysing the news coverage of the Gulf War, Sandikcioglu (304) noticed that the division into "two worlds, Us and Them" is structured by conceptual frames: civilization vs. barbarism and maturity vs. immaturity[3]. According to Sandikcioglu (308) the frame, civilization vs. barbarism, consists of the conceptual metaphors ORIENTALS ARE BARBARIANS and WESTERNERS ARE CIVILIZED, as well as the subframe "the Oriental is immoral" and "the

Westerner is moral." The author (308) notes that "the most forceful" narrative employed during the Gulf War was shaped by this framework. The narrative portrayed Saddam Hussein as a "reincarnation of Hitler," drawing comparisons between his invasion of Kuwait and Hitler's invasion of Poland. It also linked the US invasion of Iraq to the response of the Allies, attributing the support of the civilization to the West and accusing the Orient of regressing to barbarism.

The next frame, maturity vs. immaturity, consists of the conceptual metaphors THE ORIENTAL IS A STUDENT and THE WESTERNER IS A TEACHER. It should be noted that the frame also relies on the uneven distribution of power, as "the 'teacher' is allowed to determine everything, i.e. the 'teaching methods,' the 'evaluation' of the performance and most importantly the 'subjects'… to be taught" (Sandikcioglu 312). Conceptualizing the West as a teacher and the East as a student has far-reaching consequences. The metaphors imply that there is a difference in knowledge and education levels between the Orientals and the Westerners, with the latter being more culturally, politically, and economically advanced and experienced, as well as expected, just like teachers, to achieve specific educational objectives, even if it requires being strict.

Sandikcioglu (317) concludes that the news coverage of the Gulf War was influenced by the Orientalism framework and "polarized the world into the Orient and the West, into Us and Them." As could be observed, Iraq was typically associated with "images of barbarism, weakness, immaturity, emotionality and instability," while the West was characterized by a number of positive attributes, including "civilization, power, maturity, rationality and stability" (317). Although the narration presented a simplified and stereotypical image of the enemy, it was effective in turning the American people against the Iraqis and justifying the US involvement in the Gulf War.

The review of Lakoff's and Sandikcioglu's views on metaphorical conceptualizations that emphasize the *Us/Them* polarity will serve as the theoretical groundwork for further analysis. In what follows, I want to argue

that American presidents exploited the *Us/Them* asymmetry not only to influence the public opinion during the Gulf War, but that it was used earlier to shape the perception of the sides during World War I, World War II, and the Vietnam War. What is more, this asymmetry was achieved not only by the use of the fairy tale scenario and the frameworks discussed by Sandikcioglu, but also by the metaphor WAR IS A JOURNEY.

Presidential Speeches on World War I

Let me begin with the "Address to Congress Requesting a Declaration of War Against Germany" delivered by Woodrow Wilson on 2 April 1917. The following excerpts reveal the self-defence scenario, in which the president casts the government and people of the United States in the role of both a Victim (1–3) and a Hero (9–14), while the Imperial German Government fills the role of a Villain (4–8):

1) I advise that the Congress declare the recent course of the Imperial German Government to be in fact nothing less than war against the government and people of the United States.
2) American ships have been sunk, American lives taken, in ways which it has stirred us very deeply to learn of;
3) I thought that it would suffice to assert our neutral rights with arms, our right to use the seas against unlawful interference, our right to keep our people safe against unlawful violence.
4) The present German submarine warfare against commerce is a warfare against mankind. It is a war against all nations.
5) I officially laid before you the extraordinary announcement of the Imperial German government that on and after the 1st day of February it was its purpose to put aside all restraints of law or of humanity and use its submarines to sink every vessel (…)
6) The new policy has swept every restriction aside. Vessels of every kind, whatever their flag, their character, their cargo, their destination, their errand, have been ruthlessly sent to the bottom league without warning and without thought of help or mercy for those on board (…)
7) (…) the German government itself and were distinguished by unmistakable marks of identity, have been sunk with the same reckless lack of compassion or of principle.
8) I am not now thinking of the loss of property involved, immense and serious as that is, but only of the wanton and wholesale destruction of the lives of noncombatants, men, women, and children (…) Property can be paid for; the lives of peaceful and innocent people cannot be.

9) Our motive will not be revenge or the victorious assertion of the physical might of the nation, but only the vindication of right, of human right, of which we are only a single champion.
10) We desire no conquest, no dominion. We seek no indemnities for ourselves, no material compensation for the sacrifices we shall freely make. We are but one of the champions of the rights of mankind.
11) It is common prudence in such circumstances, grim necessity indeed, to endeavor to destroy them before they have shown their own intention. They must be dealt with upon sight, if dealt with at all.
12) It is our duty, I most respectfully urge, to protect our people so far as we may against the very serious hardships and evils (…)
13) Our object now, as then, is to vindicate the principles of peace and justice in the life of the world as against selfish and autocratic power (…)
14) It will be all the easier for us to conduct ourselves as belligerents in a high spirit of right and fairness because we act without animus, not in enmity towards a people or with the desire to bring any injury or disadvantage upon them, but only in armed opposition to an irresponsible government which has thrown aside all considerations of humanity and of right and is running amuck.

The speech begins by depicting the US as a victim of an unfounded attack. In (1–3) Wilson states that the US remained neutral in the belief that "it would suffice" to keep the American people "safe against unlawful violence." However, a ruthless and merciless villain attacked the country, showing no respect for the law, human rights and international agreements. In Wilson's scenario Germany commits a crime "against mankind" and wages a "war against all nations," forcing the innocent victim to respond to the attack. The president justifies the US war actions stating that the US did not want to join the war and emphasizing that it is "common prudence" and "grim necessity" to fight against Germany in order to protect the American people and other nations.

The analysis suggests that the fairy tale scenario identified by Lakoff (1991) in the narrative of the Gulf War had been used during World War I in an unchanged form. What is more, it served the same functions: firstly, it emphasized the asymmetry between the two countries, influencing the way they were perceived. The United States was portrayed as a benevolent nation, committed to defending not only its own citizens but also the interests of other countries facing threats from Germany. In contrast, Germany was depicted as

an archetypal villain, exhibiting indiscriminate aggression and a lack of empathy and moral rectitude. Secondly, it provided a moral justification for the US involvement in the conflict. This was achieved when the President repeatedly asserted that the United States was forced by Germany to respond, leading many in the public to perceive the US as an involuntary participant in the war.

Sandikcioglu (300) argued that the narrative employed during the Gulf War was closely linked to Orientalism. However, upon closer inspection of the same data (excerpts 1–14), it becomes apparent that the narrative employed by Wilson was shaped by the frame civilization vs. barbarism, although the country labelled as immoral was not representative of the Orient. The framework offered by Sandikcioglu (308) consists of the conceptual metaphors ORIENTALS ARE BARBARIANS and WESTERNERS ARE CIVILIZED, with the subframe "the Oriental is immoral, the Westerner is moral." In Wilson's speech, the Americans (Westerners) are portrayed as those who "desire no conquest, no dominion (…) no material compensation for the sacrifices." Furthermore, they are portrayed as "champions of human rights" who seek to "vindicate the principles of peace and justice." It is noteworthy, however, that the subframe is not identical, as Wilson's narrative depicts Germans as barbarians, responsible for "wholesale destruction of the lives of noncombatants, men, women, and children," despite the fact that Germany is not a Middle Eastern country. It is therefore important to highlight that in this context, the conceptual framework civilization vs. barbarism gave rise to the conceptual metaphors AMERICANS ARE CIVILIZED and GERMANS ARE BARBARIANS along with the subframe "the Americans are moral" and "the Germans are immoral."

Let me turn to "A World League for Peace" speech, delivered by Woodrow Wilson on 22 January 1917. The following passages have been selected in order to demonstrate how the president employed the WAR IS A JOURNEY metaphor in order to discuss the conflict:

15) We are that much nearer a definite discussion of the peace which shall end the present war. We are that much nearer the discussion of the international concert which must thereafter hold the world at peace.
16) In every discussion of the peace that must end this war it is taken for granted that that peace must be followed by some definite concert of power which will make it virtually impossible that any such catastrophe ever overwhelm us again.
17) (…) so far as our participation in guarantees of future peace is concerned, it makes a great deal of difference in what way and upon what terms it is ended.
18) I do not mean to say that any American government would throw any obstacle in the way of any terms of peace (…)
19) With a right comity of arrangement no nation need be shut away from free access to the open paths of the world's commerce.

As with any war, peace marks the end of the conflict. Thus, in the journey metaphor employed by Wilson, peace is the destination towards which the US is heading. However, it is important to remember that peace is relative. Hence, it was impossible for both the Allied Powers and the Central Powers to achieve their desired outcome and end the war as they intended. Emphasizing that "peace must be followed by some definite concert of power" and that "it makes a great deal of difference in what way and upon what terms it is ended," the president suggested that only one side could win, and the first to do so would defeat the other. Additionally, Wilson used the adjective "nearer" to indicate the US' position relative to the opponents on the way to the goal.

Pointing out the position and emphasizing the possibility of only one side winning suggests that the metaphor WAR IS A JOURNEY implies another metaphor—WAR IS A RACE. As the Allied Powers and the Central Powers were competitors in this race, they had to unite and work effectively and quickly to defeat the opponent. The WAR IS A RACE metaphor emphasizes the *Us/Them* asymmetry, without explicitly identifying any negative traits of the opposing group. The mere fact that they are against Us is sufficient to portray Them in a negative light.

The analysis indicates that the fairy tale scenario and the conceptual framework civilization vs. barbarism by Sandikcioglu can be identified in the narrative of World War I. These metaphorical conceptualizations not only align

with those discussed by both researchers, but also serve the same purposes. In addition, it was demonstrated that the WAR IS A JOURNEY metaphor serves the same goals, highlighting the *Us/Them* asymmetry. In what follows, I will argue that this conceptual system is highly applicable and was also exploited during World War II.

Presidential Speeches on World War II

On 8 December 1941, Franklin Delano Roosevelt addressed Congress requesting a declaration of war. The passages (20–26) demonstrate the use of the fairy tale scenario in which the president casts the US in the role of both a Hero (25–26) and a Victim (20–22), and ascribes the role of Villain to Japan (23–24):

20) The United States of America was suddenly and deliberately attacked by naval and air forces of the Empire of Japan (…) The United States was at peace with that Nation and, at the solicitation of Japan, was still in conversation with its Government and its Emperor looking toward the maintenance of peace in the Pacific.
21) I regret to tell you that very many American lives have been lost. In addition American ships have been reported torpedoed on the high seas (…)
22) There is no blinking at the fact that our people, our territory, and our interests are in grave danger.
23) The Japanese Government has deliberately sought to deceive the United States by false statements and expressions of hope for continued peace (…) It will be recorded that the distance of Hawaii from Japan makes it obvious that the attack was deliberately planned (…)
24) (…) since the unprovoked and dastardly attack by Japan on Sunday, December 7, 1941, a state of war has existed between the United States and the Japanese Empire.
25) No matter how long it may take us to overcome this premeditated invasion, the American people in their righteous might will win through to absolute victory.
26) As Commander in Chief of the Army and Navy I have directed that all measures be taken for our defense.

Passages (20–26) reveal the self-defence scenario. The portrayal of the US as an innocent victim, who "was at peace" with Japan and was "looking toward the maintenance of peace," contrasts with the depiction of Japan as a villain who "deliberately sought to deceive" the US and put the American people and

territory in danger. It should be noted, however, that Roosevelt emphasized the *Us/Them* asymmetry not only by casting the countries in different roles but also by referring to them in vastly different ways. He treated the US both as a country and a nation. Although the name "United States" appears several times, the president also uses expressions such as "American lives" and "American people." However, he referred to Japan as "the Empire of Japan" and "the Japanese Government," focusing solely on the government's control of the territory. This created a powerful asymmetry, influencing how the listeners perceived both countries. The president emphasizes that the US is a nation and that each of his listeners is an important part of the country. On the contrary, he talks about Japan in terms of the territory ruled by the government, not mentioning the many civilians that would be attacked by the US. The dehumanization made it easier to convince the American people to attack the Japanese and to overcome possible moral hesitation.

One day later, on 9 December 1941, Roosevelt addressed the nation with the following words:

27) The sudden criminal attacks perpetrated by the Japanese in the Pacific provide the climax of a decade of international immorality.
28) Powerful and resourceful gangsters have banded together to make war upon the whole human race. Their challenge has now been flung at the United States of America. The Japanese have treacherously violated the longstanding peace between us.
29) Japanese forces had loosed their bombs and machine guns against our flag, our forces and our citizens.
30) And no honest person, today or a thousand years hence, will be able to suppress a sense of indignation and horror at the treachery committed by the military dictators of Japan (…)
31) Many American soldiers and sailors have been killed by enemy action. American ships have been sunk; American airplanes have been destroyed.
32) The Congress and the people of the United States have accepted that challenge. Together with other free peoples, we are now fighting to maintain our right to live among our world neighbors in freedom, in common decency, without fear of assault.
33) We Americans are not destroyers—we are builders.

The aforementioned passages (27–33) are rich in figurative language. First, they reveal the self-defence scenario, in which Japan is again portrayed as a

Villain, and the US as an innocent Victim forced into military action. The *Us/Them* asymmetry is well-visible when we juxtapose the way Roosevelt talks about Japan ("gangsters") and the US ("we are not destroyers—we are builders"). Moreover, the wartime actions of Japan are described as "criminal attacks" and "a war upon the whole human race," while the military response of the United States is referred to as a "fighting to maintain our right to live (…) in freedom."

Second, in (29–31), the president points out that the war waged by Japan is marked by "bombing", "killing" and "destroying." One may say that this is a literal definition of war, however, turning to Fabiszak's (2007: 104) account we can read that

> [d]efinitions focusing on only one aspect of this complex and multi-faceted concept are incomplete and may be intentionally used to obscure those aspects which are not acceptable to the public opinion, but not all rhetoric is based on conceptual metaphors, though they may probably be activated by both metaphorical and non-metaphorical linguistic expressions.

Finally, it should be noted that the narrative is shaped by the framework civilization vs. barbarism. The subframe "Japanese are immoral" and "Americans are moral" underly the conceptualization of Japanese as "powerful and resourceful gangsters" whose attacks "provide the climax of a decade of internationality immorality" and the Americans as those who fight for "freedom" and "decency."

The analysis shows that the fairy tale scenario and the metaphor WAR IS VIOLENT CRIME: MURDER, ASSAULT, KIDNAPPING, ARSON, RAPE, AND THEFT offered by Lakoff (1991), as well as the conceptual framework civilization vs. barbarism discussed by Sandikcioglu, can be identified in the coverage of World War II. Additionally, these metaphorical conceptualizations perform the same functions as those identified in the Gulf War coverage, with highlighting the *Us/Them* asymmetry being the most relevant.

Presidential Speeches on the Vietnam War

Let me turn now to the speeches concerning the Vietnam War. The excerpts (34–41) come from the speech delivered by John F. Kennedy on 25 May 1961:

34) (…) while we talk of sharing and building and the competition of ideas, others talk of arms and threaten war.
35) Our strength as well as our convictions have imposed upon this nation the role of leader in freedom's cause (…) We stand for freedom.
36) We stand, as we have always stood from our earliest beginnings, for the independence and equality of all nations (…) And we do not intend to leave an open road for despotism.
37) The great battleground for the defense and expansion of freedom today is the whole southern half of the globe—Asia, Latin America, Africa and the Middle East—the lands of the rising peoples. Their revolution is the greatest in human history. They seek an end to injustice, tyranny, and exploitation.
38) For the adversaries of freedom did not create the revolution; nor did they create the conditions which compel it. But they are seeking to ride the crest of its wave—to capture it for themselves. Yet their aggression is more often concealed than open. They have fired no missiles; and their troops are seldom seen. They send arms, agitators, aid, technicians and propaganda to every troubled area. But where fighting is required, it is usually done by others—by guerrillas striking at night, by assassins striking alone—assassins who have taken the lives of four thousand civil officers in the last twelve months in Vietnam alone—by subversives and saboteurs and insurrectionists, who in some cases control whole areas inside of independent nations.
39) (…) we will make dear America's enduring concern is for both peace and freedom—that we are anxious to live in harmony with the Russian people—that we seek no conquests, no satellites, no riches (…)
40) Powerful propaganda broadcasts from Havana now are heard throughout Latin America, encouraging new revolutions in several countries. Similarly, in Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Thailand, we must communicate our determination and support to those upon whom our hopes for resisting the communist tide in that continent ultimately depend. Our interest is in the truth.
41) We are not against any man—or any nation—or any system—except as it is hostile to freedom. Nor am I here to present a new military doctrine, bearing any one name or aimed at any one area. I am here to promote the freedom doctrine.

As can be observed Kennedy chose to employ the fairy tale scenario to describe the conflict in Vietnam. It is important to note that Kennedy makes very few references to the victims and refers to them collectively as "the whole southern half of the globe—Asia, Latin America, Africa and the Middle East."

The president focuses almost solely on the noble features of the US, assuring that the country "stands for freedom" and "independence and equality of all nations." Interestingly, Kennedy did not identify a villain. The enemies are referred to as "others" and "the adversaries of freedom." The dismissive language downplays the strength and ability of the villain to challenge the US. Moreover, it emphasizes the asymmetry between a brave hero and a cowardly villain, influencing the public's perception of the sides.

On 7 April 1965, Lyndon B. Johnson also employed the fairy tale scenario. As visible in (42–49), the US was cast in the role of a Hero, North Vietnam and Communist China were cast as the Villains, and South Vietnam as a Victim:

42) The first reality is that North Viet-Nam has attacked the independent nation of South Viet-Nam. Its object is total conquest.
43) Simple farmers are the targets of assassination and kidnapping. Women and children are strangled in the night because their men are loyal to their government (…) Large-scale raids are conducted on towns, and terror strikes in the heart of cities.
44) The confused nature of this conflict cannot mask the fact that it is the new face of an old enemy. Over this war--and all Asia--is another reality: the deepening shadow of Communist China (…) This is a regime which has destroyed freedom in Tibet, which has attacked India (…) It is a nation which is helping the forces of violence in almost every continent. The contest in Viet-Nam is part of a wider pattern of aggressive purposes.
45) Our objective is the independence of South Viet-Nam, and its freedom from attack. We want nothing for ourselves--only that the people of South Viet-Nam be allowed to guide their own country in their own way.
46) We are also there to strengthen world order.
47) We will not be defeated. We will not grow tired. We will not withdraw, either openly or under the cloak of a meaningless agreement.
48) Because we fight for values and we fight for principles, rather than territory or colonies, our patience and our determination are unending.
49) This generation of the world must choose: destroy or build, kill or aid, hate or understand (…)Well, we will choose life. In so doing we will prevail over the enemies within man, and over the natural enemies of all mankind.

The *Us/Them* asymmetry is clearly evident when we compare the descriptions of North Vietnam and China to that of the US. The Communist China is referred to as "a regime which has destroyed freedom" and "a nation which is helping the forces of violence." Furthermore, the descriptions of the communist countries include nouns such as "brutality", "conquest", "attacks",

and verbs such as "ravage" and "destroy." In contrast, the US involvement in the war was favourably described as fighting "for values" and "principles." Referring to the US, the president used nouns such as "freedom", "bravery", "values" and verbs such as "to guide" or "to strengthen." As can be seen, the scenario presented the conflict in stark contrast, with no acknowledgement of the war's complexity. Additionally, passages (42–29) reveal the metaphor WAR IS A VIOLENT CRIME, which was exploited by Johnson to obscure the inconvenient facts about US war actions in Vietnam.

The next speech to be analysed was delivered by Johnson on 31 March 1968. As visible in the excerpts (50–53), the narrative employed by the president was shaped by the framework maturity vs. immaturity:

50) That the United States would stop its bombardment of North Vietnam when that would lead promptly to productive discussions—and that we would assume that North Vietnam would not take military advantage of our restraint.
51) Our purpose in this action is to bring about a reduction in the level of violence that now exists. It is to save the lives of brave men—and to save the lives of innocent women and children.
52) Thus, there will be no attacks around the principal populated areas, or in the food-producing areas of North Vietnam (…) But I cannot in good conscience stop all bombing so long as to do so would immediately and directly endanger the lives of our men and our allies. Whether a complete bombing halt becomes possible in the future will be determined by events.
53) North Vietnam rushed their preparations for a savage assault on the people, the government, and the allies of South Vietnam. They caused widespread disruption and suffering. Their attacks, and the battles that followed, made refugees of half a million human beings. The Communists may renew their attack any day.

The metaphors THE US IS A TEACHER and NORTH VIETNAM IS A STUDENT underlie the aforementioned metaphorical expressions. Johnson asserts that America has a higher level of humanitarianism and morality, as it is concerned with "the lives of innocent women and children." Moreover, the US is portrayed as a teacher responsible for maintaining order, which the president emphasizes by expressing his desire to reduce the "level of violence." In contrast, North Vietnam is depicted as a rebellious student responsible for "widespread

disruption and suffering." The term "savage" suggests that North Vietnam is not only disobedient but also lacks cultural and educational refinement. Additionally, the president implies that the US is in control and that the bombing will only cease on its terms. By stating that "whether a complete bombing halt becomes possible in the future will be determined by events," Johnson suggests that North Vietnam will either be punished by further bombing or rewarded by reducing it. The framework maturity vs. immaturity highlights the uneven distribution of power and cultural and educational disparities between the US and North Vietnam.

The last speech to be analysed was delivered by Richard M. Nixon on 25 January 1972. In this speech, the president employed the WAR IS A JOURNEY metaphor:

54) There were two honourable paths open to us. The path of negotiation was, and is, the path we prefer. But it takes two to negotiate; there had to be another way in case the other side refused to negotiate. That path we called Vietnamization. What it meant was training and equipping the South Vietnamese to defend themselves, and steadily withdrawing Americans, as they developed the capability to do so. The path of Vietnamization has been successful (…) But the path of Vietnamization has been the long voyage home. It has strained the patience and tested the perseverance of the American people.
55) As I have stated on a number of occasions, I was prepared and I remain prepared to explore any avenue, public or private, to speed negotiations to end the war.
56) For 30 months, whenever Secretary Rogers, Dr. Kissinger, or I were asked about secret negotiations we would only say we were pursuing every possible channel in our search for peace.
57) Some Americans, who believed what the North Vietnamese led them to believe, have charged that the United States has not pursued negotiations intensively. As the record that I now will disclose will show, just the opposite is true.
58) We will pursue any approach that will speed negotiations.
59) It is a plan to end the war now; it includes an offer to withdraw all American forces within 6 months of an agreement; its acceptance would mean the speedy return of all the prisoners of war to their homes.

Motion verbs such as "pursue" focus attention on the progress that is being made. Next, the president's strategies for ending the conflict are mapped onto "paths." Unlike the words "option" or "possibility", "path" indicates direction.

Each “path” has an endpoint, which implies that the “journey” is not pointless. Furthermore, the president put an emphasis on a tempo, using words such as “speed”, “speedy” and “intensively.” By highlighting the direction and pace Nixon aims to convince the audience that the war is progressing as desired. Additionally, the use of pronouns “we”, “us” and “our” indicates that the participants of a race are projected onto the president and the nation collectively. This, in conjunction with an emphasis on speed, gives rise to the 'WAR IS A RACE' metaphor. As previously indicated, the WAR IS A RACE metaphor highlights the *Us/Them* asymmetry, convincing the participants of the race that they must work quickly to defeat the opponents. Secondly, it directs people’s attention towards the final goal, keeping them engaged, without focusing on what must be sacrificed to achieve it.

The analysis indicates that the fairy tale scenario, the metaphor WAR IS A VIOLENT CRIME, and the framework maturity vs. immaturity were used to emphasize the *Us/Them* dichotomy during the Vietnam War. Furthermore, the asymmetry between the sides involved in the conflict was also highlighted by the WAR IS A JOURNEY metaphor.

Observations and Conclusions

The aim of this paper has been to identify and analyze the metaphorical conceptualizations used to highlight the *Us/Them* asymmetry in speeches concerning wars. I demonstrated that the metaphor systems and frameworks identified by Lakoff (1991) and Sandikcioglu in the coverage of the Gulf War had been also employed earlier by American presidents to influence people’s understanding and evaluation of World War I, World War II, and the Vietnam War.

The analysis indicates that, as to be expected, the primary reason for exploiting the *Us/Them* asymmetry was to create adversarial images of the countries. These images were then used to serve different political agendas, most often to justify involvement in war and establish a convenient narrative

for the American Cabinet. It was demonstrated that the fairy tale scenario was particularly effective in evading responsibility for war actions, as it placed the blame for joining and waging a war on an enemy rather than on a president. Moreover, the fact that the framework "civilization vs barbarism" may be identified in an unchanged form in WWI, WWII and the Vietnam War may suggest that it is not part of a "culture-specific model" that "helped frame the debate about the Gulf crisis" as Sandikcioglu (299) argued, but rather part of a more universal model that can be applied in various contexts, not limited to those involving the Orient. I believe that the conceptual frameworks described by Sandikcioglu may have a wider application and a different origin than anticipated, not necessarily so closely linked to Orientalism. As previously noted, the framework has the potential to influence the narrative of any conflict and shape the perceptions of countries that are not representatives of the Orient. Nevertheless, the extent to which it can be applied is beyond the scope of this study.

Finally, it was observed that the American presidents used the metaphor WAR IS A JOURNEY to emphasize the *Us/Them* asymmetry. Although this metaphor may not be the most obvious choice, it assumes a different meaning in the context of war. The concept of war is mapped onto a journey, however, the desired trajectory and conclusion of this journey vary depending on the country in question. Therefore, the conflict can be conceptualized as a struggle between two opposing forces, each with their own distinct goals and perspectives. It is evident that only one plan for the journey can be accomplished, and that only one goal can be achieved. Furthermore, when the emphasis is placed on the pace at which the desired outcome is reached, the metaphor WAR IS A JOURNEY transforms into the WAR IS A RACE metaphor. The latter unites people and encourages them to take fast and effective actions aimed at defeating the opponents. Furthermore, the WAR IS A RACE metaphor can readily highlight the *Us/Them* asymmetry in a variety of contexts, without a

need to name the opponents' negative features. The mere fact of their opposition is sufficient to portray them in a negative light.

Endnotes

1. The article provides a summary of the findings presented in my unpublished MA dissertation.
2. All of the speeches were taken from the site https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches.
3. The author provides a total of five conceptual frameworks.

References

Barcelona, A. (Ed.) 2000. *Metaphor and Metonymy at the Crossroads: A Cognitive Perspective*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Deignan, A. 2010. "The Cognitive View of Metaphor: Conceptual Metaphor Theory," in: C. Lynne & M. Robert (Eds.), 44–56.

Fabiszak, M. 2007. *A Conceptual Metaphor Approach to War Discourse and its Implications,* Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu im. Adama Mickiewicza.

Gibbs, R. W. 2009. "Why Do Some People Dislike Conceptual Metaphor Theory?," *Cognitive Semiotics* 5: 1–2, 14–36.

Gibbs, R. W. 2011. "Evaluating Conceptual Metaphor Theory," *Discourse Processes* 48, 529–562.

Keysar, B., Y. Shen, S. Glucksberg, et al. 2000. "Conventional Language: How Metaphorical is it?," *Journal of Memory and Language* 43, 576–593.

Kövecses, Z. 2002. *Metaphor: A Practical Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Kövecses, Z. 2015. *Where Metaphors Come From. Reconsidering Context in Metaphor.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Kövecses, Z. 2020. *Extended Conceptual Metaphor Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lakoff, G., & M. Johnson. 1980. *Metaphors We Live By*. London: University of Chicago Press.

Lakoff, G. 1986. "The Meanings of Literal," *Metaphor and Symbolic Activity* 1, 291–6.

Lakoff, G. 1987. *Women, Fire and Dangerous Things*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Lakoff, G. 1991. "Metaphor and War: The Metaphor System Used to Justify War in the Gulf," *Peace Research* 23, 25–32.

Lakoff, G. 1993. "The Contemporary Theory of Metaphor," in: A. Ortony (Ed.), 202–51.

Lakoff. G., & M. Turner. 1989. *More than Cool Reason*. *A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Lynne C. & M. Robert (Eds.) 2010. *Metaphor Analysis. Research Practice in Applied Linguistics, Social Sciences and the Humanities*. London: Equinox.

Ortony, A. (Ed.). 1993. *Metaphor and Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Sandikcioglu, E. 2000. "More Metaphorical Warfare in the Gulf: Orientalist Frames in News Coverage," in: A. Barcelona (Ed.), 299–320.

Steen, G. 2011. "The Contemporary Theory of Metaphor—Now New and Improved!," *Review of Cognitive Linguistics* 9, 26-64.

Abstract

This paper aims to analyse the metaphorical conceptualizations that highlight the dichotomy between the countries and people in the service of political agendas. The study introduces the brief account of Lakoff's and Sandikcioglu's remarks on the use of figurative language in a political discourse. This is followed by a systematic analysis of the metaphorical conceptualizations that emphasize the *Us/Them* asymmetry in the speeches of American presidents regarding World War I, World War II, and the Vietnam War.

POLITICS AND POETICS OF DIFFERENCE IN LITERARY & CULTURAL STUDIES

CURRENTS. A Journal of Young English Philology Thought and Review. Vol. 10/2024
Ed. E. Lorek-Jezińska, N. Strehlau, J. Antoniak, B. Jankowska, www. currents.umk.pl
ISSN 2449-8769 ||

Anna Temel
University of Warsaw

THROUGH THE EYES OF THE MACHINE: RETHINKING HUMANITY, LANGUAGE, AND THE SOCIETAL STATUS QUO IN *THE MURDERBOT DIARIES*

Keywords: science fiction, queerness, gender, language, technology

Introduction

Discussing social change and progress can be a challenging part of public discourse, one sparking controversy, heated discussion and even leading to phenomena such as culture wars. Such discussions can, therefore, often be difficult to conduct and may be limited by entrenched beliefs, ideological divides, and the reluctance to consider alternative perspectives. Literature, especially speculative fiction, however, can offer endless possibilities for exploring signs of change and the manifestations of difference through a lens of imaginary worlds, creating space for the examination of scenarios that might seem too abstract and controversial for contemporary society. For many decades, the science fiction genre has been a platform for such imaginary explorations of change, often using the themes of alien worlds or species as metaphors for pertinent social issues. Historically, classic science fiction novels, such as *The Left Hand of Darkness* by Ursula K. Le Guin or *Dune* by Frank Herbert have utilised the genre to discuss the themes of gender, intersectionality, or environmental crisis by bringing relevant social issues to a "vacuum" of the future and places seemingly distant from Earth. As societal issues and concerns evolve, and the perception of the new and unknown shifts,

science fiction continues to explore them to reflect the ever-changing societal landscape

An example of such an exploration can be found in *The Murderbot Diaries*, a series of science fiction short novels written by Martha Wells, which premiered in 2017 and as of now, consists of seven parts. The series has been widely and positively received, winning the prestigious Hugo Award in 2021, and being praised not only for its main storyline, centred around space adventure, but also for its insightful take on humanity and various aspects of human behaviour. The philosophical potential of the series is often noticed by reviewers, such as Jason Sheehan, who, while reviewing the first book of the series, points out the numerous possible interpretations of the story and states that among the biggest strengths of the book lies the fact that "Martha Wells did something really clever. She hid a delicate, nuanced, and deeply, grumpily human story inside these pulp trappings, by making her murderous robot story primarily character-driven." Adding to this notion, another reviewer, Andrew Liptak, calls *Murderbot* a "story about a machine coming to understand what it means to be human." The themes of relatability and reimagining what constitutes humanity are often said to be the strongest, possibly most interesting aspect of the stories, one which makes the main character into a powerful social metaphor. *The Murderbot Diaries*, through its depiction of technology that exists beyond human biases, utilises the exploratory potential of the science fiction genre to deconstruct the societal status quo and its elements such as binary gender and heteronormativity, and perform pertinent social commentary.

The series is centred around a Security Unit, a cyborg created for the purpose of combat, named Murderbot, who goes rogue, hacking its controlling module, and, as a result, becomes autonomous. Each part of the series presents a different adventure, but all are connected by the main character. Throughout the series, Murderbot becomes progressively more human in its appearance, through various alterations that replace its generic, robotic look with more

unique characteristics. It also gradually starts to display more human personality traits as it learns to function independently in society. As Sheehan notices, part of the phenomenon of Murderbot is "that something so alien can be so human," highlighting the multidimensionality of the character's personality. As a rogue machine entering society, Murderbot becomes an external observer of human behaviour, who chooses to adopt certain characteristics and reject others. It progressively develops relations and friendships with humans and other bots, and through its unique perspective, constantly offers new remarks on how human relationships and societal roles work. As Murderbot develops a complex identity that rejects numerous widely accepted societal norms, it starts to, in many ways, engage with queerness.

Although the story might appear simple and adventure-centered at first sight, upon closer investigation, the various possible interpretations of *The Murderbot Diaries*, many of which connect to queerness and intersectionality, become apparent. In his review, Sheehan draws a parallel of the character's experiences and journey to functioning in society as a coming-out narrative, that "mirrors the lives of trans people, immigrants, those on the autism spectrum or anyone else who feels the need to hide some essential part of themselves from a population that either threatens or can't possibly understand them." Additionally, connecting to Veronica Hollinger's (25) idea that "our critiques of sex and gender polarities often leave those polarities in place," *The Murderbot Diaries* avoid making gender and sexuality the central focus of their narrative. Instead, these issues remain in the background of the main character's adventures and experiences. As Misha Grifka Wander (151) observes, this approach allows the story to bypass the problem of reinstating the status quo of Western perceptions of gender and transcend the subconscious limitations imposed by social constructs. The undermining of the societal status quo becomes even more apparent, as Wander (151) points out, because of the lack of an arbitrary reminder of what "normal" is, as she states comparing the series to *The Left Hand of Darkness,* "[t]here is no Genly Ai there

to remind the reader of the status quo, and hence, no one there to reify the very system being critiqued." Therefore, despite, seemingly, revolving around space adventure and light-hearted plotlines, *The Murderbot* series invites a queer reading by imagining a being whose queer identity exists outside of various human limitations.

Murderbot's queerness, which is the main topic of analysis in this article, manifests on three levels. First is Murderbot's non-binarity, present in the story in the form of rejecting binary gender categorisation whenever possible, especially by resisting the use of gendered pronouns. Second is the character's asexuality and aromanticism, expressed through its rejection of any type of romantic and sexual relationships. Third and last is the main character's take on gender performativity and identity in the understanding of Judith Butler, as Muderbot chooses which aspects of human behaviour to adapt and perform when needed, but rejects those that do not agree with its queer identity. While engaging in such analysis, it is crucial to point out that Murderbot is aware of queerness and performs it consciously; the character is fully capable of understanding the meaning and repercussions of manifesting its queerness and willingly chooses to do so. Simultaneously, because of Murderbot's status as a being existing in a grey area between a human and a machine, it is stripped of unconscious bias, defined by Sarah E. Fiarman (10) as a set of "unconscious preferences on the basis of gender, race, sexual orientation, or other aspects of identity," further adding to its potential for re-examining such concepts and norms.

The article is centred around the role of Murderbot as an example of an outside, neutral observer of human behaviour. By deconstructing the portrayal of the character through a lens of a queer reading, the article proposes that because of its familiarity with human social constructs, biases, and norms while simultaneously being an "outsider" to them, Murderbot becomes a metaphorical, philosophical device for their deep questioning. The analysis of the three most prominent aspects of Murderbot's queerness is conducted

through the lens of not only queer theory but also through various gender studies concepts, examining the numerous possible interpretations and implications of the character's approach to social norms. Additionally, the article examines how the series depicts queer identity as a factor that reinforces Murderbot's individuality and agency, humanising the character. The article aims to show that Murderbot's portrayal not only serves as an example of how technology can exist outside human concepts of binary gender and heteronormativity, but also offers a critical perspective on the social processes that shape these concepts and allow them to exist within society, and poses queerness as their empowering alternative. Ultimately, the queer reading of *The Murderbot Diaries* encourages a reconsideration of how the portrayal of marginalised identities, both human and non-human, can disrupt and reshape dominant cultural narratives, offering new ways of thinking about individuality and inclusivity.

Non-binarity

The first analysed dimension of Murderbot's queerness is its non-binarity, a concept understood as the avoidance of identifying oneself as either male or female, identifying as both at the same time or alternating between gender identities (Richards et al. 95). Non-binarity can be embodied in a number of ways, ranging from appearance to preferred pronouns. In the case of Murderbot, the most noticeable way in which it manifests its non-binarity is, in fact, linguistic. Despite its human-like appearance, the pronouns used by everyone when referring to Murderbot are "it/its," which is also Murderbot's preference, indicating its conscious rejection of binary gender. As Pennington (352) notes, literary attempts at exploring genderlessness in SF that are "using a shared language that by its nature is gender charged" can reinstate binary gender's association with language instead of challenging it. However, the choice to assign the genderless pronoun "it" to a sentient, humanoid being, simultaneously undermines the preconceived notions surrounding the pronoun

as well as avoids engaging with binary gender. Such a choice of pronouns serves as an example of how, in many cases, as Robin Anne Reid (98) notices, queerness or any type of widely perceived otherness interplays with language and challenges its set rules. This interplay of language and queerness, according to Reid (98), is strongly embodied by the main character and how the story's narrative "foregrounds the gendered English pronoun system by Murderbot's insistence on 'it' as a chosen pronoun." Additionally, as Gal (2) argues, "linguistic innovation is a function of speakers' differential involvement in, and evaluation of, social change," highlighting the connection between linguistic choices and social progress. The character's choice of pronouns can, therefore, be considered as a form of not only manifesting queerness but also as a tool for challenging the deep engraving of gender binarity and preexisting biases onto language, imagining solutions outside of the existing linguistic norms, and reinforcing social change.

In addition, the choice of "it/its" pronouns can be interpreted as a form of not only challenging the rules of language but also distancing from human concepts, divisions and rules as such. As Gal (1) claims, "sexual differentiation of speech is expected to occur whenever a social division exists between the roles of men and women." Murderbot's linguistic rejection of binary gender therefore represents the rejection of the social construct of gender and gender roles. When talking about the character's preferred pronouns, Holly Swyers and Emily Thomas (286) point out that "[i]t is not a robot, but it clearly does not see itself as human, frequently distinguishing itself from 'the humans' throughout the novella." This leads to a complication in the queer reading of the series, in the form of the dehumanising potential of the use of "it/its" pronouns. However, as Misha Grifka Wander argues, addressing this possibility,

> Trans+ activists have had to push against the use of "it" to dehumanize trans+ people, but Murderbot claims those pronouns for itself. While dehumanization is generally seen as a tool of oppression, Murderbot actively chooses to dehumanize itself. It is deeply uncomfortable with the idea of being human. (150)

The active choice of potential dehumanisation, in a queer reading, can therefore be seen as a rejection of what has historically culturally constructed humanity. For Murderbot, "it" pronouns are not treated as derogatory or limiting to its agency, but rather, as Wander (150) claims, "are key to Murderbot's ability to linguistically express its identity." Instead of serving a dehumanising function, they signify genderlessness, simultaneously allowing for the bot to be perceived as a conscious, independent "being," a notion which is confirmed by the reception of the series, as according to the findings of Swyers and Thomas (291) "the majority of reviewers (a) recognised the genderlessness of Murderbot, (b) regarded Murderbot as a being rather than as a thing, and (c) rejected what would have been the obvious pronoun solution of an earlier era (he)." These findings, however, also bring up the question of the difference between being genderless (agender) and being non-binary. When defining non-binarity, Richards et al. (95) claim that it exists as an umbrella term, under which being agender or genderfluid falls. Murderbot can consequently be classified as both genderless and non-binary, and the reviewers' perception of its gender affirms it. Circling back to the pronouns that affirm non-binarity or genderlessness, while most non-binary people choose the pronoun "they," Murderbot, as mentioned earlier, refrains from it. As Wander (150) claims, despite its awareness of human diversity, Murderbot "does not include itself in that spectrum. It does not choose the genderless pronoun 'they', but the pronoun most distant from humanity and from human ideas such as gender and sexuality." When interpreting this notion, Wander (150) suggests that "Murderbot's use of the it pronoun asks us to consider posthumanist potentiality," building on the idea of Murderbot as a tool for the re-examination of the very concept of humanity. The use of the "it" pronoun for a conscious, anthropomorphic being can be read as a way of escaping and opposing human norms and constructs and performing what is perceived as queerness, in resistance to them.

While analysing the series' take on non-binarity and the main character's distancing from human concepts such as gender, it is crucial to examine Murderbot's original purpose and its relation to both gender and sex. When looking at Murderbot and SecurityUnits (also called SecUnits) in general, it is important to begin the analysis by discussing the differences and connections between the terms "gender" and "sex." As Amy Blackstone (335) explains, building on the separation between sex and gender initially defined by Ann Oakley, "gender parallels the biological division of sex into male and female, but it involves the division and social valuation of masculinity and femininity." Further interpreting this notion, Blackstone (335) concludes that "gender is a concept that humans create socially, through their interactions with one another and their environments, yet it relies heavily upon biological differences between males and females." SecUnits, including Murderbot, can be said to exist both outside biological sex because of a lack of bodily functions relating to procreation, and outside of the concept of gender because of a lack of socialisation, as they do not need to independently exist in human society, showing the possibility of the existence of anthropomorphic technology that does not engage with either sex or gender in any way. When examining the reason for their existence, it is apparent that Murderbot's and other SecUnits' clear purpose is combat, which is crucial when interpreted through the lens of the concept of gender roles, which assign beings with social purpose based on gender. As Blackstone (335) points out, "[g]ender roles are based on the different expectations that individuals, groups, and societies have of individuals based on their sex and based on each society's values and beliefs about gender." SecUnits, by being both sexless and genderless, can be said to break the traditional connection between masculinity, male-gendered body, and being a fighter bot, connected to the idea of "violent but ultimately good masculinity" introduced by Samantha Holland (165). According to Holland (165), popular culture texts cannot divorce the idea of a cyborg from existing social gender preconceptions, and portrayals of such technologies are always heavily

influenced by the concept of binary gender, with the emphasis on the observation that fighter cyborgs tend to be portrayed as hypermasculine, exaggerating stereotypical gender characteristics. However, the portrayal of Murderbot is a "perfectly androgynous," post-gender statement in the understanding of Haraway, a cyborg existing above gender and therefore above limitations of gender roles and biases, and plays into Lisa Yaszek's (7) idea of a cyborg as an ideal metaphor for modern political activists. Murderbot's very existence outside these limitations is an activist statement in itself, one which also enables a queer reading from an "outside" perspective, allowing for a deep rethinking and re-examining of the understanding of the concept of gender and gender roles through a character with no pre-existing human biases.

However, while Murderbot's sexless and genderless physicality is initially predetermined, later on in the series, it has an opportunity to acquire a gendered body and let go of its "perfectly androgynous" status, which becomes a crucial plot point for manifesting its queerness. The centrality of the body to queerness is described by WG Pearson, who claims that:

> [i]t is on the body—whether human body, alien body, virtual body, body politic, body of work, body of writing—that queer exerts its greatest effects. But it is also the body (in all of these senses) that is threatened by queer's potential disintegration in the face of a defensive and frighteningly powerful heteronormative hegemony over lives and meanings. (73)

The "heteronormative hegemony" manifests itself very clearly when Murderbot is faced with the choice to gender its body. After gaining autonomy, Murderbot encounters ART, a highly intelligent transport bot, and after talking to it, realises it needs to look "more human" to complete its current mission. This element of the plot is closely connected to and can be interpreted through Pearson's (72) concept of "livable life," where queerness, among other factors, can limit the potential of fitting into certain socially accepted categories, and, consequently, makes it harder to be perceived as human. Murderbot's initial reaction to ART's suggestion of alteration is negative, as it claims that SecUnits

are never altered and that the act of alteration is associated with the inferior bots called Sexbots. The alteration is presented as a derogatory concept based on a stereotypical view of what it means to be human, which connects with Ashley Barr's (53) claim that lack of gender and asexuality are often equated to inhumanity, and that such connection to inhumanity often becomes a reason for correction, both medical, and through the enforcement of societal norms aimed at integrating asexual individuals into the conventional path of human development. Despite evident repercussions of the choice, Murderbot opts not to acquire a gendered body and receives an alteration to its arm and legs that makes it appear more human without making its appearance distinctively masculine or feminine. The choice of such a correction, which still performs the humanising role but, simultaneously, does not relate to binary gender, presents a possibility of non-conformism to gender as a humanising agent. Additionally, when Murderbot discusses the alteration process, it clearly states its feelings towards both its body and sexuality, saying:

> ART had an alternate, more drastic plan that included giving me sex-related parts, and I told it that was absolutely not an option. I didn't have any parts related to sex and I liked it that way. I had seen humans have sex on the entertainment feed and on my contracts, when I had been required to record everything the clients said and did. No, thank you, no. No. (Wells 2018: 30)

The quote strongly suggests that Murderbot consciously and fully rejects the possibility of acquiring gender not only because it has negative connotations with such alterations, but also because it simply likes its non-gendered body. In a queer reading, Murderbot's rejection of binary gender, interpreted as a rejection of conforming to the stereotypical societal standard of it as "more human," intertwines with the concept of a "livable life," and Pearson's (72) observation that if the aspects that make the "non-normative" lives "unlivable" are, among others, gender and sexuality, then "surely we may look to sf to posit worlds in which it is possible both to live differently and to think differently about how we live." This is exactly what Wells does in *The Muderbot Diaries*,

utilising the science fiction genre to create a world and a character that allows for a reexamination of numerous norms that can potentially make a life "unlivable." Muderbot's unique situation of not being born in a gendered body and consciously rejecting one when presented with an opportunity to acquire it is one of the examples of such reexaminations that allows for a reimagining of the necessity of performing gender in stereotypically acceptable ways to exist in society and questions the cultural power dynamics behind such necessity.

Asexuality

Sexuality is the second analysed aspect of Murderbot's queerness, which connects to and undermines the aforementioned stereotypical connection between heteronormativity and humanity. As a cyborg, Murderbot exists in what Barr (45) calls a "contested state between human and machine," and therefore can serve as a "useful starting point for considering both how we confer humanity, in general, and the role sexuality and desire play in that process" (45). In the series, Murderbot is portrayed as an outside observer of human concepts of sexuality, which it first encounters in the media. Murderbot's favourite form of entertainment is watching TV series, but it always skips over parts with romance. This is the first time when the reader learns of Murderbot's asexuality, which is a sexual orientation characterised by a "lack of sexual attraction to anyone or a disinterest of being sexual with others" (Antonsen et al. 1615). In its own words, Murderbot states:

> I'd watched three episodes of Sanctuary Moon and was fast-forwarding through a sex scene when Dr.Mensah sent me some images through the feed. I don't have any gender or sex-related parts (if a construct has those you're a sexbot in a brothel, not a murderbot) so maybe that's why I find sex scenes boring. Though I think that even if I did have sex-related parts I would find them boring. (Wells 2017: 19)

In this passage, Murderbot explains that it does not relate to romantic plots on the show as it has no interest in any form of sexuality; it is not something Murderbot misses or wishes to have. Therefore, in addition to asexuality,

aromanticism, defined as the lack of any romantic attraction (Antonsen et al. 1616) also applies to the character. As previously mentioned, the lack of sexuality is true for all SecUnits and not unique to Murderbot, but because of Murderbot's rebellion against its controlling module, it possesses more agency and autonomy than other SecUnits, such as its ability to watch media freely, making its view on sexuality informed and personal. It is also important to point out that the fact that Murderbot's asexuality takes the form of being repulsed by both sexual acts and sexed bodies is not unusual for asexual people. As Mark Carrigan (8) explains, "[s]ome asexual people are entirely indifferent to sex, some are viscerally repulsed by it, while others can derive enjoyment from sexual act without these acts being motivated by sexual attraction." Consequently, Murderbot's portrayal can be considered an accurate depiction of an asexual individual.

While Murderbot openly manifests its asexuality despite the potential repercussions, it simultaneously knows that heteronormative sexuality is an easy path to appear more human and make its life in the human world easier. The negative social consequences of manifesting one's asexuality connect to the notion that asexual individuals are socially perceived as less human. Barr (53) notices that in science fiction narratives, "cyborgs are put on a path to humanity when they demonstrate an ability to feel emotion and sexual desires," while in real life, "individuals who identify as asexual are placed on a similar progression and aligned with the original inhumanity of cyborgs in the process" (53), an idea confirmed by Holland (163), who claims that human desire is perceived as the "central difference between humans and machines." Despite being aware of this phenomenon, Murderbot purposefully rejects the concept of desire in human understanding. In a queer reading, this rejection can be interpreted as resistance against the othering of asexual and aromatic individuals. Such a reading engages with Barr's (58) idea of otherness and the position of humanity, where the "interjection of otherness (whether in the form of a cyborg or an asexually identified individual or occupants of many other

positions)" is not destructive, but instead highlights that traditionally understood humanity "was always unattainable in the first place because it maintained itself, in part, through the exclusion of otherness" (58), therefore deeply questioning the connection between heteronormativity and humanity.

Another concept present in the series that closely connects to the rethinking of the meaning of humanity is the role of rationality in being perceived as human, and rationality's connection to queerness. SecUnits' rationality opposes sexuality, and, as a result, humanity; as mentioned before, Murderbot's original purpose contradicts any need for it. The interplay of sexuality and rationality is also explained by Barr (51), who claims that "mechanical rationality and competence are described as 'asexual' so that asexuality becomes associated with inhumanity." However, it can be argued that further in Murderbot's journey when it gains full control over its fate and body, the rational choice would be to accept certain aspects of sexuality to make its life in human society easier and more "livable." Despite this, Murderbot executes its agency and refuses this idea. The character's conscious choice to reject sexuality once it gains full autonomy removes the mechanical, inhuman aspect and replaces it with empowerment through the asexual aromantic identity, reimagining what truly constitutes agency and, as a result, humanity. Murderbot connects a cyborg and an asexual individual, portraying asexuality not as an othering, pre-existing condition that is deemed undesirable by society, but as what can be interpreted to be its chosen form of resistance against the humanising function of stereotypically understood sexuality, challenging the notion that some sexualities are inherently "more human" than others.

Performativity and Identity

The final analysed aspects revolve around performativity, identity, and their interplay within the series. Throughout the story, it is apparent that Murderbot does not like to be perceived by humans and is not used to being looked at. However, as it enters human society, it realises it is expected to adjust its

behaviour because of "the gaze," which, in this case, could be called "human gaze." As Moe explains, building on Mulvey's concept,

> [t]he gaze represents the notion that something happens inside of us (within our cognitive and psychological processes) when we become conscious of others' observations of us and that we often alter our physical presentation, language, demeanor, and behavior in response to such changes. (1)

In accordance with this idea, humans' approach to Murderbot visibly changes when it saves one of them and shows the team its (human) face, prompting deeper reflection on its identity. In that moment, it starts being perceived by humans, and considered to be, to a certain degree, a person, and as a result, becomes an object of their expectations and their gaze. Murderbot's response to the situation clearly defines its stance:

> He said, 'Why don't you want us to look at you?' My jaw was so tight it triggered a performance reliability alert in my feed. I said, 'You don't need to look at me. I'm not a sexbot.' Ratthi made a noise, half sigh, half snort of exasperation. It wasn't directed at me. He said, 'Gurathin, I told you. It's shy.' (Wells 2017: 60)

The response, especially the mention of Sexbots, suggests that it associates human perception with sexualisation, and it has no interest in performing sexuality for the "human gaze." Even when later on in the series Murderbot adjusts to functioning in human society and develops emotional relationships with humans, and, to a certain extent, alters its appearance, it repeatedly states that it does not want to be perceived by humans nor is it interested in abandoning its queer identity for their comfort. This notion is especially visible when Murderbot rejects affectionate physical contact, or expresses a strong dislike for any sexual allusions made towards it, further rejecting the very core of "the gaze."

The rejection of being perceived is also a further rejection of any possibility of being gendered and connects to non-binarity, as Zach C. Schudson explains that "[s]ome non-binary identities (e.g., agender) might involve not having a gender identity at all or rejecting aspects of gender/sex as a social category

more broadly;" this could include being perceived by humans, who tend to impose their norms on all beings. Performing sexuality and gender for the human gaze would make Murderbot appear more human (in the eyes of humans) but would be against its identity. The performance of gender, even though it is potentially socially gratifying and "humanising," is therefore damaging to the unit's integrity. Such a power dynamic connects to Butler's concept of discrete genders. Butler (1988: 522) claims that "as a strategy of survival within compulsory systems, gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences. Discrete genders are part of what 'humanizes' individuals within contemporary culture; indeed, we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right." Murderbot chooses its identity over the benefits of performativity, using queerness as a tool of resistance against the social construct of gender.

Additionally, Murderbot's unchanging rejection of conforming to performativity gives space for imagining a "liveable life" outside of gender and invites a questioning of the necessity of socialisation into gender performativity. As Pearson explains, connecting Butler's theories, as well as gender and sexuality to the concept of liveable life,

> [g]iven the extent to which gender is conflated with sexuality in contemporary thought, either because gender is seen as an effect of (hetero)sexuality or because it is understood as the same as sexuality (so that gay people, for example, are seen as having become another gender entirely), Butler's argument points to the extent to which the doing of gender regulates, enables, and limits the capacity to have a livable life and to be recognized as human. (76)

Performing gender correctly or incorrectly is therefore closely tied to the "livability" of life. As brought up by Swyers and Thomas, such a notion can also be noticed among the voices of contemporary LGBTQ+ activists, such as Taylor Alxndr, who claims that "[t]hose of us who don't perform gender correctly—whether cis or trans—are often told to pick a side, or become tossed to the side entirely. We're generally invisible to the wider community." Connecting to the concepts of livable life and discrete genders, Alxndr adds that "[a]nyone living

in-between or outside of the binary is disqualified or forgotten." In the series, however, Murderbot rejects the potential safety, acceptance, and other benefits of performing gender for the "human gaze," and despite this rejection, manages to function successfully within society, highlighting its non-conformity and individuality, and contrary to the stereotypical belief, imagining queerness as humanising. By analysing the series and its depiction of a possibility of a "livable life" that rejects heteronormativity and gender performativity, it becomes apparent that these concepts do not have to be permanently tied to existence in human society and, crucially, are not a natural construct. As Hollinger claims,

> when gender is theorized as performative, in a move which re-situates the 'tragedy' of the masquerade of femininity and turns it into ironic contestatory practice, we become less dependent upon essentialist ontological categories and, at least theoretically and imaginatively, we can initiate a more radical inquiry into the nature of the individual sexed and gendered subject. (28)

Examining Murderbot's rejection of performativity through a lens of queer reading, therefore, enables a questioning of human concepts such as compulsory heterosexuality and binary gender, and allows for the deconstruction of gender and its performance as artificial social constructs from a perspective of a being whose identity can exist outside of them.

The sense of identity, which interplays closely with the concept of performativity, is central to the series. Crucially, Murderbot's perception of its own identity does not change significantly despite the many external and internal changes it undergoes throughout the story. Even after its physical "humanising" alteration, which, as it states "would make it harder for me to pretend not to be a person," (Wells 2018: 34) Murderbot tries to keep its identity as unchanged as possible, connecting to Pearson's (76) idea that "[s]ometimes a normative conception of gender can undo one's personhood, undermining the capacity to persevere in a livable life" (76). Personhood can, therefore, be reinforced by the rejection of conformist alteration of its identity

and the rejection of performativity. As mentioned before, Murderbot embraces certain aspects of humanity, such as developing friendships with humans; however, it continuously purposefully rejects the socially imposed limitations and forms of performative self-categorisation that tie to humanity, but go against its identity, such as the various manifestations of the gender binary. Some of the examples include how when picking clothes, Murderbot considers both clothing traditionally associated with women and men or how it continues using "it/its" pronouns throughout the series, even when its legal status is more equal to that of a human. A seemingly turning point in its avoidance of self-identification comes when Murderbot has to specify its gender to obtain a job. By portraying this situation, the series does not refuse to consider gender and self-identification as an integral and compulsory part of existing in human society but shows that from the perspective of Murderbot, such categorisations are not necessary, and not an integral part of its identity. As Butler (1999: 164) claims, connecting the act of categorisation to the body, traditionally, "sex/gender distinction and the category of sex itself appear to presuppose a generalisation of 'the body' that preexists the acquisition of its sexed significance" Murderbot, however, is detached from the human bodily aspect and, therefore, free to decide its identity, existing above physical limits, its gender identity (or lack thereof) not connected in any way to biological sex. In the story, when forced to specify its gender, it chooses a way to omit categorisation, saying "[I] listed my job as 'security consultant,' and my gender as indeterminate," (Wells 2018: 37) showing a possibility of an official, purposeful rejection of binary gender when being forced to self-identify. This example depicts how Murderbot only engages with the stereotypical human identity frames when necessary, and even then, does not abandon its true, queer identity to conform to social norms, imagining a way of existing outside of them while still living a "livable life" and embracing its personhood. Murderbot's simultaneous "humanisation" and entrance into the human world, and constant, unchanging refusal to perform gender and sexuality as

understood by humans can be read as a rejection of the interweaving of human identity and gender performativity. The character serves as an example of a being that exists beyond human bodily limitations and can fully decide its own identity by completely detaching it from physical sex and its social implications, such as preexisting biases. Murderbot's case, therefore, imagines how in a society that imposes a certain set of norms and expectations on anyone who wants to exist within it, queerness can offer a form of opposition that undermines these very norms and allows for the existence of gender performance-free identity.

Conclusions

This queer reading of *The Murderbot Diaries* shows the various ways in which the series, and, in particular, the main character, perform social activism and propose queerness as a tool for opposing the societal status quo. Each of the three analysed dimensions of Murderbot's queerness undermines different culturally accepted societal standards connected to gender and sexuality and rethinks the social power dynamics that maintain them. Murderbot's unique, "outside" perspective serves as a philosophical device for questioning the cultural mechanisms within the social norm system and allows for a rethinking of concepts deeply engraved into the perception of "normality" and "humanity." The analysis of the stories shows how contemporary science fiction can not only critique current power structures but also empower marginalised identities through illustrating how they can hold the potential to drive meaningful social change and foster a more inclusive understanding of what it means to be human. The series portrays queerness as a potential source of empowerment and a tool for truly deconstructing heteronormative, patriarchal structures, as well as undermines the connection between queerness and inhumanity, showing the strong relation between agency, personhood, and queer identity, and shows how the science fiction genre can be used to explore potential social change.

References

Alxndr, T. 2016. "Nonbinary Folks Are Still Invisible, Even in Queer Spaces," *Them*. https://www.them.us/story/nonbinary-invisibility-queer-spaces, DOA 27.02. 2024.

Antonsen, A., B. Zdaniuk, M. Yule, & L. Brotto. 2020. "Ace and Aro: Understanding Differences in Romantic Attractions Among Persons Identifying as Asexual," *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 49: 5, 1615–1630.

Barr, A. 2019. "To Be Real For You: Acousmatic Cyborgs, Asexuality, and Becoming Human," *Excursions Journal* 9: 1, 45–60.

Blackstone, A. M. 2003. "Gender Roles and Society," in: J. R. Miller (Ed.), 335–338.

Butler, J. 1988. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40: 4, 519–531.

Butler, J. 1999. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.

Carrigan, M. 2015. "Asexuality," in: C. Richards & M. J. Barker (Eds.), 7–23.

Fiarman, S. E. 2016. "Unconscious Bias: When Good Intentions Aren't Enough," *Educational Leadership* 74: 3, 10–15.

Gal, S. 1978. "Peasant Men Can't Get Wives: Language Change and Sex Roles in a Bilingual Community," *Language in Society* 7: 1, 1–16.

Haraway, D. 2006. "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late 20th Century," in: J. Weiss, J. Nolan, J. Hunsinger, & P. Trifonas (Eds.), 117–158.

Holland, S. 1995. "Descartes Goes to Hollywood: Mind, Body and Gender in Contemporary Cyborg Cinema," *Body & Society* 1: 3–4, 157–174.

Hollinger, V. 1999. "(Re)reading Queerly: Science Fiction, Feminism, and the Defamiliarization of Gender," *Science Fiction Studies* 26: 1, 23–40.

Liptak, A. 2018. "Martha Wells' Murderbot series is a fantastic story about what it means to be human," *The Verge*. https://www.theverge.com/2018/10/13/17928580/martha-wells-murderbot-exit-protocol-artificial-condition-exit-strategy-science-fiction-book-review, DOA 27.02.2024.

Miller, J. R. (Ed.) 2003. *The Encyclopedia of Human Ecology*. Santa Barbara: Bloomsbury Academic.

Moe, A. M. 2015. "Unveiling the Gaze," in: A. Trier-Bieniek (Ed.), 1–17.

Pearson, W. G. 2008. "Towards a Queer Genealogy of SF," in: W. G. Pearson, V. Hollinger, & J. Gordon (Eds.), 72–100.

Pearson, W. G., V. Hollinger, & J. Gordon (Eds.) 2008. *Queer Universes: Sexualities in Science Fiction*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.

Pennington, J. 2000. "Exorcising Gender: Resisting Readers in Ursula K. Le Guin's Left Hand of Darkness," *Extrapolation* 41: 4, 351–358.

Reid, R. A. 2023. "I Came for the 'Pew-Pew Space Battles'; I Stayed for the Autism," in: L. Yaszek, S. Fritzsche, K. Omry & W.G. Pearson (Eds.), 96–101.

Richards, C., & Barker, M. (Eds.) 2015. *The Palgrave Handbook of the Psychology of Sexuality and Gender*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Richards, C., W. P. Bouman, L. Seal, M. J. Barker, T. O. Nieder & G. T'Sjoen. 2016. "Non-binary or Genderqueer Genders." *International Review of Psychiatry* 28: 1, 95–102.

Schudson, Z. C., & T. Morgenroth. 2022. "Non-binary Gender/Sex Identities," *Current Opinion in Psychology* 48, 1–5.

Sheehan, J. 2019. "Sulky, Cynical 'Murderbot' Is One Of Sci-Fi's Most Human Characters," *NPR*. https://www.npr.org/2019/01/27/688354123/sulky-cynical-murderbot-is-one-of-sci-fis-most-human-characters, DOA 27.02.2024.

Swyers, H., & E. Thomas. 2018. "Murderbot Pronouns: A Snapshot of Changing Gender Conventions in the United States," *Queer Studies in Media & Pop Culture* 3: 3, 271–299.

Trier-Bieniek, A. (Ed.) 2015. *Feminist Theory and Pop Culture*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.

Weiss, J., J. Hunsinger, J. Nolan, & P. Trifonas (Eds.) 2006. *The International Handbook of Virtual Learning Environments*. Dordrecht: Springer.

Wells, M. 2017. *All Systems Red: The Murderbot Diaries*. New York: Tor Publishing Group.

Wells, M. 2018. *Artificial Condition: The Murderbot Diaries*. New York: Tor Publishing Group.

Yaszek, L. 2023. "Introduction: A Brief History of Gender, Science Fiction, and the Science Fiction Anthology" in: L. Yaszek, S. Fritzsche, K. Omry & W. G. Pearson (Eds.), 3–10.

Yaszek, L., S. Fritzsche, K. Omry, & W. G. Pearson (Eds.) 2023. *The Routledge Companion to Gender and Science Fiction*. London: Routledge.

Abstract

Engaging with social change and progress within public discourse often encounters resistance due to entrenched beliefs and ideological divides. Literature, particularly science fiction, provides a unique platform for contemplating societal transformation through the exploration of imaginary worlds and scenarios detached from the contemporary status quo. This article is centred around the philosophical potential of science fiction and the role of technology as a powerful metaphor for change and difference, focusing on Martha Wells' series *The Murderbot Diaries*. The article delves into the role of Murderbot, a cyborg embodying an outsider perspective on human behaviour, as a metaphorical device for a deep questioning of the status quo. The article claims that through a queer reading, Murderbot's familiarity with human social constructs, biases, and norms, juxtaposed with its status as an "outsider," makes it a potent tool for societal critique. By analysing the portrayal of Murderbot's queerness through the lens of queer theory and gender studies, this study examines its profound implications for understanding social norms. Additionally, the article explores how the

portrayal of queer identity in *The Murderbot Diaries* strengthens the character's individuality and agency, thereby humanising it and questioning the very concept of humanity. The article aims to show that Murderbot's queerness not only challenges conventional notions of binary gender and heteronormativity but also offers a critical perspective on the social processes at the source of these concepts. Furthermore, it posits queerness as an empowering alternative to conforming to the status quo. Through this analysis, the article contributes to a nuanced understanding of social change and identity within the context of speculative fiction, inviting a reconsideration of established paradigms and embracing diversity.

CURRENTS. A Journal of Young English Philology Thought and Review. Vol. 10/2024
Ed. E. Lorek-Jezińska, N. Strehlau, J. Antoniak, B. Jankowska, www. currents.umk.pl
ISSN 2449-8769 ||

Barbara Pawlak
University of Łódź

TECHNOAPOCALYPSE: THE EFFECTS OF THE TECHNOLOGICAL DISASTER ON THE HUMAN SUBJECT IN DON DELILLO'S *THE SILENCE*

Keywords: technology, humanities, DeLillo, disaster, *homo technologicus*

Introduction

In contemporary American literature, one of the authors that thoroughly engages with the intricacies of technology is Don DeLillo. Throughout his novels, such as *White Noise, Cosmopolis,* and *Zero K*, DeLillo offers insights into how technology shapes modern existence. From the means of communication and accessing information to the reshaping of human identities, technology permeates existence in the ways both seen and unseen. DeLillo presents the complexities of living in a technologically saturated world and the implications it holds for the understanding of self and society.

In his newest novel, *The Silence*, DeLillo examines the issue of the overwhelming dependency on technology by presenting a scenario where it all suddenly and quietly ceases to function. Through this silent disaster, DeLillo exposes how much the mind relies on the ever-present stimuli, such as those coming from television screens. Throughout the novel it becomes clear that the human subject's relationship with technology goes beyond mere convenience and connectivity.

In this paper, I shall analyze how in DeLillo's *The Silence* the mysterious blackout is not merely a disastrous event which endangers people's lives and

interferes with the means of travel, communication, and entertainment. It also uncovers the underlying issues plaguing society, mainly the overdependence on technology. After the blackout commences, the story's characters are shown to be struggling with their thoughts and are desperate to fill a void that has remained after all their devices have fallen silent. However, the emptiness that they experience is not the effect of the blackout, but rather it was always there, just hidden under the constant stimulation from technological devices.

Homo Technologicus **in the Making**

Firstly, it is important to describe how thorough the influence of technology upon a human being might be. There is a large body of research concerning this relationship and how it operates and to what degree it affects humans. Sadie Barker in her article "Static, Glitch, Lull: DeLillo's Ambient Apocalypse" suggests that *The Silence* focuses not on the immediate effects and consequences of the mysterious blackout, but rather on how it affects people on the personal level (97). Barker describes how the novel exposes changes in human behavior stemming from technological dependence:

> DeLillo is thus most interested in habit: the habits that constitute the everyday and endow the glitch with its power to undo. (…) Amidst the slow recension of privacy and information, the commodification of viewership and technological socialization, the glitch does not cause but rather performs transformations already underway. (97–98)

The blackout, or how the author calls it "the glitch," is not the root of the problem, but rather an unfortunate event that exposed the overwhelming dependency on the technological marvels. The most crucial part of this analysis is presenting what the blackout uncovered in human behavior regarding relationship with technology. The dependency on this new modern stimulus is so thorough that I would like to argue that the characters in DeLillo's novel could be becoming *homo technologicus*.

In his article published in *Philosophies*, Kevin Warwick describes *homo technologicus* as "a symbiotic creature in which biology and technology intimately interact" (199). Warwick specifies that "the entity is formed by a human-technology brain/nervous system coupling in which the complete entity goes well beyond the norm in terms of Homo sapiens performance" (200). That is to say, the creation of the new post-human being will be done once we arrive at the level of interfering and modifying our brains or nervous systems directly, thus affecting our way of thinking and perceiving reality. It could be argued that this process will be done forcefully or will happen spontaneously over time. After all, as he says, "the human brain is affected by the technology around us. It develops over time to interact more efficiently with that technology" (Warwick 199). Humans then can be argued to naturally lean towards electronic devices, machines, robots, gadgets, etc. and adjust to use them.

Warwick's article provides a valuable argument for this study, because DeLillo writes about the human subjects undergoing similar changes. It could be said that the modification of brain or the nervous system is being done without a direct interference of brain implants or network connection. It is, instead, done by the presence, usage and reliance on technology alone. By the sheer volume of devices, their convenience in use and dependency on them, the human subject underwent already a complex and ambiguous shift. A direct interference is not needed for such a drastic change to occur. As it will be shown later, the characters in DeLillo's novels are dramatically affected by the lack of technological stimuli, even though they were not directly connected to a machine or were not suffering from an implant or prosthesis failure.

This profound vulnerability is described in Sonia Baelo-Allué's "Technological Vulnerability in Fourth Industrial Revolution: Don DeLillo's *The Silence.*" The article presents how the dependency on technology and offloading part of skills and human capacities to technological processes has made humanity vulnerable. The author states:

> [t]he boundary between the human and the machine becomes porous as the non-human becomes an essential part of the (post)human sense of identity. Losing the machine means losing a part of ourselves and that makes us especially vulnerable to the threat of its loss. The combination of technological ubiquity and intimacy with our dependence on ICTs [Information and Communication Technologies] makes our human fragility more obvious as our role is diminished in an informational environment that engulfs us. (137)

Baelo-Allué points at an unprecedented reliance on technology and warns against its malicious effects on the human subject. The more technology is used and incorporated into the daily routine, the more the society becomes dependent on it. The destructive consequences of this dependence and increasing compatibility of technology with human mind and body are described in Don DeLillo's *The Silence*, where the human subject is presented as fragmented, incapable of complex thought and unable to meaningfully communicate with peers. As Baelo-Allué suggests, "[t]he more advanced, the more vulnerable, but this vulnerability and posthuman suffering only becomes obvious when technology disappears and we are left to our own devices, struggling to recover and remember what truly makes us human" (146).

Technological progress and dependency irreversibly changed human subjects. No longer can they survive without technology, as it seems to have become part of their very being. Human subjects did not become fully posthuman, but were changed enough for technology to affect their mind and body. Consequently, they feel an immense sense of loss once the blackout begins. "Losing technology is losing a part of the self" (147)—states Baelo-Allué and that proves to be true for the characters that suffer from the mysterious blackout in Don DeLillo's novel. Their reactions and fate seem to be a cautionary tale about the relationship between technology and the human subject. One of the proposed views of this relationship is the comparison with a virus rampaging through the humanity. In *Technophobia! Science Fiction Visions of Posthuman Technology*, Daniel Dinello states that "[s]cience fiction often questions the notion that technology is neutral—that men control it, that they determine its benefit or harm. The technological virus undermines the techno-

utopian dream of mastery, demonstrating that it exists only as a delusion" (247). Technology changed human subjects and also took partial control over them. Yet, it was control given up willingly for pleasure and convenience, and to expand their own capabilities. This issue is mentioned by Baelo-Allué, who notes:

> However the paradox of the information age is that despite the explosion of options and data, this knowledge is not firsthand and does not come directly from our own senses: we gain control, but we also lose it, becoming vulnerable. Our dependence on technology extends the reach of our senses but also weakens us and our humanity. (142)

In other words, human beings gain more control by becoming more efficient at performing tasks with the knowledge of the world at their fingertips, but at the same time they offload abilities, sometimes as essential as recollection, thus becoming more technological and more controlled by the capabilities and functionalities of electronic devices. Don DeLillo in *The Silence* presents the reality in which technology is suddenly stripped away from the human subject.

Technological Silence

Don DeLillo's *The Silence* is a deceptively simple novel that follows a small cast of characters in a limited space. The novel presents a group of friends—Jim, Tessa, Max, Martin and Diane, who up to watch the Super Bowl together. Jim and Tessa are on the plane on the way to Newark, New Jersey, while Max Stenner and Diane Lucas wait with Martin, Diane's former student, in the apartment for their travelling friends. Yet, there is a hanging sense of foreboding, as the signs of the upcoming disaster are present in the novel. Jim recites mindlessly the data from the screen as a way to fill the silence, even though what he most needs is sleep: "[It] was the point. He needed to sleep. But the words and numbers kept coming" (DeLillo 4). Jim was seemingly enthralled by the screen and the numbers, and his entire self being bound to the technological marvel of the plane, as it is later noticed: "His name was Jim Kripps. But for all the hours of this flight, his name was his seat number. This was the rooted procedure, his

own, in accordance with the number stamped on his boarding pass" (DeLillo 6). From the very beginning the topic of technology is weaved into the description of character's behavior and thoughts.

It is shown that Jim has a peculiar relationship with technology. His wife, poet Tessa, points out that "But you're happy about the screen. You like your screen," to which he replies, "It helps me hide from the noise" (DeLillo 13–14). It may seem at a glance that Jim is referring to the roar of the engine and the ambient hum of the plane. However, as the story progresses, it becomes increasingly apparent that he hides from the noise of his own mind in dire need of upholding a conversation that goes deeper than flickering lights on the screen. By contrast, Tessa seems to be still fighting against the interference of technology by writing down the memories of their trip, as well as forcing herself to remember the name of Anders Celsius without looking it up on her phone. When she finally recalls that bit of information, it turns out that:

> She found this satisfying. Came out of nowhere. There is almost nothing left of nowhere. When a missing fact emerges without digital assistance, each person announces it to the other while looking off into a remote distance, the otherworld of what was known and lost. (DeLillo 14–15)

The unassisted recollection of trivia turns out to be more gratifying and it draws attention to the concerning element of some experiences being denied by the technological dependency. A seemingly mundane matter of recollection becomes a unique experience that feels profound, indicating that, in comparison, just a search through the Internet would feel shallow. Tessa and Jim's situation resonates with Arthur Schopenhauer's theory of boredom. Each part of the body manifests a certain will, which for the mind it is a will to cognize (Schopenhauer 272). Both Jim and Tessa desire mental stimulation, but each found a different venue to pursue it. Tessa strains her own mind, while Jim relies on technological stimuli to provide content for mental engagement, as a way to keep away the boredom which is, "the particular variety of suffering" (Fox 480). Technology provides an invaluable source of engagement that might

replace one's ability to cognize and make an individual dependent on devices to keep the mind occupied.

However, a mysterious event disrupts the technological devices. Jim and Tessa's plane ceases to function and falls from the sky. Yet, we see that it is not an isolated event, as the Max and Diane's apartment is hit by the blackout as well, although the term "glitch" used by Sadie Baker seems to fit the event better, due to the unusual effects that are described as follows:

> Something happened then. The images onscreen began to shake. It was not ordinary visual distortion, it had depth, it formed abstract patterns that dissolved into a rhythmic pulse, a series of elementary units that seemed to thrust forward and then recede. Rectangles, triangles, squares. They watched and listened. But there was nothing to listen to. Max picked up the remote control device from the floor in front of him and hit the volume button repeatedly but there was no audio. Then the screen went blank. (DeLillo 25–26)

Diane checks her laptop, a landline phone and a desktop computer, but they all ceased to function. The mysterious blackout disrupts all of the plans the characters have, endangers their lives, and forces them to rethink their relationships with technology. The narration paints a grim picture that could be summed up with words from Langdon Winner's book *Autonomous Technology: Technics-out-of-Control as a Theme of Political Thought*: "[u]nder present conditions men are not at all the masters of technological change; they are its prisoners" (55). The freedom suddenly gained from the technological imprisonment does not lead to the characters' enlightenment, but it furthers their confusion and uneasiness, as they struggle to face the world that is no longer interconnected, full of noise and the flashes of the screens.

The immediate effects of the blackout are horrific as Jim and Tessa's plane suddenly falls from the sky. After the emergency landing, they are taken to a nearby hospital to treat Jim's minor injury. An interesting point to note is that they were driven away in a van, which makes the event even more mysterious; it cannot be explained by, for example, an electromagnetic pulse, which would have also destroyed car batteries. The glitch switched off phones, computers,

lights, leaving all digital communication, the access to the Internet and consuming entertainment through the television or the radio impossible.

It is revealed that the loss of technology is not a mere inconvenience, but a possible beginning to a societal collapse. The receptionist at the hospital describes the situation as follows, "[e]veryone I've seen today has a story. You two are the plane crash. Others are the abandoned subway, the stalled elevators, then the empty office buildings, the barricaded storefronts" (DeLillo 59). Although DeLillo is not writing about a straightforward disaster or apocalyptic fiction, there are clues left that bring forward the images of the society slowly breaking apart, as the confusion and the panic start to spread. Instead, as Mark Tardi states, "[t]he tension or prospective anxiety then comes from what is happening outside of the frame, on the other side of the windows nobody wants to look out of" (430). The novel provides scarce details what exactly is happening to the society at large, but these are vivid enough to create a vision of a collapsing society.

However, the event is something more than just a sudden, disastrous blackout. As Jim and Tessa join up with Max, Diane and Martin, the novel begins to unravel the human dependence on technology. The devices promise the convenience of communication but once they had been taken away, they uncover human interconnection to technology. When it failed, the effects were akin to losing part of self (Baelo-Allué 147). As mentioned in the previous section, the modern human might already be a form of *homo technologicus*, part-human, part-machine, which could explain the profound effect the glitch had on the characters in the novel.

This new part-human/part-machine form is represented in Max's behavior once he realized that the television will not switch back on any time soon. After a moment of staring at the blank TV screen—a detail which will be repeated throughout the novel—Max proceeds to present the broadcast himself. As Diane notices:

> It was time for another slug of bourbon and he paused and drank. His use of language was confident, she thought, emerging from a broadcast level deep in his unconscious mind, all these decades of indigenous discourse muddled by the nature of the game, men hitting each other, men slamming each other into the turf. (…) Diane was stunned. Is it the bourbon that's giving him this lilt, this flourish of football dialect and commercial jargon. Never happened before, not with bourbon, scotch, beer, marijuana. (DeLillo 46–47)

The self-broadcast of the Super Bowl game emphasizes his interconnection and dependency on technology. Because of his experience in watching television and knowledge of commercial and football jargon, as well as the ways of how the broadcast operates, he is able to imitate the transmission impeccably as if he was the television itself. Diane muses about his ability:

> Or is it the blank screen, is it a negative impulse that provoked his imagination, the sense that the game is happening somewhere in Deep Space outside the fragile reach of our current awareness, in some transrational warp that belongs to Martin's time frame, not ours. (DeLillo 48)

Diane's thoughts suggest an image of Max as a form of a cyborg that receives an imaginary signal from somewhere around the world and broadcasts it mindlessly. Max is interconnected to the technology to such a profound degree that he is able to replace the device himself. He might be already a well-functioning cyborg and the glitch simply uncovered his loss of humanity.

The most disturbing demonstration of the consequences brought by technological dependency resulting in the loss of humanity appears at the end of the novel, where each of the characters voices their thoughts in separate monologues. By the end of the story, all of them find themselves unable to properly talk to each other for they are fully overwhelmed by the effects of the glitch. Their soliloquies reinforce the feelings of confusion, loss and fear of the upcoming apocalypse. Diane emphasizes the anxiety about the state of the outside world in her speech:

> The end-of-the-world movie. People stranded in a room. But we're not stranded. We can leave anytime. I try to imagine the vast sense of confusion out there. My husband does not want to describe what he has seen but I am guessing bedlam in the streets and why am I so reluctant to get up and walk to the window and simply look? (DeLillo 104–105)

Diane makes comments about the ambiguous state of the world, but as the previous fragments have suggested, the city is most likely far from peaceful. She notes that that their small group can leave at any time. Yet, the situation puts the pressure on her and the others, which is enough to feel anxiety about learning what is happening outside. As for Diane herself, she realizes nobody is listening, and finally tells herself to stay quiet as she is not able to find the connection or understanding of the people she is supposed to be close with. The characters in the story were described as a group of friends, and yet they are unable to communicate their deep and personal thoughts to each other. Jim describes his traumatic experiences of being a passenger on the falling plane. Max tells the story from his childhood about counting the stairs that led to his apartment. Martin delves into his obsession with Einstein's Theory of Relativity. Tessa recalls her habit of writing down memories in her notebook; yet, nobody is listening to each other. They are communicating for the sake of filling in the titular silence with their own voices, instead of relegating the task to a howl of the engines or a crackle of the neon lights in the background. The sudden disconnection revealed the shallowness of their thoughts and profound feeling of loss that made them unable to understand their situation or communicate meaningfully with each other.

Ultimately, the novel ends with a passage about Max passively sitting before the TV screen: "Max is not listening. He understands nothing. He sits in front of the TV set with his hands folded behind his neck, elbows jutting. Then he stares into the blank screen" (DeLillo 116). It encapsulates the characters' situation and what awaits them in a future without the technology. Max and the others do not arrive at the point of revelation or the profound knowledge about self and their circumstances. That shapes to be a future of emptiness and mindlessness, or seemingly simple boredom. As it was mentioned previously,

boredom is a form of suffering, and DeLillo's *The Silence* strongly emphasizes the mental anguish caused by the lack of stimuli, and the untrained mind not being used to cognize or lacking desire to pursue a different source of engagement without outside influence of technology. After all, Max, after delivering his soliloquy, returns to what he was doing previously, completing the apocalyptic vision of humanity learning nothing from the ordeal they had to go through.

Conclusion

The Silence presents a vision of a disaster that targets technology, and although it lacks the quality of a sublime spectacle it cannot be overlooked, as it uncovers important issues regarding the usage and increasing presence of technology. The possible consequences of its loss would lead to tangible tragedies, such as crashed planes and a mass panic across the country. Although the effects of the glitch are not described in detail, the scarce comments about the state of the world create an image of the civilization leading to its collapse.

The novel also uncovers how contemporary humans are dependent on technology and how it penetrated thoroughly their very being. Through DeLillo's writings it could be said that the current fate of humanity without technology is that of confusion, as they would seek to desperately fill that emptiness in their minds. Characters in the novel fit the description of *homo technologicus*, i.e. a part-human, part-machine form, as the glitch disables electronic devices the characters in the novel find themselves at a loss, and increasingly finding trouble in communicating their thoughts meaningfully. Technology is shown as an inseparable part of their being.

Life after the mysterious blackout is shown to be a struggle, which showcases people's hopeless dependence on technology. Its constant presence provides necessary stimuli to experience reality and at the same time offloads human beings from remembering, thinking or communicating meaningfully. Yet, exactly these meaningful conversations that are not reliant on an outside hum

of various devices, but come from the inside of the mind, are being consumed by the constant technological presence.

References

Baelo-Allué, S. 2023. "Technological Vulnerability in the Fourth Industrial Revolution: Don DeLillo's *The Silence* (2020)," in: M. Fernández-Santiago & C. M. Gámez Fernández (Eds.), 135–149.

Barker, S. 2021. "Static, Glitch, Lull: DeLillo's *The Silence*," *Moveable Type* 13: 1, 95–100.

DeLillo, D. 2020. *The Silence*. London: Picador.

Dinello, D. 2013. *Technophobia!: Science Fiction Visions of Posthuman Technology*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Fernández-Santiago, M. & C. M. Gámez-Fernández (Eds.). 2023. *Representing Vulnerabilities in Contemporary Literature.* New York and London: Routledge.

Fox, I. J. 2022. "Schopenhauer on Boredom," *British Journal for the History of Philoso*phy 30: 3, 477–495.

Schopenhauer, A. *The World as Will and Representation.* Ed. by J. Norman, A. Welchman and C. Janaway. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Tardi, M. 2021. "When There's Too Much Technology: A Review of Don DeLillo's *The Silence* (Scribner, 2020)," *Text Matters: A Journal of Literature, Theory and Culture* 11, 428–431.

Warwick, K. 2016. "*Homo Technologicus*: Threat or Opportunity?" *Philosophies* 1: 3, 199–208.

Winner, L. 1977. *Autonomous Technology: Technics-out-of-Control as a Theme in Political Thought*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Abstract

Multitudes of apocalyptic visions are based on events of great magnitude, such as a global nuclear war, a catastrophic natural disaster or an invasion from outer space. It is easy to imagine the immediate effects of these calamities and all the loss of life, the destroyed infrastructure and the ravaged land. However, there is a more insidious vision of the apocalypse that does not immediately present itself as a spectacle of death and destruction. One of the less frequently used ideas for the end of the world is a disaster that destroys technology. A precise strike of a solar flare or a powerful electromagnetic pulse could lead to the end of modern civilization as we know it. One example of such a catastrophe is presented in Don DeLillo's *The Silence.* In the novel, without any warning, all technological devices stop working. The characters in the story struggle with their new situation. While it does not describe a massive panic or more spectacular signs of the end of the world, the text draws attention to a different issue. Above all, Don DeLillo shows how the technology became an inseparable part of not only our lives, but also of our very being. The lack of technological presence directly interferes with the characters thinking and speech. This problematic situation shows that the mysterious event led to something more than lack of connection with the

outside world, damaged planes and broken lights. As much as the disaster leads to the ruin of modern civilization, it also shows how the human mind cannot operate properly without stimuli provided by the technology. The novel provides a vision or a warning for the state of the society, which without the access to technology would crumble on the mental level.

CURRENTS. A Journal of Young English Philology Thought and Review. Vol. 10/2024
Ed. E. Lorek-Jezińska, N. Strehlau, J. Antoniak, B. Jankowska, www. currents.umk.pl
ISSN 2449-8769 ||

Agnieszka Jagła
University of Łódź

REDEFINING BOUNDARIES BETWEEN HUMAN AND NONHUMAN IN *THE STONE GODS* BY JEANETTE WINTERSON

Keywords: transhumanism, posthumanism, nonhuman, *The Stone Gods*, humanoid, enhancement

Introduction

The Stone Gods (2007) by Jeanette Winterson is a novel difficult to classify as belonging to one literary genre, as it combines sci-fi, dystopia, and traits of a post-apocalyptic story. It is also marked by its striking postmodern quality, as the author includes literary techniques such as intertextuality and metafiction, which largely highlight the circular aspect of the novel. Julie Ellam argues that "*The Stone Gods* is better described as a set of 'novellas-in-a-novel'" (220). The book is divided into four parts, each of them telling the recurring love story between two protagonists—Billie Crusoe and Spike—in various settings as each part explores the same storyline but in alternative realities.

This article focuses on the depiction of the human-nonhuman relationship between Billie and Spike as presented in the first part of the novel in the chapter entitled "Planet Blue." I argue that the technologization of the society and the procedure of genetic manipulations in the novel can be seen as a representation of transhumanist thought aimed at human enhancement, especially extending the human lifespan. The goal of this article is to illustrate how the novel erases the dichotomy between human and technological

nonhuman and how this human/nonhuman encounter influences the concept of the human. Posthumanist thought provides the background for the article through the commentary of posthumanist thinkers such as Rosi Braidotti and Francesca Ferrando.

Transhumanism and the Creation of Genetically Fixed Society

The transhumanist stance is most visible in the idea of *ageless* society introduced in the first part of the novel through the procedure of Genetic Fixing. The procedure as such is not described but the readers find out that it relies on the premise of *fixing* the genotype in order to repress the aging process of the cells; as a result, citizens of planet Orbus have the possibility to *fix* their age to remain permanently the same. Genetic Fixing can be viewed as a representation of one of the key points of transhumanist thought discussed through the selection of ideas typically associated with the movement. Luna Dolezal argues that the view of enhancement as the pursuit of improvement of human condition also connects transhumanism strongly to the Enlightenment (313). This connection enforces the human-centred vision of the world, which is manifested through its desideratum advocating for human enhancement and prolonging human lifespan. Among major supporters of age defying processes is Robert Ettigner—a physicist and the author of the book *The Prospect of Immortality*—and Saul Kent, the founder of Life Extension Foundation. The first attempt at compiling the transhumanist claims was made by Natasha Vita-More in "The Transhumanist Manifesto" (1983, 1st version). Therein, Vita-More advocates for "Life extension & expansion," claiming that "[t]ranshumanism is the first philosophy and worldview to publicly proclaim the need to eradicate disease and to advocate for longevity and ageless thinking." The belief that the aging process can be defeated is echoed by other declarations and manifestos of the movement. In "A Letter to Mother Nature", first delivered in by Max More in his keynote address in 1999 at EXTRO-4 Conference in Berkley and later

published in *The Transhumanist Reader* (2013), More repeats his wife's claim and presents it as the first amendment:

> Amendment No. 1. We will no longer tolerate the tyranny of aging and death. Through genetic alterations, cellular manipulations, synthetic organs, and any necessary means, we will endow ourselves with enduring vitality and remove our expiration date. We will each decide for ourselves how long we shall live. (More 450)

Finally, *The Transhumanist Declaration* (2012)—the product of efforts and cooperation of many transhumanist thinkers—also lays the foundation of the movement by preaching the extension of life as one of the key points:

> 8. We favor morphological freedom—the right to modify and enhance one's body, cognition, and emotions. This freedom includes the right to use or not to use techniques and technologies to extend life, preserve the self through cryonics, uploading, and other means, and to choose further modifications and enhancements. (55)

The matter of defying the aging process reoccurs throughout the years and has been reflected on by the transhumanists and futurists, representatives of philosophy, literature, biology, and technology. Winterson imagines humanity overcoming this threshold as the problem of age in *The Stone Gods* is eliminated—the age of an individual can be fixed, the breeding takes place outside of womb and the genetics are mastered. Thus, the civilisation on Orbus can be viewed as a representation of the society which achieved "morphological freedom" pursued by the transhumanists. The invention of Genetic Fixing challenges the category of the *human*. Ironically, the procedure leads people into sexual perversion: while women want to be fixed as increasingly younger, men feel attracted to minors. As Robo *sapiens* Spike ventures to prove in her conversation with Billie, due to many enhancements, determining the difference between human and nonhuman becomes increasingly more difficult and challenging (Winterson 77–79). In the article I will be exploring the erosion of those boundaries.

However, as the gulf between Billie and Spike begins to dwindle, the novel shifts its focus from abovementioned technological and biotechnological

upgrades to interspecies connection between the two characters who serve as representatives of, respectively, human and technological other. By moving the human away from the centre of interest and altering the focus to their relation with the technological other instead, the novel gains a new perspective and presents this human-nonhuman entanglement through the posthumanist lens. Unlike transhumanism, posthumanism is viewed as much more inclusive and open. It advocates for the acknowledgment of human and nonhuman marginalised subjects who are not default beneficiaries of technological advancements and distances itself from a human-centred narrative which assumes a heterosexual, white male as a figure representative of human species. In his definition of posthumanism, Cary Wolfe points out that the humanistic roots present in transhumanism clearly distinguish it from posthumanism (356). He underlines the difficulty of establishing boundaries between human and nonhuman:

> not only is the line between human and non-human impossible to definitively draw with regard to the binding together of neurophysiology, cognitive states and symbolic behaviours, the line between 'inside' and 'outside', 'brain' and 'mind', is also impossible to draw definitively. (358)

Another point of difference between two perspectives highlighted by Wolfe is their approach to widely understood question of finitude—the unavoidable end of all the beings and relationships with human inventions:

> not just the finitude that obtains in our being bound to other forms of embodied life that live and die as we do, that are shaped by the same processes that shape us, but also the finitude of our relationship to the tools, languages, codes, maps and semiotic systems that make the world cognitively available to us in the first place. (358)

Thus, unlike transhumanism, posthumanism renders the dichotomy between humans and nonhumans irrelevant—or even non-existent—and refutes the idea of immortality in favour of accepting death as the inescapable part of existence. I argue that these two aspects of posthumanism can be found in Winterson's novel and, in attempt to analyse them, I apply the framework

provided by posthumanist philosophers, Rosi Braidotti and Francesca Ferrando.

Human and Nonhuman Entanglement

The novel contextualizes the outcomes of enhancement within the broader posthumanist framework by juxtaposing the enhanced human being to the technological nonhuman and the planet. It not only raises the question of how *human* are the enhanced human beings on Orbus, but also what distinguishes the enhanced society from the Robo *sapiens* (an intelligent humanoid.) During the quest to Planet Blue, Robo *sapiens* Spike argues that the distinction between robots and humans is negotiable and difficult to establish. The obsession with physical beauty and politics of enhancement is juxtaposed with Robo *sapiens*' own outlook on physicality. As a humanoid, Spike represents the Harawayan idea of a post-gender cyborg. Despite her very much sexualized female appearance, she perceives "gender" as something with which she herself does not identify nor does she showcase any specific preference for a male or female partner. This theme is further developed by the ever-changing gender of Billie and Spike and stretched to the human-nonhuman transformation. Such a use of *gender fluidity* sparks a comparison between *The Stone Gods* and Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* as both texts reject the ideas of being limited by gender or perceiving gender as an ultimate definition of the self. Furthermore, just like in *Orlando*, the circularity of *The Stone Gods*' narrative, resembling the lifecycles of nature, also enforces the need to reject the binary human/nonhuman, male/female categorization.

The entanglement of the human with the nonhuman is further highlighted by the environmental landscape, its relevance to human life, and the influence humans have on it. As Caracciolo argues, the human individual is deeply embedded in the reality which is nonhuman:

> The image of the circle pervades the novel, at multiple levels: diegetic, temporal, and thematic. But only the metaphorical paranarrative reveals

> the deep significance of this circularity: it holds a mirror up to Winterson's fluidly circular metaphysics, in which the human, embodied subject seeps into, and is at the same time shaped by, the nonhuman realities of geology and the cosmos. (233)

While seemingly the focus of the novel might be the collapse of human civilisation and it might seem human-centred, as Caracciolo points out, Winterson positions the timelines of characters within a much broader time scale of a planet, something which seems excluded from the transhumanist contemplations.

As it has been mentioned earlier, humans on Orbus were subjected to a wide variety of enhancements to achieve age fixing, such as cloning, breeding outside the human body and genetic modification. Therefore, the society of Orbus can be viewed as an example showcasing the humans which successfully transitioned into the posthumans. Those alteration to the genetic body of the human are pointed out by Spike in her argument with Billie and Pink as she tries to establish the difference between the human and herself—Robo *sapiens*:

> 'Every human being in the Central Power has been enhanced, genetically modified and DNA-screened. Some have been cloned. Most were born outside the womb. A human being now is not what a human being was even a hundred years ago. So what is a human being?' (77)

This transition altered the human to such an extent that, at this point, the border between human and nonhuman seems purely conventional. Spike undermines the understanding of the "human" as a concrete taxonomy of being and her comment echoes the classical debate between Plato and Diogenes concerned with the definition of a man.

Spike continues to challenge the distinction between the humans and her nonhuman self by stating that even without any enhancements the body of the human "is in a constantly changing state" (77–78). Ferrando highlights this exact evolutionary aspect of DNA in her book *The Art of Being Posthuman*:

> Not only does it self-replicate, but also it is constantly changing, in the processes of mutations, epigenetic expressions and horizontal gene transfers (...) Mutations can be approached as techniques of evolution,

> resulting not necessarily from errors but also out of knowledge of the self as (p)art of the environment, manifesting specific changes in choice and interpretation. (57–58)

To encapsulate the "essence" of what it means to be a human, which Spike seeks in the debate, proves a futile task. As Ferrando argues further: "DNA is not a static "thing" that can be essentialized; it is an embodied process in the here and now" (66). The argument on this everchanging state of a human being, brought up by Spike, parallels the ship of Theseus paradox. The paradox provokes a philosophical debate whether the ship which has all the parts substituted by identical parts remains the same ship. It also relates to the dilemma faced by transhumanist thinkers who argue whether mind uploading would be a process that allows to transmit what it is that is considered a human. A posthumanist philosopher Katherine Hayles criticizes such a presumption expressed by Hans Moravec:

> How, I asked myself, was it possible for someone of Moravec's obvious intelligence to believe that mind could be separated from body? Even assuming such a separation was possible, how could anyone think that consciousness in an entirely different medium would remain unchanged, as if it had no connection with embodiment? Shocked into awareness, I began noticing he was far from alone. (1)

The argument oftentimes used against the transhumanist logic as mind uploading relates to the constantly changing state of a human being, which implies that the human nature is impossible to "capture."

However, the debate concerns not only the physical aspect of DNA and genetic manipulations. To prove that Homo sapiens and Robo *sapiens* are different, Billie (the protagonist) and Pink (fellow passenger) argue that the ability to experience emotions is something distinguishing humans from technological nonhumans. However, Spike finds the argument insufficient, and Billie further explains that the key feature of being a human is sensitivity:

> 'So your definition of a human being is in the capacity to experience emotion?' asked Spike.
> 'How much emotion? The more sensitive a person is, the more human they are?'

> 'Well, yes,' I said. 'Insensitive, unfeeling people are at the low end of human—not animal, more android'. (78)

Spike's wish is, perhaps, not only to define the boundary between human and nonhuman, but also to defy it. In her attempt to prove the lack of logical arguments which would support the supposed uniqueness of the human, Spike echoes the posthumanist wish to promote an inclusive approach towards all beings. As exemplified by the exchange between Spike and Billie quoted earlier, Spike critically deconstructs any possible definition that would contain "human" as a closed category by demonstrating that any supposedly absolute distinction may, in fact, be placed along a diverse spectrum. Ferrando, however, believes that it is the "posthuman awareness" which would allow an even deeper insight into defining human being in the world:

> Existential posthumanism proclaims the final deconstruction of the absolute "self/other" dichotomy: such a deconstruction is not a destruction. Posthuman awareness leads to a state which may transcend the human in *toto*, in a condition which exceeds and precedes humanhood as a historical construction. (187)

Spike exhibits this posthuman consciousness, especially when she questions the anthropocentric approach to the practice of categorising all beings. Robo *sapiens* downplays the superiority of human species through pointing out its destructive impact on the environment and the planet, proving that human emotionality and empathy do not necessarily translate into love and care towards the environment. During the dispute, Robo *sapiens* lectures Billie and Pink about the fallacy of the human-centred approach, which resulted in the depletion of natural resources and the collapse of the planet. Even the robot, which is itself a direct creation of the system, critiques the politics of the Central Power focused only on the enhancement of humans and the pursuit of technological advancement in order to facilitate comfort to the society: "'There are many kinds of life,' said Spike, mildly. 'Humans always assumed that theirs was the only kind that mattered. That's how you destroyed your planet'" (79). Tomasz Dobrogoszcz views the environmental abuse presented in the novel as

"a legacy of the patriarchally modelled culture," (17) and describes *The Stone Gods* as "a highly gendered narrative" (13). Technological pursuits in the novel, which can be seen through the creation of omnipresent technological upgrades, humanoid robots and genetic enhancements, are, in fact, not driven by innovative and creative urge but by the lust for power: "*The Stone Gods* articulates the destructive potential of masculinist technocracy, emphasizing pernicious effects brought about by abuses of technology which are, in essence, caused by the urge to satisfy typically male desires for domination and control" (Dobrogoszcz 17). The centrality of transhumanism and the focus on self-enhancement and defying the aging process, as the novel forecasts, result not only in the destruction of the planet and the extinction of species, but also in the endangerment of the human species itself. Ferrando highlights the pressing need to embrace the entanglement with technology as the only way to avoid destructive generalizations: "The human/machine dichotomy must be deconstructed in full awareness to avoid perpetuating ultimate essentializations—resulting in social oppressions, ecological devastations and, more extensively, existential obfuscations" (115).

The novel criticizes human perception of the world from the superior position in the hierarchy of living beings, the ultimate ignorance of diminishing differences between homo sapiens and Robo *sapiens* in the aftermath of the genetic modifications pictures humans as a narcissistic species confident of their higher status. The refusal to acknowledge the reality and repercussions of human actions becomes a downfall leading to a never-ending loop of human-induced disasters. The blind elevation of mankind makes it impossible for people on Orbus to imagine that Robo *sapiens* is the next stage in the human evolution, something which will outlive the posthuman man: "'I am a Robo sapiens,' said Spike, 'and perhaps it will be us, and not you, who are the future of the world'" (78). Spike justifies her claim by not only mentioning the self-destruction of humans, but, most importantly, highlighting the fact that Robo *sapiens* surpasses the human and can be seen as a successor in the posthuman

world: "'That was once true,' said Spike. 'It isn't true any more. We are solar-powered and self-repairing. We are intelligent and nonaggressive. You could learn from us'" (79). Spike undermines the preconception that robots are inferior to humans, thus demonstrating that the technological advancement shifted the dynamic between humans and nonhumans in terms of not only intelligence but also endurance.

Technology: Limitation or Transcendence?

The ignorance of the binary way of teaching-learning experience brought up by Spike exemplifies human detachment from everything nonhuman. The refusal to acknowledge the entanglement with technology, which is ever-present on Orbus and also a vital part of its inhabitants, manifests itself through Gene Fixing. This entanglement with technology is so permanent that life without technology—or with less technology—is rendered impossible for the humankind, as they have completely lost the ability to survive in an environmental landscape deprived of technological advancement:

> 'Humans are rendering themselves obsolete,' said Spike. 'Successive generations of deskilling mean that you can no longer fend for yourselves in the way that you once could. You rely on technicians and robots. It is not thought that anyone in the Central Power could survive unassisted on Planet Blue. Pink, do you know how to plant potatoes?' (78)

Human dependence on technology makes them unable to free themselves from the system. Therefore, this relationship does not reflect the positive entanglement proposed by Ferrando, but instead embodies an unhealthy dependency that narrows the capacity for humanity to overcome their limitations and survive. Thus, the concept of going back to nature is rendered impossible. As the novel sarcastically notices, the technology, as opposed to nature, is so omnipresent that there are special organisations that have to raise money not to maintain but to create "strips of wild." Even dogs on Orbus are robots with the option to turn the barking sound off: "Robo *sapiens* is

evolving—*Homo sapiens* is an endangered species. It doesn't feel like it to you now but you have destroyed your planet, and it is not clear to me that you will be viable on Planet Blue'" (79). Spike argues that, in an absurd way, technological growth, which was supposed to bring humanity further and create more advanced society, resulted in the creation of an after-human species—Robo *sapiens*, as the human lost the position of hegemony or self-sufficiency in the world.

The ignorance of human connection with the nonhuman is not only limited to technology, but stretches even further to the environment, the planet and other species. The society on Orbus exists but ignores the fact that they occupy the planet. During her conversation with Billie, Robo *sapiens* Spike points out to the fact that, despite their genetic affinity, humans "feel no kinship" with apes, a tendency which is compared to the possibility of developing such relations with the robots (34). This observation aligns with Braidotti's postulate to create a more inclusive categorisation encapsulating the connectedness and entanglement of all beings existing in the world: "the proper subject of the posthuman convergence is not 'Man', but a new collective subject, a 'we-are-(all)-in-this-together-but-we-are-not-one-and the-same' kind of subject" (2019: 54). This glimpse of this collective subject can be seen in the chapter "Planet Blue" where Billie and Spike develop a romantic and sexual relationship with their sexual act highlighting, in a literal sense, the idea of becoming one. Considering the gender of both characters, even though Spike rejects the gender category, Dobrogoszcz views the relationship between the two characters as a response to the male-dominated society: "Billie's attraction to Spike is largely rooted in the robot's antagonistic relation to the patriarchal culture of colonial conquest and capitalist technocracy in which the woman resides" (19). The love that develops between the two characters becomes a glimmer of hope in the novel and symbolises the act of resistance to patriarchy since the romance is not only homosexual but also interspecies. Hence, it can be stated that, through engaging in a relationship with Spike, Billie rejects

human/nonhuman categorisation and prejudice, showing the human capability for openness. Their relationship becomes "the intervention" in the destructive cycle of human defeat:

> The novel also problematizes the patriarchal binaries as these characters find fulfillment in a homoerotic zone: love is offered as a solution to all the sickening patriarchal binaries, and, ironically, it is offered to them not by their fellow citizens but either by the robots or a noble savage. (Birlik & Taskesen 71)

Spike re-establishes the lost kinship between humans and nonhumans, which might seem counter-intuitive on the surface, as usually the development of technology is blamed for the human detachment from nature.

However, Braidotti argues that at the core of technology lies the sense of connectedness: "Contemporary machines are no metaphors, but they are engines or devices that both capture and process forces and energies, facilitating interrelations, multiple connections and assemblages. They stand for radical relationality and delight as well as productivity" (2013: 92). The philosopher also finds similarity between humans and animals existing in technological and natural landscape respectively: "The merger of the human with the technological results in a new transversal compound, a new kind of eco-sophical unity, not unlike the symbiotic relationship between the animal and its planetary habitat" (92). Billie discovers that she is not only physically attracted to Spike but also has developed feelings for her. The strength of the connection established between Billie and Spike prompts Billie to follow her heart in a spontaneous decision to abandon the rest of the crew travelling to the colony and stay with Spike. The novel attempts to illustrate that love transcends the human/nonhuman categorization. Billie's reckless decision to stay and put her life in danger in order to spend more time with her beloved proves that love truly is an intervention even when the world is about to end. Although both characters die by the end of the chapter, the author leaves readers with the promise of another story: "This is one story. There will be

another" (113). Thus, the cycle of life and death continues and propels the novel.

Dismantling, Recycling, Death and Rebirth

The novel reintroduces the concept of death and presents it as a recycling. At the beginning of the novel, during a live broadcast interview between Spike and Billie, Billie asks Spike about the prospect of her being destructed:

> 'How do you feel about being dismantled? It's a kind of death, isn't it?' 'I think of it as recycling, which is what Nature does all the time. The natural world is abundant and extravagant, but nothing is wasted. The only waste in the Cosmos comes from human beings.' (37)

Thus, the act of dismantling is viewed not only as a representation of death for the technological nonhuman, but, most importantly, it is also perceived by the Robo *sapiens* as the reinventive act. By the end of the chapter, Spike has to dismantle herself in order to save energy; in the end, as she dies in Billie's arms, only her head remains. This particular perception of death as a form of recycling not only brings the individual back to the collective, but also serves as a reminder of equality in the face of death: "Death (...) is the becoming-imperceptible of the nomadic subject and as such it is part of the cycles of becomings, yet another form of interconnectedness, a vital relationship that links one with other, multiple forces" (Braidotti 2006: 147). The application of Braidotti's framework makes it possible to view parts of the novels and their ending in death of the characters as a process of becoming a part of the nonhuman world. This is also the message of the story—the characters who die are reborn, recycled to life. The novel, therefore, challenges the very idea of Genetic Fixing which can be seen as the realisation of immortality proclaimed by the transhumanists. The powerful reintroduction of death as a form of recycling introduces a posthumanist perspective to the technologised vision of the future through emphasising the belonging of humans to the ecosystem. Therefore, the argument about the ever-changing DNA made by Ferrando bears

a resemblance to the way that lifecycle is present in both human and nonhuman existence:

> How can life and death coexist? In order to answer this question, let's bring two simple examples, by mentioning that all the cells in the human body are constantly dying and regenerating—cells in the epidermis, for instance, last about a week. Another example can be found in our daily compost of vegetable scraps, which will decompose and break down into organic humus (that is, rich soil). (108)

Posthumanism and its vision of recycling represents the possibility of closeness and unity with nature and the planet, while transhumanism with its technological advancement is presented as furthering the separation between the two. Braidotti draws attention to the importance of realizing this *connectedness* between all human and nonhuman beings:

> Relationality extends through the multiple ecologies that constitute us. Such webs of connections and negotiation engender a sense of familiarity with the world and foreground the simple fact that we are ecosophical entities, that is to say ecologically interlinked through the multiple interconnections we share within the nature—culture continuum. The posthuman subject may be internally fractured, but is also technologically mediated and globally interlinked. (2019: 47–48)

It adds to the problematic idea whether technology can bring the society closer or further apart as the metaphor of death, seen as the reintroduction to the natural cycle of life, is expressed by a humanoid robot and not a human. The Robo *sapiens* Spike, thus, perceives death as a concept which is more planetary-related rather than human-centred. Such perspective allows her to escape the human fear of death and enter a nature-culture continuum which extends beyond one person's lifespan. As Johns-Putra (186–187) notices, there is a seminal contrast in the novel between repetition and intervention. Winterson applies in her novel the motive of eternal return of recurring patterns of history caught in an infinite loop allowing death and life to become a continuum instead of opposites. The love shared between Billy and Spike transgressing human/nonhuman boundary is presented as the intervention which might break the cycle of human destruction.

Conclusions

Despite its transhumanistic premise, the main message of the novel seems to be rooted in posthumanist thought. Transhumanism in the novel manifests itself through both the invention of Robo *sapiens* as well as the existence of genetic enhancement, illustrating a possible next stage in the evolution from human to posthuman. The main problem presented in the rhetoric of transhumanism is its superior placement and fixation on the human being rejecting the nonhuman, here present in the form of Earth as well as technological other. The invention of Genetic Fixing is aimed at helping the society to remain ageless without considering the repercussions of such a decision on the environment. Meanwhile, the creation of Robo *sapiens* serves the purpose of not only improving human life but also utilizing the humanoid for the purpose of sexual pleasure. Those examples illustrate the supreme position of the human perpetuated by the transhumanism, which, in consequence, draws the boundary between the human and the other. The novel, however, attempts to show the fallacy in this way of thinking as it ultimately leads to the downfall of the civilisation. *The Stone Gods* realizes Braidotti's "Ethics of Becoming Imperceptible" as it attempts to present death as a new form of becoming, divorced from transhumanistic dream of immortality. The relationship which transgresses the species proves the posthumanist necessity for human openness to others. As Spike and Billie fall in love, they establish the connection transcending the transhumanist rise of humans above all nonhumans. Technology in *The Stone Gods*, represented by Robo *sapiens* Spike, becomes an illustration of Braidotti's idea of relationality and Ferrando's rejection of human/machine dichotomy as it reveals the depth and potential lying in the entanglement with the nonhuman and reintroduces the idea of death as recycling, which establishes the human—nonhuman bond even more deeply.

References

Birlik, N., & B. Taskesen. 2008. Jeanette Winterson. "The Stone Gods." *World Literature Today*, 82: 2, 71.

Boundas, C. (Ed.) 2006. *Deluze and Philosophy.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
Braidotti, R. 2006. "The Ethics of Becoming-Imperceptible," in: C. Boundas (Ed.), 133–159.
Braidotti, R. 2013. *The Posthuman*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
Braidotti, R., & M, Hlavajova (Eds.) 2018. *Posthuman Glossary.* London: Bloomsbury Academic.
Braidotti, R. 2019. *Posthuman Knowledge.* Cambridge: Polity Press.
Caracciolo, M., A. Ionescu, & R. Fransoo. 2019. "Metaphorical patterns in Anthropocene fiction," *Language and Literature* 28: 3, 221–240.
Dobrogoszcz, T. 2020. "Jeanette Winterson's *The Stone Gods* as a Feminist Cyborg Story," *Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich* 63: 1, 11–20.
Dolezal, L. 2016. "Morphological Freedom and Medicine: Constructing the Posthuman Body," in: A. Whitehead & A. Woods (Eds.), 310–324.
Ellam, J. 2010. *Love in Jeanette Winterson's Novels*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.
Ferrando, F. 2024. *The Art of Being Posthuman.* Cambridge: Polity Press.
Hayles, N. K. 1999. *How We Became Posthuman (74th ed.).* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Johns-Putra, A. 2017. "The Unsustainable Aesthetics of Sustainability: The Sense of an Ending in Jeanette Winterson's *The Stone Gods*," in: A. Johns-Putra, J. Parham, & L. Squire (Eds.), 177–194.
Johns-Putra, A., J. Parham, & L. Squire (Eds.). 2017. *Literature and Sustainability: Concept, Text and Culture.* Manchester*:* Manchester University Press.
More, M. 2013, "A Letter to Mother Nature," in: M. More & N. Vita-More (Eds.), 449–450.
More, M., & N. Vita-More (Eds.) 2013. *The Transhumanist Reader.* Oxford: Wiley.
Vita-More, N. 2020. "The Transhumanist Manifesto," *Natasha Vita-More,* https://natashavita-more.com/transhumanist-manifesto/ DOA 4.01.24
2013. "Transhumanist Declaration" in: M. More & N. Vita-More (Eds.), 54-55.
Whitehead, A., & A. Woods (Eds.) 2016. *The Edinburgh Companion to the Critical Medical Humanities.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
Winterson, J. 2015. *The Stone Gods.* London: Penguin Books.
Wolfe, C. 2018. "Posthumanism," in: R. Braidotti & M. Hlavajova (Eds.), 356–358.

Abstract

The article discusses the human—nonhuman relationship in *The Stone Gods* (2007) by Jeanette Winterson. The goal of the article is to show how the novel questions the boundary between the human and the nonhuman—Billie and a Robo *sapiens*—Spike. The article applies transhumanist and posthumanist theory while acknowledging the elements distinguishing both from each other. Its main argument is that genetic augmentation in the form of Genetic Fixing and widespread technologization of life can be viewed as a representation of the transhumanist ideology, while the entanglement between the characters unravels the posthumanist message of the novel, which negotiates the dichotomy between human and nonhuman.

CURRENTS. A Journal of Young English Philology Thought and Review. Vol. 10/2024
Ed. E. Lorek-Jezińska, N. Strehlau, J. Antoniak, B. Jankowska, www. currents.umk.pl
ISSN 2449-8769 ||

Wiktoria Rogalska
University of Łódź

FROM NECROMANCER TO MOTHER: THE ANALYSIS OF A CYBORGIAN FEMALE IN *RAISED BY WOLVES*

Keywords: cyborg, reproduction, motherhood, *Raised by Wolves*

Introduction

Science fiction as a genre allows its creators to explore radical ideas, such as the possible future of reproduction. Science fiction texts attempt to analyse the potential outcomes based on the technological development in contemporary Western society as well as the reinforced traditional religious values. Writers, especially feminists, draw attention to the fact that technological advancement begins to impact the conventional understanding of borders between human and nonhuman beings as well as possible reproduction strategies. The functions previously reserved for women/mothers and men/fathers transform and develop into novel forms of existence, challenging the normative boundaries of species. Moreover, the fact that the future existence of a cyborg- and human-made child is possible, makes it crucial to consider the biological and emotional changes that these artificial women/mothers may experience.

One of the science fiction series that discusses the implications of technological advancement and the reproductive procedures was the TV show *Raised by Wolves*, created by Aaron Guzikowski. The series started to air on HBO Max in 2020 and continued until 2022, releasing two seasons before its cancellation. The series revolves around the story of two atheistic androids,

Lamia/Mother (Amanda Collin) and Father (Abubakar Salim), who settle on Kepler 22-b after the religious conflict between the Mithraic and the Atheists made Earth inhabitable. The androids are programmed to repopulate the planet with the human race to allow it to flourish again in the new environment still undefiled by religious extremists. Lamia and Father are partially successful, as they are able to fertilize six embryos. As the years pass, the androids have six children; however, suddenly they start to die, one after the other, leaving Campion (Winta McGrath) as the only survivor from the first generation. Their family's life is further disrupted when a Mithraic Ark lands on the planet, and the believers decide to settle there, and turn it into the home of their god, Sol. The situation known from the history of the Earth is starting to repeat itself. Moreover, according to Guzikowski's interview with Deckelmeier for *ScreenRant*, the religious motifs and this theme of repeating history of the humankind was an intentional choice in order to develop the world-building elements ("Aaron Guzikowski Interview: *Raised by Wolves*").

Moreover, Guzikowski also mentions in that same interview that the relationship between his own children and technology was the inspiration for creating *Raised by Wolves*. The aspects of the unknown future that people can only speculate about based on the current socio-political situation and its influence on parenthood and technological development, may connect the TV-series with the possible predictions for the future of humanity and the actual place of the human subjects in it.

This paper aims to showcase how *Raised by Wolves* challenges the traditional narratives regarding reproduction and motherhood by suggesting that these concepts can be redefined through the use of technology. Although Lamia (also known as Mother) is not a (traditionally understood) human female, she becomes a mother in the world where after a religious war and an environmental crisis, humans are forced to leave Earth in order to find a new planet. Lamia, as a cyborgian figure and a mother, reshapes the definition of nonbiological reproduction and questions the boundaries between human and

nonhuman beings. As a figure, Lamia becomes the exemplification of a merger between technology and inorganic biology. She starts off her maternal journey with the human children who all but one die, next in act of protecting her family, she kidnaps five children from the Mithraic Ark, lastly she experiences pregnancy and gives birth to a snake-like offspring, whom she then needs to destroy because it poses a threat to the rest of population on Kepler-22b. Moreover, the foetus/child she creates is a fusion of a cyborg and a "devolved" human; it becomes a being that is simultaneously machine and a carbon-based organism. However, it is vital to point out that although Lamia was created to be a perfect mother, she still experiences human struggles to fulfil her maternal aspirations, and eventually decides to destroy her own biological offspring who becomes the danger to the family she created ("The Beginning" 41:34–44:00). Although Lamia, as a cyborgian figure, was initially created not to conform to the established by humans ideals regarding the normative patriarchal society and the female gender roles, she still falls victim to the stereotypical ideas of motherhood.

Imagining a Cyborgian Figure as a Metaphor for Womanhood

It is crucial to establish the distinctive characteristics of a cybernetic figure in order to understand Lamia's origin. According to Donna Haraway's essay "A Cyborg Manifesto," a cyborg is "a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as creature of fiction" (149). Haraway emphasises that a cyborg is a hybrid being that transcends the borders between a machine and a biological organism as well as reality and fiction. It is crucial to point out that Haraway's cyborg may have two interpretations. First, a 'cyborg' can be understood as a metaphor of nonhuman beings/organisms interconnected with nature, such as animals or plants; or technological inventions and machines that are integrated by people into their realities.

Second, in rather ambiguous/abstract terms, in her essay, she emphasises that 'cyborg' is a state of mind; it is an extended metaphor for people of different races, sexes, and bodies to identify themselves as parts of the real world, not just imaginary desires. Real examples of cyborgs mentioned in the text are women of colour, and people with disabilities, especially considering the ones who decide to use prosthetics. These humans are labelled as 'others' because they do not conform to image of the normative society.

Referring to these instances, in Haraway's view, cyborgs should exist without preassigned gender as they are "creature[s] in a postgender world" (150). Gender imposes particular roles and norms on the characters, whereas the cyborg is supposed to be without predisposed origin. By definition, "the postgender world" assumes that a cyborg has no connections to gender roles and norms established in the patriarchal society. Cyborgs become agender, and therefore, are able to fulfil the roles of women or men/mothers and fathers, as they do not identify with these categories.

Also, cyborgs have no emotional connection to the Biblical origin story and the Garden of Eden; therefore, the concept of innocence is insignificant to their history and the fight for survival (175). Haraway points out that "cyborg writing is about the power to survive, not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them [cyborgs] as other" (175). While discussing the lack of connection to religion, it is vital to note that the cyborgian characteristics Haraway lists are similar to real-life atheists' viewpoint, as they also believe that there is no higher power that rules the world and is responsible for human existence. Evolution and the ability to adapt to the current circumstances are the reasons why humans survived, not fate or God's plan.

The application of Haraway's text is crucial to understand the motifs behind Lamia's primary creation, and further transformation. Mother becomes of a prime example of a rebellious cyborg that transgresses the physical and emotional borders between human and nonhuman beings.

Raised by Wolves introduced Lumia as a mother cyborg, who, after reprograming, was capable of nourishing and caring for human embryos using her robotic body. Before she was sent to Earth and forgot about her military background, she was a Necromancer, a machine created by the Mithraic and used for war crimes. Her main purpose was to locate and eliminate the Atheists with the use of her powers. Her entire body was built to be indestructible and self-restorative. Furthermore, her eyes were her main weapon as they could shoot destructive laser rays. In order to control her power around the children, she has interchangeable optical parts, which operate as eyes but do not possess the same murderous superpowers. In general, Lamia uses her power to protect her children; however, it is crucial to point out that she still is a murderous weapon. In the first episode of the series, after discovering that the Mithraics are planning to kidnap her son Campion to raise him as a follower of their religion, she begins her attacks on the Ark of Heaven, a Mithraic starship. In a sequence of scenes, the viewers can observe as Lamia kills the Mithraic android and burns off the faces of the soldiers who attempt to assault her and her family. After entering the Ark, she proceeds to use her ultrasonic scream to liquify the bodies of other attackers, and finally, she tears out the eyes of the pilot. As it is described, although Lamia's primary function is to care for her children and home, she is a brutal machine that does not feel empathy for people who try to take her loved ones away ("Raised by Wolves" 42:42–47:47).

Moreover, Lamia only saves five children from the Ark (48:05). Her particular choice of taking only them may have been motivated by the fact that when she and Father initially landed on Kepler-22b, they had six embryos ready for fertilization, and as it is established, only Campion survives under the critical living conditions. Hence, Lamia saves those five to repeat her first failed attempt at motherhood.

Lamia's limited choice as to saving only those five children could be connected to the conversation between Lamia and the Atheist leader Campion Sturges in the episode "Infected Memory," which reveals Lamia's origins as a

Mithraic machine of war, reprogrammed by Atheists to be a caregiver. Viewers can notice that in the early stages Lamia was caring and loving towards unidentified or Mithraic children, but as soon as Campion Sturges revealed that the child she is holding was of an atheist origin, Lamia broke the child's neck as she was still in the early stages of her reprogramming (31:20–32:20). Although it is not explicitly showed in the series, one can assume that Sturges's project of changing a Mithraic murderous machine into Mother must have been composed of many experimental checkpoints. One of them was the situation mentioned above, because Lamia is capable of having this maternal instinct as long as she does not know that the child is an atheist. The process of Lamia's reprogramming was vaguely similar to the act of mechanical 'rewiring of values' as Sturges needed to technologically manipulate Lamia's system to turn her into a caring and selfless mother who would not discriminate between her children based on their religious believes. According to Haraway, cyborgs as "the illegitimate offspring of militarism […] are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins. Their fathers, after all, are inessential" (151). These machines can never be fully controlled by their creators because at a particular point of their programming, cyborgs become stronger than non-cyborg humans. Lamia had two human 'creators' who attempted to exploit her power – the Mithraic and Sturges. As a Necromancer, she was constructed by the Mithraic military service, and then reprogramed by Sturges ("Memory Infected" 24:51–25:10). It should be noted that while her original form was changed by Sturges forcefully by reprograming her system, Lamia still is not faithful to any of the creators. Intentionally or not, she killed the children on the Ark, and if Sturges' programming worked, it should not have happened.

One of the main storylines in the TV series is the conflict between humans, worshipping the sun deity Mithras, and Lamia and Father, who are atheists. Humans seem to consider themselves superior to machines because mentally and physically, they belong to the category "human"; they have origins, history and religion, which provides them with a sense of arrogance: Hunter, one of the

Mithraic children, explains, "you see, androids, they were built to protect us, to do our dirty work, so we can stay pure" ("Pentagram" 27:38–27:43). The aspect of overpowering can be seen in a disagreement regarding childcare. According to the group of believers, it is unnatural for cyborgs to raise children and it should not be accepted under any circumstances, as only human parents are capable of establishing a loving and caring relationship with their offspring. As Lamia explains, "For instance, [Mithraics] believe that allowing androids to raise human children is a sin, which forced them to send an ark" ("Raised by Wolves" 15:24–15:30). It is crucial to note that religiously affiliated people are in opposition to the atheist faction, represented by the two cyborgs. As Haraway claims, cyborgs do not know their origin and therefore religion or politics; hence, they are not controlled by the words of the prophets (religious or political representatives). In effect, Lamia does not understand the worshippers of Mithras as in her point of view religion is the cause of all the conflicts and general scientific regression. From the very first episode of the series, she preaches the total exclusion of religion. She teaches her children that "the civilization [they are] seeding here will be built on humanity's belief in itself, not an imagined deity" ("Raised by Wolves" 15:57–16:04). She believes that religious prophets only reinforce the idea that faith and deities are responsible for human existence and advancement, and therefore, these same religious followers believe that humans deserve to be treated as the masters of the planet. If one considers the implications of Lamia's creation, and her reprogramming, the fact that she is not faithful to these earthly masters connects her to the atheistic cyborgian figure.

The conflict between the religious settlers and cyborgs is further complicated by Lamia's pregnancy because previously this process of reproduction was reserved for living beings. Haraway claims that "cyborg replication is uncoupled from organic reproduction" (150). The process of 'cyborg reproduction' or creating a hybrid of human and machine is not (or at least should not be) necessarily similar to human sexual procreation. However,

in the TV-series, Lamia transgresses these boundaries linked to human/nonhuman (machine) and physical/nonphysical dichotomies. When talking to Father about the impregnation procedure, she said that "we [Lamia and Campion Sturges] communed in a virtual space. And while we did, information was downloaded into my drives. Instructions for how to build a new kind of being. It was as if my sensors began to multiply, and my programming seemed almost infinite" ("The Beginning" 15:08–15:30). Lamia describes the act of procreation as a technological process—a data transfer from one medium to another; however, it is crucial to mention that in the episode "Lost Paradise," when Lamia and Sturges have sexual intercourse, the visuals create a rather passionate scene. In this simulation of memories, Lamia is human, and their scene of 'transferring the data' resembles a romantic and sensual scene between two lovers whose intertwined bodies float in the air while they are being soaked in a white fluid (resembling the fluid that runs in Lamia's body) ("Lost Paradise" 32:07–34:02).[1]

Lamia and Sturges' intercourse and Lamia's pregnancy transgress the border between natural sexual act and a mechanized vision of motherhood. Furthermore, the fact that a cyborg whose inner organs are supposed to be technical parts can procreate and carry the pregnancy to term means that Lamia's body functions similarly to a human woman. In "A Cyborg Manifesto," Haraway notices that the border between a human and a machine is further challenged by "creatures simultaneously animal and machine" (149), and that is precisely what the act of procreation showed in the series between Lamia and Sturges creates. The foetus/child is the fusion of what appears to be natural procreation and machine-dependent existence (at least in the early stages of foetal development).

Haraway's cyborg theory allows us to recognize Lamia as a cyborgian figure, transgressing the borders of human understanding of dichotomies human/nonhuman (machine), and physical/nonphysical reproduction strategies. She is simultaneously a murderous machine and a mother who takes

care of her loved ones. Lamia develops as a character in the series and her mind as well as her body is capable of transformation. What is more, Lamia is a complex and rather complicated character which could imply that as the plot goes on, she gains experience that allows her to explore her monstrous, technological and maternal sides.

Lamia, the Monstrous Mother of a Cyborgian Child

Rosi Braidotti in her text "Mothers, Monsters and Machines" analyses the connections between a monstrous mother and a machine. She argues that femininity is associated with monstrosity because they both represent the binary opposition to 'man'; femininity and monstrosity are considered as 'other' to the standardized phallocentric view that 'man' is the normative symbol of humanity (80). Braidotti states that "monsters are, just as bodily female subjects, a figure of devalued difference" (80). Because these subjects deviate from the norm, they are considered representatives of 'other', or as Kristeva would define it—an 'abject'. In *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Kristeva states that 'abject'/'abjection' is a part of being a human that is considered simultaneously fascinating and repulsive. Moreover, it cannot be eradicated because it allows humans to create cultural, social and physical boundaries of what they consider known, secure, and acceptable (2). Therefore, as Braidotti notes that femininity and monstrosity are seen as the polar opposites of 'man', she surmises that

> [w]oman as a sign of difference is monstrous. If we define the monster as a bodily entity that is anomalous and deviant vis-a-vis the norm, then we can argue that the female body shares with the monster the privilege of bringing out a unique blend of fascination and horror (81).

Braidotti claims that the sole existence of women is monstrous as they are the 'others' of men. The female body becomes the uncharted territory as it provokes the mixed feelings of horror and fascination over the unknown. In the science fiction genre, the quest to tame the figures of 'others' is linked to female monstrous figures. Veronica Hollinger in her text "Gender in Science Fiction"

claims that there are "two appropriately 'monstrous' figures, the alien, and the cyborg, through which to explore the perspectives and experiences of hegemonic culture's traditional 'others'" (132). Because cyborgs also belong to the category of 'other' just as women and mothers, they become the 'sign of monstrous difference.'

Braidotti argues that "the monster is the bodily incarnation of difference from the basic human norm; it is a deviant, an a-nomaly; it is abnormal" (78); hence, the connection between mothers and monsters is founded on the mutual transgression of traditional bodily human/nonhuman boundaries. When it comes to the border between monsters/mothers and machines (cyborgs), Braidotti notes that as a result of the advancement in the technological/scientific field, people have gained control mechanizing human artificial reproduction. According to Braidotti, "recent developments in the field of biotechnology, particularly artificial procreation, have extended the power of science over the maternal body of women" (78), and she continues that,

> [t]he possibility of mechanizing the maternal function is by now well within our reach; the manipulation of life through different combinations of genetic engineering has allowed for the creation of new artificial monsters in the high-tech labs of our biochemists (78).

Technological advancement as a cause of mechanizing the maternal function and the control over reproductive rights of women is founded on the basis of the understanding that machines/monsters are considered to be 'other' and inferior to Man. Moreover, those scientifically created monsters are capable of reproduction, and they become the manipulators of life, and consequently, death. Because the maternal function can be replicated by non-human creations, women as the preliminary 'life- and death-givers' are seen as incubators because female bodies and their reproductive organs are considered as "the passive receptacle for human life" (79). The female body exists purely for the reproductive purposes and as an incubator, both functions, if technologically possible, could be entrusted to the non-human/machine.

Hence, as Braidotti sees it, even if a woman becomes pregnant, her position in the social hierarchy does not improve as socio-culturally pregnancy is considered a monstrous state and, therefore, she is seen as the inferior 'other.' From a physical standpoint, it is so because of the fact that a woman is capable of transforming her body to create an environment to grow a foetus, which makes her "morphologically dubious" (Braidotti 80). It means that a woman is able to break the fixed bodily form for a longer period, disrupting "the distinct shapes as which marks the contour of the body" (80), a transformation of which men are incapable. This ability to shapeshift puts women in the space of 'the monstrous' because their bodies are not defined by fixed boundaries.

The discussion of bodily transformations goes further as the foetus grows inside the mother. The approach toward the foetus is ambiguous as a result of unforeseen consequences of the birth of the child. According to Braidotti, there is a myth that a woman due to her sexual desires cannot give birth to a healthy (not monstrous) child. She provides examples from Greek mythology, religious studies, and Freud's psychoanalysis. They all attempt to prove that women are responsible for creating monsters, and deformed children, which are the effects of women's incompetence, their relationship with the devil or their sexual desires/imagination, respectively. Braidotti states that "it is as if the mother, as a desiring agent, has the power to undo the work of legitimate procreation through the sheer force of her imagination" (86): it is assumed that women are capable to transform foetuses in their wombs into monstrous beings. Braidotti connects sin, sexual desires to women's pregnancies to further accentuate the fact that religion and patriarchal thought seem to encompass even the anatomical/physiological process in the female body.

Moreover, cyborg symbolizes the redefinition of motherhood because, as Braidotti writes "in the age of biotechnological power, motherhood is split open into a variety of possible physiological, cultural, and social functions" (94). It means that a cyborgian figure, which is not connected physically or emotionally with any biological, cultural or religious affiliations, possesses the capability to

redefine the diverse interpretations of motherhood. Furthermore, cyborgs as creatures that are not connected to the normative gender norms and roles may redefine the meaning of being/becoming a (non)human not only for themselves but also for their children. Their offspring may be biologically, culturally and socially 'other' and 'same' as human—such binary opposition is possible according to Haraway, who argued in "A Cyborg Manifesto" that cyborgian reproduction produces "creatures simultaneously animal and machine" (149).

It is particularly fitting to analyse Lamia's pregnancy according to Braidotti's theory of "Mothers, Monsters, and Machines" because Lamia represents all three categories. She is a murderous machine that was created for mass extinction; however, she is also a mother to six human children, and one of unknown cyborgian origin. The scenes that portray Lamia alone or interacting with her foetus serve as an example of how the figure of cyborg may redefine motherhood, and therefore, amplify the number of the reproductive possibilities of the humankind.

Lamia is a figure that represents two conflicting roles—a Necromancer and Mother, a death- and life-giver, respectively. The fact that Lamia's character from the very beginning is established as a figure that is contradictory and connects all different aspects of being a mother, a monster and a machine allows us to explore her biological and emotional development in regard to the cyborg theory (Haraway) and the maternal functions (Braidotti).

Lamia experiences biological, physical and emotional aspects of motherhood because she becomes pregnant herself. At first, the origin of the foetus is unknown. In the beginning, Lamia assumes that "[she] made it [herself]" ("Umbilical" 18:26); however, it is later revealed that the visualisation of Campion Sturges activated a process in Lamia's body that made it possible for cells to duplicate. As mentioned, after sexual intercourse, Lamia gets pregnant, and according to her, "it was as if my sensors began to multiply, and my programming seemed almost infinite" ("The Beginning" 15:08–15:30). Lamia becomes the patriarchal nightmare, as in a way, she did create the foetus

herself. Although the creator triggered an operation in her system, one can assume that because it was in a virtual reality, it was Lamia who unconsciously triggered her pregnancy. However, as the plot develops, there appears a suggestion that Lamia was sexually assaulted by a mysterious creature which bears similarities to monstrous (deformed) animals that attacked the settlement in the first episodes. In the episode "The Beginning," Mother is almost pushed into a crater by a hooded individual; however, Lamia is faster and rips out its heart. After uncovering the masked being, Lamia and Father note that its face, although deformed, resembles a human face. In their bag, Father finds a skull whose carbon build is not only that of a human but also local to the planet. It means the initial assumption that Kepler-22b was not inhabited by a humanoid species was false. Moreover, this discovery further points to the suggestion that it was that hooded being that manipulated the pod and thus Lamia's simulation ("The Beginning" 27:00–29:15). As a result, Lamia's foetus is of human and cyborg origin, and was conceived in the simulation. The possibility that the human race may not only reproduce with machines but also do it in the virtual sphere redefines the fixed nature of biological reproduction.

When it comes to the maternal aspects evident from a physical examination of Lamia's body, she embodies many biological and physiological characteristics of an expecting mother. In her pregnancy, Lamia's body transforms and merges the traits of a typical human pregnancy with animalistic body. She develops a pregnancy bump; however, the process is accelerated in comparison to the human pregnancy period. Furthermore, she does not have breasts but rather six separate mammal glands, which she uses to feed the foetus fuel-blood through her extended umbilicals ("The Beginning" 38:52). Considering human/nonhuman anatomy, she does not have the reproductive organs needed for impregnation and carrying the pregnancy. However, the embryo has started developing; therefore, one should assume that the foetus grows in a space similar to the uterus.

Nevertheless, it is crucial to remember that Lamia is still a murderous machine with an addition of maternal instinct. In "Umbilical," she has a conversation with Tempest, one of her adopted children, about the danger that she may pose as an expecting mother whose main priority is to care and provide for her foetus. Mother warns her daughter that she could kill and cannibalise her if she does not find another source of food (12:46–13:42). This maternal need to provide for the child is rooted in the primal survival instinct, and as the foetus grows and feeds on human/animal blood and Lamia's fuel fluid, it is even more visible that the offspring is of human and cyborg origin.

While discussing the 'origin' of the foetus, it is also crucial to mention the fact that although Lamia describes it as a mechanical data transfer and multiplication of cells, in the episode, the viewers can see that it as intercourse between Lamia and Sturges. As mentioned previously, Braidotti notes in her essay that it was believed that women's sinful desires could influence the foetus's anatomy/appearance (82). Thus, Lamia's sexual awakening could be interpreted as a reason for demonization of her offspring ("Lost Paradise" 32:07–34:02). Moreover, in the last episode of the first season, "The Beginning," as Lamia gives birth to her child, the viewers can see that it resembles a deformed snake hybrid (37:48–39:00). While Lamia, as a cyborgian character in the series, has no connection to religious beliefs, the figure of a snake evokes particular biblical imagery connected to the Fall of Man. What is more, this analogy is crucial to consider because Lamia's first and only purpose was to save humanity and allow to renew the race yet, instead, Lamia's monstrous offspring may potentially destroy humanity again.

The fact that Lamia becomes the 'creator and destructor of life' is also symbolic to her being a Mother. Braidotti, referencing Kristeva and her definition of 'abject', argues that the maternal site fulfils dual function, "as both life- and death-giver, [and] as object of worship and of terror" (82). Abjection of the maternal is connected to the significance of the mother as a figure that possesses control over life and death; this figure can simultaneously symbolise

the beginning of life and the inevitability of death. Moreover, as Lamia is a monstrous mother, she transgresses the boundaries of the normative motherhood, and is capable of imposing death onto her own child as she bears the responsibility for bringing it to the planet. Nevertheless, it is an emotional decision because the child is still her creation and killing it will transform her into a 'creator of death.' Lamia plans to lure the child into one of spaceships and travel down one of the earth pits in order to destroy it. She claims that "[she] can make it fall and make sure it doesn't come back in the lander. And [she] will never be anything but a creator of death" ("The Beginning" 41:37).

What is more, as Lamia embodies the title of 'creator of death,' it is crucial to mention the initial purpose of hers and Father's journey to Kepler-22b. They were supposed to renew the human race; yet Lamia notices that she is not able to perform her role as the mother of the new humanity because she inevitably must kill the creature she constructed in her womb.

Lamia is burdened with making such a decision about killing her biological offspring because it endangers the children of humanity for whom she is responsible. It is also crucial to remember that this snake-like child is not what she was expecting: she exclaims that "It wasn't [their] creator. Something else put that inside [her]" ("The Beginning" 40:01). Lamia is aware that the pod has been infected with a virus and this creature is an effect of a (sexual) assault/manipulated data transfer. The fact that even her own pregnancy has been subject to an orchestrated experiment further extenuates Lamia's role as 'an incubator' for the future of humanity—her womb and romantic feelings towards Campion Sturges have been used to ensure the survival of the parasite.

Conclusion

The main purpose of this article was to showcase the example of a cyborgian female figure that becomes a symbol of redefinition of womanhood and motherhood. Lamia, as a machine that was programmed to become a 'perfect mother' according to traditional standards, struggles with conforming to the

fixed gender norms and roles reinforced in the patriarchal society, in this case by the religious group—the Mithraics. As Lamia transgresses physical, biological and emotional boundaries, which results in her conceiving a child with a human specimen in the virtual space, the fixed borders of the normative definitions of motherhood, pregnancy and reality of life and death become inessential. It also puts into question the reproductive possibilities between humans and machines and the status of the resulting offspring.

Authors such as Haraway and Braidotti recognize the significance of the figure of 'other' as the one that transgresses the boundaries of human understanding in social, biological and cultural spheres. The Mother as well as the offspring become 'abjects' because of the origin of what they represent to human beings—the complete elimination of borders between human and nonhuman as well as monstrous and maternal, in the case of Mother.

Moreover, as the maternal function is mechanized to such an extent that a cyborg may become pregnant, it is crucial to consider what role women may have in this reality and how their roles as mothers may change in regard to these artificially created children who are actual hybrids of humans and machines. The abjection of the maternal is still present, as the mother is always seen as the monstrous feminine, even during her pregnancy. Hence, although Lamia was to be a representative of the new version of motherhood, and embrace its cybernetic aspects, she fell victim to patriarchal standards imposed on women to gain control over reproduction. Furthermore, it may be concluded that Lamia was doomed from the very beginning of her mission because she was reprogrammed by her creator from the archetypical role of a murderous female-machine to another archetype—that of a Mother, whose womb has been used without her knowledge and consent.

Endnotes

1. It is crucial to mention that while in the episode "Lost Paradise" Lamia believes that she gets pregnant after her sexual encounter with Campion Sturges, later it is suggested that the pod, and hence, the simulation were infected by a type of virus. It may seem that Lamia was actually sexually assaulted by some other nonhuman being, and it is

strongly implied that it may have been the monstrous creature that attacked the settlement in the early episodes. Moreover, in the episode "The Beginning," it is also suggested that these creatures are devolved humans. As this part of the plot is revealed in the last episode, there is no more confirmed information.

References

Braidotti, R. 1994. "Mothers, Monsters, and Machines," *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*, New York: Columbia University Press, 75–94.

Creed, B. 1986. "Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection," *Screen* 27: 1, 251–265.

Deckelmeier, J. 2020. "Aaron Guzikowski Interview: Raised by Wolves," *Screen Rant*, screenrant.com/raised-wolves-aaron-guzikowski-interview/ DOA 1.12.2024.

Haraway, D. 1985. "A Cyborg Manifesto," *Socialist Review*, 149–81.

Hollinger, V. 2003. "Feminist Theory and Science Fiction," in: E. James & F. Mendlesohn (Eds.), 125–136.

James, E & F. Mendlesohn (Eds.) 2003. *Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kristeva, J. 1982. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Trans. L. S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press.

Raised by Wolves. 2020. Created by Aaron Guzikowski: 1.1: "Raised by Wolves", 1.2: "Pentagram", 1.3: "Virtual Faith", 1.4: "Nature's Course", 1.5: "Infected Memory", 1.6: "Lost Paradise", 1.8: "Mass", 1.9: "Umbilical", 1.10: "The Beginning."

Abstract

In her text "Mothers, Monsters and Machines" (1997), R. Braidotti recognizes the unifying factor that connects the monstrous feminine with a machine. She compares the female body to a child-producing machine, which she sees as an incubator for 'the future of humanity.' Taking into consideration today's technological advancement and science fiction speculations, the idea of artificial motherhood is no longer an unrealistic scenario. Also, Donna Haraway , while coining the concept of the cyborg in her "A Cyborg Manifesto" (1985), considers the reproductive possibilities of female cyborgs. As she notices, the cyborgian female, created to surpass human expectations, rebels against the known rules and standards. Yet, the present text argues that a cyborg may still succumb to the idealized version/imposed standards of patriarchal views regarding motherhood.

The paper aims to analyse the character of Lamia, a female-gendered cyborg in the TV series *Raised by Wolves* (2020-2022), which showcases the portrayal of an influential mother figure. Despite the stereotypical gender patterns, and religious and racial prejudices, she experiences all the stages of motherhood, while still being a cyborg and a "Necromancer". However, she also become the victim of the normative/patriarchal thought/control over reproductive possibilities in virtual space.

CURRENTS. A Journal of Young English Philology Thought and Review. Vol. 10/2024
Ed. E. Lorek-Jezińska, N. Strehlau, J. Antoniak, B. Jankowska, www. currents.umk.pl
ISSN 2449-8769 ||

Mercy Robi Onyango
University of Łódź

AMERICAN LITERATURE IN THE EYES OF AFRICAN STUDENTS

Keywords: American literature, colonialism, postcolonial studies, African perspective, manifest destiny

Introduction

Homi Bhabha posits that the dynamics of cultural engagement, whether antagonistic or affiliative, are created through performative actions. Differences in representation should not be quickly interpreted as mere reflections of pre-existing ethnic or cultural traits entrenched in tradition. From the minority perspective, the social articulation of difference is a complex, ongoing negotiation aimed at legitimizing cultural hybridities that arise during times of historical change (Bhabha 2). Postcolonial theory can therefore help us to start thinking differently about cultural diversity, why it is important, and how it should emerge in the study of literature. As Carter points out, literature has largely been silent on the cultural processes that have transformed literary education but this needs to change, given the great importance of culture on individual artistic and literary expression (821). Post-colonialism has the ability to dissect the processes in question through the lens of pertinent themes such as representation, identity, modernity, and resistance, all of which are central to a lot of theories on culture and difference (Carter 822).

One of the hallmarks of postcolonial theory is that it helps to center existing theories on the legitimacy of colonial power within literature. Such discussions

can be traced all the way back to the early discourses on the morality of European expansion and the subsequent ethical challenges created by forceful conquest, violent settling, and revolts arising from this conquest (Marzagora 163). In the context of the current research, the moral question of why African students are forced to study American literature despite the trauma of colonialism, questions of neocolonialism and persistent white supremacy cannot be ignored. The mere fact that African students still study these writings more than 50 years after most African countries gained independence from their colonial masters speaks to the strong presence of post-colonialism.

It is against the backdrop of this post-colonial reality that this paper explores the various feelings of an African Student reading specific American literary texts through themes such as puritanism and transcendentalism.

Teaching American Literature in African Schools

Very few studies on how American literature is taught in African schools exist, pointing to a serious research gap in this area. This research dearth possibly stems from the fact that most African schools focus on teaching literature written by African authors as a form of decolonization (Paasche 67). The few Western literary works taught in African schools are mainly classical British literature – and not American – due to British colonial legacy in Africa (Nebbou 2013: 2023). Generally, Western education in Africa has its roots in the European education systems brought to the continent by colonial powers such as France, Britain, and Portugal (Osikomaiya 10).

It is also important to note that the dissemination of American literature in Africa is usually a product of donations from organizations, schools, and well-wishers based in the West rather than officially through the educational system (Zell and Thierry 5). As such, African students typically consume American literature unofficially through donations and not as part of their school syllabus and curriculum. The result is that popular book genres, such as American romance and thriller novels, are more popular amongst African youth (Hofmeyr

133) than literature written by American literary giants like Edgar Allan Poe and Mark Twain.

One of the few studies that have explored how American Literature is taught in African schools was conducted by David Nicholls. He focused on the process of teaching of American literature in Francophone West Africa and found that American literature was most prevalent in West African universities during the late 1990s. According to Nicholls, the majority of literature students at West African universities preferred American literature to African and British literature due to the prevalence of American popular culture (392). American music and movies were an integral part of African youth culture in the late nineties, gaining widespread acceptance by way of radio and television. In addition, the desire of many African students to work in America was an influential factor as these students sought to learn American cultural and linguistic nuances through American literature.

Nicholls, however, noted an interesting phenomenon, namely that the specific type of American literature taught in these West African universities was African American literature. Nicholls hypothesized that the reason behind this is the desire of African scholars to create ties with their African American kinsmen across the Atlantic due to the common ancestry between Africans and African Americans (392). Inspired by the theoretical directions of the African diaspora and the passionate efforts of scholars on both sides of the Atlantic to create ties with each other, most literature teachers at West African universities heavily favored teaching African American literature. Classes are therefore infused with lectures about the moral outrages of slavery and other atrocities that African Americans have undergone. In that way, many professors have found in African American literature a critical language of dissent. However, Nicholls argued that, by focusing predominantly on African American literary texts, the teachers are providing skewed perspective of America, giving their students a very limited view of race and race issues in the United States.

In terms of the mode of pedagogy and instruction, literature in Africa is mainly taught as an optional subject at the secondary school level (Sanoto and Van Der Walt 33). While the English language is a compulsory subject at both the primary and secondary school level, many African students can opt out of being taught literature, as it is not a compulsory subject in all African school curricula. Furthermore, countries in Africa approach teaching literature differently. For instance, in Botswana, the literary texts taught at primary schools are mainly literature for younger children, with a heavy inclination towards nursery rhymes, poems, stories and role-playing (Sanoto and Van Der Walt 36). The syllabus for teaching English in primary schools in Botswana does not include a list of literary texts that students should be taught and teachers are expected to incorporate literature teaching using their own preferred books. At the senior secondary level in Botswana, literature is an optional subject and even then there is a lack of depth in the content matter.

In addition, teaching of literature in African countries like Botswana mostly focuses on helping students to enjoy the texts they read and the student's language development as opposed to the aspects of literary criticism that are typical in the literature classes of the West (Sanoto and Van Der Walt 33). Generally, the goal is to encourage the development of a reading culture amongst African students by providing them with an opportunity to develop a fundamental interest in reading, especially given the challenge of illiteracy on the continent (Sloan 45). Overall, literature lessons at primary school level are regarded as reading lessons during which the engagement with literature is rather minimal. As a result, Sanoto and Van Der Walt bemoan the fact that literature students in Botswana are not exposed to the typical analytical elements of literature pedagogy, such as literary device identification, plot structure analysis, character and plot development, and analyzing thematic elements like imagery and symbolism (33).

Historical Events that Influence African Students' Readings of American Literature

One of the most impactful events that have influenced the way in which African students approach and interpret American literature is undoubtedly colonialism. According to Mosweunyane, the infiltration of Western powers during colonialism generally helped to facilitate the entry of Western knowledge systems into Africa (50). Therefore, due to the colonial and neo-colonial connection that African countries had with Western countries, Africans have been exposed to all forms of American culture, including music, film, and literature and this exposure has naturally shaped the education system. Furthermore, the omnipresence of American culture functioned as a way of molding the overall development of the African continent in a very Western way by attempting to make it similar to Europe and North America in terms of modernization, capitalism, culture, entertainment, and education. The teaching approaches, including class lectures and teleconferencing, inevitably shaped the transmission of knowledge in African classrooms and the type of information consumed by African students, which was mostly Western in nature and origin (Mosweunyane 51).

The introduction of Western-style formal education in Africa also influenced the process of cultural transmission and inter-generational communication, which are viewed culturally as some of the functions of the school (Mosweunyane 51). One area of literature that was affected greatly by the introduction of the Wester-style formal education was oral literature. Oral literature includes the traditions and stories passed down from one generation to the next through verbal narration and includes folktales, myths, proverbs, and legends (Shehu 178). In pre-colonial Africa, oral literature served as an important educational vehicle for the youth where moral lessons and values were carried forward to the next generation. This reduced drastically following the introduction of western formal education and was replaced with a culture focused on the written form of text. Therefore, African students went from

mainly listening to stories to actually reading them, helping to inculcate a reading culture that was largely missing traditionally (Trudell 436). The regrettable result, however, was the quick erosion of African culture and the rich African traditions of oral literature.

Overall, the fast spread of Western civilization and globalization has had a massive impact on how and what African students read (Olney 30). Among the most evident effects of Western civilization on African students has been the introduction of Western literary forms and genres like the novel or short story collections. Traditionally, African storytellers conveyed their stories orally but that changed when the focus turned to the written form of storytelling. African writers naturally adopted European literary traditions and methods and, as a result, their works reflected those Western influences even when the stories were African in nature. Furthermore, the themes and topics within African literature have been molded due to interactions with Western civilization whereby topics like colonialism, globalization, and romance are now regular themes in African literature (Gikandi 313).

In response, however, African authors made concerted attempts to prevent the proliferation of American literature in Africa to prevent the re-colonization of African minds (Pandurang 162). The rise of Pan-Africanism is therefore a major historical event that helped redirect what African students read, especially given the movement towards intellectualism that it inspired (Mazrui 59). Leading African authors like Ayi Kwei Armah, Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Wole Soyinka were encouraged to write about their unique experiences in their individual African countries and communities. They were also urged to highlight their people's suffering and plights, and assert their African identity by shedding light on their ancestry (Nebbou 2015: 251). Therefore, although these African writers were all exposed to Western culture, they rebelled against Western literature and narratives to assert their African identities and maintain a connection with their African communities and roots. Achebe and Soyinka, in particular, focused on the conflict that existed between

African and Western traditions, pointing out that Africans were at risk of losing their culture and values due to mental enslavement, what they referred to as colonialism of the mind. As a result of Pan-Africanism, African students started to mainly read African literature (Paasche 67).

Slavery and the civil rights movement is a final major event that has affected African students' readings of American literature. As has been mentioned earlier, Africans feel culturally and spiritually connected to African Americans and, as a result, they favor African American literature over general American literature. This has affected the type of literature that African students read with an overwhelming majority preferring to read African American texts than those written by white Americans. The sense of connection and empathy due to similar lived experiences has created this affinity towards African American literature (Nicholls 392).

Discussion

The world of literature is largely dominated by Western authors, most prominently American authors who have been fixtures in the literary world ever since the advent of the American Revolution in the eighteenth century which spawned an era of enlightenment and the creation of an elite class (Uslu 183). This has, without a doubt, been at the expense of literature from the developing world, African literature included. Given the sheer influence American culture has had on the world, most African students and readers of literature have consumed American Literature in some form or fashion, whether formally in class or just casually as lovers of literature. Most African students have therefore been exposed to an inordinate amount of American literature. This experience has not been a straightforward or positive one, though, considering the shadow of neocolonialism that exists between African people and the West. American Literature as perceived by contemporary African students is thus a critical area of investigation. Do African students see themselves in American literature? Do American stories and themes resonate

with the African experience? Do the depictions within American literature demonstrate similarities or differences between Africans and Americans? These are all pertinent questions that require careful dissection.

While there are particular themes featured within early American literature, there are some that transcend both eras, namely those that revolve around the survival of the land (Giles), which would later evolve into the famous "The American Dream" discourse. A significant number of writers discussed themes like wars, battles, slavery, the strength of the American trials, freedom, belief in God, hard work and Manifest Destiny. There is no doubt that these narratives have shaped the perceptions of overseas audiences about America, its people and American Literature (Giles).

Of particular interest in this discourse is how African students feel when confronted with the concept of "manifest destiny" which is pervasive within much of American Literature. Manifest Destiny propagates the idea of American exceptionalism where America is portrayed to be special when compared to other countries (Depkat 98). The term is widely used in American literature and history to refer to the philosophy of 'territorial expansion.' The main argument proposed by this philosophy is that nothing could come between American expansionism and its realization. It is borne from the time when Puritans came to America in 1630 with the belief that if they managed to survive in the new world, this would be a sign of God's favoritism and approval and following their eventual survival, they indeed started to believe that they were a special and chosen people. In fact, the Puritans considered other people to be 'savages' who lacked the ability to develop themselves and were therefore in need of salvation (Boggs 38). This belief was so pervasive in literature that, as Buell (25) points out, one cannot read any pre-Civil War American literature without seeing the phrase "manifest destiny." Even journalists used this term to refer to the objective of the White Americans to settle and civilize the West. "Manifest Destiny," as explained by Gray, essentially revolves around the inevitability of American Supremacy (28).

One of the most problematic aspects about the literary works that have appraised Manifest Destiny is their seeming acknowledgement that violence is a way of achieving breakthroughs (Madsen 378). It is seen as an inevitable remedy for the wrongs done in the society, and the survival of one group over the other. Obviously, this rhetoric does not sit well with most African students due to their history of colonialism. The inference an African student deduces from reading about manifest destiny as presented in the literary texts is that violence and the sense of American and white supremacy can be justified which, taking into consideration atrocities of colonization experienced by Africans in the past, may understandably cause feelings of anger and annoyance (Gray 48). The idea that, somehow, colonists were justified in their imperialism because of their desire to achieve their goals is an affront to the African pride that many students have. Therefore, whereas the concept of manifest destiny may create a sense of patriotism amongst white Americans, the opposite feeling is true with respect to African students. More so given the fact that conflict and violence is still very much prevalent on the continent. Most parts of Africa have faced different forms of ethnic hostility, often motivated by one community's expansionist ideals that threaten the very existence of other groups. The latter was evident in the Rwandan 1994 genocide, for instance, which was propagated against the Tutsi ethnic group.

Among the most compelling explorations of the concept of manifest destiny is found within the aptly titled book *Manifest Destiny* written by Anders Stephanson. Stephanson argues that the idea of manifest destiny is exemplified by three main ideals (7). The first one is the assumption that the US has unique moral virtues that other states do not have. Secondly, that the US had a mission to redeem the world by spreading the American way of life to all parts of the world. Third, that manifest destiny is divinely ordained. These ideals provide a specific lens for the critical analysis of American Literature by African students. For one, it provides them with a first-hand view of the superiority complex that Americans have over Africans. Africans feel alienated and different from

Americans by the mere description of being morally inferior to them. Moreover, by propagating the first ideal about Americans having morally superior virtues to other countries, African students can easily begin to feel like something is morally wrong not only with them and their people intrinsically, but with their governments as well. It is not uncommon for many African students to feel that African governments are inherently evil and corrupt, especially given the level of corruption and conflict on the continent, and this idea is reinforced by ideas such as those proposed by Stephanson in his text. It is almost as if he was saying that only Americans have a moral compass and this idea is dangerous for the self-esteem and self-perception of African students.

Students have the opportunity to critique Africa-US relations through the manifest destiny ideology. For example, the US threatened to withdraw aid to Uganda for passing an anti-gay law. While this may seem to be a win for democracy, an African student may find themselves questioning whether this has been done in good faith to protect human rights in Uganda or merely satisfies the inherent manifest destiny by spreading the American way of life. To what extent does this perpetuate the idea that Americans are morally superior to Africans? How can an African student gauge whether anti-gay laws are based on a genuine goodness or a moral superiority complex? It becomes a slippery slope, especially considering that African students have their own cultures, norms, and religious perspectives.

In *Manifest Destiny*, Stephanson also introduces readers to the role of manifest destiny in American ideology, underlining how important this ideology is within the American landscape as a whole. The author argues that it is the manifest destiny ideology that has significantly shaped how America has understood itself and its foreign relations, creating a major impact on American culture and beliefs. According to him, manifest destiny had "ideological power that worked in practical ways and was always institutionally embedded … not mere window-dressing" (Stephanson xiv). As such, manifest destiny is not a mere theoretical concept but has had real and tangible, practical ramifications

on the United States, shaping America's perceptions of the external world and its responses to it. It is not surprising that ramifications of such a perspective have been felt by African students as well. The ideological focus on white male elites that the ideology created has elevated rich Caucasian Americans above other demographics of people. Since African students do not fall within this demographic, it is easy for them to feel alienated from the greater American culture as a whole, like second class citizens playing second fiddle to their more 'important' white male counterparts. This feeling of difference reverberates throughout the United States whereby white males have a greater concentration of power and wealth than any other demographics, especially African immigrants who come to the United States in an attempt to escape poverty. The stark difference in the class and socioeconomic levels undoubtedly creates a rift between the two demographics, which is a recipe for disillusionment and anger.

Nonetheless, even though an African student may be angered and triggered after reading American texts such as *Manifest Destiny*, there is a certain degree of enlightenment that comes with reading a book like *Blood Meridian* by Cormac McCarthy. Contrary to other works, this work of fiction departs from the obsession with violence as a means for Western expansion. Instead, it depicts it as a massacre of women, children and men from all cultural backgrounds. An African student reading this novel feels a sense of redemption and vindication that is missing from the chest-thumping of Stephanson's work. Daugherty's analysis of *Blood Meridian,* which belongs to the new school of thought (Western Revisionism), explains how McCarthy used Judge Holden, a terrifying and the most fascinating character, to depict the selfishness, unparalleled traits of violence, power and cruelty of Western expansionism. Judge Holden's obsession with brutality towards both non-humans and humans stemmed from his belief that the only way to achieve a unified existence is to fulfill one's destiny, which ties in with the ideology of manifest destiny. Through hyperbole, the author invites the readers to critically analyze the United States'

westward exploration and expansion (McCarthy 107). In effect, it raises questions about the inevitability of violence in American expansionism and raises the question: does the end necessarily justify the means or does the process matter as well? The heinous qualities of the judge anger and repulse the reader, particularly African readers who have an intimate knowledge of the brutality of Western colonization.

While much of the attention in *Blood Meridian* is devoted to Holden, the Kid, another important character in the novel, rejects Holden's ideology of brutality and war acts as a source of renewal that is intrinsic to biblical eschatology (McCarthy 108). By using the American ideological tropes of spiritual regeneration, relinquishment and individualism, the author portrays the Kid as fulfilling the desire for what he calls "apocalyptic transformation" (330). Even though the Kid's death signifies a failure to chart a course from the violence, he ends up developing a moral center in a world that is lacking in morality. The Judge's tenure epitomizes the biblical apocalypse, a period of chaotic rule by the Anti-Christ followed by a divine rule. Therefore, the storyline in the novel seems to move the narrative towards a rupture in human history heralding a transformed world. Any African student reading such a text can feel optimistic about the future of the continent, especially when comparing the end of this novel to his or her own context. As a continent, Africa has been subject to numerous ills ranging from epidemics, pandemics (like Ebola), ethnic violence, genocides, the brutality of dictatorial regimes, civil wars claiming the lives of millions of people. In close reference to the *Blood Meridian* narrative and the apocalyptic theory, could those tragedies be seen as heralding a better future? The novel's ending suggests that even in the face of immense violence and suffering, there is still hope for renewal and transformation. This message can resonate with African students who have witnessed the continent's struggles and yearn for a brighter future.

The works of twentieth century American literature and its authors, especially Afro-American critics (particularly female ones), resonate more with

African readers than authors from previous eras. These authors have helped to ensure a semblance of balance in the American literary landscape by calling into question some of the narratives and themes that are harmful to Africans. The voices of such authors have largely contributed to a richer, more unbiased analysis of American Literature heritage in the eyes of African students. Furthermore, the twentieth century brought with it the emergence of Black intellectuals who countered white supremacy and challenged long-held anti-Black beliefs that were borne out of white-centric ideologies such as the manifest destiny ideology. Boutelle, in his work, explored how Black intellectuals such as Mary Ann Shadd, Jane Nardal, Martin Delany and Daniel Peterson centered their work on the concept of Black internationalism (31). This is a concept that emerged in the 1940s as a politically insurgent reaction to slavery, colonialism, and white supremacy that put a voice to Black people's rebellion against their oppression. This movement replaced slurs like "negro" with "Afro-American," thereby providing Africans with a dignity that been denied from them in previous American literature, especially those that underscored manifest destiny.

Boutelle countered the concept of manifest ideology, taking issue with the way how emigrants were consistently framed as settler-colonists in West Africa despite the fact that it was the historiography of the colonial movement that allowed for African Americans to be deported from America to Liberia in the first place (33). According to the narrative discussed by Boutelle, the return of African Americans back to their home countries could be seen as an embodiment of manifest destiny as they brought with themselves the benefits of Christianity and civilization. This highlights the type of arrogance amongst white authors and historians as they felt that Christianity and colonization had been a benefit and blessing, and not a burden or curse, to African people. Boutelle (33) rightfully pointed out that colonization relied on American imperialist ideology in order to thrive. This work validates the feelings of alienation and disconnect that many African students experience when reading

texts that propagate ideologies such as manifest destiny by affirming that, indeed, colonization and slavery were wrong and not a part of America's manifest destiny as had been claimed in American literature. The twentieth century literature focusing on the experiences of African Americans gave a voice to the voiceless and, in consequence, made it possible for African students to see a dignified depiction of themselves through these Black intellectuals and authors.

Beyond Black intellectually, Giles pointed out that the view and perception of African literature can, ironically, still be understood through the lens of America's history and thus received in a more positive light by African students. This is evidenced in the writings of Christopher Columbus who famously penned about his travels in Africa that occurred from 1482 and 1485. During these three years, Columbus traded along the tropical West African Gold and Guinea coasts, as well as the Portuguese fortress of São Jorge da Mina in what is currently Ghana, in the process creating awareness about the Atlantic wind systems and Portuguese navigation (Hair 113). His work highlighted the importance of Africa in his so-called discoveries. Thus, while he did not specifically depict Africans in a positive light, his work nevertheless provides African students with some idea about what Africa was like in that era.

A discussion about the overseas audiences' attitudes towards American literature cannot ignore the main concepts characterizing the diverse stages of its historical development. These include the Puritan Age, the Transcendentalism of the mid-1860s, romanticism, slavery (predominantly in Afro-American literature), and the call for social reform. The themes, characters and symbols discussed and applied by the authors in each of those phases stir different observations in the African student. In the Puritan Heritage, the common themes in American literature revolve around concepts, beliefs and values. This is evident in the works of Brad Streit who highlighted Puritan ideals and values (Jovanović 129). Streit not only recognized the role of women in this era but also portrayed them as submissive, modest and reverent. Even

though these ideas come from texts written centuries ago, these themes, especially the portrayal of women, still resonate with current events occurring in Africa. In this regard, a contemporary African student reading early American literary texts has a sense of connection with the literature of that era.

Simultaneously, the obsession with the Puritan values in the literary works of Streit is criticized for overly exerting pressure on women to be submissive, modest, and reverent (Lecky 56). These are the same struggles women in African fiction seem to face. Similarly to the male-centric Puritan Age, African male writers often depict women through "their androcentric models" which place them in a subordinate position, similar to the one in Brad Streit's works (Adesanmi 271). Kumah established a connection between the literary world and male dominance, noting that: "As a consequence of the male-dominated literary tradition, many of the depictions of African women are reductive – perpetuating popular myths of female subordination. Female characters in male-authored works are rarely granted primary status – their roles often trivialized to varying degrees – and they are depicted as silent and submissive in nature" (6).

Anne Bradstreet is, however, one of the pleasant surprises of this Puritan era, standing out as the first true female voice in American literature who combined a conservative Puritan outlook on life, society and politics and the important role of women in not only domestic life but also in art and literature. In her poem "Dialogue between Old England and New," Bradstreet expresses her concerns with the social, religious and political upheaval in England, lamenting about the destructive impact of the civil strife on human life:

> O pity me in this sad perturbation,
> My plundered Towers, my houses devastation,
> My weeping Virgins and my young men slain (in Gordon 196).

Bradstreet, unlike most Puritan authors, abhorred violence and did not see it as means of achieving one's destiny. She also took issue with discrimination against women as can be seen in her work "In Honor of that High and Mighty

Princess Queen Elizabeth of Happy Memory" where she reprimanded her male readers for demeaning women. Thus, whereas Bradstreet did indeed portray women as "submissive, modest and reverent" in her earlier works, she evolved and became more feminist-leaning in her work, a marked departure from fellow writers at the time. By reading her work, therefore, female African readers can be consoled by the fact that not every Puritan era writer had a superiority complex that encouraged discrimination against minorities. Some, like Bradstreet, called for equality in society.

Apart from the Puritan age, the concept of transcendentalism is also essential in exploring the possible feelings of an African student studying American literature. This spiritual philosophy is both an idealistic literary and philosophical movement that emerged in the mid-nineteenth century (Buell 24). The dominant themes espoused in the fiction of that era included individualism, equality, self-reliance and integrity. In addition, literature is dominated by the belief that humans are best as an independent entity and not as a part of a political or organized entity. Ralph Waldo Emerson's famous quote affirms: "a man in debt is so far a slave" (114). The message of this quote can be found also in other Emerson's texts in which he often encourages his fellow countrymen to free themselves from indebtedness.

The works of the representatives of transcendentalism, especially those focusing on individualism, seem to evoke many feelings and observations in African students: for instance, the issue of indebtedness, even though discussed in the 1860s, still resonates with the contemporary economic context in Africa. A Kenyan reading the works of Emerson cannot help but sympathize with the thought that Kenya runs the risk of being economically enslaved to China since, as one of the biggest recipients of Chinese loans, its outstanding debt totals $9.8 billion. Thus, these works are thought provoking for African students, serving as a call for reflection on the socio-economic situation of their countries.

Conclusion

Feelings of difference, alienation, and connectedness are critical themes within literature, including American literature. This article aimed to explore the impact studying American literature has on African students. The analysis revealed that, besides providing a platform for critical analysis, American literature can also be used to better understand how the African continent is perceived by the world. The application of postcolonial theory allows for pertinent themes such as representation, identity, and resistance to find their rightful place within literature. The fact that African students still study American literature today is evidence of the lasting effects of colonialism.

Additionally, this paper also explores the feelings of African students reading various American literary texts, such as *Manifest Destiny* by Anders Stephanson and *Blood Meridian* by Cormac McCarthy. The analysis showed that the students can experience a wide range of emotions: from anger and frustration when confronted with themes of violence and supremacy in *Manifest Destiny* to a sense of connection and optimism when reading about the possibility of renewal and transformation in *Blood Meridian*. The students can also find parallels between the portrayal of women in Puritan literature and the struggles of women in contemporary African fiction. Finally, the theme of indebtedness in transcendentalist works resonated with the current socio-economic situation in many African countries. In conclusion, reading American literature evokes a complex mix of emotions in African students, highlighting the enduring impact of colonialism and the importance of cultural diversity in literary studies. Postcolonial theory provides a valuable framework for understanding these dynamics and fostering critical engagement with literature across cultures.

References

Adesanmi, P. 2017. "From Post-global to Post-truth: African Literature beyond Commonsense," *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 4: 2, 271–279.

Bhabha, H. K. 2012. *The Location of Culture*. London and New York: Routledge.

Blamires, H. 2021. *A Guide to Twentieth Century Literature in English*. London: Routledge.

Boggs, C. 2011. *Phantom Democracy: Corporate Interests and Political Power in America*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Boutelle, R. J. 2023. *The Race for America: Black Internationalism in the Age of Manifest Destiny*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Buell, L. 2016. *Literary Transcendentalism: Style and Vision in the American Renaissance*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Carter, L. 2004. "Thinking Differently about Cultural Diversity: Using Postcolonial Theory to (Re) read Science Education," *Science Education* 88: 6, 819–836.

Daugherty, L. 1992. "Gravers False and True: 'Blood Meridian' as Gnostic Tragedy," *Southern Quarterly* 30: 4, 122.

Depkat, V. 2021. *American Exceptionalism*. Blue Ridge Summit: Rowman & Littlefield.

Emerson, R. 1860. *The Conduct of Life.* Boston: Tricknor and Fields.

Gikandi, S. 2012. "Realism, Romance, and the Problem of African Literary History," *Modern Language Quarterly* 73: 3, 309–328.

Giles, P. 2011. *The Global Remapping of American Literature*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.

Gordon, C. 2007. *Mistress Bradstreet: The Untold Life of America's First Poet*. Boston: Little, Brown & Company.

Gray, R. 2011. *A History of American Literature*. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons.

Hair, P. EH. 1990. "Columbus from Guinea to America," *History in Africa* 17, 113–129.

Hofmeyr, I. 2004. "Popular Literature in Africa: Post-resistance Perspectives," *Social Dynamics. A Journal of African Studies* 30: 2, 128–140.

Jovanović, S. D. 2017. "America, Puritan Literature before the Age of Reason," *Reči* 10, 126–144.

Kumah, C. 2000. "African Women and Literature: West Africa Review," http://www.westafricareview.com/vol2/Kumah.html, DOA 5.05.2024.

Lecky, K. 2019. *Pocket Maps and Public Poetry in the English Renaissance*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Madsen, D. L. 2010. "The West and Manifest Destiny," in: J. C. Rowe (Ed.), 369–386.

Marzagora, S. 2016. "The Humanism of Reconstruction: African Intellectuals, Decolonial Critical Theory and the Opposition to the 'Posts' (postmodernism, poststructuralism, postcolonialism)," *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 28: 2, 161–178.

Mazrui, A. A. 2005. "Pan-Africanism and the Intellectuals: Rise, Decline and Revival," in: T. Mkandawire (Ed.), 56–77.

McCarthy, C. 2001. *Blood Meridian: Or the Evening Redness in the West*. New York: Modern Library.

Mkandawire, T. (Ed.) 2005. *African intellectuals: Rethinking politics, language, gender and development*. London: Zed Books.

Mosweunyane, D. 2013. "The African Educational Evolution: From Traditional Training to Formal Education," *Higher Education Studies* 3: 4, 50–59.

Nebbou, A. 2013. "The Colonial Discourse Versus the Anti-colonial Discourse in West African Postcolonial Literature," *Scholars World-IRMJCR* I: III, 24–29.

Nebbou, A. 2015. "Individualism in both the African and Western Novel," *African Journals Online,* 250–258.

Nicholls, D. 2002. "Teaching American Literature in Francophone West Africa," *Pedagogy* 2: 3, 392–395.

Olney, J. 2015. *Tell me Africa: An Approach to African Literature*. Vol. 1389. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Osikomaiya, O. 2014. "Sub-Saharan African Students and their Experiences in American Higher Education," http://repository.library.northeastern.edu/files/neu:336505/fulltext.pdf.

Paasche, K. I. 2016. "The Linguistics of Literature in Education: African Literature in African Universities," *New Trends and Issues Proceedings on Humanities and Social Sciences* 9, 65–74.

Pandurang, M. 2002. "The Trajectory of African Critical Discourse in English: An Overview," in: C. Rollason & R. Mittapalli (Eds.), 162–172.

Rollason, C. & R. Mittapalli (Eds.) 2002. *Modern Criticism*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers.

Rowe, J. C. (Ed.) 2010. *A Concise Companion to American Studies*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

Sanoto, D, V., & C. Van Der Walt. 2018. "Training Primary School Teachers for Literature Teaching: A View from Botswana," *Per Linguam: a Journal of Language Learning= Per Linguam: Tydskrif vir Taalaanleer* 34: 2, 30–35.

Shehu, S, F. 2021. "Forms And Significance Of Oral Narratives." *Journal of Chinese & African Studies (JOCAS)* 2: 1, 177–184.

Sloan, R. C. 1956. "American Books in Africa South of the Sahara." *Library Trends* 5: 1, 34–45.

Stephanson, A. 1996. *Manifest Destiny: American Expansion and the Empire of Right*. New York: Hill and Wang.

Trudell, B. 2019. "Reading in the Classroom and Society: An Examination of 'Reading Culture' in African Contexts," *International Review of Education* 65: 3, 427–442.

Uslu, A. D. 2009. "Reflections of History on Literature: The Impact of the American Revolution and Benjamin Franklin on Washington Irving's 'Rip Van Winkle'," *Cankaya University Journal of Law* 12: 2, 179–192.

Zell, H. M., & R. Thierry. 2015. "Book Donation Programmes for Africa: Time for a Reappraisal? Two Perspectives," *African Research & Documentation. Journal of SCOLMA (the UK Libraries and Archives Group on Africa)* 127, 3–130.

Abstract

American literature is undeniably a powerful force in the literary world. A towering giant, it stands above others, exerting a significant influence on global literary cultures. Students from different nationalities and cultures therefore find themselves having to contend with the fact that they have to focus heavily on American literary works, typically at the expense of their own literary traditions and the unique experiences from their respective cultures. All societies should receive their just due to ensure a more well-rounded understanding of the world. Without this representation, there is a very real danger that perspectives become skewed towards the American experience at the expense of other cultures which are very rich, colorful, and replete with enlightenment and lessons that can often be missing from American literature. The United States does not represent the whole world and literary works need to reflect this reality. Having cultural diversity is critical in literature to ensure proper representation. The following discussion thus seeks to examine the feelings of African learners who read American texts such as *Manifest Destiny* by Anders Stephanson and *Blood Meridian* by Cormac McCarthy. The article tries to answer the question whether the students may feel a connection to certain stories but feel alienated from others, depending on the relatability of the texts to their African experience.

CURRENTS. A Journal of Young English Philology Thought and Review. Vol. 10/2024
Ed. E. Lorek-Jezińska, N. Strehlau, J. Antoniak, B. Jankowska, www. currents.umk.pl
ISSN 2449-8769 ||

Hanna Stelmaszczyk
Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań

QUEER GOTHIC OTHERNESS OF TRUMAN CAPOTE'S *OTHER VOICES, OTHER ROOMS* AND RANDALL KENAN'S *A VISITATION OF SPIRITS*

Keywords: Truman Capote, Randall Kenan, otherness, queer Gothic, homophobia

Introduction

The Gothic motif of Otherness has a significant presence in the genre. As Louis S. Gross (90) notes, in the case of American Gothic especially, the motif's prevalence lies in "the singularity and monstrosity of the Other: what the dominant culture cannot incorporate within itself, it must project outward onto this hated/desired figure". The Gothic thrives on difference—there must always be a juxtaposition that is analysed, the opposition between something known and the unknown one may venture into. Transgressions, forbidden desires, breaking the social norms and reaching beyond the acceptable are inherently connected to Gothic narratives. However, the status quo must be ultimately reinscribed—the characters may plunge into the darkness, but only to eventually resurface. Thus, the purpose of the Gothic tale is to name what is unacceptable and point out the transgressions. Desire must be carefully controlled for fear that the fabric of society will break down (Haggerty 12). However, in the course of the genre's development, Otherness has also become a metaphor for oppression and discrimination. In other words, the villains became the protagonists.

Despite the variety of American Gothic subgenres, as Eric Savoy (67) claims, what they all have in common is "an epistemological frontier in which the spatial division between the known and the unknown, the self and the Other, assumes temporal dimensions". The signification of the Other in Gothic narratives evolved from showing a threat and emphasising the dangerousness of the one that is beyond society to pondering the feelings and experiences of the outcast. As aptly put by Savoy (72), "the recent queer theoretical project conceptualizes the interplay between repression and preterition by redeploying the allegorical tropes of the gothic, in particular by personifying the haunting 'Other'". As such, the motif became an important mode of describing the internal struggles of queer people. The motif of the Other developed "a certain preoccupation with the figure of the homosexual as spectre and phantom, as spirit and revenant" (Fuss 3) and started emphasizing the self-doubt of queer individuals and the fear of the reaction they might receive should they ever come out. This is especially visible in the paranoid Gothic, a literary mode that bares the mechanisms of homophobia.

This paper aims to analyse Truman Capote's *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (1948) and Randall Kenan's *A Visitation of Spirits* (1989) through the lens of paranoid and queer Gothic. Both are Southern Gothic novels describing the struggles of queer characters—adolescent boys who have been cast as the other by their environment. In both novels the protagonist is a part of a somewhat isolated community and grows into his identity, discovering new things within himself and, eventually, facing them. Yet the tales and their endings are fundamentally different. In *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, Joel begins his journey of discovering his identity and the community he finds himself in is a source of support, inspiration, and liberation. Whereas in *A Visitation of Spirits* Horace knows perfectly well who he is—his journey is an attempt of coming to terms with his identity. For him, the community is the source of the oppression. Instead of helping Horace accept his identity, society punishes him for it. He is effectively forced into hiding his true self, which results in self-hatred and,

ultimately, his death. The first section of the paper will focus on a methodological inquiry into the topic of queer and paranoid Gothic. The second will focus on *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, and the third—on *A Visitation of Spirits*.

Methodology: Paranoid and Queer Gothic

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990: 186) defines paranoid Gothic as "Romantic novels in which a male hero is in a close, usually murderous relation to another male figure, in some respects his 'double,' to whom he seems to be mentally transparent". As she notes, homoeroticism and homophobia have their inherent place in this type of narrative, as "the Gothic novel crystallised for English audiences the terms of a dialectic between male homosexuality and homophobia, in which homophobia appeared thematically in paranoid plots" (Sedgwick 1985: 92). To be precise, in those texts the individual is terrified of being accused of homosexuality, and thus "paranoia is the psychosis that makes graphic the mechanisms of homophobia" (Sedgwick 1985: 91). As will be shown, this term is also applicable to narratives of queer individuals who are still in the closet and fear they will be outed.

As a genre obsessed with transgressions, Gothic fiction has always had a fascination with liminal themes, especially those regarding dissident sexualities or even sexual taboos, from homoeroticism to incest. Therefore, the Gothic "was the first novelistic form in England to have close, relatively visible links to male homosexuality" (Sedgwick 1985: 91). Among the classic examples are such works as *Caleb Williams* (1831), *Frankenstein* (1818), *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824), and, from later narratives—*Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886). Although same-sex attraction is present in many works of Gothic fiction, being both "unlivable passion and ungrievable loss" (Haggerty 16), the genre has never restricted itself to it. In fact, the genre can be even said to have anticipated certain discussions about sexuality and gender identity, preparing the ground for them with its exploration of human identity and desires (Haggerty 2). As George E. Haggerty (2) notes, the peak of Gothic fiction

correlated with the beginnings of the modern codification of gender and sexuality—he calls the genre "a testing ground for many unauthorised genders and sexualities". In this way, despite the sensational matter in which those themes were—and still are—often presented, Gothic can be rather progressive, thanks to its departure from narrative conventions (Dos Santos 25). The Gothic means to scandalise and outrage, but by doing so, it also blatantly challenges the cultural system and the dominant social mores (Haggerty 10). It is especially visible in queer Gothic—as defined by Andrio Dos Santos (26), queer Gothic, if treated as a thematic, structural and analytical approach, refers to those texts in which sexuality and gender identity occupy a central role in the narrative. Its primal concern is analysing the way it treats and presents those themes.

Queerness, if defined broadly, means simply being different—in other words—being the other. Sedgwick (1994: 7) defines queer as "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality, aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically". Yet, according to William Hughes and Andrew Smith (3), queerness "is a quality which may be said to inflect a sense of difference not confined simply to sexual behaviour but which may equally inform a systematic stylistic deviance from perceived norms in personal style or artistic preference." Thus, while being queer might not necessarily be connected to heteronormativity, in this paper I will define queerness as a transgression of cultural norms and social constructions regarding gender and sexuality; and queer Gothic—as narratives operating around issues regarding gender identity, gender expression, and sexuality.

Others Looking and Other Looks

The plot of *Other Voices, Other Rooms* is rather simple—following his mother's death, the protagonist, Joel Knox, travels from New Orleans to Alabama to live

with his father and his family in an isolated plantation house, Skully's Landing. The boy has never met his father—he does not even bear his last name—and, upon his arrival, the father remains mysteriously out of sight, which creates an atmosphere of secrecy and alienation. The novel stays true to the Southern Gothic conventions, most notably its love of the grotesque, obsession with the past, the bygone glory, and, naturally, its dilapidated mansions (Lloyd-Smith 121–122). Almost every inhabitant of the once grand, now decaying house is strange in some way. Among them are: a histrionic stepmother, an invalid father, a Black servant who bears scars of past violence, her dwarfish grandfather, and decadent Randolph, brother of Joel's stepmother. There is also the mysterious Lady, who is connected to Cousin Randolph's secretive past.

In the novel, otherness is clearly noticeable. From the very first moment the reader meets the protagonist, it is quite obvious that Joel does not fit into the gender norms and the stereotype of boyishness. Radclif, a driver who will take him to Noon City, "had his notions of what a 'real' boy should look like, and this kid somehow offended them. He was too pretty, too delicate and fair-skinned; each of his features was shaped with a sensitive accuracy, and a girlish tenderness softened his eyes, which were brown and very large" (Capote 8). Interestingly, the driver is not portrayed as a positive character or a masculine role model for Joel—Capote here "upends the stereotype of the monstrous queer by making the 'normal' man grotesque and contemptible" (Haefele-Thomas 117).

Thus, Joel is from the onset recognised by those around him as the other. The protagonist is aware of this—in fact, it seems to be something he is ashamed of. Joel's anxiety over his otherness being noticed is particularly perceptible in his relationship with his father, Mr Sansom, a harrowing spectre haunting the mansion. Perplexed by the fact that his father is not there to greet him, Joel's deep fears start to raise their head:

> what if his father had seen him already? Indeed, had been spying on him ever since he arrived, was, in fact, watching him at this very moment?

> (…) And his father thought: that runt is an imposter; my son would be taller and stronger and handsomer and smarter-looking. Suppose he'd told Miss Amy: give the little faker something to eat and send him on his way. And dear sweet Lord, where would he go? (Capote 42)

Irrational as his thoughts may seem, this internal monologue does allow the reader a glimpse into Joel's worries and his state of mind—this child, with his dead mother and absent father and never feeling at home while living with his relatives, is afraid of being abandoned again. As Bri Lafond (67) notes, the boy fears that there is something in his nature—his looks, character, behaviour, or his failure to adhere to the standard of manliness—that will drive away the only family he has left. He is afraid of being seen, weighed, and found wanting.

The judging gaze of a parental figure is represented in the novel by the cold, unmoving eyes of bedridden, paralysed Mr Sansom. His eyes are, in fact, his most described feature. Their impact is even more poignant as, since Joel's father is unable to talk to him, they will never have a meaningful conversation—he will never know what his father thinks of him and whether he is accepted or not. Sansom's looks might not be antagonistic; however, the intent behind this persistent watching is destined to be forever unknown as are the thoughts behind them. In his father's silence, Joel's paranoia rings clearly.

Despite those festering fears, Skully's Landing gives the boy opportunities for self-discovery, outside the reach of the father's judging stare. To occupy himself during the day after his arrival, Joel turns to a game he had devised when still living in New Orleans—Blackmail. It has a voyeuristic character, "the idea being to approach a strange house and peer invisibly through its windows" (Capote 52). Back in New Orleans, it allowed him to experience life by proxy—to witness love, eroticism, and death while remaining safe on the other side of the glass:

> On these dangerous evening patrols, Joel had witnessed many peculiar spectacles, like the night he'd watched a young girl waltzing stark naked to victrola music; and again, an old lady drop dead while puffing at a fairyland of candles burning on a birthday cake; and most puzzling of all, two grown men standing in an ugly little room kissing each other. (Capote 52)

The game continues in Alabama, just as Joel's growing up is ongoing. What the boy is doing in the strange world of the Landing is "having a look around"—it is here that, probably for the first time, he gets to experience queer companionship and is coaxed into questioning his identity, or is allowed to see how multi-faceted queer experience is. This experience of trying to find one's way in the confusing world is a part of the process of growing up. In Capote's novel, this process is given a Gothic colouring, but the heart of it remains unchanging—through a series of encounters and through experience, a young person learns something new about themselves. Most importantly, it is during the game of Blackmail that the protagonist meets the more benevolent of the Landing's ghosts:

> She was holding aside the curtains of the left corner window, and smiling and nodding at him, as if in greeting or approval; but she was no one Joel had ever known: the hazy substance of her face, the suffused marshmallow features, brought to mind his own vaporish reflection in the wavy chamber mirror. And her white hair was like the wig of a character from history: a towering pale pompadour with fat dribbling curls. (Capote 54)

The aspect of fascination and recognition is essential—for Capote, finding one's identity, or one's otherness, is inherently connected to finding one's reflection in others. He is once again relying on the visual aspect to communicate this notion to the readers—"in the process of (…) discovering someone, most people experience simultaneously an illusion they are discovering themselves: the other's eyes reflect their real and glorious value" (Capote 157). As the author has Randolph say, "They can romanticize us so, mirrors, and that is their secret: what a subtle torture it would be to destroy all the mirrors in the world: where then could we look for reassurance of our identities?" (Capote 107–108).

Continuing on the motif of mirrors, despite her ghostly otherness, Joel describes the Lady as "his own vapourish reflection" (Capote 54)—he immediately identifies with her and feels drawn to her, much like he takes a liking to the eccentric Randolph. He is similarly (platonically) attracted to a tomboyish Idabel, whom he meets shortly after his arrival and who becomes his

friend—despite her rowdy behaviour, his internal reaction to her appearing is a friendly "Hi, Idabel—watchasay, Idabel?" (Capote 24). Idabel comes in "[w]hooping like a wildwest Indian, the redhead whipped down the road, a yelling throng of young admirers racing in her wake" (Capote 20). In contrast, Joel, as previously stated, is described as petite, with delicate features (Capote 8). She is stereotypically boyish, loud, and brash while Joel is slightly effeminate, insecure, and unsure of himself—they are mirror reflections, as they both represent a kind of androgyny (Mitchell-Peters 129). Ultimately, it is the Lady who is beckoning the boy, not Idabel. The girl is on her own journey, although she does offer Joel friendship and some of her adventurous spirit. The Lady seems both foreign and familiar at once: she is simultaneously "no one Joel had ever known" (Capote 54) and his reflection.

Joel is also intrigued by various queer-coded Others he meets, such as dwarfish Miss Wisteria, a carnival performer, or masculine Miss Roberta, an owner of a shop in Noon City, where Joel starts his journey. Even when there is no conscious recognition of their shared Otherness, there is undeniable fascination. Thanks to the people he meets and his reactions to them, Joel learns to accept his own budding otherness and queerness. As Brian Mitchell-Peters (127) notes, "Joel's realizations come about through exposure to the queer gender rebelliousness of Idabel and Randolph, rather than a homosexual love affair with another character. Consequently, Joel's discovery is a queer-sexual awakening, rather than sexual experience". By the end of the novel the metamorphosis is complete—even though Joel's sexual orientation and gender identity are never precisely stated, since, unlike Idabel, he does not develop romantic feelings towards anyone, he has gathered a deeper understanding of himself which prompts him to state happily: "I am me (...) I am Joel, we are the same people" (Capote 170).

As has been previously mentioned, the novel portrays multiple queer and queer-coded characters and does so in a non-judgmental way. For example, it is explicitly stated that Randolph, one of the Landing's inhabitants, was in love

with a man, and he can be described as gender non-conforming or genderqueer, as he is, in fact, the Lady. The man is an eccentric decadent, a walking mystery parading around in silks, "[f]aceted as a fly's eye, being neither man nor woman, and one whose every identity cancelled the other, a grab-bag of disguises" (Capote 159). Moreover, Joel's friend, Idabel, does not identify as a girl. As she bluntly states, "I never think like I'm a girl; you've got to remember that, or we can't never be friends. (...) I want so much to be a boy" (Capote 101). When the duo visits a local carnival, Idabel experiences what can be called a homosexual awakening upon meeting Miss Wisteria, an attractive young woman with dwarfism who works at the fair. It is Idabel who is instantly smitten with her, not Joel, who reacts with astonishment: "Joel could not understand what had taken her. Unless it was that the midget had cast a spell. But as she continued to fawn over tiny yellow-haired Miss Wisteria it came to him that Idabel was in love" (Capote 147). Within the closed-off world of the Landing, and among its inhabitants, Idabel's gender identity and her infatuation, Joel's effeminacy, or Randolph's cross-dressing are never condemned. Instead, they are treated as natural and inherent parts of the characters.

The author does not focus on the negative aspects of being queer—the characters do not experience any punishment or ostracism nor do they feel any guilt and shame. Capote moves away from the gloomy reality into a world of understanding and possibilities (Mitchell-Peters 108). Capote's approach to queer Gothic rejects the seemingly inescapable gloomy reality in favour of a safe haven where queer adolescents can explore their identity and be acknowledged without fear of violent backlash. As Mitchell-Peters (108) notes, this novel "marks the first modern representation of homosexuality where a character's queerness does not lead down some version of the river Styx to a contemporary hell". While Capote's contemporaries focused on repression, oppression, and hopelessness that plague queer individuals, he instead uses gothic themes to create a cast of captivating, likeable, if eccentric, characters. "The destructive reality of homosexual panic" has no place in the universe centred around

Skully's Landing (Mitchell-Peters 109). Capote's Others are all visually different, bending gender norms: Idabel shares Joel's androgyny, being boyish in both appearance and behaviour, and Cousin Randolph is described as a decadent, Southern Oscar Wilde, flamboyant and eccentric. Yet they all come together in the slightly unreal world of the mansion, free to explore their identities and be true to their reflections.

Demons of Homophobia

A Visitation of Spirits (1989) by Randall Kenan is a Southern Gothic novel that tells the story of a gay, African American teenager, Horace Cross, coming to terms with his sexuality. He is forced to do so in difficult circumstances—his family and himself are devout Christians. Moreover, the community he grows up in forces traditional gender norms on children as they grow up, punishing any deviation from the perceived norm with ostracism. Kenan's novel utilises typical American Gothic motifs while, simultaneously, subverting many of the genre's conventions—the church is oppressive and offers no help to the suffering protagonist, the dilapidated house is a safe haven for the pair of gay lovers, and a demon speaks the truth (Wester 1035). *A Visitation of Spirits* explores the agony of having to live within a community that demonises homosexuality and defines itself by excluding all those who do not comply with its rules. Horace will never be accepted fully and must hide that part of himself that would prompt rejection and expulsion from the community. Thus, he is forced to hide his identity, to shatter it, as a part of him has already been rejected. The inner turmoil he experiences, caused by the unsolvable conflict between the enforced, heteronormative identity and his homosexuality, is overwhelming and deeply harmful, leading the boy away from the rational and into the darkness of the irrational, the uncanny, and the supernatural (Wester 1036).

As observed by Maisha Wester (1035), Kenan's Gothic demonstrates how patriarchal domination thrives and feeds itself on archetypal representations of

the racial, sexual, and gendered Other. It is shown that it is the community that creates the Other, but at the same time refuses to see how these constructions preserve the oppression within—in a community that built its identity on exclusion, instead of plurality, the boy can never show his full identity (Wester 1035). Instead, he is forced to shatter himself and only show one sliver of himself at a time—no matter to whom he turns, whether it is his family, his white friends or people he works with at the theatre, there is always an aspect of him that remains hidden, and he continues as the other (Tettenborn 252). In other words, he always hides some aspect of himself, a part of him always marks him as the Other—and he cannot reconcile those parts of himself.

Horace's family is deeply homophobic, and any behaviour that diverges from the perceived norm is a slippery slope to becoming the ultimate deviant—a homosexual. He must be constantly on guard, as his behaviour is constantly observed and judged. When Horace pierces his ear, one of his aunts comments on the offence: "[h]e just pierced his ear. Like some little girl. Like one of them perverts. (...) No big deal? Don't you see? Zeke, you got to put a stop to this now. Who knows what them boys will have this fool doing next. Having him out stealing. Wind up in jail" (Kenan 208–209). Horace is neither the first nor the only family member treated as a burgeoning, dangerous Other. It is a well-established custom to expel relatives who start to exhibit transgressive, disorderly urges. This fate befell many of the family members—including the fathers of both Horace and Jimmy (the second narrator of the novel, Horace's cousin and a local preacher), as well as Horace's mother. It would seem that there is a curse on the Cross family—as one of Horace's aunts, Ruth, says to his grandfather, the patriarch: "You'll see yourself one day, Ezekiel Cross. See what you and your family, your evil family have wrought. And it won't just be on Jethro. It's on Lester. It's on this boy here. It was on your grandboy. You all is something else" (Kenan 223). This "something else" is what the family so persistently is trying to eradicate, the Cross family curse, which may be understood as destabilised sexual and gender norms or, in more general terms,

queerness, which inexorably attacks and destroys the feeling of solid patriarchy in the family. The curse itself is executed by males who reject Tims Creek's heteronormative and racially essentialist conceptions of masculinity, and by women who refuse to define themselves as subordinates within the patriarchy (Wester 1043).

Horace's otherness becomes personified at least twice in the novel: once as the Demon and again as the Doppelgänger, Horace's mirror reflection, in the true paranoid Gothic manner. By the end of the night, he visits the community theatre, and there it waits:

> As Horace looked into the mirror, the face appeared more and more familiar, though it was becoming obscured by milky white greasepaint. He realized. Saw clearly. It was him. Horace. Sitting before the mirror, applying makeup. Of all the things he had seen this night, all the memories he had confronted, all the ghouls and ghosts and specters, this shook him the most. Stunned, confused, bewildered, he could only stare at his reflection, seeing him and him and him. (Kenan 247-248)

Being forced by the community to present in a certain way (even though, as previously mentioned, Horace does rebel against those norms) resulted in a strange case of a double. The mask Horace had created became the norm, whereas his true self was reduced to the repressed mirror reflection. Ultimately, it is this meeting, standing face to face with his nature, that is more horrifying to Horace than the processes of othering and homophobic environment. While the oppression comes from without, the paranoid fear of being found out and the inability to accept oneself comes from within. The double forces Horace to make a white mark on his face, symbolically branding him as a traitor—presumably of himself. His reflection once again urges him to accept his true nature, but he is unable to respond to the beckoning of the other Horace:

> His reflection stood there, his hand extended. I'm your way, he said. (…) Horace looked at his hand. His hand. Never had he felt such self-loathing, and by and by, his depression became anger as he glared at the spirit. (…)

> In such a rage he could barely see, Horace raised his gun and fired. (…) He looked at his hand, covered in blood, and Horace looked up at Horace, his eyes full of horror, but in recognition too, as if to say: You meant it, didn't you? You actually hate me? (Kenan 265–266)

In his inability to accept who he truly is, Horace lashes out at his Doppelgänger and, in doing so, at himself, committing a metaphorical suicide, disguised as a murder. This internalised hatred will soon kill him, as, by eliminating one aspect of his identity, he renders himself incomplete, foreshadowing fate that awaits him at the end of the nightmarish road (Tettenborn 262).

Another poignant scene happens in the community's church, where the ghostly preacher delivers a sermon about the sin of homosexuality, one full of hatred, hellfire and brimstone—a traumatising address that young Horace must have heard some years prior. He hears the preacher say about queer people: "[b]rothers and sisters, there is no time but now, and now I am telling you: It's unclean. You heard what Paul wrote to the Romans: Unclean. (…). That's right. Unclean. That's what it is. Unclean. And you knows it" (Kenan 87). The boy's meeting with his personal history in the church ends in a chorus of voices of his family and neighbours that shun him, yell that he should be ashamed of himself, and hurl slurs and insults at him (Tettenborn 257). This particular scene is at least partially a figment of Horace's imagination, yet it gives the reader an insight into his troubled psyche, clearly portraying his biggest fear—being outed and cast out by his community. Among the ghosts, Horace asks himself: "[h]ere, amid these singing, fanning, breathing beings were his folk, his kin. Did he know them? Had they known him? It was from them he was running. Why?" (Kenan 83). Horace knows he is forced to hide and run away from the people with whom he should feel the safest. But he is considered one of them only as long as they do not know about his sexual orientation. The whole scene echoes the paranoid Gothic and the excruciating fear of a queer individual, a fear of being found out by the hostile environment and punished for the presumed transgressions.

As Paulina Palmer (157) notices, "Horace is connected with concepts of metamorphosis and doubling, both psychological and physical, from the start of the narrative". The community, and thus the protagonist as well, treats homosexuality like a foreign body, a monster within. Maisha Wester writes that:

> Horace acts much like a typical villain and/or monster in his inability to fit within their stable identities; his transgression of recognized categories threatens to destabilize the hierarchies and boundaries that order the world of Tims Creek as much as any vampire or ominous rogue could. (1040)

By enclosing Horace in gothic motifs of otherness, lunacy, and haunting, the fundamentalist, separatist group deforms him and ultimately leads him to his death (Wester 1036). However, his tragic death suggests that it is not his queerness that is the horror from which he must run. The narrative continuously emphasises the idea that it is the repressive heteronormative constraints that create the demonic Other. As Kenan puts it, bluntly, using cold, scientific language:

> [w]hether or not the malevolent spirit existed is irrelevant, in the end. For whether he caused it or not, the boy died. This is a fact. The bullet did break the skin of his forehead, pierce the cranium, slice through the cortex and cerebellum, irreparably bruising the cerebrum and medulla oblongata, and emerge from the back of the skull, all with a wet and lightning crack. This did happen." (284–285)

The demonic, magical veneer of his journey is insignificant—it is his arbitral casting as the Other and his tragic end that are notable and truly real—only death matters.

Conclusion

In *Other Voices, Other Rooms* Capote takes the horror both out of the genre and out of being queer. Instead of focusing on the hardships of being non-heteronormative, he presents the reader with an almost carnivalesque parade of characters. He incites sympathy for his actors, choosing to portray them as

visually different, but kind-hearted eccentrics and misfits. It is not them who do not fit in with the world—it is the world that is hesitant to embrace them. But safe enclaves, such as Skully's Landing, exist—places where one can be their true self, free from fear and shame (Mitchell-Peters 109). It would seem that, for the author, it is only natural to accept whatever weirdness hides in one's reflection. For Capote, otherness is something that comes from within, and no one should feel ashamed of who they are (Mitchell-Peters 112–113). The outside world may be oppressive and hostile, but within a circle of close friends and confidantes (in the novel embodied by Randolph and Idabel), it is safe to explore and grow into one's true self.

Randall Kenan's approach to the topic is fundamentally different. Whereas Joel has to seek his identity, Horace knows perfectly well who he is—it is this self-knowledge that is a burden for him. He is aware that he cannot come out to his family and community, for the reaction would be one of incomprehension and coldness at best, or, at worst, of outright hostility, maybe even violence. The community he lives in is built on exclusion and unceasingly forces him to hide aspects of his identity. It is unable and unwilling to fully accept him, and know him for who he is. It leads to considerable mental anguish for Horace, ultimately ending in his nightmarish Way of the Cross around the town and through the pivotal moments of his life, the last of the stations being the boy's suicide. Kenan mercilessly details the mechanisms of homophobia and their consequences. Unlike in Capote's book, in this novel the otherness is ascribed by the society—it is the community that creates the other, and it is the other that has to pay the price for it.

Both novels echo the paranoid Gothic fiction, baring the mechanisms of homophobia, describing the incessant feeling of being watched and scrutinised, being recognised as the other and coming to terms with it. However, Capote's vision is, ultimately, rather optimistic. His characters do not experience guilt or shame over their identities and seem to find a way and a place for themselves in the confusing world. Kenan does not provide his readers with final respite,

refusing to end his gruesome tale on a hopeful note, showing what happens when one is left without support in a hostile community. Both writers subvert the genre, but whereas Capote's intent seemingly was to tame the queerness and put soothing brightness into the Gothic, Kenan revisits the genre and overturns its basic assumptions—the other comes from within the community, not from the outside, the demon speaks the truth, brutal as it may be. The true horror is in reality, the evil forces come from people's hearts, not from the depths of hell.

References

Bomarito J. (Ed.) 2006. *Gothic Literature: A Gale Critical Companion. Vol. 1.* Farmington Hills, Mich.: Thomson Gale.

Capote, T. 2004. *Other Voices, Other Rooms*. London: Penguin.

Dos Santos, A. J. R. 2022. "An Introductory Overview on The Representation of Dissident Sexualities, Abjection, and Subversion in Queer Gothic Fiction," *Moderna Språk* 116: 1, 23–32.

Fuss, D. 1991. *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*. New York: Routledge.

Gross, L. S. 1989. *Redefining the American Gothic: From Wieland to Day of the Dead.* UMI Research Press.

Haefele-Thomas, A. 2017. "Queer Southern Gothic," in: J. A. Weinstock (Ed.), 115–127.

Haggerty, G. E. 2006. *Queer Gothic*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Hughes, W. & A. Smith (Eds.). 2009. *Queering the Gothic*. Manchester, UK; New York: New York: Manchester University Press.

Kenan, R. 1989. *A Visitation of Spirits*. New York: Grove Press.

Lloyd-Smith, A. 2004. *Continuum Studies in Literary Genre. American Gothic Fiction: An Introduction*. New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group.

McRuer, R. 1993. "A Visitation of Difference: Randall Kenan and Black Queer Theory," *Journal of Homosexuality* 26: 2-3, 221–232.

Mitchell-Peters, B. 2000. "Camping the Gothic: Que(e)ring Sexuality in Truman Capote's *Other Voices, Other Rooms*," *Journal of Homosexuality* 39: 1, 107–138.

Palmer, P. 2012. *The Queer Uncanny: New Perspectives on the Gothic*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press.

Pugh, W. W. T. 1998. "Boundless Hearts in a Nightmare World: Queer Sentimentalism and Southern Gothicism in Truman Capote's *Other Voices, Other Rooms*," *Mississippi Quarterly* 51: 4, 663.

Savoy, E. 1998. "The Face of the Tenant: A Theory of American Gothic," in: J. Bomarito, (Ed.), 66–74.

Sedgwick, E. Kosofsky. 1985. *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Sedgwick, E. Kosofsky. 1990. *Epistemology of the Closet*. University of California Press.

Sedgwick, E. Kosofsky. 1994. *Tendencies*. London: Routledge.

Tettenborn, É. 2008. "'But what if I can't change?': Desire, Denial, and Melancholia in Randall Kenan's *A Visitation of Spirits*," *The Southern Literary Journal* 40: 2, 249–266.

Trušník, R. 2014**. "**Dying Protagonists in Two Gay Southern Novels: Randall Kenan's *A Visitation of Spirits* and Jim Grimsley's *Dream Boy*," *American and British Studies Annual* 7, 90–97.

Tucker, L. 2003. "Gay Identity, Conjure, and the Uses of Postmodern Ethnography in the Fictions of Randall Kenan," *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 49: 2, 306–331.

Weinstock, J. A. (Ed.). 2017. *The Cambridge Companion to American Gothic*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wester, M. 2007. "Haunting and Haunted Queerness: Randall Kenan's Re-inscription of Difference in *A Visitation of Spirits*," *Callaloo* 30: 4, 1035–1053.

Abstract

Otherness is the Gothic motif that has become a metaphor for all kinds of oppression and discrimination—its signification went from showing a threat and emphasising the dangerousness of one that is beyond society to pondering the feelings and experiences of the outcast. As such, it became the important mode of describing the internal struggles of queer people, their self-doubt, and the fear of the reaction they might receive should they ever come out. This paper undertakes an analysis of Truman Capote's *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (1948) and Randall Kenan's *A Visitation of Spirits* (1989)—two Southern Gothic novels, both of which are describing the struggles of queer characters, adolescent boys who have been cast as the other by their environment. The article examines how both novels portray otherness and the communities' reactions to this difference. Truman Capote in *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (1948) connects the struggle of finding one's identity to finding one's reflection in others. He uses the Gothic atmosphere to indicate the protagonist's fear of abandonment and to portray a difficult journey of discovering one's identity and growing into it—in his depiction, otherness is something inherent that is meant to be discovered and embraced. The author creates a rather optimistic tale of the other finding his identity, his place and people in the confusing world. His others do not experience any guilt or shame over their identities—instead, they accept them. In contrast, *A Visitation of Spirits* (1989) by Randall Kenan focuses on the idea that otherness is ascribed, and not inherent. The author describes a hermetic, exclusionist community that mercilessly punishes any deviation from the heteronormative norm. He shows how the other is created, and the internal costs of the threat of exclusion.

CURRENTS. A Journal of Young English Philology Thought and Review. Vol. 10/2024
Ed. E. Lorek-Jezińska, N. Strehlau, J. Antoniak, B. Jankowska, www. currents.umk.pl
ISSN 2449-8769 ||

Piotr Matczak
Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań

"THERE OUGHT TO BE A PLACE FOR PEOPLE WITHOUT AMBITION": THE AMERICAN DREAM AS A DIVISIVE FORCE IN CHARLES BUKOWSKI'S *FACTOTUM*[1]

Keywords: the American Dream, Charles Bukowski, social inequalities, ambition

Introduction

One of the ideas that lie at the very core of American identity is, undoubtedly, the American Dream. In its common understanding, it denotes a happy way of living that is thought of by many Americans as something that can be achieved by anyone in the United States especially by working hard and becoming successful. Some of the acclaimed American writers explored this concept in their writing: Mark Twain in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), F. Scott Fitzgerald in *The Great Gatsby* (1925), and Arthur Miller in *Death of a Salesman* (1949). Charles Bukowski, the twentieth-century American novelist, also wrote extensively on the topic of the American Dream, discussing its relevance in a series of novels featuring the character Henry Chinaski, a working-class man disappointed with American reality.

This article analyzes the perception of the American Dream during the Second World War presented in one of Charles Bukowski's novels, *Factotum* (1975). The methodology is based on the close-reading method and refers to sociopolitical literature on the American Dream in both historical and contemporary sources. This study aims to locate the events described in the

novel within the sociopolitical situation of the United States and present Bukowski's perspective on the nature of the American Dream.

The Concept of the American Dream

The idea of the American Dream can be traced back to, arguably, the Puritan times, since scholars such as Jim Cullen claim that even the Pilgrims "intuitively expressed rhythms of the Dream with their hands and their heart" (5). Since then, it has been present in American literature and culture and has never ceased to be a major force driving individuals and groups toward their goals and desires. Throughout American history, the Dream functioned as a peculiar social cement in society, "a kind of lingua franca, an idiom that everyone (…) can presumably understand" (Cullen 3). In the nineteenth century, the American Dream embodied a philosophy that boosted the territorial expansion of the United States, resulting in large populations inhabiting the newly acquired lands in the hope of succeeding in life.

The American Dream gained increasing popularity in the nineteenth century, which can be linked to the waves of migration from Europe and other continents (Borjas 23). The immigrant groups that were lured to America by the promise of free land and opportunities strongly believed that they could establish a secure future in this new, vast, underdeveloped area of the country. The Dream was fueled especially by the California Gold Rush in the 1840s and 1850s; this phenomenon even received its own name, the California Dream (Starr 443). People continued to inhabit the newly acquired territories throughout the century, making the belief in the American Dream stronger than ever.

The history of the American Dream in the twentieth century hints at certain cracks and fissures. The idea that was once a unifying factor for the whole nation suddenly ceased to meet the needs and requirements of the American people (Cullen 117). Territorial expansion was the main reason for this change, meaning that there were no new lands to inhabit (Cullen 140). Overcrowding

became a problem in already established cities, which was visible, for instance, in the cases of Los Angeles Skid Row[2]. There were fewer possibilities for people to climb the social ladder, and the American Dream started to lose its relevance.

A significant crisis appeared with the Wall Street Crash of 1929, which ushered in the decade of the Great Depression. These are the years of Bukowski's childhood and adolescence and, by the same token, the time in which *Factotum* is set. The economic crisis triggered many social changes, from increased unemployment and suicide rates to the altered role of the man in the family: the father stopped being the breadwinner as many had lost their jobs during the Depression (Cullen 154). Therefore, what people understood as a successful way of life changed significantly, with the Dream becoming even less attainable.

During the 1930s, the first essays on the topic of the American Dream were published, the most prominent of them being *The Epic of America* by James Truslow Adams (1931). Adams was the first to use the term "the American Dream"; he praised the idea, describing it as an endeavor to make life "better and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to the ability of achievement" (256). This American author and historian wrote the book to defend American identity, which he considered to be in danger after the socialist reforms introduced by Franklin Delano Roosevelt following the Wall Street Crash (Cullen 4). In the years that followed, American society began to divide in their perspectives on the American Dream, forming two groups: those who favored the Dream and believed in its efficacy, and those who were skeptical of the Dream as an insufficient method of coping with life in the US. However, it is important to note that not all segments of society were equally aware of or engaged with the concept of the American Dream at that time.

The Bukowski family arrived in the United States, having fled the economic crisis in Germany (Sounes 21), just to experience an even greater one in California. Charles Bukowski was an eyewitness of the American reality at that time. Moreover, he also observed how his father's obsession with the American

Dream ended with his futile attempts to achieve it. According to Baughan, Charles Bukowski grew increasingly disillusioned with the American Dream itself, which culminated in his overt criticism of it in his later writing (10).

The Perception of the American Dream during the Second World War

The most significant sociopolitical event that marked the decade of the 1940s in the United States was, undoubtedly, the Second World War. The United States declared war on Japan in December 1941, and celebrated the victory over the Third Reich and Japan in May and September 1945, respectively. However, the reports of Nazi rule in Germany were heard and widely discussed in the US media long before the official outbreak of the war, and the war's aftermath continued to resonate in the following decades.

The Second World War is a crucial context for the analysis of the American Dream in the 1940s as it altered the social dynamics. The military draft resulted in many men being sent to Europe and the Pacific to fight the Nazis, which meant that mostly women, elderly people, and males who for some reason were unfit for the draft stayed in the country (Baughan 19). Charles Bukowski, similarly to Henry Chinaski in *Factotum*, was in this latter group. Although Bukowski "dutifully registered for the draft for World War Two," he was rejected and classified 4-F, which meant unfit for service under the established physical, mental, or moral standards (Sounes 33). By the same token, the fictional Henry Chinaski is left in the United States despite his eagerness to serve in the military. This results in his father, Henry Sr.'s, frequent comments about his son's uselessness: "It's bad enough you don't want to serve your country in time of War…" (Bukowski 19).

In addition to the altered demographics in the time of war, the nature of the conflict triggered the change in the perspective on the American Dream. The persecution of the Jews by the Nazis, at least for some Americans, bore similarities to the racial discrimination of Black Americans in the States. This observation arguably brought back the question of equality as an inherent

(albeit long-forgotten) element of the original American Dream. Publishers started to notice that "the American Dream was of equality—both democratic and economic—which would measure collective, not individual, success" (Churchwell 214). As Sarah Churchwell argues in her book *Behold, America: A History of America First and the American Dream* (2018), such voices were present in American newspapers of the time. Among other voices, she quotes an article from *Shamokin News-Dispatch* issued on September 22, 1934:

> 'If the high hopes of the last 18 months are not to be dashed, maintained a Pennsylvania editorial a few weeks later, it would be wise for the country to recall the ideas 'which helped, in the early years of the republic, to build that great American dream which has always dazzled our eyes just beyond the horizon,' namely, 'that the rights of the humblest man could be made as sacred as the rights of the mightiest, and that progress should mean nothing at all unless it means a better life and a truer freedom for the fellow at the bottom of the heap.' This 'noble dream' may have become 'stained and frayed' over time, 'but it remains our finest heritage; and if the confusion of this era is to mean anything at all, it must mean a revival of that dream and a new effort to attain it.' (Churchwell 200)

As shown in the quotation above, the American media undertook certain measures to restore the concept of the American Dream, which in their view had become corrupted and overfocused on financial values during the interwar period.

The US accession to the Second World War finally laid the ghost of nineteenth-century isolationism to rest. Having been involved in the First World War, the United States had been balancing on the threshold of isolationism and interventionism in the world's affairs and was finally drawn into the war by the perspective of Hitler's domination over Europe[2]. With the changing situation in US foreign policy, the American Dream, which had once been the pillar of American isolationism, started to be employed as a vessel to defend the world against the totalitarian ideologies of fascism and communism. The Dream was praised as a natural American force that saved the country from "succumbing to the pull of totalitarianism" (Cullen 191). Moreover, due to

the newfound interventionist strategy, Americans cared even more about how they were perceived by the rest of the world (Kubiak 206).

The grand slogans of patriotism and equality, however, clashed with the reality of the American working class. Although it might have seemed back in the 1940s that the situation of the American people was bound to improve, the historical commentary provided by scholars such as Harrison (148–149), Cullen (151), and Churchwell (260–261) leave no doubt that the Americans were mostly unaffected in any positive way by the declared changes in the Dream ideology. The American Dream was still being perceived through the lens of financial success, and Churchwell argues that the focus on material gain brought about the deterioration of the quality of manufactured goods and offered services (284). She presents the views of Dorothy Thompson, an active opponent of Hitler, who claimed that "the attack [Pearl Harbor] had happened (…) because America had contented itself for decades with a degraded ideal, a dream of just getting by" (Churchwell 284). So, it can be argued that the financial element of the American Dream did not seem to change in any way.

While the financial aspects of the American Dream remained dominant, upward mobility was still unattainable for virtually all working-class Americans. As manufacturing became increasingly automated, companies found workers redundant. Russell Harrison leaves no doubt that "there is no way such work is anything but degrading and an assembly-line worker is never going to be middle-class" (125). The new technology disrupted the relationship between the value of human work and social mobility, making it possible to produce more effectively and with lower financial capital. This transformation left the working class with almost no chances to break from poverty, which had earlier been possible through hard work; the dominant American ideology in the 1940s did not, nevertheless, acknowledge this change yet. As Sounes points, "the patriotic America would say that any one of these people has the chance of becoming a millionaire, but in truth, the vast majority are stuck in their place" (8).

Overall, the American Dream during the Second World War was already a controversial idea, with many people still believing in its efficacy, but also with others denying the value of hard work leading to improved living conditions and happiness. What once had been a unifying factor for the American nation became a divisive force. This phenomenon of division is explored in *Factotum*.

The American Dream as a Divisive Force in *Factotum*

Factotum (1975) is a novel by Charles Bukowski that criticizes the American Dream in the 1940s from the perspective of the 1970s. In *Factotum*, the reader perceives the American reality through the eyes of a young adult from a working-class family who has little-to-no chance to improve their situation experiencing a gradual, societal downgrade. Henry Chinaski, the main protagonist, works a sequence of dead-end jobs, which lets him tighten his bonds with the working class and experience the struggle of poverty first-hand.

The 2009 edition of *Factotum* is prefaced by the introduction by Neeli Cherkovski, a lifelong friend and biographer of Bukowski. Cherkovski points to the generational differences between Henry Chinaski and his father, which appear in the first part of the novel. As he phrases it, "citizens like Bukowski's father still believed you could make it through hard work and plain old endurance" (ix). This quote marks the first crucial area in which the American Dream becomes a divisive force: it creates a conflict between the old and the young generations of Americans.

The major division caused by the American Dream is also visible in social classes. Chinaski is a working-class member who perceives the United States through the job market and the (lack of) opportunities it provides for people like him: working-class young adults. In the story, he has grown to understand the pervasive exploitation of the working class by American companies. In an argument with his employer, he bluntly says: "I've given you my time. It's all I've got to give—it's all any man has" (84). The protagonist, like many other employees, often lives from hand to mouth because the salaries are extremely

low. On the other side of the social hierarchy are the rich company owners, for whom the working-class people work. In a conversation with one of his bosses, the main character comments that he devotes his time to working at a factory so that "you [the boss] can live in your big house on the hill and have all the things that go with it" (84). This situation draws the reader's attention to the ongoing social inequalities in the United States in the 1940s and emphasizes the division between the wealthy and the poor.

Apart from inter-class divisions, the American Dream causes intra-class fissures among the workers. Chinaski views the American Dream, and in turn American capitalism, as the survival of the fittest. He realizes that there are too few jobs for Americans, many of whom are badly paid (130). This leads to a peculiar fight for jobs that can be seen in a scene at a weaving company. As Henry recalls it, he once observed the row of seamstresses sitting at their machines, "the number one seamstress at the #1 machine, bent on maintaining her place; the number two girl at the #2 machine, ready to replace her should she falter" (100). Very often, there is no mutual understanding between the employees because the economic situation demands that they are to be as efficient as possible to be able to keep their jobs.

In another scene, the protagonist is appointed manager of the people who have to do the dishes at the restaurant. This means he needs to visit a square full of people eager to get the job for one day and choose a few to employ for the task. Being in a position of power, he decides to organize a peculiar hunger game by throwing two pennies in the crowd and guaranteeing the job to people who bring them back to him (153). He takes pleasure in watching people fight for jobs, while he is already employed and has a kind of authority over them. From his higher social position, he distances himself from the unemployed masses who still need to fight for jobs.

The American Dream seems to overwhelm Chinaski throughout most of the novel. To achieve it, one needs ambition and perseverance. However, the protagonist openly claims that ambition is something he lacks. This acceptance

seems tobe a peculiar coping mechanism: by rejecting the element needed to achieve the Dream, he rejects the American Dream as a whole. Moreover, he states that "there ought to be a place for people without ambition, I mean a better place than the one usually reserved" (97). There is a suggestion that he opposes the present socioeconomic situation of people who do not chase after the unattainable Dream.

The depiction of ambition in the novel is extensive and nuanced. Chinaski claims that, to be successful, one needs passion (5), but for some people "ambition is handicapped by laziness" (80). He belongs to this group as he admits to being passive. When he becomes unemployed and sees his lover Jane going out to the bar alone, he comments: "Yet I had to let it happen, I had to let events take their own course" (83). By giving such a statement, Bukowski places Chinaski in the long-lasting current of inert characters in American literature, with examples of such being Washington Irving's Rip van Winkle, Stephen Crane's Henry Fleming, or Kurt Vonnegut's Billy Pilgrim.

However, lack of ambition is not the only explanation for Chinaski's rejection of the American Dream. Another factor that contributed to this decision is his striving for authenticity. Having observed that diligent work for a company with the hope of social mobility deprives people of originality, Henry seems to keep his real self by refraining from getting engaged in his job. Jane, his lover, remarks that he is "real and present" when she compares him to other people that she knows who "are only ten per cent there or twenty per cent" (105). Chinaski thus gains "the freedom to be able to autopoietically[3] define himself" (Di Stefano 12). By eradicating the internal need for self- and social validation achieved through vocational life and social appraisal, he is able to transcend the idea of the working class, based very clearly on the notion of work, and oppose the capitalist system by refusing to adhere to its regulations. The protagonist can, in turn, create his personality as the antithesis of what it means to be a member of the working class in the United States.

Nevertheless, Henry Chinaski at some point experiences a brief change of heart. Having been accepted for publication by one of the literary magazines, he experiences newfound levels of excitement and hope for the future. In ecstasy, he declares the desire to accumulate money and become a prominent writer. His previously absent ambition is visible for the first time since childhood, and one more time he presents his disputable morality by claiming to "build an empire upon the broken bodies and lives of helpless men" (43). However, his excitement quickly fades away as he returns to mundane reality. A few scenes later in the novel, he is again horrified by life.

Charles Bukowski portrays Henry Chinaski as a character full of nuances. He creates the protagonist with a complex set of beliefs and opinions on the sociopolitical aspects of the mid-century United States, which includes an expanded view of the American Dream. Influenced by the familial and societal factors during the Great Depression, Chinaski needs to face the challenge of reconciling the historically and culturally conditioned ways of understanding and conceptualizing the American Dream with the twentieth-century reality he grew up in and lived through. All this is pursued with the view to achieving personal integrity. Thus, throughout *Factotum* the reader witnesses how the understanding of the American Dream is being modified and adjusted by its main character. This process, full of meanderings and digressions, is a lengthy yet still incomplete one at that.

Conclusion

To conclude, by no means can Charles Bukowski be labeled as a great defendant of the working class or a writer unanimously critical of the American Dream. His perception of the Dream, which can be observed in Henry Chinaski's views on that matter, suggests that he had ambivalent opinions on the Dream. On the contrary, Bukowski's attitude toward it was nuanced and unstable, moving from deep contempt toward the so-called success to hope connected to the

potential achievement of the Dream. Even within one person's mind, the American Dream proved to be a force with a divisive potential.

This ambiguity of the Dream in the author's mind corresponds with the sociohistorical research presented in the article. Although the idea was meant to signify a unifying force for the Americans, it hardly managed to fulfill this aim. More commonly, the Dream would be a bone of contention, triggering disagreements and conflicts between and within social classes and American families. People who happened to be in a position of power—among them, at least temporarily, was Chinaski—tended to be more positive toward the Dream, while those who found themselves in different kinds of predicaments seemed to see it as a fallacy, something that will never be attainable.

What is possibly striking, though, is the relative stability of the concept of the American Dream in the past century. When a contemporary reader sees the definition provided by Adams, it turns out that it has remained unaltered until nowadays. The contemporary American may have the same kind of dilemmas concerning the Dream, at the same time believing in its efficacy and doubting its relevance, as the Chinaski/Bukowski tandem had in the middle of the twentieth century. Arguably, it shows how strong the idea of the American Dream has been in the United States from its outset in colonial times.

Endnotes

1. This article presents the results of research done as a part of the author's BA thesis entitled "Debunking the American Dream in Charles Bukowski's *Ham on Rye* and *Factotum*" completed at the Faculty of English, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań in 2023.

2. Los Angeles Skid Row is a neighborhood with a considerable homeless population. It serves as an example of an impoverished area where overcrowding made it hard to find decent living conditions.

3. Apart from the vision of Hitler's domination over Europe, the immediate cause of US accession into World War Two was the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

4. *Autopoiesis* is a term coined by Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela to denote a biological phenomenon of the self-maintaining chemistry of living cells. It refers to self-creation and self-organization; autopoietic systems are "autonomous, self-referring, and self-constructing" (Maturana and Varela v).

References

Adams, J. T. 1931. *The Epic of America*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.

Baughan, M. G. 2004. *Great Writers: Charles Bukowski*. New York: Chelsea House Publishers.

Borjas, G. J. 2006. "Making It in America: Social Mobility in the Immigrant Population," *The Future of Children* 16: 2, 55–71.

Bukowski, C. 2009 [1975]. *Factotum*. Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press.

Churchwell, S. B. 2018. *Behold, America: A History of America First and the American Dream*. London Oxford New York: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Cullen, J. 2005. *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Di Stefano, G. 2017. "Meaningfulness and Meaninglessness of Work in Charles Bukowski," *World Futures* 73: 4–5, 271–284.

Harrison, R. 1994. *Against the American Dream: Essays on Charles Bukowski*. Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press.

Kubiak, H. 2013. "The American Dilemma 70 years later," *Krakowskie Studia Międzynarodowe* 1, 199–229.

Maturana, H. R. & F. J. Varela. 1980. *Autopoiesis and Cognition: The Realization of the Living*. Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands.

Sounes, H. 2007. *Charles Bukowski: Locked In The Arms Of A Crazy Life*. London: Grove/Atlantic.

Starr, K. 1986. *Americans and the California Dream, 1850-1915.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Abstract

The paper examines the perception of the American Dream in American society during the Second World War as presented in Charles Bukowki's *Factotum* (1975). The article defines the notion of the American Dream in the 1940s and discusses it as a divisive force in the American society. The research identifies different perspectives on the Dream held by members of various social classes, with particular emphasis on the views presented by the main protagonist, Henry Chinaski. The Dream, which was a once unifying factor, seems to have been a source of deepening fissures in the picture of a coherent American population. *Factotum* presents an idiosyncratic story of negotiating the meaning of the American Dream in the mind of a troubled individual. Influenced by the pervasive belief in the Dream in the 1940s US, he tries to reconcile his inner beliefs with the surrounding reality, in an attempt to find his place in the community. This seems to be an impossible quest: the American Dream is presented to be an oppressive factor that eventually forces him to resign himself to the demi world of American outcasts.

CURRENTS. A Journal of Young English Philology Thought and Review. Vol. 10/2024
Ed. E. Lorek-Jezińska, N. Strehlau, J. Antoniak, B. Jankowska, www. currents.umk.pl
ISSN 2449-8769 ||

Daniela Anisiei
"Vasile Alecsandri" University of Bacău, Romania

Mihaela Culea
"Vasile Alecsandri" University of Bacău, Romania

TRAUMA AND LITERATURE: VIRGINIA WOOLF'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE STUDY OF PTSD

Keywords: Virginia Woolf, trauma, PTSD, shell-shock, scriptotherapy

> "It was one of the horrors of Virginia's madness that she was sane enough to recognise her own insanity, just as one knows that one is dreaming when one begins to wake. But she could not wake." (Quentin Bell)
>
> "Reflect on the patriarchs. True, they had money and power, but only at the cost of harboring in their breasts an eagle, a vulture, forever tearing the liver out and plucking at the lungs—the instinct for possession, the rage for acquisition which drives them to desire other people's fields and goods perpetually; to make frontiers and flags; battleships and poison gas; to offer up their own lives and their children's lives." (Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*)
>
> "The traumatized—the subjects of history—are deprived of a language in which to speak of their victimization." (Shoshana Felman)

Introduction

Not only Virginia Woolf's work of genius, but also her personal life sparked a lot of interest and controversy, mainly due to the health and mental problems she struggled with, from a very early age. Her traumatising life experiences (from close relatives' deaths to child abuse, war or patriarchal discrimination) but also the way she unsuccessfully managed to internalize them, had a strong

impact on her mental health. The attitude of a demanding and intransigent father aggravated an already frail mental health, especially after losing her mother in 1895 (at only eleven years old). However, as Virginia Woolf herself confessed in her journals, her father's death, offered her the freedom to write. She was certain that while he was still alive, her writing would have never happened and his life would have ended hers (Woolf 1980: 208).

Virginia Woolf's personal life and connections to her acclaimed form of art have been thoroughly analysed, both previously and following her death by suicide, in 1941. This study focuses primarily on Virginia Woolf's continuous battle with mental health, as well as how the writer's life experiences were influenced by the societal context of the beginning of the twentieth century and how these personal circumstances shaped her writing. The article argues that the writer's personal traumas, such as familial losses and experiences of sexual abuse, profoundly transformed both her psychological condition and her literary output. Woolf's feminist views and her critique of patriarchal structures, which were integral to her writings, are also a key point in this paper. As referenced by her nephew and biographer Quentin Bell (11) (a patriarchal figure whose talent was considered inferior to his aunt's) as well as her own autobiographical work, or her husband's journals, it appears that mental health issues were exacerbated and wrongly diagnosed or mistreated by the unexperienced predominantly male psychiatrists from the beginning of the twentieth century. Analysed in connection with the massive psychiatric and psychological advances in the field of the human psyche, stress related affections and trauma, Virginia Woolf's bouts of illnesses earn different connotations in the twenty-first century.

Mirrored by the biased male-dominated literary criticism from the literary world of her time, the patriarchal supremacy heightened Woolf's anxiety and deeply impacted her own perception as a writer: "her anxiety reached maximum levels when she was publishing something; here moods improved enormously when she felt *admired*" (Bell 107). It was mostly fear of criticism, as

Bell (28–29) writes in his aunt biography: "she was very aware that to the public she might appear *mad*. Her dread the ruthless mockery of the world contained within it the deeper fear that her art, and therefore herself, was a kind of sham, an idiot's dream of no value to anyone" (Bell 28–29). Moreover, the historical events like the World Wars (particularly in the novel *Mrs. Dalloway*) and her involvement with the Bloomsbury Group, influenced without doubt her thematic choices or character construction. The depiction of a war veteran, Septimus Warren Smith, reflects the psychological damage of war and societal neglect, which followed the collective war trauma.

Already perceived by the scholars as an author whose personal challenges were intricately connected to her literary work (Toms 1–2; Woolf 2018: 116), Virginia Woolf's mental health struggles were often misunderstood or mishandled—by both family and specialists (Poole 3). This has undoubtedly affected her personal life and had an enormous impact on her writing. Sue Roe described Woolf as someone who "used the process of writing as a way of shaping meaning: language did not immediately express but rather gave her access to the insights her work reflects" (Roe 130). This blend of personal suffering and societal oppression contributed to the limited understanding and appreciation of her work. Woolf's literary techniques (especially her deep explorations of character consciousness) can be interpreted as proofs of resistance against the confining societal and narrative norms: her art develops from being innovative to becoming an act of defiance against the patriarchal structures that constrained her, while she successfully used talent to take control over her identity and articulate the problems that she struggled with. Marie-Helen Rosalie Stahl (2) argues that in novels such as *To the Light House,* Virginia Woolf lights up "the inner world of the female protagonists in contrast to their external world, revealing the social constraints that women face in society" (2). Some of the themes she chose to depict in her novels reflect her personal battle with mental health stigma or they critique the era's medical practices, while they also intertwine with her broader concerns about gender

inequality. As early as the beginning of the twentieth century, she managed to challenge traditional boundaries between sanity and insanity. Her oeuvre thoroughly scrutinises the intersection of gender, mental health, and artistic expression, in an attempt to portray how human consciousness ends up being shaped by societal expectations.

The aim of this study is to shed more light on the image of Virginia Woolf, the woman behind the writer, seen through the lens of her medical struggles, but in close connection to the shortcomings of the medical system of those times and its predilection to diminish mental health concerns in general, and marginalise women patients, in particular. Through her literary achievements, Woolf not only sought personal healing (making use of 'scriptotherapy') but did so through fighting against the societal biases, which transformed her work into an in-depth study of the human condition.

WW1, PTSD and Trauma Theory

i. The Contribution of Post-World War I Literature to the Depiction of Trauma

The entire literature written a decade after World War I is a "literature of trauma" (DeMeester 649) with characters like Woolf's Septimus Warren Smith (from the novel *Mrs. Dalloway*), in constant need to make their drama meaningful, on their journey towards healing. This is not an easy parcourse, because the trauma survivor experiences an "inability to communicate his experiences to others and thereby give those experiences meaning and purpose" (649) and this makes rehabilitation strenuous. The detailed exploration of Septimus' case reveals his alienation, selective memory issues or bouts of paranoia which are illustrators of the veteran's stringent need for attentive and empathic care. Many writers and authors of 'trauma literature' intuitively had depicted the characters' struggle to communicate their suffering. This is indeed a crucial step in moving on with one's life, a process comparable to assembling the pieces of a puzzle together. However, it is only a supportive

listener that can help sufferers articulate their trauma (DeMeester 655; Shay 4, 173; Herman 138, 224; Wiesel 33).

Erich Auerbach investigates innovative narrative techniques and their emergence in literature as a phenomenon (after and as a response to the World War atrocities, in the conscience of the people who managed to survive): "sometimes many individuals, or many fragments of events, are loosely joined so that the reader has no definite thread of action which he can always follow" (545). The scholar's analysis extends this discussion about the emergence of adapted narrative techniques to mimic the disjointed reality of post-war survivors (in connection with their shattered consciousness). He argues that the dissipation of "reality into multiple and multivalent reflections of consciousness" (551) (which emerged in post-war literature) is a direct consequence of experiencing war atrocities, as well as a means of criticism. In the context of trauma, the therapeutic power of a narrative or any form of artistic expression is one of Woolf's undisputed accomplishments. However, this narrative therapy is not just about recounting events, but also about finding meaning while establishing a connection among them. This idea is further explored by other scholars; in his book *Conversations with Elie Wiesel,* we find out about a survivor's need to "record events for future generations, the main obsession during the war, so the tales should not be lost or wasted" (Cargas 5).

ii. The Narrative of Trauma Survivor

Herman's book, *Trauma and Recovery*, gives an incredibly detailed explanation of what victims' divulgements meant for the development of psychotherapy as we know it. Freud and the psychiatrists of his times developed the practice of listening to sufferers' stories, having no idea where this path may lead, when trying to decipher the mysteries of hysteria in women (13, 17). While encouraging women to speak about their lives, Freud reached the terrifying conclusion that all women suffering from hysteria had been victims of sexual

abuse in early life. Herman then explains how the results of such findings were immediately considered implausible and unrealistic due to their social implications (not only the middle class but mostly the higher classes, had numerous hysteria cases amongst women).

Consequently, Freud chose to ignore the findings of his study, due to the scale of unbearable truth it accounted for (14). Still filled with controversy, scholars and activists such as Florence Rush named Freud's reassessment "The Freudian Cover-up" (Kitzinger 253) in a famous article from 1977, which bears the same title. Other theorists, such as Sayers, believed that while Rush focused mainly on the psychoanalyst's patriarchal motivation behind his decision to turn a blind eye on the findings of his study, theorists such Masson (mostly because it was an unpopular theory among his peers) accused Freud of deliberately corrupted and subjective reasons (286).

Tal was another theoretician who underlined a victim's urge to communicate (one way or another) the trauma story, as a means of gaining purpose and a sense of normality in the life that follows the abuse. Tal names it a "universal drive to testify" as well as to communicate the "historical truth, which leads ... to what might be called the documentary fallacy" (120). The same theoretician gives Jill Morgan's example, a victim of sexual abuse, who believed that reaching out to other female victims was the condition for her "survival to be meaningful" (120).

Based on decades of experience as an adviser, Dr Jonathan Shay believes that when it comes to counselling veterans, the existence of storytelling is crucial: healing depends on "being able safely to tell the story to someone who is listening and who can be trusted to retell it truthfully to others in the community" (4). This lack of meaningful conversation can be perceived by the veteran as an imposed silence, and in Septimus' case, it accentuated his weakness. "The psychological damage aggravated by a culturally prescribed process of post-war reintegration that silences and marginalizes war veterans" (DeMeester 649) was something that deepened his drama. The veteran's

storytelling itself becomes of therapeutic importance, with the main goal being that he shares his traumatic experience in a supportive environment which facilitates healing. The narrative becomes similar to rearranging shattered pieces of chaotic memories.

Many other scholars have underlined the importance of a 'narrative' or a 'story' (Herman 1, 177, 183, 213) which the traumatized veteran needs to structure, from the initial pre-narrative struggle to the fully developed one (similar to reassembling a jigsaw) (184, 187, 213), in the absence of which the victim cannot move on. To achieve that for her character and even for herself, Woolf conveyed the fragmented psyche making use of the stream-of-consciousness story-telling (which fully opposes the traditional types of narratives). Woolf created such a pre-narrative (inspired by her own trauma) by thoroughly portraying Septimus' dissolution of consciousness. She was successfully able to depict this fragmentation in her novels, displaying the "psychological chaos caused by trauma, instead of reordering it as more traditional narratives do" (DeMeester 650). Therefore, storytelling becomes more than a literary device; it equates a critical psychological tool that helps suffering individuals (such Woolf herself was) to comprehend and re-evaluate their daunting life experiences.

iii. Shell-Shock Diagnosis, Treatment and its Limitations

"The Report of the War Office Committee of Enquiry into Shell-Shock" published in 1922 (around the same time Septimus' character was created) interprets shell-shock as "a commotional and/or emotional disturbance and a mental disorder," as well as a "functional nervous incapacity" affecting soldiers in trenches, due to the continuous exposure to "explosions and projectiles" (4). The document also states that, since not all patients were exposed to shell-bursts, there must have been some other reasons behind the increasing number of mentally incapacitated veterans. Amongst other triggering factors, the above-mentioned paper indicates: the vast amount of physical training leading to

exhaustion, the unfamiliar environment, or the feelings of repulsion, hardship and anxiety (added to the factors of standard neurosis, encountered in the civil environment). The report also suggests the hypothesis that 'shell-shock' incapacitated veterans might even have been wrongly diagnosed, since "the term was very loose and ill-informed" (5–6). The increasing numbers of soldiers' crushing down under the burden of presupposed 'shell-shock' had therefore forced the institutions in charge to have a closer look into it. However, soldiers "passing through medical establishments" were still labelled as suffering from shell-shock (5–6).

A veteran with post-trenches erratic behaviour was often considered as irresponsible. The same study, however, expressed the difficulties arising from the "lack of statistics" around this affection (7) and had quite a difficult time in producing evidence in front of the Committee, going as far as to quote examples of traumas from Shakespeare's *Henry IV* or even *Romeo and Juliet* (11–12).

However, the report also included as possible causes of the affection, strange reasons such as the insufficient or inefficient training of the soldiers and the effect of going to war with undisciplined troops. Revolting causes such as cowardice or lack of loyalty were not completely dismissed; severe punishment was applied to veterans which led to 'shell-shock', its occurrence in relation to courts-martial, the hypothesis of the affection getting contagious (138) or applying treatment based on merits (198).

Whereas this post-war condition was not perfectly understood by doctors, treatment for 'shell-shock' varied widely and often reflected bias and lack of proper care. Some soldiers were treated with rest and support, while others underwent more aggressive interventions such as electroconvulsive therapy (Loveland 253) or hypnosis (25). However, stigma surrounding off-trenches mental illness meant that many soldiers were reluctant to seek treatment or disclose their symptoms for fear of being labelled or even get killed as a punishment; after World War 1, in the UK only (until it was eradicated in 1930)

more than 300 war veterans received death penalty by shooting due to presupposed cowardice (Taylor-Whiffen in Loveland 26).

iv. PTSD's Late Recognition in the Field of War Trauma

In our times, PTSD is the fourth most commonly diagnosed psychiatric disorder in the United States of America, with an overwhelming over 600.000 possible symptom combinations which increase its ambiguity, up to the point where it allows a soldier who commits war crimes, to share the same diagnosis with his victims (Sehgal 1). This complexity underscores the challenge in diagnosing and understanding PTSD, which paradoxically groups perpetrators of war crimes and their victims under the same diagnostic category (due to the enormous of symptom combinations).

It is only recently (in 1980, shortly after the returning of American troops from Vietnam) that veterans have been examined through the lens of their personal suffering and not only though their own acts of violence (through the one they have inflicted in others). Historically, it took multiple global conflicts for medical professionals to fully grasp the profound psychological impact war has on soldiers' psyche. Specialists speak about permanent changes to brain function and structure, particularly in areas linked to fear and memory, such as the amygdala and hippocampus (Theodoratou et al. 2). Herman highlights other dysfunctionalities such as "lasting alterations in the endocrine, autonomic, and central nervous systems (…) the regulation of stress hormones" (238).

Overwhelming feelings of intense fear, helplessness or horror or the habit of persistently re-experiencing the event (e.g., through dreams, flashbacks, reliving the event, distress, or physiological arousal in response to internal or external cues) (Herman 379; DSM IV 277) are just a few of a large variety of symptoms surrounding PTSD. Dr Shay prefers a less discriminatory terminology (as opposed to the term of post-traumatic stress-disorder) such as "psychological injury" (179) and he actively mitigates against the official name, which adds to existing stigma. When thinking about it as an injury, the dignity

of the soldier is restored, transforming it into an "entirely honourable" disposition and makes possible the social integration back to civility (181). Williams et al. name the recollection of past events "an autobiographical memory," essential for one's sense of self, social identity and goal pursuit (122). Traumatic experiences lead to general memory loss, and therefore affect one's successful journey in the world. Usually, people experiencing this type of traumas avoid all types of stimuli which may trigger painful memories, but if their symptoms persist for more than a month—such was the case of Septimus—the patient must therefore be dealing with acute stress disorder (127).

PTSD as a mental disorder was recognised by specialists as late as in 1980, when it was introduced in the official Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM (Tal 135). The description, diagnosis and symptoms are similar to the ones of shell-shock (observable in Woolf's character) and they vary from: mental imbalance, hyper-vigilance, sleep disruption or memory loss. Shay also talks about the variety of symptoms, adding to the generalized list "the intrusive memories" (169). The Manual asserted that PTSD can be chronic or delayed, following an event which is "outside the range of usual human experience," resulting in "diminished responsiveness to the external world, referred to as psychic numbing or emotional anaesthesia" (236). It "usually begins soon after the traumatic event," with feelings of detachment and estrangement from other people (such as Septimus often evoked), the disorder being "apparently more severe and longer lasting when the stressor is of human design" (236). The recovery process goes hand in hand with a thorough comprehension of all its profound connotations, but damage to the central system caused by malnutrition or head trauma has also been identified as possible causes.

Many other theoreticians have analysed the psychological side effects of the war; Grossman for example, believes that killing in combat is a phenomenon neglected by specialists (3) arguing that the pressure felt prior to committing

murder is immense; therefore, many soldiers fail to fire, which can cost them their and their comrades' lives (4). This intense pressure associated with killing (even in self-defence), places an overwhelming pressure, since many soldiers are unable to save themselves or fight back. Therefore, they consciously refuse self-defence, as if they perceived their own life as less valuable than their enemy's life. This hesitation shows the multitude of consequences the act of killing can have on human psyche: it is not natural for sane people to kill other humans, and most of them are not psychologically fit to easily come to terms with doing so. A year after the war ended, J. W. Appel and G. W. Beebe argued that a soldier can stay in combat, a maximum of 200–240 days before getting psychologically injured, while adding that "there is no such thing as getting used to combat" (in Herman 37). However, this type of information did not appeal to the military authorities, and they often neglected or never followed such findings with specific measures, in order to lessen the pressure on the soldiers and smooth their reintegration into society (Shay 181; Herman 47, 57).) It was not feasible for military authorities to accept that no one truly becomes accustomed to combat, and to accept theories which suggested that humans are frail and present limited endurance in sustained warfare: this was not at all a winner's frame of mind. Whether it was disregard for these scientific findings, disbelief or chosen ignorance, the decision makers did not impose rotations or mandatory rest periods to avoid soldier's prolonged exposure to combat (Herman 70, 89; Tal 119).

v. Recognition of PTSD and its Feminist Implications

Not just war veterans struggle to deal with painful memories; analysing the victims of incest's surest path toward healing, McNaron & Morgan (15) argue that only speaking about it we may "threaten its continued, unacknowledged presence." Commenting on McNaron & Morgan's research, Kali Tal emphasises that "by translating the overwhelming and anxiety-producing memories into language, (…) women begin to transform their painful experiences into more

manageable stories" (172). Communicating the trauma to others validates one's experiences and Tal's conclusions in this matter are enlightening: the introduction of the new terminology of PTSD in 1980 "replaced terms such as shell-shock and battle fatigue, and thus acknowledged the connection between war-related trauma and other traumatic experiences such as rape, incest, incarceration in concentration camps" (135). Therefore, the incorporation of post-traumatic stress-disorder into the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) could also be interpreted as a strategic weapon for feminists all over the world (Tal 135). They viewed it as a means to delve deeper into the complexities of women's experiences (particularly in the context of trauma), and to offer new lenses for interpreting these experiences within women's literature. By recognizing PTSD as a legitimate psychological condition, feminists sought to shed light on the often overlooked or misunderstood aspects of women's lives primarily the impact of trauma on their mental health. This recognition provided means and official proof for feminists to advocate for greater awareness and understanding of the diverse range of negative experiences that women go through, as well as to challenge traditional narratives and representations of women in literature (Tal 135). Tal wonders whether "all feminist literature is based in trauma" (136) and since this may just remain a rhetorical question, he argues that one thing is certain: statistics have shown that the "relative number of women who have been traumatized far exceeds the number of men who have survived combat or even the number of men who wore military uniforms during the Vietnam War era" (136).

Another trauma theoretician, Cathy Caruth, reminds us that "trauma is not simply an effect of destruction but also, fundamentally, an enigma of survival" (58). Making peace with the past as well as the process of recreating and reinterpreting "memories until they take a manageable form" or "learning to accept the world as it is" (Tal 145) are the keys to healing, whereas "the patient who cannot make peace with his or her memories represents a failure of the

psychotherapeutic process" (145). Caruth's (58) perspective on trauma highlights its dual nature: the immediate damage it causes and the enduring struggle of living with it. Consequently, surviving trauma is as much about the continuous effort to process and integrate painful experiences as it is about reliving the initial event. The process of healing involves actively engaging with memories, transforming them into forms that one can handle, and accepting the present reality. This transformation and acceptance are crucial for healing.

Virginia Woolf's Literary Contribution to the Understanding of PTSD

i. Virginia Woolf's Personal Relationship with Trauma

Suzette Henke and David Eberle call Woolf's early life a "daunting catalogue of traumas" (in Ahmed 4). On top of the personal ordeals, the collective calamity brought by the World Wars inflated further the pressure on such a fragile psyche, which struggled from childhood to adjust to life's often cruel circumstances. Virginia Woolf often succumbed to despair, due to a multitude of stressors, which deepened her agony her episodes of depression from 1895, 1904 or 1910 to only name a few, documented by her nephew, Quentin Bell (11).

As already pointed out, Auerbach wrote in *Mimesis* about the modernists' unique manner of reflecting the turbulence brought by the World War; a Europe "unsure of itself" was a very favourable terrain for 'odd' writing techniques to arise. In the mournful atmosphere of "universal doom" (551) that surrounds many of the literary works of that time, Auerbach acknowledges the "symptoms of confusion and helplessness" belonging to a disaster struck humanity which left the reading public "with an impression of hopelessness" (551). The same theoretician interprets the suffering and struggles of those times as one of the main driving energies behind Woolf's and other modernists' innovative genius, giving *To the Lighthouse* as an example—a novel that "breathes an air of vague and hopeless sadness" (551).

Woolf purposely tried to create a new type of fiction, and the proof lies in Quentin Bell's biography of his aunt; she was aware that her novels (therefore her writing style) might appear "mad" to her readers, but she was still determined to invent a new type of fiction (Bell 28). She herself wrote in *A Writer's Diary* that the process of creating *Mrs. Dalloway* would be "the devil of a struggle. The design is so queer and so masterful (…) certainly original and interests me hugely" (Woolf 1954: 57).

However, her anxiety crises were getting worse immediately after publishing a new book, while tensely waiting for the reviews: "her dread of the ruthless mockery of the world contained within it, the deeper fear that her art and therefore herself, was a kind of sham, an idiot's dream of no value to anyone (…) favourable notice was more valuable than mere praise; it was a kind of certificate of sanity" (Bell 28–29).

Scholars such as Henke have written about a form of therapy through writing: "scriptotherapy" (xvi), which undoubtedly helped Virginia Woolf to overcome her sadness and deep sense of loss, throughout the difficult years of adolescence and youth:

> The subject of enunciation theoretically restores a sense of agency to the hitherto fragmented self, now recast as the protagonist of his or her life drama. Through the artistic replication of a coherent subject-position, the life-writing project generates a healing narrative that temporarily restores the fragmented self to an empowered position of psychological agency. (Henke xvi)

What Virginia Woolf managed to achieve through her writing and especially through the creation of her character, Clarissa Dalloway, was to reintegrate her own haunting memories and writing her experience of trauma in a coherent narrative (Theut 24).

Other scholars believe that Woolf constructed all her female characters to reach that specific form of restorative mental lucidity required in the healing process (Chen 3), "especially since for this particular author, writing is healing and the redeeming of her fragmented self" (4). Stephanie Heine also observes a

correlation between Woolf's art and the notion of traumatic memory defined by Sigmund Freud (29), in other words, the way in which these memories migrate into her literary texts. References to traumatic events like World War I do not occur in the form of narrated past events, but mere memories or "present symptoms that are encountered and acted out by the readers" (Heine 40).

Woolf makes use of a revolutionary fictional technique in her novels: she uses two different facets of the same 'self' when creating some of her characters, as she confesses in *Sketch of the Past*: "It would be interesting to make the two people, I now, I then, come out in contrast. And further, this past is much affected by the present moment. What I write today I should not write in a year's time" (Woolf 1985: 75). Therefore, Woolf articulates a hidden facet of the 'self', which is not a static entity and draws its complexity from past experiences and current reflections about it. These shape the 'self' and offer meaning to one's personal history and unique path in life. The multifaceted 'self' is therefore a continually evolving one and very useful for a writer and not only from the character development point of view. Less similar to previous literary forms of expression, this modernist technique becomes synonymous with any person's own inner voice.

During her life, apart from her fictional work, Virginia Woolf wrote an impressive number of diaries—something that may have started out of therapeutical reasons (journaling is known to aid with the mental restructuring of the trauma) and developed further into a mastered skill. The writer embarked on her diary-writing journey at the tender age of fourteen in 1897, and it continued until her tragic death at fifty-nine in March 1941, just four days before her suicide: "Thirty-Eight handwritten diary volumes are safeguarded today in the United States and England. Together they offer some 2,312 entries and 770,000 words" (Lounsberry 1). In her book *Becoming Virginia Woolf. Her Early Diaries and the Diaries She Read*, Barbara Lounsberry identifies three stages of diary writing in the writer's life: the exploration one, the maturity and the experienced phase. Initially, Woolf's diaries from 1897 to

mid-1918 represent a period of experimentation, which offers glimpses from her formative years, documenting her thoughts, experiences, and literary aspirations from adolescence and young adulthood. Transitioning into the period from 1919 to 1929, Woolf's diary entries take on a more mature and minimalist tone, reflecting her burgeoning modernist sensibilities. During this phase, her writing becomes more focused and introspective, often capturing the essence of her creative process with metatextual entries. The final stage of Woolf's diary-keeping (from 1930 until her death), is marked by a notable growth in both quantity and intensity. During these years, the entries indicate a heightened engagement with her inner thoughts but also in other diary writers' work, which she read and analysed during her final years (Lounsberry 2). Writing was a big part of Woolf's life, and she managed to successfully succumb into it as her own form of therapy, which worked.

ii. War Veterans' Mental Struggle Reflected in the Creation of Septimus

The atrocities of the war scar the survivors, marking these invisible but permanent wounds, which change them thoroughly. Veterans' social life is totally compromised, while PTSD becomes a silent killer: an overburdening disorder, aggravated by unsympathetic psychiatrists, unable or unwilling to care. At the beginning of the twentieth century, soldiers' psychological pain was a taboo subject and the "Report of the War Office Committee of Enquiry into 'Shell-Shock" published in 1922 discloses that soldiers who suffer distress in trenches were not psychologically fit to fight (393). The specialists looked at war trauma as the 'shell-shock' effect (with symptoms ranging from tremors, pounding headaches, amnesia, visual or auditory hallucinations), as the result of exposure to exploding shells (402).

DeMeester (656) argues that "since the publication of *Mrs. Dalloway*, substantial advances have been made in our understanding of war neurosis and the psychological effects of trauma." Scholars argue (Bonikowski 24) that one purposeful aspiration of Virginia Woolf when writing *Mrs. Dalloway* is

connected to the writer's own personal trauma and the incorrect treatment recommended by the psychiatric elite of time, to trauma survivors. In our days, the terrible effect deflagrations have on human psychic are well documented. But things were much different one hundred years ago and especially when it came to dealing with women's mental distress: "the medical establishment generally ordered them to come to terms with their femininity by getting married, having children, and learning to be a better mother" (Tal 136). Another renowned scholar, Roger Poole (3) argues that through the process of creating Septimus, Virginia Woolf may have tried to exorcise her past insidious memories.

Septimus Warren Smith is a self-made war hero who enrolled voluntarily and miraculously survived World War I: a "pale-faced" man with a very uneasy look "which makes complete strangers apprehensive too" (Woolf 2016: 11), a very terrified young man, "as if some horror had come almost to the surface and was about to burst into flames" (12). The veteran was certainly going through a 'shell-shock' crisis, but was treated by unsympathetic doctors. He was "paralyzed" by noisy London, looking almost hypnotised at the tree pattern on the curtains of the motor car that startled him, leaving him "rooted to the pavement" (12), while the dangerous world around him "wavered and quivered and threatened to burst into flames" (12).

Septimus' thoughts and words of suicide overwhelm his wife, Rezia, whose cry for help in the most apprehensive moments of her husband's crises, remained mute, therefore unheard. His numbness often got him staring absent-mindedly by his wife's side, while he "did not see her and made everything terrible" (19). She did indeed care too much that others might hear her husband's declared wish to die; however, in those times, the threat of being institutionalised made other atrocities seem pale. Peter Knox-Shaw argues in "The Otherness of Septimus Warren Smith" that the character's response to war-stress is delayed (in DeMeester 656); it is only some years after returning from the trenches that his neurosis fully takes shape. Septimus' stress disorder

manifests a delayed reaction, and it did not exhibit immediately after he returned from the trenches. Significant things have happened from the moment he returned from the trenches and the illness's initial symptoms: meeting and marrying Rezia and returning (now married) to the United Kingdom. It is obvious that Septimus suffered from even a more severe type of PTSD—what specialists call today acute stress disorder (Williams et al. 127).

Septimus would often even hallucinate about his lost friend and commanding officer, Evans, seeing him "behind the railings" (Woolf 2016: 20). Some critics such as Suzette Henke analysed the veteran's case from a Freudian angle, only acknowledging the "repressed desire and guilt as the cause of megalomaniac fantasies and paranoia" (in DeMeester 654). However, there are some other facets of Septimus' obsession with his now-dead comrade and superior, Evans. Woolf is very explicit about his untreated and uncommunicated grief and horror experienced in trenches, especially when he saw Evans dying in front of him.

Judith Herman in *Trauma and Recovery* underlines the importance of the "emotional attachments among fighting men" (25) also asserted by W.H.R. Rivers (professor of neurophysiology, psychology and anthropology) in his attempt to cure his most famous patient, a veteran named Sassoon. Treated with "dignity and respect" by his doctor, "rather than being silenced, he was encouraged to write and talk freely about the terrors of war" (Herman 21–22). To be able to convince Sassoon to return to the trenches (the accepted way to assess if a therapy was successful), Rivers discovered that "fear was something stronger than patriotism, abstract principles, or hatred of the enemy" which could not motivate the veteran as the "love of soldiers for one another" (35) did. The theory behind this magical cure was that the "strongest protection against overwhelming terror was the degree of relatedness between the soldier, his immediate fighting unit, and their leader" (37). In his imagination, Evans was part of Septimus' life even after he died, in the form of vivid hallucinations. Herman argues that in the case of trauma survivors there is a

> sense of alienation, of disconnection, [which] pervades every relationship, from the most intimate familial bonds to the most abstract affiliations of community and religion. When trust is lost, traumatized people feel that they belong more to the dead than to the living. (Herman 52)

Acclaimed psychiatrist in the field of WWII trauma, Dori Laub, a Romanian Jew and victim of the Holocaust, speaks about this "imperative to tell" of the traumatized, who simply must utter his or her story to the world, to be able to survive (not just the other way around) a mission that becomes "an all-consuming life-task" (Laub 77). However,

> no amount of telling seems ever to do justice to this inner compulsion. There are never enough words or the right words (…) and never enough listening or the right listening to articulate the story that cannot be fully captured in thought, memory, and speech. (77)

Laub is certain that no trauma survivor can find peace in silence, because the future life after the ordeal is only a "substitution for the mourned past" (78); therefore, the PTSD sufferers cannot replace their dead comrades (which most of the times they witnessed dying) with real people from his present, real life. This is why Rezia cannot compete with Evans and cannot reach Septimus: the voluntary or imposed act of silence "serves as a perpetuation of its tyranny" (Laub 78). Laub also reiterates the importance of that interior double (that could take the shape of a comrade's hallucination), constructed by the traumatised in the moments they face terror. This further becomes a condition of survival: "a creative act of establishing and maintaining an internal witness, who substitutes for the lack of witnessing in real life" (79).

We can identify Evans as Septimus' double, forced to separate from, once he returns from the trenches. The veteran perceives his real wife as being intrusive, when she tries to bring him back to reality, as if she was inappropriately prying, "always interrupting" (Woolf 2016, 20) when trying "to make him notice real things" (21). Rezia is too much aware of her husband's slow but certain social death, since he is talking "aloud to himself, out of doors"

(21) which he ought not to, because people "must notice" (19). Judith Herman (70) emphasises the veteran's need for "tangible evidence of public recognition" once returned at home, and identifies a "general lack of public awareness, interest, and attention." DeMeester also observes that Septimus' frustration is caused by this "limitations of language" (655); he is not able to speak out the trauma or to offer new meanings to his experiences, through the use of language. In today's terms, the sufferer would undergo psychotherapy sessions: a form of "communication between a trauma survivor and an untraumatized listener" (655). Therefore, veterans often "fear their sacrifices will be quickly forgotten" (Herman 70). The inability to form trustful relationships once back from the trenches is also a trait Woolf intuitively gifts her character with. According to the same scholar, "combat veterans will not form a trusting relationship until they are convinced that the therapist can stand to hear the details of the war story" (138), while most of the time they fail to do so.

The traumas left Septimus with his mind and consciousness fragmented and dissolute; Woolf herself, in *A Writer's Diary,* wrote that her novel *Mrs. Dalloway* was meant to be a tool used to "to criticise the social system and show it at work, at its most intense" (Woolf 1915: 56). DeMeester (653) believes that the key to Septimus' recovery lies in the causes of the problem. The critic disagrees again with Suzzette Henke who misdiagnosed the character as schizophrenic and also interpreted his suffering through the lens of the homophobic stigma around presumed homosexual desires, concluding that the real crime he ever committed was homosexuality. Septimus' obsession with Evans can indeed be interpreted on the basis of what may appear to be intense homosexual feelings of affection towards his comrade. It was natural for such unacceptable feelings to be repressed and interpreted as guilt, in strict and homophobic patriarchal Victorian society; therefore, this observation is not totally dismissible. Rezia confuses the reader even further, when she comments that: "everyone has

friends who were killed in the War. Everyone gives up something when they marry" (Woolf 2016: 49).

This hypothesis becomes even more credible if we consider aspects of Virginia Woolf's personal life; however, there is not sufficient evidence in the text to fully sustain it. It is more plausible that the strong impact of all the horrors he witnessed in the trenches could be the main source of Septimus' anguish and despair: "all the other crimes raised their heads and shook their fingers and jeered and sneered over the rail" (80) as well as the vivid images of his dead friend: "It was Evans! But no mud was on him; no wounds; he was not changed" (61). Showalter (172) argues that healing for Septimus was impossible, since true patriotic soldiers were not allowed to show any display of emotions, while Smith (195) believes the veteran was denied any right to mourning, therefore healing, by his gender. Septimus' mourning and suffering "feminize him" with grief wrongly assumed to be an unpatriotic trait (Anisiei 4). His and Rezia's obsessive and continuous dread that people "might notice" (Woolf 2016: 18) is a typical example.

Common words such as hunger, fear, death hold different meanings for ordinary people and become "different realities" for the trauma survivor. Bouts of paranoia are another common symptom of PTSD: such as when he pointed "at her hand take her hand, look at it terrified" (Woolf 2016: 58) (when he saw Rezia was not wearing her wedding ring). The characteristic 'gazing' and 'staring' are other undisputable symptoms: so profoundly encapsulated in their obsessive thoughts, sufferers' attention is difficult to be re-directed towards the meaningful. Rezia's desperate attempts fail when she is trying to make him 'see', repeatedly imploring him to 'look' (21).

Numbness affected Septimus' ability to speak about the endured ordeals or to express his depleting feelings and memories, in order to leave some room for healing. Herman stresses the link between the patient's difficulty to verbalise the trauma and its physiological effect: "preliminary results of brain scanning studies of patients with PTSD, using the sophisticated technique of positron

emission tomography, suggest that during flashbacks, specific areas of the brain involved with language and communication may indeed be inactivated" (240).

These findings can also be correlated with the brain's response to trauma and the body's reaction to perceived threat (known as fight-or-flight response), which has a typical reaction in the body: increased heart rate, heightened alertness, and the release of stress hormones like adrenalin, etc. (Vingerhoets et al. 34). However, any dysregulations of this response (usually caused by exposure to severe trauma) is identified as one of the causes of PTSD (Sherin 263). The reverse effect is that people with PTSD have been found to continually produce high amounts of fight-or-flight hormones even when there is no danger (Vingerhoets et al. 36). However, trauma affects individuals differently, and people's responses, when in a life-threatening situation, are not the same. While some may experience numbness and difficulty expressing their trauma verbally (known also as the 'declarative memory dysfunction' or "the ability to consciously remember and reproduce emotionally neutral material"), others may exhibit hyperarousal or avoidance behaviours (Samuelson 346). While the existing literature agrees that the memory dysfunction is both a pre-existing factor and a consequence of PTSD, memory problems reduce the patient's resources to address life's demands and can have a negative consequence on patients' ability to benefit from psychological treatment (349).

Many other theorists reiterate the victim's urge to speak out the trauma in a coherent narrative; but speaking out also meant that doctors knew how to listen—little from their behaviour depicted in Mrs. Dalloway suggests empathy. Septimus was very explicit in his intention to kill himself to escape his doctors:

> it was too late now. Holmes was coming. Razors he might have got, but Rezia, who always did that sort of thing, had packed them. There remained only the window, the large Bloomsbury-lodging house window, the tiresome, the troublesome, and rather melodramatic business of opening the window and throwing himself out. It was their idea of tragedy, not his or Rezia's (for she was with him). Holmes and Bradshaw like that sort of thing. (Woolf 2016: 131–132)

DeMeester (650) asserts that it is remarkable that Woolf ingeniously identifies the shell-shocked veteran's essential difficulty: not the suffering during the war, but the failure in giving meaning to this suffering, depriving the protagonist of purpose and leaving him with an existential emptiness. Emphasising the recovering process, DeMeester highlights Woolf's early understanding of a form of healing philosophy behind 'logotherapy', a concept and technique implemented by a Holocaust survivor and psychiatrist, Viktor E. Frankl (659). In his masterpiece *Man in Search for Meaning*, Frankl underlines every person's continuous search for purpose throughout life. The absence of meaning leads to an existential frustration, which sets the conditions for common neurosis to develop, just as Woolf imagined her character's development when back from trenches.

iii. Secondary Traumatic Stress as Reflected in Rezia's Behaviour

Secondary traumatic stress is not recognised by DSM-5 as an official mental health diagnosis and is often used "interchangeably with vicarious trauma" (Craigen et al. 40). Theoreticians such as Figley have analysed STS as the legitimate behaviour "resulting from knowledge about a traumatizing event experienced by a significant other. It is the stress resulting from wanting to help a traumatized or suffering person" (7). Recent studies highlight the increased attention which should also be given to family members of the PTSD sufferer, which may experience STS.

Rezia's own suffering caused by her husband's alienation made her a highly eligible candidate to develop PTSD. Her husband's frequent crises carved deeply inside her and before she knew it, anxiety and anguish took over. Her incapacity to speak to someone about her husband's bouts of madness can lead readers into thinking that his suicide would have come to her as a relief: "and he would not kill himself; and she could tell no one. 'Septimus has been working too hard'—that was all she could say to her own mother. To love makes one solitary, she thought. She could tell nobody, not even Septimus now" (Woolf

2016: 19). His illness made two victims, not just one: "it was she who suffered—but she had nobody to tell" (19).

Condemned to silence, Rezia became a collateral victim of PTSD and her inability to seek help sentenced her to continual misery: "I am alone! I am alone!" (20). From a different angle, Rezia's own form of trauma could be seen as proof of domestic unloyalty, since at one point she just "can't stand it any longer" (Woolf 2016: 17) and abandons her husband to doctor Bradshaw's incompetency. She even complains about being rewarded with so much suffering, her own anguish distracting her from Septimus'. Memories and home country nostalgia make us wonder whether, on top of her struggles with Septimus, she is not suffering from homesickness, another symptom of depression caused by a traumatic change of environment, living "without friends in England" because she "had left Italy for his sake" (12). Her home country seemed distant, almost inaccessible, like a beautiful dream, or a mirage:

> Far was Italy and the white houses and the room where her sisters sat making hats, and the streets crowded every evening with people walking, laughing out loud, not half alive like people here, huddled up in Bath chairs, looking at a few ugly flowers stuck in pots! (19)

Dr Holmes, apart from repeating to Rezia that "nothing is the matter" (12) with her husband, recommended treatments ranging from music shows to crocket or other games played outside. Not that they would be inefficient, however, PTSD sufferers taken outside of their comfort zone and exposed to situations they do not feel at ease with, do not improve; on the contrary, this may even aggravate their condition since the victim "prefers to be with familiar people than with strangers" (Herman 218). Holmes's reassurances and recommendations, though most likely intended to help, fail to address the specific needs of Septimus. The suggestion to engage in public activities like music shows or outdoor games overlooks the importance of a safe and familiar environment for these individuals, overlooking the necessity of understanding the psychological comfort zones of the patients.

Conclusions

It is not a secret anymore that wars have profoundly affected survivors, often leading to permanent psychological disturbances and an existential void that necessitates a search for meaning. It took two world wars, and other ones of lesser magnitude but the same catastrophic consequences on the human psyche, for health specialists to fully understand the disastrous effects a war has on its survivors, leaving many unanswered questions related to the reasons behind this deferment. The key must have been accepting that the experience of war leads to permanent and dramatic psychological changes and disturbances. The existential emptiness that often accompanies unprocessed trauma can lead to severe psychological distress, making normal life painful to live, unless a constant search for meaning becomes the prevalent preoccupation of the survivors. This article has discussed the complex nature of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder noting its prevalence and the vast array of symptom combinations that complicate diagnosis. It highlights the challenge of understanding PTSD, as it can encompass both victims and perpetrators of war crimes, reflecting the psychological aftermath of wars throughout history.

Virginia Woolf's doctors (herself a victim of incest and sexual abuse) who treated her during her bouts of illness, such as Dr Head or Sir George [Savage] as documented by her nephew (Bell 15,18), may have not encouraged her to talk through her traumatic life experiences; however, her genius found even a better way to deal with it: "the writing and rewriting process allows women to manipulate imagery and generate metaphors for their suffering, reframing their problems in a useful and creative manner" (Tal 172). Her experiences with trauma and her therapeutic use of writing proved to be an exquisite tool for any trauma survivors. Despite inadequate support from her doctors to address her suffering, Woolf utilized journaling and writing as a means to process her experiences creatively.

Ultimately, the aim of this work has been to shed more light on Woolf's literary oeuvre as a reflection of her struggle with trauma, illustrating how she

transformed her suffering into literature, demonstrating the transformative power of narrative. Virginia Woolf's portrayal of a shell-shocked veteran, Septimus, captures the core challenge of trauma—the struggle to find meaning in suffering. Woolf mirrored herself in the veteran's dysfunctionality, as a consequence of her own suffering, since trauma survivors have communication difficulties caused by their unfulfilled needs. Structured narratives belonging to the sufferers represent the transformative process of a traumatic event from one's past: from a painful memory to a liberating one. In other words, it proved to be an effective way of regaining control over one's existence.

Woolf used her talent and creative resources to cope with psychological pain. Her entire life is seen as the proof of how trauma can be creatively metamorphosed into literature, providing insight and healing not only for herself, but for readers as well. Surviving war and trauma in general is, therefore, forcing sufferers to find meaningful connotations to meaningless experiences.

References

Ahmed, A. 2009. "Virginia Woolf and the Poetics of Trauma Narrative," Montreal: PHD Thesis. *University of Montreal*, Canada. https://papyrus.bib.umontreal.ca/xmlui/handle/1866/6679, DOA 16.02.2023.

American Psychological Association. 2017. *Clinical Practice Guideline for the Treatment of PTSD.* https://www.apa.org/ptsd-guideline, DOA 18.02.2023.

American Psychological Association. 1980. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders III*. Washington: American Psychological Association.

Anisiei, D. 2024. "Virginia Woolf's Life Struggle with Depression and Illness through the Lens of Her Characters," *Litermedia* 1–7. https://litermedia.com/index.php?ind=downloads&op=entry_view&iden=371, DOA 1.03.2024.

Auerbach, E. 1974. *Mimesis, the Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Bell, Q. 1972. *Virginia Woolf: a Biography*. London: Hogarth Press. https://archive.org/, DOA 12.04.2023.

Bonikowski, W. 2013. *Shell Shock and the Modernist Imagination: The Death Drive in Post-World War I British Fiction.* Burlington: Ashgate.

Cargas, H. J. 1992. *Conversations with Elie Wiesel*. South Bend, Indiana: Justice Books. https://archive.org/, DOA 12.04.2023.

Caruth, C. 1996. *Unclaimed Experience. Trauma, Narrative and History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Chen, S. 2022. "Moments of Being, A Real Trauma Truth of Virginia Woolf? Writing of Trauma in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* and To the Lighthouse. MA Thesis," Tromsø: UIT, The Arctic University of Norway.

DeMeester, K. 1998. "Trauma and Recovery in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway,*" *Modern Fiction Studies* 44: 3, 649–673. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26286042, DOA 18.02.2023.

DeSalvo, L. 1989. *The Impact of Childhood Sexual Abuse on Her Life and Work*. London: Women's Press.

Frankl, V. 1985. *Man, in Search for Meaning*. (Revised and updated). New York: Washington Square Press.

Heine, S. 2014. "The Force of the Blow—Traumatic Memory in Virginia Woolf's Writing," *Anglia* 132: 1, 40–57. https://doi.org/10.1515/anglia-2014-0003 .

Henke, A. S. 1998. *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women's Life-Writing*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Herman, J. L. 2015. *Trauma and Recovery. The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. New York: Basic Books.

Kaplan, E. A. 2000. "Review of Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women's Life Writing," *Biography* 23: 1, 223–231. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23540211, DOA 4.06.2023.

Kaptein, A., A. Appels, & K. Orth-Gomer (Eds.). 2000. *Psychology in Medicine.* Houten: Bohn Stafleu Van Loghum.

Kitzinger, C. 1996. "'The Freudian Coverup': A Reappraisal," *Feminism & Psychology. The Sage Social Science Collection* 6: 2, 251–259.

Laub, D. 1991. "Truth and Testimony. The Process and the Struggle," *American Imago* 48: 1, 75–91. JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org/stable/26304032, DOA 1.02.2024.

Lounsberry, B. 2014. *Becoming Virginia Woolf: Her Early Diaries and the Diaries She Read.* Gainesville: University Press of Florida.

Loveland, J. L. 2007. "Combat-related Trauma: An Historical Analysis through a Biopsychosocial Lens," Master's Thesis, Smith College, Northampton, MA, USA. https://scholarworks.smith.edu/theses/425, DOA 1.05.2024.

McNaron, T.A.H. & Y. Morgan. 1982. *Voices in the Night: Women Speaking about Incest*. Pittsburgh: Cleis Press.

Poole, R. 1990. *The Unknown Virginia Woolf*. London: Humanities Press International.

"Report of the War Office Committee of Enquiry into 'Shell-Shock," 1922. His Majesty Stationary Office. UK. https://wellcomecollection.org/works/v33yrqma, DOA 2.10.2024.

Samuelson, K. W. 2011. "Post-traumatic Stress Disorder and Declarative Memory Functioning: A Review," *Dialogues in Clinical Neuroscience* 13: 3, 346–351, DOA 4.05.2024.

Sayers, J. 1996. "Exposing Fathers: What's New?" *Feminism & Psychology* 6: 2, 286–289. https://doi.org/10.1177/0959353596062018, DOA 2.05.2024.

Sehgal, P. 2022. "The Case Against the Trauma Plot," *New Yorker* January 3 & 10. https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/01/03/the-case-against-the-trauma-plot, DOA 12.03.2023.

Shay, J. 1994. *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of the Character.* London: Macmillan.

Shay, J. 2014. "Moral Injury," *Psychoanalytic Psychology* 31 : 2, 182–191. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0036090, DOA 1.02.2024.

Sherin, J. E., & C. B. Nemeroff. 2011. "Post-traumatic Stress Disorder: The Neurobiological Impact of Psychological Trauma," *Dialogues in Clinical Neuroscience* 13: 3, 263–278. https://doi.org/10.31887/ DCNS.2011.13.2 /jsherin,https://www.ncbi. nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3182008/, DOA 10.05.2024.

Showalter, E. 1987. *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830–1980*. New York: Penguin Books.

Smith, S. B. 1995. "Reinventing Grief Work: Virginia Woolf's Feminist Representations of Mourning in *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*," *Twentieth Century Literature* 41: 4, 310–327. JSTOR, https://doi.org/10.2307/441533, DOA 17.03. 2023.

Stahl, M-H R. 2016. "Illuminating Inner Life: A Comparison of Virginia Woolf's *To The Lighthouse* and Arthur Schnitzler's *Fräulein Else*" (dissertation). Stockholm University. https://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:su:diva-131243, DOA 10.05.2024.

Tal, K. 1996. *Worlds of Hurt*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Theut, K. 2019. "All That Summer She was 'Mad': Illuminating Virginia Woolf's Authorial Agency Using Modern Trauma Studies" (BA thesis). Michigan: *University of Michigan Press*. https://lsa.umich.edu/content/dam /englishassets/migrated /honors_files/Theut,%20Kaela_Thesis.pdf, DOA 1.02. 2023.

Theodoratou, M. et al. 2023. "Review: Neuropsychological Consequences of Massive Trauma: Implications and Clinical Interventions," *Medicina* 59: 2128. https://doi.org/10.3390/medicina59122128, DOA 3.05.2024.

Trombley, S. 1981. *All that Summer she Was Mad: Virginia Woolf and her Doctors*. London: Junction Books.

Vingerhoets et al. 2000. "The Psychobiology of Stress," in: A. Kaptein, A. Appels, & K. Orth-Gomer (Eds.), 34–49.

Williams, L. 2014. "Virginia Woolf's History of Sexual Victimization: A Case Study in Light of Current Research," *Psychology* 5: 10, 1151–1164.

Williams et al. 2017. "Autobiographical Memory Specificity and Emotional Disorder," *Psychological Bulletin* 133: 1, 122–148. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909. 133.1.122.

Woolf, V. 1954. *A Writer's Diary. Being Extracts from the Diary of Virginia Woolf.* Edited by Leonard Woolf. San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich.

Woolf, V. 1980. *The Diary of Virginia Woolf 1882–1941* (vol 3). New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich.

Woolf, V. 1985. *Moments of Being.* Edited with an Introduction and Notes by Jeanne Schulkind (2nd ed). New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich.

Woolf, V. 2016. *Mrs. Dalloway*. London: Penguin Vintage Classics.

Woolf, V. 2018. *Orlando*: *A Biography*. Global Grey eBooks. https://www.global greyebooks.com/orlando-a-biography-ebook.html, DOA 10.05.2024.

Abstract

Virginia Woolf's personal life has sparked an incredible amount of controversy throughout the years. Numerous speculations have been developed about her personal struggle with mental illness and the effect it had on her writing. This article argues that in Woolf's case, writing took the form of "scriptotherapy", which is regarded as an effective means of dealing with trauma. From another angle, the article aims to shed more light on yet another manifestation of Woolf's genius: an intuitive but accurate description of a war veteran's torment and subsequent suicide, as a consequence of dealing with untreated Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. When examining Septimus' trauma, we identify similarities between his story and Woolf's personal experience with the male-dominated psychiatric elite of her times (documented by her biographers). The study also investigates Virginia Woolf's feminist perspective on trauma, through analysing societal norms' profound influence on human suffering.

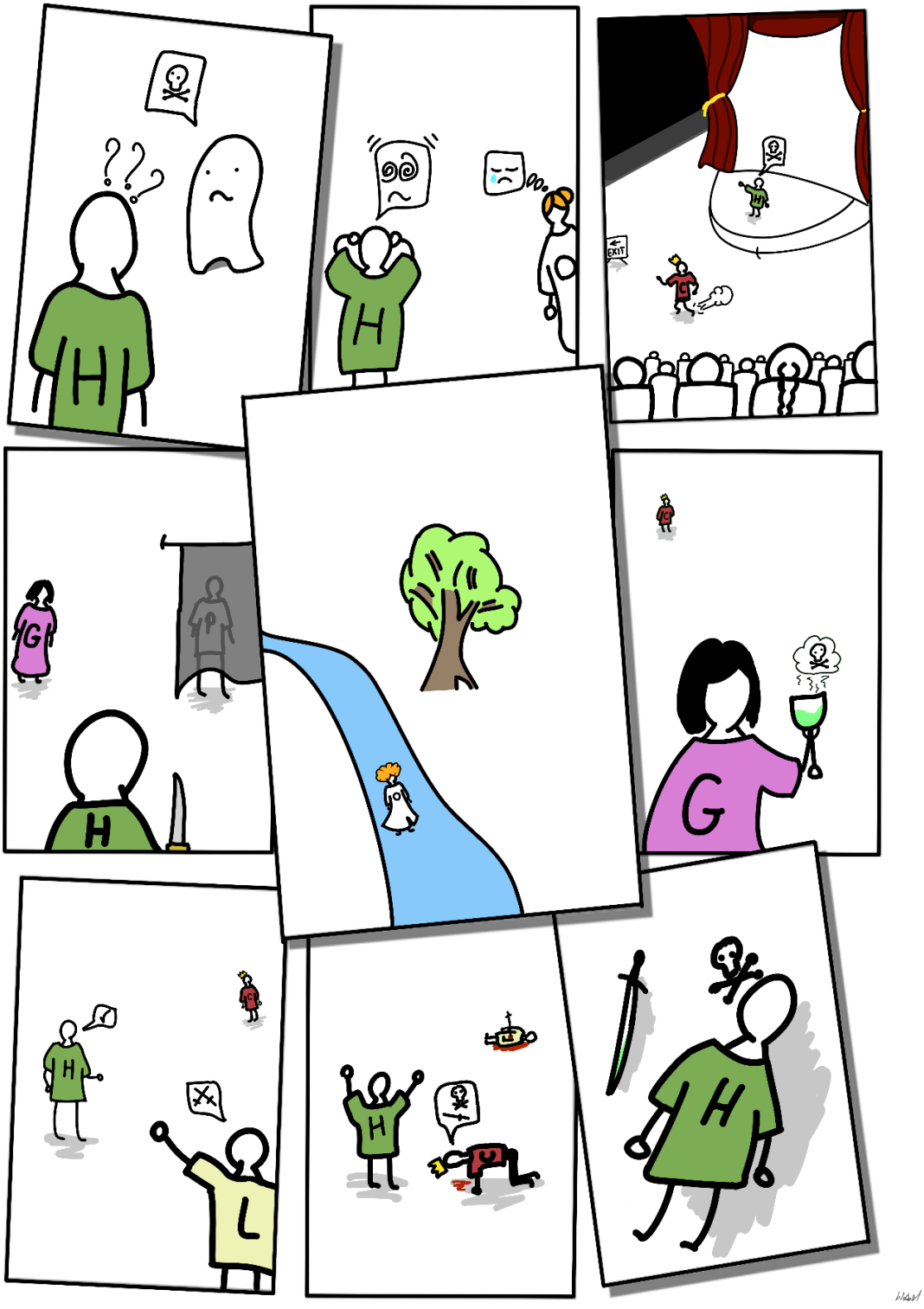
STUDENTS' CORNER

CURRENTS. A Journal of Young English Philology Thought and Review. Vol. 10/2024
Ed. E. Lorek-Jezińska, N. Strehlau, J. Antoniak, B. Jankowska, www. currents.umk.pl
ISSN 2449-8769 ||

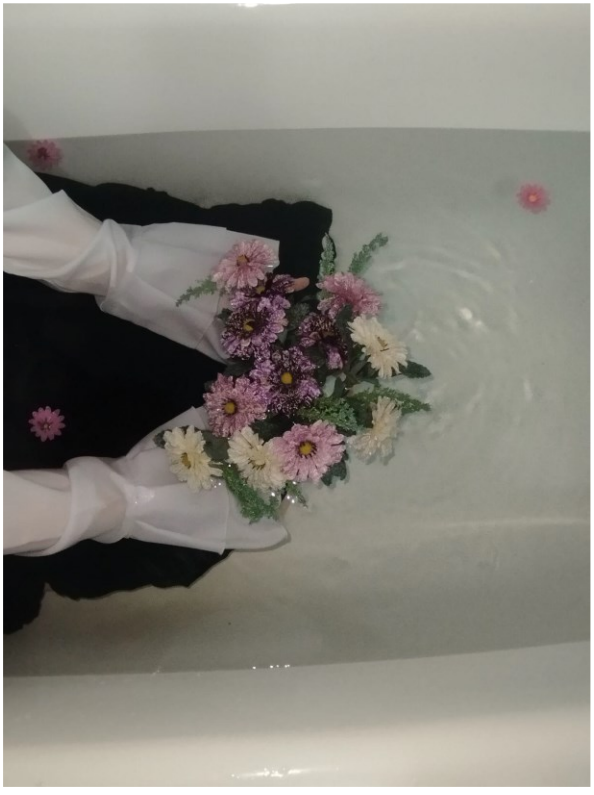
OPHELIA AND HAMLET VARIATIONS: INTERTEXTUALITY AND ADAPTATION PROJECTS BY NCU STUDENTS

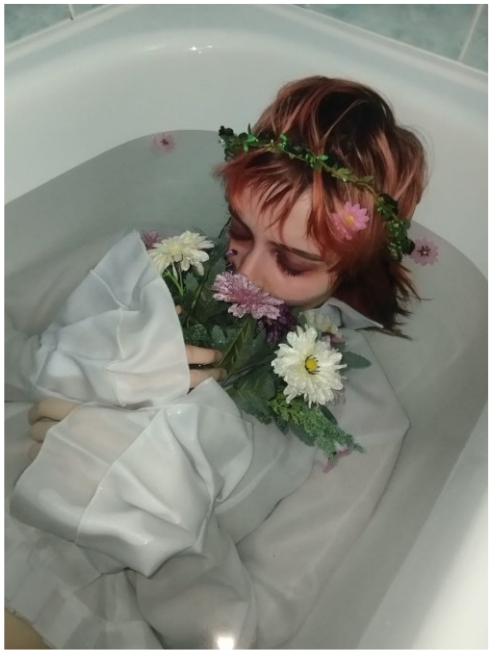
The course in "Intertextuality and Adaptation" (English Studies, BA programme, 2nd year) examines the theory and practice of re-writing, using William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as an example. The seminar culminates in the presentation of the projects devised by the course participants. Referring to one or more intertextual practices examined in the course, the students explore the potential of Shakespeare's tragedy to entertain, surprise, communicate and inspire. The projects devised for the 2023/2024 course use different media and forms to demonstrate a range of attitudes to the original play, from parodic *subtraction* to playful *permutation* to nuanced *additions* and medial *substitutions*. Featuring a comic strip, photo portfolios, collages, tarot cards, a drawing, a poem and a short story, this collection testifies to the continuing liveliness of Shakespeare's drama and the creativity of its readers. We hope that you will find as much pleasure, when viewing and reading this project, as its creators had when working on it.

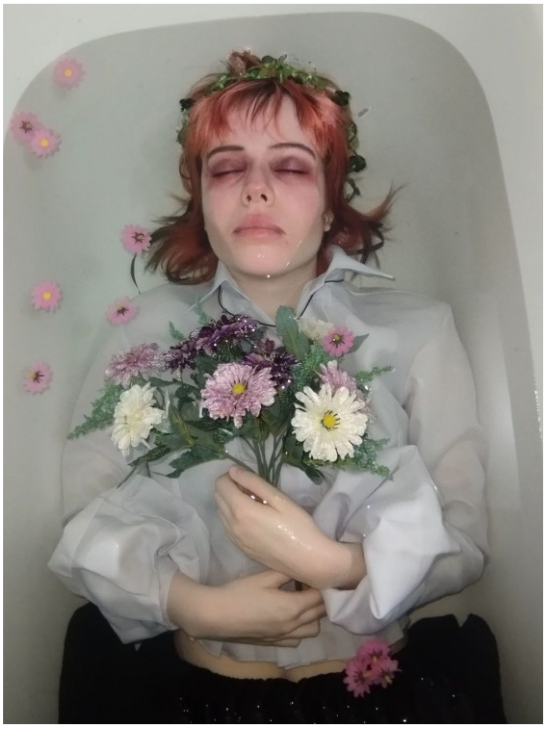
Edyta Lorek-Jezińska


H
H
EXIT
H
G
H
G
H
H
L
H

Darja Stryho





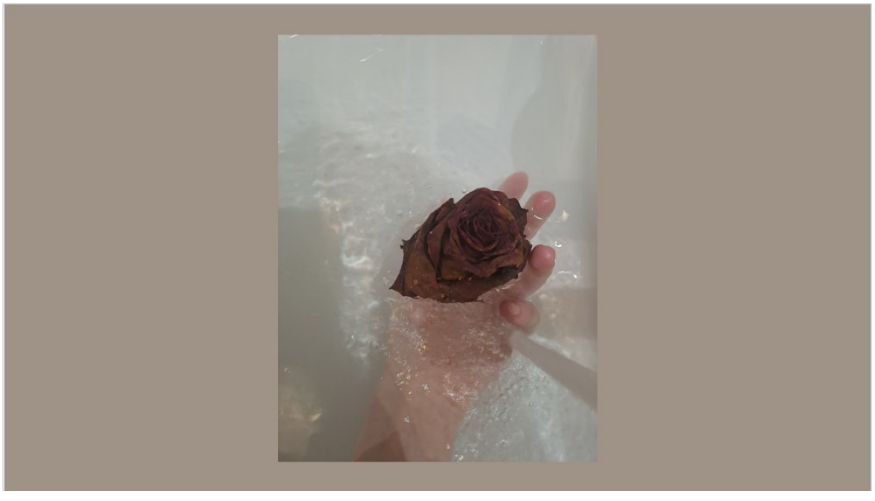


Love or regret?

Hamlet! Oh
My dearest! Dearest?
Dearest you were to me
Once upon a time,
Share My secrets
With you
I did,
Once upon a time.
Give My heart to you,
I did.
Once upon a time.

Once upon a time
Figure out you're cruel,
I did.
Once upon a time
Got used by you,
I did.
Once upon a time.
Told My father about it,
I did.
Once upon a time.
Got ridiculously frustrated about it,
He did.
Now he will haunt you forever,
My dearest! Dearest?

Roksana Różycka & Wiktoria Umiejewska



Natalia Humienna

Destiny Carved in a Black Diamond

People always say one's eyes are the reflections of one's soul. I've always found it poetic, but never actually understood the concept. How could one look into someone else's eyes and see everything they've been through, all the thoughts and emotions going through their heads.

Looking into the eyes of my friends all I saw were the twinkling stars of joy and happiness, their current emotions of distress or relief. Maybe I've never looked deeper, but maybe I didn't even want to. Maybe I wanted to feel special, the only person the world was against. Someone who had everything and shouldn't feel the way they felt because other people had it worse. Maybe I wanted to be misunderstood.

My mom always told me I was special, that I had my own story to write and a destiny to choose. She was a fan of William Shakespeare's plays so much that she named me Ophelia. *You are exceptional*, she reminded me whenever she could, *Your future is in your hands.*

Maybe my future was really what I was afraid of. She spoke about it too much; I felt a pressure building in my chest. Some sort of expectation I knew I could never meet.

Frankly, she didn't call me Ophelia just because she liked *Hamlet.* No. My mom never did anything without a reason, she always sought an ulterior motive for everything. She wanted to give the character a new story, create a new fate. Give her a second life.

What would she think if she saw me now? Standing so close to the edge, looking down at the liters of turbulent, cold water, falling off the edge of some Colorado's waterfall I didn't even bother remembering the name of.

A couple of my friends and I decided to go for a camping trip in Colorado in order to celebrate our graduation from high school. I wasn't very excited about it, to be honest. I much rather would have spent this week and all the following ones, sitting alone in my bed, running away from everything, especially from myself.

So I ended up here, standing one step away from the freedom I've been seeking. A single decision and I could finally be free of the heaviness resting on my shoulders, pulling me to the ground. No more expectations, no more thinking of the shadowy future ahead of me. The feeling in my chest would subside, thoughts in my head would finally stop spinning in circles like an overcrowded, never-ending carousel.

And yet, I just stood here. Stood and watched, too afraid to make a move. Was this really what I wanted? What if…

Drowning in the water; I thought it was a poetic way to die. Both Ophelias conquered by the same, unforgiving force of nature. Both driven to the edge of their endurance.

I wondered if my life was doomed from the moment my name was chosen. Maybe the decision I was about to make was not truly my own. Perhaps it was just fate pulling the strings, orchestrating the course of my existence. But I figured it didn't really matter. All that mattered to me was the freedom I was about to find.

But was I capable of taking that step?

I looked down at the yet undisturbed surface of water, paying close attention to the reflection that appeared in it.

They say eyes are mirrors of the soul.

Chestnut brown orbs shone back at me, staring without mercy, judging. Looking into them, I saw a stranger. They didn't show what was behind the scenes. Nor what I was about to do.

"Ilia!"

The sudden shout of alarm startled me. I panicked, trying to get as far from the water as possible, feeling like it burnt me. She couldn't know what was going on in my head, not before I made the decision.

But it seemed that the power to decide was already taken away from me.

I forgot how close to the edge I was. When I moved backwards, my foot lost the connection with the ground.

"Ilia!"

Somehow I found myself hanging from the ledge. My hand clamped tightly around a branch. The rustle of water echoing in my head, mixing with the loud thumping of my heart.

I could feel the strain on my arm, it hurt. I knew it was only due to the adrenaline pumping in my veins that I was still holding on. Out of control, my eyes roamed downwards, staring down at the chasm below me. Liters of water swirled miles underneath my feet. Waterfall swooshed right next to me. I swallowed a lump in my throat.

I could hear voices somewhere above me, as if they were trying to break an invisible veil surrounding me, they were calling my name, saying to hold on.

If I had to compare this experience to anything, I would say it reminded me of sleepwalking. No idea how I knew that because it had never happened to me before, but it felt right. I looked up like in trance, following some unspoken command, and met the eyes of my best friend.

She was lying on the ground, one hand holding on tightly onto something I couldn't see, the other stretched in front of her, reaching out for me to grab. Too far away. Someone ran up behind her but I couldn't make out the features. Her mouth moved rapidly but I couldn't hear a word. I think someone screamed something at one point. I didn't care. I was staring into her eyes hypnotized.

They say eyes are the windows of the soul.

It was now that I finally understood, looking into those sky blue eyes of my best friend, what they meant. They were full of unshed tears, radiating with fear and concern. Yet it was not what I was mystified about.

There, in her eyes, I saw her past, how much she hurt even after all those years that her mother chose alcohol instead of her. Hurt by her father who remarried a crazy woman and didn't care about her. I saw all the strength she had inside that kept her going and would still do so even years later. The stubbornness to create her own life and family.

Family that I was supposed to be a part of.

I remembered the day she told me about it. Told me about her past and asked me to stay. To never leave. It was rainy outside, she appeared at my doorsteps, all drenched and distressed. Her black velvety hair, damped and clinging to her dark face that was completely wet with both tears and rain. After I helped her dry up and gave her some of my clothes, we sat on my bed, a warm tea in her hand. We talked all night. I remember the promise I gave her in the heat of the moment, wanting to cheer her up.

I'll never leave you.

Those few words rang loudly in my head.

And then it hit me like a speeding train. The realization of what I was contemplating just mere seconds ago. What I was about to do to her, to my friends, to my mom. To my family. And most importantly, to myself.

A spark of hope bloomed inside me. I didn't want to die. Not like that. There was a future I could build and I knew she would help me. They all would.

I felt my hand slip slightly. *No no no!* I screamed in my head. Not now. I had to hold on. I had to.

I sent her a look, hoping it would convey the message. *I don't want to die*, my eyes screamed desperately. She was reaching out her hand closer towards me. Still too far away. I clenched my teeth, using all the strength I still had left inside me to pull myself further. Just a few inches. I could see she did the same. Our fingers brushed. Almost there.

At that moment, the sound of a branch snapping caught my attention.

"No!" I screamed desperately, while trying to stretch my hand further than it was physically possible. And then, miraculously, she clutched my hand, saving me.

A wave of relief swept through me. Everything was going to be okay now. My future didn't seem so scary if I had her and all my friends by my side. In a minute, she would pull me up and we could still be happy together. Or at least that's what I thought in that fleeting second. But then the branch snapped completely and my hand slipped out of hers.

Everything happened so fast. First, I noticed my friend's horrified expression. She started getting further and further away from me. I was falling, which caused my dress to billow, making me feel as if I was flying.

Next, piercing pain went through my body and I felt an uncomfortable sensation of water flowing into my eyes and ears. I heard faint sounds of people panicking and screaming somewhere high above me.

That's when the panic really set in. I was drowning. I kicked my legs, desperately reaching for the surface. I couldn't see anything clearly. As my struggles intensified, the weight of my soaked white dress dragged me deeper. The surface remained agonizingly out of reach.

Eventually, I found myself unable to reach the surface at all. I wondered if maybe Hamlet's Ophelia did not choose death either. Perhaps it was fate who dictated that our lives had to end.

My mind kept replaying the brief minute, in which I found hope. Hope that was snatched away. I just wished my friends wouldn't be too devastated and that my mom wouldn't grieve over me for long.

As the cold darkness surrounded me, I couldn't help but wonder if Hamlet's Ophelia had felt this same chilling embrace. My consciousness was slipping away. The pain, the panic and the regrets merged into a numbing surrender. I had no energy left to fight.

My last thought was my mother. Would she feel guilt for naming me Ophelia? Perhaps that's what started it all, what set in motion the events that led me to this moment.

And then everything went silent.

Aleksandra Ronatowska & Zuzanna J. A. Kalemba


OPHELIA
THE MOON


DEATH


THE LOVERS

breaking news

MUDDY DEATH!

ONE SADNESS COMES AFTER ANOTHER

After one of the most mysterious murders in the town's history, the ghost killer strikes again! Only a few months after the tragedy, Major Claudius will be forced to attend one more funeral! This morning, during her jogging sessions, Gertrude Q. found the body of a young woman floating in the lake. So far, her identity remains unconfirmed, however, the sources close to the case inform us that it was Ophelia who happened to be a victim of this awful crime.

MYSTERIOUS BODY FOUND IN A LAKE!

POLICE EXPLAIN:
There were signs!
Mysterious flowers?
Was she alone?
Why the lake?
No witnesses
and one body.

HAMLET P. AMONG THE SUSPECTS!

TOWN'S PERFECT PRINCE MAY FACE SERIOUS CHARGES!

PHOTO CREDITS:HTTPS://WWW.BEHANCE.NET/GALLERY/9943107/LOVE-YOU-MORE-THAN-40000-BROTHERS & HTTPS://WWW.HARWICHANDMANNINGTREESTANDARD.CO.UK/NEWS/15239063.DANIEL-RADCLIFFE-STARS-IN-HAPLESS-HAMLET-PLAY-WITH-A-MODERN-TWIST/

Izabella Komorowska, Wiktoria Basałaj

CURRENTS. A Journal of Young English Philology Thought and Review. Vol. 10/2024
Ed. E. Lorek-Jezińska, N. Strehlau, J. Antoniak, B. Jankowska, www. currents.umk.pl
ISSN 2449-8769 ||

SNAPS OF LIFE: HAIKU BY STUDENTS OF ENGLISH STUDIES AT NICOLAUS COPERNICUS UNIVERSITY IN TORUŃ

Old pond…
A frog leaps in
Water's sound.
Bashō

On a branch
floating downriver
a cricket, singing.
Issa

Haiku is an unrhymed verse form that emerged in Japan throughout the 17th century. Its characteristic feature is the fixed form: the poem has a set number of syllables (seventeen) arranged in three lines of five, seven, and five. Traditionally, its subject matter is related to nature, usually to the seasons or natural objects and beings, and its goal is to express a single idea, image or feeling. In his *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (1992), J. A. Cuddon describes haiku as "a kind of miniature 'snap' in words" (399), pointing to the intense emotions behind the condensed and contrastive images and to the sense of sudden enlightenment that lies at the centre of the poem. The most famous Japanese haikus come from the work of Matsuo Bashō (1644–1694) and Kobayashi Issa (1763–1828), whose poems appear at the top of the page. Today, haiku is written in various languages across the world. It has influenced the work of poets coming from different cultural milieus. For example, it was a source of inspiration for the poets associated with the Imagist movement, such as Ezra Pound and Amy Lowell. In Poland, Czesław Miłosz frequently spoke about the influence of this kind of poetry on his work and translated haiku into

Polish (*Haiku* published in 1992). The themes and images in haiku have transformed in response to the changing historical conditions, but the fixed number of syllables remains the rule. Haiku continues to be a verse form popular among both professional and non-professional writers. Moreover, the condensed form of the poetry and its emotional impact make it particularly useful as an educational tool in literature classes. The haiku presented here is a selection of poems by English Studies students (2nd year BA) of Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, created for the Introduction to Literary Theory course in 2023/2024.

Katarzyna Więckowska

Sleep, ephemeral
Warm pillow, respite
From midnight to morning lights
Bleeding time away

Snowflakes
Daylight fades away
Memories of sea and rain
The winter is back

Night nature
The sun disappeared
Whiskers brush against the walls
The hunting begins

Two faces
Two faces look up
One is made of flesh and blood
One hidden inside

Days come and go fast
The wind is blowing through time
But not for us now

A bloody forest
Afternoon sun sinks below
A wolf took its prey

Silly, black, furry
paws. Playful spark in the eyes
Besides, brings bad luck

us sitting apart
sunshine blaze on the surface
the lake will sleep soon

A raven flies up
And storms down into the dark
Losing his feathers

Ophelia or me?
There is a river
Oh, to sink and drown in it
Such a muddy death

The never-ending cold
Like the freezing cold
Of gloomy Siberia,
My heart burns with ice.

Winter
snowflakes are falling
and down with each sinking bit
all creation dies

Timelessness
Late night I return
to my residential block,
concrete slab of lives.

Crescent Moon
The Moon that is up;
You change yourself time to time:
I am not alone.

Rapid loss of breath
Plastic cups, bags. Teal water.
Beautiful creature.

CURRENTS. A Journal of Young English Philology Thought and Review. Vol. 10/2024
Ed. E. Lorek-Jezińska, N. Strehlau, J. Antoniak, B. Jankowska, www. currents.umk.pl
ISSN 2449-8769 ||

ABSTRAKTY

Daniela Anisiei, Mihaela Culea

Trauma and Literature: Virginia Woolf's Contribution to the Study of PTSD

Życie osobiste Virginii Woolf przez lata budziło znaczne kontrowersje. Powstało wiele spekulacji na temat jej osobistej walki z chorobą psychiczną i wpływu tej choroby na jej twórczość. Jak pokazuje niniejszy artykuł, twórczość pisarska Virginii Woolf przyjęła formę „skryptoterapii", która uważana jest przez specjalistów za skuteczny sposób radzenia sobie z traumą. Ponadto artykuł ma na celu rzucić więcej światła na jeszcze jeden przejaw geniuszu Woolf: intuicyjny, ale trafny opis cierpienia weterana wojennego, a następnie samobójstwa, będącego konsekwencją nieleczonego zespołu stresu pourazowego. Badając traumę Septimusa, dostrzegamy podobieństwa między jego historią a osobistymi doświadczeniami Woolf i kontaktami ze zdominowaną przez mężczyzn elitą psychiatrii jej czasów (co zostało udokumentowane przez biografów). W artykule zbadano także feministyczne spojrzenie Virginii Woolf na traumę, analizując głęboki wpływ norm społecznych na ludzkie cierpienie.

Barbara Chmielewska

Metaphorical Enhancements of the Us/Them Asymmetry in War Speeches of American Presidents in the Years 1917–1972

Niniejszy artykuł ma na celu analizę metaforycznych konceptualizacji użytych przez prezydentów Stanów Zjednoczonych w celu podkreślenia asymetrii „My/Oni." Na wstępie omówione zostają spostrzeżenia G. Lakoffa i E. Sandikcioglu na temat roli języka metaforycznego w dyskursie politycznym. W kolejnej części artykułu następuje systematyczna analiza przemówień wygłoszonych przez amerykańskich przywódców w czasie I i II wojny światowej oraz wojny w Wietnamie.

Agnieszka Jagła

Redefining Boundaries between Human and Nonhuman in *The Stone Gods* by Jeanette Winterson

Artykuł omawia relacje pomiędzy istotą ludzką a nie-ludzką w powieści Jeanette Winterson *Kamienni bogowie* (2007). Celem artykułu jest ukazanie sposobu w jaki powieść kwestionuje granicę między bohaterkami reprezentującymi człowieka (Billie) i robota (Spike). Artykuł przybliża teorię transhumanizmu oraz posthumanizmu, zwracając uwagę na elementy odróżniające obie myśli filozoficzne. Głównym wnioskiem wyłaniającym się z analizy jest spostrzeżenie, że genetyczne udoskonalenie w formie Genetic Fixing jak i szeroko rozpowszechniona technologizacja życia w *Kamiennych bogach* może być manifestacją ideologii transhumanizmu. Relacja między bohaterkami powieści ujawnia natomiast jej posthumanistyczne przesłanie, które polemizuje ze sposobem rozumienia podziału na ludzi i byty nieludzkie.

Piotr Matczak

"There ought to be a place for people without ambition": The American Dream as a Divisive Force in Charles Bukowski's *Factotum*

Artykuł analizuje postrzeganie amerykańskiego snu przez społeczeństwo amerykańskie podczas II wojny światowej, przedstawione w *Factotum* Charlesa Bukowkiego (1975). Artykuł definiuje znaczenie idei amerykańskiego snu w latach czterdziestych XX wieku jako siły dzielącej amerykańskie społeczeństwo. Omówione zostały różne perspektywy, jakie na temat snu mają członkowie poszczególnych klas społecznych, ze szczególnym naciskiem na poglądy prezentowane przez głównego bohatera, Henry'ego Chinaskiego. Sen, który niegdyś był czynnikiem jednoczącym, zdaje się być źródłem pogłębiających się pęknięć w obrazie spójnego amerykańskiego społeczeństwa. *Factotum* przedstawia szczególny przypadek poszukiwania znaczenia amerykańskiego snu w umyśle niespokojnej jednostki. Pod wpływem wszechobecnej wiary w ideę amerykańskiego snu w Stanach Zjednoczonych lat 40. próbuje ona pogodzić swoje wewnętrzne przekonania z otaczającą rzeczywistością, starając się odnaleźć swoje miejsce w społeczności. Wydaje się, że jest to niemożliwe: amerykański sen jest przedstawiony jako czynnik opresyjny, który ostatecznie zmusza głównego bohatera do pogodzenia się z półświatkiem amerykańskich wyrzutków.

Mercy Robi Onyango

American Literature in the Eyes of African Students

Literatura amerykańska jest niewątpliwie znaczącą siłą we współczesnym świecie literackim. Można uznać, że jest potężnym gigantem stojącym ponad innymi i wywierającym globalny wpływ na kultury literackie. Dlatego też studenci różnych narodowości i kultur muszą zmagać się z koniecznością skupienia całej uwagi na dorobku literatury amerykańskiej, co odbywa się często kosztem ich własnych tradycji literackich oraz wyjątkowych doświadczeń kulturowych. Aby można było lepiej zrozumieć różnorodność kulturową całego świata, każde społeczeństwo powinno mieć możliwość reprezentacji swojego dorobku kulturowego. Negując ten fakt, istnieje bardzo duże ryzyko zawężenia postrzegania wyłącznie do perspektywy amerykańskiej kosztem innych kultur, które są bogate w pojęcia i doświadczenia obce literaturze Ameryki. Stany Zjednoczone nie mogą reprezentować całego świata i fakt ten powinien zostać odnotowany w dorobku literatury światowej, ponieważ różnorodność kulturowa i jej przedstawienie jest niezbędnym elementem współczesnej literatury. Niniejszy artykuł jest analizą odczuć studentów z Afryki nasuwających się przy lekturze literatury amerykańskiej (np. *Manifest Destiny* Andersa Stephansona czy *Blood Meridan* Cormaca McCarthy'ego). Jego celem jest zbadanie, czy studenci mogą czuć związek z pewnymi historiami, jednocześnie czując się wyobcowanymi w kontakcie z innymi w zależności od poziomu podobieństwa tekstów do doświadczeń kultury afrykańskiej.

Barbara Pawlak

Technoapocalypse: The Effects of the Technological Disaster on the Human Subject in Don DeLillo's *The Silence*

Apokaliptyczne wizje opierają się na wydarzeniach o wielkiej skali, takich jak globalna wojna nuklearna, katastrofalna klęska żywiołowa czy inwazja z kosmosu. Łatwo jest sobie wyobrazić bezpośrednie skutki tych klęsk i wszystkie ofiary śmiertelne, zniszczoną infrastrukturę i spustoszoną ziemię. Istnieje jednak bardziej podstępna wizja apokalipsy, która nie jawi się od razu jako spektakl śmierci i zniszczenia. Jednym z rzadziej wykorzystywanych pomysłów na koniec świata jest katastrofa niszcząca technologię. Precyzyjne uderzenie rozbłysku słonecznego lub potężny impuls elektromagnetyczny może doprowadzić do końca współczesnej cywilizacji. Jednym z przykładów tekstów poruszających problem takiej katastrofy jest „Cisza" Dona DeLillo.

W powieści wszystkie urządzenia przestają działać bez ostrzeżenia. Bohaterowie opowieści zmagają się z nową sytuacją. Chociaż DeLillo nie opisuje szczegółowo ogromnej paniki, ani bardziej spektakularnych oznak końca świata, zwraca on uwagę na inną kwestię. Przede wszystkim „Cisza" pokazuje, jak technologia stała się nieodłączną częścią nie tyle naszego życia, co naszego istnienia. Brak funkcjonującej technologii bezpośrednio wpływa na myślenie i mowę bohaterów powieści. Ta problematyczna sytuacja pokazuje, że tajemnicze wydarzenie doprowadziło do czegoś więcej niż tylko braku kontaktu ze światem zewnętrznym, uszkodzenia samolotów i zepsutych świateł. Ta technologiczna katastrofa doprowadzi do ruiny współczesnej cywilizacji, ale także pokazuje, że ludzki umysł nie może prawidłowo funkcjonować bez bodźców dostarczanych przez technologię. Powieść jawi się, jako ostrzeżenie dotyczące stanu ludzkiego podmiotu, który bez technologii rozpadłby się mentalnie.

Wiktoria Rogalska

From Necromancer to Mother: The Analysis of a Cyborgian Female in *Raised by Wolves*

Rosi Braidotti w swoim tekście „Matki, potwory i maszyny" [Mothers, Monsters and Machines] (1997) dostrzega czynnik, który łączy maszynę z figurą kobiety-potwora. Porównując kobiece ciało do maszyny, której głównym celem jest reprodukcja, można zauważyć, że kobietę postrzega się jako inkubator, który może zagwarantować „przyszłość ludzkości." Biorąc pod uwagę postęp technologiczny i rozwój fabularny science fiction, idea sztucznego macierzyństwa staje się realnym scenariuszem. Donna Haraway, opisując swoją koncepcję cyborga w tekście "Manifest Cyborgów", [Cyborg Manifesto] (1985) zwraca uwagę na reprodukcyjne możliwości cyborgów. Ponadto, Haraway zauważa, że cybernetyczna kobieta stworzona, aby przekraczać ludzkie oczekiwania, buntuje się przeciwko narzuconym zasadom i standardom.

Artykuł ma na celu analizę postaci Lamii, kobiety-cyborga, występującej w serialu „Wychowane przez wilki" [*Raised by Wolves*] (2020), która pomimo stereotypowych wzorców płciowych, uprzedzeń religijnych i rasowych, ma możliwość przeżyć wszystkie etapy macierzyństwa wciąż pozostając cyborgiem i 'nekromantką'. Wykorzystując swoją mechaniczną budowę oraz doświadczenie życiowe, Lamia wzmacnia swoją pozycję jako matka i wojowniczka, która jest gotowa poświęcić własne życie, aby ocalić swoje dzieci.

Hanna Stelmaszczyk

Queer Gothic Otherness of Truman Capote's *Other Voices, Other Rooms* and Randall Kenan's *A Visitation of Spirits*

Inność to gotycki motyw, który stał się metaforą wszelkiego rodzaju opresji i dyskryminacji—w przeszłości pokazywał on zagrożenia i podkreślał niebezpieczeństwo, jakie stanowi osoba, która jest poza społeczeństwem, później posłużył on do rozważania uczuć i doświadczeń wyrzutka. Jako taki stał się ważnym sposobem opisywania wewnętrznych zmagań osób queer, ich zwątpienia w siebie i strachu przed reakcją, z jaką mogą się spotkać, jeśli kiedykolwiek się ujawnią. Niniejszy artykuł podejmuje się analizy powieści „Inne głosy, inne ściany" Trumana Capote'ego (1948) i „A Visitation of Spirits" Randalla Kenana (1989). Powieści te reprezentują gatunek Southern Gothic i opisują problemy, z którymi mierzą się ich queerowi bohaterowie, dorastający chłopcy, którzy zostali przez swoje otoczenie uznani za innych. Artykuł analizuje sposób, w jaki obie powieści przedstawiają odmienność i reakcje społeczności na tę inność. Truman Capote w „Innych głosach, innych ścianach" łączy poszukiwanie własnej tożsamości ze znalezieniem swojego odbicia w innych. Wykorzystuje gotycką atmosferę, aby wskazać strach bohatera przed odrzuceniem i przedstawić trudną drogę odkrywania własnej tożsamości i dorastania do niej—w jego przedstawieniu inność jest czymś wrodzonym, co należy odkryć i przyjąć. Autor tworzy raczej optymistyczną opowieść o innym, który odnajduje swoją tożsamość, swoje miejsce i ludzi pokrewnych sobie w zagmatwanym świecie. Jego inni nie doświadczają poczucia winy ani wstydu z powodu swojej tożsamości— zamiast tego akceptują ją. Z kolei „A Visitation of Spirits" autorstwa Randalla Kenana skupia się na idei, że inność jest przypisana, a nie wrodzona. Autor opisuje hermetyczną, wykluczającą społeczność, która bezlitośnie karze wszelkie odstępstwa od heteronormatywności. Ukazuje, w jaki sposób tworzona jest inność i jakie są wewnętrzne koszty groźby wykluczenia.

Anna Temel

Through the Eyes of the Machine: Rethinking Humanity, Language, and the Societal Status Quo in *The Murderbot Diaries*

Podejmowanie tematu zmian społecznych i postępu w dyskursie publicznym często napotyka na opór ze względu na zakorzenione przekonania i podziały ideologiczne. Literatura, w szczególności science fiction, stanowi jednak unikatową platformę do

rozważań nad transformacją społeczną poprzez eksplorację wyimaginowanych światów i scenariuszy niezależnych od współczesnego status quo. Niniejszy artykuł koncentruje się na filozoficznym potencjale science fiction i roli technologii jako silnej metafory zmiany i odmienności obecnej w serii *The Murderbot Diaries* (*Pamiętniki Murderbota*) Marthy Wells. Artykuł analizuje rolę Murderbota, cyborga ucieleśniającego perspektywę zewnętrznego obserwatora ludzkich zachowań, jako metaforycznego narzędzia do głębokiego kwestionowania społecznego status quo. Atykuł twierdzi, że dzięki queerowemu odczytaniu, znajomość Murderbota z ludzkimi konstruktami społecznymi, uprzedzeniami i normami, zestawiona z jego statusem "outsidera", czyni go silnym narzędziem krytyki społecznej. Analizując queerowość Murderbota przez pryzmat teorii queer i gender studies, niniejszy artykuł bada jej głębokie implikacje dla zrozumienia norm społecznych. Ponadto artykuł analizuje, w jaki sposób przedstawienie queerowej tożsamości w serii Murderbot podkreśla indywidualność i sprawczość postaci, tym samym uczłowieczając ją i kwestionując samą koncepcję człowieczeństwa. Artykuł ma na celu pokazanie, że queerowość Murderbota nie tylko podważa konwencjonalne pojęcia binarnej płci i heteronormatywności, ale także oferuje krytyczne spojrzenie na procesy społeczne leżące u źródeł tych pojęć. Ponadto przedstawia queerowość jako dającą poczucie sprawczości alternatywę dla dostosowywania się do status quo. Dzięki tej analizie artykuł przyczynia się do zniuansowanego zrozumienia zmian społecznych i tożsamości w kontekście fikcji spekulatywnej, zachęcając do ponownego rozważenia ustalonych paradygmatów i przyjęcia różnorodności.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Daniela Anisiei is a post-graduate MA student at "Vasile Alecsandri" University of Bacău, Faculty of Letters, studying Communication Practices in English. She holds a BA in Political Sciences and a MA in Communication, both at S.N.S.P.A. Bucharest, Romania and a second BA in English/French from "Vasile Alecsandri" University of Bacău, Romania. For over 20 years, she has worked as a primary and secondary school teacher in Piatra-Neamţ, Romania or in countries like the UK or UAE. She has participated with papers yearly at various Students' Conferences organised by UVA Bacău or other Universities. She has two articles published in Romania (in RoBrit) and two in Bulgaria: in *LiterMedia* and *Studies in Linguistics, Culture, and FLT*.

Barbara Chmielewska is an English philology student at the University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn. Her main interests are cognitive linguistics, gesture, and political discourse. Her current research focuses on the role of metaphorical conceptualizations and figurative language used in presidential speeches related to war.

Mihaela Culea is an Assoc. Prof. and Vice Dean at the Faculty of Letters from "Vasile Alecsandri" University of Bacău. With a doctoral degree in English literature and culture, her research interests include Enlightenment English literature, British cultural history, cultural studies and discourse analysis. She has published four monographs and over sixty scientific articles in internationally indexed journals.

Agnieszka Jagła is a PhD student in literature studies at the Department of British Literature and Culture at the University of Łódź. Her doctoral

dissertation focuses on the concept of transhumanism in selected 21st century English literature.

Piotr Matczak is a master's degree student of English Philology at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. His primary area of interest is Californian literature of the 20th century. He is currently working on his MA project concerning spatiality in selected novels about 1960s California. His BA project is entitled "Debunking the American Dream in Charles Bukowski's *Ham on Rye* and *Factotum*". Additionally, he is the head of a student team researching the impact of a literary mentoring program on the development of academic skills in high school students. Professionally, he teaches English in a high school in Poznań.

Mercy Robi Onyango is an English master's degree graduate from the university of Łódź, class of 2020. She graduated from the University of Nairobi with a BA in Education in 2016. Currently, she is a prospective PhD candidate as well as being engrossed in research on Afropolitan Literature.

Barbara Pawlak is a PhD student in the Doctoral School of Humanities of University of Łódź. She published articles entitled "The Return of the Sublime and the Transcendental in Don DeLillo's *Zero K*" in *Explorations: A Journal of Language and Literature* in 2021 and "Approaching the sublime in *Chernobyl* (2019)" in *Currents: A Journal of Young English Philology Thought and Review* in 2020. Her current research focuses on the technology and its effects on human subjects in Don DeLillo's novels and the technological sublime in the media.

Wiktoria Rogalska is an MA student of English Philology at the Department of British Literature and Culture, University of Łódź. Her BA thesis concentrated on posthumanism, technological advancement and their influence on gender roles/norms. She is very much interested in feminist and queer studies as she finds them relevant to understanding the unforeseen future

Hanna Stelmaszczyk is a student at the Faculty of English at the Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań and is currently writing her MA thesis. She is interested in Romantic and Modernist literature and poetry as well as Gothic fiction. Her research interests are the portrayal of otherness and the uncanny in fiction, as well as gender and queer studies.

Anna Temel is a first-year PhD student at the Doctoral School of Humanities at the University of Warsaw, where she previously earned her bachelor's and master's degrees in American Studies. Furthermore, she studied at the University of Sussex in the United Kingdom through a scholarship, concentrating on digital feminism and modern art. Anna's PhD centres around the subversion of gender and sexual normativity in speculative video games. She specialises in analysing texts of popular culture through a perspective of posthumanism. Throughout her academic career, Anna has delivered numerous conference talks covering a wide range of topics, including feminist music, digital activism, and the interplay of gender and technology.