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Poetry

“Among the Ashes”

Kayla Mendez and Claryse Mendoza

In the crying ashes lay a potsherd
that scraped Job’s oozing, pus-filled boils; covered
his soles up to his crown which stole his strength.
Riches blessed upon him brought a great length
of easy faith. Without your aid he will curse
thy Holy name. My messengers brought much worse
news of his slaughtered cattle and scorched sheep.
But the haunting silence made him weep
for his children naively ate together
under the same roof. To stop Job’s blether
about his undying love for his
protective God, what you giveth is
what I taketh away. Your blood gushed
as a sacrifice while Job’s blood slushed
onto the cracks as unwelcomed torture.
Peppered with rotting flesh flakes, his warmer
spirit tries to keep his frame from crumbling.
His wife’s shame also sent his faith stumbling;
broken was his heart, abandoned past the time
gifted. You were wary putting Job in grime,
for you knew his delicate faith could not
endure the trials. With more than one ought

to have, his blessings poured out without
hesitation. No more riches brought a drought,
an empty potsherd coated with dust was he.
In the midst of an overwhelming sea
of people, Job was as barren as a
potsherd. The loyal ones waited till the seventh day,
like good servants should, to reveal what
I have known for ages. You called me a mutt
for showing the power I was meant to have.
You cast away my dominance to calve
your insecurities. And I still know
that man can surpass your greatness, though
you are their maker. Now my legacy
continues with the naked's ascendancy.
If you truly loved Job, you'd have shook
him from false confidence, yet you forsook
your perfect and upright man. It is
inevitable, even for those of his
character, to stay fearful of you.
Your pottering hand could make a new
spirit within Job whose beliefs are scattered,
yet you remain watching clay get battered.
The hardest of blows were from his wife;
not Eliphaz's, not Bildad's, not Zophar's strife.
Not the seven sons' and three daughters' death.

Not the burning of his sheep with fire's breath.
Not the farmhand's and cattle's bloody murder.
His help-mate's resentment to be a martyr
completely covered the potsherd in dust.
Only through rebirth could Job leave gloom's thrust.
Smoothed with humility, he was guarded
from further torment but was still departed
from security in faith. Your test was passed
while fear of me in your creations stays vast.

“A Saint or a Vampire: A modern-day tribute to 19th century vampire literature”

Miguel Ramirez

I reach out to the altar pleading with Christ,
struggling with the weight of what's behind me.

“Forgive me, for I have sinned in His house.”

Albert's fangs are deep in my neck,
connecting his soul to my own.

“Why have I done this?”

My vision becomes a red blur,
losing the battle of consciousness.

“I couldn't let him hurt anyone else.”

Albert was once a humble man,
staying true to himself and to others.

“He's not a man anymore.”

I admired his vision and his strength,
studying the truths of life.

“He's become death itself.”

He was an orchid of the church,
growing with his audience.

“I have to stop him.”

He grabs my pruned hands,
forcing them to pray.

“Does he think God can save us?”

My heart beats too fast,
clasping before its arrest.

“I won’t save him this time.”

The holy fountain continues to flow,
containing the water of peace.

“He hasn’t sensed the end.”

I grab the wooden stake,
feeling the life it once had.

“His death will save many.”

I turn to Albert’s bright yellow gaze,
looking at him for the last time.

“The church will mark his tomb.”

His face is covered with my blood,
flooding his thoughts and hunger.

“Albert can’t walk this Earth.”

I throw him into the fountain,
staking his vampiric heart of darkness.

“Am I destined for Heaven or Hell?”

His blood seeps into the fountain,
corrupting its holy roots.

“I’m sorry for your death.”

He left his “Kiss of Judas” on me,¹
gifting me a bloody death.

“But why must I suffer?”

I will die in this pool with him,
drifting to the house of the unknown.

“Jesus, forgive us our sins.”

I feel our blood and the water,
bathing our soon-to-be corpses.

“I am no saint in this world.”

I close my bloodshot eyes,
accepting His entrance to beyond.

“God, let us suffer no more.”

¹ The “Kiss of Judas” is in reference to the bite of the vampire. This is noted in Julian Osgood Field’s 19th Century narrative, “A Kiss of Judas” (1893).

“Agosto 21, 2015 11:11 p.m.”

José Chaman

Agosto 21, 2015 11:11 p.m.

Tu recuerdo persiste en mí
como un río que nace de la lluvia
y desciende desde las santas alturas
para irrigar el bosque de mi alma.

En otras palabras,
tu recuerdo es fuente de vida
para este corazón marchito
que viaja de otoño a otoño...

buscando a aquel pino marcado
con dos iniciales y el inicio
de un viaje más profundo
hacia el origen de este amor.

Guardo aún la esperanza
de encontrarnos nuevamente,
no como lo que somos ahora,
sino como lo que fuimos alguna vez.

Y así remo por el río de tu recuerdo:

esperando pacientemente
verte por fin en alguna orilla,
para continuar este viaje juntos
hacia el principio del final.

August 21, 2015 11:11 p.m.

Your memory persists in me
like a river that is born from the rain
and descends from the Holy heights
to irrigate the forest of my soul.

In other words,
your memory is a source of life
for this withered heart
who travels from autumn to autumn...

looking for that marked pine tree
with two initials and the start
of a deeper journey
towards the origin of this love.

I still keep hope
to meet again
not like what we are now,

but as what we once were.

I stir by the river of your memory
waiting patiently to see you
on some lost shore,
and to continue this journey together
towards the beginning of the end.

“The Human Fall”

Tanya Brouse

Graffiti litters the walls
Screams sprint down the haunted halls
Knives and scalpels smile
The dried blood has been here a while

No mortal escapes the human fall.

Dead vines stick to the walls
A dark faceless spirit crawls within the halls
The doll’s stitched face smiles
The glass from the shattered mirrors has been here a while

No mortal escapes the human fall.

Empty chains hold to the walls
The broken crucifixes lay scattered in the halls
The dark red eyes smile
The decaying corpses have been here a while

No mortal escapes the human fall.

Run while you can

As far as you can go
Or it'll catch you
If you're too slow

It will chase you everywhere
No matter the place
Work or home
Time is always a race

At what time Death will attack you
You will truly be aware
For like a silent night owl
It watches you with a merciless stare
Then it rips you from the present
To the state of the unknown

But where is the unknown?
Who could tell?

All we know is this: humans are feasted on when Death rings the dinner bell.

No mortal escapes the human fall.

No mortal escapes the inevitable human death
That creeps upon you from the moment you take your very last dying breath.

“aftermath”

Rhi Broussard

you knew that revelry would eventually come to this end
that you would have to leave, but
even knowing there would be a different world
you weren't expecting this on the other side.

that party must have lasted days, you think
as you hear whizzing above you
a glance reveals a silver object flying
through the air up high

you wonder to yourself
is your little town by the river still there?
there's no way to know unless you go
so travel there you shall

without a reliable steed to travel with,
you have no way to go but by foot
more mental monstrosities pass by
on a road of smooth and small cobbles

the journey is not long, but
the only sight that greets you

as you approach the remnants of your home
are ruins of the old stone walls

the buildings are gone, as are the people
your old life nothing but a memory
how much time has truly passed, you wonder
running your fingers over mossy old stones

how did it come to this? what could've caused it?
you have no clue and that, perhaps, is the worst.
the lack of understanding, of what happened
you wish that you could know

“Little Butterfly”

Rosa Deyo

It's not too far into November
Drink in hand, I sit down, sun on my back,
Wind blows in my face, ice cold
Taking a sip, I shiver

The pavilion I face has not one crack
In the middle, a little butterfly flaps its' wings,
I think not before I cross the concrete
The little butterfly reaches out for me

Gently I pick him up, holding him close
Even sheltered by the wall of my chest,
The wind pushes him over
My other hand blocks out the offender

Running around the pavilion,
I look for a flower in the sun,
It's the least I can do
As I fuss over the little butterfly

Soon I see a flowerbed
Red, purple, yellow, all in the radiant sun,

I carefully place the little butterfly
He seems happy in the petals now

Tears well in my eyes as I walk away
I grab my drink and leave,
Goodbye little butterfly
It's too far in November for you.

“A Storm”

Floridell Berry

A storm.

An element of life we all must face at some point.

The howling wind, the flashing lightning,
the screaming thunder, the pouring rain,
the looming clouds, the bending trees.

But what if I told you,
that I am the storm,
and the storm is me?

Sometimes,
I am the lightning.
I see and then I leave,
chipping in for the hell of it.
And everyone remembers.

Sometimes,
I am the thunder.
Screaming for my own voice to be heard,
loud enough to make everything stop.
And everyone remembers.

Sometimes,
I am the trees.
Bending down to the wills of others,
hoping not to break.
And everyone remembers.

Sometimes,
I am the wind.
Demanding complete control,
pushing everyone in my way.
And everyone remembers.

Sometimes,
I am the rain.
Obscuring the view,
hiding the truth.
And everyone remembers.

And sometimes,
I am the clouds.
Once you see me there is no turning back,
I am the instigator.
And everyone remembers.

“No Longer His Number One”

Tanya Brouse

Hot red tears falling down her face
Her wanting to scream so innate
Pressure bottling up inside
Undeniable confusion and anxiety sky high
Questions rushing in and out of the mind
The senses bursting, the whole situation awry
Too late to turn back to what was
It's all said and done

Look in the mirror sweetheart –

You're no longer his number one.

Her tears created a stream
Yet he never once came
She stared at the skeleton white telephone cord
Yet he never once rang
She closed her eyes and fell asleep
Wishing she could recreate what they used to be
All the while across the city

He was with her –

The new girl.

What a pity.

“The Last Seat”

Negin Yazdani Motlagh

The last seat of the bus is the coziest place on Earth.

Summer noon and the cold breeze that informs me of unrequited lovers’
season.

It’s delightful in summer’s burning heat.

Big windows facing the land of people
with specific stories to their individual.

They don’t see me; I fantasize their story.

My ears are drunk on the Waltz player’s fondness
the perfume of air and paper.

I wish the traffic light would stay longer.

It’s delightful, the last seat of the bus.

“In Good Company”

Sarah Calogero

I hope one day
to be successful
enough to be
burned in effigy.
Because a witch
at the stake is
the same as a
saint when you
really get right
down to it.

And I know
if I face the mob,
the head they cut
from my shoulders
will have created
something thoughtful.

So, I'll sleep with
as many emperors'
daughters as I like
and risk getting told

my visions of God
are heresy while
being branded
with a scarlet
letter.

For the only things
worth doing in life
are those which
get you crowned
in thorns.

“The Silence is Blaring Loud”

Magdalena Trujillo

Mom,

I saw you today when I was running.

You were a cardinal

flying next to me.

So, I ran harder, faster

to inflict pain on my body

that I couldn't take from yours.

It was tears, not sweat,

streaming down my face.

How could a heart hurt so much,

but still be alive?

Why you?

Why now?

Why not me?

I would've traded spots

with you in a heartbeat,

but I know that you would have suffered

as much as I am now,

The silence is blaring loud

without you here.

I love you and

I hope I don't keep you waiting too long.

“Summer Love”

Michael Lazcano

A loving kiss bestowed upon my head,
troubles drifting away like dandelions in the wind,
wasting away in a sea of fathomless bluebonnets.

Blades of grass brushing against my arms,
your hands running through my hair,
my eyes meeting yours.

Sun rays illuminating that golden skin,
fingertips gliding effortlessly across my chest,
safely in your loving arms.

This used to be a dream,
a prayer at the foot of my bed,
you are now by my side.

“two years prior”

Rhi Broussard

don't listen, they say, to the whispers in the night
the winds that whistle, that promise dreams fulfilled
the shadows that speak, that coerce you in
the stars you swear twinkle brighter at those words

don't take heed, you're told, of the birds that chirp words
the animals whose eyes are beckoning you to follow
the crickets that chirp through the night in familiar song
the brook by the forest that bubbles with laughter

don't follow the path, someone chided, to where nature has stolen it
where the bushes bend out of your way, as if by magic
where the trees gossip as you pass, whispering their secrets
where the light warps as you walk, guiding you along

don't leave the village, everyone warns, for you are safe here
you are cherished and loved, with no desires to speak of
you are cared for, with people who know your every need
you are in familiar waters, with days all the same

don't disobey, you're always told, for disaster will follow
what if you thought them wrong, for the forest holds no secrets any longer

what if you listened to the whispers of the night, for it tells no lies
what if you followed the light, for its promises of idyllic life

you broke every rule, you think, as the birds sing an unknown song
as you step onto soft grass, not wondering where your shoes have gone
as you watch the forest become new, eyes wide at the sights
as you turn your back on the village, never to return

“Her”

José Chaman

Her eyes
profound as the ocean
bright as the sun

a reflection of eternity
I can see my life
mirrored on Her beautiful eyes

Her smile is paradise
all I want is to make Her laugh
make Her happy
make Her feel alive

She wrote Her name on my skin
using Her teeth and lips
She said I was Hers
and I said She was mine

She kissed my soul
She touched my heart
She undressed my pain
She made me feel alive

“Love Through My Eyes”

Abigail Fernandez

He asked me what love was through my eyes,

I responded...

Love is a best friend.

Love is a florist taking off the thorns from a beautiful rose.

Love is the rainbow appearing after the crying clouds.

Love could be your gentle touch.

Love could be your presence melting my worries away.

Love could be you.

“In This Hello”

Amanda Magana

Is that you I hear through the wind?
An echo along the leaves,
a game of tag you like to play
to reassure me?

You're in this opaque air,
entering my atmosphere;
your scent lingers from my hair
down to where the earth appears.

In this hello, I weep
for your eternal sleep.
I'll keep your whispers safe
within my chest.

You'll come to me
in the curves of the moon.
I'll let the wind serve
as the passing between me and you.

I'll love you as the night falls
into midnight blue

and dreams of you
consume me.

“Self-Love”

Negin Yazdani Motlagh

You reach a point where nothing else matters.

Neither the bad nor the good affects you.

You reach a point when you no longer differentiate between seasons.

You start to enjoy everything in the same way.

Neither the bitter cold of winter, nor the sunset of autumn, or the massive heat of summer bothers you anymore.

You are just moving forward.

It is at this point where you realize the truth: people only love the benefits that you bring.

This is when you **Learn to Love Yourself.**

This is when you realize, now is the time to do the things you have always promised.

Otherwise, you are just moving forward.

“Warmth”

Brandon Schmidling

I feel the sun hit my face.

As I walk out my front door to attack the day.

I feel the sun hit my face,

giving me comforting warmth,

strength to face the day.

I feel the sun hit my face.

Giving me courage to face forward,

letting me know that I'll be okay.

The sun shines upon me in earnest.

Waiting to see what I do with this life of mine.

The sun shines upon me with warmth.

Like a hug from my mother.

The sun encourages me to try my best.

Short Fiction

“Stranger’s Cigarettes”

Rosa Deyo

I wasn’t in the hospital room when Danny woke up. At the time I was leaning against the wall on the side of the hospital, not too far from the entrance but still out of sight from anyone walking in or out; I hid outside where the smokers went. I didn’t smoke, I never liked the taste, but those days I never found myself declining the offers of a free cigarette from anyone who found me out there. I never asked for a cigarette, it wasn’t something I was seeking out, yet I looked forward to the offering of strangers, nonetheless. The people I met by that wall were never there for me. They had their own worries that they were caught up in. They were simply using the tranquility of the hospital exterior to take a breather from reality just on the other side of that wall.

Danny smoked. Not a lot, but enough for me to notice at times, like when he would get into my car late at night, his jacket still smelling of tobacco. My friends said they never noticed it, but they were rarely next to him. Their shoulders never brushed his, nor did he ever lean over them, crowding them against the billiard table to adjust their shot before they took it.

I didn’t know what cigarettes he smoked, or even if he was ever loyal to a specific brand, but sometimes when a stranger offered me a cigarette, it tasted like how his lips had tasted. The familiarity was always brief, but I never forgot that taste.

How could I forget?

“sunset stowaway”

Rhi Broussard

Lights float through the glade, giving the small, wooded area a magical feel. Faeries flit about, adding to the feeling of mysticism. If you were sensitive to the magic in the air, you would know exactly what was going on, but alas. You grew up with folktales of the fae, knowing that listening to them would only lead to bad things. To never eat anything in their realm, to never grant them your name, to never owe one of them anything. Tales of caution, or of warning. Your parents warned you about them every night when you were a little sprout, saying that they might come and snatch you in the night and replace you with a changeling child.

You know that couldn't happen now, that only infants were swapped, but the prospect still chills you. That chill remains, even as sprites dance through the air, leaving trails of glittering sparks behind them. Undoubtedly some sort of magic, but you aren't sure what. The small faeries have a beauty to them, even knowing the wickedness that sprites and their kind spawn from. The fae aren't to be trusted, but... these few can't be doing any harm, can they?

One step forward. The sprites stop, and there are titters of laughter. Whispers in a language you can't hope to understand, as the otherworldly lights circle around the glade... it's beautiful, in a way. The light warps in an unnatural sense, making the glade seem to almost glow. Trees you've never seen before surround this small paradise, with all kinds of wildflowers growing in the soft grass. You spot the occasional moss-covered rock being used as a perch as the fae to pause in their revelry. Maybe you'll stay a while.

Wait. No. You can't stay, something could happen. If you enter this glade and stay for even a moment, the world could be a changed place upon your return, with nothing familiar. Your family, gone. There's tell of tales of family members gone missing into the woods, never to be seen again. You know of one such person, one who entered these very woods two years past and never returned.

But... you can feel a tugging sensation, deep in your chest. There's a longing, you know, for something different. You know it's wrong, you know

that entering this glade will spell the end of everything you know. Your family, distraught. Your betrothed back in your little town by the river will think you a betrayer. Despite that... the longing is there, and you reach for it, ever tentative. The step you took... somehow you know that just that small step has set something in motion.

More tittering, more words in a mysterious language, and... footfalls. The soft crunch of grass. You freeze, the grip on your basket of sweet blueberries tightening as someone else enters the glade. You know from the moment you lay eyes upon them that they're a fae. If their otherworldly nature didn't give it away, then the pointed ears and unnatural eyes would. Beautiful, you think, eyes going wide as the fae stands amidst the grass and flowers growing wild. You shouldn't go to them, but... one long and slender finger crooks, beckoning you forward. Your basket falls to the forest floor, and despite the small voice of reason screaming for you to stop, you enter the glade.

“Going up the Hill”

Courtney Peña

To avoid the things that scare me in life, I would constantly run through them so that I could get them out of the way faster. Why would I want to stop running during the lowest point in my life? I would constantly tell myself to keep running. Look ahead at the end result. Look towards my future.

Throughout my life, I had been running. My heart was always accelerating, and my breathing was always rapid. I had never been satisfied with the present because I wanted to escape to the future. That’s why I would run through life. Recently, a man suddenly appeared in my path. He was a middle-aged man with blonde hair and light-colored eyes. I could not stop myself in time, and I ended up running into his chest. The man did not fall, but he grabbed me by the shoulders. He looked right into my eyes and was inhaling and exhaling. He did not talk, but just by looking into his eyes, I knew he wanted me to follow his breathing. I mirrored him, and I slowly started to calm down. Once my heart rate went down, I realized who this man was.

My legs began to feel weak, and I fell to my knees. I put my small hands over my face and cried. Once I moved my hands, I saw that the man was on his knees and looking at me. He smiled at me, and it made me feel comforted and somehow valued. Without talking, his smile made me realize that I was safe with him. He put his hands on my cheeks and gently wiped the tears from my face. Afterwards, he stood up and extended his right hand towards me. I grabbed his hand, and he pulled me up. We continued to walk on the street, arm in arm.

We walked the neighborhood block in one straight line. The first house on the block had a noticeable exterior. There were two young girls playing basketball while the mother was pulling weeds and the father was watering the grass. We waved at them, and they waved back. We continued walking, and the man pointed out another house. There were two adult women and their parents sitting on lawn chairs, and they were chatting. They all had cold drinks and bug spray with them. The man said, “Hello,” to them and the parents said it back to us.

We continued walking in silence for a while until we heard crying. There were two parents taking a newborn baby out of their vehicle. The new mother looked madly in love with her family. Meanwhile, the father had this look of happiness that I had never seen in a man. So as not to intrude on their beautiful moment, the man and I whispered, "Congratulations," and made our way down the street. Then, three kids ran into the man and me. They apologized and the parents came running to us and also apologized. We reassured them that it was fine and then we had a short conversation. The family bond that these individuals had made my heart warm, but the man wanted us to keep walking. I waved goodbye and continued walking.

The last house we saw was a huge farmhouse. Outside the house, there was an elderly couple snuggled together. Their kids, in-laws, and grandkids were happily interacting with each other. The grandmother had her head on her husband's shoulder. His left arm was around her while his right hand was holding onto her hand. Their adult kids were dancing with their spouses under the stars. The children were trying to capture fireflies. I started to get shaky as I realized what I had been seeing. I stopped and looked specifically at the grandmother and grandfather. They both looked at me with a familiar smile. The grandmother and I then looked at the man. He extended his left hand, and I knew to grab his hand. We walked away from the big, loving family.

The neighborhood ended with a grassy hill. I had no idea where to go after this. I turned around to see the houses and the people, but I physically could not walk back. So, I looked up at the verdant green hill and then towards the man. He nodded at me as if it was okay for me to climb to the very top. Since fire ants were my number one enemy, I was hesitant to have my feet touch the grass. Then the man finally spoke to me. "Don't you trust me? You are free to lie down and embrace nature. You will be okay. Just trust me." The man got closer to me and whispered, "Go where the Holy Spirit takes you." I looked at him, but he was gone. The sun suddenly started rising, and I knew what to do.

I wiped the tears from my face and whispered to myself, "I am the way and the truth and the life." I took off my shoes and walked on the grass. I climbed to the top of the hill, and I didn't look back. I only looked up at the sky, stars, and the sun. I arrived at the spot where I knew the Holy Spirit was guiding me. I laid down and looked at the sky once more before closing my

eyes. I trusted the man. I knew this man, and I knew I was going to see him soon when I closed my eyes.

“The Camping Trip”

Amanda Quiroz

Ella sat down on the long wooden bench while her brother, Derek, listened protectively and looked into the dark woods. A *snap* broke the silence and sent shivers down their spines. Ella turned her face to look at Derek and asked, “Derek, what-what if- what if it’s a-?”

Bear, Derek finished the thought in his head, just as a snarl came from the bushes behind them. The hair on the back of Derek’s neck stood straight and the two of them were frozen – statues in the middle of the woods. Derek reached his arm around his sister, wanting to protect her from whatever was lurking around their campsite.

They listened to the crickets chirping until another growl broke the silence. Ella and Derek huddled close together. Suddenly, a pair of arms wrapped around them with a deafening roar sounding from behind them.

Ella and Derek screamed and squirmed to get out of the grasp they were bound in. While trying to escape the horrific circumstance, Derek made a wish: *I wish that I had treated my sister better before Curt planned this stupid camping trip.* He remembered the long car ride and how the two of them argued back and forth because of Ella’s constant singing; her seven-year-old crow-like voice sparked frustration that made Derek’s pale face turn bright red in anger. He pictured Curt’s frequent glances in the rearview mirror to check on them. Curt had begged them to try and get along with each other as they drove to their campsite, filling in the empty parental role that tore his siblings apart.

Thoughts of every harsh insult that he said to her filled his head and he wondered what he could have done to be a better brother. Finally, he thought about the evening they had earlier and how Curt, Ella, and himself had gathered around the picnic table surrounded by the aroma of freshly grilled and seasoned burgers. The giggles mixed with the chirping crickets of that evening filled his ears and he realized it was the most peace he had experienced with his siblings since their mother’s passing. Now, as his life flashed before his eyes, he longed for more of those moments.

A familiar laugh broke Derek from his thoughts. Looking up, he realized that the “bear” was Curt. He felt the firm grip around him loosen; he and Ella were released from Curt’s grasp. They heard a *thump* in the grass and turned around to see that their older brother had collapsed on the ground, laughing hysterically.

Derek and Ella exchanged glances with each other as Curt’s roaring laughter filled the night. Slightly embarrassed, they hunched their shoulders and felt their faces get hot. The two younger children; however, were glad that the other was safe. Derek gave Ella a small smile and reached out his hand so that he could take her back to her tent.

“Muse of Snow”

Alice Liz Kyriel

A forest of snow glittered in the sunlight with ice crystals hanging from the trees. Sometimes, Frost Roses peeked through the snow to greet oncoming travelers.

It may have been silent, but it was full of life. Snow fairies flew through the trees and small animals peeked out of their hideaways. If you made it through the forest, you could find the cozy town of Snowgate.

It was here that a young lady hiked to her favorite forest clearing with her bag slung over her shoulder. She had set out from her cabin earlier that morning to find a cool place to drink her hot chocolate. The sound of snow crunching beneath her boots was music to her ears and the feeling of the soft cold breeze running through her dark hair felt refreshing.

"Even though I was just out here yesterday, researching the local legends makes it feel like an eternity. Feels good to get some fresh air. Maybe today I'll finally see her."

Her name was Wynn, and she was a mage from Rune City where she produced spell books and art pieces. She came to Snowgate in pursuit of artistic inspiration. She had caught wind of a rumor that the nearby forest was home to a beautiful forest spirit. So, every morning, she would emerge from her cabin in hopes of seeing it. So far, no luck.

She trekked on until she reached Frost Rose Hill. When she got to the top, she searched her bag for her thermos decorated with various small stickers.

"There's not a lot of info on this spirit other than that she's beautiful and she supposedly passed away in a snowstorm," she said with an exasperated sigh.

"That last part sounds about right," said a soft voice behind her.

Wynn jumped, almost spilling her drink. She looked frantically around her, but she did not see anyone.

"Ah, you can't see me, can you?" the voice said disappointedly.

"No and it doesn't help that no one ever comes here," Wynn said. "Who are you?"

"Whoops! I haven't introduced myself, have I? My name is Isolde," the voice said nervously.

"Oh, that's such a lovely name!" Wynn said while sipping her hot chocolate and looking for the source of the Isolde's voice.

"Thank you!" Isolde said, seeming to have shaken off the previous nervousness.

"So, what brings you here, Isolde?" Wynn asked.

"Well... I don't have a physical body so I can't eat or drink anything. But I could smell the hot chocolate, so I came over. Plus, you seem very sweet," Isolde replied.

" Ah, umm... Thanks Isolde. Anyways, my name is Wynn," she said as her face burned bright red. "Sorry for asking but is there a reason I can't see you?"

"Oh, my bad! It's been a while since I've met someone. Just gimme a sec," Isolde said.

Slowly, a beautiful woman began to materialize out of the air. She had long snowy white hair and wore a lovely black coat and gray scarf. She was a lovely sight for sure, but something did not make sense to Wynn.

"Wow you're beautiful!" Wynn exclaimed. "But if you're bundled up..."

"How did I pass away? It's ok, I figured it might come up. I was hypnotized by a will-o-the-wisp and fell through the ice of a nearby lake. I couldn't swim with my coat on, but I don't think the wisp knew," she said with a slight chuckle.

They awkwardly laughed at the statement before switching topics. The two of them continued to talk and found they had many common interests. Before long, it became the middle of the day.

“This has been fun Isolde, but I should get back to my cabin. It’s about time I go cook lunch,” Wynn said as she put her nearly empty thermos back into her bag

“Do you live on your own?” Isolde asked.

“Yeah, I know you can’t eat but do you want to come smell my cooking?” Wynn said, giggling slightly while turning towards her cabin.

“Oh yes please!” Isolde exclaimed with a gleaming smile on her face.

Wynn came to Snowgate looking for artistic inspiration and she found her sitting on her kitchen counter. She cooked a warm bowl of Creamy Potato Soup, her favorite thing to eat after a day out in the cold.

"Hey," she said, "I was wondering... After lunch do you want to help me with a project?"

"That could be fun! What kind of project is it?" Isolde asked excitedly.

"Well, I was wondering if you would mind being my model for one of my sketches," Wynn asked, trying to keep herself from being too pushy.

"W-wait me?? Umm... are you sure?" Isolde asked, her face slowly turning red.

"Yeah, I'm sure! I think you'd make a great subject!" Wynn replied, smiling warmly at her muse.

"O-ok! W-where do you want to do this sketch?" Isolde stammered nervously.

Wynn pulled out her paintbrush and painted a symbol on her palms.

"I know the perfect place. I'm not usually out in the cold for long, but with this Heat Rune, I should be fine for at least 2 hours," she said.

After walking for a while, they reached where they first met, Frost Rose Hill. Isolde was given free rein to choose her pose, so she opted to just sit down in the snow in a more natural pose.

Wynn then took out her sketchbook and began to draw her. She carefully assessed her muse and began drawing the outline. Then she began

filling in the details while making sure to keep her pencil strokes delicate to encapsulate the softness of Isolde's face or the fur lining of her jacket.

When she finished, she called Isolde over to look at it. Isolde was so elated when she saw it that she could not help but try to hug Wynn. Upon realizing it was not possible, the two of them laughed it off.

"It's so beautiful! Can we do another?" Isolde asked excitedly.

"Sure! Sounds good!" Wynn replied happily.

The two of them continued making art for hours with occasional breaks to repaint the symbols on Wynn's palms or eat.

Eventually, they returned to the cabin to rest. This routine of resting then sketching continued for years with the two of them improving as time went on. Eventually they became widely recognized in the art world. Isolde even learned how to physically hug Wynn even if it was just for a moment. The two were a perfect artistic pair.

“The Gift of Being Valued”

Joseph Hall

“Gage?” asks Crystal, noticing the fondness in his eyes. Even under the night sky, his light-brown colored eyes twinkle with the light of the fire.

“Yeah?” Gage answers.

“Why are you staring at me like that?” she says softly.

“Staring at you like what?” Gage answers innocently, understanding what she meant, but finding it odd for someone to ask about something that feels so intuitive.

“Gage? You know we’re not really the same age, don’t you?” she says, trying to get him to understand what she meant.

“I mean, we’re only, like, two years apart or something, but yeah, why?” he answers nonchalantly, in his usual tone.

“It just makes me feel... awkward, I guess... What?! Gage?!” she says, a little annoyed, laughing at Gage closing his eyes in the middle of the conversation.

“Well, if it makes you feel weird, I guess I can try my best not to look at you!” he responds with his eyes forced shut with as much effort as possible.

She can barely respond to him through her laughs, rolling around in the autumn-yellow grass.

“No...Gage. Just...never mind, ok? If you wanna look at me, then just look at me... for as long as you want.”

“Wow! Closing your eyes is super scary. It’s just so... dark, you know?!” he says, relieved to open his eyes up to the pleasing reality of loving eyes looking right into his.

Crystal chuckles lightly, “You amaze me, Gage.”

“Huh?” Gage answers, confused about what he may have done that was so special.

“... I don’t know what it is about you, Gage, but... you're one of the coolest kids I’ve ever met.” She looks away for a second, pulling her long brown hair behind her ears, embarrassed that she’s smiling like that at a kid.

“Really?!” His big cheeks perk up and turn cherry. “Thanks! I’m gonna assume that I’m not the only one and you must know a lot of ‘em, then,” Gage says with his typical sunny disposition.

They both start laughing after that statement. Crystal then kisses the blood stains left on the bandages she wrapped around each of Gage’s gashed knees.

Gage puts one of his hands on top of Crystal’s, which still resting on his knees. She doesn’t even use words to respond to it, but just looks away before she lightly grabs Gage’s hand and places it on the grass.

“Don’t touch your knees too much, ok? We don’t want ‘em getting infected, Gage.”

“Ok, mom!” Gage teases her.

“Mom?” she responds in disgust.

“Yeah. Never met her, but I would imagine her saying and doing things like this,” he says solemnly, turning it into a compliment. “Thanks, by the way.”

“Gage?” she responds to him, hearing something in his answer that spurs her curiosity. “You never told me about your parents.”

“Well, my big brother never says much about them,” Gage explains. “He just always used to say we were just fine on our own. I never asked him how they died, but I guess I didn’t need to. He’s always kept us up and running, so I figured he was all I needed... And don’t get me wrong, he’s great. But I still wonder sometimes, you know?”

“Honestly, I couldn’t imagine it, Gage,” Her heart of compassion puts a grim expression on her face. “I would say I’m sorry to hear that, but I guess if you’ve been happy with not questioning your life without them then I’m happy for you. And your brother did a great job taking care of you. He must miss a little guy like you a lot.” She looks back at him, letting him see her smile. “I know I would.”

“Yeah. He’s probably worried sick about whether I’m playing around too much, getting myself killed, not taking enough showers, or not wearing clean enough underwear or something,” Gage recounts nonchalantly.

“Gage, what?” Crystal says, mind boggled.

They both chuckle. After hearing Gage’s list of obscure concerns, Crystal was glad she was not Gage’s mom. But her and Gage’s conversation did make her think about how precious it is to her to be treasured by Gage as an invaluable piece that fills a hole in his life.

Creative Non-Fiction

“Am I Alone?”

Nayeli Madrigal

I don't know what – or who – it was that evening. I was downstairs in the family room, on the couch, ready to put on Netflix while my two dogs dozed in the baby-gated kitchen behind me. It was in this moment of mellow silence when the first knock came.

It wasn't a loud slam, but rather a firm knock, as if only meant to grab my attention. Confused, I looked out the window into the dwindling twilight of the autumn evening, but nothing was there. Nobody was home besides me, and all my pets were inside. Brows furrowed, I explained it away to myself with the possibilities of a stray squirrel or raccoon. I settled again, the event already out of mind.

Then came the second knock, this time on the backdoor window, a few feet to the right of the first window. This knock was more aggressive, and I couldn't help but think of “it” (whatever had first knocked) being irritated that I had written off its first knock. I got up, nervous now, and looked out the window. Nothing was there. I couldn't explain this knock with squirrels this time, and my stomach dropped as I imagined someone trying to see if anyone was home to break in. I checked the security cameras for the house, only to find that they also showed nothing was there that could cause the knocks.

Once I made that realization, a third knock rapped on the kitchen window, high above the sink – easily 7 feet high from outside. My dogs were startled awake and began to growl. They must've known this was out of the ordinary, too. I was stuck in place between the first two windows, unable to make myself move.

A fourth knock came, past the kitchen window and in the dining room now. My dogs barked, scared into defense, and fought each other to look out the curtains of the dining room. After what felt like a minute, it fell silent, and I started hoping that the incessant knocking had stopped.

No. I heard hard knocks on the living room window. It didn't stop at all. All it did was begin to circle my house. My dogs were barking, angry and

scared. I was still standing, but I had started shaking with terror. I was completely, horrifyingly alone – yet not.

The front door, the next area with windows, got a few hard knocks next. I got the notification that someone was at the door from my home security system, but the camera in the doorbell still showed that nothing was there.

Barely three seconds passed, and I heard knocks from my parent's bedroom. In a burst of fear, I shot up the stairs, with the sole mission of finding the cats. *Maybe, somehow, they're the ones making the noises*, I tried to reassure myself. At the top of the stairs I found them waiting for me, staring up at me with their large eyes and purring, a vision of contentment. I took a breath and realized I didn't hear any more knocks. It was over now.

Forget Netflix, I'll just take a nap, I thought to myself. *I'm just tired, that's all*. I led the way to my room, my cats in tow, chirping and meowing happily. I laid down in bed, surrounded by fur and warmth. *My friends are not gonna believe this*, I thought, already planning to tell them everything. As my eyes drifted close and I approached the edge of unconsciousness, I heard a door on the other side of the house slam shut.

“Oyster Bake”

Rene De Los Santos

My first memories of Fiesta are from Oyster Bake. My next-door neighbor, Richard, would go missing one day every year and then come back talking about the “Oyster Bake”. He would regale me with the cotton candy, giant Cokes, and rides that he consumed that day. I would listen and jealousy would stew on missing out on the fun while wishing for next year to come, so that I could finally go to enjoy the Oyster Bake.

Next year came but this time I remembered earlier than later. I asked Richard, “Hey are y’all going to Oyster Bake again?” Richard paused and then told me to wait. Richard and his mother came out. Mrs. Hernandez lowered her head saying, “You can come with us if your mom gives you permission to go.” Richard smiled with a friendly nudge while we were outside in hopes that our plans might work.

As much as I loved my mom, I knew she was a hard sell, so I had to pick the right time with the right tone and in her right mood, which I did as soon as she got home from work while making dinner.

I entered the kitchen quietly with my kid voice in a low register and slight quiver to sound contrite but also curious. “Mom?” I quizzically asked. “Yes,” she responded. “Richard said that he’s going to Oyster Bake and his mom said that I could go if I got permission from you and that it’ll be with his whole family,” my proposal was delivered as only a 9-year-old could deliver it.

My mom paused and moved her spoon to the spill plate. She then turned, looked at me with her tired work eyes and said, “No, you can’t go. They run out of oysters by noon and there’s nothing left to do but drink beer. You can’t go. Now come back inside and get ready for dinner.” Begrudgingly, I went back outside to pick up my Star Wars figures.

“Hey! What did your mom say?” Richard asked with a glint of hope. I dropped my head to avoid his eyes and said, “I can’t go. They run out of oysters by noon and there’s nothing left to do but drink beer. I can’t go.” I grabbed my group of figures, turned to go back inside while leaving Richard

and my dreams of Oyster Bake behind for another year.

Fast forward to 1998, A buddy of mine invited me down to go see this up-and-coming band from Austin, who just made it big on MTV with their song “The Way.” The band was FastBall, who released their song in the winter, but their popularity didn’t happen until the Spring, so in curiosity, I joined my buddy in checking out the sights of this legendary festival.

Now to set the context, St. Mary’s Oyster Bake in the 1990s did not have as much security as it does now, and the festival brings in the rowdies from the surrounding Westside neighborhoods. If you haven’t met a person from the San Antonio Westside just understand that they come from a blue collared background with matching humor. The best comparison would be Boston’s Southies or a Brooklynite from the 1940’s.

To continue, the Oyster Bake did not disappoint. I sampled the many light beers which were overpriced and small. The meats on a stick and syrupy confections guaranteed to make a dentist smile with future referral prices. Again we were not disappointed as we walked the campus to the various music stages with a solid lineup. With night coming on, we walked to the headliner stage in hopes of musical acumen from these visitors from Austin with MTV credentials. Full disclosure, I had not heard their song except for their one hit wonder so this was a learning experience which I was readying myself for as well as the Westside audience.

The wait seemed long as the students and the union workers ready the stage for the headliners of the night. Off stage, you could see the fraternity who organized the entertainment with high fives to each other. Confidently, the fraternity MC walked on stage to thank the beer distributor and the other business sponsors; in addition the MC had his fraternity bros in tow—koozies, shirts and frisbees into the well embalmed crowd of light beer drinkers.

Then, there was another delay of 11 minutes as the sound check guys rechecked their work for a fourth time. Eleven minutes may not seem long but in beer time for a drunk this is somewhat annoying because the boozier must make a calculated decision of more beer, a restroom visit while losing your group or expanding your bladder.

Needless to say, the band was not making friends with the Westside crowd.

In minute 6 of 11, the crowd out of boredom decided to throw the koozies, which were gifted by the fraternity. The crowd seemed more interested in the pink foam distractions than the coming band so finally the fraternity MC seeing this event unfolding decided to run to the back and get the band on stage. The music was shut off and out walked the band who launched into a short melancholy ballad which seemed to stun the Oyster Bake crowd. The first 18 seconds of the song seemed great but fell flaccid to the crowd's ears. People looked at one another and began to grumble. Then another song was played by the band which again assaulted the crowd's ears. These Westsiders were perplexed, was this their blue collared sensibilities or was this bad music?

During the middle of the second song, someone in the crowd yelled what everyone was thinking, "HEY! Play the song!" In a releasing sigh of relief, the crowd grunted with nonverbal affirmation. As the song was ending, a person closer to the stage yelled with a Westsider accent, "Yeah man, play the song." The lead singer in his tight jeans, tight 1980's new wave pink blazer and Mod Caesar haircut grabbed the microphone in an awkwardly defiantly punk manner and said "We're from Austin, Texas. We'll play whatever we want."

And with that salvo, the Westside Oyster Bake crowd oohed with the collective understanding that it was time to get *necio*. The third song was another mopey ballad performed quickly after his statement. Meanwhile, the crowd was arming themselves with stuff to throw. The first items to be launched were the koozies since many were already in hand. The band snicker at the foam hitting the front of the stage but the band's sneers quickly changed as the cups of partially filled but overpriced beers started to hit the stage. The first beers hitting the stage were just spray, so the band kept playing their melancholy ditty in defiance. However, the full beers were soon in the air ready to be landed on the stage. The full cups landed on the front of the stage but the beer that stopped the show arrived at the drum kit. The drummer was doused with watered down foamy beer along with a Westside hello from the now emptied cup. With the drums stopped, the defiant singer grabbed the microphone again and stated, "We're out of here."

FastBall walked off stage. The fraternity president and other musical dignitaries tried to stop the band. The fraternity bros were yelling at each other in confusion and frustration. Meanwhile, the Westside crowd did not miss a beat. Everyone was yelling, “Play the song! Play the song!” The cup tossing stopped but the chanting grew through the entire west field. Time seemed forever but it was a mere 5 minutes.

Off to the side of the stage, FastBall, their manager, and the fraternity MC were yelling at one another. FastBall was trying to leave but their management held them back while the MC could be seen talking about contracts. I guess he was a first year at the law school. By minute 4 of the 5-minute wait, FastBall slumped their shoulders, wiped their faces, and turned around to face the stage. Begrudgingly, they walked on stage and in contrite tone; the lead singer whispered, “Okay, we’ll play the song,” and with that announcement, the crowd roared, “They’re playing the song!!”

The song was played. The crowd tried to sing along but were either too drunk or too unenlightened of their musical catalog as was I. The song finished and the band ran off the stage. The crowd dispersed into the night as most of the booths had finished serving beer and taking tickets.

I stood off to the side just watching everyone leave as the union workers quickly walked on stage to disassemble the sound equipment and as the police moved in to clear the final show.

And in the dark, underneath the Texas live oak trees, I thought to myself “Mom was right.”

Essays

“Unmasking the Red Death: A Marxist and Structuralist Approach to Poe”

Mary Arnolds

Edgar Allan Poe published his short story “The Masque of the Red Death” in 1842, describing the horror of a bloody plague and the attempts of the nobility to escape it. Despite losing half of his kingdom to the plague, the Prince Prospero is unalarmed, and invites a thousand lords and ladies to his castle. There they lock themselves in, confident that they are safe from the Red Death, and revel continuously for five or six months. Prince Prospero eventually finds that all of his wealth and his fortified walls cannot keep out illness, age, and death. He and the rest of the courtiers fall ill and die in their own blood. Poe’s use of the conventions of Gothic literature and his vivid descriptions of the grotesque and terrible have led many to appreciate this as an entertaining and symbolically crafted horror story about human mortality. However, behind the mask of Poe’s fantastical descriptions of “blood-bedewed halls” and the “glare and glitter” of oblivious nobility caught in a deadly dance, readers begin to catch glimpses of reality. They are led to ask questions about the ways Poe’s story reflects the dynamics of society.

A dauntless prince and his light-hearted friends lock themselves away with hoards of wealth and security, leaving the unlucky peasantry to die right outside their walls. The upper class, believing they possess the means to avoid death and “bid defiance to contagion”, sacrifice the lower class to the Red Death. “The external world could take care of itself”, they tell themselves, knowing full well that it cannot. In his book *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (1981), the Marxist literary critic Fredric Jameson argues for the “priority of the political interpretation of literary texts” (17). Poe’s story can be thoroughly analyzed not only for its merit as a work of art, but also for the artful presentation of deeper themes. For most of the story, the narrative is essentially controlled by Prince Prospero, the only character with dialogue. The details of death and sickness are blithely glossed over in favor of descriptions of his cleverly constructed castle and dream-like masquerades. The symbols and details that appear throughout this story are not accidental. Poe’s language is meant to be carefully examined, as “linguistics” is “the mother of structuralist literary

theory” (Scholes 12). It is only through a combined approach of a structuralist analysis of presentation and a Marxist literary analysis of ideas that the full impact of Poe’s work can be appreciated.

Poe’s short story provides an interesting opportunity to understand the relationship of the human subject - the reader - with the text, both in the context of fiction and reality. A common technique used by authors to create an immersive story is strong characterization; if the reader has a deep understanding of who a character is, they are more likely to be invested in the character and to be open to letting the story impact their view on life. Poe takes a different approach; there are only two individually distinguished characters throughout the whole story: Prince Prospero and the Red Death. The rest of the characters are described as collectives: the thousand lords and ladies, and the peasantry suffering outside the castle. Neither of the individual characters are meant to be “relatable” or likable to the reader; instead, the two collectives are the most provocative in terms of Marxist literary analysis, not because of who they are but because of what they represent. Frederic Jameson references another Marxist literary critic George Lukacs to explain the way in which “cultural texts [are] taken as an essentially allegorical model of society as a whole...the literary “character” being read as [a] “typification” of elements on other levels, and in particular as figures for the various social classes and class fractions (33). The application of this idea to Poe’s story urges that the two collectives deserve just as much - if not more - focus than the individuals. They typify the divide between social classes that exists to this day. Poe describes the stark difference in their situations - the bourgeoisies’ faces are covered by jeweled masks as they dance and laugh, while the commoners’ faces are covered in blood as they succumb to the plague.

Another way Poe uses the individual characters of Prince Prospero, and the Red Death is to represent and dramatize concepts. Prince Prospero’s name itself suggests wealth and fortune. As the only character with dialogue, he stands as a symbol and spokesperson for the noble class. It is significant that the rich collective has a voice, while the poor collective does not. The Red Death is a bit more straightforward - Poe is giving death a perceivable form. He is defamiliarizing the encounter with death by portraying it as an unwelcome, sudden visitor appearing like “a thief in the night” (Poe). In his 1974 text *Structuralism in Literature*, Robert Scholes acknowledges the

influence of formalism when discussing the structuralist use of defamiliarization but emphasizes the importance of recognizing when a text “make[s] the familiar seem strange, so that we see it again” (84). Not many people would deny the truth that death will eventually come for everyone. However, when confronted with the reality of death, shock and denial often cause an inability or unwillingness to comprehend it. In a similar way, Poe’s introduction of the Red Death leaves the reader uncertain whether it is just another noble making a terrible joke, or something much more ominous. The two individuals, the Red Death and Prince Prospero, confront each other at the end of the story. The “bold and robust” Prospero charges the corpse-like spectre and attempts to stab it with a dagger, but one glance from the mummer instantly causes him to fall to the ground dead (Poe). While Prospero initially enjoyed “dominion” over his subjects, even as they were decimated by the plague, “Darkness and Decay and the Red Death [hold] illimitable dominion over all” by the end of the story. Prince Prospero’s attempts to hoard wealth, gaiety, and youth was futile compared to the inevitability of death. Had he realized the fleeting nature of his good fortune and power earlier, perhaps Prospero could have been able to lessen the effects of the Red Death by distributing his resources in the pursuit of the common good. Instead, his selfish decision to sacrifice his citizens and reinforce the inequalities between the collectives led to the destruction of his kingdom.

The descriptions of the setting in “The Masque of the Red Death” does more than simply enhance the Gothic atmosphere of the story and leave a disquieting, dreamlike impression on the reader. The introduction of Prince Prospero’s castellated abbey is the first sign that things are not as they should be. In the Middle Ages, abbeys inhabited by religious orders could be a refuge for the poor, sick, and needy. However, Prospero’s abbey is not only in “deep seclusion” but is enclosed by a “strong and lofty wall” with “gates of iron” and bolts welded shut (Poe). The prince’s tastes for the eccentric can explain the strange layout of halls in the abbey: six rooms - each with monochromatic colors schemes of blue, purple, green, orange, white, and violet - ending in a seventh room of sable and scarlet. These seven rooms represent the progression of the stages of life. The first chamber, entirely blue, faces eastward towards the rising sun and represents birth. The final chamber, red glass and black velvet, faces westward towards the setting sun; the colors are clearly symbolic of age and death, and the “blood-tinted panes” foreshadow the Red Death (Poe). One chamber leads into another with a

series of sharp turns so that “vision embrace[s] but little more than one at a time” (Poe). From the vantage point of one stage of life, a person cannot see far into the future. A connection can also be drawn between the seven rooms and the seven deadly sins. The individual rooms may not perfectly correlate to individual sins, but the significance may lie in the hedonistic activities unfolding in the seven rooms; there is a disconnect between the noble’s revelry and the traditionally holy spirit of an abbey. The metaphor of stages of life is further supported by the movements of the Red Death. It appears beside Prince Prospero in the blue room, and slowly makes its way west through the chambers. This is a subtle reminder that death can strike at any stage in life. Prince Prospero pursues it through all seven chambers, rapidly progressing through all the stages of his life, before dying in the final chamber. The abbey stands as a microcosm of life and death; locks and walls will not keep mortality and change out.

Poe’s strong use of imagery also serves to strengthen the multiple recurring symbols, which makes the allegorical nature of this story even more evident. One of the most significant is the giant ebony clock in the black and red chamber. As the “heart of life beat feverishly” in all the less threatening chambers, the pendulum’s rhythmic swaying imitates a slow, somber heartbeat in the chamber of death. Every hour it tolls loud enough to be heard throughout all the chambers, and its bells cause the revelers to falter in uneasiness. The clock is a physical manifestation of the passing of time, and an unwanted reminder of mortality. Every hour the revelers try to laugh it away, but they cannot ignore it. Other important symbols are the braziers of fire that stand outside the windows of the colored chambers, casting garish shadows on the people inside. While the nobility are alive and celebrating, the fires burn and fill the halls with warmth, color, and light. However, when the Red Death arrives at the abbey and nobility begin to die, the clock and fires die with them. The “life of the ebony clock went out with the last of the gay”, its pendular heartbeat slowing and stopping (Poe). The “flames of the tripod expired”, leaving the halls dark, cold, and lifeless (Poe). Both of these symbols reinforce Poe’s message about the transient, fragile nature of human life. A final important symbol are the masks and costumes the nobility wear to the masquerade. They dance along the fine line between dreams and nightmares, portraying “much of the beautiful, much of the wanton, much of the bizarre” and “something of the terrible” (Poe). Perhaps the anonymity granted by the masks gives them the nerve to continue their frenzied pursuit

of pleasure for six months, believing it “folly to grieve, or to think” (Poe). Perhaps they attempt to don a mask of madness just for the thrill of it, or as a way to hide from the madness and chaos outside the abbey walls. Or perhaps they wear masks out of shame, recognizing their cowardliness and selfishness, knowing that they are committing a grave error but being too afraid to change anything.

A surface level reading of “The Masque of the Red Death” reveals an eerie tale with a lesson about human mortality and the inevitability of death. However, reading through the lenses of structuralist theory and Marxist literary theory uncover several layers and prompt the reader to ask questions about their own world. The form of “The Masque of the Red Death” is certainly a short story, but other classifications could be considered. According to Scholes, a “simple form” is a universal “structuring principle of human thought... intimately connected with the human process of organizing the world linguistically” (42). Scholes presents nine types of simple forms; based on the characteristics of each, “The Masque of the Red Death” could arguably be categorized under the form of *anti-legend*. Whereas a legend is the embodiment of human values and ideals, the anti-legend presents human depravity and vice until “values become transvalued and heroic evil takes on a romantic air of glamor” (Scholes 44). Just as legends present superhuman virtue as exemplary and attainable, anti-legends present human vice as a warning against the corruption that exists in the reader’s world. The anti-legend of “The Masque of the Red Death” cautions against the arrogance, greed, and self-centeredness that exacerbates and solidifies class tensions and inequalities.

Frederic Jameson suggests another approach for the interpretation of literature: the medieval system of four levels originally intended for the interpretation of Sacred Scripture. These four levels account for different aspects of the text, ensuring that the reader is not “sheltered from the omnipresence of history and the implacable influence of the social”; instead, the reader is encouraged to “explore the multiple paths that lead to the unmasking of cultural artifacts as socially symbolic acts” (Jameson 20). The first level is the literal or historical (Jameson 31). This level concerns itself with the facts of the story, the sequence of events, and the actions of the characters. Interpretation on this level requires basic reading comprehension skills about theme and plot - for example, recognizing conventions of

Gothicism in Poe's writing. The second level is allegorical (Jameson 31). Interpretation on this level considers secondary and symbolic meanings behind the author's words. Reading "The Masque of the Red Death" on the level of allegory allows the reader to have an open mind to multiple meanings, some more obvious than others (for example, as a tale about life and death, or as a tale about the injustices of the class system). The third level is the moral (Jameson 31). Interpretation on this level involves the individual reflection and application to the soul of each reader. A moral reading of "The Masque of the Red Death" might encourage the reader to question whether they have ever barred the gates of their heart to people in need. The third level is the anagogical or political (Jameson 31). This interpretation involves the human race as a whole, stressing the fact that no action can occur without wide-reaching consequences. Jameson emphasizes the value of a Marxist political interpretation of literature through this level. Literature, being part of the superstructure of society, is ultimately influenced by the economic base and should be viewed as such a product. In addition, it is the moral and anagogical levels of interpretation that allow the individual to "'insert' himself or herself" into the text (Jameson 30). The reader as a critic is a vital element in this process of reading and comprehension. After all, Marxist literary theory and structuralism both respond, "specifically to the problem of the relationship of the human subject with his own perceptual and linguistic systems, and with the objective world"; they are both "integrative, holistic ways of looking at the world, including man" (Scholes 2-3).

A shallow reading of "The Masque of the Red Death" would give the reader an opportunity similar to briefly peeking through a window at Prince Prospero's abbey. Gothic literary customs provide the architecture on which the story is constructed. Indulgently rich sensory language colors the narrative like the stained-glass windows of the seven chambers. As the laughing revelers cavort through the castle, it would appear that the dark, dreamlike charm will sustain them forever. However, behind the glittering mask of grotesque and beautiful language, Edgar Allan Poe writes about a sickness at the heart of relationships between classes of people. Using the combined techniques of Marxist literary criticism and structuralist reader-response theory, deeper understandings, and multiple meanings of "The Masque of the Red Death" can be brought to light. Suddenly, a prince is dead on the floor. The music has stopped, the fires are extinguished, and blood stains the hands of every reveler.

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“To be Poor, To be a Woman, and To be a Poor Woman: Feminism and Marxism in *Titanic*”

Tanya Brouse

Evaluating a text through critical theory is an insightful way to derive new meanings and interpretations that would not be obvious otherwise to a reader. One can combine multiple theories to create a new analytical approach, allowing a reader to use a double magnifying glass to engage a work of literature critically. One could apply critical theories such as feminism and Marxism together to analyze society's power structure from a socio-economic and gender perspective. The highly regarded and critically acclaimed film *Titanic* (1997) offers a multifaceted motherlode of socialist feminism and Marxist criticism opportunities because of the imbalance in gender inequity and social class portrayed in the early twentieth century. However, before delving into a feminist Marxist evaluation of the film, it is necessary to understand what each theory entails.

Marxist criticism, established in the 1930s, concerns class differences, money, power, and capitalism ("Marxist Criticism"). Which class does the work claim to represent? How do characters from different classes interact or conflict? What social classes do the characters represent? These questions are just some of the many that Marxist critics ask when examining a text. Marxist criticism is heavily concerned with society's power structure and dynamics. Wherever money exists, so does power. Marxist critics seek to understand who has money, why they have it, and how that allows them to control the means of production. The means of production then lead to the class struggle often seen in capitalist societies.

Feminist criticism, which began in the 1960s, analyzes the "economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women" ("Feminist Criticism"). Feminist theory seeks to exploit the misogyny interwoven in literature, including the complete omission or marginalization of women writers. While doing this, feminist critics often ask many questions. How is the relationship between men and women portrayed? How are male and female roles defined? What are the power relationships between men and women? Like Marxist criticism, feminist theory emphasizes the notion of power and who has the privilege of using it to their advantage.

The film *Titanic* follows first-class passenger Rose DeWitt Bukater and third-class passenger Jack Dawson. Even though she is now opulently affluent, Rose still feels the repercussions of her past financial hardships when she is forced to get engaged to maintain her social status. Moreover, even though Jack is from a lower social class than Rose, he still enjoys certain freedoms because of his gender that Rose does not enjoy. Jack represents the capital and class difference for Rose and the patriarchal and misogynistic standard for women in society. I argue that a feminist Marxist critique of the film reveals Jack as a foil representing the consequences of Rose's intersectionality of class and gender.

Rose's oppression directly results from her intersectionality when she must balance the expectations of being a 20th-century woman while maintaining her social status. In one pivotal scene, Rose and her mother, Ruth, have an intense conversation about how their past financial hardships have forced them into positions of struggle when faced with the burden of trying to uphold their social status. Rose's mother is confused when she says, "I don't understand you. It is a fine match with Hockley. It will ensure our survival" (*Titanic* 1:12:50-1:12:54). After listing off all the negatives of living a less affluent life, Ruth clarifies to her daughter that she absolutely must marry her fiancé for the family's financial and social survival. Rose inevitably comments about the unfairness of the situation, only for her mother to respond, "Of course it's unfair. We're women, our choices are never easy" (*Titanic* 1:13:39-1:13:43). This exchange between the two women is essential in how it reveals the consequences Rose has to face from her financial situation. A feminist Marxist critique analyzes two facts from this situation. The first fact is that Rose is a woman living in the 20th century. Her gender automatically puts her at a disadvantage because of the rigid gender norms, including the pressure of marrying into wealth. The second significant fact is that Rose's oppressive engagement directly results from her capital struggle. In essence, the need to maintain wealth forces her under the subjugation of her patriarchal fiancé, Cal Hockley, who only desires to control her. The two binaries of men/women (feminist theory) and rich/poor (Marxist theory) explain why Rose faces this tumultuous situation due to her intersectionality. As a woman, she is already controlled by the men in her life, and as a woman who needs to maintain her social status, she is controlled by the class system.

Jack's character is a complementary foil to Rose because he lives the life she desires but cannot have due to her gender and class situation. In one specific scene, the dialogue between Jack and Rose reveals the stark differences between the two characters. While watching the sunset together, Jack reveals how he has traveled to many places, such as Southern California and Paris. Rose asks Jack, "Why can't I be like you? Just head out for the horizon whenever I feel like it?" (*Titanic* 53:39-53:43). These two simple yet powerful questions highlight Rose's inability to progress in society. While Jack has quite literally traveled the world, Rose cannot go as far as another part of the ship without her finance's approval or acknowledgment. Jack may be from a lower social class than Rose, but he possesses the one thing she does not: the privilege of self-discovery and self-determination. Jack is essentially more free than Rose because he is not stuck to the same rigid obligations as a wealthy woman by being a poor man. From a Marxist perspective, Jack is seen as the proletariat class, while Rose represents the bourgeoisie. Two famous Marxist critics, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels express different ideas about class struggle in their book *The German Ideology* (1867). It is asserted in the book how "the condition of life forced upon [the proletariat] becomes evident to him...[and] within his own class, has no chance of arriving at the conditions which would place him in the other class" (Marx and Engels 679). In this scene, Jack, the proletariat, has already accepted that he cannot move up in the class system. Through this acceptance, he achieves the liberation Rose does not have. In essence, Jack does not have to care anymore about whether or not he will become rich. He has accepted that he has "no chance of arriving...in the other class" and can enjoy his life as much as he pleases because he has nothing to lose doing so (Marx and Engels 679). On the other hand, Rose cannot enjoy such freedoms since she has a lot to lose: her engagement, wealth, reputation, and social status.

The costumes Jack and Rose wear play significant roles in demonstrating class struggle. When Cal invites Jack to dinner with the first-class passengers, he does not have anything to wear besides the simple clothes he owns. After borrowing a fancy suit from Molly Brown, a wealthy woman on the ship, Jack undergoes a complete transformation in physical looks but also human identity when Cal comments, "You could almost pass for a gentleman" (*Titanic* 59:05-59:07). Unlike Jack, Rose already owns extravagant clothes because she comes from a high class. However, he must

wear a suit to fit in properly. The vital connection between Rose and Jack in this scene is in their clothes. The clothes represent power and a complete ascension into a higher social class. Before he received the suit, the first-class passengers barely noticed Jack (the bourgeoisie). Now, he wears a "disguise", the suit, that takes him to the same level as Rose. However, even though Jack now looks like the ruling class, he is not fully assimilated or accepted. As Cal said, Jack is "almost" a gentleman. His poor background still follows him around like a shadow follows a person, alienating him from genuinely joining the bourgeoisie.

While Jack cannot fully transform his class identity through his change of clothes, neither can Rose establish her personal identity as a woman when being restricted by the wealthy class. Rose wears her ornate clothes to distinguish herself from the second and third-class passengers. However, the fancy clothes severely restrict her from developing a unique individuality as a woman. Paul Lauter explores the rigidity of the female identity in relation to class in his essay "Working-Class Women's Literature: An Introduction to the Study". Lauter's essay asserts how "social feminist criticism must come to grips with the relationship between female subjectivity and class identity" (Lauter 859). When viewed through socialist feminist criticism, Rose's clothes are chains that keep her captive in the restrictive life that comes from being a wealthy woman in the early 20th century. Her dress is predominantly dark maroon with hints of light red. One can interpret the light red as complimenting not only the delicacy of a red rose (complimenting her character name), it also hints at Rose's fiery nature when she tries to discover her identity when spending time with Jack. Nevertheless, the dark maroon represents the cloudiness that instills over Rose when she is with her captors, the other first-class passengers. Rose is stuck in a lifestyle full of expectations such as motherly duties and proper etiquette due to her social class, and as a result, her female identity is suffocated. This ties back to Rose's struggle with her intersectionality of class and gender because her "class identity" controls her "female subjectivity", or her freedom to decide who she wants to be (Lauter 859).

The design of the film's setting, the ship, parallels class warfare, further developing Jack's role as a foil for Rose. The ship's actual layout displays the third-class passengers (the poor people) in the bottom cabins while the first-class passengers (the rich people) in the upper cabins,

demonstrating society's socio-economic hierarchy. Like the ship, the socio-economic hierarchy places the proletariat on the bottom of the pyramid and the bourgeois on top. This structure is significant because it determines who lives and dies when the ship sinks. This similar point is demonstrated in *The German Ideology* when it acknowledges how "the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas...the class which is the ruling material force of society is at the same time its ruling intellectual force" (Marx and Engels 690). It is not surprising how class becomes a literal determiner if a passenger dies or not since class identification places value on a person in society. The "ruling class", the first-class passengers, ensure they are the first to get on lifeboats because they express their desire to live. They believe themselves superior and inherently more worthy of saving than the lower classes. Their desire to live then becomes "the ruling intellectual force" in how the crew organizes who gets on a lifeboat and when (Marx and Engels 690). The crew's first instinct is to save the first-class women and children. This directly affects Jack because, as a third-class passenger, the first-class passengers do not see him as someone whose life is worth saving. As a result, his foil portrays the opposite of Rose because she does not have this issue; she is one of the first people placed on the lifeboats. The prioritization of her life is one of the very few instances in which being an upper-class woman truly benefits her.

Even though Rose's life is spared because of her gender and social class, her intersectionality is still problematic because of the life that waits for her in the future. Lauter's essay asserts how "ruling groups had traditionally used the sexual and domestic virtue of their women as a way of valorizing their moral authority" (Lauter 869). These "ruling groups" are the bourgeois men, specifically Cal. When speaking to Rose, his accent and tone of voice are incredibly condescending as if she were his child rather than his soon-to-be wife. After Lovejoy, Cal's friend, catches Rose partying with Jack and the other third-class passengers below deck, she has a heated discussion with Cal. In a violent rage after flipping over a table, he sternly commands, "You will honor me...you will honor me the way a wife is required to honor a husband" (*Titanic* 1:11:10-1:11:20). Cal's tone is laced with rage and superiority. He quite literally stands over Rose, paralleling how 20th-century husbands stood over their wives in authority. He is eliciting Rose's "domestic virtue" as his future wife as a means by which to "valorize [his] moral authority" over her (Lauter 869). The power dynamic

is clear here: it belongs strictly to Cal because he is the man, and Rose is his subordinate. This is a significant predicament for Rose because it forecasts her future as his wife. If he treats her this badly as his fiancée, how will he treat her behind closed doors after marriage?

Despite facing an imbalance of power with Cal, Jack's foil helps Rose conquer the issues arising from her intersectionality when he helps her rediscover lost parts of herself. Throughout the entire film, Rose experiences many different events with Jack that stem from social gatherings with the first-class passengers to partying with the third-class passengers. Rose starts to inevitably transform from who she used to be, a proper lady, to a more nuanced and independent woman who can make her own decisions. It is as if she experiences two different lives aboard the ship: her life with Cal and her life with Jack. While experiencing two separate lives, Rose develops two different identities with which she struggles. Does she wed Cal? There is no law forcing her to marry him. However, the decision not to will mean a certain ruin for her wealth and social status. To save her capital, she sacrifices her freedom and dignity and subjugates herself to domestic servitude. Yet, there is also the option to choose Jack, which will almost guarantee class debasement but allow her to be her true self. The decision proves to be a tough one because of the related issues of class and gender. Rose technically should be nowhere near Jack because of the drastic differences in class. To further this point is the fact that she is a woman already engaged to a very wealthy and powerful man, putting her on an even higher shelf of societal ranking. She is essentially "off-limits" because of her wealth when viewed through a Marxist critique. At the same time, she is "off-limits" because she is Cal's property when viewed through a feminist critique.

The mixing of feminist and Marxist critical theory is significant because it allows one to analyze the repercussions of being from a certain social class or gender. That combination is then evaluated in how it can either work for or against a person, depending on their specific classification (rich man, poor woman, etc.). Where there is money, there is access to power. Additionally, wherever a male resides, access to power exists as well. When both are combined, a Marxist feminist critique allows for the criticism of who holds power, when one exhibits that power, and what justification do they use for that power? *Titanic* conveys a myriad of opportunities to explore

the power between Rose, Cal, and Jack based on class and gender. Ultimately, Rose's intersectionality proves difficult for her as a woman trapped in the 20th-century social structure.

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