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Foreword

Welcome to the 2025 Research and Creative Inquiry (RCI) Day, the 20th annual celebration of student scholarship, research, and creativity at Tennessee Tech University! From humble beginnings nearly two decades ago, when fewer than 50 posters were presented, RCI Day has grown into a dynamic event showcasing over 200 posters representing a diverse array of disciplines.

College education is a game changer, and undergraduate research is an accelerator for students to take off for productive careers. This is because college education and research are now essential for students to learn skills essential to solve real-world problems. In addition, students develop skills for leadership, communications, collaboration, analytical and critical thinking through research.

To our students: Congratulations on your outstanding accomplishments and your commitment to sharing your research experiences and findings with the broader community. For many, today marks your first public presentation—an important milestone signaling the beginning of your professional journeys. Embrace this experience as an invaluable step toward mastering the interdisciplinary skills necessary to address global challenges in human health, sustainable resource management, cybersecurity, energy innovation, food security, and national security.

To our dedicated faculty, staff, and campus community: Thank you for your steadfast mentorship, encouragement, and active engagement in student research activities. Your ongoing support enriches our students' educational experiences and strengthens our collective pursuit of knowledge and innovation. Please continue to inspire and nurture collaboration and experiential learning across disciplines, fostering groundbreaking discoveries and meaningful innovation.

We extend heartfelt appreciation to everyone involved in making this milestone 20th annual RCI Day possible. Special recognition goes to our judges for their assessments, as well as the staff from the Office of Research and Economic Development and the many volunteers across campus who have dedicated their time and talents.

Congratulations once again to all student presenters, collaborators, and mentors whose passion and hard work embody Tennessee Tech's unwavering commitment to academic and creative excellence. Together, let us celebrate the remarkable achievements displayed today and look forward to even greater accomplishments ahead. WINGS UP!

Dr. John Liu

Vice President for Research

On behalf of the **Tennessee Tech Research & Economic Development Team**

After Rana Plaza: Labor Exploitation and Corporate Deception

by Amina Begum

Bangladesh experienced one of its worst tragedies on 24th April 2013: the Rana Plaza garment factory collapse. The collapse of the eight-story building resulted in the "tragic loss of over 1,134 lives and left over 2,000 people fatally injured" (Hoskins). It has been over ten years since the collapse, but the survivors are still being exploited through minimum wage, poor working conditions, and dealing with verbal, and physical violence, with little to no significant improvement in their lives. This disaster serves as a stark reminder of the overwhelming trauma experienced by the Ready-Made Garment (RMG) industry workers of Bangladesh and the ongoing challenges they face. This man-made disaster, which led to a significant loss of life, was not just an accident. It was caused by a mix of political and economic factors that made this disaster almost unavoidable.

In this paper, I look at how the trauma experienced by the RMG workers—especially in the aftermath of the Rana Plaza collapse—has largely gone unaddressed. I approach the incident through the lenses of neo-colonialism and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) to examine how both national and international corporations have responded. In examining this tragic event, using these theoretical frameworks, my paper will argue that the workers' trauma translates into the economic gains for those in power, such as the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) and the international clothing brands. While CSR is intended to promote ethical labor practices, in this case, it functions more as a tool for reputation management rather than a genuine effort to protect workers' rights. As the work environment becomes harsher, the workers' resistance intensifies, and the stronger their resistance, the more

aggressive the management's response. This leads to a vicious cycle of violence, causing ongoing trauma for these workers.

Understanding Bangladesh’s Garment Industry

Bangladesh has a long history of textile production and industry, making it a substantial source of income for the entire region. And while British colonialism sought to limit and control this market, the garment industry managed to survive and even develop during the colonial and subsequent post-colonial periods. It became the most important sector for earning foreign currency through exporting ready-made textiles. Yet the impact of over two centuries of colonial rule left a lasting scar. The departure of the colonial powers did not mark a complete break from the past. Instead, it left behind a local ruling class, policies, and practices of colonial governance, in what I describe as neo-colonialism. These elements continued, with local authorities now answering to global corporate textile buyers. I refer to these entities as neo-colonial enterprises because they have a significant influence over Bangladesh's textile industry. This influence has been growing since the end of British colonial rule in India in 1948. According to WTO's World Statistical Review 2023, Bangladesh ranks second in garment exports as a single country, with apparel export of $45 billion in 2022 (Zaman). Undoubtedly, since Bangladesh became independent in 1971, the Ready-Made Garment (RMG) industry has played a key role in rebuilding and developing the country's economy. It stands as the single largest source of export earnings. This reliance on the RMG sector for economic growth, along with the competitive advantage of low-cost labor and materials, and the predominance of international buyers, has made Bangladesh an appealing hub for international apparel brands.

Brand Dominance in the Global Garment Industry

In order to grasp the complexities surrounding the Rana Plaza disaster and the exploitation of the workers, it is essential to first understand the concept of neo-colonialism. Neo-colonialism refers to the continued influence and control former colonial powers exert over former colonies, but it is done in a more subtle and economic approach. It can be described as the existence of a reality where “the state which is under neo-colonialist influence often has independence and some trappings of international sovereignty but in reality, its overall economic system as well as policy is heavily influenced from outside” (Nkrumah ix). The garment industry in Bangladesh, including the Rana Plaza factory, is deeply integrated into the global supply chain, which is dominated by Western corporations. These corporations, driven by the demands of consumers in developed countries, often seek the cheapest labor and production costs. As the growth of the RMG industry in Bangladesh is closely linked to the international corporations, these developed or first world countries, which used to control many parts of the world, including regions in South Asia, still have a lot of power in global business. To attract foreign investment and maintain economic stability, Bangladesh must meet the demands of these Western corporations, even if it means compromising the safety and wellbeing of their own workers.

The Role of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in the RMG Sector

One way international corporations maintain legitimacy in these global power structures is through Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). CSR is often defined as “the economic, legal, ethical, and discretionary expectations that society has of organizations at a given point in time” (Carroll 90). In theory, CSR should hold corporations accountable for fair labor practices and ethical supply chain management. But in practice, CSR often functions as a corporate branding

tool rather than a commitment to substantial reforms. Despite commitments to ethical labor standards and corporate transparency, many multinational brands continue to outsource production to factories where workers' rights are frequently violated. These multinational brands rely on self-regulation mechanisms and voluntary CSR initiatives, which frequently lack enforceability. This results in a situation where Western corporations maintain an ethical public image while supply chain workers—particularly garment workers in Bangladesh’s RMG industry—remain vulnerable to exploitation and hazardous working conditions.

The data below reveal significant overall growth in the sector over the past three decades, with exports reaching $45.71 billion in 2022. This shows that the industry was approaching the $50 billion mark. But the updated data reveal an interruption in this growth, with exports declining in 2023 and 2024. This interruption highlights the complex factors influencing Bangladesh's RMG sector. One of the key challenges is the reduction in purchase orders from international buyers, impacting production levels and placing financial strain on manufacturers. It is also worth noting that Bangladesh's RMG sector has faced internal challenges, including labor unrest and political instability. The ousting of the former prime minister in 2024 and subsequent political climate have likely contributed to uncertainty within the sector. At first glance, this impressive growth within the RMG sector might imply an industry free from trauma, thriving independently through effective policymaking and support from the government and other relevant parties, without any undue external influence. However, the reality is more complex than it appears. According to a media outlet *The Diplomat*:

> In 2020, Bangladesh garment manufacturers say global fashion retailers have cancelled or put on hold more than $3 billion in orders due to the coronavirus outbreak. The cancelled orders, according to reports to the BGMEA from manufacturers, included tens of millions

in purchases from many big buyers, including European buyers. Bangladesh manufacturers and labor groups have been appealing to big retailers to honor their commitments to suppliers. (Alam)

Bangladesh's Apparel Export to the World

Value in Millions USD (Calendar Year Basis)

Year	Woven	Knit	Total RMG
1994	1544.89	341.53	1886.42
1995	1976.4	512.18	2488.58
1996	1942.37	686.27	2628.64
1997	2621.33	810.49	3431.82
1998	2871.06	976.29	3847.35
1999	2987.73	1169.9	4157.63
2000	3376.49	1448.22	4824.71
2001	3162.28	1432.72	4595.00
2002	3076.28	1573.4	4649.68
2003	3398.84	1850.36	5249.2
2004	3686.78	2532.62	6219.4
2005	3689.6	3210.48	6900.08
2006	4544.83	4388.67	8933.5
2007	4608.4	4741.93	9350.33
2008	5655.5	6223.42	11878.92
2009	5695.88	6194.61	11890.49

2010	7067.34	7787.26	14854.6
2011	9252.8	9961.67	19214.47
2012	10117.43	9670.71	19788.14
2013	12052.3	11448.68	23500.98
2014	12421.26	12162.7	24583.96
2015	13805.44	12797.26	26602.7
2016	14931.33	13736.95	28668.29
2017	14673.99	14538.94	29212.93
2018	16681.04	16245.84	32926.88
2019	16630.64	16441.74	33072.38
2020	13242.36	14228.37	27470.73
2021	16216.38	19595.49	35811.87
2022	20996.78	24712.37	45709.15
2023	**16771.01**	**19115.60**	**35886.61**
2024	**17952.37**	**20529.71**	**38482.08**

Table 1 : Bangladesh's Apparel Export to the World

Source: *Export Performance. Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association*. www.bgmea.com.bd/page/Export_Performance. Accessed 10 Feb. 2025.

The Rana Plaza Collapse and Its Aftermath

The RMG industry of Bangladesh faced a severe blow when global fashion retailers cancelled or put orders on hold due to the coronavirus outbreak. The consequence was severe, as can be seen in the table above. Millions of Bangladeshi factory workers were sent home, without their wages or even severance pay. This economic vulnerability is nothing new; rather, it is a

reflection of the unequal power structures within the global supply chain. As one factory executive put it, “We experienced a 15-20% price squeeze from the buyers after Rana Plaza. But we are forced to accept buyers’ prices, otherwise they will move away. They have plenty of choice in Bangladesh" (qtd. in Fontana and Dawkins 9). This highlights how factory owners and workers have little leverage in negotiations, as global brands maintain control over pricing and production standards. The economic distress caused by the pandemic only increased these longstanding inequities, making workers even more vulnerable to exploitation.

While CSR frameworks promote ethical labor practices, the reality remains that multinational buyers dictate conditions that often undermine workers' rights. By imposing downward pressure on production costs, these corporations prioritize profit over the well-being of those producing their goods. Here, CSR can be interpreted as a modern tool for maintaining economic dominance, allowing corporations to project an image of social responsibility while continuing exploitative labor practices behind the scenes. This highlights the neo-colonial influence of global buyers and the dependency of Bangladesh's RMG sector on these external enterprises. The cancellation of orders not only highlights the nature of this dependency but also reveals the vulnerability of the workers at the bottom of this global supply chain, whose livelihoods are heavily dependent on the decisions made by the BGMEA managements and the powerful international corporations.

“The result of neo-colonialism is that foreign capital is used for the exploitation rather than for the development of the less developed parts of the world” (Nkrumah ix). In Bangladesh, the exploitation within the RMG factories is clearly evident. Workers often face violence, low wages, long hours, and unsafe working environments. The investments by international corporations do not reflect a genuine development of the local workforce. Instead, these

investments are primarily aimed at extracting value from cheap labor. While advocating for workers' rights, these corporations are reluctant to increase pay for the products they buy, which could help in ensuring fair wages for the workers. The collapse of the Rana Plaza factory was a direct consequence of prioritizing corporate profit margins over worker safety and tolerating hazardous workplace conditions.

Factory Workers' Continuing Fight for Fair Wages

In recent months in Bangladesh, workers have intensely protested for higher wages. As per *Al Jazeera*, the protests sparked when the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association proposed a 25% hike in the minimum wage to $90 per month (approx.10,900 TK), the first since 2018. Workers are demanding a $208 monthly minimum wage. Workers say they currently need to work overtime to make ends meet at a time when inflation is running at 9.5 percent (“Bangladesh Workers”). The ongoing protests of the workers not only highlight the issue of immediate wage, but also show their desperate plea for recognition, respect, and a reevaluation of the value and dignity of labor in the global garment industry. In 2024, according to *Daily Star*, a further 9% increase to Tk 13,625 (approx. $121 USD) will take effect in April 2025. This adjustment follows labor protests and negotiations between workers who initially demanded a 10% raise and factory owners who initially offered 8% (“Govt. declares 9% raise”). These demands reflect the ongoing problems of exploitation and unfair treatment that workers in this industry have faced for years. In this situation, ideology is a justification for exploitation—meaning the exploitation and the poor working conditions might have been necessary for the economic growth. Even the legal system of the country also failed to enforce safety regulations due to the ideology that prioritizes the economic gains over the workers’ safety.

Post Rana Plaza: Are Factories Safer Today?

In response to international outcry and widespread criticism following the Rana Plaza factory collapse, significant steps were taken to improve safety standards, most notably through the implementation of the Fire and Safety Accord. This agreement, forged between global brands, Bangladeshi factories, and labor organizations, was intended to enhance fire and building safety in the garment sector. It should also be noted that the 2018 Accord included plans to shift the responsibility for implementing these safety programs to a national body in Bangladesh. This body is referred to as the RMG Sustainability Council (RSC) and currently oversees the country’s factory inspections, remediation monitoring, workplace program, etc. However, the effectiveness of these measures remains questionable. According to BBC News, Factories face tight margins due to international brands' pressure to lower costs. This makes the expense of new safety measures challenging, especially as factory bosses question the push for compliance amidst falling garment export prices (“Bangladesh Clothing Factories”). While the international accord and RSC do represent a step forward in acknowledging and addressing some of the industry's systemic issues, they fall short of bringing about substantial change in the workers’ day-to-day working conditions and in their lives. I believe the accord often serves as a diversion, turning our attention away from the survivors, the victims’ families, and the ongoing struggles for fair labor practices and safety standards.

The Wounds That Remain: A Collective Trauma

Although these initiatives may seem to address safety concerns in the RMG industry, they fail to acknowledge how deeply disasters like Rana Plaza affect people's lives. For survivors and victims' families, the collapse was more than a workplace accident; it was a life-altering trauma

that continues to shape their reality. According to the American Psychological Association, *trauma* is an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape, or natural disaster. Immediately after the event, shock and denial are typical. Some people have difficulty moving on with their lives (“Trauma”). The RMG workers and the Rana Plaza survivors have been pushed into poverty; they face social stigma and battle severe mental health issues. Shahorbanu, mother of Siddique, describes hearing the terrified voice of her son over the phone, “Ma, please save me. Somehow, just please save me!” She could not save her son. “I miss when he would come back home and call me Ma—‘*Umma*’. It is a great suffering to bury the body of a son” (Hoskins). Shahorbanu’s recollection of her son Siddique’s final moments during the Rana Plaza collapse shows the sheer helplessness she experienced. It also captures the lasting psychological impact of witnessing the horrific aftermath of her son. Her narrative goes beyond the immediate event and delves deeper into the enduring nature of trauma. It highlights not only her son’s helplessness in his final moments but also her own in the face of an irreversible loss of a beloved.

“I dream bad dreams very often and become scared still today if I remember the day of the collapse. I cannot think of working or living in the high rise building as I am frightened of the repetition of the same incident again in my life—P, Sales Representative” (Kabir et al. 13). P’s statement as a survivor of the Rana Plaza collapse shows the recurring nightmares and the fear that have fundamentally altered their relationship with their past and present selves. In her book *Memory, Narrative, Identity: Remembering the Self*, Nicola King emphasizes how catastrophic events disrupt the continuity of one's life narrative, dividing it into a “before” and “after” (3). P’s statement highlights the rupture in their sense of self. The “before” self, who could work and live in high-rise buildings without fear, contrasts with the “after” self, who is now dominated by post-

traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), fundamentally changing their perception and interaction with society. Survivors like P are unable to move on from the incident, as they witnessed the deaths of many fellow workers. It is hard for them to forget the memories of those people. This has resulted in depression, suicidal ideation, and, in some cases, suicide, because they are now considered burdens to their families.

“I think it could have been better if I was found dead in the collapse... it is painful to be treated as a burden by my own family” said B, a sewing operator (Kabir et al. 13).This statement illustrates the impact of feeling abandoned by those who are supposed to be a source of support and comfort. In B’s case, the family became a source of pain, altering B’s sense of self and existence. This is, as stated by Edkins, that our identity and the meaning of our existence are closely tied to the social context in which we find ourselves (4). When this context is marked by betrayal or danger, especially from those closest to us like family, it can lead to a deep existential crisis, shattering any illusions of safety and security we once held. This reveals that the surviving workers face neglect not only from the government but also from their community and even their own families.

Initially after the disaster, the survivors were provided with a small amount of compensation and medical facilities by government and many non-government organizations. But it is not enough, and the compensation stopped after some time. The survivors also face obstacles in accessing healthcare facilities, increasing their vulnerability to further health issues. They find themselves treated inhumanely by factory owners and management, often facing discrimination and stigmatization. "I faced problem to get the job in RMG sector as they (employer) thought I will not be able to employ full physical strength...I could not finish my job on time, the PM used to scold me. I left the job.—I, sewing operator" (Kabir et al.15). This

dehumanizing treatment is not just about the physical workspace but also reflects disregard for the workers’ well-being and dignity. This forced departure from the job further highlights the broader systemic issues within the RMG sector—lack of empathy and accommodation for workers who have gone through significant trauma.

“No factory owner wants to give me a job when they get to know that I am a Rana Plaza survivor. I want to join in this sector again because I am not skilled at other works—J, quality inspector” (Kabir at al. 15). The reluctance to employ Rana Plaza survivors stems from a fear within the industry's power structure. Being a survivor is not seen as a mark of resilience but rather as a liability. Their voices, carrying the harsh truths of the industry, are systematically muted. It is, as stated by Edkins, “to prevent survivors from speaking” their own language which would “expose the part played by relations of power” (Edkins 4-5). This exposure poses a threat, as it would challenge the authority of management, the government, and global brands. It risks exposing their manipulation of the market and workers for increased economic benefits. The testimony of the survivors can challenge the structures of power and authority (Edkins 5) through their shared experiences. The survivors may develop a form of solidarity and collective identity. This can challenge and disrupt the dominant narratives. The RMG management and the government officials are aware of the workers’ traumatizing conditions, yet they choose to utilize them in a way that is economically beneficial to them. They do not want the survivors to be aware of their collective identity because then they have to resort to force in order to silence them.

The demands of the workers are not just for structural improvements; they are for a transformation in how they are treated and compensated—which continues to be overshadowed by narratives of superficial progress. The traumatic experiences the survivors are carrying have

not been recognized. “Sometimes I dream my fellow workers who died in the collapse. Their faces are very clear to me till today…I wake up with strange feeling in midnight. I also get frightened if anyone touches me while I sleep—K, Sewing Operator ” (qtd. in Kabir et al. 12). This quote from one of the survivors clearly shows lingering suffering from trauma and captures the intensity of it. The disaster inflicted not only physical harm but also deep psychological wounds. The exploitation and trauma faced by workers in the RMG sector is not a recent event; it has been a persistent issue for decades. Despite occasional coverage in various media outlets, there seems to be an underlying pattern: these stories often gain attention only when they align with the interests or agendas of the media or other influential entities. It is a well-known fact that Bangladesh’s garment industry heavily relies on female workers, who are frequently subjected to harassment and various forms of abuse. As reported by a foreign relations study, the abuses faced by these women include verbal abuse, physical violence, coercion, threats, and retaliation. One female worker recounted her experience of abusive treatment when requesting maternity leave, recalling the factory owner's response: “If you’re all concentrating on f****g, why work here? Go and work in a Brothel!” (United States 11).

This type of incident is not an isolated one; rather, it is a systemic issue within the RMG industry. However, it is crucial to recognize that abuse in these workplaces is not exclusive to female workers. Male employees are also subjected to various forms of mistreatment. Verbal abuse, often involving derogatory and demeaning language, is a frequent occurrence, aimed at intimidating and controlling the workers. Physical abuse, ranging from pushing and shoving to more severe forms of violence such as sexual assault, is also reported in these settings. Such treatment creates an atmosphere of fear and submission, which is often used as a tactic to keep workers compliant and discourage them from advocating for their rights or reporting violations.

Rethinking Responsibility in Global Labor

In revisiting the Rana Plaza tragedy through the lenses of neo-colonialism and trauma theory, this paper has tried to highlight the deep-rooted issues in Bangladesh's garment industry. Workers have no choice but to accept whatever wage they are offered, whatever working conditions they are offered. They are in a state of mind where they have lost their sense of identity. Even before the Rana Plaza incident and similar events, these workers have consistently lived with trauma. It might even be characterized as generational trauma. They have been so marginalized and unheard that they have become accustomed to this constant state of trauma, attempting to normalize and endure it due to a lack of alternatives. For many, enduring abuse and violence is a necessary sacrifice to earn the money they need to live. This harsh reality is their means of survival. The trauma extends beyond personal suffering, as it is deeply embedded in the economic framework of Bangladesh’s garment industry.

CSR, despite its promises to safeguard workers and maintain ethical labor standards, has largely evolved into a mechanism for corporations to preserve their economic control. While international brands voice support for labor rights, their persistent use of exploitative supply chain practices reveals that CSR initiatives often amount to little more than reputation management. So, why does this matter? It matters because we, as consumers, are part of this system, too. It is easy to say we will boycott brands tied to labor abuse, but in reality, such actions may only create space for another brand to take their place without meaningful change. What we truly need is greater consumer awareness and responsibility. We must look beyond the label, examine a brand’s labor policies and CSR practices, and use our voices to advocate for fair labor and ethical production. Our voices have power, and that power must be used with intention. But this is not just about shifting policies; it is also about listening. Survivor testimony reveals

the emotional and psychological costs that CSR language tends to erase. These narratives are not only powerful, but also disruptive. They expose the failures of corporate accountability and force us to confront the reality behind economic systems. So, if we truly care about justice, then raising our voices is not optional—it is essential.

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The Dead Women of Poe and Hawthorne

by Caroline Grugin

Dramatic scenes of death, contributions from Gothic and Romantic influences, feature prominently in early nineteenth century American literature—death through violence, through poison (or antidotes), or through the best intentions gone horribly wrong. In his often referenced work "The Philosophy of Composition," Edgar Allan Poe remarks, "It is only with the dénouement constantly in view that we can give a plot its indispensable air of consequence" (675). Death, then, makes itself available as the ultimate end, and therefore the perfect beginning, to an author determined to capture the most intense moments of a character's existence; within this perspective lies, perhaps, the origin of Poe's army of beautiful, dead women who haunt the pages of his short stories. Nor do they linger only in Poe's writing, for dead women grace the pages of Nathaniel Hawthorne's short stories as well, leaving husbands, lovers, and family members to stare in awe and horror at beautiful corpses. Over a century after these women's literary births, their deaths remain the only resolution that their broken men and enthralled readers may hope to find. Together, these two authors claim responsibility for more fictional female deaths than can be counted on two hands (just in their short stories), each tragedy magnifying the emotion, mystery, and horror within a beautiful story.

Poe and Hawthorne, pioneers of the Gothic and the Romance, respectively, have long had their literary (and real life) relationships with women extensively analyzed by academics. A century ago, Stovall marveled that "No other great American poet has been so consistent as Edgar Allan Poe in his use of women as the subject of poetry" (163), highlighting the poet's fascination with femininity. In the 1970s, feminist critic Nina Baym acknowledged that "the criticism," in reference to feminist scholars' views about Hawthorne's depiction of women, "shows a striking consistency of orientation; it is mainly judgemental in nature" (250). While

the scholarship may very well consistently agree on the significance of these deceased women, judgemental or otherwise, less agreement exists about what that significance means in regard to either author. After all, ideas of death, the “only event that is impossible to experience before transforming it into art,” fall to the individual for interpretation and are, “in that regard, unusually sensitive to the cultural currents" (Weldon 3). Literary scholarship, and writers thereof, often share this unusual sensitivity, likewise shifting among critical lenses and cultural trends. Some academics indicate that Freudian fixations on the mother or misfortunes of the heart provided inspiration for these early American tales of eerie and heartbreaking feminine death, while others suggest the motivation arose from either homoerotic tendencies or purely misogynistic ones.

Yet these rationalizations struggle to account for the roles which the dead and dying female characters fill within these stories, most of which do not center the women themselves. If Hawthorne kills a female character because he lost his mother, that explanation accounts for her existence, but not her purpose. If Poe kills his character because of his own broken heart, such an account would not satisfactorily, on its own, clarify her presence within the story. As Poe sharply reminded his critics, he did not have “the least difficulty in recalling to mind the progressive steps of any of [his] compositions (“The Philosophy” 676), and therefore the reason for the literary death must be presumed to be intentional and essential to the story—she is dead, yes, but why? The answer, then, both for the women and for their deaths, can be partially seen in Bronfen’s analysis of Poe’s “The Oval Portrait,” when she asserts, “portraits cannot be seen independently of their artist’s signature, and in some sense also represent him” (114). The artist exists entangled with his art, and neither he nor his creation can be understood fully without the other; likewise, the deceased woman written by Poe or Hawthorne reflects not only the author who created her, but also the male counterpart who caused or shaped her death. Inseparable from his actions, she, his muse, his love, or his

ultimate fear, lays bare the male character’s desire for control and the inherent flaws from which he cannot escape.

This duality is best represented through four key short stories: “The Oval Portrait” and “The Birth-Mark” reveal the failings of individual hubris through the male characters’ attempts to perfect or preserve their spouses, while “The Fall of the House of Usher” and “Rappaccini’s Daughter” expose generational flaws that ultimately result in the destruction of a bloodline. These pairings explore how each female death functions as a mirror for the male character’s illusions of control. Contrasting Poe's idealized depictions of feminine death with Hawthorne’s morally complex portrayals reveals how each author uses the deaths of women to bring the darker aspects of male desire, power, and helplessness to light.

Edgar Allan Poe openly wrote about his love for beauty in its many forms, but he particularly admired that exquisite beauty which arrives in the form of melancholy. He asserted, “Beauty of whatever kind, in its supreme development, invariably excites the sensitive soul to tears. Melancholy is thus the most legitimate of all the poetical tones” (“The Philosophy” 678). It stands to reason then that the sweetest sorrow of a lost love rises above all other heartbreaks, all other bouts of melancholia, to fill its role at the peak of poetic inspiration. Poe affirms this stance in a quote that echoes upon the pages of countless journals and books: “the death, then, of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world” (680). Critics have claimed this line as proof of many alleged characteristics, including Poe’s warped mental state, his hatred of women, and his obsession with death. Curiously, those same writers frequently disregard the second half of the line, or maybe intentionally overlook it. He finishes his sentence with the words “—and equally is it beyond doubt that the lips best suited for such a topic are those of a bereaved lover” (680). While the woman’s death creates aesthetic beauty, the grief-burdened response of her lover develops

emotion. Both her death and his reaction are necessary for the story to reach the height of Poe’s esteem and to properly express the sentiment of melancholy.

The simplest representation of both Poe’s melancholic beauty and the reciprocal relationship of the perfect women with her broken man can be seen in “The Oval Portrait,” which offers a powerful depiction of an idealized, deceased bride whose existence functions as a mirror for the male artist’s obsession and failures. Stovall describes the unnamed character as “a lovely creature...who sits patiently in her husband's gloomy studio and smiles uncomplainingly, and slowly wastes away to death rather than hinder him in the painting of his masterpiece” (7). This story, originally titled “Life in Death,” comes from the perspective of a wounded traveler who has no choice but to break into an empty chateau. Arrested by the sight of a portrait so realistic and lovely that he imagines its subject to be real, the traveler reads her story to learn that she died the moment her husband finished painting her portrait; or, at least, her husband noticed his second wife’s mortal state the moment he finally looked away from the painting. The climax arrives during the last lines, after the final brush stroke has touched the canvas: “while he yet gazed, he grew tremulous and very pallid, and aghast, and crying with a loud voice, ‘This is indeed Life itself!’ turned suddenly to regard his beloved—She was dead!” (Poe, “The Oval” 299).

The short story ends abruptly and does not linger over her corpse. Although Poe documents the woman’s decline and the painter’s ignorance, describing her as one “who pined visibly to all but him” (“The Oval” 298), the tale turns away from the horror of her death, leaving her to be preserved in words as in the portrait—flawless. He describes her superlatively, saying, “She was a maiden of rarest beauty, and not more lovely than full of glee” (298). Her character, one of devotion and resolution, can be gleaned from her continued presence in the tower where her husband’s fixation took place, even as “the tints which he spread upon the canvas were drawn from the cheeks of her who sate beside him” (298). Her

perfection, made up of innocence, beauty, and commitment, transfers from her physical form into the painting, and while the portrait “was a mere head and shoulders,” it maintained the “immortal beauty of [her] countenance” (297). Her love was perfect, her beauty perfect, and her death therefore equally perfect. This flawless nature stands in stark contrast with her husband, the monomaniacal painter, and serves to magnify his failures. Poe does not allow his readers to question the man’s love, despite his ignorance of his wife’s suffering, and describes the portrait as “A proof not less of the power of the painter than of his deep love for her whom he depicted so surpassingly well” (298). However, unlike the nature of the woman, the measure of this man’s love does not reflect back to his character, and he in particular “was a passionate, and wild and moody man, who became lost in reveries” (298). Whereas her devotion emphases her perfection, his fixation underlines his imperfection.

In her essay “Misery Is Manifold’: Bereavement in the Tales of Edgar Allan Poe,” Stobert argues on behalf of Poe’s men, claiming that readers must understand the bereaved perspective before they may truly understand Poe’s depiction of grief. She reminds readers that “While female characters are undoubtedly central to Poe's tales, his male mourners deserve equal attention.” Additionally, she argues that “the shock effects these 'dark ladies' generate often overshadow the roles of the other pivotal figures in Poe's tales of revivification: bereaved men” (Stobert 282). Although the bride of this story would not classify as a dark lady, the audience’s shock at her death, along with the academic interest in the dead woman, does threaten to overshadow what may be the most important moment of this story—the man’s realization of eternal loss at the very moment of perceived success. He fell victim to hubris, imagined himself capable of creation at the level of God or of woman, and in his furious, obsessive need to create a work of perfection that would live on after him, he failed to see that the goal would require an excruciating sacrifice.

Herein lies Poe’s purpose, the same purpose that will repeat itself throughout his stories of dead and dying women. For Poe, “Woman so often not only embodies values associated with death but enacts death’s work rhetorically” (Bronfen 66). The dead young woman takes on the role of Death, here to disturb, to challenge, and to reflect the actions and failures of the man back onto himself. He must look upon her corpse and reckon with his mortal failings, while she continues on, immortal, a symbol, a representation of pure love and perfection. Juxtaposed with her, and only her, his humanity crumbles while his body trembles from the shock of her loss. Her death ensures her eternal perfection, and it ensures his eternal failure.

For Hawthorne, this beloved-lover dynamic shifts, although its literary purpose stays the same. The soon-to-be-dead woman, who in the previous section remained a symbol of perfection and beautiful melancholy, now transitions into one-half of a sharp dichotomy of the natural and the orderly, upon which science and religion lay a heavy hand. Somewhere on her body she carries a single, glaring flaw that her lover despises, and that he finds impossible to ignore; this impossibility stems from the fact that the flaw does not correspond with her sins, but with his own. In contrast with Poe’s largely undescribed, idealized dead women, Hawthorne’s female characters are complex figures whose deaths occur when the men who love them find that they hate what these young women symbolize: the ugly and toxic marks of their own failures.

In bringing the women to life before their deaths, Hawthorne does not treat them like symbols, but instead gifts them characteristics deeper than beauty and devotion; they are independent characters replete with histories, knowledge, hopes, and interests. Nina Baym addresses Hawthorne’s representation of men and women in her book *Hawthorne’s Women: The Tyranny of Social Myths:*

> [The female] represents warmth, imagination, intuition, and love; identified with nature and the heart, she also implies the nonrational complexities and mysteries of the self. The male prefers to live in an orderly, rational, moral world, and in the course of structuring such a world around himself he inevitably rejects the woman. So doing, he suppresses himself as well as her. (250)

In this contradiction between the literary sexes, the woman written by Hawthorne represents the problematic truths of an uncontrollable world; for that reason, the male character must exclude the nature of his lover in order to be happy. Her association with nature exists as a challenge to the man who seeks to control her, just as civilization seeks to bring order to the wildness of the woods. Hawthorne’s stories often feature male characters who urgently need to understand their female counterparts, who become obsessed with making sense of what they perceive as chaos, but who cannot reconcile the feminine into their world; the only solution, from this line of thought, requires the woman herself to change into something that can be more readily understood, or rather into someone who will better fit into his comfortable world of masculine order.

Yet the further development of the woman’s character does not affect the role which she fulfills within the text, which aligns tightly with that crafted by Poe. Once again, the woman’s demise highlights not her own flaws, but the flaws of the man who sought to control her; this dynamic manifests itself clearly within the relationship Georgiana and Aylmer share in Hawthorne’s “The Birth-Mark.” In this short story, Aylmer, an “eminent proficient in every branch of natural philosophy” marries Georgiana, who he claims “came so nearly perfect from the hand of Nature” (260), barring the single small, hand-shaped birth-mark upon her cheek. This mark, which Hawthorne describes as “the fatal flaw of humanity, which Nature, in one shape or another, stamps ineffaceably on all her productions,” became for Aylmer a symbol “of his wife’s liability to sin, sorrow, decay, and death” (261, 262).

Through a series of increasingly extreme experiments, Aylmer forces the mark to fade from his wife’s face, but in stealing her birth-mark, he ultimately steals her life, the consequences proving that truly this mark of nature represented not her fatal flaws, but his own pride, overconfidence, and ambition. After all, her mark could never have killed, but his hatred did.

Georgiana dies, one of two options which she herself presented to Aylmer in response to his horrible fixation with her birth-mark. “Life is a burthen,” she had cried to him before begging him to “Either remove this dreadful Hand, or take my wretched life!” (“The Birth-Mark” 264). To her belongs a sacrificial nature; recognizing her husband’s disgust and discomfort with her appearance, she offers up part of herself to please her beloved, in whom greed and hubris run rampant. He gleefully accepts, because his overconfidence lies to him, and causes him to lie to her. In the midst of his experiments, he calms her nerves, reassuring her that “Unless all my science have deceived me, it cannot fail” (275). Yet it does fail; he fails. Hawthorne describes the final moments of both the birth-mark’s existence and Georgiana’s life, by saying, “Its presence had been awful; its departure was more awful still. Watch the stain of the rainbow fading out of the sky; and you will know how that mysterious symbol passed away” (276-277). The rainbow, either a marvel of nature or a sign of God’s love after the destruction of the flood, vanishes because Aylmer did not actually achieve perfect creation as he so desperately desired—he, a flawed man rather than an all-powerful deity, accomplished nothing more than complete destruction.

Elisabeth Bronfen asks, “Is the death of the beloved, or the dead beloved, a substitute figure for one’s own death?” (63). If so, if the relationship is reciprocal, then it may be presumed that the flaws of the dead beloved manifest the flaws of the lover. Although the physical mark, what Aylmer calls a flaw, lay upon Georgiana’s face, this symbol of original sin does not reflect her internal state, but his. The mark taunts him, like her death will taunt him, as a representation of his own powerlessness. In the final pages, Hawthorne describes

how Aylmer’s overconfidence, his belief that with his science he could create more perfectly than God or Nature, causes him to fall deeply into a sin which can be defined with the last line of the story: “he failed to look beyond the shadowy scope of Time, and living once for all in Eternity, to find the perfect Future in the present” (“The Birth-Mark” 278). Aylmer refused to be satisfied, and so Georgiana’s death must reveal his hubris, along with the obsession with which he exerted masculine control over feminine nature. Hawthorne openly cautions his readers against such futility, reminding them that, “had Aylmer reached a profounder wisdom, he need not thus have flung away the happiness, which would have woven his mortal life of the self-same texture with the celestial” (278). Her death, essential to both the story and Aylmer’s lesson, exists to reflect sins back upon her lover, and feels all the more tragic for it.

Perhaps the greatest heartbreak shared between “The Oval Portrait” and “The Birth-Mark” lies in how the dying women protect their lovers from the irreversible wrongs those men have done, once again magnifying the tragedy of their mistakes. Although the bride’s and Georgiana’s deaths draw the readers’ attention to crimes of men, even in dying these women do not wish their husbands to suffer overly much from guilt; this reluctance supports them in completing their final purpose. As Bronfen describes, the women function “as the agency that heals the wound of death’s presence in life even as she is also seen as its source” (69). The young bride continued to sit for her husband’s art while she died in the turret beside him, where “she smiled on and still on, uncomplainingly, because she saw that the painter (who had high renown) took a fervid and burning pleasure in his task” (Poe, “The Oval” 298). Georgiana similarly offers comfort to her worried husband, the very man who would kill her, when she “poured out the liquid music of her voice to quench the thirst of his spirit” (Hawthorne, “The Birth-Mark” 272). Both women sacrifice themselves for the sake of their lovers’ passions, comfort, and happiness, and both men enthusiastically accept the risk of that

sacrifice. Weldon describes it perfectly when he identifies that, “the male protagonist is frequently willing to overlook, reject, and sacrifice women. More often than not, the male protagonist's fear is not that he will be parted from his lover but that their union will drag him down to the grave” (4). Following his failure, he does not follow his wife to the grave but instead must gaze with shame at what his choices brought about.

Ultimately, Poe’s “The Oval Portrait” and Hawthorne’s “The Birth-Mark” rely upon their female characters to expose the deeply personal failings of their male counterparts in order for the reader to properly experience the full range of sentiment brought on by their tragic deaths. For Poe, the unnamed bride’s death exposes the artist’s obsession with capturing beauty, leaving him a fool who traded a living, changing beauty for a stagnant, though immortal, reproduction. Similarly, in Hawthorne’s story, Georgiana’s tragic end uncovers Aylmer’s sinful pride in his relentless quest for perfection, exposing his misplaced belief in his own power. Both authors use the deaths of these women to highlight the specific, self-inflicted flaws of each man, and in so doing, Poe and Hawthorne reveal that these individual, immediate flaws are powerful enough to destroy what these men claim to love, even before exploring the weightier, inherited flaws that linger across generations.

Female power to bring truth to light extends beyond the individual level, and one of the greatest representations of a woman’s death exposing generational flaws exists in Poe’s story of utter collapse and horror “The Fall of the House of Usher.” Unlike the previous two stories, this tale contains a narrator who claims to witness the destruction of the family first-hand. The unnamed narrator receives a letter requesting that he visit with his old friend Roderick Usher at the family estate; the invitation turns into the opportunity to witness and support his friend’s declining mental state, a decline which allegedly stems from the imminent death of his twin sister, the man’s last living relative. The visit ends abruptly, not due to the death of Madeline Usher, but due to her overwhelming destruction of the

household, symbolized by the fall of the physical manor house itself into the lake beneath it, the final moments of which the narrator describes with the haunting line, “the deep and dank tarn at my feet closed sullenly and silently over the fragments of the ‘*House of Usher*’” (216).

Mysteriously little is known about the woman herself. Madeline Usher appears only three times within this tale, without ever speaking, and even descriptions of her physical appearance must be inferred from the knowledge that she shares a likeness with her twin brother, whose features “made up altogether a countenance not easily to be forgotten” (Poe, “The Fall” 202). It was not necessary to describe her because, as Stobert explains, “many of the qualities which make Poe's women fascinating apply to his men as well: emotional intensity and willpower… and finally, in the case of Roderick Usher, an ethereal yet deteriorating physical beauty” (Stobert 285). Presumed equally beautiful, Madeline’s insubstantial figure drifts through the pages as it does through the household, seemingly already distant from the living, but her aura blankets the house and infects the male characters even in her physical absence.

Truly, Poe requires the narrator, and therefore the reader, to subsist off only a couple of glimpses of her physical form prior to the final moments of the story, hiding her true abilities behind a focus on her brother. Readers must acquire information about her second-hand through brief descriptions provided by the narrator, who imparts that “The disease of the lady Madeline had long baffled the skill of her physicians. A settled apathy, a gradual wasting away of the person, and frequent although transient affections of a partially cataleptical character were the unusual diagnosis” (Poe, “The Fall” 205). From this diagnosis, it might be assumed that the young woman’s physical frailty would prevent her fulfilling the functions which the previously analyzed characters completed. However, her power cannot be questioned, regardless of her character’s lack of explicit development beyond her existence and her disease.

Far from the soft and joyful idealization of the young girl from “The Oval Portrait,” she nonetheless maintains the very same level of perfection as did the dead bride. It has already been stated that Poe held melancholic beauty in the highest esteem, yet Madeline Usher transcends this concept, as her character represents the literary embodiment of the sublime. Beautiful, frightening, and misleadingly powerful, she causes her own brother to live in terror of what she may bring about. The poor, failing man confides in his friend, “I feel that the period will sooner or later arrive when I must abandon life and reason together, in some struggle with the grim phantasm, FEAR” (Poe, “The Fall” 204). Fear of her and fear of what comes next have inverted the power structures from the previous two stories so that Roderick Usher believes himself to be without control. He takes no action, makes no preparation, because, like Poe, and like the readers of the story, he cannot tear himself away from this most exquisite sentiment embodied within his sister. Feminist writer Joan Dayan argues that “The sublime is a production of excess in the mind, and Poe allows himself to be consumed by the surfeit” (3). If true, then Poe’s male characters in this tale are likewise drunk off of the possibilities of the sublime, trapped between curiosity and horror, unable or unwilling to distance themselves from the feminine power which so entrances them.

Following Madeline’s death, the narrator and Usher distract themselves with music and books while her power to expose her brother’s frailty and the weakness of the Usher male bloodline grows stronger. Even after her burial in an almost comically secure vault, Roderick still fears her, because, as in “The Birth-Mark,” the death of the beloved must represent the coming death of the man left grieving; after all, “there is no life, no flesh, that has not already been struck by death” (Bronfen 116). Furthermore, the nature of twins implies that the aforementioned reciprocal nature of death must be heightened in this sibling relationship, as does the whispered fact that “The stem of the Usher race, all time-honored as it was, had put forth, at no period, any enduring branch” (Poe, “The Fall” 200). The too-closeness of blood

and the extreme similarity in appearance between the two siblings draws Madeline’s power and Roderick’s weakness into overwhelming contrast.

Her death exposes the truth—Roderick’s fatal flaw stems not from his fear of death, but from his secret desire for death combined with the inherited weakness of his spirit that allowed his fear to paralyze him. The broken man admits this to the narrator, who describes the scene: “To an anomalous species of terror I found him a bounden slave. ‘I shall perish,’ said [Roderick], “I must perish in this deplorable folly. Thus, thus, and not otherwise, shall I be lost” (Poe, “The Fall” 204). Burdened by inescapable, suffocating fear of what comes next, convinced she will bring about his doom, his entire character becomes fixated on his own death as it is represented by Madeline’s. In *Love and Death in the American Novel*, Fiedler examines Poe’s frequent writings on death, claiming, “but in Poe…the death-wish is always uppermost” (Fiedler 415). His analysis of Poe’s obsession with death aligns with Roderick’s fatal flaw (which Madeline will eventually force him to confront), a simultaneous fear of and longing for death, which renders him incapable of resisting the collapse of his household. Roderick, the last of his family line, waits impatiently for his own demise as his physical self continually weakens. Madeline, meanwhile, embodies the inescapable decline of the Usher family as her deteriorating body mirrors Roderick’s mental and emotional decay.

“The ending of ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’,” Fiedler suggests, “expresses directly the lust for a union with death which is Poe's ruling passion. Madeline…returns from the grave to claim her brother just as he has, almost equally, feared and desired” (415). After days of Roderick ignoring the sounds from her vault, the sounds which would indicate that blood still moved within her veins, the sounds which imply Roderick’s fears persist unabated, the stronger twin succeeds in forcing her way out of her imprisonment to stand in the doorway of life and death. Roderick, who cries out “as if in the effort he were giving up his soul” (Poe, “The Fall” 215), has no choice but to finally face his fears. Without a word,

Madeline Usher, bloodied from her escape from her sepulcher, fulfills her function as a nineteenth-century literary dead woman and drags her weak-willed brother into death, where he secretly longs to settle. Her power succeeds in magnifying the inherited family defects until the entire household fractures under the pressure of its knowledge. Madeline, a humanoid representation of the sublime, a mirror created to reflect the failures of her family’s weak bloodline back onto her brother, and an elite representative of Poe’s dead women, alters the traditions of the other stories by bringing her brother along with her into the underworld.

Madeline, whose death destroys generations of intentions, shares her accomplishments with another powerful young woman. In “Rappaccini’s Daughter,” Beatrice Rappaccini, isolated to a similar extent as the previous woman, exists in a far brighter world than the Ushers. Her days pass not with gloom and swamp gas but with flowers and fountains; sadly, this nature-filled world of light and color cannot save her from the same fate. The final dead woman of this analysis, she bears the heavy burden of exposing the sins of her father along with those of her lover, eradicating the poisonous plans both men have for her future, but sacrificing her life in the process.

The descriptions of her beauty might initially lead a reader to believe that Beatrice should be categorized alongside Poe’s idealized women. Only ever seen in her father’s garden, her beauty resembles that of the flowers around her. The man infatuated with her describes her as “A young girl, arrayed with as much richness of taste as the most splendid of the flowers, beautiful as the day, and with a bloom so deep and vivid that one shade more would have been too much” (Hawthorne, “Rappaccini” 391). However, unlike Poe’s characters, her beauty continues uninfluenced by sorrow or ill health, for “she looked redundant with life, health, and energy” (391), a description emphasized by its direct contrast with her father, “a tall, emaciated, sallow, and sickly-looking man” (390). Beyond her physical appearance, Hawthorne develops her character with a great reputation for

intelligence. An academic of her lover’s acquaintance describes her as the girl “whom all the young men in Padua are wild about, though not half a dozen have ever had the good hap to see her face,” and hints that her education reached such a level that “she is already qualified to fill a professor’s chair” (395). With her character so thoroughly developed, she appears close to perfection.

However, since Hawthorne must imbue his female characters with a perceived flaw, as with Georgiana’s birth-mark, Beatrice cannot escape his writing unscathed, and so bears the cruel marks of her father’s experimentation and evil plans. Giovanni hints at what could be wrong with her in the very same breath he admires her beauty, wondering “What is this being?—beautiful, shall I call her?—or inexpressibly terrible?” Her perfection carries with it the toxic nature of the beautiful garden in which she spends her days, her beauty more akin to foxglove than a rose. Truly, the stories whisper that “Poison was her element of life. With that rich perfume of her breath, she blasted the very air. Her love would have been poison!—her embrace death!” (410).

Beatrice, through her open and generous nature, takes her father’s wicked intentions from the whispered shadows and draws them into the open, where he confirms he shares the same sin as Aylmer: he thought he could improve upon God’s creations. Rappaccini, through the powers of his scientific research, had transformed the couple. Of the literally toxic Giovanni, he says with pride, “he now stands apart from common men, as thou dost, daughter of my pride and triumph, from ordinary women” (419). Rappaccini, certain that his alterations to humanity will result in true perfection, proves his ambitious, criminal pride when he speaks about the common man and the ordinary woman with disgust. In the same scene, Beatrice rises to her fate. At the moment of her death, she lays bare his plans for generational sins when she questions her father, “wherefore didst thou inflict this miserable doom upon thy child?” (420). Caught off guard by her horror, by her unwillingness to accept

his plans for her, Rappaccini faces the first and final challenge to his poisonous dreams. Hawthorne, through Beatrice’s dying words and her rejection of such toxic ambitions, forces his readers to see that Rappaccini’s manipulation ends with the destruction of his bloodline, thus proving that his desires to control and to create were all, at their heart, a failure.

As for Giovanni and his flaws, he also joins in a brotherhood with Aylmer, sharing in the all-encompassing need to control the woman he admired, as exposed by his initial infatuation with and subsequent rage-filled rejection of her. Beatrice, her character even more developed than Georgiana’s, falls into the category of “dark” women upon whom the scholarship fixates. Fiedler latches onto her as “the prototype of them all” (298), the tempting woman who lives outside the strict regulations of society and can therefore maintain a sensuous femininity off-limits to other women. He elaborates on this claim, determining, “the poison that would have made her superhuman…is, of course, the full magic of sex with which she is endowed, that primal power bred out of ladies by civilized life, but deliberately bred back into Beatrice by her magician father” (298). Sexuality, represented here as toxic, as an inherent sin that must be scourged from her body lest it poison others, simultaneously gives her the power to expose the sins of men. This terrifies Giovanni, forcing him to confront desires and fears that lie outside his neatly ordered understanding of the world.

Giovanni realizes his desire for her early in the story, acknowledging that “she had at least instilled a fierce and subtle poison into his system,” and describes it thus: “It was not love, although her rich beauty was a madness to him…but a wild offspring of both love and horror that had each parent in it, and burned like one and shivered like the other” (Hawthorne, “Rappaccini” 398). He desires Beatrice, and yet she infuriates him; already infected with her sensuality, having long spent time in her natural world, he hates her for existing outside of the masculine order he understands, and outside the bounds of his obsession. “Thou hast filled my veins with poison!” he spews at her defenseless self, “Thou hast made me as hateful, as

ugly, as loathsome and deadly a creature as thyself—a world’s wonder of hideous monstrosity!” (417). Bronfen wrote an interpretation of this type of intense emotional switch, and though she originally described Aylmer’s intentions towards Georgiana, the concept fits equally well with this pairing. The woman, she said, who represents man’s failures, “must have sorrow, she must be sinful, she must be punished for his desire” (Bronfen 128). Giovanni feels alarmed by Beatrice’s natural state, and subsequently feels enraged by it, because Beatrice’s unwitting act of drawing him into her world mimics his desperation to bring her into his own world where he could hold full power over her.

Like Madeline Usher, who returns from the grave to confront her brother with the inevitability of their shared end, Beatrice offers no comfort to this flawed man, instead choosing to deliver a damning critique of those who claimed to love her but ultimately sought only to control her. Her piercing question to Giovanni, “was there not, from the first, more poison in thy nature than in mine?” (Hawthorne, “Rappaccini” 420), throws a dagger at the heart of his hypocrisy, exposing his moral failings as being deeply intertwined with his obsession with her. Through her death, Beatrice uses the only power left to her, forcing both men to confront the consequences of their actions. Her demise lays bare Rappaccini’s poisonous pride, rooted in his generational hubris, while simultaneously reflecting Giovanni’s inability to understand or accept moral complexity. Innocent in death, yet surrounded by the poisonous flowers of her father’s garden, Beatrice’s corpse becomes a haunting condemnation of the destructive consequences of their respective ambitions and obsessions.

To understand both Poe and Hawthorne’s use of women’s deaths requires equal analysis of men’s fears and failures, or in the reverse, “if Poe destabilizes any sure identification of women, he also questions what it means to speak, or to love, as a man” (Dayan 1). The authors center the stories around these relationships, and therefore analyzing the lover without the response of the beloved, or vice-versa, removes the essential nature of

the text. As Weldon says, “The suffering of women, while it may be different from that of men, is related to, and perhaps even contingent upon, male suffering, and it will also not be relieved until men change their assumptions (5). The two halves, the killer and the corpse, the mourner and the mourned, are too intensely intertwined to separate; together, these relationships depict suffering, but they also function to interrogate humanity’s deepest fears, of death of course, and of failure, helplessness, and the loss of control.

Four dead women leave horrified lovers and family members torn open by grief, their flaws and guilt on display for all to scrutinize. These women, neither the narrators nor the main characters of their own stories, hold a power that equals that of the men they leave behind. Neither Poe nor Hawthorne lingers long past their moments of death, perhaps because “The abode of the dead...is not a pleasant place; and Poe is ordinarily careful not to give or attempt to give a very detailed description of it” (Stovall 5), but also because the true depth of their power lies in, not after, the moment of exquisite sacrifice. Through their deaths, the young bride, Georgiana, Madeline, and Beatrice force their male counterparts to reckon with their actions, their sins, and their crimes, requiring them to truly know themselves for the first time (or, in the case of Roderick, to be punished for his sins even if he could not face them) and leaving them without the possibility of comfort as they shoulder the weight of what they have done. Herein lies the true shock of these gothic and romantic tales, or, as Leslie Fielder explains, “The final horrors…are neither gods nor demons, but intimate aspects of our own minds” (38). The artist in his turret, Aylmer in his laboratory, Roderick beneath the lake, and Giovanni and Rappaccini in the garden all find themselves confronted with the consequences of their failures by the very women whom they failed, trapped alone in their stories and in their minds with the knowledge that their own sins cost the life of one they loved.

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Breaking the Cycle: Trauma, Black Masculinity, and Systemic Oppression in August Wilson's *Fences*

by Hannah Byers

August Wilson's *Fences* explores race, family, and Black masculinity in America during the mid-20th century. Written in 1983 and set between 1957 and 1965, the play takes place during a critical era in the Black American experience, overlapping with the Civil Rights Movement and shifting racial dynamics. *Fences* examines how generational trauma and rigid gender expectations shape relationships, specifically between fathers and sons. The relationship between Troy and Cory Maxson serves as the focal point for these themes, and their explosive confrontation in Act 2, Scene 4 illustrates the rooted pain that arises from unhealed wounds from society. Scholars have often analyzed racial barriers and intergenerational conflict in *Fences*; critics like Sandra Shannon and Alan Nadel emphasize the play's commentary on systemic oppression and Black identity. However, while much of the analysis highlights Troy's personal struggles, this paper argues that Wilson presents the father-son conflict as a personal failing and a reflection of a more significant societal issue. Through close analysis of Act 2, Scene 4, and engagement with scholarly sources, this essay explores how *Fences* illustrates the cycle of generational trauma and toxic masculinity as a result of racism and systemic oppression.

Fences follows the story of Troy Maxson, a former baseball player turned sanitation worker, as he struggles with his past disappointments and the pressures of fatherhood. The play takes place during a time of racial transition in America, where Black athletes and professionals were beginning to break barriers, yet discrimination remained deeply embedded in society. Being denied opportunities due to racism, Troy struggles to support his family while forcing strict expectations on his son, Cory. Troy is denied opportunities at his workplace due to racism, as he is fired in Act 1, Scene 1 because he asks his boss, "Why you got all the white mens driving and the colored lifting…You think only white fellows got sense enough to drive a truck" (Wilson 4). He is also denied opportunities due to racism in his baseball career. He tells his friend Bono in Act 1, Scene 1, "Man batting .269, understand? .269. What kind of

sense that make? I was hitting .432 with thirty-seven home runs! Man batting .269 and playing right field for the Yankees!” (11). These quotes by Troy show the hurt he has experienced through a racist society in the workplace and sports. Therefore, he is attempting to protect Cory from the same hurt he had. Cory is a talented football player who hopes to secure a college scholarship, but Troy refuses to support him due to being discouraged by his own failures. This generational conflict builds throughout the play, culminating when Cory stands up to his father in Act 2, Scene 4, by challenging his authority and exposing the emotional wounds that have shaped their relationship. Their confrontation serves as a pivotal moment that shows the themes of masculinity, control, and the repetitive nature of trauma.

Act 2, Scene 4 is one of the most emotionally charged scenes in *Fences*, representing a breaking point between father and son. Readers can identify the controlling nature of Troy throughout the play. In Act 1, Scene 3, Cory tells Troy about a football recruiter wanting to visit, but Troy is stern in not allowing him into the house since “[Troy’s] the boss around here,” and he does “the only saying what counts” (Wilson 38), meaning Troy will not allow any other thought about Cory’s football career to arise. Later in the play, Cory confronts Troy about his controlling nature by accusing him of using authority as a means of keeping him down rather than supporting him. He says, “You ain’t never gave me nothing! Ain’t never done nothing but hold me back. Afraid I was gonna be better than you. All you ever did was try and make me scared of you” (88). In response, Troy views Cory’s defiance as a challenge to his role as the head of the household. The argument escalates into a physical fight, with Troy taking his old baseball bat from Cory and nearly swinging at him before stopping himself and telling Cory to leave. This scene highlights the damaging effects of toxic masculinity, as both characters link love with control rather than emotional openness. In *Toxic Masculinity: Men, Meaning, and Digital Media*, the authors define “toxic masculinity” as a way to “describe a range of behaviours and performances of masculinity that cause harm not only to men themselves but also to those around them” and serves as a “metaphor of toxicity and its applicability and adaptability in a range of contexts” (Blogett et al. 1). Troy’s inability to express vulnerability stems from his traumatic past, where he faces rejection both from his father and from a racist society that denies

him opportunities. His response to Cory reflects a common pattern in families affected by generational trauma, where past pain is unintentionally passed down rather than healed.

Furthermore, this scene of the play highlights how systemic racism plays a role in shaping personal relationships. Troy’s refusal to support Cory’s football dreams is not just an act of control; it is rooted in his belief that Black men will always be denied opportunities, just as he was in baseball. At the beginning of the play, Troy talks to his wife, Rose, and his friend, Bono, about how Cory will be denied opportunities just as he was because “The white men ain’t gonna let him get nowhere with that football” (Wilson 10). Rose does not cling to the past, as she notes how “Times have changed since [Troy] was playing baseball…That was before the war” (11), but Troy does not listen. While understandable given Troy’s experiences, this pessimistic outlook stifled Cory’s potential and built a gap between them. In Act 1, Scene 3, Troy expresses love as a responsibility rather than an emotion, listing what he provides—food, clothes, shelter—because Cory is “flesh and blood… ’cause it’s [Troy’s] duty to take care of [Cory]” (40), not out of love, but out of responsibility. Notably, trauma is part of the larger structure of systemic racism that took opportunities from Black men and broke generational bonds. The fight in Act 2, Scene 4 results from the frustration and lack of control that Troy experienced throughout his own life. Troy becomes a product of the system that hurt him, and he passes the damage on. Wilson uses this moment to illustrate how oppression reaches beyond external barriers—it allows itself into the home and shapes identities and relationships in painful ways.

Scholars have long debated the role of masculinity and generational trauma in *Fences*. In her analysis of Wilson’s work, Sandra Shannon discusses in *American Dream: The Dramatic Vision of August Wilson* how Troy’s character represents the struggles of Black fatherhood under systemic oppression. She argues that Troy’s inability to show love in conventional ways stems from his belief that survival is the key to raising a Black son in a hostile world, not love and tenderness. In the same work, Alan Nadel examines the symbolism of fences in the play, noting how they serve as barriers and representations of emotional confinement. The “fences” Troy builds reflect the emotional distance rooted in his past. While these scholars’ primary focus is on Troy’s personal struggles, my argument expands on

their analyses by emphasizing how Wilson presents these issues as part of a broader societal pattern rather than an individual failing. This distinction is essential because it shifts the blame from Troy as an isolated, flawed character to a product of generational and institutional forces. By situating Troy’s emotional tyranny and strict parenting within the context of systemic racism and economic disempowerment, Wilson critiques the societal structures that limit Black men’s expressions of vulnerability and affection. The trauma Troy carries—passed down from his abusive father and brought back by the disappointments of a racist society—becomes a cycle that affects his relationships; in this case, his relationship with Cory. Thus, *Fences* tells the story of one man’s internal conflicts and shows how oppressive systems can shape or break family dynamics over time. This perspective allows for a more subtle reading of Troy. He is not simply defined as a failed father but rather as someone searching for survival in a world that denies him agency, dignity, and emotional freedom.

The concept of toxic masculinity in Black communities has also been explored in sociological studies. bell hooks, in *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*, discusses how Black men are often conditioned to equate strength with emotional detachment, a central theme of Troy’s character. “Many Black males,” hooks states, “learn early in life that being real men means repressing emotions—refusing to care, to nurture, to be gentle, and kind” (68). Troy’s emotional detachment is not personal—it is part of a learned survival strategy rooted in systemic racism, where he believes he is doing the right thing by withholding affection. Still, he is acting out of the societal standards discouraging emotions and vulnerability. Additionally, Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow* provides a broader context for understanding how systemic racism historically limited Black men’s opportunities, reinforcing cycles of trauma and control within families. She writes, “The harm is not just to the individual, but to the family and community structure as a whole” (192). Systemic racism has a strong impact than affects more than just one individual (e.g., Troy). Because of the reinforcement of generational trauma, systemic racism has the power to impact the entirety of families. Similarly, in *Cool Prose: The Dilemmas of Black Manhood in America,* Richard Majors and Janet Mancini Billson argue that Black men adopt a “cool prose” as a defense mechanism against societal pressures. They write, “Because Black males are often denied

traditional outlets for masculinity and achievement, they are forced to express manhood in symbolic ways—through posture, speech, or emotional restraint” (Chapter 4). This concept of emotional restraint as a survival strategy is evident in Troy’s character, as he masks vulnerability with authority and control. Through this lens, Troy’s emotional distance and controlling behavior are not merely personal flaws but rather reflections of a broader cultural script shaped by systemic oppression—a script that Wilson critiques to expose the emotional cost of survival for Black men in America.

This performance of masculinity is visible mainly in scenes where Troy dismisses Cory’s desire for emotional connection and support. For example, when Cory asks Troy why he never liked him, Troy responds, “Like you? I go out every morning… bust my butt… put up with them crackers… cause I *like* you? You’re the biggest fool I ever saw” (Wilson 40). This moment highlights how Troy views love not as emotional openness but as a responsibility—a performance of care rooted in labor, sacrifice, and survival. His language is loaded with frustration, particularly in the phrase “put up with them crackers,” which reveals how racism at his job fuels his internalized bitterness. Instead of processing these feelings, Troy channels them into dominance and distance at home, equating vulnerability with weakness. Troy’s treatment of Cory mirrors bell hooks’ identification of real Black men “refusing to care, to nurture, to be gentle, and kind” (68). Another moment that reveals this is when Troy blocks Cory’s chances at a football scholarship. Instead of supporting his son’s ambitions, Troy insists that sports will not lead to anything—a view created by his own history of racial exclusion. Michelle Alexander argues that systemic racism does not only limit opportunities, but it also creates a lasting emotional and psychological trauma, especially within families. Troy’s decisions are personal and created by a long legacy of disappointment and societal barriers. His inability to express love to Cory comes from his learned understanding that control is equal to love. This contributes to their relationship and continues the generational trauma Troy wants to prevent. By incorporating these perspectives, this essay shows how Wilson’s play speaks to ongoing struggles with race, masculinity, and generational conflict—struggles that continue to shape the emotions and affections within Black families today.

Ultimately, *Fences* is more than just a play about a father and son. It is a commentary on the lasting impact of racism and societal expectations on Black families and distorted expressions of love, masculinity, and identity. Act 2, Scene 4 serves as a crucial turning point where the personal and the political intersect, revealing how deeply ingrained trauma, rooted in an abusive father and disappointments of a racist society, shapes everyday interactions and meaningful relationships. The symbolic fences in the play serve as barriers and representations of emotional confinement. Troy's failures as a father are not isolated flaws but reflections of the systemic forces that shaped his life. By portraying these struggles with empathy, Wilson helps deepen our understanding of Black manhood and challenges audiences to confront the legacies of injustice that persist today. *Fences* urges us to recognize the fences we inherit and build—and dares us to imagine a future where those barriers will not define our relationships.

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Jazz, Blues, and Sports:

Black Culture in *Fences* as a Bridge and Barrier

by Claire Harris

The importance of culture can never be overstated. It brings us closer to our ancestors and fosters a spirit of community and pride amongst those who share it, creating an identity that can transcend age and distance to connect us to one another and the generations that preceded us: which makes sharing it an important means of passing this connection down. Throughout history, the significance of literature to the exposure and sharing of culture—not only with one another but also with the world—has been witnessed time and time again; however, not everyone has had the same opportunities in terms of recognition. In "Putting Black Culture on Stage: August Wilson's Pittsburgh Cycle," Patricia Gantt explains, "Wilson elected to present America through a black cultural lens" due to the fact that, according to Mike Downing, he believed that white culture had "access to all mechanisms to promote its own agenda; whereas black culture has not had the same benefits" (Gantt 2). This effort is especially apparent in Wilson's 1985 play *Fences*, the sixth inclusion in his "Pittsburgh Cycle" series that follows the story of Troy Maxson and his relationship with his family in the 1950s and 60s, at the height of the Civil Rights Movement.

In *Fences*, black culture takes center stage through Troy's three children—Lyons, Cory, and eventually his daughter Raynell, who is born during the play. A sizable age difference separates them from one another, yet the culture they share as Black Americans creates a bridge that connects, or further exposes, the differences between them. Similarly, the relationship each shares with their father is plagued by another kind of distance—be that physical or emotional absence or even death, yet as they are with one another, they are connected to, or further

separated from, him through the culture that he passed down to them or his resistance to share in it with them. Through his use of the blues, jazz, and sports in *Fences,* Wilson highlights the importance of Black Culture as a bridge to connect the generations to one another.

Lamont Pearly Sr. describes the blues as “the expression of freed African Americans” in his article “The Historical Roots of Blues Music.” Beginning in the 1860s, the blues as a musical movement emphasized the struggles of former slaves and their descendants in the Southern states, speaking of “cotton bales/gins, boll weevil, juke houses, and sharecropping” (Pearly), but more than that, it was something uniquely African American—an art that originated from the talents and experiences of the black men and woman who made it. Like all forms of art, music is imperative to the sharing of culture, and the blues in particular primarily manifests itself in the passing down of history. In “The Significance of Blues for American History,” Douglas Henry Daniels describes Afro-American music as “a primary source of chronicling black history” (14). The blues were a way to pass down the experiences, hardships, and lives of the people who created and sang them, offering a way for listeners to connect to those long dead and ensuring that these stories and connections were not lost to time. In *Fences,* we see this illustrated through Raynell and Cory. Cory did not grow up with Raynell. He was eighteen when she was born, and he was thrown out by his father. In the final act of the play, we see Cory return seven years later from the Marines to attend Troy’s funeral, where he meets Raynell, perhaps for the first time. “Cory comes home and confronts his connections with the past. One of these legacies is his tie to his half-sister Raynell, with whom he shares the memory of their father's song” (Gantt 10). Despite the sizable age gap between them and the fact that Cory and Raynell know little about one another, they are able to connect through the blues song their father taught them, singing together, “Old Blue died and I dug his grave / I dug his grave with a silver spade / Let him down

with a golden chain / And every night I call his name / Go on Blue, you good dog you / Go on Blue, you good dog you” (Wilson 99), the same verse Troy sang to himself on the steps of his house just one act previously.

Cory never truly felt connected to his father due to the emotional distance Troy let foster between them, telling his mother, Rose, “Papa was like a shadow that followed you everywhere” (Wilson 96). Troy’s own upbringing was horribly abusive, with him even claiming that his father never cared whether his children ate as long as he himself was full, which led him to believe that, as long as he provided for his family financially, that was all he had to do. He thought Rose was responsible for meeting Cory’s emotional needs, but all this did was drive him and his son apart, with Cory even claiming that his father “ain’t never gave [him] nothing” (86). Even so, Cory had that connection to the culture he and his father shared through the blues. “For Wilson,” Jay Plum claims in his article “Blues, History, and the Dramaturgy of August Wilson,” “The blues reawaken cultural consciousness and provide a new understanding of life” (564). It serves “as an African American “always already” text that inscribes cultural experiences” (564). Raynell is separated from her father now by death; Cory was separated from him in life emotionally; and both siblings are separated from one another by age and distance. Yet through the song Troy shared with them, they are able to connect with one another and with him.

Lyons, however is not able to join in the song, leaving him watching in silence, unable to share in the connection that his father never shared with him (Wilson 99), likely due to his fifteen-year absence from Lyons’s life but also, in part, because of his love for jazz, which Troy does not understand. Like the blues, jazz is an important part of black culture, as Erika Lindsay stresses in her article “Jazz as Part of the African American Cultural Diaspora,” stating that it “gave African American artists a platform to communicate their worldviews” and “provided

institutional platforms for self-definition” (Lindsay). In *Fences*, we see Lyons attempt to connect with Troy through his own music. He asks his father to come and listen to him play, yet Troy is resistant, stating that he “doesn’t like that Chinese music. All that noise” (Wilson 48). Like Cory, Lyons is disconnected from his father, first physically through his absence and then emotionally by Troy’s disregard for the things that are important to him. “The only thing that matters to me is the music” (Wilson 18), Lyons says in response to his father’s criticisms about his lifestyle. Troy claims that he is “living the fast life…wanna be a musician…running around in them clubs and things” (Wilson 18). He does not see jazz in the same way that Lyons does. He does not hold it in the same esteem as he does the blues, which furthers the distance that exists between him and his oldest son. Lyons wants to connect to his father, but he cannot accept Troy’s attempts to change who he is, telling him, “if you wanted to change me, you should’ve been there when I was growing up” (Wilson 18). Troy’s inability to connect with Lyons prevents his son from sharing in the same culture that his father passed down to his half-siblings, and Troy, stuck in his ways, cannot try and meet him where he is now, nor does he show any desire to participate in what he does not consider a valid part of their culture. Lyons does not even know about the life he had before him, claiming in response to Troy’s story about his own father, that he “didn’t know [he] left when he was fourteen” (Wilson 53). This shows just how vast the gap between them is by the time the play takes place, and how it is not something that can easily be bridged anymore because of Troy’s unwillingness to connect with his son. He does not teach Lyons the same song that he taught Cory, and perhaps that is because he was mpt able to be in his life at the start. In this way, Wilson highlights the gaps that persist between Troy and Lyons, and by the end of the play, between Lyons and his half-siblings too.

Perhaps some of Troy’s dislike for jazz can be understood when looking at it from a historical context. In her article “The Painful Birth of Blues and Jazz,” Stephanie Hall writes, “Recording these new musical genres for wider distribution was a challenge, because those who controlled the recording industry, who were mainly white, felt that blues and jazz should be performed by white musicians” (Hall). In many ways, Troy’s grievances are deeply rooted in the mistreatment that he knows exists in the world, which he likely experienced countless times in his life. The first scene of the play is a conversation between Bono and Troy, in which we discover that Troy, who works as a trash collector, has called out how unfair it was that there were no black truck drivers. He tells his boss, Mr. Rand, “what’s the matter, don’t I count? You think only white fellows got sense enough to drive a truck?” (Wilson 2). His efforts do pay off, as, later in the play, he tells Rose that Mr. Rand did decide to make him the first black garbage truck driver (Wilson 44), yet even so, Troy cannot recognize the larger changes in the world, especially in regard to baseball.

Baseball, the first sport in the United States to fully integrate, plays an important role in African American history and black culture in general. In her article “Baseball as History and Myth in August Wilson’s *Fences*,” Susan Koprince writes that the “history of black baseball began in America in the decades following the Civil War and continued in various forms until 1947, when Jackie Robinson finally crossed baseball's color line” (Koprince 349). In his younger years, Troy had a talent and passion for baseball, which he still carries. Even so, he never made it to the major leagues, a fact that he believes is based solely on the color of his skin. Rose, however, disagrees, asking, “why don’t you admit you was too old to play in the major league? For once…why don’t you just admit that?” (Wilson 37). *Fences* takes place at the height of the Civil Rights movement in the United States. Times are changing, yet Troy, still dealing with the

scars from his past, cannot see it despite all the evidence around him. “Throughout the play Wilson places Troy within the historical context of the Negro Leagues, allowing his character to echo the feelings of actual black ballplayers who were denied a chance to compete at the major-league level” (Koprince 349). This inability to let go of the past creates a disconnect with Cory, as Troy is resistant to the idea of him playing football in college. “The white man ain’t gonna let you get nowhere with that football noway. You go on and get your book-learning so you can work yourself up in that A&P or learn how to fix cars or build houses or something, get you a trade. That way you have something can’t nobody take away from you” (Wilson 35). Troy does not want his son to suffer the same fate that he did. His refusal to sign his son’s papers does seem to come from a genuine care for him, as he tells Rose that he wants Cory to “move as far away from my life as he can get” (Wilson 39), yet he is blind to just how much this is affecting the connection he has with his son, who wants to share in his father’s love of sports. He cannot accept that Cory may have a better chance than he did of breaking through, evident from how easily he splits the log that both Bono and his father struggle to cut through (Wilson 61).

The National Museum of African American History and Culture writes, in their introduction to their sports exhibit, that “sports were among the first, and most high profile spaces to accept African Americans on relative terms of equality” (Sports). Cory and his father could have shared a connection with one another through their mutual love of sports, and Troy could have seen his dream realized partially through his son’s achievements; however, his reluctance to recognize that the world is changing around him just pushes him further away from his son, creating a larger gap that shows its severity through their final confrontation towards the end of the play (Wilson 85-89). As with Lyons, this part of their culture cannot bridge the distance between Troy and Cory because Troy will not let it.

The importance of black culture as a connective force takes center stage throughout the duration of August Wilson’s *Fences*, which is made most apparent through the way that he uses jazz, the blues, and baseball. Despite the sizable age difference between Cory and Raynell, as well as the absence of their father, first emotionally for Cory and then through death for them both, the two are connected to one another and their father through the blues song that he passed down to them. By comparison, Lyons is missing this shared connection due to Troy’s reluctance to share in the aspect of their culture that he was a part of, a phenomenon that is seen again through Cory and Troy’s resistance to the idea of him playing sports in college. With each of his children, the role culture plays as a bridge when it is shared is emphasized—whether by showing that connection itself or by exposing the distance that can occur when it is not shared.

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Laughing at Those Who Take:

The Use of Humor for Resistance and Survival in *Green Grass, Running Water*

by Daisy Hudson

In his novel *Green Grass, Running Water,* Thomas King develops the idea that Native Americans are funny and use humor to resist the pain and stereotypes they have been subjected to. The first point King makes is that humor is used for survival. The saying that one must laugh through the pain stands true in King's work. The characters know what has been taken from them, and they use laughter to fight against the ones who try to take from them. The second point is that humor is used to resist the outdated, serious stereotype. There is a stereotype of seriousness always portrayed in Western literature and art, and it is used as a control tactic to keep Natives in their place of the past. Instead of accepting this narrative, Natives work to prove themselves against the seriousness bestowed upon them and resist this concept that once controlled their image. Finally, King's work reveals the hypocrisy in Western literature and art. He turns items, characters, and events into a comedic story that helps Non-Natives see the damage they have caused to Native Americans. In *Green Grass, Running Water,* the characters establish humor as a survival tactic in Native American culture; moreover, this novel serves as an outlet for Native characters to display their humor as resistance against the stereotype that has been placed on them. Finally, King uses *Green Grass, Running Water* as a comedic channel, not only to give Non-Natives an idea about the damage they have caused to Native humanity but also to include them in the joke.

The Damage to Humanity

The stereotype of seriousness and stoicism has been placed on Native Americans in literature and other media. As W. W. Hill writes, "A popular fallacy has long existed that the

American Indian is a stolid, unemotional individual incapable of expression or appreciation of humor or wit” (qtd. in Thompson 2). Even when Natives started to fight against this ideal, the stereotype still surrounded them. For example, the “Keep America Beautiful” commercial is an example of television media that portrays Native Americans as stuck in the past, but more importantly, it portrays their character as stoic and serious. The commercial shows that the stereotype has followed Natives even into present times. It is a modern example of the stereotype that has kept Natives from being seen as funny. Movies, TV shows, and literature such as westerns have created this stereotype for centuries. However, Natives use humor to make light of the troubles they have faced and are facing in the present day. Natives use humor just as much as any other culture. However, their use of humor can reflect the pain they have been put through. According to Thomas King, “There are probably cultural differences in humour, but I suspect what makes Native people laugh is pretty much what makes all people laugh. Sure we laugh at misfortunes and we laugh at catastrophes and we laugh at sexist and racist jokes, but these moments do not define our humour as much as they define our fears and hatreds” (181). Natives laugh in fear of what they will face and the hatred of their assimilators.

Although Natives know they are funny and what makes them laugh is considered normal humor, they still face the stereotype of seriousness. The harm that this has caused is that Natives are thought of as not having the ability to be funny. Aitor Ibarrola-Armendariz writes, “Aware of the centrality of stereotyping in processes of conquest and domination, King engages some of the malign ways in which the image of the Indian has been manipulated by the Western mind in order to reify its difference” (75). King highlights this view of domination with Natives because of their seriousness during a scene with a parody of Natty Bumppo called Nasty Bumppo. Nasty states, “…Indians can endure pain… Indians don’t talk much…These are all Indian gifts…”

(King 434). Nasty relies on Natives' seriousness as a gift in order to use his “white gifts” against them. Furthermore, he uses these qualities to say that Natives cannot feel emotion, which further pushes the stereotype. This keeps them from being able to claim their humor, and it takes a piece of their humanity away. Colonists thought Natives could not feel anything because they could only be stoic. They were considered sub-human because of their “lack of emotions,” which led to them being assimilated and eradicated. So, with their humanity stripped, Natives turned to the one thing they knew could get them through these hardships. Natives used humor for survival.

Humor for Survival

Native people always knew themselves to be funny, so when they suffered horrible treatment at the hands of colonists, they used humor to get through the troubles they suffered. King states,

> Some of you are probably wondering what exactly Native people have to be happy about. Good question. Actually, not very much. Poverty, unemployment, drugs, disease, depression, governmental paternalism, sports mascots, Hollywood stereotypes, just to name the usual suspects. So it’s a good thing that humour is not necessarily about happiness, any more than it is about laughter. (175)

Here King gives the reason that Natives use humor for survival: it is simply to laugh. Natives already knew that their humor could get them through hard times. So, when put on reserves and marched out of their territory, they laughed through their pain as a way of moving forward. This keeps them from being stuck in the past because they are willing to laugh, which keeps them pushing towards a new beginning.

In *Green Grass, Running Water*, Latisha uses a different stereotype, that of Natives eating domesticated animals, alongside humor, to survive. To begin, she has a café called the Dead

Dog’s Café, which is a joke in itself because tourists know that she is not selling dead dogs Rather, the fun and mystery in the name of the restaurant attracts tourists, which is how she survives. Playing into a different stereotype humorously allows Latisha to make money. Furthermore, during an interaction with a customer, Latisha uses a joke, which makes the customer see her in a lighter view. The interaction goes, “Jennette shook her head. ‘Did you kill the bastard?’ Latisha laughed. ‘No, he’s still alive. I threw him away’” (King 147). This interaction makes the tourist see that Latisha, a Native, has a sense of humor. Furthermore, this usage pays Latisha’s bills and gives her the ability to rise above unemployment. According to Norma, “People come from all over the world to eat at the Dead Dog café…Germany, Japan, Russia, Italy, Brazil, England, France, Toronto. Everybody comes to the dead dog café” (King 59). The reader can see that Latisha uses this funny stereotype to attract people, and through this tactic, she survives.

Through Latisha, King is setting up the idea that there is more to a Native than just seriousness. This stereotype has caused Natives to be looked down upon and considered sub-human. This, along with the troubles Natives have faced, have kept them out of the job market. According to the U.S. Bureau of the Interior in 2010, “While the nationwide unemployment rate hovers around a distressing 10 percent, some reservation[s] face unemployment rates of up to 80 percent. Chronic joblessness often seems endemic to many parts of Indian Country, resisting all antidotes, and plaguing one generation to the next” (Lavendure para 2). It is known that Native Americans also suffer the highest unemployment rate in the United States. As stated by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, “In general, American Indians and Alaska Natives are less likely than the overall population to be employed” (para 3). King talks about how difficult it is to get or make a job on the reserve in *Green Grass, Running Water*, so if Latisha could not combat this

stereotype and be a comedic presence to her tourists, then her business probably would not have taken off. She would have been stuck in this statistic of being an unemployed Native. However, Latisha’s uses the absurdity of the Dead Dog Café to live.

Finally, Norma states that the café serves as “a real Indian restaurant” (King 59). Even though this is a short interaction in the novel, it is pivotal to understanding that this restaurant serves as a place for outsiders to get to know real Natives, not just the ones they see on television. This ability to combat the stereotype that Natives do not have a sense of humor keeps tourists coming back because they know they will have a fun time. This comedic aspect of Latisha and the Dead Dog Café is what keeps her surviving and laughing at those who take. Through this ability to use her humor for survival, Latisha is resisting the stereotype that is often placed on Native Americans.

Humor as Resistance

As seen with Latisha, King uses his novel to talk about survival. However, King’s work also shows resistance against the serious stereotype. William Thompson states, “Oppressed groups often use satiric humor, for it is a powerful weapon which uplifts the oppressed—if only temporary” (1). King uses this satiric humor to give power to his characters and, in turn, his writing. One character who resists this stereotype is Eli. King uses Eli to switch the roles of comedic ability between Whites and Natives. When Eli starts to assimilate into white life with Karen, he becomes more serious and loses his sense of sarcastic wit. He shows up to the Sundance in business attire; he does not joke in any of his interactions with Karen’s parents; and he no longer wants to return home to the reserve. His “whiteness” takes away from the Indian side of him, thus taking his humor with it. However, once he returns home, he starts to get his sarcasm and humor back. A major scene that depicts this humor is when Bill Bursam tells him

that he “can’t stay there forever” (King 295). Instead of letting Bursam’s words anger him, Eli retorts, “As long as the grass is green and the waters run” (King 295). This is a sarcastic and humorous joke because Eli knows that the treaties do not support Natives. However, Eli is throwing the government’s words into the faces of those who try to take from him. Although he is only one person, he uses his sarcastic humor as resistance. According to Patricia Linton, “Eli's retort encapsulates in sardonic humor his intention to stay… his implicit accusation that the effort to take his own small plot reiterates the larger historical displacement of Native Americans from their tribal land” (218). His resistance against the people trying to take causes him to have the last laugh and fight for Natives as a whole. His small gestures and humor in facing displacement are resistance against the past of moving Natives elsewhere in favor of colonists. King's usage of Eli’s character shows that humor can be used as resistance against the stereotypes and troubles that Natives face in their daily lives.

As King demonstrates, the humor used towards Sifton is a resistance against the stereotype Eli has faced. King portrays him as serious when he is a “white man,” but others in the novel may still hold Eli as a serious stoic Native because of his determination to keep his land. In his interactions with Sifton, Eli uses humor to poke fun at the dam. However, Sifton thinks of Eli as funny. King states, “‘So why come?’ Sifton looked at Eli and both men began to chuckle. ‘Because you make the best damn coffee. And because I like the walk’” (King 151). Although Sifton tells Eli that it is because of the coffee or the walk, it is simply because Sifton enjoys Eli’s company and humor that he keeps coming back. King uses situations like Eli’s to show Non-Natives that Natives are funny. Furthermore, his work creates a space for Non-Natives to see and realize their mistreatment of Natives but also to include them in the joke.

The Bigger Picture: Hypocrisy, Humanity, and Inclusivity

King wrote *Green Grass, Running Water* to show the humor Natives use for survival and resistance, but his main point in the novel is to include Non-Natives in Native humor to show them the damage they have done and their hypocrisy. However, King also wants to include them in the joke because of his belief that comedy is a part of a community. When sharing his ideas on Native humor, King states, “All those years ago, when Bianca had told me that it was too bad there weren’t more people to laugh at our jokes, he was gently reminding me that humour is only truly funny when it is inclusive, that humour that excludes is, in the end, a weapon” (179-180). King incorporates Western literature and classics into his story in a comedic way to make sure that anyone who reads the novel is included. Sure, the jokes may target some of these untouchable stories in some ways, but that is what makes the jokes funny. Westerners and Non-Natives have probably heard of these titles, so they can also be in on the joke. For example, King uses the Dog Dream as a way to show how Christianity has taken away from Native Creation Stories. He uses the Dog Dream as the Christian God. When God sees the Garden of Eden, he decides to take it from First Woman, a Native character. He states, “Wait a minute, says that God. That’s my garden. That’s my stuff” (King 42). The way King uses jokes about stories in The Bible, such as the one listed above, brings Non-Natives into the loop of the joke and the harm they have caused. It shows them the ridiculousness of their usage of titles such as the Bible to create the narrative that Native stories are false. It gives Non-Natives a taste of their own hypocrisy. King uses this type of writing to show Non-Natives the troubles they have caused because of their views and ideas of Natives, but he does so in such a light-hearted and fun way that allows the jokes to be funny. He proves that Native authors, such as himself, can take those stories of discrimination and make them comedic. He shows the humanity of a Native by using

humor as a way to share the unfairness that Natives have been through. The humanity that was taken because “Natives could not feel emotions” is restored through King’s humor.

Besides using jokes as a way to show harm, King also uses them as a way to show that Natives are funny just to be funny. He includes jokes not about who is right or wrong or about the harm done to Natives, but jokes about everyday life that everyone can relate to. For example, King includes Norman Bates, a well-known fictional serial killer, as a front desk motel clerk (169). This fun joke and reference does not interfere with King’s message, but it shows that Natives can use well-known references for humor just like any other culture. There are multiple instances of fun, light-hearted humor as a use of community for all readers in this novel, which King uses as a way to prove Native humor. Through this humor, such as crazy serial killers or Disney characters, King provides humor for everyone, including people who may not take to his ideas of Christianity. Moreover, people who may not get all of the references to the Bible or classic literature can pick up on film characters, thus providing humor for all. Finally, this use of community jokes allows Natives and Non-Natives to realize that maybe humor as a whole is not that different.

King’s novel *Green Grass, Running Water* brings light to the harm that Natives have suffered and how they use humor for resistance and survival against this harm. Furthermore, King’s humorous writing attracts readers, thus creating an opening to talk about this harm. King uses these jokes as a way to prove that the serious stereotype that has been placed on Natives is false. He flips the script to poke fun at those who take from Natives but does so in a way that incorporates them into the jokes and gets them to play along. He gives Natives back their humanity because his novel takes those stereotypes placed on Natives and creates a community

of humor that includes Natives. Overall, King’s novel provides evidence of the troubles Natives have faced, while also creating a fun atmosphere for all readers.

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