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Essays

"The Subject of Gender Roles and Sexuality in the Bell Jar" by Christina Yoo

The topics of gender roles and sexuality were and still are commonly depicted themes in American literature. Throughout American history, there were many significant historical events about the issues of gender roles and sexuality that have captured and received attention from many generations of people. Several of these historical events include the feminist movement and the development of civil rights for women, LGBT-related matters, and society's conventional expectations regarding gender roles and preserving sexual urges. Perhaps one of America's most memorable decades were the 1950s because not only did the decade define the aspects of the United States as a socially conservative nation with excessive materialistic desires, but it also highlighted the origin for social changes to ensue among younger generations of people who believed that concerns such as expectations of maintaining traditional social norms and labeling sexuality as an offensive taboo should be disintegrated and become openly recognized. One way of expressing that dislike and disagreement were depicted in literature. Several of these literary writings which attained that criteria was Sylvia Plath's 1963 novel The Bell Jar, in which the main character Esther Greenwood is a unique individual who tries to overcome society's expectations of women during the 1950s by altering her views of the roles of women and attempting to express her sexuality by losing her purity and innocence. With these perspectives that Esther acquires, she is faced to challenge her views against how 1950s America approaches its stance towards their expectations and standards for women concerning their position in society.

The subject of gender roles is largely depicted in The Bell Jar because Esther not only struggles with her personal battle of depression, but she is also at odds with abiding to society's anticipations for women to behave reserved and compliant in nature. An example of this conflict is her relationship with Buddy Willard. Buddy signifies everything that Esther is not and because of his near arrogant demeanour and thoughtless attitude towards approaching women, Esther feels that Buddy does not genuinely love her for her. In return, Esther dismisses his way of presenting his affection to her as unromantic and no longer develops a stronger liking towards him. Esther also finds his kisses very undistinguished and simulated yet ironically, she becomes angry when Buddy admits that he has had sexual relations with another woman during a summer. A quote which explains Esther's response towards Buddy's sexual liaison states "What I couldn't stand was Buddy's pretending I was so sexy and he was so pure, when all the time he'd been having an affair with that tarty waitress and must have felt like laughing in my face" (Plath, 71). Esther becomes irate with Buddy not because he was being unfaithful to her as a boyfriend, but that he was being hypocritical and insincere with her from the beginning. At a time in 1950s America when women were expected to act demure and had limitations in society, men were deemed to be the natural patriarchal leaders in society and involving themselves in adulterous acts were considered to be a normal part in a man's behaviour, whether he was in a committed relationship or not. Esther is angry because Buddy had presented himself falsely as an innocent and pure youth, and is perhaps even jealous that Buddy as a man has had the privilege to transgress away from society's expectations of people by experiencing premarital sex and appearing to be comfortable with the idea. Esther felt that Buddy "must have been laughing" in her face as a method of indirectly taunting her that she lacks potential and is deficient in terms of bodily experience. The emotion that Esther feels towards Buddy's affiliation with another woman results from Buddy's unreasonable attitude towards her and to women in general. As a

woman, Esther does not attain that privilege because that notion is looked down upon, and becomes frustrated with herself and with society because of her lack of personal and sexual confidence. Rather than completely shunning Buddy out of her life, Esther prefers to keep Buddy as an object so that she can possess him as a method of demonstrating and proving to him that like Buddy, she too can experience sexual intimacy and bodily closure if she decides to do so, despite society's conventional expectations for women.

In correlation to traditional values and gender roles expected by women, the subject of becoming a married woman is also another source of internal conflict that Esther faces with in the novel. To Esther, the thoughts of marriage and motherhood seems like a distressed life filled with restrictions and limitations and because of this belief, she does not want to acquiesce into getting married and becoming a mother anytime soon. By disallowing herself into becoming involved in that phase of a woman's life, Esther believes that she will be able to achieve sexual freedom and bodily closure without those subsisting features. This is why Esther cannot see herself married to Buddy because if she did stay committed to him, then she would have to live up to not only society's expectations but also Buddy's expectations of her and their marriage. Esther's own sense of stability and freedom is when she is involving herself in school writing poetry and editing for a women's magazine. It is her way of allowing herself to express liberally with no boundaries and by becoming married to Buddy, Esther would lose those feelings of free-will and self-determination because of her priority as a doting wife and mother. In addition to these expectations that 1950s American society anticipates from women, Buddy's mother Mrs. Willard is also a part of that society. A woman who abides to conventional values for how a woman should live her life, Mrs. Willard has influenced her son to search for a suitable wife to fulfill his needs. In result, Buddy believes that "'What a man wants is a mate and what a woman wants is infinite security'" and that "'What a man is is an arrow into the future and what a woman is is the place the arrow shoots from'" (Plath, 72). When Buddy states that what a woman desires for is "infinite security" and a "place the arrow shoots from", he is describing about how women tend to look for men who will take care of them financially and offer them comfort and security for a long period of time. This quote itself explains how prevalent male chauvinism was during the 1950s and how much that represented Buddy, because men were supposed to be the sole caretakers and supporters for their wives. However, it is ironic that Buddy mentions about financially supporting a woman because as a man, he is searching for a "mate". This part of the quote sounds metaphorical in which Buddy pursues women as mere objects to possess for a long period of time. On the other hand, for Esther, submitting herself and serving to a man in a long-term committed marriage not only feels socially confined, but also degrading as well. Esther clarifies this feeling by stating "The trouble was, I hated the idea of serving men in any way. I wanted to dictate my own thrilling letters" (Plath, 76). Esther loathes the thought of succumbing herself to a man because if she marries, she must perform menial and uninteresting domestic duties which seems like "a dreary and wasted life for a girl with fifteen years of straight A's" (Plath, 84). With these thoughts, Esther gradually becomes more determined to gain her own independent control and individuality upon herself.

Sexuality is also a crucial theme in the novel. Not only is Esther challenged with the issue of gender roles and what society expected from women during that time, but she is also challenged but determined with the subject of losing her virginity and purity. This change of thought ensues in Esther after discovering that Buddy has had sexual relations with a woman and that in return, he and the rest of society hypocritically expects her to preserve her virginity until marriage. As mentioned earlier, Esther does not completely shun Buddy away because not only does she wish to prove to him that she too can experience sexual intimacy and bodily closure, but she also desires to offer up her virginity to exact an act of revenge to get even with Buddy. The

fact that Esther longs to feel wanted and coveted by other men signifies that she is still naïve and sexually interested and by believing this idea, she "thought a spectacular change would come over" her if she "crossed the boundary line" (Plath, 82). However, from Esther's perspective, she does not pursue a deeper relationship with other men because they are just objects who can satisfy her sexually and intellectually. She constantly seeks a man who is a "somebody [she] didn't know and wouldn't go on knowing – a kind of impersonal, priestlike official, as in the tales of tribal rites" (Plath, 228). In a way, Esther is somewhat selfish, careless, and aloof in trying to see who is a potential man who is willing to offer to sleep with her. Esther is also unaware of the consequences that may occur if she were to recklessly utilize men as objects of sexual desire and presently expose her body to unfamiliar people. Even her mother, a woman of conventionality who shares similar beliefs as Buddy's mother, consistently advises her to protect herself from other men but Esther disallows her mother's advice and believes that she will become more sexually confident if she seduces men. With this belief, Esther is now in control of the sexual aspect of her life. To Esther, marriage is not associated to sexuality because becoming married is like a confinement which requires sacrificing everything for another person. Also, Esther views marriage as a discouraging restriction when it comes to sexuality and bodily intimacy but if her virginity is lost, that barrier of restriction is broken down and characterizes personal freedom to her. In the scene when Esther finally loses her virginity to Irwin, she begins to bleed immensely. A quote in that scene states "I couldn't possibly be a virgin any more. I smiled into the dark. I felt part of a great tradition" (Plath, 229). Ironically, even though she is clearly in pain, Esther feels relieved and at the moment, unregretful. However, Esther's mindset towards the end of the novel alters when she realizes that losing her virginity, especially to an intelligent and charming man such as Irwin, did not seem as life-changing and stirring to her. Esther had only been hasty about losing her virginity and innocence thoughtlessly because it "weighed like a millstone around [her] neck" and that "defending it for five years" resulted in Esther being tired of protecting it out of habit and instinct (Plath, 228). After responding to Irwin that she plans to never see him again, Esther states that she "was perfectly free" (Plath, 242). In the end, Esther finds peace and calmness in her sex life because she had controlled that aspect of her life by finally experiencing bodily intimacy with another man.

Throughout the novel, Esther is challenged with many different issues that induce her to ponder and resolve life decisions that seem momentous to her. Even though Esther is internally and personally successful in conquering over female sexuality, society's prospects for women have not changed. By filling in the void of struggling with attaining the role of the ideal woman, Esther chooses to rather express and take control of her sexuality towards the opposite sex. In result, she gains a different aspect of freedom by prevailing over the situation. However, despite liberating herself sexually and attempting to stray away from societal expectations, Esther nonetheless still belongs to a form of societal construct and community, which in her case is an outline for other women who aspire to conquer over the same issue as Esther had faced before.

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“Making Merry with the Author” by David Napolitano

All of the most integral works of literature, especially the timeless works of fiction, each become a looking glass into the dark chapters of human history. During 19th century London, for example, the Industrial Revolution’s profound social desolation exploited the common worker as a mindless cog within the oppressive corporate machine. In this unapologetic cruelty, those who enforced labor only knew class identity above all else. By comparison, race, gender, or even age never even crossed the mind. Those who oversaw this capitalist agenda profited off this brutish exploitation without a trace of sympathy. One of the few exceptions to this compliance came from a renowned English author. For Charles Dickens’ case, a writer’s duty calls for unleashing the literary vitriol upon the tragedies of a nation’s complicated practices. This author wrote A Christmas Carol, one of his many literary responses about the Industrial Revolution, as criticism towards the abhorrent nature of this ghastly subject, and he aroused sympathy for the poor’s anguish. Particularly for A Christmas Carol, a Marxist examination of Dickens’ Christmas-themed novella, one that tells of the miserly Ebenezer Scrooge’s redemption, embraces a tender, colloquial tone without any rhetorical pretenses of a familiar literary narrator. The searing depiction of Scrooge’s greed, in fact, emphasizes the absurdity of this abusive indulgence. Despite how Scrooge, the novella’s protagonist, occupies the higher rungs of the social ladder, Dickens retains his colloquial style of narration, which this Marxist analysis of A Christmas Carol reveals a socially conscious author who exposes the dysfunction through one of the most distinctive literary narrators in English literature. No other literary theory unravels Dickens’ colloquial narrative as a scathing critique of the one-percent’s callousness towards the poor’s decaying welfare more introspectively than Marxism; a formal and straight-faced narrator subsequently serves inadequate service towards these socioeconomic issues, since that prototypical narrator comes off as an aloof, brown-nosed intellectual. Dickens’ inherent subjectivity, by stark contrast, exposes society’s decaying corners with intimate honesty. His tone furthermore takes on the form of a socially fueled protest against capitalism’s rampant destruction. In fact, the narrator’s fondness for the citizens of Dickens’ fictionalized London reaffirms his story’s overall treatment of Christmas as a season of universal generosity that overlooks the status quo’s restrictions. Dickens even envisions his more tertiary characters just as equally alive as his main ones. As the story’s themes of selflessness and turmoil develop, they make their significant impacts upon all the characters for better and worse. They, through how Dickens details Scrooge’s cold interactions with these characters, enforce the author’s resilient demands for the one-percent’s responsibility in sustaining a balanced welfare for all social classes. In Dickens’ patriotic activism of A Christmas Carol, he emotionally distills what he sees as capitalism’s destructive apotheosis: the demise of one, young, innocent, dying little boy named Tiny Tim, not the hundreds of deaths of anonymous people. Scrooge’s redemption ignited by Tiny Tim’s death highlights the real social priorities for caring for the less fortunate of citizens. An author with more sensitivity towards social criticism through fiction carries more astute eyes towards the real world’s social maladies.

In Dickens’ craftsmanship of his narrator as more like an affable neighbor than an intellectual superior, the author’s social commentary about industrialism rings much more honestly. From the novella’s fourth stave, Death guides Scrooge through the London streets desolated with darkness, figuratively and literally, as well as social languishment. Dickens envisions, “the ways [that] were foul and narrow; the shops and houses were wretched; the people [were] half-naked, drunken, slip-shod, ugly. Alleys and archways, like so many cesspools, disgorged their offences [sic] of smell, and dirt, and life, upon the staging streets; and the whole quarter reeked with crime, with filth and misery.” (Dickens 70) The socially conscious

author paints a disturbingly vivid picture of an infested London street burdening the injustice for the less fortunate. Through Dickens' commitment to social realism, he establishes a closer the relationship with his fellow reader, resulting in a more emotional authenticity. This climaxes when Scrooge follows the Ghost of Christmas-Yet-to-Come into his lonely resting place. Dickens actively chastises Scrooge's miserly nature even in the face of death, for "here, then, the wretched man whose name he had now to learn, lay underneath the ground. It was a worthy place. Walled in by houses; overrun by grass and weeds, the growth of vegetation's death, not life; chocked up with too much burying; fat with repleted appetite. A worthy place!" (80) In a brief moment does Dickens relish in the comeuppance of the wealthy elite's misdeeds. Despite this, the author warns of the lack of any existential rewards deriving from committing good deeds for the most squalid of people who need it most. According to "Of Great Place," one of Sir Francis Bacon's many essays, he reveals the wealth of influential positivity that good deeds have on a prosperous society. Without cynical indifference, "in place there is license to do good and evil, whereof the latter is a curse; for in…the power to do good is the true and lawful end of aspiring; for good thoughts (though God accept them) yet towards men are little better than good dreams, expect they be put in act; and that cannot be without power and place, as the vantage and commanding ground." (Bacon 1666) Committing oneself to good deeds for others roots itself within unfavorable passiveness, yet potentially leads to following through with actual action that fulfills this beneficial service. The good deeds upon which Dickens' insists push back on industrial expansion-a sociopolitical idea that Bacon properly fits his personal description of "evil." When Dickens' skillful narrative craft exposes the social discord among social classes through subtle eyes, explicit political discourse comes off as heavy-handed and condescending. His approach to narrative tone, therefore, lambasts the rampant destruction of capitalism.

In embracing a gentler style of a narrative tone, Dickens takes a more proactive stance against capitalism's abject destruction by rejecting a traditional narrative voice. From the first stave of A Christmas Carol, the author reveals Scrooge's loneliness that commonly exudes from the apathetic, cold exteriors of the wealthy elites. As Scrooge, for this perfect instance, walks through the densely populated London streets: "Nobody ever stopped him in the street to say, with gladsome looks, 'my dear Scrooge, how are you? When will you come to see me?' No beggars implored him to bestow a trifle, no children asked him what it was o'clock, no man or woman ever once in all his life inquired the way to such a place of Scrooge. Even the blind-men's dogs…would tug their owners into doorways and up courts; and then would wag their tails as though they said, 'no eye at all is better than an evil eye, dark master!'" (10)

Dickens ignores a typical scenario of a rich man showered with beggars that describes the classist discord right on the nose, and the author instead portrays the social divide through alienation. This interaction, or lack thereof, more effectively envisions Dickens' discontent with the wealthy elite's collective indifference towards the poor's plight. After this scene, Dickens extends Scrooge's loneliness into a scene when the miser already basks in physical isolation, but now within an atmosphere reminiscent of purgatory. Later in the first stave, Scrooge secludes himself within his lifeless home that comes with a:

> Sitting room, bedroom, lumber-room. All as they should be. Nobody under the table, nobody under the sofa; a small fire in the grate; spoon and basin ready; and the little saucepan of gruel (Scrooge had a cold in his head) upon the hob. Nobody under the bed; nobody in the closet; nobody in his dressing gown, which was hanging up in a suspicious attitude against the wall. (19)

The lifelessness of Scrooge's innermost home manifests itself into the class identity of this miserable miser. This deathly interior even manifests itself as Dickens' subtle warning towards Scrooge, and to the wealthy elites, that redemption through good will for the less fortunate saves

all souls from damnation. Just as narrating through colloquialism condemns class warfare, Christian justice for the poor combats poverty. In David Richter's Falling Into Theory: Conflicting Views on Reading Literature, specifically Terry Eagleton's chapter entitled "The Rise of English," literature matures into an inherently ideological tool, rather than a mere fictional account. Not just human decency, but "religion, moreover, is capable of operating at every social level: if there's a doctrinal inflection of it for the intellectual elite, there is also a pietistic brand of it for the masses." (Eagleton 49) Richter validates literature as an invaluable document of how an author interprets the world around someone. His rhetoric democratizes literary discourse among all corners of social classes, and Dickens champions literature as an accessible beacon of democratic discussion for people of all social classes. Through these specific means that Dickens' cordial narrative style occupies, A Christmas Carol has more to say about how institutions bring about society's structural injustices than any other story with Christmastime as its setting. This, combined with Richter's democratic rhetoric, empowers the overlooked humanity lost by corporate cynicism. As Dickens' depicts Scrooge's toxic greed, the one- percent's responsibility in aiding a balanced welfare exponentially grows as a necessity. Dickens exposes Scrooge, as his protagonist, for his damaging avarice as a means of demanding responsibility from the one percent in sustaining economic justice for the less fortunate. From the first stave, the miser partakes in a one-sided interaction with the two few decent men collecting money for the poor's welfare. Dickens makes Scrooge's gross corruption all too clear, as the latter immerses himself within such a deep affair with money that even "at the ominous word, 'liberality,' Scrooge frowned, and shook his head, and handed the credentials back." (14) Scrooge gains such pride from his penny-pinching that he goes out of his way in voicing his supporting the seedy establishments that enforce class division rather than unity. Crooks like Scrooge "don't make myself merry at Christmas, and I can't afford to make idle people merry. I help to support the establishments I have mentioned – they cost enough: and those who are badly off must go there." (15) Scrooge, in his infinite financial "wisdom," considers all the prisons and workhouses his idea for a stable economy. While real-life Scrooges believe they should donate money to a good cause, Dickens accuses these people for embellishing their positions within the status quo. Authors like Dickens serve justice in raising economic awareness of his times; according to Richter's familiar work, writers and especially authors exist as objectors towards society's woes. Like the most important of authors, Dickens vehemently exposes reality's harshest truths; Christmas wears an innocuous surface. Richter's section, "The Literary Imagination" by Martha C. Nussbaum, takes note on the prowess of the imagination of literature. Considering its power demonstrates that "if literature is, from the Gradgrind economist's viewpoint, dangerous and deserving suppression, this implies as well that it is no mere frill, [and] that it has the potential to make a distinctive contribution to our public life." (Nussbaum 357) Literary art transcends imagination as a real-life influence, despite its fanciful roots. Richter's claim proves that Dickens' compassion and generosity extends itself beyond seasonal love and into a social revolution against the corruption that renders those responsible into ominous compliance. Through Scrooge's obsession with gaining profits, Dickens exposes the economic instability that sticks up for the wealthy and condemns the poor. Only in the author's stalwart duty does he take a liking to the downtrodden.

Dickens unabashedly announces his distaste over the status quo's socioeconomic oppression, for his sympathy for the 99% validates Christmas as a celebration for universal generosity. From the third stave, Scrooge embarks with the Ghost of Christmas Present on the sight-seeing of anonymous people during Christmastime. One of those sights includes some solitary people on a sailing boat. Despite a less than glamorous locale, "they stood beside the helmsman at the wheel, the loo-out in the bow, the officers who had the watch; dark, ghostly

figures in their several stations; but every man among them hummed a Christmas tune, or had a Christmas thought, or spoke below his breath to his companion of some by-gone Christmas Day, with homeward hopes belonging to it." (59) Dickens goes so far as letting his authorial guard down and relishes in the yuletide cheer. Observing Fred, Scrooge's nephew, for his overflow of merry-making, Scrooge asks of his fellow reader that "if you should happen, by any unlikely chance, to know a man more blessed in a laugh than Scrooge's nephew, all I can say is, I should like to know him too. Introduce him to me, and I'll cultivate his acquaintance." (59-60) Dickens invites the reader in considering the outlook of a Christmas for those of hardly any wealth, if at all. His cheerful sentiments for these ordinary people breaks all social boundaries. In fact, Dickens' affable perspective of a socially conscious Christmas shares resemblance to Samuel Taylor Coleridge's humanistic views from Specimens of the Table Talk. Though not directly related to Christmas, Coleridge professes that "love is the admiration and cherishing of the amiable qualities of the beloved person, upon the condition of yourself being the object of their action." (Coleridge 507) At least one person loving another who earns that compassion validates another person's life, rather than that person guiding oneself through pride alone. Contrary to the seclusion and division that industrialism inspires, Christmas unites people from across all class identities in the face of poverty. As Dickens' celebrates the universal love that Christmas brings, he relegates the status quo down to its destructive means. As Scrooge grows enlightened of his redemption, Dickens makes his rallying cry for providing for the less fortunate of citizens.

As the premonitory death of Bob Cratchit's son, Tiny Tim, ignites Scrooge's salvation, Dickens mounts at the forefront his real social priorities of caring for those feeling the impact of an imbalanced economy. In the final stave of Dickens' story, Scrooge opens his arms towards his overworked clerk, Cratchit, in helping his financial struggles that hinders the clerk's family. In performing this selfless deed:

> Scrooge was better than his word. He did it all, and indefinitely more; and to Tiny Tim, who did not die, he was a second father. He became as good a friend, as good a master, and as good a man, as the good old city know[s], or any other good city, town, or borough, in the good old world. Some people laughed to see alteration in him, but he let them laugh, and little heeded them; for he was enough to know that…some people did not have their fill of laughter in the outset; and knowing that…he thought it quite as well that they should wrinkle up their eyes in grins, as have the malady in less attractive forms. His own heart laughed: and that was quite enough for him. (88)

For Dickens, displaying kindness for those financially struggling builds something like a surrogate family. Aiding in financial struggles calms this conflict between the rich and the poor. As part of Richter's work, Gertrude Himmelfarb's chapter entitled "The New Advocacy and the Old" embraces literature as subverting the traditional image of the rich, straight, white, Christian man as the dominant hero. Himmelfarb regards what she dubs as "old history" as a chapter in life dominated by bias; indeed does "the class bias of that history, it was said, was concealed behind a facade of objectivity-of documents, footnotes, impersonal rhetoric, and all the other paraphernalia of academic scholarship. The new history, by contrast, was avowedly partisan." (Himmelfarb 85) Himmelfarb condemns the academic circle in expressing compliance towards the exploitation of the most vulnerable of citizens. The overlooked corruption of this revered circle only exacerbates the apparent indulgence in profiting in exchange for well-being. With persistent evil abound, Bacon protests how goodness must never perish, "for corruption do [sic] not only bind thine own hands or offering. For integrity used doth the one; but integrity professed, and with a manifest detestation of bribery, doth the other. And avoid not only the fault, but the suspicion. Whosoever is found variable and changeth [sic] manifestly, without manifest cause, giveth [sic] suspicion of corruption." (1667) Corruption, in its most influential

state, guides a person's decision making through the sole purpose of self-serving one's well-being. The purest of this goodness derives from a sincere place of altruism, not from a gain of profits. Though Dickens' character of Scrooge undeniably characterizes the very archetype that Himmelfarb opposes, giving Scrooge a chance for redemption gives hope for mending the social divide. As Dickens demonstrates with A Christmas Carol, overthrowing the indifferent glance upon the poor does socioeconomic justice.

Through Dickens' advocacy for economic justice, he disguises his political call to action as a conversational, intimate, and extroverted narrative that exposes the societal dysfunction at its most abject. Though the novella's despicable protagonist, Scrooge, has more commonalities with the 1%, a Marxist analysis reveals Dickens's colloquial narration as the creative result of a socially outspoken author exposing the dysfunction welfare, cementing Dickens as one of the most distinctive literary narrators in English literature. The raw subjectivity of this style, unlike a more aloof narrative voice, displays a greater concern for society's darker corners with greater intimacy. Dickens' tone, because of this, enlivens this protest of social justice for capitalism's profound damage to the human spirit. Even a character as minor as the helmsman shares the Christmastime resolute with a more integral character like Fred. In observing this, the narrator that displays fondness for the citizens of Dickens' fictional take on London further champions Christmas as a holiday that rejects the bindings of the status quo. As the novella's many themes such as generosity and corruption unravel, Dickens reveals his outspoken, political nature through his many characters. In one of these characters, Scrooge's character arc acts as Dicken's warning towards the one percent that an equally miserable life leads an equally miserable death. This, within A Christmas Carol, lends to more in-depth social commentary on institutional corruption more than any other story set in Christmas. As a result of this specific setting, Dickens' sentiments for the poor transcend this season of love into a socially charged revolution against the corruption that manipulates unstable class dynamics. By the novella's heartfelt conclusion, Dickens finally brings the status quo all the down to its destructive means. This Marxist analysis therefore knows no other narrator in English literature than Dickens. In his accusation towards the Industrial Revolution's gross classism towards the poor, his unpretentious sentiments distinguish himself from the outstanding canon of English literature in the form of the colloquial narrator making merry with the reader with A Christmas Carol.

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“Ishmael: Ideal Observer” by John Murphy

Abstract
Much of the scholarship on Moby Dick has focused on the ways in which Melville criticizes the American church. What has often been overlooked is that Melville also provides a solution to the issues he sees and it comes in the form of a character, Ishmael. In Ishmael’s epistemological pursuit Melville argues that the ideal seeker of knowledge will balance truth-seeking ambition with open-minded humility. I will be focusing primarily on the ways in which Ishmael is exemplary epistemologically (how he goes about believing) rather than focusing on his ontology (what he believes). In an American age so filled with oppression and religious arrogance Melville presents Ishmael, the ideal seeker, as an example of how his readership can balance their already developed truth-seeking ambition with open-minded humility.

The fact that Ishmael and Ahab are on the same ship and end up chasing the same White Whale, yet finish the journey at vastly different levels of sanity demands the reader’s attention. It is as if Melville is saying that how one goes about pursuing something is more important than what exactly they are pursuing. Both Ishmael and Ahab are pursuing the same thing, the White Whale, yet do it very differently, specifically in the area of balancing ambition with humility. Ahab’s lack of balance leads him to the monomaniacal pursuit of the whale that drives him completely insane. On the other hand, Ishmael is less aggressive and able to psychologically survive the whole ordeal. Ishmael’s method preserves his sanity while Ahab is plunged into the depths of delusion. In the same way that Ahab’s unbalance is a destructive force, Melville believes the same lack of balance is at work in America’s religious. In fact, much scholarship has mentioned the ways in which Melville criticizes the dogmatic aspects of the church. For example, Yothers writes that Moby Dick “is often in antagonistic relationship with the more rigid varieties of Christian orthodoxy”(185). It is important to note Melville’s criticism of the “more rigid” forms of Christianity. Furthermore, Melville has a history of critiquing the church as Coleman points out that even in Melville’s first novel Typee he “offended readers in Britain, where the book was first published, by blasting Christian missionaries in the South Seas as selfish hypocrites bringing ruin to an innocent people”(133). He often wrote with the intent to criticize the religiously arrogant of his day. Much scholarship has focused on problems Melville has with the church’s beliefs, but not enough has been paid to Melville’s critique of the church’s epistemology. In other words, Melville has just as much a gripe with how the church goes about their religious journey as the journey itself. Rather than focusing on the ways Melville thinks the American church can correct the target of their religious journey, this paper will focus on the epistemological improvement Melville believes they can make to refine the way they go about their journey. Through Ishmael’s epistemology, Melville argues the ideal pursuer of knowledge in life will go about the journey balancing truth-seeking ambition with open-minded humility. Critical to an accurate understanding of this paper are the definitions of Epistemology and Ontology. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy defines Epistemology as “the study of knowledge and justified belief. As the study of knowledge, epistemology is concerned with the following questions: What are its sources? What is its structure, and what are its limits?”. In other words, Epistemology has to do with how we know what we know and thus our confidence in what we know. On the other hand, Ontology is defined as “the study of what there is…Many classical philosophical problems are problems in ontology: the question whether or not there is a god”. Put differently, Ontology refers to what we know. As they relate to the novel, Ontology is the journey they are on. If the Pequod’s journey were compared to a religious quest, Ishmael and

Ahab have the same Ontological perspective. They both believe in the existence of the White Whale and want to pin it down (although Ishmael's desire is delayed because he only finds out about the whale after boarding the ship). Epistemology in the novel is the manner in which the journey is undertaken. Ishmael as ideal observer is epistemologically humble, lacking the certainty of catching the whale that Ahab has in his epistemological arrogance. Or, as Yu puts it "Ahab pursues while Ishmael quests; one is obsessed while the other is fascinated: pursuit and quest, obsession and fascination -they make the difference"(118).

Important to note is that Ishmael's epistemological humility should not be equated with a post-modern perspective: a perspective that believes there is no ultimate knowledge and although appearing open-minded and humble is paradoxically as certain as Ahab. Ishmael's humility lacks absolute commitment to either end of the doubt-certainty spectrum. Cosgrove writes "Ishmael's reading is that of the sceptic, almost… that of the postmodernist, who cannot expect to arrive at any sense of a definitive meaning or any grasp of some…grand recit" (71). Cosgrove notably uses "almost" to make sure the reader does not equate Ishmael with a post-modernist. The post-modern reading would be absolutely certain there is no whale to catch and thus, just as unbalanced as Ahab's since it could lead to equally catastrophic results. In other words, Ishmael could hold the exact opposite beliefs of Ahab yet be just as destructive if the way in which he went about believing did not change. The problem is therefore not what is believed, but rather how one goes about believing. A superior epistemology is one that leads to a peaceful journey no matter what is believed, namely Ishmael's. He is situated ideally in a balance of ambition and uncertainty.

The remainder of the essay will focus specifically on Ishmael's balance, but before proceeding it is paramount to showcase Ahab's imbalance. Late in the novel, Ahab has a revealing conversation with Starbuck about the chase of the White Whale and Ahab's complete unwillingness to abandon it after Starbuck pleads with him is indicative of his epistemological pride. He reflects on his life at sea and laments "the desolation of solitude it has been…oh, weariness! Heaviness!… for fourty years I have fed upon dry salted fare- fit emblem of the dry nourishment of my soul"(405). Ahab's statements carry a twinge of regret. It is almost as if there may be a break in his monomania. He further cries out "Why strife for the chase? why weary, and palsy the arm at the oar, and the iron, and the lance? How the richer or better is Ahab now?"(406). In these lines Ahab is grappling with whether or not his 40 years at sea have been worth it. Uncharacteristic of the monomaniac, Starbuck realizes this rare reflective mood and makes an attempt to convince Ahab to relent by pleading "noble soul! Grand old heart, after all! why should any one give chase to that hated fish!… let us home! Wife and child too, are Starbuck's… even as thine, sir, are the wife and child of the loving, longing, paternal old age"(406). Starbuck not only plays on Ahab's pride by calling him a "noble soul" but also appeals to his emotions in reminding him of family back home. If there were even a hint of mercy or reason within Ahab, this would be his chance to demonstrate it. A cargo full of blubber, a mind full of regrets, and a ship full of men who want to see their families are not enough to dissuade Ahab from the fruitless chase. Although there appears to be a glimmer of hope that Ahab will relent and return home safely, these hopes are quickly dashed when Moby Dick is spotted that evening and Ahab fanatically cries "There she blows! There she blows! -there she blows! There again! -there again!" (408). Despite Starbuck's most impassioned pleas and Ahab's own regrets, he remains obsessed with the chase and is unwilling to relent, revealing an unbalanced epistemological arrogance impervious to persuasion.

In the balance of restraint and ambition Ishmael leans more on the side of restraint. However, one occasion in which Ishmael is seen departing from his usual calm and rational restraint is when he is approached by the prophet Elijah. Preparing to board the Pequod for the

whaling journey, Ishmael and Queequeg are approached by Elijah who referring to the whaling contract Ishmael and Queequeg signed asked "anything down there about your souls?" (87). By asking about their souls Elijah is implying that there is something mysterious about the journey they are about to undertake. Next, he warns them of captain Ahab. Instead of giving his attention to the prophet predicting his death, Ishmael immediately says to Queequeg "let's go; this fellow has broken loose from somewhere"(87). Ishmael's reactionary response deems the prophet's advice unreasonable, possibly revealing Ishmael's desire to go whaling even in the face of reasons not to. Despite saying he was going to leave, Ishmael stays to hear more of what the prophet has to say. Elijah then tells of Ahab's lost leg to which Ishmael ignorantly replies "what all this gibberish of yours is about, I don't know, and I don't much care for it seems to me that you must be a little damaged in the head. But if you are speaking of captain Ahab, of that ship there, the Pequod, then let me tell you, that I know all about the loss of his leg" (88). This response is not only unreasonably passionate but not based in truth. Elijah is warning Ishmael of the journey he is about to take because the captain is mad but Ishmael completely rejects the advice and calls the prophet "damaged in the head". Furthermore, at this point in the novel Ishmael did not know "all about" Ahab's lost leg. Ishmael's replies are representative of a reaction rather than a response and reveal that he is more interested in going on the journey than listening to a reasonable warning. He has made up his mind and will not be stopped. This situation is one of the only moments in which Ishmael compromises his humble open-mindedness in favor of ambition. By not hearing out a possibly reasonable warning about the journey and instead plunging headlong on what is now foreshadowed to be a dangerous quest Ishmael succumbs to the call of ultimate understanding and compromises his epistemological balance.

On the opposite end of the ambition-humility spectrum, while describing the mist that comes from the spout of the whale, Melville gives us a central insight into Ishmael's epistemological humility. As seen in the previous paragraph, Ishmael has a driving desire for the call of the unknown evidenced by his refusal of Elijah's warning. However, here we are privy to one of Ishmael's fundamental epistemological beliefs. Referring to the whale spout he says "in this world it is not so easy to settle these plain things. I have ever found your plain things the knottiest of all"(292). Here, Ishmael is not saying that things cannot be understood but he is rather saying that things are often much more difficult to understand then they appear. He does not take any meanings for granted, and deeply understands his own shortcomings in being able to comprehend the world, hence his further comment that "you might as well stand in [the whale spout], and yet be undecided as to what it precisely is"(292). Here, is a key example of his willingness to admit the incompetence of human intellect when it comes to grasping and understanding not just the great mysteries of life, but also the "plain things". When it came to Elijah, Ishmael leaned too far on the side of ambition by disregarding the prophecy, but in this scene, we see Ishmael lean heavily toward humility since he believes that not much in the world can be understood easily. What makes Ishmael the ideal seeker is this very combination of beliefs. He is able to navigate the complex world in a balanced manner that frees him up from being tied to one end of the ambition-humility spectrum.

The two ends of the spectrum come together and can be seen in "The Whiteness of the Whale". Ishmael's attempt to describe the Whiteness of the Whale is the perfect example of his epistemological balance. Here, Melville puts on full display Ishmael's ambition and humility when it comes to the greatest mysteries of life. Describing his approach, Ishmael says "how can I hope to explain myself here"(159). The Whiteness he has seen is so bewildering that it confounds human language and communication, casting doubt on whether or not he will be able to comprehend it. He does not start with an attitude of complete certainty but is rather chastened

in his confidence that he will be able to communicate what he sees in the Whiteness. This statement represents the epistemological humility that Ishmael exhibits throughout the novel. Ishmael then finishes his sentence saying "and yet, in some dim, random way, explain myself I must, else all these chapters might be naught"(159). What he is saying here is that he feels some sort of obligation to understand the Whiteness. In a situation where understanding seems to be a hopeless endeavor Ishmael reveals himself to be a true seeker and nevertheless attempts to describe what he sees. This half of the sentence reveals Ishmael's epistemological ambition. Attempting to defy the odds, he proceeds to do his best to understand what he sees even though there is doubt he will be able to do so. Without his epistemological ambition he would not venture to accomplish so daunting a task and without his epistemological humility he may too eagerly attempt to describe the Whiteness. It is this epistemological balance of humility and ambition that makes Ishmael the exemplary seeker of the novel.

What ultimately sets Ishmael apart as the ideal seeker is his meta-humility seen in the "Epilogue". It is not just his chastened ambition, but also how he feels about such an epistemological viewpoint. Such an open-minded man as Ishmael may ironically find pride in his great capacity for humility. Yet, while recounting his final run-in with the White Whale he begins the retelling with the words "It so chanced" and goes on to say "I was he whom the Fates ordained"(427). He recognizes it is not his superiority that keeps him alive, but rather mere happenstance, an exemplary admission of personal limitation. In the same way that Ishmael points to fate and not personal superiority for his salvation, Melville suggests to his readers a new way to go about living out their own salvation. If Melville only wanted the religious of his day to be more open-minded, they may succeed at it and thus become arrogant because they succeeded at being more open-minded. So, in Ishmael's last words Melville institutes a sort of safeguard against such arrogance with Ishmael's meta-humility.

It is one thing to be humble about your understanding of the world, but entirely another to humbly respect the religious view of others. If Ishmael's balance bears no relation to how he treats those different than him, he is neither the ideal seeker nor is he an exemplary character to model oneself after. However, Ishmael's epistemological humility is beautifully displayed in his friendship with Queequeg. Ishmael comes face to face with his religious practices in "The Ramadan". How he handles this situation serves as a good basis for examining how exactly Ishmael's balance works itself out in interpersonal relationships. Ishmael says "I cherish the greatest respect towards everybody's religious obligations, never mind how comical"(79). If the sentence had ended at "obligations", it may appear that Ishmael is perfect in his respect of all religions, but "how comical" is actually a testament to Ishmael's religious tolerance. Instead of viewing all religions equally, he holds the view that some are more comical than others and despite some being more comical he still chooses to respect them. It appears Ishmael is contradicting himself, but with "how comical", the statement moves from being relativistic to tolerant. If Ishmael saw every single religion as true there would be no need for him to tolerate them because he would necessarily agree with them. However, Ishmael must tolerate other religions because he does not view them as equal. Ishmael is not only able to retain his own religious convictions, but also retain his belief in the truth of them which is exactly what Melville's proposition of epistemological renewal can provide. A renewed respect for all other religions would allow the American church to still believe they are right and pursue God, but it does call for a humility and tolerance of other's practices, no matter how different. Ishmael unashamedly thinks his religious views are right, but that does not necessarily mean that he does not respect Queequeg's. Furthermore, in an act of tender affection Ishmael "took [his] bearskin jacket and threw it over [Queequeg], as it promised to be a very cold night; and he had nothing but his ordinary round jacket"(82). Here, Ishmael is seen not only paying lip service to his

tolerance of Queequeg's difference of religion, he is also kindly supporting it. Ishmael's epistemological balance thus not only relates to interpreting the world, but has major implications for interpersonal relationships and being able to respect all views, even if they are seen as "comical".

Ishmael is the ideal seeker because he stands head and shoulders above the other characters in his desire to ambitiously seek out truth, balance this pursuit with humility, and respect those who differ from him. At a point in history where the Ahab-like assurance of the church had led to much suffering, Melville presents the epistemology of Ishmael which serves as a perfect example to challenge the religiously arrogant. What sets Ishmael apart is not what he believes, because he believes much of what the church believed at the time, but rather how humble he was about his beliefs. An American Christian at the time need not disavow their faith in God in order to be more like Ishmael. Precisely is his power as ideal seeker to the religious audience. He allows the church to retain their beliefs while changing how they go about them in order to produce a country of harmony in which every man is free to believe what they choose. Therefore, Ishmael offers a model for not only the religiously arrogant of the time, but one for all time, one that furiously pursues truth, humbly acknowledges one's own limits, and recognizes the inherent dignity of those who disagree.

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“Even Jack*sses Deserve Sympathy” by John Murphy

There was once a man beloved by the masses for his refreshing personality. In an industry dominated by bravado and flash, this man was shy and soft-spoken. A few years into his successful career, he was labelled as divine and compared to a god. After being labelled a god, he felt he could do whatever he pleased and ended up making a fool of himself in front of his entire nation. The entire nation then called him every bad name under the sun, even the leader of his nation, whom he greatly admired, called him a “jack*ss” in front of everyone. This watershed moment created the persona this man would go on to embody for years to come, someone who was cocky, had immense power, and was for the most part evil. So fiercely torn between who he was, and who society labelled him as, he eventually fell into a great sickness. After slowly recovering, he reemerged into the public eye. Observers could tell he wasn’t the same, the damage had been done. Again, in front of millions of people, he showed himself to be just what they had labelled him as, a “jack*ss”. On May 1, 2018, at TMZ studios, Kanye infamously said in regards to slavery “400 years? That sound like a choice to me”.

I was as stunned as everyone else at the unapologetic and demeaning nature of Kanye’s appalling statement. His statement seemed to betray everything that he had stood for. This ordeal actually reminds me of a tale I once read of a hideous prince who was the ugliest man in the land. A fairy godmother gives him a mask with a beautiful face that is made out of gold. She told him to wear it continuously for a few years. After meeting a princess and falling in love, the princess removes his mask to find that his face has conformed to the mold of the mask and he is now the most handsome man anyone has ever seen (Daskam 632). After watching Kanye’s demise, I suppose the power of the mask works both ways. No matter how beautiful you are, if someone gives you an ugly mask and you wear it a long enough your face will conform to it. When Kanye first debuted, he emerged as a refreshingly sweet rapper, wearing polos and backpacks instead of typical gold chains and rapped about topics others wouldn’t, like the pitfalls of materialism that he admittedly struggled with. Despite the delightful start, after years of being labelled, he has turned into something disturbingly different. Early in his career, Kanye was being hailed a god and was put on the cover of Rolling Stone wearing a crown of thorns with the title “The Passion of Kanye West” in contrast to “The Passion of the Christ” (Oggunaike). It is no wonder he felt like he could act out. If society viewed him as divine how could they condemn him? He acted out by interrupting Taylor Swift’s acceptance speech at the 2009 Video Music Awards in defense of Beyoncé who he truly thought deserved to win the award. Directly after and in the years following it would not be forgotten. Even the President of the United States at the time, Barack Obama, called him a “jack*ss” on national television. What made Obama’s criticism all the more hurtful was the fact that Kanye looked up to Obama greatly as a fellow Chicagoan. With labels like these he was given an ugly mask to wear, a villain persona to embody. Being pulled in two directions, he was forced to wrestle with who he really was anymore. Was he a god? Was he a sinner beyond help? These questions were explored on a 2012 album where he reconciles both his perceived deity and sin into a hideous character named “Yeezus” (Ye+ Jesus). The interviews surrounding the album were explosive as he often flew into a rage. It almost seemed like who the media viewed him as and the maniac described on the album had become who he actually was. After years of stress and being seen as some sort of evil deity he finally had a mental breakdown and was hospitalized in the Fall of 2016. Since then he has been diagnosed with bipolar disorder. It makes you wonder if his illness has been a lifelong struggle or if it became a battle between who he really was and the mask that society had given him to wear.

Recently, while listening to a podcast, I learned about the "type three" personality in the Enneagram test. The Enneagram is a personality test that categorizes people into one of nine personality types and the "type three" is labelled "The Achiever". This personality type is obsessed with success and getting there by any means necessary, even if that means becoming someone they are not. One of the major problems is that they "adapt so much to the expectations of others that they lose touch with what they are really feeling" ("Type Three"). After combing through some internet forums and looking at descriptions of this personality type I have good reason to think Kanye is a "type three", the most prone personality type to confusions of identity. Labels and expectations can be dangerous because when we label someone as a "god" or a "jack*ss" or anything else for that matter we can unintentionally give them a role to play. For Kanye, he was given so many negative roles to play that it is no wonder why we have seen such a fall from grace. Considering the combination of Kanye's personality predisposition of losing his identity and the negative masks given to him, it is sadly unsurprising he has turned into exactly what we expected him to be.

Celebrities losing touch with who they really are is tragically common. They have a hard time discerning who they play on stage, who people label them as, and who they truly are. Even us, non-celebrities, have been given names and labels by others, labels like "loser" or "stupid" that we have to sift through and decide which are true and which are not. Despite our best efforts we still sometimes give into other's negative expectations of us, the only difference is our ugly moments aren't televised.

Poems

Short Stories