Breaking Stereotypes in American Popular Culture

Proceedings of the 10th Annual Conference
of the Croatian Association for American Studies

Edited by Sanja Runtić, Jadranka Zlomislić,
and Jelena Pataki Šumiga

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Introduction

This volume is the proceedings of the *10th Annual Conference of the Croatian Association for American Studies: Breaking Stereotypes in American Popular Culture*, which was hosted by the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Osijek, on September 9–10, 2022. The conference, which brought together twenty-two early-career and senior scholars from across Europe, was co-organized by the Croatian Association for American Studies and two research centers affiliated with the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Osijek—Centre for Popular Culture and Center for North American Studies. The keynote lecture, *Challenging "Karen" Stereotypes*, was delivered by Kamilla Elliott, Professor of Literature and Media at Lancaster University. A rich variety of the contributions, in addition to the interdisciplinary scope and the relevance and appeal of the conference theme, provided an excellent forum for a productive exchange of ideas on the construction and persistence of stereotypes and stereotypical representations in the context of both global popular culture and the American cultural space. The eight chapters contained in this volume aim to continue this conversation by exploring how the dynamics of making and breaking of stereotypes has been addressed in American cultural industries while illuminating a range of stereotypical tropes and processes of their production and dissemination as well as their wider (cross)cultural resonances, both historical and contemporary. Focusing on diverse cultural and semiotic practices and mediascapes—from fiction, drama, film, and music to social-media blog, podcast, and memoir—and approaching the subject matter from various theoretical and disciplinary angles, this volume explores not only the patterns inherent to the mobilization, cultural apprehension, and reinforcement of ste-

reotypes but also mechanisms through which stereotypical attitudes, expectations, and representations can be circumvented, contested, and upended.

In Chapter 1, "How to Nurture (Little) Men and (Little) Women: New Directions in Louisa May Alcott's Educational Novels," Jelena Šesnić discusses Louisa May Alcott's March family trilogy—*Little Women*, (1868–1869), *Little Men* (1871), and *Jo's Boys* (1886). Šesnić argues that the three novels not only disrupt stereotypes contained in antebellum educational concepts and practices by proposing an alternative reform-based pedagogical vision invested with the Transcendentalist principles but that they also became vitally engaged in a transitional moment in the evolution of American modern public schooling. She maintains that even though they primarily adhere to the Transcendentalist ideas, Alcott's educational novels juxtapose, and to a degree also bridge the gap between, the spiritually informed sentimentalist Transcendentalist approach to education on one hand and the empiricist, scientifically structured, and disciplinarian educational model, which was being revived by the emerging concept of Social Darwinism, on the other, and that, as such, they provided an alternate heterogeneous platform for the nineteenth-century American public education debate and continue to serve as its valuable archive.

In Chapter 2, "Challenging Gender Stereotypes in Holly Black's *The Folk of the Air* Trilogy," Valentina Markasović fills the gap in academic research on Black's young adult fantasy series by analyzing its main couple, June and Cardan, in relation to traditional romance protagonists. By applying Regis's definitions of the romance hero and heroine to the series' three installments—*The Cruel Prince* (2018), *The Wicked King* (2019), and *The Queen of Nothing* (2019)—Markasović argues that Black's protagonists complicate gender stereotypes. Specifically, Jude is portrayed as steadfast and assertive in both her political fight against the oppressive fairies and her private relationship with Cardan. By refusing to give up her agency in favor of the hero, she thus breaks the traditional gender stereotype of a submissive romance heroine. In occasionally displaying what

are typically seen as male characteristics, such as dominance over Cardan and aggression while fighting political oppression, Jude resembles female protagonists of fantasy and young adult literature. However, Jude's characterization eschews even those archetypes since she also emphasizes her femininity by wearing dresses and painting her face. When it comes to Cardan, Markasović maintains that Black's male protagonist straddles Regis's prototypes of a "dangerous hero" and "sentimental hero" in need of healing but that he fits neither of them fully because of his non-stereotypical male appearance and tendency to wear eye make-up as well as the fact that he overcomes his psychological issues mainly by himself. Finally, the author analyzes Jude's and Cardan's connection to nature and magic and concludes that Black's hero and heroine also subvert the stereotype about the connection between women and nature by showing Cardan as a (pro)creator, which is a role usually reserved for women.

Chapter 3, "Reconceptualizing the Ill Body: Laurie Brooks's Jack McCall as the Hero of the Romantic Mode," by Lucija Periš discusses the portrayal of illness in Laurie Brooks's play *The Secret of Courage* (2019). Periš points to Brooks's awareness of negative societal perceptions of illness and her efforts to help demystify and destigmatize health concerns by embroiling her fourteen-year-old protagonist, Jack McCall, in an engaging array of challenges in his out of the ordinary battle against leukemia. The author applies Northrop Frye's theory of myths, outlined in his *Anatomy of Criticism*, to show that Brooks's play reflects the six phases of the mythos of summer. According to Periš, by blending reality with fantasy and employing the heroic quest pattern to conjure the protagonist's courageous and triumphant battle with the disease, Brooks's play portrays Jack McCall as the hero of the romantic mode instead of stereotyping him as an ostracized and undesirable villain or victim. The author concludes that *The Secret of Courage* thus challenges negative and harmful stereotypical imagery of illness, demonstrating that literary works can break entrenched biases and contribute to making a positive shift in the public perception of "medical conditions that are still considered taboo."

Chapter 4, "*Encanto*: Everyday Hero(in)es and the Power of (Colombian) Community," by Jelena Pataki Šumiga explores the subversion of several stereotypes in Disney's animated film *Encanto* (2021), which focuses on a magical Colombian community. Considering the lack of academic papers on *Encanto*, this chapter is a welcome discussion on one of Disney's most recent titles. It argues that the film breaks the stereotypes linked to Hollywood's portrayal of Latinos and Latin Americans, Disney's traditional portrayal of race and gender, and the larger-than-life superhero/ine trope. Drawing on Charles Ramírez Berg's *Latino Images in Film: Stereotypes, Subversion, and Resistance* (2002), the author maintains that *Encanto* dismantles the ubiquitous stereotypical depiction of Colombians and other Latin Americans as brutes and criminals by offering an authentic portrayal of and celebrating the Colombian culture. The latest Disney animated release, she claims, also challenges previous Disney films' endorsement of heteronormativity and their stereotypical representation of race as it not only refrains from the blond, blue-eyed, tall, slim, and romantically committed princess ideal but also refuses to oversexualize non-White female characters and portray non-White characters as inferior. Finally, Pataki Šumiga contends that *Encanto*'s heroine, Mirabel—the only family member without a magical gift, whose strength is found in her self-acceptance and acceptance of her community—subverts the superhero/ine stereotype, typically portrayed as a figure larger than life.

In Chapter 5, titled "The Woman in the Bathtub: Elderly Women and Sexuality as a Horror Trope," Filip Medar explores non-stereotypical portrayals of older women in American horror films, more precisely, in the slasher genre. By employing Kristeva's concept of the abject, the author first argues that horror films typically present naked bodies of older women as belonging to "monstrous crones" or "hags" who frighten, torture, or kill, as opposed to the sexually appealing "final girls." He then describes the specific characteristics and the functioning of the "crone" trope—its monstrosity and the concomitant stereotyped portrayal of the old and naked female body—based on the examples of the apparition

from *The Shining* (1980) and *Doctor Sleep* (2019), the diabolic protagonist of *The Witch: A New-England Folktale* (2015), and the shape-shifting monster in *It Chapter Two* (2019), embodied by the old Mrs. Kersh. The second part of the analysis explores the portrayal of the old female body in Ti West's slasher film *X* (2022). Medar argues that, unlike the other four films, in *X*, West employs the naked old woman motif not only as a device to convey and amplify the horror effect but also as a salient narrative formula underlying the film's subversive undertones that, combined with filming techniques such as exposition, diegetic music, and the "mirroring of the killer and the survivor," ultimately disrupts the viewers' preconceived expectations by inviting empathy for the villain. Medar concludes that, in that way, *X* undermines both the anticipated manifestation of the abject as well as the clichés of the slasher genre.

Chapter 6, "The Emergence of the 'Final Girl' in Stephen King's *The Shining*," by Iva Romić discusses the role of female characters in Gothic fiction. It traces the evolution of female stock characters in Gothic fiction—from the "damsel in distress" stereotype, who, due to her weak, submissive, and passive nature is in constant need of rescuing by the male hero, to the modern version, the "final girl," an empowered female character who is no longer depicted as a victim waiting to be rescued but survives against all odds and is able to "defeat the monster" by herself. Romić argues that the emergence of the "final girl" character is reflective of the socio-historical changes in gender dynamics as well as the appeal of the Gothic genre to the female target audience. She explicates the stereotypical traits of the "final girl" on the example of Wendy Torrance from Stephen King's 1977 horror novel *The Shining*, observing that, in order to save her child and herself, Wendy abandons the "angel in the house" role of a wife subservient to an abusive husband and, forced into an overwhelming fight for survival, transforms into a strong, courageous, and resourceful woman able to evade her husband's attacks and the demonic entities manifested by the hotel. The author sums up that although initially Wendy is more a victim than a force to be reckoned with, her ability to

persist and survive despite all probability align her with the "final girl" trope.

In Chapter 7, "Breaking Blackface: African Americans, Stereotypes, and Country Music," David Livingstone discusses country music and its principal instrument, the banjo, both of which have their roots in African-American culture but were appropriated by and incorporated into the dominant American culture and were eventually alienated from African Americans through blackface and minstrel tradition. Even though African American presence in nineteenth-century country music tradition was obscure and frequently bolstered blackface minstrelsy racist overtones and harmful clichés, as in the case of composer James Bland, Livingstone argues that for all the exploitation and stereotyping it suffered in the past, African-American country has survived and has continued to thrive in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Apart from "ghost writers," such as Lesley Riddle and an unknown African-American woman, originator of "Dink's Song (Fare Thee Well)," whose music was capitalized on and whitewashed by White artists, Livingstone pinpoints a number of twentieth-century African-American musicians, such as William Ledbetter (Lead Belly), Mississippi John Hurt, Elizabeth Cotton, DeFord Bailey, and Charley Pride, who made a name for themselves in the folk music industry. He argues, however, that it is alternative (alt-)country, a genre that has gained increasing attention and popularity in the last thirty years, that has truly brought African American country singers and songwriters to the mainstream. Focusing on the old-time string band Carolina Chocolate Drops, in particular its acclaimed song "Cornbread and Butterbeans" (2010) and solo and collaborative projects of the band's (former) members—Rhiannon Giddens's "Julie" (2017), Our Native Daughters's "Polly Ann's Hammer" (2019), and Dom Flemons's version of the folk standard "Home on the Range" (2018)—as well as Amythyst Kiah's "Black Myself" (2021), David Livingstone's discussion reveals the significance of alt-country in reclaiming banjo music and shedding its tainted racist baggage. Livingstone concludes that the contemporary revival of Black folk

music has re-envisioned a new African American musical idiom that has obliterated stereotypes associated with country music and "returned the tradition to its roots."

In Chapter 8, "Breaking Stereotypes across Cultures: The Croatian and Hungarian Stereotypical Representations of American Culture," Jadranka Zlomislić and Lívia Szélpál present the results of their joint comparative research into cultural stereotypes, conducted at three universities—the University of Pécs (Hungary), the University of Szeged (Hungary), and the University of Osijek (Croatia). Using the Critical Discourse Analysis methodology and focusing on stereotypes about Americans envisioned by Hungarians and Croatians and vice versa, this study seeks to facilitate the intercultural dialogue by broadening Hungarian and Croatian English major students' perception of American culture, developing their intercultural competences, increasing their responsiveness to cultural diversity, and heightening their awareness of harmful intergroup biases and stereotypes. The first part of the study explores the American–Hungarian cross-cultural stereotypes, drawing upon different scholarly, literary, and non-literary sources—historical data, Hesna Al Ghaoui's blog and her Internet diary *Hesna amerikai naplója* [Hesna's American Diary], Jessica Keener's novel *Strangers in Budapest* (2018), and an interview with Paul Kantor, former Fulbright scholar in Hungary. It also reports the results of a qualitative analysis conducted in a Hungarian higher education classroom setting in order to detect and possibly dismantle stereotypes envisioned by the two cultural groups about each other. Following a similar methodological strategy, the second part of the study focuses on the Croatian perspective of America and Americans and vice versa. It first discusses two memoirs written by Cody McClain Brown, an American expatriate in Croatia—*Chasing a Croatian Girl: A Survivor's Tale* (2015) and *Croatia Strikes Back: The Unnecessary Sequel* (2018)—and then presents the results of a classroom survey taken by a group of Croatian English major students at the University of Osijek, comparing their (projected) hetero-stereotype responses to their views after being exposed to an intercultural

communication situation through interaction with the author himself. While maintaining that stereotypes can be a "helpful mental tool for testing or assisting in social encounters," the paper also highlights the importance of combating rigid generalities loaded with biased assumptions through intercultural pedagogy, communication, and exchange.

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How to Nurture (Little) Men and (Little) Women: New Directions in Louisa May Alcott's Educational Novels

Abstract

As is well known, Louisa May Alcott's books for children and young adults had a broad popular appeal in the post-bellum United States and helped establish their author's reputation and financial success. Alcott undeniably drew on her own experience of being home-schooled and raised by experimental educational methods advocated by her parents, Bronson and Abigail May Alcott, and other Transcendentalist reformers, who laid out novel and unconventional theories of education based on their philosophical principles. Even though Alcott considered ways to undo the stereotypes regarding the education and raising of children, it also transpires from reading her family March trilogy—*Little Women* (1868–1869), *Little Men* (1871), and *Jo's Boys* (1886)— that she generally found ways to straddle the gap between the traditional, Victorian and the new, Transcendentalist/romantic models of education. Moreover, as new scientific ideas infused with social Darwinism began to spread in the late nineteenth-century, Alcott increasingly incorporated some of their features in her educational novels. In this essay, I propose to examine how Alcott manages to create visions of an alternative educational model for boys and girls, respectively, and to what extent this reflects a departure from traditional methods and stereotypes, and leads to the adoption of more modern nurturing practices in the realms of public education and popular culture.

> *I suppose it is inevitable, since we live in America, so I won't borrow trouble,*
> *but hope that some of the new ideas of education will produce a few*
> *hearty, happy, capable, and intelligent girls for my lads.*

—Louisa May Alcott, *Jo's Boys*

Louisa May Alcott's best known and best-selling novel, *Little Women* (first volume published in 1868, second volume in 1869), concerns the development of four typical American middle-class girls, namely, Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy March, as they transition into young women. It is perhaps hardly necessary to recount the novel's plot, the story having become a household item for generations of American and global readers, both male and female (Stimpson 593). As an essential part of the girls' *Bildung*, the coming-of-age process, the novel keenly registers the nurturing practices and the ways of instruction and education that the March girls receive in the ambit of their home and under their mother's, Marmee's, benevolent and enlightened supervision. The novel's phenomenal success opened to Louisa May a gateway to literary fame and financial security for herself and her family, and launched her irrevocably into the realm of literary celebrity according to the times. Such a prominent position thus enabled Louisa May to illustrate and propagate in her subsequent children's and young adults' novels considered as sequels to *Little Women*—*Little Men* (1871) and *Jo's Boys* (1886)—ideas that engaged more sophisticated and intriguing concepts of education for children and young adults, i.e., from primary to post-secondary education. The ways in which Louisa May Alcott made use of the opportunity to disseminate in reader-friendly and unobtrusive forms these notions in her educational trilogy in the con-

text of late nineteenth-century American culture will be the focus of the
ensuing remarks.[1]

The debate about different educational models begins to resonate in
the scope of larger issues about the (diminishing) role of religion—
although temporarily rescued by Transcendentalism—and the (rising) role
of science, from medical, to natural, to social, to educational, which began
to shape the profile of the late-nineteenth-century United States. As this
development is outlined by Bernard Wishy, it might be possible to argue
that Alcott's educational trilogy spans the key moments in the trajectory
of education as it was transposed from mostly spiritual and moral to a
largely scientific and professional endeavor carried out by qualified ex-
perts rather than well-meaning amateurs of the likes of Jo and Fritz Bhaer
of Plumfield. Tentatively, *Little Women* exemplifies the rise and demise of
the home as the center point of nurture; *Little Men* carries this suspicion
even further, creating a hybrid educational setting where the old and the
new styles still co-exist, while in *Jo's Boys* Alcott makes a more decisive
transition towards a formal and officially, scientifically certified format of
education.

One of the striking facts as regards education in *Little Women*, howev-
er, is that the March girls mostly receive their schooling at home, except
for the youngest Amy, whose case will be considered later. Why is this
the case, and how can this situation sustain Alcott's ongoing interest in
contributing to the debates about children's education? There are perhaps

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[1] My argument presupposes, although it cannot fully encompass within its restrict-
ed scope, a number of intersecting processes in mid- to late-nineteenth-century Amer-
ica. The broadest development is outlined by what Philippe Ariès terms the invention
of childhood in Western culture evincing the emergence of the figure of the child as a
being endowed with mind, emotions, and in need of nurture and guidance across a
wider spectrum of society (not restricted merely to the higher classes). Intersecting
with this is the rising culture of domesticity in the United States, as demonstrated by
numerous studies of sentimental and domestic culture of the nineteenth century (see,
for instance, Brodhead, Samuels, Strickland, Tompkins). Added to this are the at-
tendant shifts in the constitution of the literary field in postbellum America, where a
niche opened to accommodate children's authors and a didactic-educational mode of
literature in the context of popular culture, as shown by Richard Brodhead.

several reasons. The most obvious would be that female education in America at the time shortly before and during the Civil War was hampered by gender stereotypes, as indicated by an earlier experience, namely, that of Margaret Fuller, who received her early education at home before being sent for a short stretch to a more formal educational setting. Nonetheless, being a woman, she would not be admitted to Harvard (as was her brother) nor to most other institutions of higher education in the country (Douglas 263–69). However, this tendency should also be seen in a different light, in terms of the then current debates into the educational reform spawned by the New England Transcendentalist movement, which sought to make an impact on the notion of education and the idea that a new spiritually-minded subject is sustained by a new kind of upbringing. We shall therefore look into ways in which Alcott's educational novels, from *Little Women* to its two sequels, *Little Men* and *Jo's Boys*—sometimes jointly referred to as the March trilogy—intervene into public debates about education and seek to introduce particular Transcendentalist and other reformist educational ideas, thus circumventing or obviating stereotypical educational endeavors applied to both boys and girls. As Wishy points out in his seminal study *The Child and the Republic*, "The spread of common school education after 1830 started a full-scale American debate about educational theory that has continued with enormous vigor down to today" (67). Alcott's juvenile literature crucially participates in and contributes to the debates of the time, as will be shown.

By all means, Bronson Alcott, Louisa's reformist father and one of the quirkiest Transcendentalists, was no enemy of (female) education—his experimental and short-lived Temple School in Boston was co-educational. He resented, however, traditional educational methods and sought energetically to implement all manner of pedagogical reforms (Showalter x). Besides teaching himself, he recruited for this goal several talented and multifaceted women, from Margaret Fuller to Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, both prominent and energetic members of the Transcendentalist circle in their own right. Bronson Alcott drew for his re-

formist views on particular "ideas of child development," partly derived
from direct observation of his four daughters and their early develop-
ment, which he would subsequently apply at home and in his experi-
mental schools (Showalter xi–xii). For instance, Bronson's eldest daugh-
ter, Anna, was only four when she attended the Temple School and was
thus one of the youngest pupils there. As pointed out by various critics,
his other source of inspiration and influence in this regard was the work
of the Swiss reformer Johannes Pestalozzi (Flint 80; Parille and Mallory
16; Proehl 43).

The Transcendentalist impulse, which Strickland appropriately terms
"the sentimental revolution" (3), required a whole new outlook on the
family and relations between parents and children. This impulse is reflect-
ed in Bronson's facetious autobiographical account of the communitarian
experiment at Fruitlands, a utopian community established by Bronson
Alcott and Charles Lane, an English reformer, when Louisa was ten years
old. Retreating with her parents and three sisters to a secluded farm in
New England's countryside, Louisa recollects the experience in terms of
the pilgrimage in line with one of her favorite texts, *Pilgrim's Progress*, and
the pioneer experience: "Thus these modern pilgrims journeyed hopefully
out of the old world, to found a new one in the wilderness" ("Transcen-
dental" 538). Seeking to reform the shape of the nuclear family and to
apply in practice the spiritual principles of abstemiousness, non-violence,
vegetarianism, and the repudiation of materialistic principles and depend-
ence on commodities, the (male) reformers recruited their children and
only one woman, Abigail May Alcott, to reside permanently at Fruitlands
as co-partners in their scheme of self-reform and purification ("Tran-
scendental" 539). As Alcott quips, "in those days communities were the
fashion and transcendentalism raged wildly" ("Transcendental" 544).

Fruitlands, apart from being an experiment in companionate living
and labor (albeit not a lasting or a successful one), provided the Alcott
children—the beneficiaries of their father's program of spiritual uplift—
with a unique opportunity to try out a whole new way of living and learn-

ing for the brief duration of the experience. It is partly from Louisa's journals of her time at Fruitlands that we may get a sense of the novelty and radicalism of the proposition to rearrange their own and their family's lives in order to provide an example of principled living.

The daily program for Louisa in this "Utopia" ("Transcendental" 549) consisted of rising early, bathing in cold water, studying various subjects, reading, music lessons, helping with chores, and frolicking with her sisters around the farm and in the woods. In her diary, which she had been encouraged to keep since her early childhood, Louisa notes her emotions, thoughts, reflections on her guided reading, and self-reflexive comments on her own behavior: "I was cross to-day, and I cried when I went to bed. I made good resolutions, and felt better in my heart" ("Transcendental" 554). Like self-scrutiny, a poignant lesson inculcated by her parents, the habit of keeping a journal was also practiced by other adult Transcendentalists including the luminaries of the movement, Emerson, Thoreau, and Fuller, among others, who drew upon the introspective tradition of American Puritanism. Even though Luisa was only ten when she penned these thoughts, her mother comments on the margins of her daughter's diary: "Remember, dear girl, that a diary should be an epitome of your life" ("Transcendental" 555), clearly implying that attention to one's thoughts, emotions, and feelings is crucial for self-growth in moral, spiritual, and intellectual sense, a triad that would continue to figure in Alcott's literature for boys and girls.

Fruitlands catered to a program of the integration of labor and philosophy in an effort to awaken Man (Woman) Thinking, Emerson's idea of a holistic human being rather than a fragmented, specialized individual, so that even the children were required to take part in sundry forms of agricultural and domestic labor and also be little scholars. What shows in Louisa's jottings, however, is a rising sense of anxiety about the tensions besetting the Fruitlands utopia and her sense that Lane was trying to interfere between her father and her mother, a development which indeed

eventually led to the dissolution of the consociate arrangement in tandem with other difficulties facing the brave pioneers.

These new methods reflected not simply the Transcendentalists' concern for transforming the dominant model of public education at the time, which was mired in Lockean materialism and sensualism, on one hand, and rote learning and mechanical repetition and cramming, on the other; they also meant to involve the ideas of marriage, the family, sex/gender relations, and even sex/gender roles as such—all of which were in the purview of the reformers. Still, as Strickland points out, Alcott does not merely advocate what today would be termed a feminist perspective; rather, she is more refined in pushing for co-education, companionate marriage, and consociate family (39, 133; Proehl 43–44).

Closely correlating with the Alcott family experience, *Little Women* weaves the story of the girls' education into a larger plot of nineteenth-century female *Bildung*, particularly at the time when female education was going through considerable adjustments to new social ideas and new post-war socio-political realities. What these adjustments entail will be illustrated by the ideas of Ralph Waldo Emerson, the leading light of the Transcendentalist movement, which, however, as shown by Philip F. Gura, features many diverse and multifaceted theories and approaches, making it difficult to impose a single dominant strain. However, we could assume Emerson's influence and proximity to the Alcotts, from the parents (Bronson and Abigail) to Louisa May herself, who professed a great admiration for the philosopher and his ideas in the course of her life and work (Alcott, *LW* 431; Walls 430).

Emerson's ideas will thus serve as a general departure point to explain not only the general cultural drift of the Transcendentalist reforms but also more particular notions of education within it. Emerson's rambling style requires that we search in his different writings and essays for a coherent theory of education from which some practical observations could be derived and applied.

In 1837, Emerson delivered an address before the Phi Beta Kappa Society at Harvard, known by the title "The American Scholar," poised to become one of the definitive expressions of American intellectual and spiritual independence from Europe and its models, or at least one of its most articulate expressions. Hailed as a declaration of American cultural independence, the essay is interesting also as an attempt to chart a viable program of education of the American genius, education that would be pertinent to American conditions and relevant for the nation's spiritual needs (Buell 43–44). Emerson thus lays out a model of an ideal scholar, but also prods the American institutions of higher education (here, one of its leading universities) to foster a model of learning that would give rise to a new kind of individual. For one, as Emerson says, American education should be more attuned to the study of "letters" (humanities) rather than "mechanical skill" ("The American" 43). Such a more encompassing, holistic approach should furthermore counter the already rampant specialization, fragmentation, and division of education and labor subsisting in society. That this re-valorization of education and labor is absolutely necessary is pressed by Emerson as he belabors the idea of "the true dignity of his ministry" that should come forth in any man's labor in any form or capacity: "Man is thus metamorphosed into a thing. . . . The priest becomes a form; the attorney a statute-book; the mechanic a machine; the sailor a rope of the ship" ("The American" 44).

Where the needed unification of these functions should take place, according to Emerson, is in Man Thinking, or, the American scholar, who must therefore solicit the help of contribution of different modes of gaining knowledge and experience that would allow him to perform the role of a newly dignified, consecrated member of society. In the course of the essay, Emerson famously provides a blueprint for resuscitating the role of education and turning it into a tool for individual and social regeneration. The first source of a new educational program is, appropriately, nature, "this web of God, but always circular power returning into itself" ("The American" 45). Nature is, for the young scholar, the first

model allowing him to decipher not only the external world but also to understand "the law of the human mind" working by the principles of "analogy" and "identity" ("The American" 45). By striving to understand the laws of nature, we simultaneously gain insights into our own soul or mind.

Presumably, this analogizing from nature to the human being and back is a direct way of obtaining knowledge not mediated by institutional meddling unlike the other major source of (self)-knowledge that Emerson posits, the influence of books, "the mind of the Past" ("The American" 46). Here, Emerson is mindful lest the book knowledge stifle the inspiration, the creative and thinking genius that had engendered particular books. Rather, what he suggests is that the knowledge of books should be used as a template for individuals to unleash their own creative and active effort relative to their times rather than just imitating or blindly accepting the dogmas of the past. This would indicate that, for Transcendentalists, each person is potentially a genius if s/he taps into her/his divine, soulful potential, while one type of the awakening of this spirit ought to happen in educating young people to assume different offices in society or to equip them for living a good life: "Colleges . . . can only highly serve us when they aim not to drill, but to create; when they gather from far every ray of various genius to their hospitable halls" ("The American" 49).

As a third ingredient in this new program for raising and nurturing the Man Thinking, Emerson posits the need for practical education grounded in the experience of the quotidian, in terms of places, types of labor, different idioms, the cross-section of society, all of which should be integral to the scholar's holistic education. Experience, having tried something whether to succeed or fail in it, comprises a valid asset in the scholar's toolkit: "Only so much do I know, as I have lived. Instantly we know whose words are loaded with life, and whose not" ("The American" 49). This call for practical endeavors, which should not be foreign to the American scholar at least, echoes the idea of pragmatism and practical interweaving of abstract knowledge with lived experience and concrete

action: "I do not see how any man can afford, for the sake of his nerves and his nap, to spare any action in which he can partake" ("The American" 50). The experience and action thus leaven the scholar's bookish knowledge and equip him all the better to perform his manifold duties for American society. One manifestation of this fruitful interweaving is, for instance, the use of language, which should replenish itself from the speech of the people, from "action," "life," whereas the "frank intercourse with many men and women" ("The American" 51) should make provision for the expressions used by the scholar, but also reflect the production of the nation's culture and literature. Importantly, Emerson implies that educational institutions, colleges in particular, should embrace this new program of raising scholars who will be able to respond to new national needs and to reform "[t]he mind of his country, taught to aim at low objects" ("The American" 59).

While Emerson's lofty exhortation aims at shaking up the complacent colleges, Alcott seeks to transpose some of these ideas into an educational program more suitable for younger students, children, and adolescents, while the premises retain their Transcendentalist flavor and further endorse the Emersonian trilogy of nature, books, and experience, now adjusted to the lower rungs of the educational system and younger age groups. This shows in particular, as Flint contends, in the way Alcott combines Transcendentalist abstraction (of Emerson's style) with the pragmatic, practical, and hands-on approach favored by other reformers and implemented by Alcott's parents at home and in public (81). Alcott readily conceded the importance of her personal experience and her home-induced love of books and reading for her literary imagination, choice of topics, and style, as is evident in her guarded comments on the proofs of what is later to become *Little Women*: "It reads better than I expected. Not a bit sensational, but simple and true, for we really lived most of it, and if it succeeds that will be the reason of it" (*The Journals* 166).

It is precisely the enmeshment of the abstract and the practical that Alcott rehearses in the trilogy. For one, as she demonstrates in *Little*

Women, she is quite ambivalent about the benefits of formal, public education, one reason being that it fails to implement Emersonian standards. The chapter "Amy's Valley of Humiliation" recounts a school episode when Amy is punished for harboring pickled limes under her desk, which condenses all the troublesome points of the public educational system in New England. For one, corporal punishment was the order of the day, as pupils were regularly feruled for different offenses. Next, the teacher, Mr. Davis, is a caricature of an incompetent but harsh instructor, a member of the tribe of "nervous gentlemen with tyrannical tempers, and no more talent for teaching than 'Dr. Blimber'" (*Little Women* [*LW*] 58). More subtly, Mr. Davis's educational methods are obviously of the old school, as he lays great stress on "Greek, Latin, Algebra and ologies of all sorts" but foregoes "manners, moral, feelings, and examples," which, as the narrator opines, "were not considered of any particular importance" (*LW* 58). In such an instrumentalist model of education, Amy is to face the wrath and contempt of an irascible educator and to be humiliated by the public show of punishment in class. The narrative sympathetically takes up her childish perspective of the event, which, banal though it may seem, had solemn meaning for her: "For the first time in her life she had been struck; and the disgrace, in her eyes, was as deep as if he had knocked her down" (*LW* 60). After the corporal part of the punishment is meted out, the little scholar is further humiliated as she is ordered to "stand on the platform till recess," for all the school to see, confounding her sense of wrong and humiliation by the sense of shame: "[F]or a second she felt as if she could only drop down where she stood and break her heart with crying" (*LW* 60). The narrative continues to register Amy's inner feelings and her perception of the event: "[T]he proud and sensitive little girl suffered a shame and pain which she never forgot," and part of the shock comes from the fact that Amy's upbringing at home is fundamentally different, as "during the twelve years of her life she had been governed by love alone, and a blow of that sort had never touched her before" (*LW* 60). The family's reaction is also indicative of their profound disagree-

ment with traditional methods, as she is withdrawn from school, and her
mother dismisses the standard educational methods as inappropriate and
ineffective: "I don't approve of corporal punishment, especially for girls.
I dislike Mr. Davis' manner of teaching, and don't think the girls you as-
sociate with are doing our any good. . . ," declares Mrs. March and closes
the door on the youngest sister's career in a public school (*LW* 61). This
is not to say that the mother lets Amy lightly off the hook but, rather, that
the moral lesson is obtained in a radically different way.

As a teacher in Bronson Alcott's experimental Boston school, Eliza-
beth Palmer Peabody, one of the leading Transcendentalists and the
owner of a famous bookstore featuring the latest foreign titles brokering
new ideas to America, took to writing a journal of everyday instruction at
the school soon to be published under the title *Record of a School* (1835), in
which she partly wants to vindicate Alcott and his presumably outlandish
and controversial methods of dealing with children (Hamblen 82–83). In
addition to Emerson, Peabody's educational writings will be taken as em-
blematic of some of these new tendencies (Walls 426–27). By faithfully
recording the daily work done in class and particularly Bronson's intense
and imaginative interaction with his young students, ranging from the ag-
es of four to twelve, Peabody demonstrates the systematic grounding of
his methods, based as they were on the new philosophy of education in
tandem with the new philosophical notions of human nature (Parille and
Mallory 21; Peabody 38, 110).

To give but one example how Bronson intends to apply the new sci-
ence and how it later seeps into Louisa's writings, I will discuss the issue
of disciplining the child and the question of applying the punishment. As
Peabody repeatedly demonstrates, Alcott insisted on his pupils being very
disciplined and focused in the class and did not hesitate to apply various
modes of punishment in order for the children to acquire self-control.
But he sometimes did it in quite unorthodox ways, also by means of "vi-
carious punishment," as Peabody terms it (146). This line of proceeding
will be familiar to the reader of *Little Men,* since the same logic is applied

at Plumfield, a boarding school for boys run by Jo and Professor Bhaer,
her German husband. Bhaer, in fact, in terms of some of his features and
the ideas that he professes, reminds one of Alcott's father, who likely is
one of the prototypes for the Professor's profile, but not the only one, as
reasonably suggested by Laura Dassow Walls (430). Bronson's idea is,
first, for the pupil to understand why the punishment is being applied;
secondly, he turns the tables on the perpetrator as he demands that the
culprit punish him, the teacher. As Peabody explains, often in the course
of administering punishment and smacking Bronson, the guilty party
would cry (145). Granted, this would possibly not be a widely applied
new educational invention in any school, but Bronson's other practices,
obviously carefully thought through from the arsenal of theories coming
from Europe, from Pestalozzi to Froebel, would be more likely to survive
even in a modern educational environment (Manning 2–3).

Peabody records fascinating examples of Bronson conducting analysis
with individual pupils in class and skillfully leading them to self-
knowledge through guided conversation often based on a reading of se-
lected texts or the parsing of a word. The choice of questions strikes one
as a careful and sensitive psychological exercise, while the reader is taken
aback by the scope and depth of the young students' answers, which
range over a whole field of human knowledge and endeavor or show the
child's capacity for introspection. Clearly, Bronson did not think his stu-
dents incapable of generating thoughts on virtually any subject under the
sun. In that his program resonates with the Emersonian, Transcendental-
ist notion of the divine spark within us, which plugs us into the lap of
mother Nature, while our native capacities constitute the latent power
within us, capable of growth. The wonderful intuitions that the students
provide in these sessions are a record of the innate capacity of the human
mind, combined with the moral sense that the teachers, Bronson and
Peabody, strove to awaken in children. This is very much in line with
Ralph Waldo Emerson's contemporary writings on education: "Whilst
thus the world exists for the mind; whilst thus the man is ever invited in-

ward into shining realms of knowledge and power by the shows of the world, which interpret to him the infinitude of his own consciousness--it becomes the office of a just education to awaken him to the knowledge of this fact" ("Lectures: Emerson on Education"). This could very well provide a manual for educators at all levels even nowadays.

This theory, and its quotidian practice in Bronson's school, was readily transposed into his daughter's fictional works, scattered with autobiographical facts, so let us look at a few examples from particular educational settings that Louisa May recreates in the other two novels, *Little Men* and *Jo's Boys*, both focusing on the male *Bildung* but also presenting co-educational settings. Let me once again revert to some of Emerson's insights on education, such as when he opines, "I believe that our own experience instructs us that the secret of Education lies in respecting the pupil" (Emerson), the call which was the underlying principle in Plumfield (a name evocative of Fruitlands). Symbolically, this location stands for a kind of pastoral retreat, a self-styled City on a Hill (Van Engen 49–59), apart from the contamination of the rest of society and its ways in its effort to raise new young American men and women.

In *Little Men,* the narrative focus is on twelve boys raised and educated by Jo and her husband in Plumfield, joined by three girls, Daisy, Bess, and Nan. As the narrator unveils a cast of pupils at Plumfield, we might be put in mind of a morality play in which each particular boy embodies one of seven deadly sins. Jack Ford is "a sharp, rather sly lad" who loves money and skims his peers for profit (*Little Men* [*LM*] 20); Ned Barker is prone to tale-telling, as is Nat; George Cole—Stuffy is a lazy glutton; Demi might become a victim of his intellectual pride. Others show minor or less conspicuous moral defects, such as making mischief, misbehaving occasionally, and disrespecting the rules. The remains of the old theology find extension also in the prevailing idea in Plumfield that the boys need religion but in an attenuated form which will be taught them through nature (*LM* 38), and the novel does not insist overmuch on theological views except in broadly abstract pantheistic ways. The Bhaers, faithful to

their Transcendentalist roots, which we recall from *Little Women*, employ "sympathy" to reach the boys (*LM* 45). Other helpful educational tools in an unobtrusive way are stories, Bible stories, fables, fairy tales, and importantly, music. There is a notion, for example, that Nat might be redeemed through his talent for music, which indicates a soul's higher aspiration and thus vindicates Nat's potential corruption in his earlier life.

Generally, the structure of *Little Men* revolves around the episodes presenting a particular child (a boy or a girl) and demonstrating a unique educational problem which in the course of the chapter gets addressed and resolved in most cases. Each child embodies a specific vice or frailty—depending on one's perspective—which is occasionally attributed to heredity and sometimes ascribed to unhappy circumstances. In the case of Nat, a street urchin and an orphan who is received in Plumfield, the problem is not only his poverty but also his soiled appearance, which prefigures possible moral defects caused by street life.[2] The narrative does not provide the exact tally of nature vs. nurture but is aware of the longstanding debate raging in the course of the nineteenth century and unable to ascertain which of them comes first. This openness is indicated, for instance, in the chapter "In the Willow," in which the children are paired and contrasted for better effect: Daisy and Nan as two distinct feminine types; Tommy and Nat, the former depicting the worldly principle, the latter a spiritual drive; Demi and Dan, illustrating a difference between "the little deacon" and "the Colt" (*LM* 207, 232).

As already mentioned, one of the striking facts for the contemporary reader about Plumfield would be its co-educational nature, a facet which Louisa May Alcott evidently took from the practice in Bronson Alcott's Temple School. A cohort of twelve boys is joined by a small number of girls—the dainty and feminine Daisy, the tomboy Nan, and the sublime,

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[2] This raised the specter of pauperism, a particular blend of traditional ideas about poverty in the Protestant context and the new ideas incarnated in social Darwinism (see Brownson, Leviatin, Schocket—particularly Schocket's joining the issue of pauperism to that of racialization).

angelic Bess. This co-educational aspect of the school was one of Jo's "inspirations," as she proudly claims in her conversation with Teddy Laurence, her companionate friend from *Little Women* (*LM* 312).

Following upon Wishy's helpful historical overview of American education, one is pressed to admit the necessity of establishing a nation-wide system of public education, meaning that the responsibility for child rearing was gradually wrested away from the parents and the family and transferred into the hands of the professionals. The process of the professionalization of education (Wishy 67–68) is presented ambivalently by Alcott, since in her education trilogy, it is the case that Plumfield combines the features of home and family with those of the boarding school and the formal educational setting (Clark 326). Already in Alcott's time the balanced combination of these two sides was slipping away. Moreover, as Wishy contends, "[i]f the school was going to share or supplement the work of the home" (69), then Plumfield is devised as a utopian place where Jo and Fritz Bhaer play both surrogate parents and educators to their own children, their nephew and nieces, and the boys and girls whom they take in as students—roles that occasionally interfere with each other. For example, Jo, acting as mother, would not condone some actions that she ought to endorse as a teacher in relation to her sons. Concurrently with the raised stakes of nurturing a child, the level of "emotional investment" in each child goes up, as well (Wishy viii).

As is amply the case with *Little Women*, in *Little Men* one also finds scattered autobiographical episodes. In one of them, Jo's attempts to discipline Nan, a tomboy among the girls. The scene of Jo tying Nan to a bedpost, as Strickland explains, echoes a parallel episode from Louisa's childhood when her mother similarly tried to punish her after she had run away (31). In Jo's application, however, the act of binding a child, but in a way that Nan would be able to extricate herself, is there not primarily as a form of corporal punishment but, more importantly, as a way to appeal to her conscience and to foster her self-control (*LM* 183). Illustrative in this episode is what Wishy calls a wavering between the issues of "tradi-

tion and authority" and "rational sanctions for limits on [a child's] free-dom" (vii).

Another major concern of the educational theories and models seeping into Alcott's books is the inconclusive wrangling between nature and nurture. Going for the side of nurture, a major contribution by the Enlightenment theory of man as a blank slate, there would be quite a few corrections from different sources. First, the notion of nurture was incongruous with the Transcendentalist belief in the soul, inborn genius, and inspiration, which mark every human being. Next, it went against the abiding religious belief in the fallen nature. Later on, it faced a fierce adversary in the form of Darwinism and its related theories, which began to spread in the United States in the postbellum era. If indeed the truth about human nature is that it is endlessly perfectible, then there is hardly a more important question than that of the nurturing of children. If indeed human nature is malleable to some (considerable) degree, it then follows that it is open to modification through education, as Wishy comments (viii). Approaching it from the other side, Rousseau's notion of the ideal nature still created an opening for nurturing practices to make the child resistant to the corruption of society (Parille and Mallory 16). While these models generally tended to favor nurture over nature, the Darwinian revolution made that idea less possible to entertain and, at least to some extent, swung the question back towards the pole of nature, heredity, and biology.[3] The terms of the debate became even more complicated with the growing dissemination and appreciation for Darwin's ideas, or for the way Darwin's followers deployed them. Whereas prior to the scientific discourse on human nature as predetermined, the experiments would be focused on more ethereal things, such as spirit and mind (see

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[3] A good overview of the influence of Darwinism and its various applications in American culture is to be found in Bannister and in Hofstadter. For the ways Alcott manages to combine and waver between her Transcendentalist roots, sentimental/romantic inclinations, and Darwinian notions, see Levander, Proehl, Wishy. Levander in particular is concerned with the issue that Darwinism serves the process of nation-building based on the idea of Whiteness.

Peabody), as in *Little Women*, the new scientific wave was inclined to drop these categories and take into account more sensible, materialist, biological, and hereditary strains.

In its seclusion, Plumfield becomes an experiment for moderating the boys' and girls' behavior and modifying it to suit the latest wave of educational theories.[4] I stress the word *experiment*, since it is by considering *Little Men*'s structure that we notice the pattern employed in the individual chapters. Each chapter focuses on a particular student, elucidates his or her background, considers a problem or a crisis organically related to a pupil's "nature," and describes methods used by the Bhaers to contain the crisis. Each section thus becomes an occasion for the narrative to delve into the possible educational strategies in dealing with boys and girls, respectively. Of the two groups, the emphasis in this novel is on boys, due in part to their greater vulnerability and exposure to contemporary social ills—pauperism, crime, homelessness (Wishy 131), as exemplified by the appearance of the figure of the "Wild Boy" (LM 87).

In the novel, this particular issue is taken up in two plotlines, Nat's and Dan's, respectively. The pairing of the two is also a suggestive device, since the two boys come from a similar milieu—the urban slum—and have been consistently exposed to street life, poverty, and abuse. That the same or similar circumstances nevertheless have produced different outcomes for the two boys serves to underscore the importance of nature, heredity, and biology, which—all other things being equal—will prove a key factor in determining the boys' respective chances to become useful members of society. When Nat is admitted to Plumfield, he soon adopts

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[4] In the context of the late nineteenth century, in particular concerning the immigration tide, pauperism, etc., public opinion was split along the lines that follow the two predominant strains of social thinking: one that "argued that heredity determined the character of individuals and groups" and drew its inspiration from social Darwinism, and another which placed emphasis on the way that "material conditions determined the character of individuals and groups" (Leviatin 19). These debates found their echoes in the contemporary ideas of education and Americanization and were reflected particularly in *Little Men* and *Jo's Boys*, more squarely placed in the social and cultural contexts of the era.

the school's ways and is quite tractable, manageable, and susceptible to moral lessons or punishment, to which he is exposed for his habit of lying. Conversely, Dan proves to be more intractable, his temperament standing in the way of docility or susceptibility to discipline. The question is whether this is corrigible, or whether he is long gone. The narrator is at first willing to gamble that his revolt against discipline is due to his unfortunate circumstances (*LM* 86). However, as he reappears later in the novel and joins the cast of characters in *Jo's Boys*, we realize that at least some of his accidents result from his character set-up. Their respective trajectories are to be deciphered even from the boys' faces: ". . . Uncle Teddy would sit opposite . . . that he might study the faces before him – both so happy, yet so different, for Dan's was square and brown and strong, while Nat's was long and fair and rather weak, but very amiable with its mild eyes and good forehead" (*LM* 154).

Having been evicted from Plumfield on account of his misbehavior and unwillingness to bend to discipline, Dan is sent to another institution, where he also does not last long. Finally, hungry and exhausted, he wanders back to Plumfield to ask for forgiveness and to be given a second chance, which the Bhaers readily concede. It is interesting that Jo favors Dan over the other boys precisely for the sake of his wildness and the idea that he is a "prodigal son," impetuous and difficult to restrain, just as she used to be in her childhood (*LM* 141).

Dan begins to discover in himself an interest in nature, turning into a veritable "naturalist" (*LM* 145). This framing of Dan's story is interesting in view of the aforementioned new winds in education appearing in the second half of the nineteenth century and inspired by the rise of Social Darwinism. Dan's narrative, therefore, ought to be seen in relation to the idea of struggle, survival, and savagery that prevail in nature, as illustrated in the episode when a big crab devours small crabs (*LM* 149). If this was an appropriate image of Dan's former life, with him back in Plumfield, it now needs to be exchanged for a new way guided by "love and gratitude" (*LM* 151). However, even with this promising direction, the naturalist,

Darwinian script remains tied to Dan, who in the sequel to *Little Men* still remains "the black sheep of [Jo's] flock," calling up an animalistic metaphor (*Jo's Boys* [*JB*] 11).

Dan's naturalist inclinations lead him to other lines of inquiry and beget his interest in older civilizations, archaeology, and ethnology as fledgling attempts to provide a scientific account of cultural differences. More often than not, these differences would underlie taxonomies and hierarchies based on some presumably immutable features, such as race and social status (e.g., pauperism) in particular thus raising the stakes of the Plumfield students' educational chances and endowing the experiment with scientific aura.

When the children, led by Dan and his desire to assemble a naturalist collection, are encouraged to establish a museum of natural history in Plumfield, we see a new principle at work. Nature is no longer a romantic and Transcendentalist source of inspiration or knowledge; it is no longer a fount of spiritual nourishment but turns into a blueprint for scientific principles that will provide explanations and definitions previously derived from other sources. The museum's cabinet of curiosities sampling world cultures is a good example of this new tendency, which now begins to permeate the education of the children, too. Pursuing further this line of thinking, we observe that the idea of Dan's education is tied to taming and breaking in, just like a young colt has to be subdued and trained. Dan needs to realize the wild impulses within himself and learn to control them. Before interiorizing self-control, however, a process of domesticating needs to take place just as the one he had been practicing on a horse. Here Alcott wavers between the discipline of love and sympathy, which she has already proclaimed as paramount for Plumfield (and Dan in particular) and the notion of intractable nature that requires struggle, contention, force, and submission (*LM* 241).

Another marked change attending the transition from *Little Women* to the next two March novels is dictated by the changing gender norms observable in American society during the post-war era. As the situation for

the girls in *Little Women* still shows considerable obstacles for them to pursue different careers rather than the ones represented by feminine roles, in family or in the public, the other two novels, *Jo's Boys* in particular, have come to the point where they contemplate and represent a host of new roles for women, as the society seems to have become more inclusive of them.

Considering the changes in the representation of viable female types in post-Civil War literature, Abate points out that already by the 1860s, the tomboy appears as a literary type (xv) signifying "gender-bending female figures" (x). These figures become increasingly accommodated in children's literature, in itself a burgeoning section of the literary field after the Civil War (see Brodhead 80; Wishy 54). Furthermore, Clark points out importantly that the inclusion of girls in the school story is a novelty introduced by Alcott (325). As Abate explains, Annie Harding, nicknamed "Naughty Nan," continues Alcott's abiding interest in tomboyish girl characters: "Although a generation younger than Jo March, this tomboyish figure is in many ways patterned after her" (48). Jo literally projects her younger self into a strong-willed, impulsive, and rambunctious girl child: ". . . I feel a great sympathy for Nan, because I was such a naughty child myself that I know all about it" (*LM* 102). One major distinction between Jo and Nan, however, is that, unlike Jo in *Little Women*, Nan pointedly does not go through the process of "tomboy taming," which, according to Abate, "sought to eradicate . . . a gender-bending girl's iconoclastic ways and have her adopt more feminine behaviors" (31). *Little Men*, therefore, accommodates new dispensations in gender roles. As Jo continues to elaborate on her sympathetic identification with Nan, she nevertheless contrasts Nan, a little feminist, with Daisy, a domestic type. However, this is done with the intent to exercise the idea of different models of feminine *Bildung*, both equally valid and feasible in the novel, rather than to favor the traditional over the transformative one: "[Nan] is full of spirits and only needs to be taught what to do with them to be as nice a little girl as Daisy. Those quick wits of hers would enjoy

lessons if they were rightly directed, and what is now a tricksy midget would soon become a busy, happy child" (*LM* 102). Even though not exactly tamed, Nan needs to be disciplined so that in *Jo's Boys* she might blossom into a new kind of woman: "[I]t was what she needed, for this little garden was full of sweet flowers, half hidden by weeds; and when kind hands gently began to cultivate it, all sorts of green shoots sprung up. . ." (*LM* 110).

According to Wishy, during the nineteenth century, the growing debates about the nature of the child, and the fittest form of his/her nurture, become entangled with the idea of the American nation, its character and identity, its past, present, and future (4). Also, in the context of this paper's interest in the aspects of nineteenth-century American popular culture, I would like to endorse the argument made by Wishy to the effect that by the 1830s, concurrent with various reform initiatives, "the older and isolated concerns about the proper raising of children merged into a flood of popular criticism" (4), of which Alcott's novels partake.[5]

Plumfield illustrates these tendencies as it tries to model itself on an extended family, while "their rules were few and sensible" (*LM* 16).[6] Instruction and studying are interspersed with "jovial games" and occasional but restricted rough-and-tumble (*LM* 16). Besides academic subjects, "manners and morals were insinuated" (*LM* 18). In Jo's playful take, "[W]e don't believe in making children miserable by too many rules and too much study" (*LM* 24), meaning that Plumfield's curriculum combines

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[5] As Van Engen contends, social elites in the early republic had no doubt of the value and the necessity of education to foster "an informed citizenry . . . absolutely vital to any liberty loving republic" (121). Education was recognized as a tool for not only molding and perfecting individuals but also additionally building up the nation (121).

[6] The new educational endeavor attempted in the fictional Plumfield, as critics point out, exemplifies and amplifies the extant reforms and debates in the ambit of new, progressive, romantic, and scientific pedagogical ideas on education. As Proehl sums it up, "Plumfield serves not only as a testing ground for different pedagogical philosophies but also reflects the tensions between competing understandings of childhood development in nineteenth-century America" (44). See other contributions in Elbert and Ginsberg.

"Latin, Greek, and mathematics" with Transcendentalist topics of "self-knowledge, self-help, and self-control," making it "an odd school" for its time (*LM* 33). Religion is taught, but this is done through nature and age-appropriate Bible stories (*LM* 38, 51), and Jo keeps a record, her "conscience book" (*LM* 37), of each of the pupils. Corporal punishment, still a fixture in American schools, was avoided in Plumfield unless strictly necessary but was even then employed in line with the new method, as previously illustrated. Fictional material—stories, fables, fairy tales—is amply used to spur the children's imagination, while the teachers rely on "sympathy" to mold their charges (*LM* 45). The school aligns itself with the Transcendentalist adage, as expressed by Peabody: "We need schools not for inculcation of knowledge, merely, but for the development of genius. Genius is the peculiar attribute of the soul" (17).

However, rather than being simply a pastoral retreat from the increasingly complex society, Plumfield is supposed to reflect how these new tendencies should provide a buffer and accommodation to the manifold challenges facing the nation from the rupture caused by the Civil War to major transformations of the urban space due to industrialization and immigration. How education might bridge some of these divides and repair some of these problems is highlighted in the chapter of *Little Men* titled "Round the Fire," in which stories become a framing device for an influx of the new national sentiment. In a game of storytelling, Silas, a farmer who helps with the chores around Plumfield, tells a story of his Civil War experience, which not only showcases his manly valor but also suggests a way of reconciliation between the two warring sides and lectures children in the value of forgiveness for the sake of a new community.

That Plumfield should give a yield of new young Americans is clear in the culminating chapter, "Thanksgiving," in which the national ritual, itself invented in the course of the Civil War and so as to act as a salve to the sectional differences, is celebrated with all the appurtenances of a "site of memory" (Nora) for the sake of the present and the future. The

standard elements required to fill the story taking shape in the course of
the nineteenth century, as documented by Van Engen, include the Pil-
grims, the Native Americans, religion, and liberty, and are being peddled
to American children in schools across the nation in order to sustain a
nation-building myth and "create . . . a usable past" (200). We perhaps do
not realize how late an invention the Thanksgiving holiday has been
(Kaplan 592; Van Engen 115–18). The Thanksgiving table of Plumfield,
even though a bit constricted, is still inclusive enough to sit not only the
descendants of the Pilgrims (the Marches) but also first-generation immi-
grants (Fritz Bhaer and his nephews, Emil and Franz) and the formerly
delinquent boys excluded from the social contract, such as Nat and Dan.
They are all embraced in the vision of a new American community of-
fered at the end of the novel, testifying to the success of the educational
experiment: "[T]he good Professor and his wife were taken prisoner by
many arms and half hidden by the bouquet of laughing young faces which
surrounded them, proving that one plant had taken root and blossomed
beautifully in all the little gardens" (*LM* 315).

After a ten-year span, in *Jo's Boys,* Plumfield has advanced from a
modest boarding school predominantly for boys to a full-scale co-
educational college endowed by Laurie, the March sisters' companion
from *Little Women*. There is the lingering Puritan view of the city as a
place of "temptations" (*JB* 11), from which the young people should be
shielded. Especially in the post-Civil War context, as Wishy mentions,
Americans found that they needed to "adjust . . . the old Christian repub-
lican code to the demands of the complex, industrial society" (82). The
difficulty of this enterprise is shown in the relative insularism of all three
of Alcott's novels. In the first one, the women of the March family are
safely ensconced in their family home, a modest but warm shell of pro-
tection from the intrusive outside events, from war to poverty. In *Little
Men*, the boarding school is set apart from the city and set in pastoral sur-
roundings, making it possible, for a while at least, to flee the corruption
and temptations of the city and its complex universe. In *Jo's Boys*, the pas-

toral seclusion is deepened as the boarding school is expanded into a college which is a self-contained system—removed from the confusion of everyday life. The grounds of the college present "the pleasant scene," set in contrast to "the rapid growth of the city" (*JB* 3–4).

Pursuing further my aforementioned concerns, the debate of nature vs. nurture, the issue of gender, and the national element of education, let us delve into some aspects of *Jo's Boys*. Here we should focus again particularly on the figures of Dan, the wild boy, Nat, his counterpart, and Nan and Josie, the tomboys. We notice that the question raised by evolutionary theory and its blank moral purpose begins to insinuate itself into the young people's life plots. Dan returns from years of adventure in South America, followed by the spell of adventurous living in California and among the Natives of the West. It is clear that his wild nature has not changed, since he returns as a dark, brown, strong, and restless man yearning for open space, freedom, and independence. This strong inclination is ascribed by Jo to his (imaginary) Native background, which can be fantasized about in the novel, given that Dan's parentage is unknown. Surrounded by animals (his mustang and a dog) and drawn to nature, Dan cannot stand the strictures of civilization and evinces the untamed nature of an Indian to whom he feels unusually strong affinity and friendship (*JB* 57). He is only partly an Emersonian, more willing to learn from Nature rather than from books.

In the span of time from *Little Men* to *Jo's Boys*, the educational view has further shifted to favor the role of nature ("race," as also transpires in Dan's case). If Dan's lineage is also racially marked, as suggested by the insinuation of his Indigenous origin, the evidence of his Mexican (Spanish, brown) complexion, and by him being cast in the role of Othello (to Bess's Desdemona), he comes close to the dark, ambivalent, and potentially corrupt male characters of Alcott's sensational thrillers here transposed into an educational setting but brimming with subversive potential (Stern x, xii, xvii). However, Alcott has by now given up on the idea that nurture can sway nature, as Jo contends: "We can't change his nature –

only help it to develop in the right direction" (*JB* 50). But from the point of view of a strict Darwinian outlook, there is no warranty for this meliorist expectation (Wishy 95, 112). Indeed, as Dan's plotline evolves, we see his further enmeshments into borderline situations and risky endeavors, just in line with his wild temperament that resents being civilized. Ultimately, due to the defects of his nature, he will not be reintegrated into the pastoral utopia of Plumfield but remains the inveterate rebel. Despite his delinquency, he still continues to draw the strongest sympathy from Jo, thus leading Clark to speculate that Alcott projected on Dan her subversive views (331).

In unpretentious descriptions of day-to-day goings-on at Plumfield, what comes forth is a particular educational tone, perhaps best qualified by Emerson as "Sympathy, the female force," which, as Emerson explains, is "deficient in instant control and the breaking down of resistance, [but] is more subtle and lasting and creative" (Emerson). Jo's boys indeed are governed and disciplined by love, extended by their teachers and substitute parents, Jo and Fritz, who, therefore, as if on Emerson's cue, "cherish mother-wit" (Emerson). Conversely, if boys should be extended female-styled sympathy and instructed by mother-wit, the girls, who have gained at least in Alcott's fictional universe, but increasingly also in post-Civil War America, access to all manner of educational institutions and can now contemplate different professions, need to strike out on their own. Mr. March, the philosophically minded father from *Little Women*, obviously modelled on Bronson Alcott, expounds on his educational precepts and announces that "the woman's hour has struck" (*JB* 23).

As for Jo, her advice to her girl charges echoes her own unorthodox upbringing, "let them run and play and build up good, stout bodies before she talks about careers" (*JB* 32), and she shows her girls running a gamut of options, from pursuing careers in acting or medicine to being involved in romantic and marriage plots. New gender roles for women are being interrogated rather than simply prescribed, so that the question

of the supposed feminine nature remains open. That Alcott's view of gender roles modulates new social trends is illustrated in Nan's character. Erstwhile Naughty Nan now morphs into another feminine type, ambivalently titled "the superfluous [woman]" or "spinster," while Jo allows herself to still second-guess the advantages of marriage to her premarital freedom and independence (*JB* 13). In Nan's trajectory, the novel thus convincingly outlines possible avenues of fulfillment for women who fall out of the traditional feminine roles. By now the text has adopted an intellectual argument that can plausibly endorse and sustain Nan's plea for equality, even within the broader public sphere demarcated by juvenile literature. Her tomboyism "would evolve from a method of raising adolescent girls to a type of training ground for professional adult women" (Abate 48).

Arguably, it was this didactic framework that contained Alcott's more daring endorsement of the feminist ideas of the time. As an example, Alcott takes up the traditionally derogatory feminine types, the superfluous woman and the spinster, and turns them into empowering roles for women (*JB* 186). In another twist, what starts out as the sewing circle for female students under the tutelage of Meg, who, faithful to her character in *Little Women*, fulfills the nurturing feminine role (*JB* 185), soon evolves into a hub of reading and discussing art, "romances, poetry, and plays," "health, religion, politics," and a growing body of feminist ideas (*JB* 186). The point is, however, that Alcott's feminist perspective enthusiastically encompasses a gamut of options for women, from the idea that they should seek a profession and then marry, to the notion that a woman need not marry in order to make herself useful to society, or that for some women, marriage indeed might be the ultimate goal. Her feminism is thus pragmatic and situationist, making allowances for a number of female choices as to how to accomplish their private and social roles.

A further example which distills and meshes the abovementioned gender, Darwinian, and national concerns is the continuing theme of the tomboy as a relatively new cultural type in girl's development observed

from mid-nineteenth century on and taken up in *Jo's Boys* in the next gen-
eration of the March women. Jo's niece, appropriately named Josie, is a
spirited and vibrant girl aspiring to become an actress, the wish that is fi-
nally granted to one of Alcott's heroines without the lingering fear of the
loss of respectability. This is a decided shift from *Little Women*, where act-
ing is prohibited to the respectable Protestant girls except as a domestic
diversion, "the Marches [being] a theatrical family" (*JB* 126). Now, with
religious and social strictures loosening, even the middle-class Marches
may join in. Josie's tomboy energy, just like Nan's, need not be contained
and, rather than undergoing "tomboy taming," Josie is shown in her ef-
forts to enter the profession of her dreams.

Josie is bent on pursuing a career in acting and seems to be perfectly
suited, a true natural, for that profession given her vitality, vigor, energy,
impetuousness, and pluck, all traits that might serve her well on stage.
Acting as a tomboy, Josie elicits concern from her traditionally minded
mother, Mrs. Meg, who endorses the idea that the March family stands
for respectability. Yet trying to contain both Josie's impulse for acting as
well as her elder sister Daisy's illicit affection toward the orphaned and
no-name Nat, Mrs. Meg subtly but persistently trails the line of heredity.
Even in Josie's choice of a career in acting, it is the family "stock" that
matters (*JB* 103). Likewise, Mrs. Meg only reluctantly concedes Nat's right
to court her Daisy after being persuaded so by her more democratically
minded sister Jo: "We Marches, though we have been poor, are, I con-
fess, a little proud of our good family" (*JB* 77).

Pursuing further Nat's case, we see that the source of his problems,
with Mrs. Meg and during his stay and study in Germany, becomes his
pauperism, the notion that his origin and his status as "a charity boy"
might be unrespectable (*JB* 77). Moreover, the hidden familial stock
might not evidence his potential hereditary vices that are still hinted at.
Even as a young adult, he is still prone to his inherent weakness, softness.
Even the sympathetic Jo suspects that he might lack "principles" and
firmness (*JB* 75). Indeed, when he finds himself on his own in the whirl-

wind of social and cultural life of Leipzig, his head is turned and "the weak side of his nature came uppermost here" (*JB* 147). However, given that from its inception the goal of Plumfield was utopian in that it has had "educational" as well as "social and philanthropic" aims (Proehl 43), the novel intends to find a solution to the enduring dilemma by allowing Nat to recoup and get a second chance defying the idea that biology and heredity are his only destiny. This irresolvable issue continues to haunt the text of the novel and the educational issues that it has raised, illustrating the inconclusive nature of the debate (Wishy 95).

The ferment of educational reform contained in Transcendentalism and concentrated in mid- to late-nineteenth century New England resonated deeply for some time and left its trace in practical endeavors by its proponents. It was reflected also in the popular literature for children and young adults, as shown by Louisa May Alcott's works, which thus gave it a more lasting and broader purchase. Still, Alcott, rather than being a code breaker, tended to place her work in the gap opening between the Victorian and post-Victorian age (Strickland 133), between the approaches favoring nature and those promoting nurture, between romantic and sentimentalist and empiricist and disciplinarian models of education, between Transcendentalist spiritualism and Darwinian biologism and materialism, so that we find in her novels of education the reactions to the debates percolating in mid- to late-nineteenth-century American culture. Alcott's perceptive observation of changes makes her educational novels a significant record of American popular culture in the sphere of public education as it was becoming modelled on more modern patterns, closer to our age and sensibility. Offering a curious blend of nineteenth-century Victorian decorum and its more irreverent romantic (Transcendentalist) revision, Alcott's March family trilogy still captures the attention of modern readers grappling with contemporary issues of education.

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Challenging Gender Stereotypes in Holly Black's *The Folk of the Air* Trilogy

Abstract

Holly Black is a contemporary American author of fantastic fiction. Her trilogy entitled *The Folk of the Air* (2018–2019) is a popular young adult fantasy series centering on Jude Duarte, a mortal girl growing up in a magical land called Faerie. It focuses on Jude's quest of ensuring safety for herself and her family, gaining political power, and, ultimately, becoming the Queen. The heroic quest is entangled with the romance plot, with Jude gradually developing a relationship with Cardan Greenbriar, a prince of Faerie. This chapter focuses on Jude and Cardan and analyzes them as a romance heroine and hero, respectively. It compares Jude both to the prototypical romance heroines and to the strong woman characters found in adventure fantasy. Cardan is primarily examined through Pamela Regis's elaboration of the dangerous hero in need of taming and the sentimental hero in need of healing. Finally, keeping in mind the fantasy aspect of the series, the paper turns to Jude's and Cardan's connection to magic and nature to demonstrate to what extent they confirm or subvert gender stereotypes. It argues that Jude and Cardan partially adhere to the typical characteristics of the heroine and the hero archetypes but never fully conform to the stereotypes associated with them.

1. Introduction

Holly Black is a popular contemporary author of fantasy, writing for children, young adults, and adults. In recent years, her most successful work has been *The Folk of the Air* series, whose primary narrative spans a trilogy composed of *The Cruel Prince* (2018), *The Wicked King* (2019), and *The Queen of Nothing* (2019). The plot of the series revolves around Jude, a young human woman who was taken to the mythical land of the faeries (variously called Faerie and Elfhame) as a child. Her initial goal is to make a name for herself, become a knight, and prove to herself and to the faeries that she can do everything they can, if not more. An opportunity to become directly involved in Faerie Court politics soon presents itself, and Jude begins to scheme to put her young faerie adopted brother, Oak, on the throne. In the meantime, she installs Cardan, the titular cruel prince, as her puppet king. Besides the trilogy, the narrative also encompasses *The Lost Sisters* (2018), a companion novella told from Jude's twin's point of view, and *How the King of Elfhame Learned to Hate Stories* (2020), a novella focalized through Cardan, partly shedding light on the key events from his life before and during the plot of the trilogy and partly following up on the conclusion of the trilogy itself.[1] In response to the widespread popularity of the series, Holly Black has published some bonus material in special editions of the novels or disseminated it via her newsletter.

Despite its popularity, no systematic research has been conducted on the series.[2] This paper is, therefore, an attempt to open up a discussion on this series and prompt more research on it. It aims to show that the characterization of Jude and Cardan subverts gender stereotypes. To this end, it analyzes the characters of Jude and Cardan as a romance heroine

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[1] For the sake of brevity, the titles will henceforth be shortened to *CP* (*The Cruel Prince*), *WK* (*The Wicked King*), *QoN* (*The Queen of Nothing*), and *KoE* (*How the King of Elfhame Learned to Hate Stories*) in in-text references.

[2] Previous research on this series seems to be contained to student theses. Namely, Harriet Bentley and Alexandria Gonzales have briefly examined aspects of the series within wider scopes of their respective research.

and hero, respectively. It first compares them to the prototypical characters found in romance narratives, and, in the case of Jude, young adult literature. Finally, considering the fantasy aspect of the series, the analysis focuses on the two characters' connection to magic and nature to determine to what extent they confirm or subvert gender stereotypes.

2. The Strong Woman Character

Stereotypically, a romance heroine is a mosaic of contradictory characteristics. She is "intelligent and strong" (Regis 206), "spirited and independent" but not "pushy or stubborn," "self-reliant" but "sensitive" and "vulnerable," "competent but not entirely certain of her qualities" (Meyer 26). She "must overcome the laws, dangers, and limitations imposed upon" her by society, which ultimately makes her relationship with the hero possible (Regis 29). For the overall plot of *The Folk of the Air*, this means that Jude must fight against the faerie prejudices about human inferiority. As one fey from Cardan's circle explains, "[Humans] are nothing. You barely exist at all. Your only purpose is to create more of your kind before you die some pointless and agonizing death" (*CP* 156). In Faerie, humans can be consorts (valued for their reproductive abilities, significantly stronger than those of the faeries), artisans, if they are skilled, or servants. The last group is often horribly mistreated, made addicted to faerie fruit, the consumption of which creates a false feeling of happiness and contentment, dims the reason, and molds the human's perceptions to a desired outcome—for example, a human can eat dry leaves but believe to be feasting (*CP* 10, 55–56, 111). On a personal level, the prejudice against humans is evident in the fact that the council does not take Jude seriously when she is nominally Cardan's seneschal, even though she is actually the one pulling his strings (*WK* 67, 232). Even when she becomes the Queen, she is still not immediately obeyed (*QoN* 218). Jude, "done with being weak" (*CP* 43), strives to make a better life for herself and to be free. In this endeavor, she displays all the proactive characteristics of the romance heroine. She works hard to better the position of mortals in Faerie; she puts

forward laws that "prevent mortals from being tricked into years-long servitude" (*WK* 59) and laws that ensure plentiful wages for those who do enter work-related bargains (*WK* 154). Her fight against the oppressive system, in which the human race is positioned as the disenfranchised one, aligns Jude with contemporary young adult heroines discussed by Jeffrey A. Brown (174). Her societal reform—in which Cardan also actively participates, as will be shown—exhibits her agency and both creates space for her own identity as a human and allows for equality in a relationship with a faerie.

Some authors have argued that, despite their seeming submission to the dominant hero, romance heroines always have the upper hand, conquering their love interests with their love (Owens Malek 74; Donald 81; Phillips 56). However, the more passive characteristics, mentioned above, still feature prominently in the characterization of a romance heroine. Contrastingly, Jude does not display any of the listed passive characteristics. Passivity and the lack of agency go against her greatest desires: to be powerful and always in control (*CP* 25, 87). The cause of this may be seen in her forced subjection to the faeries, which starts with the murder of her parents at the hands of Madoc, who becomes her adoptive father. Jude's need for control and, by extension, her initial inability to trust Cardan and let go of a part of control in a romantic relationship is one of the major barriers to their relationship. It comes to the forefront in moments of intimacy (*QoN* 201), the only area in which Cardan, in line with the tenets of a typical romance, undoubtedly has the upper hand due to having significantly more experience than Jude (*QoN* 202; Krentz 111). Ultimately, Jude and Cardan work together to overcome the imbalance of power and control, and both fulfil their desires while maintaining agency, without any stereotypical submission finding place in their relationship (*QoN* 204).

The reason for Jude's definitive agency may lie in the duality of her identity, which blends the traits of a typical romance heroine with elements of adventure fantasy, a genre populated by strong women charac-

ters. Driscoll and Heatwole note that "to counter images of girls' passivity . . . all forms of action, including the most violent, are made available to contemporary girl heroes" (277). This type of heroine is often criticized for favoring traditionally masculine characteristics, such as resilience, determination, bravery, resourcefulness, and pride (Driscoll and Heatwole 261). Texts with such heroines imply that it is impossible to be a strong proactive woman while also retaining one's sense of femininity. At first glance, Jude may be characterized as a masculine heroine whose gender performance, "in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self" (Butler 179), subverts the stereotypical expectations of femininity. At the beginning, she wishes to earn her knighthood by honing her swordsmanship instead of simply marrying—she proclaims not to have any interest in marriage (*CP* 10). She longs for "a kind of power, a kind of protection" that knighthood would bring her (*CP* 27). From Madoc, Jude receives a sword made by her real father (*CP* 222), and her chosen profession, as well as the symbolism of the phallic, paternal weapon (Walker 31), place her into a masculine sphere. Due to the fantasy setting, Jude is also allowed to have negative characteristics since "speculative genres make it easier for girls to act violently and remain heroic, as both their skills and the dangers they confront are unchecked by the realism required of other genres" (Driscoll and Heatwole 277). In line with this, Jude's ambition soon grows and transfigures her "into a powerhouse of control and supremacy" (McDowell); she becomes a kingmaker, Cardan's seneschal, and, finally, the High Queen who presents herself as dishonorable (*WK* 296; *QoN* 25) and ruthless (*QoN* 224).

Still, while plainly exhibiting the characteristics traditionally conceptualized as masculine, Jude does not resent more feminine notions. Although she does not strive for marriage and "boys are little more than afterthoughts" to her (McDowell), she is not opposed to love, as is seen in her initial relationship with Locke. Additionally, throughout the series, she enjoys comfortable, practical clothes as well as elaborate dresses, and

she is not against being made up. In line with other young adult heroines (see Brown 172), Jude embraces femininity while also being a strong woman character. Furthermore, she does not criticize Oriana, the character most explicitly aligned with the private, traditionally feminine space, for prioritizing motherhood; on the contrary, she praises Oriana's courage (*CP* 294), admires her for her conversation skills (*CP* 39) and opulent dresses (*CP* 167), and channels her demeanor when she wants to be obeyed, modeling her voice and stance on how Oriana would act in a given situation (*WK* 106). Not only is Jude accepting of the priorities of other women but she also combines both traditionally masculine and feminine aspects of identity into one.

Hence, the *Folk of the Air* novels do not emphasize the masculine characteristics to the detriment of feminine ones, which, according to Ames and Burcon, is a common practice that reinforces gender stereotypes in young adult fiction (51). Jude is able to remain a warrior and simultaneously engage with stereotypically feminine values, balancing and choosing her likes and dislikes on her own. In a similar vein, her marriage to Cardan can be seen as the "plot resolution that reinforces conventional notions of gender" (Brown and St. Clair qtd. in Driscoll and Heatwole 263), but the union is presented in a non-stereotypical way. To contextualize, Jude and Cardan get married in a private ceremony, according to the faerie tradition—since faeries cannot go back on their word and deny their marriage, their vows are binding even without witnesses (*WK* 211). During the ceremony, Cardan pays homage to Jude's human heritage by putting a ring on her finger, although "[t]he exchange of rings is not a faerie ritual" (*WK* 307). What is more, the symbolic exchange of rings has already taken place earlier in the series. First, while she has Cardan imprisoned after Dain's coronation, Jude takes his signet ring and, in privacy, slips it on (*CP* 289), foreshadowing both her marriage to Cardan and her future role as the High Queen. Then, Cardan steals her ruby ring to demonstrate his newly-acquired skills at sleight-of-hand (*WK* 97). This is the very ring he later returns to her during the wedding ceremony, per-

haps to play with the notion that, although she is bound to Cardan now, she is still her own person. In this way, their marriage symbolizes their union as lovers, but also as a union between mortals and faeries.

Seemingly, Jude fulfils the typical female goal in a fantasy narrative, which is to get married and ensure the domestic order via a heterosexual union (Rowe 239; Attebery 52).[3] This corresponds to the drive of the romance heroine to marry in general (Day 157) and to marry a man of a higher social and/or economic status in particular (Talbot 82). Yet, Jude does not give up her own power. She neither loses her individuality and agency nor is she relegated to domesticity. On the contrary, her power only grows with her ascension as the land begins to fill Jude with her magic (*QoN* 134, 257). All of this shows Jude to be a strong character that functions well within the fantasy narrative and demonstrates that women need not be subdued in order for the romantic story to reach a happy conclusion.

3. The Taming and Healing of the Hero

According to Regis, the hero of a love story may take two main forms—a dangerous hero whom the heroine must tame and a sentimental hero whom she must heal (112–14). Cardan is difficult to classify in those terms since he does not fully fit the description of either. On the one hand, and on a smaller scale, he exhibits the elements of the sentimental hero (Regis 114). As a marginalized member of the royal family, he is burdened by a dark past, but, importantly, he is not at fault for the events in his past or his upbringing (Meyer 27). Namely, his behavior has been shaped by an uncaring father and an openly hostile mother, both of whom only pay attention to him when he is acting out (*WK* 77): "Cardan

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[3] Karen E. Rowe and Brian Attebery are both discussing women's roles in fairy tales, but parallels can be drawn with fantasy, since much of the latter's structure and motifs comes from the former (Sullivan III 302). The main female character in a fairy tale predominantly serves merely to liquidate the "lack of a bride" of the male hero and does not have a unique role and identity outside of that (Propp 35, 79–80).

dressed in rags, looking to [his mother] . . . for approval, which only came when he was awful. An abandoned prince, weaned on cat milk and cruelty, left to roam the palace like a little ghost" (*WK* 131). Additionally, Cardan falls out of favor with the Court after he is tricked by his brother Dain, who has schemed to present Cardan as the murderer of a beloved courtier (*QoN* 5–6). In Northrop Frye's terms, Cardan can be named a *pharmakos* or scapegoat, "neither innocent nor guilty":

> He is innocent in the sense that what happens to him is far greater than anything he has done provokes. . . . He is guilty in the sense that he is a member of a guilty society, or living in a world where such injustices are an inescapable part of existence. (41)

Most of all, he is haunted by a prophecy that refers to his inimical rule and hints at his death (*QoN* 2). He must heal from the trauma inflicted by his childhood experiences and accept his own agency within the framework of the prophecy.

On the other hand, Cardan displays some typical characteristics of a romance hero who should be tamed; yet, he is never completely aligned with the stereotype of "the tough, hard-edged, tormented" (Krentz 107–109), "domineering" (Phillips 56) hero on the whole. A typical hero must be in possession of a few more key characteristics regarding his appearance and behavior, which Cardan only partially fulfils. First of all, he is handsome but not "strongly masculine" (Meyer 26), as he should be, since he does not take to traditionally masculine activities, such as sword fighting (*CP* 304–305). In the first novel, Jude still sees him as "too young, too weak, too mean" (*CP* 265). In other words, he is no stereotypical warrior incarnate (Lowell 92). Next, the clothes he wears should display finesse and wealth (Meyer 26; Talbot 81), which Cardan's extravagant raiment does, but the fact that he frequently wears kohl around his eyes and gold or silver powder on his cheekbones breaks away from the stereotypical ideas about make-up being a domain reserved for women. Furthermore, his position as the prince and, later, the High King, portrays him as the man "in charge" (Meyer 27), a "natural, effortless [leader]"

(Donald 82), but his position remains only nominal until Jude frees him of her control.

Questions of control are prominently featured in the novels and can be related to the romance heroine's purpose of taming or healing of the hero. Jude attempts to tame Cardan by binding him with a vow, which can be understood as a drastic example of subjecting the romance hero to the heroine's will. However, this manner of control proves to be fruitless as Cardan only pretends to enjoy the role of a figurehead stripped of agency who does not "worry [his] pretty head about" court politics (*WK* 98). Even in that state, he displays cleverness, becomes skilled at spycraft, and starts acting like a true king (*WK* 60, 111–12, 157). Evidently, Jude is unsuccessful in her attempt to tame him; moreover, unaware of Cardan's past trauma and the still-present prophecy, she does not try to heal him.

Jude's influence on Cardan's healing begins from a distance. He heals and grows the most when he is freed of Jude's direct influence, during her imprisonment in the Undersea.[4] Jude cannot fail to notice the change: "He's become the High King, and he's done it without me" (*WK* 255). In Jude's absence, Cardan reacquires his complete agency and is allowed the space to truly adapt to the royal role, but his changing demeanor is modelled with Jude in mind: "[W]hen you were gone, I had to make a great many decisions, and so much of what I did right was imagining you beside me, Jude, giving me a bunch of ridiculous orders that I nonetheless obeyed" (*WK* 266). While expressing admiration for her and admitting that she has helped him grow, Cardan demonstrates that, in a situation

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[4] Even when he is not with Jude, Cardan is important to the story, not just in the private, romantic sphere but also in the public, political sphere of the novels. He is not a static character but visibly develops. In this, Jude and Cardan's relationship directly opposes the second romantic plotline in the novels—the one between Taryn, Jude's sister, and Locke, a member of the court. Taryn explains: "When I'm with [Locke], I feel like the hero of the story. Of *my* story. It's when he's not there that things don't feel right" and Jude ponders: "I could point out that Taryn seems to be the one making up the story, casting Locke in the role of the protagonist and herself as the romantic interest who disappears when she's not on the page" (*WK* 87). This metatextual reference to romance stories illustrates Black's criticism on writing a romantic relationship in which only one character has agency.

like his, another's direct meddling and attempts at taming and healing can only achieve so much. Although Jude initially had a good reason not to trust Cardan and to force him into obedience, such an imbalance of power is unhealthy in any relationship, even if Jude sees their power balance as careening back and forth (*WK* 302) and believes she has not completely robbed Cardan of his free will (*CP* 320). For Cardan's change to be organic, he has to heal—with her implied help but largely on his own—and not be tamed. Instead of being tamed, he grows into more power, and it is magic that is his greatest weapon in fighting for Jude and trying to rescue her (*QoN* 76). He partially becomes the dangerous man, whose taming would place his strength at the heroine's disposal (Phillips 58)—for example, he looks "ready to tear down the whole apartment complex to find [Jude]" (*QoN* 155). Still, he does not mind being saved by Jude and acknowledges that she is "forever getting [him] out of scrapes" (*KoE* 166), yet again escaping any firm alignment with traditional gender roles and complicating his "relationship to traditional masculinity in response to" Jude's "own gender performance" (Seymour 628).

In fact, Cardan is shown to be milder and less ruthless than Jude. When he is temporarily gone from court and it is up to Jude to make political moves, she laments the fact that Cardan is not there "to stay [her] hand" (*QoN* 224). She never completely abandons her aggression, while Cardan never becomes the stereotypically dominant hero, either in their relationship or with regard to ruling. However, they do change significantly over the course of the novels, as they are required to overcome the barriers and develop a relationship; they hold onto their agency, never completely taming each other, but they do help the healing process along. As has been mentioned, Jude learns to trust and love openly, while Cardan overcomes his trauma and grows into his royal role. Jude and Cardan are, then, "willing to improve each other, be improved by one another, and . . . extend that mutual improvement to a larger community" (Shaffer 66), which results in the betterment of the position of humans in society—a reform possible only if the two work together to achieve it. The so-

ciety is now inclusive to humans—this process has been started with Jude improving the position of mortals in Faerie (*WK* 59) and is symbolically represented by a new Faerie crown being created by a trio of skilled craftsmen, one of whom is a mortal man (*QoN* 293). Furthermore, the very way of ruling has been changed, as Cardan has destroyed the old crown, whose magical properties compelled loyalty in Faerie's sworn subjects; Cardan releases the faeries from being bound to the crown, inviting them instead to follow the rulers themselves according to their own free will (*QoN* 216). Moreover, from the remnants of the broken throne, he magically creates two thrones, one for himself and one for Jude (*QoN* 284), making space for equality, not just between them as healed romantic partners and co-rulers but also between faeries and humans.

4. Gender, Magic, and Nature

Besides Jude's and Cardan's plethora of skills and resourcefulness, another important component of their power and a value that works to transform the community is magic. Although Jude is given some magical abilities by the land upon becoming queen, for the majority of the narrative, this magic is contained to Cardan. His magic fully emerges when he becomes the High King. Since "Faerie rulers are tied to the land" and "are the lifeblood and the beating heart of their realm" (*WK* 8), his magical abilities are explicitly connected to nature. In this, Black subverts the stereotype that the women are those who are inherently tied to nature—namely, women have long been conceptually linked with nature and procreation, coded as passive and juxtaposed with the masculine desire to cultivate and take advantage of the environment (Ortner 73–74; Nikolajeva 132). The narrative negates this notion by having Cardan be the one connected to the elements. After his ascension, "the isles are different. Storms come in faster. Colors are a bit more vivid, smells are sharper" (*WK* 66). The greatest display of his abilities occurs when he raises a new island from the sea floor (*WK* 313–14). What is more, the water, which is "begin[ning] to churn" (*WK* 313) during Cardan's act of creation, calls

forth the symbolic images of birth (Frye 198). Accordingly, Cardan is the one allegorically imbued with the power of procreation.

On a more literal level, it is actually the faeries who rarely get children, which is why humans, who are more fertile, are often favored as sexual partners. Cardan's marriage to Jude, therefore, potentially conjoins the symbolic fertility with the literal one. No mention is ever made to any future progeny or the plans to beget them, possibly due to the characters' ages and the existence of Oak, Cardan's nephew and Jude's adopted brother, who removes the need for the hasty creation of a royal heir, so Jude is never diminished by "an imagination of future motherhood" (Driscoll and Heatwole 278). However, Jude's humanity does suggest levels of fertility higher than are usual in Faerie, mirrored already in the pregnancy of Jude's twin, Taryn (*QoN* 50).

Jude's connection with the natural world is illustrated in the rebirth of Cardan, in which she is of pivotal importance. Cardan has been cursed and turned into a giant serpent. Interestingly, snakes had long been related to women and signified female power; they were masculinized as a symbol only later, in the Biblical tradition (Creed 64; Walker 387–88). The snake reference again upsets the image of Cardan as a masculine hero. Playing the role of the executioner, Jude slays the proverbial dragon and beheads Cardan's serpent form—at the same time, she actually allows his rebirth as he emerges from the corpse unscathed in what is clearly Black's version of the myth of the cyclical rebirth of the fertility god or goddess (Frye 160).[5] Thus, Jude becomes both the murderer and the symbolic mother, which is underlined in the violent image of the murder's immediate aftermath, evoking the connection between blood and giving birth: "I am shaking all over, shaking so hard that I fall to my knees in the blackened grass, in the carpet of blood" (*QoN* 279). Building

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[5] Cardan himself has previously made an unconcealed reference to the myth. Commenting on his then-reluctant and temporary occupation of the throne that Jude has intended for Oak, he says: "I am the Corn King, after all, to be sacrificed so little Oak can take my place in the spring" (*WK* 98).

up on this connection, it can also be seen how Cardan, stepping out of the corpse "naked and covered in blood" (*QoN* 280), further strengthens the implication of a rebirth.[6] This iteration of the dragon-killing theme, one of the main stages of a quest narrative, actually rids Faerie of the true monster, "the sterility of the land itself" (Frye 189), since the monstrous serpent has been poisoning the land (*QoN* 231). Therefore, this final battle confirms that the ultimate goal of quest narratives found in fantasy fiction is "the victory of fertility over the waste land" (Frye 193). Nevertheless, Frye's view of fertility as "the union of male and female" (193) should not be applied to Black's trilogy on the literal level, referring to procreation and its clear distinction between men and women. Any gender stereotyping in this aspect is made impossible by Jude's gender performance, her dual role of the mother and the murderer, and Cardan's strong link to the images traditionally ascribed to women, with both Jude and Cardan exhibiting a degree of connection with nature.

5. Conclusion

With Holly Black's *The Folk of the Air* trilogy being so popular, it is important to open up an academic discussion of it. Popular fiction has the power to both reflect and shape social values, and, in the period when gender identity remains a topic of much interest, analyzing one such series offers a precious insight into values and expectations upheld by its readership. This chapter was specifically interested in investigating if this young adult series manages to move beyond the gender stereotypes frequently found in genre fiction. It has been determined that *The Folk of the Air* depicts characters that, rather than completely adhering to the typical characteristics of the romance heroine and hero (as defined primarily by Pamela Regis), can rightfully be called complex. The analysis has shown

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[6] This moment confirms Cardan's status as the High King and resolves the prophecy, as he rises out of his own spilled blood. His nakedness reminds the audience of the traditional Faerie coronation, in which the heir is unclothed and "the nakedness becomes . . . some sign of power" (*CP* 235).

that the protagonists of the series, Jude and Cardan, only partially adhere to the typical characteristics of the romance heroine and hero. Jude is a strong, intelligent, and independent heroine; even when she experiences weakness, such as the vulnerability she feels in regard to her opening up to Cardan, she works through it. At the same time, her character complies with the propositions of a typical strong woman character of the fantasy genre: she is determined, resourceful, and proud. In addition, she is shown to be able to both wield the traditionally masculine weapons and employ magical abilities. Yet, even though she exhibits some of the stereotypically masculine personality aspects, she also counters these aspects by not abandoning her feminine traits and the respect for femininity in women that surround her. On the other hand, Cardan, being powerful and tormented, unites the qualities of both a dangerous and a sentimental hero but never conforms to a stereotypical view of masculinity. The greatest differences between Cardan and a traditional hero lie in the former's relatively physically weak constitution and in his affinity for wearing make-up, which is considered a feminine inclination. Rather than being tied to his physical abilities, his strength relies on magic and nature, aligning him with the stereotypes of the feminine. Nature has long been linked with women due to the correlation between natural processes and women's reproductive abilities, so when Cardan uses his nature magic to symbolically give birth to an island, his act of creation associates him with the feminine domain. In other words, *The Folk of the Air* trilogy prevents the solidification of stereotypes. By placing its heroine and hero in mortal peril and demonstrating their need for mutual help, Holly Black's series explores the topics of power imbalance in relationships and ultimately shows that equality is required in any successful relationship—in romantic ones as well as in the wider workings of society itself.

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3

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Reconceptualizing the Ill Body: Laurie Brooks's Jack McCall as the Hero of the Romantic Mode

Abstract

This chapter considers the idea of illness as depicted in Laurie Brooks's play *The Secret of Courage* (2019), an adaptation of the short story "Imaginary Friends" (1991), written by Terry Brooks, which illustrates the experience of a teenager, Jack McCall, who is diagnosed with cancer. The plot takes an unexpected turn when, following his diagnosis, the protagonist enters a magical world, a utopia which represents a means of reestablishing his identity and overcoming his fears, including illness. On his journey, Jack encounters mysterious creatures, such as trolls, elves, and ghosts, as well as an evil demon with whom he fights to save the magical realm. The paper employs Northrop Frye's theory of myths established in his book *Anatomy of Criticism* to show that Brooks's play follows six phases of romance: the birth of the hero, the innocent youth, the quest, the maintaining of the integrity of the innocent world against the assault of experience, an idyllic view of the experience from above, and the end of a movement from active to contemplative adventure. Drawing upon Frye's theoretical reflections, the paper aims to prove that Brooks offers a new paradigm of observing illness by portraying Jack McCall as the hero of the romantic mode, as opposed to earlier stereotypical literary representations of illness which equate the condition with inability.

Keywords: Theory of myths, mythos of summer, romance, *The Secret of Courage*, Laurie Brooks

1. Introduction: Narrating Illness

Laurie Brooks's play *The Secret of Courage* (2019) is a part of a growing body of American mainstream drama which destigmatizes illness and disrupts the ideal of a healthy body, which emerged at the dawn of industrialization, when humankind was subjected to production standards grounded on "statistical projections of what an average worker should 'normally' accomplish within a given set of parameters" (De Poy and Gilson 23). In a society of evolving market demands, health became a decisive factor in exercising economic and social freedom, a prerequisite for entering the labor market, and an indicator of one's ability to actively participate in society. Ostracism of the ill subject was underpinned by pseudo-scientific premises which associated illness with wickedness. For centuries, poor health had been regarded as a consequence of a moral lapse and "a manifestation of human original sin and individual wrongdoing" (Herndl 774). This fact mirrored in literature, which reinforced the polarization of human bodies into able and disabled, stereotyping the latter as undesirable and the characters who embody afflicted subjects as either villains or victims.[1] In line with the scientific

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[1] The centuries-old practice of treating "physical deformity, chronic illness, or any visible defect" as a symbol of "evil and malevolent nature and monstrous behaviour" (Dahl) spawned countless villains within the Western literary canon, such as Shakespeare's Richard of Gloucester (*Richard III*, 1597), Melville's Captain Ahab (*Moby Dick*, 1851), Barrie's Captain Hook (*Peter Pan or the Boy Who Wouldn't Grow Up*, 1904), or Maugham's Philip Carey (*Of Human Bondage*, 1915). On the other hand, numerous afflicted characters, like Hugo's Quasimodo (*The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*, 1831), Dickens's Timothy Cratchit (*A Christmas Carol*, 1843), Alcott's Beth March (*Little Women*, 1868), and Pomerance's John Merrick (*The Elephant Man*, 1979), were simultaneously portrayed through the lens of martyrdom, which generated the ailed victim trope, equally harmful for people affected by such medical conditions. The polarization of the ailed subject ceased in the second half of the twentieth century, when the focus shifted to protecting the rights of marginalized members of society due to an increase in health problems that followed the Second World War, as evidenced by Dore

progress of the late nineteenth century, notably, the development of the germ theory, which established a link between diseases and pathogens, contemporary narratives discharged the practice of portraying ill subjects as deviant figures, which, on the other hand, gave rise to the trope of "the passive patient attended by the heroic physician" (Herndl 773). In the light of the above, scholarly endeavors have been made to explore the representations of maladies in literature in order to clarify both their metaphoric uses (Sontag 1978; Mitchell 2015; Wohlmann 2022) and their impact on the reader's sense of self and his/her community. Scholars agree that certain ailments still carry a stigma as a result of insufficient medical advances, that is, a partial understanding of the nature of the condition that would provide the patient with effective treatment. For instance, "the fantasies inspired by TB in the last century, by cancer now, are responses to a disease thought to be intractable and capricious—that is, a disease not understood—in an era in which medicine's central premise is that all diseases can be cured" (Sontag 5).

In order to challenge the stigma associated with certain illnesses, this chapter focuses on the unconventional portrayal of illness in Laurie Brooks's play *The Secret of Courage*, a dramatization of Terry Brooks's short story *Imaginary Friends* (1991), which tells the story of a teenager diagnosed with acute cancer of the blood and bone marrow. Although writers of commercial fiction have progressively sentimentalized the idea of leukemia by depicting it "as the romantic disease which cuts off a young life" (Sontag 18), Brooks's adaptation calls for a different reading. The play opens with the McCall family gathered at Roosevelt Junior High to celebrate Jack's receipt of the so-called Susan G. Levitt Award for excellence in creative writing, granted annually to the most talented eighth-grader of the generation. The idyll is disrupted following Jack's fourteenth birthday celebration, when the family learns that the boy has leukemia. The plot takes an unexpected turn when, following his

Schary's *Sunrise at Campobello* (1958), William Gibson's *The Miracle Worker* (1959), and Leonard Gershe's *Butterflies Are Free* (1969).

diagnosis, the protagonist enters a magical forest, a utopian realm in which he discovers his inner strength and reestablishes his identity. On his quest to defeat the illness, Jack demonstrates prodigious feats of bravery and encounters mysterious creatures, such as trolls, elves, and ghosts, including an evil demon with whom he fights to save the enchanted land. Since it illustrates events and characters defying natural laws, *The Secret of Courage* can be regarded as a work of fantasy, a genre which "feature[s] an idealizing quest narrative that often pits the hero against society, and in which his progress is continuously undone by obstacles and delays" (Fuchs 128). Protagonists of this genre are extraordinary individuals of superior power, often stimulated by magic, on a mission to fight evil and protect both their own integrity and that of the community to which they belong. As the supernatural forms its core, fantasy overlaps with other literary traditions, genres, and modes of writing. Contemporary fantasy writing, for example, "preserves many of the appealing surfaces and philosophical depths of the romance tradition while creating new structural and thematic dimensions of its own" (Mathews 472). This paper relies on Northrop Frye's theory of myths to show that Brooks's play mirrors six phases of the mythos of summer: the birth of the hero, the innocent youth, the quest, the maintaining of the integrity of the innocent world against the assault of experience, an idyllic view of the experience from above, and the end of a movement from active to contemplative adventure. By analyzing *The Secret of Courage* through the lens of Frye's myth theory, the paper aims to prove that Brooks offers a new paradigm of depicting illness by portraying Jack McCall as the hero of the romantic mode, as opposed to the previous stereotypical literary representations of illness which equate the condition with inability.

2. The Mode of Romance

In her book *Romance* (2004), Barbara Fuchs describes romance as "a notoriously slippery category" because critics cannot unanimously agree

whether it is a genre or a mode (1). This paper relies on theoretical reflections of the literary critic and theorist Northrop Frye, who in the first essay of his book *Anatomy of Criticism* (2000), titled "Historical Criticism: Theory of Modes," provides an overview of the categories, or modes, into which literary works are classified, basing his division on "the hero's power of action, which may be greater than ours, less or roughly the same" (Frye 33). Frye's classification of literary modes bears a strong resemblance to Aristotle's canonical dramatic theory elaborated in the *Poetics*, in which the Greek philosopher divided works of fiction into different genres based on the protagonist's virtuousness, claiming that fictions depict characters who are either better, worse, or on the same level as us. Following in the footsteps of Aristotle, Frye established his categorization of narrative modes, basing his division on the hero's power of action rather than a moral paradigm and, accordingly, distinguished myth, romance, the high mimetic mode, the low mimetic mode, and the ironic mode while describing the hero of romance as follows:

> If superior in degree to other men and to his environment, the hero is the typical hero of romance, whose actions are marvelous but who is himself identified as a human being. The hero of romance moves in a world in which the ordinary laws of nature are slightly suspended: prodigies of courage and endurance, unnatural to us, are natural to him, and enchanted weapons, talking animals, terrifying ogres and witches, and talismans of miraculous power violate no rule of probability once the postulates of romance have been established. (Frye 33)

The aforementioned modes of narration have varied in popularity throughout history in parallel with the shift of literary epochs, with romance experiencing its expansion during the medieval era in the form of secular chivalric narratives and miracle plays celebrating saintly figures, "both lean[ing] heavily on miraculous violations of natural law for their interest as stories" (Frye 34). Even though the dominance of the romantic mode ceased with the emergence of the Renaissance, when the figure of the courtier was portrayed through the lens of the high mimetic

mode, romance has continued its tradition in an unaltered form until today, without deviating from its original pattern: "Initial equilibrium is shattered by the call to adventure; the hero crosses the threshold into a special world; he or she struggles with various adversaries and problems, and returns to the normal world, more mature and more firmly integrated into his or her society, usually as some kind of leader" (Hume 488). With this premise in mind, the following sub-chapters will try to ascertain that the protagonist of the contemporary drama *The Secret of Courage* is quintessentially a romance hero, "superior in degree" to his environment and The Demon, a wicked, inexorable force residing in the Sinnissippi Park serving as an analogy for a vicious illness that has to be tamed.

As Robert Louis Stevenson suggests in his essay "A Gossip on Romance," romantic formulas seem to run the risk of creating a gap between the reader and the protagonist since, due to the hero's superiority, there is no possibility of complete identification between the two (1925). According to Stevenson, through in-depth reading, the consumer of a literary piece develops a critical attitude and distances him/herself from the characters, growing more aware of the disparity in their degree of power: "Now in character-studies the pleasure that we take is critical; we watch, we approve, we smile at incongruities, we are moved to sudden heats of sympathy with courage, suffering or virtue. But the characters are still themselves, they are not us; the more clearly they are depicted, the more widely do they stand away from us" (113). Despite the disparity between the reader and the romantic hero, the reader is drawn to this type of literature as it often reveals his/her innermost desires or fears. It thus follows that it is not the romantic hero who attracts the reader's attention but the quest around which the piece is centered, an adventure which frequently resembles the realization of the reader's dream: "It is not character but incident that woos us out of our reserve. Something happens as we desire to have it happen to ourselves; some situation, that we have long dallied with in fancy, is realized in the story with enticing and appropriate details" (Stevenson 113). As noted

earlier, fiction of the romantic mode also reveals the other side of the subconscious, including the fears and anxieties agitating the writer and his/her contemporaries, which corresponds to Vladimir Biti's view of literature: "Since literature, even through the play of imagination, must express some experience of reality—otherwise it would be completely incommunicative—the concept of reality must consequently be understood as a common experience, which means that what will be valid as a reality must be established, among other things, precisely by creative imagination" (53, translation my own). For instance, in Brooks's adaptation "the science-fiction images about cancer (a disease that comes from deadly rays, and is treated by deadly rays) echo the collective nightmare" (Sontag 68) as Jack McCall is not merely plagued by the ailment itself but also by the anticipation of the medical treatment he is about to receive and the damage it may cause to his body: "JACK. I keep thinking that if I go into the hospital, it'll be like it was with Uncle Frank. I'll never get out. They'll blast me with chemo and radiation and all my hair will fall out and then I'll die" (Brooks 25).

3. Frye's Taxonomy of Myths and Mythoi

In his *Anatomy of Criticism*, Northrop Frye aims to systematize the structural principles of the literary canon and provide "a grammar of literary archetypes" (Frye 135) by relying on the pillars of Western heritage, which are Biblical symbolism and mythology. On that account, he establishes a classification of poetic imagery and lists apocalyptic, demonic, and analogical images as three types of images that are alternately employed in the romantic mode, depending on the author's propensities and the requirements imposed by the genre of a literary work in question. Apocalyptic and demonic images represent the dichotomy of the afterlife, reflected in the contrasting worlds of heaven and hell, while analogical imagery "presents a human counterpart of the apocalyptic world which we may call the analogy of innocence" (Frye 151). The latter forms the basis of the romantic mode as it depicts an idealized world

remote from the mundane routines of ordinary life, populated by valiant heroes, charming heroines, devoted helpers, and sinister villains. Notable representatives of such a world are the characters of children, as they embody the virtue of innocence closely associated with romance. Along the same line, the hero of *The Secret of Courage* is a teenager who journeys into the magical realm in order to overcome a health crisis. On his journey, he is joined by guardians from the supernatural sphere, whose task is to preserve the uncorrupted nature of the endangered child. According to Frye, "In the analogy of innocence the divine or spiritual figures are usually parental, wise old men with magical powers . . . or friendly guardian spirits" (151). The figure of the sage protector of innocence in Brooks's play takes the form of enchanted animals, imaginary beings, and anthropomorphic spirits and forces; thus, a barn owl and an elf accompany Jack McCall throughout his quest, even during the transitions between reality and fantasy. In addition, the relationship between human and supernatural beings in romance is reciprocal—in their endeavors, the heroes are assisted by the creatures from the supernatural stratum, who, as the legitimate inhabitants of the world of romance, equip humans traveling through their realm with powers necessary to restore balance and combat the evil forces residing in their kingdom.

Frye's narrative modes significantly differ in terms of their correspondence to real-life events, ranging from completely abstract to pronouncedly realistic ones. For instance, the world of myth is "an abstract or purely literary world of fictional and thematic design, unaffected by canons of plausible adaptation to familiar experience" (Frye 136), and is thus unattainable by human beings, whilst the low mimetic mode is essentially an artistic mimesis of real life. Frye studies myth within the framework of storytelling and points out that, in a literary narrative, the myth manifests as "the imitation of actions near or at the conceivable limits of desire" (136). Whilst myth is governed by

metaphorical logic and realism by the principle of verisimilitude, romance
represents an in-between category:

> Myth, then, is one extreme of literary design; naturalism is the ot-
> her, and in between lies the whole area of romance, using that
> term to mean, not the historical mode of the first essay, but the
> tendency, noted later in the same essay, to displace myth in a hu-
> man direction and yet, in contrast to "realism," to conventionalize
> content in an idealized direction. The central principle of displa-
> cement is that what can be metaphorically identified in a myth can
> only be linked in romance by some form of simile: analogy, signi-
> ficant association, incidental accompanying imagery, and the like.
> (Frye 136–37)

Frye distinguishes *myth* from *mythos*, a Greek term he appropriated from
Aristotle to denote literary formulas or generic plots found in a text.
Mythoi are "narrative categories of literature broader than, or logically
prior to, the ordinary literary genres" (Frye 162). Since each mythos
consists of six phases occurring in a cyclical pattern, Frye describes the
aforementioned narrative categories using the analogy to the rotary
movement of the divine, fire, human, animal, vegetable, poetic, and water
worlds, which unfolds in four phases. Namely, there are four seasons of
the year (winter, spring, summer, and autumn), four parts of the day
(morning, noon, evening, and night), four types of water movement (rain,
fountains, rivers, and sea or snow), four periods of life (youth, maturity,
age, and death), and so on (Frye 160). As shown above, knowledge of
cosmology is vital for understanding literature since, according to Frye,
there is an inherent connection between the natural order of the universe
and poetry, meaning that both cosmology and mythology are concerned
with the creation of the universe. Since cosmology forms the nucleus of
mythopoetic thinking, the previously listed cyclical symbols can as well be
interpreted as poetic images. Frye, therefore, establishes a link between
the above-mentioned narrative categories and four phases of cyclical
movement of the natural world and delineates "four main types of
mythical movement": comedy or the mythos of spring, romance or the

mythos of summer, tragedy or the mythos of autumn, as well as irony and satire as the mythoi of winter (Frye 162).

4. *The Secret of Courage* as the Mythos of Summer

The essence of the mythos of summer is a heroic exploit comprised of a series of smaller adventures, indicated by the six autonomous phases of the mode which "form a cyclical sequence in a romantic hero's life" (Frye 198). The initial phase focuses on the myth of the hero's birth, which is typically accompanied by curious events shrouded in secrecy or even the unknown, thus leaving the hero's true ancestry obscured. The young protagonist of romance is, therefore, usually "of mysterious origin, his true paternity is often concealed" (Frye 199). In this regard, Laurie Brooks demonstrates consistency with the mode of romance by simultaneously providing a detailed insight into Jack McCall's life and yet omitting any references to his father. In fictional works that belong to this mode, "the true father is sometimes represented by a wise old man" (Frye 199); likewise, the void created by the absence of the biological father in *The Secret of Courage* is filled by Uncle Frank, who mirrors the paternal figure as he helps both Jack's mother, Amanda, raise the boy and Jack fight the illness. The bond they share becomes evident in the subsequent stages of the play, after Frank's death caused by leukemia, which not only proves that there is "a hereditary factor in cancer" (Sontag 38) but also demonstrates that there is a special nexus between the two since the boy is the only one able to communicate with the spirit of the deceased uncle:

> UNCLE FRANK. It's good to see you.
>
> JACK. But you're. . . .
>
> UNCLE FRANK. Dead? Yep. Couldn't help it, buddy. Don't go thinking I wanted to leave you because I didn't. (Brooks 16)

Set in a pastoral world secluded from the influences of modern civilization, "generally a pleasant wooded landscape, full of glades, shaded

valleys, [and] murmuring brooks" (Frye 200), the second phase of romance dwells upon the idea of innocent youth. The images of bucolic scenery, unspoiled nature, and ethereal atmosphere coincide with the idea of an earthly paradise, i.e., the Garden of Eden, before the Fall as evident from the setting of Brooks's play. The analogy to the Biblical Garden is reflected in a tree that forms the nucleus of the Sinnissippi Park and signifies the dual nature of the tree of life found in the Old Testament, since it is the residence of the initially hidden demon: "The entire space is transformed into the park, using lights, sound, and set pieces. The audience feels as if they are [sic] surrounded by the flora and fauna of the woods. In the space is a massive tree, its branches mottled white as bone, crooked, seemingly dead. . . . Throughout the performance, the low sounds of the park—birds, insects, the wind in the trees—are heard" (Brooks 7). The Arcadian ambience mirrors the carefree childhood and the blithe spirit of the youthful hero and his entourage prior to the assault of the enemy, and it is usually amplified by the impetuses of first love, both friendly and platonic: "The archetype of erotic innocence is less commonly marriage than the kind of 'chaste' love that precedes marriage; the love of brother for sister, or of two boys for each other" (Frye 200). In the light of Frye's considerations, the most prominent exemplar of the innocent love in *The Secret of Courage* is Jack and Waddy's friendship but also Jack's subtle romantic interest in Joanna Farrell. The pastoral phase usually ends with an event that marks a break with an insouciant childhood, which is often anticipated, albeit rather subtly, earlier in the text. The omen, or a portent, is a "device of making a whole story the fulfilment of a prophecy given at the beginning" (Frye 139), and it implies the idea of inevitable fate. The same device is used in *The Secret of Courage* in the scene when, on the day of Uncle Frank's death, Jack experiences a headache and faints after being "distracted by the sound of wings in flight" and "the shadow of a huge owl" (Brooks 10), which foreshadows his later medical condition.

Although the archetypal pastoral phase of romance portrays the hero living in a world of "desirable law" (Frye 200), as evident from Waddy's assertion that his and Jack's priorities are "the important things in life—food, girls, and *Shadow of Darkness*—in that order" (Brooks 24), youthful characters at this stage contemplate the world of lower order, symbolized by the video game *Shadow of Darkness* and role-playing games that foreshadow the quest occurring later in the play: "Waddy grabs Jack's writing award and holds it like a shield. Waddy brandishes Jack's baseball bat like a sword. An imaginary slaughter ensues" (Brooks 21). Since departure into the imaginary realm is often preceded by daydreaming about the world of unconventional order in the safety of one's home, the romantic fiction writer introduces the reader to "a kind of prison-Paradise or unborn world from which the central characters long to escape to a lower world" (Frye 200), which is usually a childhood home. In such a metaphorical dungeon, figurative prisoners are ensured all the comforts but are denied the right to independent decision-making, since the young hero is "still overshadowed by parents" and usually "dominated by his mother" (Frye 200) in this phase. Likewise, after being visited by Dr. Mueller and informed about her son's diagnosis, Jack's mother, Amanda, refuses to tell Jack that he is ill right away with the aim of preserving his innocence, even though this approach is discouraged by the physician: "DR. MUELLER. That's not a good idea. Jack's fourteen now, and kids are smart. They always know more than we think. Best to be straightforward with this kind of information" (Brooks 14).

Since the mode of romance is marked by a perpetually nostalgic mood, the pastoral phase is often recalled as a "lost happy time or Golden Age" (Frye 200) as it addresses the serene period that precedes the complexities of growing up. To emphasize the contrast between the effects of pernicious ailment and the idyllic childhood that preceded it, Brooks interrupts the action of the play with episodes that highlight the most memorable moments from the McCall family's past, indicated by sudden flashes of camera, such as "Jack, holding a plaque" (7), "Jack,

Uncle Frank, and Waddy sing[ing] last lines of 'Happy Birthday' to Jack"
(8), and a photo showing "Uncle Frank, Waddy and Jack hav[ing] baseball
mits" (9).

According to Frye, the third phase of romance involves the theme of
quest, which refers to a number of smaller adventures paving the way for
the ultimate or decisive battle. The romance "tends to limit itself to a
sequence of minor adventures leading up to a major or climacteric
adventure, usually announced from the beginning, the completion of
which rounds off the story. We may call this major adventure, the
element that gives literary form to the romance, the quest" (Frye 186–87).
Jack's expedition to the enchanted Sinnissippi Park appertains to the
romantic quest described by Frye, given that it consists of a series of
successful and failed endeavors that lead the hero towards the
antagonistic Demon, the most notable one being the pursuit of an owl
feather that imparts courage, which demonstrates that "power is the
prerequisite of justice" (Frye 201) in the mode of romance. The hero and
his enemy usually epitomize the good/evil dichotomy by appearing as
two opposite poles of morality. More precisely, the protagonist is
ascribed messianic characteristics and the antagonist is vested with
demonic features. The hero is "analogous to the mythical Messiah or
deliverer who comes from an upper world, and his enemy is analogous to
the demonic powers of a lower world" (Frye 187). Since Frye discusses
literature within the framework of cosmology, he points out that the
protagonist and the antagonist of romance can be analyzed through the
prism of the rotary movement of nature, as the opposite sides of natural
cycles: "The enemy is associated with winter, darkness, confusion,
sterility, moribund life, and old age, and the hero with spring, dawn,
order, fertility, vigor, and youth" (Frye 187–88). Being "young and full of
magic" (Brooks 43), Jack McCall can be seen as the personification of
virtue, whilst "an evil, unrelenting force" (Brooks 32) such as The
Demon incarnates "the world of the nightmare and the scapegoat, of
bondage and pain and confusion" (Frye 147). The polarity of the hero

and his enemy is highlighted, however, in the subsequent phase of romance, which portrays the anticipated conflict. Whilst Jack prepares a shield and a sword for the battle, that is, the writing award and the baseball bat Uncle Frank gave him to protect himself, The Demon tries to trick Jack to avoid the fight. He does so by alternating his form and voice in order to resemble people close to Jack: "Its voices constantly change and, during the following, include among anonymous voices, Dr. Mueller, Mom, Waddy, Pick, Uncle Frank and Jack himself" (Brooks 48), telling him he will not succeed.

Cancer imagery has been rather frequently employed in contemporary fiction to express "fairly complex feelings about strength and weakness"; thus, whatever seems "ruthless, implacable, predatory, could be analogized to cancer" (Sontag 61). Just like Jack's illness, "The Demon [symbolizing cancer] has to be locked away, and that takes a special kind of magic" (Brooks 32), a secret indicated in the title of the play. Moreover, the symbolism behind the demonic figure is the uncorseted power of nature superimposed on human beings and manifested in conditions such as illness that, in its more severe form, is beyond human control. As Sontag points out, demonic characters found in fictions can always be interpreted as some kind of overwhelming force: "Cancer was never viewed other than as a scourge; it was, metaphorically, the barbarian within" (16). Just as the scenery in the pastoral phase mirrors the temper of the young hero, so does the setting in the quest phase reflect the enemy that dwells in it. Inhabited by the figure of the tyrant-leader, "the vegetable world [of the demonic realm] is a sinister forest" (Frye 149), which is why Brooks again evokes Biblical references connected to the wasteland to describe the world of lower order controlled by the ignoble Demon. Echoing Frye's observation that "In the Bible the waste land appears in its concrete universal form in the tree of death, the tree of forbidden knowledge in Genesis, the barren fig-tree of the Gospels, and the cross" (Frye 149), the landscape of the Sinnissippi Park during the quest phase is characterized by sparse flora,

uncultivated land, and a barren tree analogous to the tree of death, described in the play with adjectives such as "dead" and "white as bone" (Brooks 51).

According to Frye's typology, characters involved in the romantic hero's ventures are divided into either helpers or detractors, that is, those who are "either for or against the quest" (Frye 195). They are subjected to black and white characterization; namely, the characters helping the hero are idealized and depicted as "as simply gallant or pure," and those hindering the progress of the quest "are caricatured as simply villainous or cowardly" (Frye 195). Besides human helpers, the mode of romance sees supernatural beings as an equally legitimate entourage of the hero, as evidenced by the barn owl Deirdre, the ghost of the Warrior Spirit, and the guardian elf Pick, who prevents the evil troll Wartag from hurting Jack upon his arrival at the enchanted park: "Wartag tries to run, dragging Jack behind him. Pick brings the magic again, stronger, closer. Deirdre screeches. Wartag, wounded, derrière smoking from the lightning strike, drops Jack" (Brooks 29). On the other hand, Deirdre represents a tacit companion, as indicated by the shadow of an owl that accompanies Jack both in the real and the magical world. "The faithful companion or shadow figure of the hero has his opposite in the traitor" (Frye 196), a moral antithesis to the guardian figures represented by the sinister troll Wartag, who wants to set The Demon free. During the quest phase, characters who support but do not actively participate in the quest also emerge, usually in the form of an "old wise man . . . who affects the action he watches over" (Frye 195). In Brooks's play, this character is represented by Uncle Frank, who supports Jack during his ventures with words of encouragement: "JACK. Uncle Frank? Is there some way you could look after Mom for me if . . . you know . . . she doesn't have anybody else. I don't want her to be alone. / UNCLE FRANK. She won't need me because you'll be there" (Brooks 47–48). This dialogue demonstrates that the figure of the old sage, who most often appears in masculine form, has a feminine equivalent in "the sibylline wise mother-

figure . . . who sits quietly at home waiting for the hero to finish his
wanderings and come back to her" (Frye 195). In *The Secret of Courage*, this
figure is embodied by Jack's mother, Amanda.

The fourth phase of romance includes the defense of the hero's
integrity, and it builds on the preceding phase as it begins only after the
hero has successfully completed the quest for "an owl feather [which]
brings courage to its owner" (Brooks 36) and enables him to consolidate
his heroic status. Since the underlying theme of this phase is that of "the
maintaining of the integrity of the innocent world against the assault of
experience" (Frye 201), the play takes shape of a moral allegory as it
resembles a test of moral endurance with a subtle lesson in ethical values.
The body to be safeguarded against the sinister figure can be "individual
or social" (Frye 201) or, in this case, both, since Jack physically defends
not only himself in the duel with The Demon but also common virtues of
all children, such as youth and innocence, which are threatened by the
lethal force. Metaphorically, The Demon symbolizing cancer can be
observed as a force assaulting an entire collective body, which is the
youth, "since this form of leukemia is often found in children and young
adults like Jack" (Brooks 14).

This phase is the key part of romance as it focuses on the combat
itself; everything that precedes it is the preparation for the battle that
unfolds, and the phases that follow are merely a recognition of the hero
for his accomplishments. The decisive battle, that is, the conflict that
takes place in this phase of romance is called "*agon*," and it usually ends
with "*the pathos* or death-struggle" (Frye 187),[2] a physical fight between
the hero and the enemy which ends with the death of either the hero or

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[2] The Greek term *pathos* was also used by Aristotle in his *Rhetoric* but with a diffe-
rent meaning, as a mode of rhetorical persuasion which, together with *êthos* and *logos*,
forms a triad of artistic proofs. According to Aristotle, a speech consists of three ele-
ments: the speaker, the subject addressed, and the audience, and "each provides a dis-
tinct means of persuasion or sources of belief" (Aristotle xlix). *Êthos* is a Greek term
employed by the philosopher to denote a persuasive technique based on the character
or credibility of the speaker, *logos* on the reasoning or logic behind the argument, and
pathos on the emotions of the audience (Aristotle 190).

the leviathan: "Jack swings the sword, working to force The Demon back into his prison. Finally, Jack swings his sword in a mighty arc, and The Demon disappears into the huge tree. Lights and sound climax. There is an awful scream and the voices are silent" (Brooks 51). Although the decisive battle in the mode of romance occasionally ends with the hero's death, it is always marked by the victory of moral virtue represented by the hero. The fight depicted in *The Secret of Courage* ends in favor of the protagonist, and the successful conclusion of the battle restores balance to the magical world, as seen in the vegetation that again "glows" and "pulsates" (Brooks 51). Furthermore, the hero of romance is often rewarded. Whilst in secular narratives the reward for a successful quest is usually material and palpable, "in mythopoeic romance [the reward] often means wealth in its ideal forms, power and wisdom" (Frye 193), or, in this particular instance, determination and resilience acquired as a result of virtuous conduct, as demonstrated by Jack's words: "I'm not going to give up without a fight. And I can win" (Brooks 52).

The image of a battlefield is often evoked in fictions dealing with subjects afflicted by cancer. Due to the resistance that is attributed to it, the malignant illness is often accompanied by the usage of military terminology and the jargon of warfare, and, as Sontag contends, "With the patient's body considered to be under attack ('invasion'), the only treatment is counterattack" (54). In the same vein, Brooks's play centers on the fight between the ailing hero, referred to as "the young warrior" (Brooks 33), and the demonic figure embodying the malady. The Demon is hidden in the tree, sometimes hiding and sometimes showing, indicating the volatility of the illness, its remission and reoccurrence. Consequently, after the battle with the monstrous villain, in Waddy's eyes, Jack conjures up the image of a hero returning from battle: "JACK. My head. I feel like I've been hit by a truck. / WADDY. You look like you just fought a war" (Brooks 51).

The fifth or the penultimate phase of romance is envisioned as a "reflective, idyllic view of experience from above" during which the

romantic passenger returns to his original habitat and receives recognition for his triumph over the barbarous world, whilst the sixth or the *penseroso* phase signifies the completion of the cyclical movement followed by the hero brooding over the previously experienced events and, eventually, detaching himself from the experience (Frye 202). Since the protagonist of *The Secret of Courage* "falls, unconscious" (Brooks 51) immediately after killing the demonic figure, which implies the end of his journey and a return to the world of natural order, the fifth and the sixth phase in the play are somewhat intertwined. The fifth phase in Frye's mythos of summer, called "*anagnorisis* or discovery," includes the exaltation of the hero, which often implies social recognition (Frye 187). However, in Brooks's play, it is Jack himself who recognizes his newly acquired courage that will help him fight the illness: "JACK. Pick. I've got to tell him. I did it, Waddy. Pick said I had the magic inside me, but I didn't believe him until I fought The Demon, well, I had to" (Brooks 51). A successfully completed adventure evokes an atmosphere significantly different from that described in the previous two phases. The mood that emerges is similar to that described in the pastoral phase, except that it is "a contemplative withdrawal from or sequel to action rather than a youthful preparation for it" (Frye 202). Although the fifth phase marks the end of adventure, it does not mark the end of the overall movement within the romance. This phase is characterized by a return to the world of natural order; namely, the transition occurs "from a lower world of confusion to an upper world of order" (Frye 184), as indicated by Jack and Waddy's decision to refocus on their earlier priorities, which are "girls, food, and *Shadow of Darkness*" (Brooks 53).

The sixth or the final phase of romance signifies the end of the romantic hero's journey, and it is marked by a significantly changed view on the experienced adventure, which is no longer an active endeavor but merely a theme that inspires stories; therefore, "a characteristic feature of this phase is the tale in quotation marks" (Frye 202). As the play progresses towards the end, the young hero finds himself back in the

family home and tells his friend, Waddy, the story of his journey to the Sinnissippi Park: "JACK. Remember? Wartag captured you, and Pick drove him away, and then The Demon said, 'I'll destroy you both!'" (Brooks 52). The heroic exploit, that is, the adventure, in this phase becomes a hazy memory that slowly fades as the hero and his friend, Waddy, return to their usual activities.

5. Conclusion

On a final note, the analysis of Brooks's play *The Secret of Courage* demonstrates that the twenty-first century represents a turning point in challenging the cancer-related stigma. In order to de-mythicize the existing cultural notions of illness and convey her fourteen-year-old protagonist's unconventional fight against leukemia, Laurie Brooks opts for fantasy, a genre of fiction with a salient tendency to the romantic mode. *The Secret of Courage* thus focuses on the quest of a teenager who is determined to find the titular secret that will help him overcome a formidable episode of illness. The play's affiliation to the fantastic mode is most evident in the adventure it depicts, which lies on the border between dream and reality.

Brooks's dramatization consistently follows six phases of the mythos of summer outlined by Northrop Frye in *Anatomy of Criticism*—the birth of the hero, the innocent youth, the quest, the maintaining of the integrity of the innocent world against the assault of experience, an idyllic view of the experience from above, and the end of a movement from an active to a contemplative adventure. According to Frye's theory of romance, the hero's origin remains unknown and mysterious until the end. Likewise, even though Brooks's play depicts the McCalls as a close-knit family, the identity of Jack's father remains obscured. In line with Frye's concept, the plot of *The Secret of Courage* is initially set in a pastoral, Arcadian landscape that abounds in various plant and animal species whose viability is threatened by the evil Demon hidden in the magical realm. The pastoral phase is interrupted by news of the boy's illness. Thus, the play moves

into the third phase, the quest, which includes a series of smaller adventures that lead the hero towards his ultimate goal—the antagonistic Demon who personifies the relentless malady. The end of the quest involves a fight with the antagonist, which represents the defense of the integrity of the children's world against the onslaught of the antagonist. The fifth phase follows the successful completion of the quest and is characterized by a transition from the fantastic to the real world. It implies a retrospective contemplation on the previously experienced adventure, a celebration of the victory over the antagonist, and the restoration of the pastoral atmosphere described in the second phase. The sixth phase marks the end of the movement and depicts Jack McCall at home, preoccupied with mundane worries, which indicates the completion of the cyclical movement and romance coming full circle.

Moving beyond the stereotypical imagery associated with cancer, which for centuries labeled cancer patients as fragile, passive, and powerless, *The Secret of Courage* demonstrates that literature dealing with illness can significantly increase the visibility of ill-affected individuals and help destigmatize medical conditions that are still considered taboo. Applying Northrop Frye's idea of the romantic hero to Jack McCall, a boy battling leukemia, this analysis intended to prove that the potential to redefine the identity of ailing subjects is invested in both fiction and scholarly literature. Considering that literary representations of illness remain understudied, this work also hopes to pave the way for further research on this topic within the framework of literary studies that would contribute to changing the existing perceptions of ill bodies.

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4

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Encanto: Everyday Hero(in)es and the Power of (Colombian) Community

Abstract

In *Latino Images on Screen: Stereotypes, Subversion, Resistance* (2002), Charles Ramírez Berg delineates the long-lasting "Hollywood stereotyping apparatus" (5), which has allowed for many stereotypical portrayals of Latino and Latin American characters as brutes, criminals, or oversexualized lovers. Stereotyping is also attributed to Disney's (animated) films, especially when it comes to the heroines of color and their communities. In this light, this chapter argues that Disney's *Encanto* (2021) is a major step toward a decidedly positive representation of Latin Americans, specifically Colombians, on the Hollywood screen. Subverting race and gender stereotypes attributed to Disney films in general, *Encanto* notably avoids the dominant stereotypes of Latinos and Latin Americans as *bandidos* and *Latin lovers*. Led by a matriarch, with a "mad*man* in the attic" and a muscle woman, the magical community of *Encanto* finds its heroine in a dark-skinned, short-haired, bespectacled girl unencumbered by romantic pursuits, whose appearance and demeanor subvert the Disney heroine stereotype. Finally, the chapter argues that *Encanto* also overturns the superhero(ine) stereotype since Mirabel's "Not Special Special" status as the only family member lacking magical powers is comparable to that of the titular protagonists of *Joker* (2019) and *The Batman* (2022), who are no longer larger-than-life figures but products of their closest relationships.

1. Introduction

If asked to summarize the portrayal of Latinos and Latin Americans on Hollywood screens in the last few decades, one's most common associations would probably be drug lords and household servants. Considering these blatant stereotypes, it is interesting to note that they include both genders, thus allowing for popular adaptations of Pablo Escobar's and Teresa Mendoza's story, and Spanglish-speaking housemaids and gardeners in sitcoms and Oscar winners alike.[1] This "Hollywood's stereotyping apparatus" (Ramírez Berg 5) has been challenged for at least two decades now by recognizing stereotypes in American-made films and by "Latino filmmakers [trying] to break with this pattern . . . through self-representation" (5). In this light, Disney's latest, Oscar-winning animated film, *Encanto* (2021), with its peaceful and loving Colombian family, the Madrigals, is a major step toward a decidedly positive Hollywood representation of Latin Americans.

Apart from defining the persistent stereotypes, which can be boiled down to violent *bandidos* and foolish Latin lovers (163), both male and female, in his seminal book *Latino Images in Film: Stereotypes, Subversion, Resistance* (2002), Charles Ramírez Berg warns about the inconsistent terminological differentiation between Latino peoples on Hollywood screens, most notably, between the "U.S. Latinos" and "Latin Americans," who "[a]s far as Hollywood was concerned . . . could all be lumped together" (6). Ramírez Berg identifies (U.S.) Latinos as people of Latin descent liv-

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[1] Mendoza is the protagonist of the TV series *The Queen of the South* (2016–2021), remade from the telenovela *La Reina del Sur* (Telemundo, 2011). Both are adapted from Arturo Pérez-Reverte's 2002 novel of the same title, based on the real-life Mexican drug trafficker Sandra Ávila Beltrán. Other popular TV shows with Latino housemaids are *Will & Grace* (1998–2006) and *Devious Maids* (2013–2016), and Oscar-winning films featuring Latino and Latin American characters include *As Good As It Gets* (1997), *Crash* (2004), and *Babel* (2006).

ing in the United States and Latin Americans as inhabitants of Central or South America (5). Both terms encompass several peoples whose differences are often merged to form a homogenous, stereotypical portrayal. In the case of Latin Americans, the lack of differentiation between particular nationalities (Cuban, Puerto Rican, Mexican, Colombian, and others) is another concern in American films. As Ramírez Berg maintains, "if Hollywood made no distinction between Latinos and Latin Americans, it certainly could not be expected to make finer distinctions, between, say, Mexicans (citizens of Mexico) and Mexican Americans (citizens of the United States)" (6). The present chapter approaches this stereotypical lack of differentiation between Latin(o) peoples in Hollywood films from the opposite angle by arguing that *Encanto* not only diverges from its forerunners through its decidedly positive portrayal of Colombians, Latinos, and Latin Americans but that it also eschews the reductive stereotypes surrounding these groups by simultaneously relating its characters to each of the three cultural signifiers.

Additionally, since the adjective "Latino" (introduced in the 1990s) is heterogeneous, including the feminine form, "Latina," another variation of it has recently been introduced: "Latinx."[2] Considering the "global movement to introduce gender-neutral nouns and pronouns" (Noe-Bustamante et al.), "Latinx" is suggested as a favorable alternative to the binary Latino/a. Even though this chapter aims to show that *Encanto* breaks both gender stereotypes and those specific to Latino and Latin American communities, it avoids the term "Latinx." This is because the term is "somewhat reviled by the people it represents" (Yarin) since it has not emerged within Latin(o) communities themselves. Seen as a form of colonization, it is, as a result, used by only "a thimble-sized portion of people with Latin American ancestry" (Yarin), or the three percent of U.S. adults who self-identify as Latino (Noe-Bustamante et al.). In that, "Latinx" is similar to the term "Hispanic," introduced in the 1970s by the

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[2] The term emerged in 2000, but it entered the English dictionary in 2018 (Noe-Bustamante et al.).

U.S. Census Bureau (Campos) and rejected due to the general attitude that Latinos "found [themselves] being classified as Hispanic" (Yarin) rather than identifying with the term on their own.

As a product of Disney, long criticized for its treatment of race and gender and for "reinforc[ing] the social and political status quo" (Zipes 22), *Encanto* is a welcome addition to breaking Hollywood's racial stereotypes since it portrays a peaceful, all-Colombian/Latin American community living in a typical setting, with typical flora and fauna, architecture, and fashion, but without any villains or overly sexualized characters. In addition to proving that, this chapter will show how *Encanto* undermines gender stereotypes with several of its characters, mainly with its heroine, who contrasts the stereotypical Disney Princess's appearance, personality, and need for a romantic pairing. Drawing on the approach of feminist (media) critics, such as Celeste Lacroix and Dawn Elizabeth England et al., as well as on Ramírez Berg's analysis of the portrayal of Latin(o) peoples on Hollywood screens, this chapter will also discuss how *Encanto* opposes race and gender stereotypes attributed to Disney films and Latin(o) peoples in general.

2. Race and Gender Stereotypes in Disney Films

Starting with *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* in 1937 to this day, the animated Disney Princess films are usually divided into three phases.[3] Depending on the author categorizing them, they are classified into the "early, middle, and current" phase (England et al. 562), the Classics, the Renaissance, and the Revival phase (Higgs 2016), or the Pre-Transition, Transition, and Progression phase (Garabedian 2015). Despite varying designations, there is a general consensus as to which films belong to which phase based on their portrayal of gender and race, that is, on the

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[3] According to Peggy Orenstein, the Disney Princess line was introduced in 2001, with princess-related merchandise as a marketing campaign for young girls (qtd. in England et al. 555).

heroines' personality and appearance or their racial and cultural background.

The first phase of animated Disney Princess films includes *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950), and *Sleeping Beauty* (1959). Produced before the emergence of theoretical discussions on gender issues, the early Disney Princess films reflect the stereotypical patriarchal distribution of gender roles. Emphasizing the 1950s housewife role-model, they depict a young heroine who is passive, submissive, and dependent, thus "supporting a stereotype of men as heroic protectors and women as delicate and fragile" (Laemle 5). By focusing on the heteronormative happy ending, this first phase is said to have established the pattern of all Disney Princess films, "featur[ing] a central female character, the princess, and a male character who is romantically linked with the princess" (England et al. 556).[4] This pattern was broken only seventy-five years later, with *Brave*'s Merida in 2012, co-created by Pixar. Additionally, these early films highlight delicate female beauty and Whiteness through the absence of dark-skinned characters. As Celeste Lacroix notes, early Disney heroines necessarily have "the classic porcelain skin tone and delicate features . . . tiny waists, small breasts, slender wrists, legs and arms" (220). Basically, this first phase of Disney Princess films reinforced the Western/White patriarchal female essence by featuring a beautiful and helpless young woman whose main goal in life is to find a (rich White) man to "rescue" her.[5]

For these reasons, with the rise of feminist criticism and, notably, since the 1990s, Disney films have been under constant scrutiny by the feminist, media, and other critics (see, for instance, Bell et al. 1–20; Giroux 43–46; Zipes 39–40; Lacroix 226–27; England et al. 565–66), who

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[4] This chapter focuses on animated films, but the heteronormative *happy end* pattern applies to numerous non-animated Disney and non-Disney films, undoubtedly inspired by the commercial success of the Princess movies.

[5] England et al. see the notion of "rescue" and its "performer" as one of the key differences between traditionally masculine and feminine traits since the rescues in early Disney were performed only by men (556).

claim that Disney films reinforce racial and gender stereotypes. According to Lacroix, Henry Giroux was among the first critical theorists who, even "as a father of young boys" (214), warned about "some accepted assumptions about the 'innocence' and 'wholesome' fun of animated films" (qtd. in Lacroix 214) that represent a "marketplace of culture" (qtd. in Lacroix 217). Since the films are combined with extremely popular mass advertising and merchandise, they are "identified as a powerful influence on children's media and product consumerism" (England et al. 555). More importantly, aimed at young audiences unequipped with "media literacy" (Goodall 163), critical thinking skills, or knowledge on race and gender discourses, Disney films, as one of the first instances from which children learn about "gender, social behaviors, and norms" (England et al. 556), represent "'crucial contributions to (children's) most important discourses of the self' and discourses regarding others" (Miller and Rode qtd. in Lacroix 217). Considering such an important role of (animated) Disney films in shaping children's identity and worldview, their scrutiny, and the recognition of both their positive messages and harmful stereotypes of gender and race, these films are said to reinforce an ongoing, worthy field of research, to which this chapter aims to contribute. The argument that Disney films are deeply rooted in social and cultural phenomena and are not just neutral family fun is supported by the fact that over the years, they have modified their takes on gender and race to reflect changes in gender roles (England et al. 563) and racial discourse (Lacroix 219; Anjirbag 13–14).

In response to the criticism targeting their emphasis on patriarchal gender roles and Whiteness, Disney Princess films introduced certain changes in their second phase. *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Aladdin* (1992), *Pocahontas* (1995), and *Mulan* (1998) all portray increasingly independent heroines willing to fight for themselves and their loved ones. These second-phase princesses display "more [traditionally] masculine characteristics," such as assertiveness, bravery, and physical strength (England et al. 562); they are more "physically mature

and[/or] athletic" (Lacroix 221), and some of them, like Pocahontas, even break the marriage pattern established in the first three films. Furthermore, these heroines come from a wider racial and cultural origin, such as Arabic (*Aladdin*), Native American (*Pocahontas*), and Chinese (*Mulan*). However, the critics persisted that despite "more realistic portrayals of young women" (Lacroix 223) based on their agency, these heroines were still "defined by male standards and goals" (223). They either "eventuate in marriage" (225) or sacrifice their love in favor of their people, as Pocahontas did (Lacroix 224; Streiff and Dundes 8), or do *both*, as is the case with Ariel, who must relinquish her independence in favor of either her controlling father (England et al. 563) or the prince.

However, the critics have noted that, in spite of modifying their portrayal of women by introducing multi-ethnic heroines, the second-phase Disney Princess films still exhibit stereotypes concerning race (Lacroix 222; Eddarif 61–62) as well as gender (England et al. 566). To illustrate, Jasmine from *Aladdin* and Pocahontas are discerned as non-White only due to their skin-tone and eye-shape; yet, their emphasized physique and clothing serve to, as Lacroix says in Said's terms, "*orientalise*" and thus stereotype: "Whereas the costuming of these characters reflects stereotypical images of each woman's ethnicity, the overall effect, taken with the increasing voluptuousness of the characters, works to represent the White characters as more . . . conservative, while associating the women of color with the exotic and sexual" (Lacroix 222). Put simply, it is the dark-skinned Disney Princesses that show more skin. Their personality traits are also not seen as strengths but as "racial stereotypes that dichotomize White from Other" (223), resulting in the "Native American . . . stereotype of the noble savage" (225) and Pocahontas's *inability* to marry a White man, rather than her *decision* against it.[6] Similarly, as in the other

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[6] As Lacroix comments, "[p]erhaps it is not coincidental that the two biracial couples (Pocahontas and Esmeralda's Otherness to John Smith and Phoebus' Whiteness) do not walk off into the fairytale sunset as husband and wife" (225). Hence, the lack of marital union for Pocahontas as the Disney Princess of color is not seen as a reflec-

second-phase Disney Princess films, *Aladdin* stereotypes Oriental women as concubines. Jasmine's rescue of Aladdin is achieved through "overt sexuality and exaggerated femininity" (England et al. 564), with Arabs being generally portrayed as "barbaric," "animal-like," and superstitious (Eddarif 61–63). Considering such criticism of "coloniality . . . embedded in animated depictions of other cultures despite Disney's reported efforts to tell more authentic stories from other cultures" (Anjirbag 2), the latest Disney films have strived to reflect further developments in racial and gender discourse.

The third phase of Disney Princess films includes *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), *Tangled* (2010), *Brave* (2012, co-created by Pixar), *Moana* (2016), and *Raya and the Last Dragon* (2021), all of which depict culturally and visually diverse, rebellious, and free-spirited women resisting patriarchal and heteronormative demands.[7] These modern heroines refuse to give up on love in favor of parental authority (Rapunzel), their career in favor of love (Tiana), and, most importantly, their personal freedom in favor of being romantically paired at all (Merida). This trend of strong Disney heroines "on a mission to save the world sans any romantic distractions" (Azeem et al. 8) has, with Moana and Raya, continued to this day.

These modern princesses have also been subjects of criticism. The portrayal of Tiana, the first Black Disney Princess, is seen as lacking in the context of African American culture, mainly due to her and her mothers' reliance on "traditionally feminine labor" (England et al. 563–64), such as cooking, waitressing, and clothes-making. Yet, even in such valid instances, the criticism can be counterpointed with other elements showing a progress from the early Disney Princess films. For instance, the princess's relationship with her mother, a rare (positive) figure in Dis-

tion of her potency and breaking away from the *undesirable* White heteronormativity but as her inability to achieve it.

  7 Tiana is Black, Rapunzel is White, Merida is a redhead Scotswoman, Moana is Haitian, and Raya is Indonesian.

ney Princess films represents "female bonding" (Orenstein 24) and close familial relationships, critically absent in early films but present in *Brave*.[8] The criticism also stumbles upon itself at times, for example, when seeing (paid) labor as a disservice to the princess status rather than as infantilization denigrated in the early films: "Tiana aspires for a career in the service industry while other princesses remain 'happily ever after' in the ivory tower of fairyland bliss profession-less and career-less" (Lester 297).[9] The two latest Disney Princesses, Moana and Raya, and potential stereotypes in their portrayals are still to be analyzed to the same extent as those of the previous heroines, but a general tendency, which this chapter aims to elucidate, is a more positive depiction of modern non-White Disney heroines and their communities. Specifically, the heroines are no longer shown needing a man to accomplish their goals, and their multi-ethnic communities are not portrayed as barbaric (see Anjirbag 13–14; Azeem et al. 8; Wardah and Kusuma 183–84; Xu 239–30).

Apart from the notable racial variety and breakage of the romantic pattern, the latest Disney Princess films even challenge their princess's princess status. There are thirteen official Disney princesses, as per thirteen films listed above, who have attained the status either by birth or by marriage (Coyne et al. 2), and *Encanto*'s Mirabel is not listed as one.[10] However, since there are no verified official criteria, and since the Princess status depends on commercial success, the line-up is changeable.[11]

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[8] "The character of Eudora also represents a departure from other Disney princess films. Usually, Disney princess movies do not include a mother, so having Eudora as a presence and a voice of encouragement for Tiana is unique" (Gregory 445).

[9] England et al. have also noted "the complexity of gendered messages in these films, [since] the princess learned to cook from her father and she was shown teaching the prince how to help in the kitchen" (564). In other words, recent Disney Princess films have made progress in depicting gender roles when compared to the early films and their gender stereotypes.

[10] As of August 2022, Raya has been included in the official line-up (see: Michaelsen).

[11] Jasmine is a princess despite not being the titular character of *Aladdin*, Mulan is a princess neither by birth nor by marriage, and *Frozen*'s Anna was never in the official

Also, Disney has recently challenged its own notion of what it means to be a princess. Namely, after Moana has been told that an animal sidekick and a dress make her a princess (*Moana* 00:52:07–00:52:16), the latest princess, Raya, is portrayed as wearing pants and an overall masculine costume (Wardah and Kusuma 182). Although the overview of race and gender stereotypes given above is based on the official Disney Princess films, this chapter will compare *Encanto*'s Mirabel and her Latin American community to earlier non-White Disney Princess characters and their communities in order to illuminate Disney's progress in following the social and cultural discussions on race and gender. Considering the lack of academic papers on *Encanto* due to the novelty of its release and considering many stereotypical portrayals of race and gender in early Disney (Princess) films, this chapter strives to open a fruitful discussion on Disney's non-stereotypical portrayal of Latin Americans.

3. Breaking Race and Gender Stereotypes in *Encanto*

Directed by Byron Howard, Jared Bush, and Charise Castro Smith, with voice-overs by Stephanie Beatriz, María Cecilia Botero, and John Leguizamo as the main protagonists (Mirabel, *abuela* Alma, and *tío* Bruno), *Encanto* is the latest addition to Disney's increasingly multi-cultural universe of animated communities. While not the first to break the pattern of White dominance in representation, it is among the few Disney films centered on Latin Americans and the only one with a female protagonist.[12]

line-up, even though she was *de facto* a princess in the film. Tinkerbell and Esmeralda were excluded from the official line-up; therefore, just because a heroine is or is not a Disney princess at the moment does not mean she will remain as such.

[12] Previous Disney animated films set in Latin America are *Coco* (2017, co-created by Pixar Studios), *Saludos Amigos* (1942), and *The Three Caballeros* (1944). While *Coco* bears the name of one of its female characters but is centered on a boy and his great-great-grandfather's adventure, the other two films combine live-action and animation and have several protagonists, none of whom are female. Animated Latin American protagonists were previously created by DreamWorks Animations (*The Road to El Dorado*, 2000), 20th Century Fox (*The Book of Life*, 2014), and Pixar (*Coco,* 2017) but not by Disney.

Led by the bespectacled Mirabel, unencumbered by romantic pursuits, a muscle-woman (Luisa), a "mad*man* in the attic" (Bruno), and, above all, a matriarch (Alma),[13] the all-Colombian cast of characters "powerfully upends, dissects, and reimagines everything that has made [Disney] rich" (Bucey). In other words, it breaks many racial and gender stereotypes associated with earlier non-White Disney heroines and their communities.

Encanto's first signifier of Colombian identity is the setting, which shows the country's "diversity of nature, music, people, food, and culture . . . evident in the film from start to finish" (Carey). A joint effort of filmmakers and Colombian architects, musicians, artists, botanists, and others, it has received much acclaim (Coolidge; Phillips; Bucey), especially from Colombians themselves.[14] Accompanied by Lin-Manuel Miranda's salsa- and bachata-filled soundtrack (Phillips), the film is set in a mountainous village surrounded by wax palm trees indigenous to Cocora Valley (Carey), next to a town with colorful houses in the "earth-colored, cobble-stoned" streets inspired by Colombia's reputable Barichara (Carey). The Madrigals' family home, *la casita*, is adorned with typical bougainvillea vines, and all the characters' "rooms represent one [country] region," with herbs such as guasca and yerba buena and animals such as toucans, hummingbird (Adamo), capybaras, and coatis. The rich setting bespeaks the filmmakers' wish to show that "[t]here's just so much of Colombia that feels like a place of wonder and fantasy and magic" (Adamo), the portrayal of which is also a positive step in the long history of animated Disney films. Magic is a common occurrence in Disney but within the context of people of color, it has not always been depicted to their bene-

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[13] Instead of the suggested family patriarch, the character of a matriarch was explicitly introduced by the history and culture consultant Alejandra Espinoza (Santaeulalia).

[14] Felipe Zapata, the botanist who provided guidance to the filmmakers, "said [they] portrayed Colombia accurately, so much so that he got nostalgic when he saw the film . . . [and details such as] the bamboo support beams within the walls of the Madrigals' home . . . [which] evoked memories of the old houses he frequented during his memorable summers in the Cocora Valley" (Adamo).

fit. Most notably, in *Aladdin*, magic marks "the lack of reason and intelligence in the Arab world" (Eddarif 62).

In *Encanto*, the magic is a gift obtained by Alma for her strength in sustaining her family and wider community through troubled times (01:22:17–01:22:21). The Colombian village founded with the help of magic is a definite reference to Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, which does set the Madrigals within a recognizable Latin American context. Yet, in spite of this intertextual link to the famous Macondo saga, *Encanto* imbues the magical with its own meaning; the film's magical aspects amplify its characters' modernity, their communal identity and mundane symbiotic relationships, and, most importantly, their positive representation. *Encanto*'s community uses magic to help its members, but it "also resists having its magical characters fall into the trope of the model immigrants . . . [who] have only earned their place because of their special abilities. The Madrigal family members belong even when they're not conjuring roses or transforming the weather" (Phillips). The characters' association with nature is also not misused, as was the case in Disney's earlier representations of non-White communities, which perpetuated asymmetrical White/non-White power relations. In contrast to *Pocahontas*, whose titular character's interaction with nature as well as her "personality and behavior in the plot are directly and clearly related to her ethnicity/Otherness and enacted in contrast to John Smith's Whiteness" (Lacroix 225), *Encanto* steers away from the White/non-White dynamics by focusing on Latin Americans. All its characters are dark-skinned, with complexions varying from olive (Mirabel, her mother, grandmother, and uncle) and bronze (sister Isabela and the cousins, Dolores and Camilo) to "Afro-Colombian" (Bush qtd. in Carey) chocolate brown with an Afro hairstyle (uncle Félix and cousin Antonio).

More importantly, the plot does not feature a traditional (Disney) villain. The only true villainess is seen in a notably short scene (00:01:15–00:01:38), repeated toward the end of the movie, in which Alma and her husband, Pedro, are fleeing from war and an armed cavalry. Despite Dis-

ney's previous interest "in historical violence, such as the war between Chinese and Mongolic states portrayed in *Mulan* or Britain's invasion of West Africa as featured in *Tarzan*" (Coolidge), the scene does not take place in real time. It is only relayed though Alma's flashback and, apart from the act of pursuit and Pedro's off-screen death, it does not dwell on the pursuers. In this way, Disney obviously prevents the White/non-White dichotomization by portraying faceless villains of unidentifiable ethnicity and race.[15] The pursuers are evil because they brought harm to the protagonist's community, not because they belong to a certain race or culture. This absence of on-screen violence perpetrated by the Latin Americans is particularly noteworthy in the context of the *el bandido* stereotype, discussed further in this chapter.

Villains are absent also from the depiction of the central Colombian community. The only two characters that somewhat resemble villains based on their actions or reputation are Mirabel's grandmother, Alma, and uncle Bruno, who inadvertently cause a strife within the community and threaten it due to the potential loss of magic. Both are redeemed, however, and their conflicts with each other and with Mirabel are revealed as opposite means to the same end—a wish to protect their home and each other. According to Ruth Coolidge, it is easy to understand the widowed matriarch's "going to extreme measures to ensure the Madrigals stayed strong . . . when it was made clear what Abuela had lost in order to become the protector of not just their family, but an entire community of civil war refugees" (Coolidge). In this way, Alma remains the reasonable matriarch and a loving grandmother, as opposed to Disney's previous strong matriarchal figure in *Tangled*. Unlike Mother Gothel, who is "egomaniacal, narcissistic, and arrogant" (DelRosso 524) and usurps Rapunzel's magic for herself, Alma fights for the greater good of the entire community.

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[15] Since the war is never explicitly named, the scene is ambiguous, but "[b]ased on context clues . . . [it] is probably the Thousand Days' War" (Coolidge), a civil war fought between 1899 and 1902 between the liberals and conservatives in Colombia.

The character of Bruno also breaks both racial and gender stereotypes, prominent in (animated) Disney films. According to Ramírez Berg, Latinos and Latin Americans in Hollywood films are usually violent, irrational, and overly sexual, and they fall into six main stereotype categories: *el bandido*, male buffoon, Latin lover, dark lady, harlot, and female clown (66). The most violent one, *el bandido*, is "one of American movie's favorite villains," who behaves in "antisocial, sneaky, violent, criminal ways" (40). Often mentally unstable, "he is a threat that needs to be eliminated in order to return the diegetic world to its tranquil, prethreat status quo" (40). None of *Encanto*'s characters fit that description, and, although Bruno's reputation initially corresponds with antisocial and mentally unstable behaviors, this turns out not to be true. Gifted with prophecy, he was mistaken for a bearer of bad luck, so he left to protect everyone, mainly Mirabel, not himself. Yet, he stayed hidden within the house because he loves his family (01:13:12). More importantly, the family and community peace, based on genuine relationships and cooperation, are achieved by Bruno's return to the family, not by his elimination.

Attributed with emotional instability and absent for the first half of the film, though, Bruno embodies the mad*man* in the attic. Far from Disney's early masculine men who swoop in to save the heroine, he hides from Mirabel and cowers before engaging in the task of helping her (00:54:57–01:00:58). In this, as a man, he breaks the gender stereotype of what Gilbert and Gubar have termed "the madwoman in the attic" (see Gilbert and Gubar). Based on women's perceived emotional instability and irrationality, "[l]abelling women 'crazy' is a key feature of the gender system" (Sweet 5), which allows for stereotyping women as unpredictable and dangerous.[16] The detriment of such a stereotypical label is evident in Bruno's becoming a taboo in the family, hence his theme song "We

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[16] *Encanto* does feature a female character characterized with volatile emotions, *tía* Pepa, whose mood aligns with the weather. Only, her portrayal is outweighed by other female characters—the rational and wise *abuela* Alma, who is undeterred by emotions in doing what she thinks must be done, as well as Luisa and Isabela, who are able to control and even hide their true emotions.

Don't Talk about Bruno." Yet, Bruno's bad reputation is disproved when Mirabel, approaching him without prejudice, learns that her uncle chose to hide from the family he loves in order to protect her (00:59:49). This demonstrates Bruno's thoughtfulness, nurturing nature, and sacrifice, which are all traditionally feminine traits (England et al. 556), as well as his intelligence and peacefulness, important in portrayals of Disney's non-White characters and of Latin Americans in general. As Streiff and Dundes argue in reference to *Frozen*, "Viewers would not expect to see this theme [of self-sacrifice] promoted for men because it is women who are supposed to put others' needs before their own" (8). Emotionality and other typically female traits are present in other male characters, as well, including Mirabel's father and her uncle Félix, little cousin Antonio, who openly expresses fear and cries (00:13:24), and Camilo, whose shapeshifting abilities can almost be interpreted as the typical female people-pleasing.

However, Bruno does exhibit one traditional masculine trait found in early Disney films; he rescues Mirabel. According to England et al., the "rescue" is one of the key features in the gendered portrayal of Disney heroes and heroines and is traditionally done by men (556). If not for Bruno's vision, Mirabel might have never learned that she is not the one who is ruining the family magic but that she is actually the one who will save it. Nevertheless, Mirabel rescues Bruno in return. She finds him in the bowels of the house and frees him from his "bad rap" (01:02:31) and hermit-life away from the family. Therefore, Bruno's rescue of her is only a stepping-stone to Mirabel's rescue of the entire community and him, too. Next, Bruno is neither the heroine's romantic interest nor her "controlling father" (England et al. 563), which further subverts gender stereotypes since those are the only two roles reserved for male protagonists in early Disney films. Despite wearing traditional male Latin American attire—a poncho but without a sombrero—Bruno also subverts the non-intelligent Latin lover stereotype (Ramírez Berg 66) by being depicted as a resourceful character focused on familial relations and not on seducing

women. Thus, considering *Aladdin's* "nefarious sexual intentions of the
villain . . . which resurface[d] in . . . *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*" (Lacroix
224), it is obvious that Disney has come a long way with its representa-
tion of non-White male characters.

The absence of sexual stereotypes, Latin lovers and dark ladies (Ramí-
rez Berg 66), might be the single most important instance of *Encanto's*
progressive portrayal of Latin American characters in the context of both
Hollywood films on Latin Americans in general and early Disney films in
particular. When Disney introduced people of color as characters, these
characters had very few signifiers that marked them as people of color,
and women of color were overly sexualized (Lacroix 222; Eddarif 61–62).
Contrary to these problematic portrayals of people of color, *Encanto* opts
against highlighting anyone's sexuality, especially that of the heroine.[17] As
a Latin(American)a and Colombiana, Mirabel is visibly dark-skinned; her
nose is prominent, her lips are wide and nude-colored, and her eyebrows
are thicker than the pencil-thin lines on the early Disney heroines. Her
costume is traditional Colombian female attire: a white blouse with ruffles
and lace and a wide colorful skirt ("Get to Know Colombia"). Unlike Ar-
ab women's costumes in *Aladdin*, which stereotype and Orientalize by
sexualizing (Lacroix 222), Mirabel's traditional clothes do not show her
"bare midriff" (Eddarif 63) nor does she feature a tiny waist like the earli-
er Disney heroines. Neither Mirabel nor her sister Isabela—the "perfect
Instagram-style princess who can make flowers bloom with her sheer
loveliness" (Bradshaw)—correspond to the *spicy* stereotypes of Latin
American women on Hollywood screens. Since the traditional Colombian
blouse usually hangs off female shoulders ("Get to Know Colombia"),
the potential was there, but Disney clearly avoided it since none of the
characters' shoulders, waists, or legs, for that matter, are bare. In terms of

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[17] Isabela's suitor, Mariano Guzmán (voiced by Maluma), alludes to the *Latin lover*
stereotype when he proposes to Dolores as soon as they get together, claiming that he
has "so much love inside" (01:27:38). But he is a minor character with very little scre-
en-time and his overly romantic character is not necessarily tied to the fact that he is a
Latin American.

both gender and race in general and Latin American culture in particular, Disney's avoidance of stereotypes in *Encanto* is noteworthy.

Instead, the focus is on Mirabel's quirkiness, her quest for self-identity within her community, and her "cool glasses" (00:28:32). The latter "may seem like a small win, but Mirabel is the first Disney . . . female protagonist to wear glasses" (Williams), highlighted in several close-up shots of her or others lovingly readjusting them on her face and in Mirabel's conversation with her mother.[18] That Mirabel wears glasses is, in fact, monumental since Disney's trademark in hits such as *The Princess Diaries* (2001) was the necessary elimination of glasses from a female face during the beautification process. Twenty years later, the bespectacled, curly-haired, and bushy eye-browed Mirabel is an antithesis to the titular princess, Mia Thermopolis, who is forced to wear eye-contacts and have her curly hair straightened and eyebrows plucked by a professional make-over artist.[19] Mirabel's hair has not received as much praise as her glasses, but, present so far only in *Brave* (2012), the heroine's curls are also Disney's step forward to be celebrated since even the Black Tiana has "straightened hair," rather than a "more Afrocentric style of cornrows, dreadlocks, twists, or even an Afro" (Lester 298). Mirabel is also the second short-haired Disney heroine from beginning to end, as opposed to the luscious manes from before.[20]

Next, she is the third consecutive animated Disney heroine who "doesn't need the love of a boy to complete her or her journey . . . [and]

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[18] The question of why Mirabel's mother, gifted with healing powers, does not "fix" her vision was raised by fans, but the director, Jared Bush, explained that Mirabel's glasses resulted from a written request of a young Disney female fan. Hence, Mirabel's mother sees nothing wrong with her eyesight and no reason to correct it (Smithey).

[19] Paolo, Mia's makeover artist, even calls her eyebrows "Frida" and "Kahlo," referencing with his derogatory remark the famous Mexican painter (Ford and Mitchell 26).

[20] Snow White was the only Disney Princess with shoulder-length hair until Rapunzel, who cuts her hair toward the end of her film to save her love interest, notably undermining the long-haired princess ideal.

no one ever bothers bringing it up, least of all the film's screenwriter" (Yamato). Mirabel's singledom counters the "reinforce[d] cultural logic regarding the natural fulfillment of a young woman's dream as continually defined by men" (Bell et al. qtd. in Lacroix 225). Since it was only recently that England et al. noted how all Disney Princess films exhibit the heteronormative pattern of a heroine with a romantic interest (556), which was broken one year later with Merida, this confirms that Disney pays attention to its criticisms, making the discussions on its portrayals of gender (and race), such as this one, all the more necessary.

Disney did not limit its non-stereotypical female portrayal to *Encanto*'s protagonists, Mirabel and Alma. The side-characters of Isabela and Luisa, Mirabel's sisters, also break gender stereotypes. At first glance, Isabela is a typical Disney princess—tall, lean, and beautiful, with long straight hair and the magical gift of growing flowers at every turn. Distinctly feminine in her ruffled lilac dress, she is the stereotypical "angel" (00:10:23) in the house. During the course of the film, she is to be engaged and married, fulfilling the stereotypical heteronormative pattern (England et al. 556). However, she deviates from it by rejecting her suitor and the sacrificial, typically female, role: "I never wanted to marry him! I was doing it for the family!" (01:08:24). She even rejects the ideal of constant perfection, both in appearance and in conduct. Contrary to the impression of being "effortlessly perfect" (00:27:55), Isabela finds it hard to uphold this ideal and revels in the sudden freedom of not having to be perfect, which is symbolized by her dress being dirtied in all the colors of the rainbow, as opposed to the traditionally feminine pink/lilac. In addition, instead of creating lovely and soft flowers, Isabela creates prickly cacti, inspiring her theme-song titled "What Else Can I Do," in which she subverts the stereotypical tendencies of Disney heroines to be perfect and find a romantic partner. Therefore, it is very telling of *Encanto* that the first step toward Mirabel's discovery of her own power starts with her helping the *stuck* princess Isabela reveal her true, *not perfect perfect*, identity.

Mirabel's other sister, Luisa, contrasts the stereotypical females in Disney films from the start to finish with her physical and personality traits—strength, athleticism, and repression of emotions—which correspond to those of traditional male characters (England et al. 559). Like Mirabel, Luisa is dressed as a traditional Colombiana, in a white ruffled blouse and colorful long skirt, but her physique could not be more different from the stereotypical (Disney) female build. Towering over every other character except for her father, she is robust and more muscular than any male in the film, and her bulging biceps are a sight not yet beheld on Disney women, or Warner Bros. and DC's Wonder Woman, at that. Luisa's physical might, however, is not depicted as violent at all. As the community muscle-woman, she performs duties usually done by men, like carrying heavy loads, rerouting rivers, fixing leaning houses, and so on. Despite her masculine body and deep voice, Luisa's face is still feminine; she wears girly earrings, and her hair is tied with a red bow. Thus, she embodies both male and female traits, and her uneasy confession "but sometimes I cry" (01:27:01) also functions as a subversion of the masculine stereotype *boys don't cry*.

Since the film focuses on the house the Madrigals live in, with many scenes of cooking, cleaning, and hosting dinner parties, one could argue that *Encanto* feeds into the same domestic stereotypes as those attached to both the aforementioned first Black princess and the portrayal of Latin Americans as house-bound servants. Indeed, Luisa's Herculean strength relates to household tasks; Mirabel's mother heals people with her food; Mirabel gains her power by ensuring the community's domestic survival, and both men and women sacrifice for it. However, rather than focusing on serving and romance, *Encanto* centers on family dynamics and relationships, which is Disney's "novel strategy credited with [*Frozen*]'s phenomenal success" (Streiff and Dundes 1), even with White characters. *Encanto*'s main conflict arises from the need to maintain the magical domestic life-power but is resolved with the recognition of each (ordinary) individual's place within the community and the need for mutually supportive

relationships. Considering early Disney heroines, deprived of (both) loving parents or siblings and the generally violent and sexualized depictions of Latin Americans, *Encanto*'s notable avoidance of these stereotypes should prevail. The Madrigals are Colombians, but their struggles and dynamics are present all over the world since asserting one's own identity and rejecting the pressure of imposed social or cultural roles is a universally human tendency, regardless of one's skin-color and nationality.

4. Challenging the Superhero Stereotype

While the domestic sphere of Disney's Latin American narrative of *Encanto* will surely feature in future discussions on the reinforcing of stereotypes, one can view the latest Disney production positively in several ways. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the film was released only eight months after the previous Disney Princess film, *Raya and the Last Dragon*. The Polynesian Raya and the Haitian Moana before her (2016) have a lot in common: both are ethnic warrior princesses free of romantic interests who depart from their communities to find their purpose and save their people. Yet, Mirabel's household adventure departs from rather than repeats this developing pattern. *Encanto* can also be viewed as a subversion of the dominance of the superhero stereotype as a figure independent from the wider community. As Garabedian explains,

> The modern Disney princess is independent, brave, and heroic, and contemporary audiences need to see strong female leads who can stand alongside their male counterparts [or even without them]. By doing so, Disney encourages the idea of equality between genders and helps build a universal acceptance of the concept of defining oneself not by how one is born, but by his or her own actions. (25)

While the argument concerning one's *actions*, that is, the importance of asserting one's own identity and path, stands true, *Encanto* shows that self-assertion is still a joint effort of community members. It is a result of self-acceptance and mutual acceptance. Alma and her children survive

thanks to her husband's actions; her family and community owe their survival to her persistence; Mirabel's safety in the community is ensured by Bruno, which she recognizes with the help of Dolores's and Luisa's insights, and, in turn, Mirabel saves everyone, including herself, by letting them be what they truly are and be accepted as such. She does not relinquish her true identity to fit in; her (magic) power comes from her acceptance of herself and of her acceptance of others. As Alma tells the younger Mirabel, but she herself loses sight of it with years, "the miracle is you" (01:25:50). As clichéd as it sounds, the real magic takes place when we accept ourselves and others as we are, Latin American or whoever. To return to Bruno's "rescue" once more: he *does* grace Mirabel with his vision, but the vision works only because Mirabel trusts him without prejudice. Bruno sees Mirabel's vision to the end due to her urging; otherwise, he would have given up, discouraged by previous negative feedback. The soapstone tile of his vision, showing Mirabel in front of the house full of cracks, is ambiguous—she might ruin the house or save it—and it is the community's prejudice toward Bruno that sways in favor of the negative interpretation. In conclusion, each member of the community is vital, starting from its youngest members. That is why, in a reversed scene from the film's beginning, the little Antonio guides his older cousin Mirabel to the door to receive her magic gift.

Hence, just like the Disney heroine, who no longer has to be a "damsel in distress" and fall "heads over heels for her prince in shining armor" (Xu 328), the superhero(ine) does not need to "single-handedly" (Nichols 242) save everyone. One's greatest power is born out of one's rootedness in their community. For this reason, Kabir's statement that "[e]ach and every child born in the family is blessed with magical powers except Mirabel, who *somehow happens* to be the main protagonist of the movie" (emphasis added) fails to recognize the breaking of the superhero stereotype that has emerged in the recent superhero films, *Joker* (2019) and *The Batman* (2022). When the *new* Joker film was first announced, soon after Heath Ledger's unprecedented portrayal in 2008, the public, including the

author of this article, approached it with apprehension. Nevertheless, the double Oscar-winner proved the skepticism unnecessary by not rehashing the Joker's *after* or the already developed supervillain figure but by focusing on his backstory and the abuse at the hands of his mother and wider community that made him the infamous "chaos monster" (Nichols 241) audiences are familiar with. The previous Jokers (Burton's, Schumacher's, and Nolan's) were also obviously traumatized beyond repair, but their films never dwell on the sources of these traumas. Todd Phillips's Joker (played by Joaquin Phoenix) does exactly that by depicting the community's abuse and rejection of Arthur Fleck. As Sauer contends, "Our witness of the dank and depressing origins of the movement overshadows [condemnation on the Joker's part]." In a fictitious parallel narrative of Arthur's relationship with his neighbor, the film gives an insight into what Arthur's life could have been had he not been systematically shunned.

Similarly, Matt Reeves's new Batman (played by Robert Pattison) received acclaim as a young character who relies on Albert's guidance while still figuring out his role in Gotham: "he even appears to be afraid of heights. . . . He gets hurt, he miscalculates a few jumps. He's human" (Santilli). When faced with the Riddler, his nemesis tells Batman how he earned his position thanks to the acclaim of the community: "All they could talk about was poor Bruce Wayne. Bruce Wayne, the orphan. Orphan. Do you know what being an orphan is?" (*The Batman* 02:16:26–02:17:23). With this, the Riddler suggests that he might have been a hero had he been given the same chance and acceptance. He is right; Batman has Albert as a positive influence who guides him, and his actions receive acclaim from the wider community, while the Riddler is rejected by everyone. Just like Bruno, everyone "saw the worst in him" (*Encanto* 01:13:07).

For this reason, Mirabel's "Not Special Special" applies to *Joker* (2019) and *The Batman* (2022), who are no longer larger-than-life figures but products of their closest relationships, proving that the relationship with family and community can make a hero and a villain out of the same per-

son, depending not only on their own actions but also on the community's attitude. All three films highlight the importance of the social aspect of individuals' lives; therefore, *Encanto*'s focus on a Latin American domestic community and the reminder of its importance is a strength, not a weakness.

5. Conclusion

Considering their massive influence on popular culture and predominantly young viewers, (animated) Disney films have long been contested for perpetuating race and gender stereotypes among young and susceptible audiences. In particular, stereotypes in early animated Disney films (1937–1959) include a White, necessarily beautiful, and powerless heroine and her heteronormative happy ending with a White male savior. While later films (1989–1998) strived to portray heroines who were more independent than their predecessors and came from different cultural backgrounds, these films nevertheless created further stereotypes, visible in the dichotomy between the Whites and the Others, a shortage of non-White markers besides skin-color, and the sexualizing of non-White heroines. Yet, the latest animated Disney heroines, from 2009 onwards, have at long last become bold and independent, even free from the need for a romantic pairing, and their non-White communities are less stereotypical.

Disney's latest animated addition, *Encanto* (2021), follows the trend by featuring modern heroines with "no boys to really think about at all, no girly hang-ups or thingamabobs to fritter over, and no romantic subplots to distract from what's truly important: survival, independence, identity, self-belief" (Yamato). The third consecutive single Disney heroine after Moana and Raya, Mirabel, is set on asserting herself and her place in the world without a romantic partner. In efficiently breaking the stereotypical Disney gender pattern, she is joined by the family matriarch, Alma, a strong and sensible female figure, her eccentric but caring uncle Bruno, who simultaneously embodies and breaks stereotypes usually linked to women, and her sisters and polar opposites, Luisa as a muscle-woman,

and Isabela, who fits the Disney Princess ideal but refuses to marry and uphold the traditional ideal of *perfect* femininity.

As representatives of the Colombian and Latin American community, the Madrigals are dark-skinned, dressed in traditional attire, surrounded by Colombian music, food, flora, and fauna, and inhabit settings modeled after real-life Colombian towns and natural sites. Deeply rooted in nature and magic, *Encanto*'s community breaks the stereotypes of non-White Disney characters as barbaric and delivers a sensible and peaceful community free from villains and violence. The absence of on-screen violence in connection to Latin Americans is major proof of the attempt by Disney, and Hollywood in general, to avoid the dominant stereotypes of the said peoples as brutes and criminals. Similarly, by eliminating the heroine's romantic interest and by not emphasizing her and other characters' sexuality, *Encanto* breaks the recurrent Latin lover and dark lady stereotypes (Ramírez Berg 66). All this testifies to the fact that Disney positively portrays its animated Latin American community and reverses its own race and gender stereotypes from earlier films, while emphasizing the importance of family and community.

Since Disney obviously responds to social and cultural discussions, it will be interesting to see whether the next Disney heroine will follow or break the traditional *hetero*normative pattern and how her portrayal will align or clash with the established or newly introduced stereotypes, which inevitably emerge with each alteration to the established narratives. In any case, Disney's portrayal of race and gender remains an issue deserving of its place under ongoing social and cultural scrutiny, to which this chapter has hopefully contributed.

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The Woman in the Bathtub: Elderly Women and Sexuality as a Horror Trope

Abstract

This chapter discusses the trope of the nude elderly female body, traditionally employed in various subgenres of American horror cinema, in five horror films. Employing Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject and focusing on the monstrous crones and hag-like characters featured in *The Shining* (1980), *The Witch: A New-England Folktale* (2015), *Doctor Sleep* (2019), and *It Chapter Two* (2019), the first part of the analysis introduces the established approach to depicting the grotesque and the horrific of the aged female body in sexual contexts, generally used to elicit the reaction of terror in an audience. The second of the paper relies exclusively on one film, *X* (2022). It argues that by applying various cinematic techniques through which the antagonist crone figure and the young and conventionally attractive "final girl" characters are mirrored, the crone trope becomes subverted and maintains that this approach, in turn, may invoke empathy and sympathy for the sexual and sexualized elderly woman and can be interpreted as both unexpected and subversive by viewers of the film and fans of the genre.

Keywords: Abject, crones, "final girl," mirroring, sexuality, slasher horror

1. Introduction

The treatment and representation of the female body in horror films have undergone significant scrutiny, notably in the contexts of feminist criticism and psychoanalysis, whereby, as Vivian Sobchack argues, scholars see the genre as a "misogynist scenario elaborated within a patriarchal and heterosexual social formation and based on the male fear of female sexuality" (336). This scenario invites the (male) spectator to view the female body as a source of monstrous terror, regardless of whether the woman in question is the antagonist of the film or one of the killer's victims. Furthermore, according to Shelley Stamp Lindsey, it is the slasher subgenre where such a "misogynistic dread of the female body" is most prevalent (36). However, the variety and number of interpretations increase once the dimension of advanced age is added to the female body motif. Female ageing and its consequences as a form of transgression have been explored for decades in horror, with crone-like characters such as Baby Jane Hudson in *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* (dir. Robert Aldrich, 1962) that launched the hagsploitation subgenre, also known as "hag-horror," or the forty-something year-old women in science-fiction horrors *The Wasp Woman* (dir. Roger Corman, 1959) and *The Leech Woman* (dir. Edward Dein, 1960), who sacrifice their humanity in search of eternal youth, only to both fall from a building to their death in their respective monstrous forms. While these characters reflect a sense of horrific revulsion towards women whose bodies, as well as personalities, change with the ageing process, they also display a form of derision aimed at women who are unmarried or otherwise fail to maintain a romantic heterosexual relationship. The presence of this notion in popular culture is also reflected in a recent analysis by Kinneret Lahad, who, by focusing on the intertwining categories of age, gender, and singlehood, notes that "women are socialized from early stages in their lives, to be wary of losing their beauty, sexual desirability, and reproductive functions" (58). By expanding on the patriarchal norms, which are both openly expressed in society and internalized by women, the author also references a type of transgression from

"age-appropriate behaviors and expectations" (Lahad 60) that women in patriarchal societies commit by existing past a certain age whilst being unmarried.

To further these arguments, this paper will first briefly review the trope of the sexualized elderly female body as a source of terror and abjection in horror films, with examples taken from *The Shining*, *The Witch*, *Doctor Sleep*, and *It Chapter Two*. Additionally, a more in-depth analysis of *X* will follow in order to argue that, within the context of slasher films, *X* challenges the pre-existing notions regarding age and female sexuality, such as the aforementioned transgression, by employing various techniques to engender a sense of empathy and sympathy in viewers towards the elderly female killer.

2. The Abject and the Elderly Body

Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining*, a psychological horror about a man who, driven mad by a haunted hotel, tries to murder his family, features arguably one of the most famous cinematic depictions of a reaction to the abject in horror. The murder scene presents Jack Torrance, the aforementioned patriarch, entering the mint-green bathroom of Room 237, where a white shower curtain covers half of the bathtub (1:12:36–1:16:00). At first, he sees a figure pulling the shower curtain back and recognizes a nude young woman who steps out of the bathtub to approach him. Attracted by the woman, Jack embraces her and they begin to kiss. Yet, during their kiss, Jack gazes towards the bathroom mirror and notices that the alluring woman has magically morphed into a rotting old corpse-like creature. The now-horrific woman begins to cackle and approach Jack menacingly, which drives him away. Furthermore, the scene of the woman approaching Jack is interspersed with those of Jack's five-year-old son, Danny Torrance, experiencing visions of Room 237 and of the woman, now appearing as a bloated cadaver floating in water, slowly rising from the bathtub. Clasen's description of the same scene as depicted in Stephen King's original novel conveys the sense of revulsion induced by the

film: "A decomposing corpse with agency, with malicious intent and the capacity to move, is a horrifying concept to a prey species vulnerable to infection. It violates a basic human intuition about dead organisms—they are not supposed to have intent and locomotion—and is highly dangerous" (85). The instantaneous transformation of the young woman into a crone forcefully blurs the boundaries between youth and old age, beauty and repulsion, and life and death. As Julia Kristeva explains, the images such as these elicit the ultimate fear of the abject:

> The corpse (or cadaver: *cadere,* to fall), that which has irremediably come a cropper, is cesspool, and death; it upsets even more violently the one who confronts it as fragile and fallacious chance. . . . If dung signifies the other side of the border, the place where I am not and which permits me to be, the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything. . . . The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. (3–4)

Regarding the abject in horror films on a more general scale, Sobchack echoes the same notion, claiming that the fear women who are deemed grotesque due to excessive behavior and physicality invoke in men "has less to do with sexual desire and castration anxiety than with abjection and death" (337). Here it is also worth noting that, in the film, Jack Torrance is depicted as a relatively disheveled middle-aged man whose physical appearance becomes more menacing as his psyche deteriorates. However, his lust towards the ghost-woman in her youthful form would not commonly be viewed as an act of transgression in Lahad's terms. Building upon Susan Sontag's notion of the double standard of ageing, Erica Åberg et al. claim that, because men and women are faced with different expectations in terms of their attractiveness, not only is their behavior judged differently but the moral value of women may also hinge upon their appearance: "[W]omen face greater losses because age

erodes their most highly valued social asset (their physical attractiveness) while enhancing men's most valued social resources" (2).

In a manner similar to the above-mentioned scene from *The Shining*, *The Witch: A New-England Folktale* (dir. Robert Eggers, 2015) depicts a shape-shifting crone from a satanic coven who terrorizes a seventeenth-century family of Puritans. The eponymous witch is first seen after she kidnaps the infant Samuel in the form of a nude hag, who then proceeds to grind the child into a bloody flying ointment to cover her body and broom (00:07:45–00:09:30). By the midpoint of the film, the witch makes her second appearance. Here, however, she has transformed into a beautiful young woman wearing a red-hooded cape, and, like the ghost-woman waiting for Jack in Room 237, she is approached by Caleb, the eldest son of the Puritan family. In a deviation of the classic fairy tale, it is the young pubescent hunter who loses his way in the woods and falls prey to the disguised wolf (incidentally, Caleb was convinced that Samuel was taken by a wolf, rather than a witch). Only, while Jack was able to recognize the ghost-woman in the mirror and run, Caleb is unable to escape the Witch's embrace, and he fails to notice that the woman's arm on his shoulder is now that of a hag (00:40:45–00:42:17). Eventually, the boy is found naked and delirious by his family and, in a horrific variation of another fairy tale, ejects an entire red apple from his throat before violently dying.

In his analysis of Kubrick's *The Shining*, Robert Kilker has noted that, while the fear of the abject, that is, "fluids such as blood, vomit, feces, pus, mucus, and others" is horrifying, the female body that bleeds every month is "especially monstrous" (58). The animated cadaver in Room 237 and the predatory witch can, therefore, be seen as abjection taken to the extreme. In addition, not only are the female figures abject due to their horrific bodies but also both the ghost-woman and the crone at times mask their severe and aged features underneath a youthful surface. The women thus commit an act of transgression that, once again, according to Sobchack, in the context of horror films, demonstrates what

Kristeva calls the abject that comes from within, or the other present in such female bodies that are "transformed, monstrous . . . divided against themselves" (Sobchack 343).

Two more films based on Stephen King's novels support such abject representations of women. The first film, *Doctor Sleep* (dir. Mike Flanagan, 2019), is a sequel to *The Shining*. The film begins with a flashback of young Danny Torrance, who, after the events of the original film, is still haunted by the ghosts of the Overlook Hotel. As he wakes from a nightmare during the night, Danny goes to his bathroom only to be confronted by the ghost of the woman from Room 237 once more (00:06:40–00:07:50). In her reappearance, the ghost again takes the form of a waterlogged corpse of a nude old woman with grey skin and large lesions covering her body. She no longer needs to morph between the young and the old form; the first-person full-frontal view of her animated and predatory cadaver trudging towards Danny is terrifying in itself. As opposed to the first film, *Doctor Sleep* eschews the internalized abjection of the changing body visible through the linking of the old body to its bygone form. Rather, it relies on laying bare and underscoring the marks of extreme ageing. Therefore, the horror is evoked by the so-called "abject that comes from without . . . these visibly decaying bodies that reach out to touch a man who recoils in horror, these 'non-egos' who threaten society less by their rage than by their presence, certainly engender this form of the abject" (Sobchack 343–44).

The second film to be considered here, *It Chapter Two,* based on King's 1986 novel *It*, features another interesting scene of elderly female nudity turning into abrupt horror. In the film, the adult Beverly Marsh, the only female member of the "The Losers Club," must return to her childhood home and face the memories of her physically and sexually abusive father in order to defeat the eldritch evil known as "It." Upon ringing the doorbell, the name on the apartment door changes from "Marsh" to "Kersh," and Beverly is greeted by a somewhat dazed looking grey-haired woman who informs her that her father passed away. Mrs.

Kersh invites Beverly in for tea and, as Beverly explores her old room, the elderly woman, who can be seen in the background behind Beverly, moves erratically out of frame, accompanied by jarring and dissonant music (01:08:45–01:08:53). The scene is followed by a conversation between Beverly and Mrs. Kersh over tea. The eeriness of Mrs. Kersh is highlighted via filming techniques, such as the close-up shot and traditional shot-reverse shot, which frame her frozen grin, as well as a large open scar on her chest, made visible by her unbuttoned collar (01:09:48). The conversation continues until Mrs. Kersh leaves to bring the cookies she was baking, whereby she is again seen moving behind Beverly, now fully nude, and scurrying out of sight. Once Beverly realizes she is faced with another manifestation of It, a monstrous giant version of Mrs. Kersh with wild hair, grey skin, a deformed face, sagging breasts, and two additional pairs of mouths on her neck charges towards her and chases her outside while cackling and screaming (01:11:00–01:11:20).

What is most interesting to note in the films described thus far is the aspect of gender and how it manifests in the monstrous hags and their victims in the context of horror films. This topic has perhaps been most famously explored by Carol J. Clover in her seminal text *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*. While this text may be most commonly cited regarding slasher fiction—Clover was in fact the first to introduce the term "final girl" in her essay *Her Body, Himself* while studying classic slasher films (x)—its notions on gender and the killer-victim dynamic will be particularly useful here. This paper has already hinted towards a peculiar type of gender ambiguity manifested in *The Witch*. As mentioned, through his victimization, the character of Caleb can be read as two distinct female fairy-tale characters: Red Riding Hood, lost in the woods, and Snow White, put to sleep by an enchanted apple. Another fairy-tale motif can be seen in *It Chapter Two* with Beverly, who regresses back into her childhood memories after being lured in by a witch posing as a kind old woman, with the promise of tea and cookies. In other

words, gender in horror oftentimes depends not on the characters them-
selves but, rather, on the functions they perform:

> The functions of monster and hero are far more frequently repre-
> sented by males and the function of victim far more garishly by
> females. The fact that female monsters and female heroes, when
> they do appear, are masculine in dress and behaviour (and often
> even name), and that male victims are shown in feminine postures
> at the moment of their extremity, would seem to suggest that gen-
> der inheres in the function itself—that there is something about
> the victim function that wants manifestation in a female, and
> something about the monster and hero functions that wants ex-
> pression in a male. Sex, in this universe, proceeds from gender,
> not the other way around. A figure does not cry and cower be-
> cause she is a woman; she is a woman because she cries and cow-
> ers. And a figure is not a psychokiller [sic] because he is a man; he
> is a man because he is a psychokiller [sic]. (Clover 12–13)

While noting that, in myth, it can be said that there are only two char-
acters or functions, the masculine active being that penetrates closed
spaces and the immobile feminine being that represents the space to be
penetrated, Clover still aims to highlight that the distribution of gender
roles in horror is "more complicated" (13). It is indeed even more com-
plicated when trying to apply the same theory outside the slasher genre
and onto, for example, the previously mentioned paranormal or psycho-
logical horror films. Here it may be more suitable to ascribe the "femi-
nine" to victims of possession and the possessed loci—as is also noted by
Clover in her analysis of *Poltergeist* (66). The examples given in this paper
feature victims struggling to find their way out of possessed bathrooms,
enchanted woods, and confined apartments. The entities terrorizing them
in such spaces appear as shape-shifting and demonic women whose phys-
ical existence, that of crones whose sexuality is made explicit and asser-
tive, strikes the viewer as uncanny and disturbing. Displaying the aged
female bodies in sexual contexts is abject in itself since, as Sobchack
comments, it evokes "the horror and fear of an inappropriate and trans-
gressive sexual desire that lingers through the very process of aging, phys-

ical degradation, and decay" (337). With this in mind and taking Clover's theory on the slasher as a starting point, this paper shall now turn to analyzing sexuality and the aged female body in the film *X*.

3. The Female Body in Ti West's *X*

The persistence of female ageing and sexuality in contemporary horror has been made highly apparent with the recent release of the film *X* (2022), written, directed, and produced by Ti West and staring Mia Goth in the dual role of protagonist and antagonist. The film provides a modern exploration of the notions of beauty, sex, and ageing in the context of the slasher subgenre. Filmed in a manner visually likening it to Tobe Hooper's 1974 horror *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, *X* is set in 1979 and follows a group of young men and women travelling from Houston to a rural and more affordable county to make a pornographic film. The cast and crew consist of performers Maxine, Bobby-Lynne, and Jackson; Wayne, who is the head of the project and Maxine's boyfriend; and film students RJ and his girlfriend, Lorraine. The farm where they intend to shoot their film belongs to the elderly couple Pearl and Howard, with Howard, unaware of their plans, expressing his distrust towards Wayne and the crew, and Pearl observing them from the house.

A technical detail that must be noted is the fact that the same actress, Mia Goth, plays both Maxine and Pearl, whereby Pearl's character is created with the help of heavy prosthetic makeup and generally low lighting. The metatextual casting choice conveys the first of many examples of mirroring between the two characters. Goth, who, in an interview, claims that she herself saw Pearl and Maxine as "the same woman in many ways," collaborated with the designers and sculptors of Pearl's prosthetics in order to abate the more monstrous effects: "There was a time when we were doing the prosthetics and we really pushed it. She didn't look human at all . . . I said to Ti, 'That doesn't interest me. That just doesn't interest me as an actor.' We scaled it back a little bit and we found the right balance that worked for the film" (qtd. in Erbland). In another interview,

Brittany Snow, who plays Bobby-Lynne, comments on Goth's technique and how her ability to shift between the two characters impacted her on set: "It was very strange. I had to really look at Pearl, and I couldn't see Mia. That's a mark of a great actress, but also, it's the mark of just how terrifying this character was. It was really easy to play off of, too. I completely forgot I was working with Mia. It was amazing" (qtd. in Juvet). Another example, on the textual level, where the two characters are linked can also be seen in the repetition of identical lines, hinting at the film's topic of desire, spoken by both Maxine, who refers to fame, and Pearl, who refers to Maxine: "I'm sick and tired of never getting what I want" (00:08:21; 01:28:34).

The first point of contact between Pearl and Maxine happens from afar; Maxine is leaving the car and, as she looks through the car window towards the window of the old couple's house, she notices a shadowy figure staring at her. An over-the-shoulder shot from Pearl's room shows Maxine walking away and glancing back at the house. She expresses her distaste for people who look at her several times in the film, for instance, when referencing or speaking to Lorraine: "People who stare give me the heebie-jeebies" (00:09:12), "What are you looking at? . . . Ain't nobody ever teach you not to stare? It's rude" (00:45:35–00:45:45). Despite being a stripper and pornographic actress, Maxine's reactions to others looking at her and observing her indicate a possible anxiety regarding her physical appearance and aspirations, which she combats by using cocaine and repeating self-affirming mantras in the mirror.

The proper meeting between Maxine and Pearl takes place as the other crew members begin shooting their film, and it is once more layered by the mirroring of the two characters. In her work "A Theory of Narrative Empathy" Suzanne Keen references a type of neurons known as "mirror neurons," that is, "neurons that fire both when an action is executed and when it is observed being performed by someone else" (qtd. in Gallese 3). According to Keen's theory on empathy (which she also describes as the precursor to sympathy), in the literary context:

> Character identification often invites empathy, even when the fic-
> tional character and reader differ from one another in all sorts of
> practical and obvious ways, but empathy for fictional characters
> appears to require only minimal elements of identity, situation,
> and feeling, not necessarily complex or realistic characterization.
> (Keen 214)

Continuing on how character identification can provoke a sense of empa-
thy (and thus potentially sympathy) in the reader, the author says the fol-
lowing:

> Specific aspects of characterization, such as naming, description,
> indirect implication of traits, reliance on types, relative flatness or
> roundness, depicted actions, roles in plot trajectories, quality of at-
> tributed speech, and mode of representation of consciousness
> may be assumed to contribute to the potential for character identi-
> fication and thus for empathy. (216)

It can thus be argued that the mirroring techniques between characters
(including literal mirroring in what follows) can be used to elicit empathy
for an antagonist such as Pearl. Namely, viewers are slowly introduced to
Pearl during her first meeting with Maxine. On the one level, their meet-
ing parallels the plot of the first scene of the pornographic film ("The
Farmer's Daughters"), which features Jackson and Bobby-Lynne, who are
filming it while Maxine and Pearl are together. As Jackson's character is
invited into a house by the farmer's daughter, so does Pearl invite Maxine
into her home. Scenes of lemonade being offered shift from an erotic en-
counter in "The Farmer's Daughters"—underlined by a typical 1970s
pornographic film score—to Maxine's silent and awkward encounter with
Pearl, where Maxine forces herself to drink the entire glass of lemonade
in one gulp so as to leave the table as soon as possible (00:33:55). Here,
Pearl's features are barely visible in the dark kitchen; she is a skeletal
grey-haired woman, possibly in her late eighties, who slowly guides Max-
ine through a hallway in order to show her photographs from her youth.
Ageing, the primary theme of *X*, is made explicit for the first time at this
point, and the concept is overtly referenced throughout the film. While

showing Maxine photographs from her youth, Pearl speaks for the first time on screen:

> I was young once too. It was taken right before the first war. Believe it or not, my Howard served in both. He survived the trenches at Omaha Beach. There wasn't anything he wouldn't do for me back then. That's the power of beauty. I was a dancer in those early years. But then the war came, so. . . . Not everything in life turns out how you expect. (00:34:55–00:35:39)

Finally, the melancholy scene takes an eerie turn when Pearl walks Maxine towards a mirror in front of which they both stand and observe each other, with their reflected images separated by a stair post, and, as the characters in "The Farmer's Daughters" begin to have sex, Pearl caresses an alarmed Maxine's breast.

After taking cocaine in front of a mirror again, Maxine leaves to shoot her scene with Jackson in the barn, where she is, unbeknownst to her or the crew, spied on by Pearl. In what can be described as a fantasy segment, images of Maxine having sex are intercut with scenes of Pearl having sex in her place (00:42:49–00:42:58). The brief close-up shots of Pearl show her age spots, greyish translucent skin, as well as the heavy blue eyeshadow she applied after her encounter with Maxine. In a more macabre sense, Pearl's attempt at beautifying herself is reminiscent of an extreme version of what Linda Dittmar calls "women of a certain age," that is, those "whose emaciated body, made-up 'lifted' face, and firmly permed and sprayed bleached hair invoke the craft of the mortician as much as that of the beautician" (72).

The midway turning point of the film occurs as Pearl returns to the house and attempts to seduce Howard, when the viewer learns that, due to his old age and weak heart, Howard is too afraid to have sex, resulting in him leaving Pearl alone in the room. In the aftermath of the rejection, Pearl is shown as a woman who is unhappy due to her aged body preventing her from ever achieving what she desires. Describing Pearl's sense of frustration, Sobchack contends that "in a sexist as well as ageist technoculture, the visibly aging body of a woman has been and still is es-

pecially terrifying—not only to the woman who experiences self-revulsion and anger, invisibility and abandonment, but also to the men who find her presence so unbearable that they must—quite literally—'disavow' her" (343).

What follows is a scene showing the young cast and crew discussing their own youth and beauty, while also considering the frustration of elderly people, like Pearl and Howard, who cannot perform sexually. As Bobby-Lynne begins to sing "Landslide" by Fleetwood Mac, the view turns into a split-screen showing a dejected Pearl removing her makeup, taking off her clothes, and going to bed alone listening to the lyrics: "But time makes you bolder / Even children get older / And I'm gettin' older too" (00:49:50–00:50:10). This scene makes explicit the point argued in this paper, namely, that *X*, in its empathy-invoking techniques, explores a dimension thematically and structurally different from the one that may be expected in classic slashers. To return to a quote by Clover:[1]

> [H]orror movies spend a lot of time looking at women, and in first-person ways that do indeed seem well described by Mulvey's "sadistic-voyeuristic" gaze. But the story does not end there. A standard horror format calls for a variety of positions and character sympathies in the early phases of the story. . . . In fact, horror's system of sympathies transcends and preexists any given example. Patrons of a slasher film or a rape-revenge film know more or less what to expect well before the film rolls, and at least one horror director (William Friedkin) has suggested that their emotional engagement with the movie begins while they are standing in line. (8-9)

The first point, that the film focuses on looking at women and at first calls for character sympathies, obviously holds true for *X*. However, a voyeuristic gaze from the point of view of an older woman and the one which situates the older woman as an object, as well, may disrupt the

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[1] It must be noted that this paper does not intend to argue that *X* is the first slasher to break away from the convention, and it is important to keep in mind that Clover's study focuses on films starting in the mid-1970s and was first published in 1992.

pre-existing expectations of the genre. If patrons of slasher films can expect that they will, in some way, empathize with the movie's victims, the constant mirroring between scenes of the eventual killer and the victims serves to elicit an unexpected notion of empathy for the killer, as well. In the same vein, this paper argues that *X* also subverts potential expectations regarding the elderly nude female figure in horror. Concretely, while Pearl is abject in the sense that she is, on several levels, Maxine in an old and cadaverous form, the reaction to her as the abject differs from the reactions expected in the films analyzed in the first part of this paper. In a narrative sense, the first half of *X* engenders what Keen calls character identification, which, in turn, allows for a sense of empathy in the viewer. This sense of empathy, and the possibility of related sympathy, distances Pearl's depiction from that of the traditional abject crones of horror.

Following Pearl's rejection, the second part of *X* embraces fully the traditional symbolism and iconography of the slasher. The first victim is RJ, who, following an argument with his girlfriend, breaks down in the shower in a scene positioning him as the female victim in Alfred Hitchcock's 1960 *Psycho*. He decides to leave the farm by himself in the middle of the night but is stopped by Pearl dressed in a white nightgown. As the radio plays "(Don't Fear) The Reaper" by the Blue Öyster Cult, RJ leaves the car to check on Pearl, who embraces and then attempts to kiss him. Rather than being horrified, however, RJ is confused and offers to help Pearl find Harold. Pearl responds to his rejection by stabbing RJ in the throat with a knife and, as the music plays louder, mounts his body and begins stabbing his neck repeatedly in motions referencing Norman Bates once again, drenching her nightgown and the car headlights in blood (00:59:30–01:00:33). RJ, who had already entered the realm of the feminine during the shower scene, dies by being penetrated by the slasher's ultimate phallic symbol. As explained by Clover, "Knives . . . are personal extensions of the body that bring attacker and attacked into primitive, animalistic embrace" (32).

Following RJ's disappearance, the remaining farm guests are slowly killed by Pearl and Harold, primarily due to the fact that their first instinct is to offer help to the senior man or woman, rather than doubt their intentions. In a symbolic death sequence, Wayne is the second person to be killed, again by being penetrated by Pearl, this time using a pitchfork to stab the voyeuristic pornographer's eyes as he peeps through a pair of holes in the wall of a dark barn (01:08:46). In turn, Harold traps Lorraine in the basement, where she discovers the body of a naked chained man. The scene makes it clear that Pearl has been collecting victims to fulfil her sexual needs due to Harold's inability to perform. As Harold lures Jackson outside, a naked and bloody Pearl enters Maxine's bed while she is asleep and begins caressing her until Maxine wakes up and screams, causing the old woman to escape.

Nevertheless, the remaining characters still see the elderly couple as confused and hapless, which is why Bobby-Lynne runs towards the naked Pearl wandering on a dock in order to give her a coat and offer assistance: "Are you hurt? I don't see anything. My nana gets confused sometimes as well, I learned all about it. Believe it or not, I even thought about becomin' a nurse one day!" (01:25:02–01:25:15). After being slapped and accused of flaunting her body and sexuality in front of Pearl, Bobby-Lynne retorts with: "It ain't my fault you didn't live the life you wanted," whereupon Pearl shoves her off the dock into an alligator-infested lake. At the same time, while pretending to be lost in the woods, Harold manages to kill Jackson with a shotgun, which is a relatively unpopular weapon for the slasher genre, although it can also be interpreted as a phallic *ersatz* symbol that Harold uses to eliminate the virile pornographic actor. This death is foreshadowed earlier in the film, when Jackson, in talking to Harold about his former career as a soldier in Vietnam, says: "Had enough farmers trying to shoot me for one lifetime" (00:20:35). With all the young people dead except for Maxine and Lorraine, the elderly couple return to the house, and Pearl convinces Harold that he is able to have sex with her.

The geriatric sex scene in *X* is horrific, although perhaps not due to the act itself. It is, in fact, introduced by a romantic conversation between the characters, with Harold reassuring Pearl that he has always found her beautiful, even in her advanced age. The horror of the scene, however, is built by the suspense in the act being played out simultaneously under the couple's bed: Maxine, who has been hiding there, crawls from under the bed and out of the room without being noticed by the couple having sex.

While Maxine manages to free Lorraine from the basement, the latter panics and tries to escape the house while screaming, only to be suddenly shot dead by Harold and Pearl (01:33:44). As was the case with the other symbolic deaths, that is, the director dying in a scene referencing Alfred Hitchcock, the pornographer being stabbed through the eyes, and the Vietnam veteran being shot by a farmer, Lorraine's death occurs only after her character's transformation. Namely, throughout the film Lorraine is depicted as shy, quiet, and uncomfortable around the pornographic actors, which leads to her being nicknamed "Church Mouse" by Wayne. However, the moment she is able to scream out her fear and frustration, she creates enough noise for the killers to hear and easily eliminate her.

After murdering Lorraine, Harold suffers a heart attack and dies, leaving Maxine and Pearl confronting each other, once again, in front of the same mirror as in the first half of the film. In yet another conversation that conflates the two characters, Pearl states the following: "You don't think I know who you really are? I saw what you did in the barn. You're a deviant little whore. We're the same. You'll end up just like me" (01:35:42–01:35:54). The meaning behind these lines can, of course, be manifold; Maxine and Pearl are both "deviant" sexually, they have a shared dream of fame, their characters are portrayed by the same actress, and Maxine also fears losing her youth with time. Finally, Pearl attempts to shoot Maxine with Harold's shotgun but she misses and shoots the mirror, and the blast launches her frail body through the door and onto the ground. With their mirror images now shattered, Maxine escapes into

the truck and kills Pearl by running her head over twice, after which she quotes Pearl's line from their first meeting: "It'll be our secret" (01:38:12).

4. Conclusion

Depictions of women in horror have provided countless opportunities for analysis. On the one hand, the genre's misogyny in brutalizing young female victims is often highlighted, and popular tropes combining such victims with scenes involving sex and/or nudity foster these commonly-held views. On the other hand, horror and its slasher subgenre are unique in the fact that they also feature young heroines, known as "final girls," as survivors with whom the predominantly younger male audience identi-fies.

Age and ageism, however, provide another dimension for criticism. Taking this into account, it becomes apparent how terror is often elicited by female transgression. Elderly women are the crones and hags of hor-ror; their very bodies—excessively marked by ageing—are abject by vir-tue of their existence, and their sexuality disturbs order. Thus, to depict the nude elderly body as monstrous and malicious, the genre has tradi-tionally employed characters such as the woman-ghost from *The Shining* and *Doctor Sleep*, the witch from *The Witch: A New-England Folktale*, or Mrs. Kersh from *It Chapter Two*.

Yet another way of depicting the elderly female villain can be seen in the slasher *X*. Pearl, an old woman and the primary killer, is depicted in scenes of nudity and sex, with special attention drawn to signs that point to her advanced age. She disturbs order by vehemently refusing to be un-noticed and demanding that her sexual needs be fulfilled. However, the filming techniques, such as the numerous ways of mirroring the killer and the survivor, diegetic music, or exposition, provide roundness and depth to Pearl's character, thereby challenging the viewer's preconceived ideas and inviting them to empathize with the killer. This, in turn, subverts common expectations of slasher moviegoers, provokes sympathy, and

ultimately leads to the questioning of the previously held notions of ab-
jection.

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The Emergence of the "Final Girl" in Stephen King's *The Shining*

Abstract

Female characters have a prominent role in Gothic literature as women tend to be the primary readers of this genre. In the beginning, Gothic literature nourished the literary tropes of the damsel in distress and the heroic persona, which was a role reserved exclusively for male protagonists. Moreover, not only were female characters consistently dependent on their male counterparts, who heroically liberated them from villains, but also the death of a male protagonist would entirely jeopardize the female character and frequently resulted in her enormous grief or tragic demise. Yet, following the emergence of modern Gothic literature, female characters have evolved into central characters and acquired the title of the "final girl," the term denoting a female character that survives despite all odds. This chapter discusses the emergence of the "final girl" trope in Stephen King's horror novel *The Shining* (1977).

1. Introduction

The need for a more complex investigation into the role of female characters in literature stems from the fact that some genres, such as Gothic

literature, have a large female readership, which has increased female characters' significance and popularity. Despite this, traditional Gothic literature nourished stereotypical gender roles by generating the trope of the damsel in distress and that of the heroic persona, which was a role reserved exclusively for the male protagonist. In line with the traditional gender hierarchy, female characters existed as shadow characters, utterly dependent on male protagonists and their impeccable ability to overcome a villain. On the other hand, the advent of feminist criticism has brought about a change within the Gothic genre, marked by the rejection of traditional gender norms, openness towards feminism, sexuality, and gender equality, and the emergence of a dominant female character that withstands male tyranny. This character came to be known as the "final girl." At the core, the "final girl" is wise, independent, and able to "defeat the monster" all by herself, which makes her the center of the story. However, the role of the "final girl" character tends to be unobtrusive until the climax of the plot is reached, when she is confronted with utter havoc on one hand and salvation of herself and others on the other.

This chapter will analyze the importance of the "final girl" trope in contemporary Gothic literature on the example of Wendy Torrance, the character from Stephen King's novel *The Shining* (1977). The first part of the analysis will provide insight into the traditional and modern female roles in Gothic literature, whereas the second part will discuss Wendy's dual characterization—as both a traditional Gothic character and the "final girl." Alongside this, it will also trace Wendy's transition towards the "final girl" character and examine its impact on the other characters and the overall plot development.

2. The Female Role in Gothic Literature

Gothic literature presents a literary style that focuses on the exploration of terror and the sublime coupled with estranged emotions, deranged behavioral patterns, and eerie entities located in a relatively familiar and mundane territory (Punter 2–3). As such, the term Gothic literature can

be applied to any form of literature in which horror abounds, from the supernatural to the bizarre, or even violent, regardless of the specific historical period or architectural setting (Tombleson 83). Alongside this, Gothic literature is always based on "the other literary form from whose *grave* it arises" (Kligour qtd. in Gamer 9). In other words, it is woven into every genre, without necessarily being the center of any of them. From its origin, Gothic literature has dealt with the marginality of human existence and, as such, has been open to cultural transition and acceptance of queerness, femininity, and otherness. Ultimately, due to its topics of interest, the Gothic has ceaselessly drawn both praise and condemnation, subjecting itself to changes, inclusivity, and multiple interpretations of the characters and their world:

> But just as living organisms evolve, so do genres. When the cultural environment which produced the niche changes, the genre must change with it. . . . It is my hypothesis that this shifting of literary niches, including the birth of new genres out of old, cannot be explained in purely formal terms, as the opening and exhausting of structural possibilities. Such changes must have been at least partly the result of a complex interaction between producers and consumers, between authors on the one hand and audiences and publishers on the other. (Richter qtd. in Gamer 30)

The portrayal of female characters in Gothic literature evolved conjointly with the common understanding of the genre and its social acceptance. Firstly, the female characters were considered a trivial necessity—helpless, voiceless, and utterly dependent on their male counterparts. As the genre developed and secured its role as a medium of the oppressed and voiceless, it quickly captured the interest of various feminist critics and authors who helped place, reformulate, and reignite interest in the Gothic among the readership.[1] Female reformation of the traditional

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[1] Gilbert and Gubar name Ann Radcliffe, Jane Austen, Mary Shelley, Charlotte Brontë, and Emily Dickinson as the most influential women in Gothic literature. Alongside this, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Sylvia Plath, Ellen Moers, and Simone de

Gothic genre was "concerned with expressing the inexpressible in female experience" (Gilbert and Gubar 59), more precisely, with women's involuntary subjugation in a male-oriented society and their inability to express their identities. In the following sub-chapters, the metamorphosis from a traditional female Gothic character to a fully independent modern Gothic heroine will be theoretically explored and explained.

2.1. Female Characters in Traditional Gothic Literature

Even though, due to its interest in the unknown depicted in a familiar setting, Horace Walpole's novel *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) excels as the first Gothic novel, it is believed that it was Ann Radcliffe who popularized the Gothic form of writing due to her revolutionary (de)construction of female characters. Robert Miles advocates that the crucial and fundamental drive of Radcliffe's literary expression is "the creation of imaginative space for her heroines" (111), who strive for individualism and equality in a male-centered society. Based on the distinction between Walpole's and Radcliffe's prototype, scholars have established two approaches to Gothic writing—the "male Gothic" and the "female Gothic." Both of these approaches revolve around the hero's and heroine's respective role in literature, their representation in plot development, and differentiation in Gothic works.

In order to understand the depth of portrayal of females in Gothic literature, one must consider its role in the male and the female Gothic writings. According to Miles, the male Gothic and the female Gothic served as a pseudonym attributed to works either created or profoundly inspired by the differing schools of Radcliffe and Lewis, respectively (95). In the male Gothic, which is believed to be traditional and "true Gothic" (Miles 183), a dominant male figure acquires the role of a hero, a selfless protector, and an embodiment of masculinity, whereas the female charac-

Beauvoir are mentioned as representatives of modern feminist criticism (Gilbert and Gubar 83–92).

ter is seen as "captured, fettered, trapped, even buried alive" (Gilbert and Gubar 83). The formulaic approach found in the male Gothic suggests that the title of a "hero" can be attributed only to a character that is exclusively male, dominant, and able to "defeat the monster" and protect the heroine. Having this in mind, Nabi indicates that the male Gothic thrives on the negative representation of women, whereby female characters fluctuate between being unnatural and artificial, either the "predator" or the "victim," but are always negative and exclusively subjected to the patriarchal ideology in the end (73–75). Carroll elaborates on the codependency of male and female characters in the male Gothic by stating that the primordial need to save the heroine rises from the uncontrivable male dominance and sexual desire: "The abduction of women—often as a thinly veiled euphemism for rape—might be seen as the articulation of an enduring sexist warning that women should keep in line because they always are and ought to be at the mercy of males in patriarchal society" (196). On the other hand, Buckley maintains that horror writings, especially of male production, allow the "exploration of sexuality, perversity, monstrosity" (127), and extreme ideas about gender, which enables them "to critique the polarization of women through binary sexual categories such as virgin and whore, victim and monster" (Buckley 126).

The female Gothic arises as a response to the male Gothic and its worldview. Even though Ellen Moers coined the term "the female Gothic" to refer to "a genre written by women for women," Ann Radcliffe popularized the genre and remains noted as its most famous representative (Moers qtd. in Miles 96). As such, the female Gothic presents a change in the understanding of the role of women in all categories of their existence, including "individual and collective anxieties about women, their sexuality, and the structures of authority which manage them and in which they participate" (Gildersleeve 94). The Radcliffean paradigm of the female Gothic showcases heroines who commonly try to save themselves from a violent male figure. The female Gothic overturns the male Gothic characterization by substituting the protector hero type

with that of an antihero and homewrecker who is prone to violence and destruction (Buckley 128). Moreover, as Alison Milbank explains, the female Gothic ultimately revolves around "subjectivity of the endangered, aristocratic heroine as its hermeneutic, and charts her incarceration in castle or convent" (86). For example, the Radcliffean heroine is put on dangerous trials, where her body goes through mutilation, violation, and possibly death, but she ultimately "resists, succeeds in escaping the tyrant's power" (Milbank 86), and overshadows the male figures in the narrative.

In addition to male-female relationships in the female Gothic, one should also take into consideration problematic female-female relationships, particularly the fundamental mother-daughter relationship. Roberta Rubenstein argues that the female Gothic is wrongly associated with exclusively opposite-sex relationships as the only source of trauma. Moreover, she suggests, "traditional elements of the Gothic genre are elaborated in particular ways, notably through the central character's troubled identification with her good/bad/dead/mad mother . . . , and her imprisonment in a house that, mirroring her disturbed imaginings, expresses her ambivalent experience of entrapment and longing for protection" (Rubenstein 312). Ultimately, the creation of the modern Gothic heroine, known as the "final girl," indicates the quintessential role of the female Gothic in the portrayal of a young woman, torn between a psychotic lover and an unstable motherly figure.

2.2. Female Characters in Modern Gothic Literature

Modern Gothic literature of the twentieth century has introduced major changes in the understanding of traditional Gothic tropes. The urbanization of Gothic settings has impacted plot development and literary characters, changing their physical appearances, traits, and perception of danger. In an attempt to define the "final girl" trope, Catherine Spooner indicates that it revolves around a female protagonist who undergoes agonizing trials and possesses the characteristics of a traditional Gothic hero (99). In the same vein, Alexandria West maintains that the "final girl" is

either a literary or a cinematographic character "who survives the events . . . though usually at some great cost to her mental health or selfhood" (16). The arrival of the modern Gothic heroine indicates a cultural reset based on the image of "an angry woman" (Clover 17) who is simultaneously the victim and the hero (Clover 17). As such, the "final girl" trope disrupts the established gender roles, making women delicate and dangerous at the same time. This is in sharp contrast to the traditional gender dynamics. As Spooner contends, "'Girl Power' was a kind of oxymoron: girls are a social group consistently constructed as powerless" and as such were never expected to be equalized with men (100).

A more precise observation of female portrayal in the modern Gothic suggests that the "final girl" is "an embodiment of trauma" (West 16) from the beginning of the plot to its end. At the beginning of the plot, the female character is usually either naïve or in a state of domestic bliss, whereas, as the action progresses, the trauma from the past unravels, making the heroine susceptible to her repressed past, a tyrannical male figure, and the danger that she is exposed to. Despite the gender reset, the formulaic aspect of the Gothic plot—"the castle, the villain, the heroine's capture and escape" (Jones 168)—has remained the same in the modern Gothic. However, major changes can be observed in the portrayal of a modernized setting, which became known as "The Terrible Place."[2] Nowadays, the heroine carries the moral duty to save those in danger at the cost of her own life, which was rarely the case in male-oriented Gothic writings. As West notes, the heroine "alone looks death in the face, but she alone also finds the strength either to stay the killer long enough to be rescued (ending A) or to kill him herself (ending B)" (47–48). Even though the heroine can be rescued, she never passively spends her time in hiding. Usually, the heroine vocalizes the need for help, as she remains in combat or lures the monster, while other unharmed characters are sent for help. In the alternative ending, the heroine

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[2] The "terrible place" is defined as "a psychical location such as a house or specific room where trauma lives" (Spooner 220).

single-handedly kills her adversary, which allows for a dual interpretation. At first, the killing is seen as a physical act in which the heroine gains victory in a fight to the death. On the other hand, a metaphorical analysis can suggest that the act of killing is an overthrow of patriarchy and a deconstruction of the Victorian "angel in the house" stereotype. Ultimately, it can be said that the "final girl" trope was created to promote female empowerment as well as to shed light on the importance of equality. Based on the premise that female characters "are not simply battling an unkillable killer, [but] are [also] fighting against societal norms and expectations" (Spooner 22), the role of Wendy Torrance as the "final girl" in Stephen King's *The Shining* will be analyzed in further sub-chapters.

3. Subversion of Female Character(s) in *The Shining*

Stephen King's *The Shining* is a novel with a limited number of characters, a singular setting, and a one-season time frame. According to Tony Magistrale, *The Shining* "presents a microcosmic view of postmodern America, providing the reader with a journey to the center of a post-Watergate heart of darkness" (16). Following the established pattern of disclosing recurring social problems and trauma, King sheds light on domestic violence, addiction, gender roles, and the socioeconomic status of his characters. From the opening sequences of the novel, he accentuates the marginality of the character types, setting them in an "overlooked" place known as the Overlook Hotel. A linguistic analysis of the noun "overlook" suggests that it is either something estranged and isolated, like the building itself, or something constantly overlooked, such as discrimination, marginality, and abuse. As Magistrale contends, "*The Shining* is . . . a scathing critique of patriarchal abuses. In the male-centered universe of the Overlook, women, children, and ethnic minorities are subsequently disenfranchised and marginalized" (101).

Despite a limited number of characters portrayed in the novel, King creates a dominantly male-oriented atmosphere in which the hunter (father) and the prey (son) are simultaneously a danger, endangered, and in

need of rescue. It can be argued that the Overlook itself is an embodiment of a predatory male as it exclusively tends and nourishes the male characters, overlooking the female ones and turning their male counterparts against them. Another key aspect in understanding the subversion in *The Shining* is the omnipresent isolation that is universal and individual. The male character, Jack Torrance, shares the trauma with the other white male inhabitants, predominantly the former caretaker, whereas the female character, Wendy Torrance, is a solitary character. It can be said that Jack subconsciously relates to the other former male inhabitants of the Overlook as he admires their masculinity and ambition, whereas Wendy, Hallorann, and Danny present the weaker, vulnerable, and dependent characters who do not chase the ideals of the American dream:

> Jack Torrance is attracted to the dead white males that inhabit the Overlook for exactly the reasons that Wendy, Hallorann, and Danny are not: his core definition of masculinity is exclusively aligned with status, career, and access to the trappings of privileged success—prestige, money, women, alcohol, and a reckless—particularly American sense of masculine independence. (Magistrale 227)

As stated before, *The Shining* does not host a great number of characters but, rather, it hosts prototypes of characters that are societally and timelessly recognizable. The description of male characters, precisely Jack and Danny, is almost utterly devoid of their physical characteristics, and emphasis is placed on their inwardness. On the other hand, Wendy is described as blond and beautiful with the worries typical of an average wife and mother: "She hung the dish towel over the bar by the sink and went downstairs, buttoning the top two buttons of her house dress" (King, *The Shining* 25). King indicates Wendy's voicelessness and submissiveness through her inability to openly oppose Jack's ideas. Even though she is concerned about the future, from the outside, she appears confident and conforms to Jack's ideas: "If it's what your father wants, it's what I want" (King, *The Shining* 29).

Even though Wendy is not the only female character in the novel, she is by far the most prominent one. Through Jack's investigation of the hotel's basement and the initial stories of the former caretaker and his family, the readers are introduced to the Grady family and learn that Delbert Grady, the father, murdered his daughters with a hatchet and his wife with a shotgun (King, *The Shining* 21). Yet, there is no additional information about these female characters except for the fact that they were too fragile to save themselves and survive in the Overlook, which correlates with the portrayal of Wendy's submissiveness and dependence from the beginning of the story: "All of em up in the west wing on the third floor, froze solid. Too bad about the little girls. Eight and six, they was. Cute as cut-buttons. Oh, that was a hell of a mess" (King, *The Shining* 38). The next sections of this chapter will explore Wendy as a paradigmatic female character in *The Shining*. The first sub-chapter will examine Wendy as a traditional Gothic (female) character, focusing on her submission to the male characters and adherence to the expected gender roles, whereas the second sub-chapter will shed light on Wendy as a modern Gothic character, commonly known as the "final girl."

3.1. Wendy Torrance as a Traditional Gothic Character

According to Punter and Byron, Female characters in traditional Gothic writings "represent and investigate women's fears about a restrictive and sometimes threatening domestic space" in which they are voiceless and subjected to their male counterparts (212). In the same vein, Colavito argues that the Gothic genre thrives on male writings in which female characters are always ignored, controlled, and repressed, which leads to their inevitable *madness* (137).

In the introductory chapter of *The Shining*, the readers witness a conversation between Mr. Ullman and Jack, in which to Ullman's question, "I asked if your wife fully understood what you would be takin on here" (King, *The Shining* 9), Jack swiftly replies, "Wendy is an extraordinary woman" (King, *The Shining* 9). In the following chapter, it is noted that

Wendy is not aware of their situation but rather conforms to Jack's idea, believing that he is ultimately always right about everything, including the Overlook. At the end of the chapter, Wendy's true feelings are revealed in solitude, indicating her inability to share her fears with anyone. All the male characters are tone-deaf to her struggle, which corresponds to Colavito's interpretation of female anxiety among male characters. Colavito suggests that in the traditional Gothic, the female characters' destiny is to be ignored and that a woman is controlled, repressed, and threatened by a man, who will consequently proclaim her mad (137). Wendy's agonies and fears for the future indicate her fragile role in the marriage with Jack and her unwilling dependency on him as he is the epitome of toxic masculinity in the novel: "The tears which had threatened all day now came in a cloudburst and she leaned into the fragrant, curling steam of the tea and wept. In grief and loss for the past, and terror of the future" (King, *The Shining* 30).

The indication that the Torrances are a patriarchal family becomes obvious when Wendy reveals her husband's propensity for domestic violence: "The handwriting on the wall was brutal but clear. Her husband was a lush. He had a bad temper; one he could no longer keep wholly under control now that he was drinking so heavily and his writing was going so badly" (King, *The Shining* 70).[3] In line with the traditional woman's role in a patriarchal family, Wendy Torrance remains obedient to her husband, even though he is prone to domestic violence: "Accidentally or not accidentally, he had broken Danny's arm" (King, *The Shining* 70). As a victim confronted with "trauma related stimuli that elicits fear and anxiety" (Barlow 66), Wendy ceaselessly produces excuses for Jack's behavior, even though she does not believe in them and holds both himself and herself accountable for past events: "Now she hesitated again. . . . 'Your

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[3] According to Kelly Jones, with the rise of modern Gothic writings, places of torture, such as dungeons, dark passages, castles, and corridors have been abandoned and exchanged for more familiar sceneries. In the contemporary Gothic, domestic homes are shown as sites of disruption and deconstruction of harmony—scenes of narcotics abuse, violence, and open vulnerability and fear (171–72).

daddy . . . sometimes he does things he's sorry for later. Sometimes he doesn't think the way he should. That doesn't happen very often, but sometimes it does'" (King, *The Shining* 28). In response to Jack's violence, alcoholism, and abuse, Wendy considers divorce but never manages to vocalize it. It can be said that Wendy's inability to abandon Jack confirms her role of a subjected and dependent female character in the novel: "That memory was already faded, but the memory of the DIVORCE thoughts was clear and terrifying. It had been mostly around his mommy that time, and he had been in constant terror that she would pluck out the word from her brain and drag it out of her mouth, making it real" (King, *The Shining* 43). Wendy's inability to leave Jack presents a paradox in itself as the character tries not to break the union that is already broken. More precisely, the domestic harmony is broken from the moment Jack hit Danny, but somehow Wendy's concept of it is not altered. In a true traditional Gothic manner, the heroine is convinced that her act would be considered the breaking point, due to which she remains passive. In his analysis of the domestic atmosphere in *The Shining*, Magistrale suggests that the Torrance family mirrors the image of modern America, where "alcoholism and drug abuse suggest all the symptoms of social decay and all the modes of self-destruction" (93), which irrevocably distorts the family as a union.

In the chapter symbolically called *Night Thoughts*, Wendy's past becomes known to the reader. It is disclosed that Wendy's mother blames Wendy for the parents' divorce: ". . . her mother drove her from the house, told her never to come back, that if she wanted to go somewhere she could go to her father since she had been responsible for the divorce" (King, *The Shining* 68). In a sense, "divorce" is not only an intrusive word that frightens Danny the most, but it is also the word that impacts Wendy, as she bears the feelings of guilt for the divorce of her parents. Wendy's disturbed relationship with her mother haunts the present situation: "Even after the accident—if you could call it an accident—she had not been able to bring it all the way out, to admit that her marriage was a lop-

sided defeat" (King, *The Shining* 74). The complexity of the mother-daughter-gothic (anti)hero stems from the patriarchal framework, in which the mother figure may dislike the hero but still wishes for her daughter to conform to expected gender normativity, which corresponds to the (anti)hero's desires: "The Gothic hero-villain and the mother may be said to do the same work as both police the daughter's behavior according to patriarchal prescriptions. While the mother tends to police indirectly, the hero-villain does so more directly. Despite their different modus [sic] operandi, both threaten the protagonist's identity and autonomy" (Davidson 94–95). Moreover, the fact that Wendy's home is built on family secrets, familial violence, and domestic claustrophobia defines Wendy as a married woman who has "no separate legal, social, or economic identity apart from her husband's" (Heller 256).

Wendy's arrival and the events *before the danger* in the Overlook present the ultimate stage in which she can be characterized as a traditional Gothic character. According to Massé, female Gothic characters always dwell between the father's and the husband's house, making them subject to the male-oriented setting and trauma that stems from it: "In the 'real' world of the frame, the woman can exist only in relation to another—usually as a daughter in the beginning and as a bride at the end" (681). In the female Gothic, every house becomes haunted as it projects "the imprisonment and vulnerability of women within structures purportedly designed for or devoted to their safety, especially the family home" (Bailey 273). Anxiety concerning the Overlook increases as Wendy observes harmonious nature that is almost shattered by the view of pointy and sharp mountains: "They were beautiful mountains but they were hard. She did not think they would forgive many mistakes. An unhappy foreboding rose in her throat" (King, *The Shining* 87). It can be suggested that the harmonious nature equalizes domestic bliss from the outside, whereas the pointy mountains suggest a threat that lurks and is merciless, just as her husband is. Coupled with the fear of the unknown, be it in the Overlook or in her marriage, Wendy's arrival at the Overlook is presented with

swirling thoughts concerning Danny's safety: "But what would happen up here if Danny had one of his fainting spells and swallowed his tongue? . . . What if the place caught on fire?" (King, *The Shining* 103). The tensions start rising as Jack becomes subjected to the Overlook and hypersensitive to Wendy's concerns and questions: "At times she could be the stupidest bitch . . . 'Want some water?' she asked brightly. (No I just want you to GET THE FUCK OUT OF HERE!)" (King, *The Shining* 232).

As the action reaches its climax, Wendy Torrance becomes torn between what patriarchy expects from her and what she expects of herself. While a confrontation with Jack signalizes the disruption of an ostensibly stable family, passivity prolongs her agony and puts Danny at greater risk. It should be noted that Wendy is the only character in the novel that neither possesses special powers nor is subjected to the horrors in the Overlook. Following this, Wendy's role as a female character is equally meaningless in her paternal home, in her home with Jack, as it is in the Overlook, which King constructs as "the apotheosis of the Bad Place" (King, *Danse Macabre* 246–47), where "universal forces collide, and the inner weather mimics the outer weather" (King, *Danse Macabre* 260). It can be said that King's idea to set the novel in a place "where the residue of past evils exerts its potency upon the present" (Cardin 637) forces and reshapes the characters in order to prepare them for their ultimate confrontation. As such, Wendy Torrance's metamorphosis to the "final girl" metaphorically divides the novel into two parts: *before the danger* and *during/after the danger.*

3.2. Wendy Torrance as the "Final Girl"

Kyle Christensen defines the modern "final girl" as a not inherently feminist character who breaks the gender expectations of fragile femininity and stands for "female empowerment and determination" (24–25). The significance of the "final girl" in Gothic writings indicates a cultural reset in which female characters can overpower monsters and tyrannical men, who are often portrayed in a similarly predatory manner. An overly vio-

lent, merciless, and male-like behavior that defies the expected fragility and the angelic portrayal of women in literature suggests the ultimate response of the "final girl" trope to the inevitable female *madness*[4] in Gothic literature.

Wendy's psychological and physical transformation occurs in a progressive manner as Jack starts identifying himself with the Overlook. The echoing sentence "(This inhuman place makes human monsters. This inhuman place) . . . (makes human monsters)" (King, *The Shining* 190) stands as a warning to all characters, especially Wendy and Jack, who will soon be deprived of their humanlike traits and be transformed into the worst and merciless versions of themselves. Jack's agitation with the voiceless and almost characterless Wendy culminates when she starts disrupting his male-exclusive unity with the Overlook: "She was prying, just the way she had always pried and poked at him. . . . Where are you going, Jack? When will you be back? How much money do you have with you? . . . Will one of you stay sober? On and on. She had, pardon the expression, driven him to drink" (King, *The Shining* 231).

King's introduction to the final action in the novel starts with the chapter "Snowbound." The characters become deprived of the rest of the world and entirely dependent on themselves. Jack's delirium has gotten worse, as the Overlook whispers monstruous things to him: "—kill him. You have to kill him, Jacky, and her, too. . . . Because they'll always be conspiring against you, trying to hold you back and drag you down. . . . I'll go with you while you give him his medicine . . . You must kill him. You have to kill him, Jacky, and her, too" (King, *The Shining* 295). Even though Wendy does not hear the Overlook, she starts anxiously observing Jack's every move, unable to distinguish harm from accident: "'What? Wendy, what the hell are you t—'Don't you touch him [Danny]! I'll kill you if you lay your hands on him again!' 'Wendy—' 'You bastard!'" (King, *The Shining* 301). The ostensibly secure family dynamic degenerates

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[4] According to Colavito, female *madness* is the inevitable nonconformist female character trait in male Gothic writings (137).

as Jack starts seeing his family as a threat to his happiness (see Cardin 909) and Wendy starts seeing Jack as a predatory man who is foremost a danger to her unprotected child. When Wendy is separated from Jack, she starts considering her options, and the readers get an extensive access into her mind for the first time through a monologue which opens *during the danger* epoch: "Jack had done this, she had no doubt of it. His denials meant nothing to her. . . . But what was she going to do about it? She couldn't stay locked in here forever. They would have to eat" (King, *The Shining* 302). From this point, Wendy abandons the formulaic role of a traditional female character and becomes as equally present and dynamic as her male counterpart and oppressor, Jack.

Jack's monologue after the peaceful night's sleep unravels the chain of unstoppable violent episodes as he itches "to pounce on her, seize her neck . . . and to throttle her, thumbs on windpipe, . . . jerking her head up and ramming it back down against the floorboards, again and again, whamming, whacking, smashing, crashing" (King, *The Shining* 348). It can be said that even though desire came "up from nowhere, naked and unadorned" (King, *The Shining* 348), it was rooted in the novel from the very beginning. Wendy's transformation to a monstruous hero[5] happens suddenly as the realization occurs that she either must find a way to defeat the source of her monstrosity (Clover 4) or embrace the death of her child: "(*If I have to, I'll take him farther up. If we're going to die I'd rather do it in the mountains.*) She had left the butcher knife, still wrapped in the towel, under the bed. She kept her hand close to it. They dozed off and on. The hotel creaked around them" (King, *The Shining* 421). According to Rusnak, the moment in which the "final girl" prepares or takes up her weapon and arms herself indicates her willingness to abdicate the fragility of womanhood and marks her becoming a worthy opponent to the mon-

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[5] The monstrous hero, a term attributed to King's *Carrie*, refers to an oppressed female character who suddenly becomes monstruous for the sole purpose of protecting herself. This type of character is characterized by an unimaginable tendency towards violence that can make her almost demonic and merciless towards the antagonist(s) (Clover 4).

struous male (126). It should be noted that despite her willingness to kill Jack to save herself and Danny, Wendy does not hate him. Jack Torrance is the embodiment of constant duality in *The Shining* as his diametrically opposed behavior reflects the overall action and relations between the characters. Based on this, Wendy is in a constant state of panic, whereby her salvation depends on the ability to properly differentiate Jack's personality shifts from the danger that comes from them. Jack is, firstly, her beloved husband and, secondly, a monster from the Overlook. It is her intellectual superiority that allows her to separate Jack's two forms and decide that the first one must be sacrificed in order to escape the second one.

Before the final confrontation occurs, Wendy reminisces about her former life with Jack and Danny. Despite being aware that it is either her and Danny or Jack and the Overlook, Wendy doubts her role as the "final girl" since, notwithstanding the life-threatening situation in which she is forced to react, she still struggles with the idea that she will be the one who will ruin the family union for good: "Her hand found the handle of the knife and she began to go down. She had seen the end of her marriage many times, in divorce, in Jack's death at the scene of a drunken car. . . . But she had never envisioned herself prowling halls and staircases like a nervous felon, with a knife clasped in one hand to use against Jack" (King, *The Shining* 469). In light of this, one can note that in contrast to male Gothic characters, female characters in Gothic narratives do not strive to become heroes. Through Wendy's character, King demonstrates that female heroism comes imposed, without glorification and as the ultimate resource for salvation:

> What would she do if he came at her right now, she wondered. . . . Would she stand frozen with terror, or was there enough of the primal mother in her to fight him for her son until one of them was dead? She didn't know. The very thought made her sick—made her feel that her whole life had been a long and easy dream to lull her helplessly into this waking nightmare. She was soft. When trouble came, she slept. Her past was unremarkable. She

had never been tried in fire. Now the trial was upon her, not fire
but ice, and she would not be allowed to sleep through this. Her
son was waiting for her upstairs. (King, *The Shining* 471)

During the final confrontation with Jack, Wendy takes two positions.
At first, she is seen as a mediator that verbally tries to encourage Jack to
leave the Overlook and save their child and marriage. As her attempt is
met with agitation and violence, Wendy concludes: "He was going to kill
her, and then he was going to kill Danny. Then maybe the hotel would be
satisfied and allow him to kill himself. Just like that other caretaker"
(King, *The Shining* 476). As Jack attacks Wendy, the remaining idea of the
existing family is shattered for good. As Wendy alone looks death in the
face (West 48), she temporarily overpowers the monster: "Sightlessly,
with the last of her strength, she groped for the bottle's neck and found
it, feeling the greasy beads of wax against her hand. . . . She brought it up
and then down, praying for aim, knowing that if it only struck his shoul-
der or upper arm she was dead" (King, *The Shining* 478). Having this in
mind, Magistrale sheds light on Wendy's role as a female in the male-
oriented Hotel, indicating that her resourcefulness was undermined, as
was her maternal strength (210). As the hunt continues, Wendy's neglect-
ed intelligence, alongside her inhuman strength, plays a crucial part in de-
flecting Jack's assault: "Wendy pushed the pantry door open with her
knee, hardly noticing the pungent odor of dried fruit that wafted out. She
picked up Jack's feet again and dragged him in" (King, *The Shining* 483).
As the action reaches its climax, Wendy and Jack clash one last time.
Even though Jack manages to strike Wendy multiple times with the mal-
let, she does not rest until her child is safe: "She heard the mallet whistle
through the air and then agony exploded on her right side as the mallet-
head took her just below the line of her breasts, breaking two ribs" (King,
The Shining 513).[6]

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[6] King's vivid description of the unpunished domestic violence and his heroine's
efforts to survive in an exclusively patriarchal and voiceless marriage shed light on this
pertinent contemporary issue:

Ultimately, Hallorann's arrival indicates Wendy Torrance's final stage towards becoming the "final girl" as it demonstrates Wendy's willingness to accept outside help because she cannot contribute anymore to the oppressor's destruction. Moreover, the acceptance of the help does not weaken her character but, rather, suggests that she has managed to survive and hurt "the monster," keeping it contained, so that it cannot harm anyone else. Even though she does not always fit the "final girl" trope, Wendy's limitless motherly love and determination to survive despite an almost non-existent chance of survival place her in this category. This is also confirmed in the epilogue chapter, which reveals Wendy Torrance as a renewed character, entirely different from her former self:

> But the change was more than that. She looked older, and some of the laughter had gone out of her face. Now, as she sat reading her book, Hallorann saw a grave sort of beauty there that had been missing on the day he had first met her, some nine months ago. Then she had still been mostly girl. Now she was a woman, a human being who had been dragged around to the dark side of the moon and had come back able to put the pieces back together. But those pieces, Hallorann thought, they never fit just the same way again. Never in this world. (King, *The Shining* 573)

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, through her gradual transgression from an entirely traditional female character to its modern version, the "final girl," the character of Wendy Torrance from Stephen King's horror novel *The Shining* illuminates the evolution of the female role in Gothic literature. At first,

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> And as she caught sight of her own blood-smeared, horrified face in the medicine cabinet mirror, she was glad. She had never believed that children should be witness to the little quarrels of their parents. And perhaps the thing that was now raving through the bedroom, overturning things and smashing them, would finally collapse before it could go after her son. Perhaps, she thought, it might be possible for her to inflict even more damage on it . . . kill it, perhaps. (King, *The Shining* 529)

Wendy is portrayed as a selfless character entirely dependent on the life she has built with her abusive and alcoholic husband, Jack. Yet, once the Torrances have moved to the isolated Overlook, Wendy's disturbed relationships in her parental home as well as Jack's tendency towards violence and her concomitant trauma come to light. It is the exclusively male-oriented Overlook setting that triggers Wendy's metamorphosis into the "final girl." As the Torrances' stay at the Overlook brings about Jack's penchant for domestic violence and his patriarchal tendencies, Wendy abandons her former "angel in the house" traits and reinvents herself as a force-driven monstruous hero. In the ultimate conflict, Wendy—the "final girl"—with the help of an outsider destroys the physical and psychological "monster" and saves herself and her child but is never able to recover her former self.

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Breaking Blackface: African Americans, Stereotypes, and Country Music

Abstract

Country is without a doubt the whitest American genre of music, and the banjo is the most quintessential instrument used in it. Both the musical style and the instrument, however, have their roots in African-American culture. It is widely believed that the blackface minstrel tradition in the nineteenth century not only appropriated and ridiculed African Americans but also eventually alienated them from their own music. This chapter will demonstrate that African-American country music continued to thrive, if not flourish, in the twentieth century. It will also examine how contemporary Black musicians have begun to rescue and redeem their musical heritage from the racist baggage of the past, thereby beginning to break the blackface tradition and legacy. These artists have started to combat the stereotypes surrounding country music and attempt to use this genre as a medium to not only entertain but also educate and enlighten. Particular reference will be made to the old-time/country string band the Carolina Chocolate Drops and the various offshoots and solo projects of its members.

Keywords: Country music, African American culture, stereotypes, alt-country, blackface/minstrelsy tradition

The African-American actors Keegan-Michael Key and Jordan Peele (who have both got on to further fame, especially Peele for his Oscar-nominated horror film *Get Out*) had a series of comedy sketches (*Key and Peele*) in the first half of the 2010s. Many of these sketches touch on controversial themes dealing with race, but arguably one of the most poignant ones is entitled "Is This Country Song Racist." The Peele character is new to the neighborhood and joins the Key character, who expresses his enthusiasm at having another "brother" around in his basement "man-cave." The room is lined with guitars, and the host asks his guest if he can play him a song. Key launches into a country song about a "red-headed girl with freckles" who has to be protected from "homies" from the "wrong side of town." When the Peele character protests that the song is racist, Key appears to be clueless as to the racial stereotypes being perpetuated. He defends the tradition as follows: "You hear the 'twang,' and you assume that it's racist, but that's just what country music is like" (Key and Peele 1:30–1:32). A second song gets even worse, with a list of African-American stereotypes like fried chicken and finally even a reference to "the only hood I like is pointy and white" (Key and Peele 1:55–1:57), an obvious reference to the favorite garb of the KKK. Peele cannot believe his own ears and asks Key to stop. Key once again explains that this is "traditional country music imagery, man, like a pick-up truck, or sleeping under the stars, or your dog got killed or your wife left you" (Key and Peele 2:24–2:29). When Peele is still very much unconvinced, Key accuses him of being a black nationalist extremist. His third song, with the lines "give me a rope, and find me a tree" (Key and Peele 3:09–3:11), is finally too much for Peele, who leaves the house in a rage. Key mutters to himself that this is merely a reference to a tire-swing, although it is obvious to the viewer that the reference is to a lynching. The scene ends with him singing yet another song which references a banjo strumming and a hanging, wherein it finally dawns on him what the songs are about (Key and Peele 3:32–3:33). The skit powerfully captures the visceral, gut reaction of many African-Americans to country music. Key and Peele here humor-

ously touch on an extremely sensitive subject, with there having been a long tradition of country music being associated with blackface minstrel songs and racism in general.

The term country music is clearly problematic. Music from the South, particularly from states such as Kentucky, Tennessee, the Virginias, and the Carolinas, was originally referred to as hillbilly music and was associated with the rural White population. Old-time music was a less derogatory term eventually used by recording companies, when the first commercial recordings were made in the 1920s. Jug bands, using cheap homemade instruments, were initially African-American and began to manifest early blues and jazz elements. String bands is a term used in retrospect for both White and Black groups which focused on the use of banjo and violin primarily. Roots music is a fairly recent blanket term which includes bands and musicians which are influenced by earlier "country" styles and instruments. Alternative (alt) country arose in the 1990s and consisted of performers who had a rock influence and also tended to be on the left politically. Americana is now a Grammy award category which was established in 2009 and distinguished from folk by the use of electric as opposed to acoustic instruments. Blues is equally difficult to precisely define, and many early country stars, both Black and White, such as Jimmie Rodgers, Lead Belly, and Hank Williams, exhibited features of the blues. Folk music is the broadest term of all. Suffice it to say that, for the purposes of this paper, the focus will be on performers singing and playing acoustic instruments such as banjos and, to a lesser extent, guitars occasionally accompanied by percussion.

African-American folk music has experienced numerous waves of assimilation, or better said appropriation, since its very beginnings. The banjo, that most American of instruments in the popular imagination, was actually of African origin and was eventually reassembled, so to speak, in the Americas by slaves. Their African rhythms and instrumentation mixed over time with the folk songs of immigrants, mostly from the British Isles. The blackface minstrel tradition in the nineteenth and early

twentieth centuries not only appropriated and exploited African-American music and culture but also popularized the banjo and eventually turned it into a "respectable" White, middle-class instrument. The established interpretation has been that the overt racism embodied in blackface minstrelsy eventually caused the practical complete rejection of the African-American banjo tradition, not only among African-Americans but also among liberal Whites. There has been, understandably, an ongoing discussion around the cultural value of the music of this period and genre and the question as to whether it should be condoned or condemned.[1] Critics such as Tony Thomas have begun, however, to call into question the established belief that the African-American distancing and alienation from country music, due to the blackface tradition, was all that black and white (pun intended). Thomas repeats the popular belief that "negative images of black banjo playing created by European American minstrelsy and racist propaganda led African Americans to abandon the banjo," only to argue that, paradoxically, "no one can point to a single banjoist who gave up the banjo for this reason" (Thomas 143–44).

Although the blackface/minstrel tradition was, absurdly, an initially all White business, over time, African American musicians were actually allowed to take part in it, albeit sometimes still with extensive employment of black paint to enhance the exaggerated grotesqueness of their features. The most prominent and popular African-American minstrel era composer was James Bland (1854–1911), whose song "Golden Slippers" from 1880 shares great affinities with the Black Spiritual tradition. Known as "the Prince of Negro Songwriters," he successfully shared his music in Europe, in particular in England (Jasen and Jones 10–11). His hit song from 1878 "Carry Me Back to Old Virginny" displays all the usual fea-

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[1] This discussion has included, among others, major artists such as Stephen Foster and Al Jolson. The arguably most comprehensive discussion of the banjo and African American culture and identity is *The Banjo: America's African Instrument* by Laurent Dubois.

tures of minstrel songs, such as a mawkish nostalgia for the "good old days" back on the plantation and the idealization of the old social order:

> Carry me back to old Virginny.
> There's where the cotton and corn and taters grow.
> There's where the birds warble sweet in the spring-time.
> There's where this old darkey's heart am long'd to go.
>
> There's where I labored so hard for old Massa,
> Day after day in the field of yellow corn;
> No place on earth do I love more sincerely
> Than old Virginny, the state where I was born.
>
> ("Carry Me Back to Old Virginny Lyrics")

The lyrics are even more disturbing when one realizes that this was written by an actual African-American. Blunt was obviously very much aware of what sells (Jasen and Jones 8–13). The song was actually the state song of Virginia from 1940 to 1997.

Claude McKay, a key figure in the Harlem Renaissance, wrote a novel titled *Banjo* in 1929, which documents Black people from the Americas living in Europe, like James Bland, in order to escape prejudice and oppression.[2] The main protagonist, a banjo playing musician by the name of Banjo, plies his trade in the cafés and bars of Marseilles. At one point, he gets into an argument with his friend Goosey about the symbolism and significance of the banjo as an instrument. Goosey, an African American, is aware of the racist connotations associated with the banjo and cannot understand why his friend continues to play this tainted instrument:

> No, Banjo is bondage. It's the instrument of slavery. Banjo is Dixie. The Dixie of the land of cotton and massa and missus and black mammy. We coloured folks have got to get away from all that in these enlightened progressive days. Let us play piano and violin, harp and flute. Let the white folks play the banjo if they

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[2] This phenomenon continued of course with African-American jazz musicians in the 1960s, the most prominent examples being Dexter Gordon or Ben Webster.

> want to keep on remembering all the Black Joes singing and the
> hell they made them live in. (McKay 90)

Banjo, however, argues that the history of appropriation does not apply to him and insists on claiming it as his own. "'That ain't got nothing to do with me, nigger,' replied Banjo. 'I play that theah instrument becaz I likes it. I don't play no Black Joe hymns. I play lively tunes'" (McKay 90). This obstinate position, refusing to reject the instrument and the music associated with it due to it having been tainted by the minstrel tradition, was not, it seems, as uncommon as we have been led to believe. Elijah Wald, in his book on Robert Johnson and the development of the Blues, counters the argument about Black people being "universally sensitive to the horrors of minstrelsy as some people like to believe":

> [N]umerous writers have stated that the banjo fell out of favor
> with black musicians because of its racist, minstrel associations,
> but this makes little sense when one considers that the most so-
> phisticated black groups of the period, the orchestras of Louis
> Armstrong, Duke Ellington and Jelly Roll Morton, continued to
> use banjos until amplification made the guitar viable in a bigger
> band setting. (Elijah Wald 49)

Karen Linn, in her book on the banjo in popular culture, provides a more pragmatic, practical explanation for the gradual disappearance of Black banjo players and African-American country music in general, this being due to economics: "There are several reasons for the poor documentation of African-American hillbilly music. The recording companies wanted to keep their 'race' and 'hillbilly' offerings distinct for marketing purposes; they concentrated on the blues and left black string bands largely unrecorded" (Linn 139). Whatever explanation or combination of factors we give credence to, the fact remains that the banjo and country music eventually became associated, almost exclusively, with "White folks."

Borrowing a term from a short story by Joseph Conrad,[3] the following section will look at African-American musicians who served as "secret sharers" or ghost writers for more popular White musicians. In some cases, these involve mostly unknown or obscure Black musicians who tutored future White musical stars on the guitar or the harmonica, introducing them to a rich tradition which was often unrecorded and unrecognized. This was the case with, for example, Hank Williams, who met African-American Rufus "Tee-tot" Payne at the age of eight. Country, folk, and rock and roll legends from the South, such as Woody Guthrie, Johnny Cash, Elvis, and Carl Perkins, all acknowledged their early indebtedness to Black singers and musicians they came across during their childhood and adolescence. Robert Cray's description of Woody Guthrie's childhood could serve as a template for almost all the country/folk/rock and roll White superstars: "He spent hours listening to the black shoeshine man at the barbershop" (Cray 49).

The legendary Carter Family is often given credit for authoring hundreds of classic country and folk standards which are still covered today. A. P. Carter was, however, initially adept at discovering and adopting songs which were popular, sung, and played in and around his home state of Virginia. When he began to run low on resources at the beginning of the 1930s, he enlisted the assistance of the African-American guitar player Lesley Riddle, who accompanied him on his song-gathering travels. Riddle would apparently learn the tune from a local source, and Carter would write down the lyrics (Zwonitzer and Hirshberg 131). Not only was Riddle essential as part of the song-collecting team but he also apparently influenced Maybelle Carter's guitar playing style: "When A.P. brought Lesley Riddle around to the rehearsals, Maybelle sat and listened to him play for hours, picking out blues licks she could use" (Zwonitzer and Hirshberg 184). Although not completely forgotten, Riddle's contribution to the legacy of the Carter Family has often been neglected, a fate all too

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[3] The referenced story is "The Secret Sharer" (1909).

familiar for African-American musicians, particularly in the Blues. Only recently has his importance begun to be celebrated with theatre productions and even a music festival, Riddlefest, named in his honor.

One of the folk standards in the repertoire of Bob Dylan, Dave Van Ronk, Pete Seeger, and many others is "Dink's Song (Fare Thee Well)," which has a somewhat similar history as the song-gathering of Carter and Riddle. John Lomax, the legendary folklorist and musicologist, recorded the song, during his field recordings in 1909, as sung by an African-American woman washing clothes in a river in Texas. Her name lives on in the title of the song, but nothing else is known about her (Alan Lomax 144). The haunting words of "Fare Thee Well" are magical in their simplicity and pathos:

> If I had wings like Noah's dove
> I'd fly up the river to the one I love
> Fare thee well, my honey, fare thee well
>
> One of these days and it won't be long
> Call my name and I'll be gone
>
> Fare thee well, my honey, fare thee well. ("Fare Thee Well")

In contrast to Dink and numerous other nameless secret sharers, there have been a number of success stories involving African-American musicians establishing themselves in the country music business. The great Huddie William Ledbetter, better known as Lead Belly, was also a "discovery" of John Lomax, although the ethical nature of their relationship has become the subject of considerable debate (see Porterfield 359–61). A number of Lead Belly's songs have become standards of both folk, blues, and even country bands. Other great African-American folk country musicians only met with popular and commercial success later in life at the time of the Folk Music Revival in the early 1960s. Mississippi John Hurt, for example, became famous at the age of seventy, only three years before his death, and Elizabeth Cotten, the author of "Freight Train," was famously "discovered" by the Seeger family when in her sixties.

One of the few African-American musicians to establish himself on the legendary Grand Ole Opry in Nashville was DeFord Bailey, "the harmonica wizard." He was even inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame after his death. The most successful Black country singer of all time was without a doubt Charley Pride. Despite battling racism and prejudice throughout his career, Pride managed to persevere and maintain his fame and success. His staying power is expressed eloquently with the following quote: "They used to ask me how it feels to be the 'first colored country singer.'. . . Then it was 'first Negro country singer;' then 'first black country singer.' Now I'm the 'first African-American country singer.' That's about the only thing that's changed" (Kennedy). Bailey and Pride were, however, very much exceptions to the rule, with the country music charts and the Grand Ole Opry continuing to be "lily white" for decades on end.

Alternative country (alt-country) has met with great acclaim and popularity over the last thirty years. One of the most interesting bands is the old-time string band Carolina Chocolate Drops. Influenced by Joe Thompson, one of the last surviving African-American old-time style fiddlers, playing in the Piedmont style of North Carolina, they have blazed a new trail for Black country music or, arguably, returned the tradition to its roots. They have been committed to redeeming the minstrel tradition with their music, educating people as to the Black contribution and the origins of country music. The band members, who have changed several times, with the mainstays being Rhiannon Giddens and Dom Flemens, play the five-string banjo, tenor banjo, guitar, fiddle, tambourine, and the bones, all of these, apart from the guitar, being staples back in the nineteenth century minstrel tradition and in string-bands. Their critically acclaimed album *Genuine Negro Jig* from 2010 contains both instrumentals and songs with vocals and both traditional tunes and covers. One of the traditional songs from the recording, "Cornbread and Butterbeans," embodies their attempt to "cleanse" the minstrel song of its racist baggage.

The song contains many of the stock material of the blackface tradition but manages to infuse it with joy, humor, and celebration:

> Wearin' shoes and drinking booze, it goes against the Bible
> A necktie will make you die and cause you lots of trouble
> Streetcars and whiskey bars and kissing pretty women
> Women, yeah, that's the end of a terrible beginning
> Cornbread and butterbeans and you across the table
> Eatin' beans and makin' love as long as I am able
> Growin' corn and cotton too and when the day is over
> Ride the mule and cut the fool and love again all over.
>
> (Carolina Chocolate Drops)

Despite the obvious poverty experienced by the protagonists in the song, the recording manages to convey the definite dignity and beauty of the depicted lovers without resorting to hackneyed minstrel caricatures. I would argue, at the risk of simplification, that the listener/audience member is not laughing at them (as would have been the case in the minstrel tradition) but with them, and this makes all the difference.

Rhiannon Giddens has gone on to do a number of projects, both solo and in collaboration with others. Her second solo album *Freedom Highway* contains a number of her own songs, including the powerful Civil War themed "Julie," which consists of a dialogue between a White slaveowner woman (mistress) and her slave (Julie), who are awaiting the eminent arrival of the victorious Union troops. The song portrays the complicated relationship between the two women with compassion but also righteous anger. When the White woman pleads with her soon-to-be-freed slave to lie on her behalf and protect her gold, Julie puts her in her place emphatically but without vindictiveness:

> Mistress, oh mistress
> I won't lie
> If they find that trunk of gold by your side
> Mistress, oh mistress
> That trunk of gold
> Is what you got when my children you sold. (Giddens)

The protagonist of the song, Julie, is celebrated for her bravery, intelligence, and wisdom without resorting to comic book clichés but, nevertheless, entertaining stereotypes. Gayle Wald, in an article on Giddens's remarkable career, points out how the song has managed to at least in a small way begin to "redeem" the minstrel tradition:

> It's a song that conjures the sonic pleasures of the minstrel stage, which produced dozens of memorable songs that retain their allure to this day. At the same time, it gives voice to the rage and grief of an enslaved black woman—exactly the sort of black interiority the minstrel tradition erased, or hid behind the masks of comedy or parody. (Gayle Wald)

One of Giddens's most interesting collaborations thus far has been the recording *Songs of Our Native Daughters* from 2019. This was a collaboration between four African-American female banjo players (apart from other instruments): Giddens, Leyla McCalla (also a former member of Carolina Chocolate Drops), Allison Russell (originally from Canada), and Amythyst Kiah. The four women share not only songwriting duties but also lead vocals. "Polly Ann's Hammer," co-written by Kiah and Russell, is a feminist variation on the classic traditional folk song "John Henry," about a legendary African-American railroad steel-driving man who died heroically in a battle with a mechanized steam drill. The song is usually interpreted as not only a celebration of unsung Black heroes who worked anonymously to lay the railroads but also as a celebration of the human individual over the impersonal machine, along the lines of a Luddite type protest (Alan Lomax 88). The song "John Henry" ends with John Henry's death but also with a message of hope when his partner takes up his job with bravery and strength:

> He laid down his hammer and he died
> John Henry had a little woman
> Her name was Polly Ann
> John Henry took sick and went to his bed
> Polly Ann drove steel like a man. Lord. ("John Henry")

The sequel of sorts, "Polly Ann's Hammer," takes up where the tradi-
tional song left off and manages to provide a triumphant feminist ending,
whereby Polly, John's widow, takes center stage and proves that she can
not only do traditional man's work but also raise a child at the same time:

> When Polly had a small baby
> On her knee, on her knee
> Grabbed a hammer in her left hand
> "Ain't no one as strong as me"
> This little hammer killed John Henry
> Won't kill me, won't kill me
> This little hammer killed your daddy
> Throw it down and we'll be free
>
> (Our Native Daughters, "Polly Ann's Hammer")

One of Amythyst Kiah's contributions to the record, "Black Myself,"
deals with various prejudices of being Black but also of being part of the
LBGTQ community. Most relevant to the present discussion is the line
"I pick the banjo up and they stare at me / 'Cause I'm black myself" (Our
Native Daughters, "Black Myself"). The song argues poignantly for the
right of a young African-American woman to be proud not only of her
skin color and sexual orientation but also of her instrument of choice, in
this case the banjo, so often associated with prejudice and stereotypes.

Yet another former member of the Carolina Chocolate Drops, Dom
Flemons, has gone on with a successful solo career. In his recordings he
has, among others, explored the history and legacy of Black cowboys in
history, whose contribution was almost completely ignored in the past.[4]
Flemons, in the liner notes to his album *Black Cowboys* from 2018, points
out the injustice of the whitewashing of the African-American contribu-
tion to cowboy culture and history: "Even though the African American
roots in cowboy music had endured since the very early days of the fron-
tier, they eventually disappeared from the contemporary narrative"
(Flemons). *Black Cowboys* includes, for example, a version of the folk

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[4] For an exhaustive discussion of this issue, see Glasrud and Searles.

standard "Home on the Range." The liner notes make reference to the version having been included in John Lomax's book *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads* from 1910, where it was apparently taken down and transcribed from a Black cowboy (Flemons). Lomax's version includes the following intriguing lines, which Flemons includes in his interpretation:

> The red man was pressed from this part of the West,
> He's likely no more to return
> To the banks of Red River where seldom if ever
> Their flickering camp-fires burn. (John Lomax 39)

This "added" verse is of interest as a Black man would understandably feel added compassion for other people of color who had been oppressed or exterminated by the White man. The song's additional lyrics also give added weight to Flemons's vision of the Black cowboy experiencing a life of relative freedom from prejudice and enslavement and finally finding a "Home on the range," "where seldom is heard a discouraging word" (John Lomax 39), which is in stark contrast to the lives of African-Americans living as slaves or later under Jim Crow.

African-American musicians, like the present and former members of Carolina Chocolate Drops, are reclaiming their cultural heritage, restoring its dignity, reviving lost and neglected voices, and using their art as an educational tool while, of course, making great music. This pioneering musical idiom has certainly encouraged yet another generation of African-American musicians to embrace not only country music but also the banjo. Kai Kater, a woman of color originally from Canada, has put out several remarkable recordings featuring the banjo. Jake Blount, another young African-American rising star, is pushing the boundaries even further with his transgressive Afrofuturist music employing both the banjo and the fiddle while still referencing traditional songs in his recordings. Jonathan Bernstein, in a review of *Songs of Our Native Daughters*, summarizes what has been accomplished over the last approximate twenty years: "It's the culmination of a movement of 21st-century singers, artists,

songwriters and instrumentalists of color who have been reclaiming the racially heterogeneous lineages of folk, country and American roots music" (Bernstein). In other words, blackface has definitively begun to break, and the old stereotypes concerning what a country musician should look like are very much being questioned and revolutionized.

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Breaking Stereotypes across Cultures: The Croatian and Hungarian Stereotypical Representations of American Culture[1]

Abstract

This study reports the results of a joint research exploring identity and diversity across cultures by focusing on the Croatian, Hungarian, and American contexts. Its primary aim is to raise awareness of stereotypical preconceptions and cross-cultural similarities and differences between Americans and Hungarians and Americans and Croats in order to broaden understanding and help break the stereotypes that may lead to discrimination and bias. The study is divided into two parts. The first part of the analysis investigates stereotypical representations of American culture from the Hungarian perspective and vice versa. It provides the historical context to the topic, discusses

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[1] The research presented in the second part of this chapter (subchapter 3.2) was funded by the project Sjevernoameričke književnosti i kulture u hrvatskom i europskom kontekstu [North American Literatures and Cultures in the Croatian and European Context] of the Center for North American Studies, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Osijek.

the Facebook blog and Internet diary *Hesna amerikai naplója* [Hesna's American Diary] by Hungarian journalist and writer Hesna Al Ghaoui and Jessica Keener's novel *Strangers in Budapest* (2018), summarizes an interview with Paul Kantor, former Fulbright scholar in Hungary, about his perception of Hungary and Hungarians, and presents the results of a qualitative analysis of Hungarian university students' stereotype response. The second part of the study takes a closer look at the Croatian perspective of America and Americans by analyzing the information obtained by student surveys conducted before and after an interactive lecture by Cody McClain Brown, an American expatriate in Croatia. In addition, it discusses the American perspective on Croatia and Croats, obtained by a qualitative analysis of Cody McClain Brown's blog, podcast, and two of his memoirs, *Chasing a Croatian Girl: A Survivor's Tale* (2015) and *Croatia Strikes Back: The Unnecessary Sequel* (2018). The results of this comparative study demonstrate that academic collaboration promoting intercultural dialogue and increasing self-awareness as well as other-awareness brings mutual benefits as we strive to break stereotypes and build bridges across cultural divides.

Keywords: Breaking stereotypes, cross-cultural, Americans, Hungarians, Croats

1. Introduction

The initial research reported in this chapter originated as a collaboration between two researchers, one from Hungary and the other from Croatia, who aimed to explore identity and diversity across cultures within the Croatian, Hungarian, and American contexts. As an international cross-comparative investigation into cultural stereotypes based on the varying perspectives among Hungarian and Croatian students and Americans who have been immersed in the Hungarian and Croatian cultures, this study aims to raise awareness of stereotypical preconceptions and cross-cultural similarities and differences between Americans, Hungarians, and Croats. It seeks to broaden cultural understanding and help break divisive attitudes and stereotypes, adhering to the premise that the identification of similarities and differences across cultures through a guided and critical

reading of literary texts, preferably in interaction with authors, will enhance students' comprehension of and knowledge about people from different cultural backgrounds. Both authors have observed that cultural generalizations expressed during classes tend to lead to the formation of cultural stereotypes that can influence a person's perception of others.

The study highlights different perspectives of individuals from a diversity of cultures and experiences with the aim of reaching new cultural knowledge and understanding. It is grounded on the concept of cultural diversity as defined by Article 1 of the UNESCO *Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity*, which states:

> Culture takes diverse forms across time and space. This diversity is embodied in the uniqueness and plurality of the identities of the groups and societies making up humankind. As a source of exchange, innovation and creativity, cultural diversity is as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature. In this sense, it is the common heritage of humanity and should be recognized and affirmed for the benefit of present and future generations. (Stenou 4)

Professionals from diverse fields of social science and humanities have been interested in the topic of stereotypes since the 1920s, when the term "stereotype" initially came to be used in the modern psychological sense. In Walter Lippmann's *Public Opinion*, published in 1922, the term "stereotype" was canonized in the vocabulary of social science and explained by Lippmann as the picture individuals form "of the world outside from the unchallenged pictures in their heads" (273). Therefore, as Curtis explains, the stereotype is perceived as an imperfect impression and a mechanism by which "[o]ne's mental images, perceptions, beliefs, and expectations about a particular individual or group dominates [sic] one's outlook towards them" (qtd. in Lippmann xxvii). As an explanation for his argument, Lippmann refers to the Platonic "Fable of the Cave" by arguing that stereotypes are "distortions," "caricatures," and "institutionalized misinformation," in other words, "pictures in our heads" (qtd. in LaVio-

lette and Silvert 258). Similarly to Lippmann, Amossy and Heidingsfeld explain that "[a]s a cultural model through which we perceive, interpret and describe reality, the stereotype is necessarily linked with representation" and that simultaneously "[i]ts preconstructed forms provide representation with foundations; they guarantee its possibility and legibility" (Amossy and Heidingsfeld 689).

The pragmatic usage of stereotypes lies in forming "template-like cognitive representations" by categorizing human beings and social groups associated with specific attributes (Martin et al. 1777). These judgmental characteristic features can be related to particular social groups or even nations. Consequently, the function of stereotypes is to help the cognitive understanding of a culture, a nation, or a society by offering a mechanism of simplified, easily learnable associated attributes acting as mental shortcuts and delivering a system of signs and a swift and structured approach to knowledge stored in memory (Martin et al. 1777).

The present study deals with hetero-stereotypes, more precisely, with a comparative analysis of stereotypes in three different cultural contexts. According to Musek, on a basic level, stereotypes provide an easy access to information about others in a simplified, generalized, and categorically structured manner; therefore, stereotypes have crucial psychological functions that help people differentiate certain groups and foster a sense of belonging to the group (15). Nationality stereotypes are the most widely accepted personality stereotypes, and Musek highlights the following mechanisms as categories in creating stereotypes: (1) strengthening self-evaluation, (2) fostering national identity, (3) denial or projection of one's deficiencies, (3) canalizing aggression, (4) conventionalized thinking for fear of the unknown, (5) cognitive regulation, (6) social learning, and (7) enforcement of group power (17–20). The present study will employ Musek's methodological concept in order to scrutinize the (re)production of specific cultural and national stereotypes.

Many factors influence the formation of national stereotypes, which can be negative or positive. While negative stereotypes are harmful, posi-

tive ones can be both harmless and harmful as they challenge the uniqueness of people's identities. Cultural stereotypes are frequently closely associated with prejudices, which can be defined as evaluative judgments, created uncritically in advance, that are not based on logically and empirically researched assessments. Mcleod suggests that "[b]y consciously challenging our own biases, engaging in constructive conversations, and promoting inclusivity," we can overcome the negativity of stereotypes and "begin to break down stereotypes and work towards a more equitable society." In the same vein, explaining the use of stereotypes in education, Soule et al. make the following observation:

> Our goal as educators should be that students from every gender, race, national origin, age, or social status see themselves as leaders or learn about leaders who are not like them in authentic—not stereotypical—ways. This doesn't mean that case authors and instructors should pretend that stereotypes don't exist but they need to be aware of them and help their students develop that awareness as well. ("The Stereotypes in MBA Case Studies")

This study relies on the definition of a stereotype as "a relatively stable opinion of a generalizing and evaluative nature," set forth by Duijker and Frijda (115). According to Duijker and Frijda, a stereotype "refers to a category of people," suggesting that they are similar in some ways and offering generalizations and judgment (115). As evaluative forms, stereotypes commonly reflect the problems of (1) validity, (2) projection, (3) generality, (4) specificity, (5) differentiation, (6) retroaction, and (7) self-description (Duijker and Frijda 128–37). By focusing on hetero-stereotypes, there needs to be an awareness that generalizing judgments must not lead to distortions based on preconceived expectations and misconceptions.

2. Methodology

The research was based on the methodology of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to obtain qualitative data from a variety of sources, including

an interview, response papers, travel blogs, podcasts, memoirs, and a
novel. The first part of the research, conducted in Hungary, included a
critical discourse analysis of the American perception of Hungary, which
was based on the following sources: travel diaries written by Hungarians
about the American continent and the United States, an Interview with
Paul Kantor, Professor Emeritus of Political Science at Fordham University, NYC, and Jessica Keener's novel *Strangers in Budapest* (2017). The
second part of the research, conducted in Croatia, included the analysis of
memoirs, blogs, and a lecture held by Cody McClain Brown, author,
blogger, podcast host, and professor at the Faculty of Political Science of
Zagreb. The empirical part of the research was conducted in both countries during the 2021−2022 academic year, and it included a qualitative
analysis of student surveys and response papers on the representation of
general stereotypes. The analysis also relied on qualitative data obtained
from the Croatian students' interaction with Cody McClain Brown.

Upon completion of the research in the Hungarian and Croatian
higher education settings, the results were compared to define cross-
cultural similarities and differences between cultures, with a particular
emphasis on exploring student perspectives regarding cultural stereo-
types. The target group included university students in Pécs, Szeged, and
Osijek (19–23 years) whose perceptions of Americans and of themselves
and others have been shaped by knowledge acquired in American studies
courses as well as through exposure to numerous forms of mass media.

This joint research is an asymmetrical comparison of the Croatian and
Hungarian cases in the sense that, in line with Jürgen Kocka's approach,
some points were investigated in detail while other parts of the analysis
were limited to a mere outline, serving as comparative reference points
(see Kocka 40). The primary purpose of this joint research was to deter-
mine a common methodological ground for further research into this
topic.

3. Breaking Stereotypes across Cultures: The Hungarian and the Croatian Research

3.1. The Hungarian Perspectives on the Stereotypical Representations of American Culture

Based on the conceptual framework mentioned above, this section presents the Hungarian perspectives on the stereotypical representations of American culture. Since travel diaries of Hungarians about America have played a significant role in creating Hungarians' stereotypical perception of America, one of the starting points for this analysis was Hesna Al Ghaoui's *American Diary* (*Hesna amerikai naplója*, 2021), which offers an insight into the stereotypical representations of American everyday life and traditions so different from the Hungarian ones. The second case in point was Jessica Keener's second novel, *Strangers in Budapest* (2017), which, conversely, depicts Hungary and the perception of Hungarians from the American perspective and provides a perfect example of the hetero-stereotype. An interview with Paul Kantor, Professor Emeritus of Political Science at Fordham University, NYC, also served as an example of the perception of Hungary from the American perspective. This section concludes with an analysis of Hungarian university students' responses on stereotypes about America and Americans as referential points for the comparison with results obtained in the Croatian context.

3.1.1. The Historical Background to Stereotypical Representations of American Culture from the Hungarian Perspective

Travel diaries written by Hungarians about the American continent and the United States were one of the very first sources that established Hungarians' stereotypes about Americans. Stephanus Parmenius Budeius's[2] *Newfoundland Letter* (1583) is one of the most significant and authentic

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[2] English: Stephen Parmenius of Buda, Hungarian: Budai Parmenius István

documents of the Gilbert expedition, a milestone in the development of the British Empire, made by an eyewitness. Addressed to Richard Hakluyt in Oxford, it describes the country's geographical location and attributes. Parmenius wrote his letter in Latin, and Hakluyt translated it into English and published it in his works on geographical discoveries (1589, 1600) (Balázs 78–79). Parmenius's description promotes the generalization that the American continent is a desolate place: "Now I ought to tell you about the customs, territories, and inhabitants: and yet what am I to say, my dear Hakluyt, when I see nothing but desolation?" (qtd. in Balázs 79).

The American identity as such evolved only after the American Revolution. In his *Letters from an American Farmer*, Hector St. Jean de Crèvecœur was among the first ones who articulated and asked the question: "What is an American" (Letter III). As he claimed, "The next wish of this traveler will be to know whence came all these people? They are a mixture of English, Scotch, Irish, French, Dutch, Germans, and Swedes. From this promiscuous breed, that race now called Americans have arisen . . ." (Crèvecœur, Letter III).[3]

After the establishment of the American identity in the eighteenth century, its image changed drastically during the nineteenth century with the accelerated rate of modernization, urbanization, technological advancements, and industrialization. Moreover, as Venkovits argues, the transfer of cultures, goods, people, and ideas across countries and continents also changed the traveling habits of people and the perception of the image of America (222). Such changes and developments also had an impact on the mentality of people, the way they gathered knowledge about and comprehended the world, and how they presented their experience to fellow citizens through travel reports, letters, and diaries (Ven-

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[3] In his *Autobiography*, Benjamin Franklin mentioned the collective title of "American" people. However, his complete *Autobiography* was published after his death, in 1791. J. Hector St. John de Crèvecœur's *Letters from an American Farmer*, in which he also wrote about the forming of the American identity as such, was published in 1782.

kovits 222). It is arguable that these travel reports also included stereotypical descriptions of the United States.

3.1.2. The Images of the United States in Nineteenth-Century Hungarian Travelogues

What were these repeated images? America has always been a springboard for the European imagination, significantly and uniquely (Kadarkay 44). Hungarians experienced and described the transatlantic journey as a place of transformations, revelations, and an ideal space of freedom. Their reports and travelogues not only highlight technological advancements in travel and migration but also reflect the mentality of the travelers who were projecting their assumptions and insecurities into their stereotypical descriptions of America (Venkovits 223). For early travelers in the Reform Age, the stereotypical description of the United States was a site of study and a possible model to be followed by their country of origin. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the United States represented the American Dream, the land of possibilities and opportunities, compared to the home country (Venkovits 224). However, as Vári argues, "the model country of the Reform Era became the land of threats by 1890" (153). Therefore, the images of America were determined by the fears and expectations that the travelers brought from home (Vári 153). Unlike Vári, Glant argues that Hungarian nineteenth-century travel writing about the United States was more complicated and complex in the *fin-de-siècle* and that the predominant stereotypical description of America was not that of the land of disappointments and threats since America was still considered to be the country of opportunities (216). Therefore, as Lévai explains, Glant's interpretation of Hungarian travel literature about the United States is not a simple story about the decline of the American Dream but a representation following a cyclical fluctuation pattern (202).

Stereotypes that have been created through repeated patterns of travel diaries as forms of hetero-stereotypes still persist in the images of the

United States as perceived by Hungarians. For example, Sándor Bölöni Farkas (1795–1842) is known in Hungarian literature for his 1831 travel diary about the United States, published in 1834. In the first half of the nineteenth century, his travel-diary of his journey to the United States, *Utazás Észak-Amerikában* [*Journey in North America*] (1831), had a significant impact on Hungarian history and has become a cornerstone for depicting the United States as a free and model country. His travel-diary even publishes the full text of the Declaration of Independence (Gál 23). Bölöni Farkas contributed with this positive view of America, promoting the stereotype of a typical American character. He describes Americans as relaxed people of stable character who are more prone to religious conversion than Hungarians (130). Moreover, he highlights the importance of education for Americans: "The Americans are fully aware that education not only is the key to individual achievement, but it also leavens national welfare" (88).

Similarly, János Xántus (1825–1894), a well-known Hungarian traveler and explorer, wrote two works about his journeys—*Letters from North America* (1858) and *Travels in Southern California* (1860) (qtd. in Bollobás 88). Like Bölöni Farkas, Xántus also depicted the American character using positive stereotypes: "According to the American concept, honest work is worthy of respect; poverty is just a misfortune, but not a shame— as opposed to Europe" (Xántus 4, translation Lívia Szélpál).[4] Xántus also emphasizes the importance of traveling with Americans to understand the typical American character and way of life. As he argues, "It is difficult to understand the American way of life from any book or description. It can only be understood and appreciated if one lives there for years and wanders along with the Americans" (Xántus 134, translation Lívia Szélpál).

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[4] There is an English translation of Xántus's work. However, the author of this part of the chapter had no access to it; she used her own translation. For further reference, see the published English translation: Xántus, John. *Letters from North America*, 1858. Translated by Theodore Schoenman and Helen Benedek Schoenman, Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1975.

Moreover, he emphasizes the pragmatic and business-oriented character of Americans: ". . . the American spirit knows no obstacle when the prospect of profit is connected with it" (136). Also, like Bölöni Farkas, in his travel diaries, Xántus associates Americans with the ideals of freedom and democracy. As the following analysis of Hesna Al Ghaoui's *American Diary* will show, the stereotypical descriptions of the American character in Hungarian travel diaries have continued to this day.

3.1.3. Hesna Al Ghaoui's *American Diary* [*Hesna amerikai naplója*] (2021) about the United States

Hesna Al Ghaoui (1978–) is a journalist, editor, reporter, and author. She was born in Hungary to a bicultural family background. She has been a correspondent of the Hungarian Television and has reported from several combat zones. As a war correspondent and reporter, she encountered the psychological and physical effects of fear that led her to focus on the issues of resilience, mental adaptability, surviving difficult situations, and even gaining strength from a crisis (Hesna Al Ghaoui, HESNA.HU).

In August 2021, she traveled to the United States with her family, as a Fulbright scholar to the University of California, Berkeley for the 2021–2022 academic year, to research post-traumatic growth/resilience. Her journey inspired her to launch a travel blog on her Facebook and Instagram official sites about the challenges of adjusting to the American lifestyle and education at Berkeley. Her adventures were published online in *Hesna's American Diary* in ten articles in *WMN Magazine*.

Hesna's American Diary also reflects the impact of the pandemic and the way the New Normal has changed the mentality of people, their world representation, and influenced their formation of stereotypes. Writing about the (post)pandemic situation on campus, she reveals: "I was shocked the first week when it turned out at the August departmental meeting that almost no professors planned to visit the campus beyond giving the required lectures and seminars" ("Amikor az ember," transla-

tion Lívia Szélpál). In the online *Hesna's American Diary*, Al Ghaoui also
discusses the following topics: resilience during and after the Covid-19
pandemic, celebrating national holidays, expensive cost of living in the
United States, lifestyle, mindset, the balance of work and family, no work
on weekends, the trauma of the Pandemic, and the Ukrainian War. With
humor and social responsibility, she writes about severe everyday issues in
the United States from the Hungarian perspective. She also photo-
documents her journey and frequently challenges Hungarian stereotypes
about Americans, for example, in her ironic Facebook post about the
"Inimitable Californian Flavors" with the Hungarian Lángos in California
or the description of her American holiday celebration (Halloween,
Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's Eve). She depicts vividly the
stereotypical Christmas (over)decoration of houses, the Halloween cos-
tumes, and traditions so different from the Hungarian traditions
("Ünnepek," translation Lívia Szélpál). *Hesna's American Diary* is a key
contribution to the contemporary discussion of stereotypical representa-
tions of the United States from the Hungarian perspective.

3.1.4. Jessica Keener's novel *Strangers in Budapest*: The American Perception of Hungary

Depicting Hungary and the perception of Hungarians from the American
perspective, Jessica Keener's second novel, *Strangers in Budapest* (2018), is a
perfect example of a hetero-stereotype. Her text is a combination of au-
tobiography, historical novel, and thriller. The novel has received ample
criticism but also much praise for its vivid portrayal of Budapest and
post-communist Hungary, which is not lacking stereotypical generaliza-
tions. The setting is Budapest in the early 1990s. As the beginning fore-
tells the end, the novel begins with the image of the Danube River sym-
bolizing the flow of life and the bridge that connects the past and the
present:

> She'd grown used to call the Danube by its Hungarian name—
> Duna. In fact, she preferred it over the American version. The
> whimsical sound—Duna—felt light on her tongue, fanciful and
> upbeat, a spirit rising. But, like all things in the city, the river that
> glittered at night concealed a darker surface under the day's harsh
> sun. (Keener, *Strangers in Budapest* 1)

The depiction of the river foreshadows the gloomy and dark past of Budapest and Hungary behind the surface and begs the complex question of whether Hungarians and their country can change after the trauma of the past:

> She knew that Hungarians supported Hitler, had decimated a mil-
> lion Jews. She knew the country had been taken over by Russia
> following the war and had only officially freed itself four years ago
> in 1991, when the last Russian troops finally vacated the country.
> It was a new day here, a new era. Communist statues had literally
> been toppled. Now Russian watches decorated with Communist
> symbols were sold as mementos on street corners to tourists. It
> was a new time of hope, wasn't it? Couldn't people and countries
> change? (Keener, *Strangers in Budapest* 10)

After the fall of the communist regime a young American couple, Annie and Will, move from Boston to Budapest with their recently adopted baby, Leo, to establish a new life. Keener gives the following depiction of Budapest:

> The streetcars reminded her of Boston, and in that way, Budapest
> felt familiar to her. Boulevards sectioned the city into twenty-three
> districts, rippling out in rings from the center of town to ancient
> ruins of former Roman settlements in the outskirts. All in all, Bu-
> dapest was a lovely, walkable city, the newest darling of capitalism
> and the Western world. A city full of promise. Now, after fifty
> years of communist rule, the Russians had finally left. Hungary's
> cultural revival had begun. The country was striving to become
> modern after decades of war and long history of failures, reopen-
> ing its rusty gates to Western businesses and entrepreneurs, like
> Will. (Keener, *Strangers in Budapest* 29)

Keener authentically portrays the post-communist Budapest, the cultural shock, and the inability to integrate into an unfamiliar culture. The city of Budapest symbolizes all of Hungary's contradictions and complicated past and struggles (Meinhart). Reading the city also entails understanding the complex set of stereotypes that represent a city that is at the same time charming as well as moody and gloomy as the dark history of Eastern Europe in the 1990s. The description of life for a foreigner in Hungary is dreary, full of bureaucratic problems, and depressing, as is the definition of its history and the behavior of its people, which is different from the more optimistic American mindset (Meinhart). Keener emphasizes the contrast between the American temperament and the stereotypical, pessimistic Hungarian attitude: "A Hungarian smiling? It was the only time Annie observed Hungarians acting effusively—toward children" (Keener, *Strangers in Budapest* 31).

Keener's portrayal of life in the post-communist Hungary—the description of urban life with Roma children selling flowers on the streets, the deep frustration of people, and the country's complicated bureaucracy—presents the Janus-faced Hungarian society, the shadow of the oppressive and traumatic past. Her explicit portrayal of racism in Hungary is thought-provoking:

> [T]hree skinheads—young men with shaved scalps, wearing black clothing and boots—emerged from the crowds and showed the little girl out of the way. "Gypsy steal American baby," one of the skinheads said, spitting on the sidewalk. . . . Gypsies steal American babies. That's just a racist lie. Plain and simple. (Keener, *Strangers in Budapest* 27)

Keener's essay, "Hidden Among Us," published in the fall 2017 edition of *The Algonquin Reader*, highlights that the novel *Strangers in Budapest* is based on Keener's authentic experience of moving to Budapest in 1993. She travelled with her husband and adopted son to (re)construct her identity with the overseas travel experience and be geographically and

emotionally close to her family's Jewish history (Hansen). As Keener argues in her essay "Hidden Among Us,"

> In the winter of 1993, I moved to Budapest with my husband, our six-month-old son, our dog, and seventeen overstuffed suitcases. We had been living in Atlanta for several years. I don't know if there is a best time for making a change in one's life, but I was in my late thirties and felt an urgency about time passing. I was especially fearful of having regrets at the end of my life. The arrival of our son, whom we adopted at four days old, intensified these feelings. ("Hidden Among Us" 45)

In both Keener's texts, one can identify a number of recurring stereotypes, highlighting the ways she sees the Hungarians from an American perspective. They can be classified into four categories, as follows:

1. the exotic post-communist city as a spectacle: "Budapest and Prague were 'it' cities and Americans were streaming over to have a look at countries long hidden behind Russia's Iron Curtain" ("Hidden Among Us" 43);

2. the city as a site of memory: "Budapest got under my skin in a different way. I was unnerved and haunted by its convoluted history. And my response felt more personal because of my own family history. I was Jewish" ("Hidden Among Us" 44);

3. the typical American mindset: "We had some savings and our American optimism" ("Hidden Among Us" 44); and

4. the Hungarian heritage: "This was a country that gave the world Liszt, produced chess and math wizards, designed distinctive porcelain and lace, and was saturated in Gypsy lore. But something had gone wrong, terribly wrong. I wanted to understand what and, most of all, why." ("Hidden Among Us" 45)

Keener concludes that what connects Americans, Hungarians, and people all over the world is the common heritage of the trauma of violence, that is, their intergenerational memory: "I began to see how we are all survivors of violence in some way or another—either personally or historical-

ly" ("Hidden Among Us" 45). In other words, she suggests not only that stereotypes are related to cultural and intergenerational memory but also that people could comprehend and interpret stereotypes as a common intercultural ground that taps into their shared collective histories and cultural experiences.

3.1.5. The Perception of Hungary from an American Perspective: Interview with Paul Kantor, Professor Emeritus of Political Science at Fordham University, NYC

The following email interview was conducted during the summer of 2022 with Paul Kantor, Professor Emeritus of Political Science at Fordham University in New York City. He was the Fulbright John Marshall Distinguished Chair in Political Science (Hungary) in 2005–2006 academic year.[5]

During his stay in Hungary as a Fulbright scholar in the 2005–2006 academic year, Paul Kantor generally experienced the overwhelming tendency of Hungarian students to rely on cultural stereotyping. Their dominant stereotype was to perceive the United States extremely positively by ignoring or not having enough knowledge about racial and class distinctions. Also, the suburban dream was a prominent recurring image in their stereotypical perception of the United States. Another stereotype that emerged during his teaching was the antisemitic view on the part of some students. However, it is important to note that although antisemitic comments were rare, they were more frequently encountered in Hungary than during his teaching years in the United States.

As for everyday encounters, Professor Kantor found Hungarians generally very friendly, warm, and thoughtful people. This image contrasted with his stereotypical impressions of other East Europeans. He grew up

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[5] The whole interview with Paul Kantor is available in the Appendix. Only those questions and answers that are closely related to the topic of stereotypes are presented in the text as a summary and evaluation of the interview.

in a hybrid American family—part Italian, part Ukrainian, part Russian, and part Slovak. Many of his family members from the Eastern European side were often rather pessimistic and cautious—compared to Hungarians. Another thing that he experienced as a stereotype during his stay in Hungary was that many Hungarians seemed to be more nationalistic than he ever expected, which manifested itself in nostalgia for the historical Hungary. He also discerned substantial distrust of governmental processes and authority. All in all, during his stay in Hungary, Professor Kantor experienced a surprising degree of nationalistic and sometimes authoritarian intolerance on the part of Hungarians—something that contrasted strongly with the personal warmth he found among many Hungarians.

In line with the aforementioned Musek's view of stereotypes, Professor Kantor argues that stereotypes can also have a positive effect as they can simplify social encounters and serve as a useful tool for starting social interactions and dealing with people initially. As he argues, this can streamline the initiation of discourse and is a way of testing social encounters. According to Professor Kantor, one should differentiate stereotypes from prejudices, which involve rigid beliefs and a conclusive and often negative opinion about something or somebody. In contrast, a stereotype is a more helpful mental tool for testing or assisting in social encounters. In order to provide a complete comparative analysis of cross-cultural stereotypes between Americans and Hungarians, it is important to explore both sides of the coin. The next subchapter will, therefore, focus on the Hungarians' perception of the United States.

3.1.6. Analysis of Hungarian University Students' Responses on Stereotypes about America and Americans

The present joint research was also motivated to explore student perspectives regarding cultural stereotypes. The study's importance lies in outlining an international cross-comparative analysis of cultural stereotypes based on Hungarian and Croatian student perspectives of Americans. Ini-

tially, the target groups included university students from Pécs and Osijek (aged 19–23), but later students from Szeged were also involved in the project. The general hypothesis was that stereotypes help to simplify and ease the cognitive understanding of others by offering a system and a cultural register of easily learnable, simplified relations (Douglas 1077) that help the learning process and facilitate the comprehension of different cultures.

3.1.6.1. Qualitative Analysis Methodology and Findings

The initial research was conducted in the spring term of 2022 on a pilot group consisting of fifteen Hungarian-born English studies BA students at the University of Pécs who took part voluntarily in the spring term of 2022. As participants they were informed about the topic of the research and asked to write a two-page response paper in English on their perception of American stereotypes by answering the following questions:

1. What is your perception of the American people and culture?
2. Can you mention some basic stereotypes about American people, culture, and history?
3. Please mention some stereotypes based on your selection and choice from literature or website.

According to the findings, most of the students did not have any first-hand experience of the United States, since they never visited the country, so their perceptions were influenced solely by the media, movies, and the Internet. As for the second question, the answers varied with recurring stereotypes in the following order: (1) junk food, (2) freedom, (3) patriotism, (4) the impact of movies, (4) capitalism, (5) celebrations and holidays, (6) superficiality, and (7) lacking or not proper knowledge about Europe. Finally, for the third question, the dominant stereotypes were the decline and failure of the American Dream and the Americanization of other cultures, for which they gave examples mostly from movies.

As a continuation of the research at the University of Szeged, 48 students answered the same above-mentioned questions in the Spring term of 2023. They were also English studies BA students, some of whom were in the teacher training program. Their ages varied from 19 to 33. They participated voluntarily in the research and anonymously submitted their answers to the three questions on American stereotypes via the *slido.com* online platform. As for the first question about their perception of American people and culture, the dominant and recurring stereotypes were the following in this order: (1) hypocrisy, (2) friendly and noisy, (3) positive mindset and open-mindedness, (4) political correctness is often offensive and ironic, (5) multiculturalism and a melting pot of cultures, (6) patriotism, (7) too much individualism, (8) poor education system, (9) guns and fast food, (10) American Dream, (10) Americanization of Culture, (11) freedom, (12) consumerism, (13) corruption, (14) Hollywood, and (15) unhealthy food. The high occurrence of stereotypes related to the movies and Hollywood correlates with the fact that cinema in the contemporary era is a kind of representative act that serves as a bridge for various areas of American Studies, which has opened up "new ways in the interpretation and reinterpretation of America" (Cristian). Generally, the answers to the first question were that Americans are friendly but more extroverted than Hungarians.[6] Multiculturalism and the positive mindset were also prominent stereotypes. The issues of patriotism, guns, and gun laws were a recurring and controversial topic, along with the concepts of hypocrisy and political correctness.

As for the second question concerning the basic stereotypes about American people, culture, and history, the answers mostly overlapped with the students' inputs for the first question, highlighting the importance of (1) patriotism, (2) fast food, (3) lack of knowledge about Europe, (4) the issue of guns and mass shootings, (5) freedom, (6) consum-

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[6] Some students based their opinion on their interaction with friends or pen-friends who live in the United States.

erism, (7) living in a "bubble," (8) poor health-care and education systems, (9) extrovert behavior and arrogance, (10) self-righteousness and open-mindedness, (11) the American Dream, (12) dynamic and business-oriented character, (13) movies, and (14) racism.

The recurring answers provided for the third question, which were based on the students' own selection of stereotypes from literature or websites, identified the following stereotypes, mentioned in the following order: (1) consumerism, (2) American football, (3) the American Dream, (4) guns and school shootings, and (5) the idea of freedom. The students' responses indicated the students' particular fondness for American sitcoms, series, movies, and comics, for example *Paul* (sci-fi comedy, 2011), *Parks and Recreation* (sitcom, 2009–2015), *The Office* (sitcom, 2005–2013), and Marvel comics. Their answers included stereotypical observations, for example, "Social media is full of videos and posts about entitled Americans," "Karens are everywhere," or "They [Americans] like to act as if Shakespeare were their favorite author, even though they don't even read his works." As for literary examples of stereotypes, they mentioned Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957), Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* (1936), African American literature about slavery, and literature about the Jazz Age, the Harlem Renaissance, the Lost Generation, and the Great Depression.

To sum up, the ideas of freedom, patriotism, and multiculturalism, open-mindedness, movies, the issue of guns, mass shootings, and the decline of the American Dream were dominant and recurring stereotypes about America and Americans in students' answers to the research questions both in Pécs and Szeged. The query of how we can break away from stereotypes via education could be the topic for further research.

3.1.7. Conclusion of the Hungarian Study

The analysis of the perception of national hetero-stereotypes—the way Hungarians perceive American people and culture and vice versa—was

conducted via individual and collective methods that included observations, factual interviews, response papers, student surveys, and written online questionnaires. The research focused on the qualitative analysis of cultural thought systems, literary artifacts, blogs, and travel reports in a historical time frame. Due to the limits of this paper, not every aspect could be covered in detail. Therefore, this research aimed to create a methodological outline for further research on the topic within the framework of American Studies. This research has shown that the working definition of a stereotype showed a variation from presenting the United States as the model country for Hungary in the nineteenth century, with the emphasis on the idea of freedom and democracy, to the decline of the American Dream and the representation of America in popular culture in the contemporary era. The dominant stereotype tested via individual and collective methods shows a cyclic feature, changing in different historical periods. The common characteristic feature of stereotypes is that they are helpful and useful tools in social interactions to ease and simplify the beginning of social encounters and foster cultural diversity.

3.2. Croats and Americans: Exploring Identity and Diversity across Cultures in the Croatian and American Contexts

The second part of this study takes a closer look at the Croatian and American cultural contexts. The purpose of the study was to embrace multiple perspectives and narrow the cultural gap by broadening the student's perspectives regarding their own culture as well as others. In line with Benjamin Disraeli's claim that "a university should be a place of learning, light and liberty" (Nicholson qtd. in Walton 196), this part of the research intended to ensure that Hungarian and Croatian students broaden their knowledge and increase their tolerance and cultural understanding by familiarizing themselves with worldviews that may differ from their own. Since "cultural stereotypes have this ability to shape social in-

teraction" (Beeghly 53), it is essential to familiarize oneself with the wider cultural context surrounding them in order to avoid stigmatization or bias. According to Osland et al., "[t]ime and experience are essential because culture is embedded in the context. Without context it makes little sense to talk about culture" (68).

The Croatian perspective of America and Americans was obtained by examining data from survey responses from first-year students of English who were taking the course American Culture and Civilization at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Osijek. The research was conducted prior to and following an online lecture by American professor and author Cody McClain Brown. Identifying, comparing, and interpreting the different perspectives of the Croatian students and the American author was expected to raise awareness of stereotypical preconceptions and the cross-cultural similarities and differences between the two cultures.

The procedure used for the survey and the qualitative analysis of the collected data was as follows: Six students' individual statements before and after the lecture and discussion with the American lecturer were recorded and reviewed several times. The positive and negative stereotypes were compared following an individual, in-depth qualitative analysis of the students' comments made before and after the lecture. Additionally, the survey findings of Croatian students' perspectives on America were compared to the American perspective of Croatia and Croats that was obtained by a qualitative analysis of Cody McClain Brown's lecture, blog, podcast, and his memoirs, *Chasing a Croatian Girl: A Survivor's Tale* (2015) and *Croatia Strikes Back: The Unnecessary Sequel* (2018). Since the lecture was at the very center of the research, first the analysis of Cody McClain Brown's work will be briefly presented, and then the results of the research will be described.

3.2.1. Examination of the American Perspective on Croatia: Analysis of Cody McClain Brown's Work

Cody McLain Brown is a blogger, podcast host, professor at the Faculty of Political Science of Zagreb, and the author of *Chasing a Croatian Girl*, *Croatia Strikes Back* (2014) and *A Hard Case in Holiday City* (2021). As an expatriate, McClain Brown illustrates Griswold's claim that "[a] specific literary culture is the product of historical and geographical circumstances" (462). His memoirs reveal as much about the foreigner adjusting to a very diverse environment as they do about the native population. As Ska-hill explains, "Literature is a credible tool in which geography can be understood in a different light; in combining the disciplines of geography and literature, the content can more aptly be put into context. The literature of these expatriates, ultimately, puts history and geography in perfect conjuncture" (50). In an insightful and frequently humorous way, McClain Brown expresses his unique perspective on Croatia and adjusting to Croatian culture to the point that it feels like home. Being immersed in a new culture is challenging, but it provides the opportunity to learn a new language, get to know different traditions, cuisines, and customs, and to leave one's own unique trace on the foreign culture one has embraced. This and much more is covered in the works of this American who is trying to fit in, while navigating between two completely different cultures.

McClain Brown has had the advantage of experiencing the foreign setting firsthand and thereby developing a much better understanding of a foreign culture than the students who were either taught information in school or obtained information through various mass media forms that are not always reliable sources. To see the world from the perspective of others, before generalizing or stereotyping, we should make certain that our perspectives are based as much as possible on facts explained through cultural context.

Before writing his memoirs, McClain Brown started writing the *Zablogreb* blog, which became popular when he began giving his humor-

ous accounts of Croatia from the perspective of a foreigner. Croats recognized themselves in his representations, and Americans who are living or have lived in Croatia found his depictions of life across cultures not only enjoyable but also very relatable. His posts went viral, and he even got messages from Croats in America thanking him for explaining what they have been trying or wanting to explain to their friends and in-laws. Readers found his observations and experiences so amusing that the blog launched his writing career in Croatia and his transition from an Oklahoma native to a Zagreb native and Split's most well-known *zet* [son-in-law] of the famous Croatian *punica* [mother-in-law]. It is interesting to note that the favorite subject of his podcast listeners has more recently been attracting theater goers in Split, who are enjoying seeing Cody McClain Brown's humorous depiction of Croatia come to life in the theatrical performance of *Draft, Slippers, and the Mother-in-law* by the Split City Youth Theater.

After his many-year stay in Croatia, McClain Brown claims to no longer feel like a foreigner. With his Croatian wife and bilingual and bicultural daughter, he is living his life the Croatian way. Through his entertaining and humorous narration, McClain Brown reveals the American perspective of Croatia, based on generalizations and stereotypes that surfaced during his journey that began with falling in love with a Croatian woman in Oklahoma and continued in Croatia, where he has decided to live his Croatian dream. His journey becomes a cross-cultural learning experience both for the author and the readers. The author confirms that living across cultures can be a daunting experience as well as a great opportunity to learn to adjust and gain cultural experience, knowledge, and understanding, which is the best way not only to become aware of stereotypes but also to make the most of the positive ones and at least understand those that appear to be negative.

The author's story begins in his memoir *Chasing a Croatian Girl: A Survivor's Tale*, which, in the Croatian edition, is titled *Propuh, papuče i punica* and literally translates to "draft, slippers, and the mother-in-law." Alt-

hough the English title may make more sense to the English readers, the Croatian title already gives away the first stereotypes McClain Brown encountered in adjusting to life in this small, to most Americans unknown, country, whose beliefs and customs are at times, perhaps, seen as too quirky by Americans. The title covers three main stereotypes McClain Brown created about Croatians based on his interaction with them and his acquaintance with their beliefs and customs. These three stereotypes point to cultural differences between Croatians and Americans. Unlike Croatians, Americans, enjoy the breeze and air conditioning. In *Chasing a Croatian Girl,* McClain Brown states: "In the summer I would open a widow at one end of the apartment and then open another one at the other end, in order to take in the nice mountain breeze" . . . and "On the hottest nights I would sleep with an oscillating fan blowing on me" (*Chasing* 98). In contrast, Croats find *propuh* [draft] a deadly health hazard "associated with all sorts of ailments . . . in short, Propuh kills!" (*Chasing* 99).

The second cultural difference concerns the differing attitude on slippers, socks, and bare feet. While Americans are free to keep their shoes on inside and even "run around, not just inside, but OUTSIDE, barefoot!" (Chasing 94), Croats have a completely opposite indoor shoe policy. As the author explains, during his first visit to Split, he "was greeted at the door with a pair of women's slippers," which he kept on "out of politeness for about five minutes before kicking them off and strolling around in [his] socks" (*Chasing* 94). He admits that before his visit to Croatia he "had no idea that being barefoot can cause all kinds of illnesses" (*Chasing* 94).

The third stereotype involves Cody McClain Brown's having to get used to the fact that Croatian mothers-in-law are family members who lay down the law. Explaining the difference between Croatian and American culture, McClain Brown admits that the "apron clad, wooden spoon totting septuagenarian [the mother-in-law] was the stubborn rock of the family," who cared more about his eating habits than his "own mother" . . . since he "was 9 years old" (*Chasing* 41).

Similarly to the observations in his memoirs, in his talk to the students at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, McClain Brown mentioned numerous other misconceptions that led to misunderstandings and embarrassment. Misconception 1: Croatia is not in Russia. He admits that he thought Croatia was a part of Russia. It is interesting that both the author and the students pointed out the poor geographic literacy of Americans. Misconception 2: Croatian women are like mail order brides who are willing to do anything for a Green Card. The author illustrated this by using the example of an episode from The Big Bang Theory series, mentioning the "hundreds of Croatian girls waiting . . . "at 'anything-for-a-green-card.com'" (*Chasing* 20). Misconception 3: An invitation to visit is usually a sign of Croatian hospitality, not of romantic interest. McClain Brown was not aware that "[i]n Croatia, it's normal when talking about going somewhere to someone that you mention they should come visit you. It definitely doesn't mean this girl is into you" (*Chasing* 21). Misconception 4: "Gifts definitely do not mean a girl is into you" (*Chasing* 21). McClain Brown was disappointed to learn that "[i]n Croatia people give gifts to everyone for every possible reason, and more commonly for no reason at all. . . . Gifts definitely do not mean a girl is into you" (*Chasing* 21). As he explained, "Come back from trip: bring gifts. Go to someone's house: bring gifts! See someone you haven't seen in a while: bring a gift. See a doctor, minister, principle, mechanic, bus driver: gift, gift, gift, and gift" (*Chasing* 28).

Additional stereotypes about Croatians that McClain Brown mentions in the book are as follows: Croatians believe that *rakija* [strong plum brandy] cures everything, that it takes a village to raise a child, that everyone has the right to tell you how to raise your child, that lunch is the main meal of the day, not dinner/supper, that free riding of trams and buses is a part of life in Zagreb because the fine is worth it if you get away with enough free rides, that neighbors are free to come and go whenever they wish, and that small living spaces mean less impatience and irritation. In contrast to the latter, McClain Brown jokingly points out that "[i]n the

US, nothing brings the family closer than time apart (usually a TV) in a separate room" (*Chasing* 62). Croatia is also, unfortunately, known for corruption, so, as an additional cultural stereotype, McClain Brown mentions the importance of connections especially when it comes to getting a job: "The all-important *veze*. At its worst, this is just nepotism, at its least bad, it is just like a reference or recommendation" (*Chasing* 155).

In the second memoir, *Hrvatska uzvraća udarac*, in the English edition *Croatia Strikes Back*, the author continues to discuss this stereotype. It is interesting to note that the noticeable difference between Croatian pessimism and American optimism and can-do spirit proved to be key when McClain Brown decided to apply for an academic position at the Faculty of Political Science in Zagreb. The consensus of his friends and even his wife was that applying would be in vain since he had no connections, which illustrates the Croatian pessimism and reliance on the importance of connections. However, McClain Brown broke both of these stereotypes by landing the job to the surprise of all.

The stereotypes mentioned during the lecture and in the first memoir are also present in the second memoir, but they mostly turn into up sides to living in Croatia that McClain Brown embraces. *Croatia Strikes Back* brings to the forefront generalizations about Croatian interpersonal relationships, especially friendships and neighborhood communities, as McClain Brown continues his battle to make Croatia his home. At the beginning of the book, the author sums up his experiences in Croatia by saying: "Nearly a decade before I had no idea where Zagreb or Croatia was, I couldn't ever imagine living here. But then I met my wife on a cold winter's night in Oklahoma. And here we were, a binational, bilingual family living in a place I once thought was Russia" (*Croatia Strikes Back* 14). The author explains why he named the sequel *Croatia Strikes Back*. He mentions that he is a *Star Wars* fan, and the title of his book reminds of the second book of the *Star Wars* trilogy. He emphasizes that "[i]n the first book I decided to live in Croatia, and this book deals with the reality of that decision" (*Croatia Strikes Back* 16). McClain Brown states: "I'd

come a long way from being a foreigner in Croatia" (*Croatia Strikes Back* 16). In the book, he refers back to his blog, explaining: "Writing the blog was like a kind of therapy, a process of reconciling my culture and my mind with Croatian culture and our life here. But, posting the blog, getting all the audience feedback and comments, became like a group therapy session for foreigners and Croatians alike" (*Croatia Strikes Back* 21).

As he settles into Croatian life, he discovers additional differences between the two cultures. Firstly, parks are "a landscape of cross-cultural exchange" (*Croatia Strikes Back* 93) where he can interact with the natives in English or his broken Croatian. Unlike in America, in Croatia, parks are spaces where children play but also where parents interact with their children's friends and their parents, who soon become part of one's coffee circle. Secondly, the raising of children is different, as well. While American children are expected to sleep in their own beds and at a proper bedtime, in Croatia, McClain Brown finds that he is the one sleeping "in a child's bed with a poster of a Disney princess hung up over it" (*Croatia Strikes Back* 29). Fourth and most important, the mother-in-law stereotype continues, as he laments in his sequel:

> Each time *Punica* came to our apartment, which was monthly and usually for two weeks, she kind of took over. In my mind it was like a foreign occupation led by a septuagenarian dictator. What had been my "little America" was transformed overnight into the "REPUBLIC OF PUNICA." (*Croatia Strikes Back* 36)

McClain Brown describes that this is not what happened in his youth, when his grandmother visited, and although he loves his mother-in-law and has nothing against her visits, he would "want her to be a bit more like [his] American grandma and give him more space" (*Croatia Strikes Back* 38).

Croatia Strikes Back confronts the challenges of living in Croatia with a sense of humor, as McClain Brown asks himself: "What can I do? Culture is the sum of all our learned behavior. I can't just become someone else

as much as I'd like to. I can't just unlearn who I am and where I came from, and neither can *punica*" (42).

In addition to the above-mentioned cultural differences, McClain Brown observes a plethora of others to which he must adjust to survive and thrive in Croatia. After becoming fully employed, the family is ready to embark on apartment hunting, which becomes an enthralling battle against bureaucracy. He comments that "If Americans move like [they] change socks, that is frequently, then Croatians move like people buy suits, a few in a lifetime for most" (*Croatia Strikes Back* 117). McClain Brown contrasts the nomadic soul of Americans, who are proud of their mobility, to the Croats being tied to their place of residence. He even observes: "[o]nce [Croatians] lay down some roots in some plot of Croatian soil, it's hard to dig them out" (*Croatia Strikes Back* 123). McClain Brown adopts this Croatian cultural characteristic as he decides to buy an apartment in the same neighborhood, close to his friends and community, which is not typical for Americans. As he explains, The attachment I've witnessed among all the people attempting to sell their apartments, and the difficulty we ourselves had in letting go of where we lived, is evidence that a greater relationship to place and people exists in Croatia than anyplace I've lived in the US" (Croatia 125).

His American optimism is tested once again after the publisher of his bestselling book enters into a pre-bankruptcy procedure. Also, the lack of the publisher's surprise at this bad news confirms that "Croatians are overly pessimistic, and Americans may be overly optimistic" (*Croatia Strikes Back* 87). McClain Brown proudly exclaims that his optimism was once again proven correct: "since you're reading a new book published by the same people, you can see that in the end it all worked out. *Take that skeptics*!" (*Croatia Strikes Back* 88).

Cultural etiquette is another issue McClain Brown brings up by emphasizing that in Croatia, "[o]pening the refrigerator in someone else's home is considered an invasion of privacy and one of the rudest things you can do" (*Croatia Strikes Back* 92). In America, when the host tells you

to feel at home and help yourself to the food and the drinks, it basically means that they will not serve you, which Croats consider rude and incomprehensible. In America, Croatian guests feel uncomfortable serving themselves and often end up thirsty and hungry. On the other hand, Americans in Croatia are sometimes overwhelmed by the constant nudging to have more when they really do not want more.

McClain Brown also mentions how hard the Croatian language is and how appreciative Croats are if a foreigner attempts to learn it, especially Americans, who they usually think are only able to speak English. Unlike in America, foreign language learning is common in Croatia, and much of the Croatian population speaks English quite well and are very critical of themselves if they do not speak it well enough.

3.2.2. The Croatian Perspective of America and Americans Obtained through Student Surveys: American and Croatian Stereotypes

The initial student survey took place as a part of a course with first-year students of English language and literature studying American culture. Among the topics that came up in discussion during the course were stereotypes and prejudices as well as the perceptions that Americans and Croats have of one another. A list of positive and a list of negative preconceptions of Croats regarding Americans was created by students during those discussions and recorded for future comparison with the students' perceptions after attending McClain Brown's lecture. Students were given the chance to select the stereotypes that personally stood out to them, comment on them, add some additional ones that were not presented, and then discuss them. Additionally, they developed a list of positive thoughts and a list of prejudices about Croats that they thought were held by Americans.

Students were able to ask questions orally or through chat during and after the meeting with the author, which was broadcast via the *BigBlueBut-*

ton virtual classroom platform. Six students—three female and three male—whose responses to the qualitative survey questions (similar to the questions the Hungarian students answered) were the most in-depth were chosen for the present analysis, largely because many students did not respond fully to the follow-up survey. One weakness of the findings is that not all students responded adequately to the follow-up survey. Hence, the six complete follow-up responses were chosen for analysis.

In accordance with the ethical codex, each male and female student was given a code consisting of a number, such as male student 1, female student 2, etc., to ensure their anonymity as research participants. For each student, qualitatively analyzed data are presented so that they can be compared and contrasted before and after the author's lecture.

Before McClain Brown's lecture, the students shared some stereotypes, both positive and negative, about how Americans regard Croats and Croatia. These viewpoints will be referred to as "before the lecture" in the text that follows. "After the lecture" will be used in the following paragraphs to refer to the viewpoints shared by the students after interacting with the guest lecturer.

- Female student 1 (or FS1), age 20:

Before the lecture: She learned about American culture and people primarily from media, including music, movies, TV, and the Internet, but also from her education. American friendliness and open-mindedness are two very positive stereotypes about Americans that the participant noted. She believes that Americans respect independence and self-reliance highly and that they are interested in sports. Among the unfavorable preconceptions of America and Americans were those of capitalism and debt. According to her, Americans view Croatia and Croats as rude and out-of-date.

After the lecture: Following McClain Brown's talk, Female student 1 expressed a more positive opinion about Americans and claimed to have discovered new knowledge. She discovered that because of the differ-

ences in their upbringing, Croats see themselves differently than Americans see them. She had also been unaware that Americans valued generosity in Croats. Her preconceived notions were challenged by the interaction with McClain Brown. After speaking with the author, student 1 has developed a noticeably more favorable perception of Americans.

- Female student 2 (FS2), age 19:

Before the lecture: This participant acquired her knowledge of American culture and Americans through media, during her education, but also by reading books. She also emphasizes how Americans place a high importance on independence and self-reliance and how their love of sports is a positive stereotype from the Croatian perspective. For this student, the negative impression that Croats have of Americans is that they live in a dangerous country. She also noted: "They may think that Croatia is a country but look at it as though it were a small town."

After the lecture: FS2 stated that she learnt a lot about Americans in the discussion that was conducted in class following the author's presentation; however, she does not recall all the specifics. She is certain that some of her unfavorable perceptions of Americans have altered. She discovered that Americans view Croats as amusing, pleasant, and very hospitable. After speaking with the author, the student feels that her perception of America has improved significantly and that the author was a fantastic speaker.

- Female student 3 (FS3), age 20

Before the lecture: Media, including music, movies, television shows, and the Internet, were the main sources from which Student 3 learned about Americans and America. She emphasized some positive stereotypes: that Americans are hard workers, that they are pleasant and open-minded, and that they are optimistic and tend to dream big. She also thinks that America is still a nation of opportunity and states that Americans place high importance on freedom and self-reliance and that they

enjoy sports. FS3 listed numerous unfavorable assumptions she personally holds, including the following: Americans are racist and like using drugs and alcohol. Americans are self-centered and solely consider their own interests. They want to be superior to other countries. She views America as a place where people consume takeout food and occasionally cook. She thinks that the Croatian school system is superior to the one in the United States. She believes that Americans are materialistic and obsessed with social media. The belief that children in America do not respect their elders is also brought up by FS3. Additionally, FS3 emphasized some stereotypes regarding how Americans see Croatia and Croats. According to her opinion, Croatia is for Americans a cheap destination for a summer vacation and a land that they know as a movie location from *Game of Thrones*. Americans might see Croatia also as a poor, small country.

After the lecture: FS3 discovered that Americans tend to have fewer parties than Croats and that they do not feel awful about asking visitors to leave if they have other plans. She found it funny that Americans stereotype Croats as party animals. The Croats' preoccupation with avoiding sitting in a draft, or "propuh," is likewise absurd in their eyes. Additionally, she has become aware that Croats are prone to excessive gift-giving. After listening to Cody McClain's observations on the Croatian gift-giving customs, she realized that every Croat brings something to their friends or neighbors each time they visit and that for Croats it is a set tradition. Although the student's interaction with the American author broadened her knowledge, she still claims to have a neutral perception of America. "I wouldn't say either positive or negative," she replied. Simply put, the only impact is that now she notices more cultural differences.

- Male student 4 (MS4), age 19

Before the lecture: Male student 4 has acquired his knowledge of American culture and Americans through media, music, movies, TV, or the Internet, and during his education. Prior to the American author's lec-

ture, Male student 4 expressed more positive than negative stereotypes. He thinks that Americans are friendly, open-minded, and patriotic and that America is still a land of opportunity. He also believes that Americans place a high priority on freedom and self-reliance. Regarding negative stereotypes, MS4 stated that people in America are highly competitive, that their educational systems are inferior to those in Croatia, and that they are addicted to social media. He also thinks that people in America want to be superior to other countries. According to MS4, Americans perceive Croatia as a small, impoverished nation that has "mentally" stagnated since the 1990s.

After the lecture: MS4 discovered that Americans are indeed incredibly proud patriots but that they respect other countries, as well. According to his claims, he was already familiar with the majority of the stereotypes that are associated with Americans; thus, he did not acquire any new stereotypes. He discovered that Americans really know very little about Croatia. In the future, he wishes that Americans would discover more about Croats. He was unaware of the comparisons made between Croats and other Western Europeans in terms of routines, habits, and customs. He finds the lecture given by the American author to be of the utmost value because it improved his perception of Americans: "It gave me a more positive image of Americans definitely."

- Male student 5 (MS5), age 27

Before the lecture: Like most of the other students previously stated, MS5 learned about American culture and people through media like music, movies, television, and the Internet. He only highlighted patriotism as a favorable stereotype about Americans and then went on to mention numerous unfavorable stereotypes, such as the idea that Americans are obsessed with firearms and live in a dangerous country. He thinks that Americans do not travel, are ignorant about the world, and do not know geography. As for the Croatian perspective on how Americans see Croa-

tia and Croats, MS5 thinks that they see Croatia as an undeveloped country.

After the lecture: Male student number five discovered a new perspective on how Americans view themselves. McClain Brown's perspective on typical American life was incredibly enlightening, and he discovered several commonplace facts he had previously been unaware of. He did not pick up any new stereotypes; in fact, certain stereotypes, in his opinion, were even broken. Because of the guest lecturer's cheerful disposition and optimistic outlook, interacting with him has proven the positive assumption that Americans always have a smile on their face. This has allowed MS5 to break whatever misconceptions he may have had about Americans. After speaking with McClain Brown, he now views Americans more favorably.

- Male student 6 (MS6), age 19

Before the lecture: Male student 6 has learned about American culture and people through the aforementioned media, his studies, and conversations with Americans on *Discord*. His favorable perceptions of Americans included the idea that they are extremely diligent workers who are fixated on their work and careers. They love their country. Americans value and emphasize independence and self-reliance, and they like sports. The following are some unfavorable stereotypes cited by MS6: Americans are fiercely competitive and addicted to social media. They eat more takeout and cook less. They incorrectly pronounce foreign words. He believes that Americans stereotype Croats as being alcoholics.

After the lecture: The self-criticism and how casually Americans use other people's homes (such as the open fridge policy) surprised male student number 6. He appreciates the American lecturer for answering his question on the reasons behind Walmart and Best Buy's notoriety. He discovered that Americans enjoy shopping in places where they can get a good deal and save money. Because the American lecturer was essentially what the student believed an American to be—a normal person who is

slightly different in terms of his lifestyle and ideologies—the interaction with the lecturer did not alter any of the student's views. He was not expecting that Americans would not be familiar with the Croatian concept of not sitting in a draft. The time spent conversing with the American guest lecturer only served to further solidify his fascination with Americans, something he has always found intriguing.

3.2.3. Discussion and Findings of the Student Survey and Lecture Interaction

The findings of the student survey as well as the student interaction with the author have shown that Croatian students are interested in learning about the American culture and that they are aware of stereotypes regarding both Americans and Croats, with which they have become familiar mostly through their education and exposure to various forms of mass media.

According to the student survey, it could be concluded that all six of the students' negative stereotypes were replaced with positive ones following their interaction with the American guest lecturer. The students listened to the lecture and had the chance to put questions to the guest speaker, who was positive and optimistic and was extremely glad to answer questions about topics that interested the students. The positive interaction with the lecturer and his portrayal of himself as a typical American caused the students to question some of their previously held negative stereotypes. In addition, during the lecture and the discussion that followed, they also got the chance to learn something new about Americans' perception of Croatia.

Raising student awareness of the generalizations and stereotypes, both positive and negative, was aimed at broadening their knowledge and critical understanding of the self and of the beliefs, worldviews, and practices that may be similar or different to their own. According to the Council of

Europe's *Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture*, published in 2018,

> Engaging and understanding different perspectives requires certain knowledge, skills, attitudes and dispositions, such as respect towards others and interest in who they are, their emotions and their concept of reality. Individuals who are proficient in this dimension are able to express sensitivity towards cultural diversity and towards worldviews and values that are different from their own. (qtd. in OECD 92)

As Croatian students interacted with the American author, it is especially interesting to note that this interaction was a two-way learning experience. Both sides became aware of similarities and differences between the two cultures that they had not been previously aware of. The students strongly agree that America is a dangerous country; Americans are obsessed with guns, glorify war and the army, greatly stress and value independence and self-reliance, are very competitive, obsessed with social media and sports, and cook less and eat more take-out food. Although, for the most part, students agree that Americans are friendly, open-minded, patriotic, optimistic, hardworking, involved in volunteering, that they like to dream big and that America is still a land of opportunity, some expressed opposing views—that Americans are racist, opinionated, materialistic, uneducated, that they like to consume drugs and alcohol, can only speak English, and have no interest in learning other languages. The only stereotype students strongly disagree with is that all Americans are rich.

As can be seen from the stereotypes mentioned above, the students have formed generalizations about Americans. Furthermore, certain aspects of culture are not only different but also incomprehensible. However, when placed in the proper context, some of the stereotypes begin to be understandable and even acceptable or logical. One of the most frequent examples that is mentioned in the paper is the stereotype of Croats as coffee drinkers. Just by juxtaposing a picture of a Croatian coffee shop

and an American one leads to a discussion on cultural differences. The American scene depicts a coffee shop swarming with people of all ages who are busily working on their laptops while consuming their coffee. On the other hand, the Croatian coffee shop scene depicts people of all ages mostly involved in what appear to be lengthy visits consuming the same beverage. Obviously, in Croatia, it is understood that cafés are for relaxing and libraries are for studying. As McClain Brown observes, "coffee in Croatia is a social function. In the US, coffee is less about being social than it is about having a boost to work harder" (*Chasing a Croatian Girl* 33). He explains: "In the hands of a Croatian that little cup of coffee is magic. . . . A Croatian can make a single coffee last for maybe three hours. . . . Lilliputian-sized coffee that I drank in, oh say, 5 minutes" (*Chasing a Croatian Girl* 38). The Covid lockdown proved just how much these extended coffee breaks are part of the Croatian lifestyle, legacy, culture, community, and even possibly a national pastime. As soon as the lockdown was lifted, that tradition was the first to be reinstated in a very noticeable manner. Even before the shops opened, just being able to sit outside, even under the coldest weather conditions, was embraced with a sigh of relief. Although "coffee to go" is becoming a familiar English phrase understood by most Croats, it will never replace one of our nation's most well-known stereotypes that end up being appreciated even by the fiercest American advocates of "coffee to go."

4. Conclusion of the Joint Research

The purpose of this joint research was to emphasize the importance of cross-cultural awareness by exploring Hungarian and Croatian students' perspectives and stereotypes about American culture. The target groups were university students, initially in Pécs and Osijek, aged 19–23, but then Szeged was also involved in the project. The aims of the research were to outline a new methodological framework for a cross-cultural comparative study on cultural stereotypes in contemporary American Studies by map-

ping an uncharted field within the discipline and raise awareness of stereotypical preconceptions and cross-cultural similarities and differences between Americans, Hungarians, and Croats in order to broaden intercultural understanding and help break the stereotypes that may lead to discrimination and bias. By promoting intercultural dialogue and increasing self-awareness as well as other-awareness, this research seeks to show that academic collaboration with people from other countries brings multiple opportunities and mutual benefits as we strive to break, or at least question, stereotypes in order to counter divisiveness and build bridges across cultural divides and embrace the rich diversity of our world's cultures.

As for the expected outcome and pragmatic usage of this study, the analysis of the Croatian and the Hungarian student survey results has shown that both Croatian and Hungarian university students believe that America is still a land of opportunity and freedom and find that Americans are generally open-minded, patriotic, optimistic, hardworking, and very involved in volunteering and humanitarian causes. On the other hand, aspects of American life that students find problematic are the deficiencies in healthcare and education as well as the lack of gun control and the issue of racism. It is also explicit that the students' stereotypical depictions of American people and culture are primarily not from firsthand experience but from their education and various forms of the media, which impact their perception positively or negatively.

This study demonstrates the powerful influence of sociocultural stereotypes and the need to prevent misconceptions that can lead to misunderstandings and create a cultural divide. It is evident that in order to broaden their knowledge and understanding as well as develop an awareness of stereotypes and generalizations, students need the opportunities to engage in constructive conversations with persons from other cultures. In that respect, the interview with Professor Paul Kantor as well as the student interaction with the American author and professor Cody McClain Brown have provided valuable insight into the upsides and

downsides of diverse cultures, the similarities that bring us together, and the differences that set us apart.

Based on the results of our analysis, it can be concluded that education and fostering communication on the topic of cultural diversity can enhance students' intercultural competence and open up new dialogues to break away from the entrenched stereotypes and challenge the traditional cultural representations of America in the contemporary era. On the other hand, the analysis has also shown that stereotypes can be meaningful tools in social interactions that can ease and simplify the beginning of social encounters and foster cultural diversity. We hope that these initial results of our joint research will provide a methodological tool for future research and spur further inquiry into this subject.

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Appendix
Interview with Professor Paul Kantor

- Question: Based on your experience, how was your country stereotyped in Hungary?

Paul Kantor: The faculty members with whom I worked seemed to undertake relatively little stereotyping, perhaps because they all visited or lived in the USA at one time or another as American Studies students, professors, or instructors. *The Hungarian students* were far more likely to rely extensively on cultural stereotyping in and outside of classes I taught. *Their dominant stereotype was perceiving the USA in an excessively positive way.* They were inclined to view the USA as a wealthy country where everyday life was easier than in Hungary, jobs were good and plentiful, and where middle-class prosperity in housing, dining, and travel were the norm. *Students more rarely seemed to know about the racial and class divisions in the USA,* or the struggling conditions often experienced in big cities with large poor populations. *The "suburban dream" was very prominent as a stereotype among students.* I recall in one lecture about describing the long and difficult travel commutes undertaken by many suburban workers due to the sprawling low-density housing and development in most metropolitan areas. *Yet a number of students did not see suburban sprawl as a problem;* in their views, workers were spending time in nice automobiles listening to music on radios, thinking about the lovely homes to which they would return! This response really surprised me. *They believed American suburban sprawl was great compared to travel on public transport in congested cities in Hungary.*

- Question: Did you experience any stereotyping by Hungarians that you had to challenge?

Paul Kantor: Of course, *I did have to try to correct the unbalanced positive views of society and politics in the USA, especially by directing attention to the unequal wealth*

and racial inequalities in the nation. Another stereotype that emerged in the course of teaching were antisemitic views on the part of some students. Some viewed politics in the USA as heavily influenced by Jews in elite positions in government and business. At times, I found these students making antisemitic assumptions with little sense of embarrassment. I also thought that students using these stereotypes would have avoided articulating this in my presence because I thought some of them would think I was a Jew (due to my name). *I hasten to say that antisemitic comments were very uncommon, but more than I ever encountered in teaching in the USA.*

- Question: How did your perception of Hungarians change during your stay in Hungary? Did it change at all?

Paul Kantor: I had very little sense of Hungarians prior to my visit. But I found *Hungarians generally very friendly, warm, and thoughtful people.* From shopkeepers to students, I always felt comfortable with Hungarians in conversations, seeking directions, and in all sorts of social activities. *This contrasted with my stereotypical impressions of other Eastern Europeans. I grew up in a hybrid American family*—part Italian, part Ukrainian, part Russian, and part Slovak in family background (all migrated to the USA 100 years ago). Many of *my family members from the Eastern European side were often rather dark in outlook—that is pessimistic and cautious—compared to Hungarians.* I met Hungarians who always seemed more Western (which they are, of course). Yet, many Hungarians I met felt that *Hungarians too often looked at life darkly.* I did not pick that up during my year as a visitor. The one change I perceived during my visit was a recognition that *many Hungarians are more nationalistic than I ever expected.* The wartime defeats, the dismemberment of the Hungarian empire, etc. seemed too often creep into conversations and become a subject of official holidays. There seemed to be *a sense of nostalgia for the historical Hungary*, a greater power, among people with whom I became friendly. I also discerned *substantial distrust of governmental processes and authority,* especially in respect to trusting the police or

governmental workers. I would say that my observation was that some Hungarian students regarded antisemitism as a normal discourse in expressing their political views – *something that contrasted vividly with the personal warmth I found among so many Hungarians.*

- Question: Do you stereotype people?

Paul Kantor: I do not do so consciously. However, it is inevitable *as a means of simplifying social encounters. But I think it is a tool for starting social encounters,* not for pursuing them in depth.

- Question: Does stereotyping help you in some way?

Paul Kantor: Yes, as mentioned above—it is a useful starting point in dealing with people initially. It *simplifies the initiation of discourse, provides a means of avoiding friction, and is a way of testing assumptions about people one encounters.*

- Question: What is the difference between stereotypes and prejudices?

Paul Kantor: I think *prejudice involves a rigid belief in who or what another person represents—it is conclusive and often negative. In contrast, a stereotype is more a mental tool for testing* or assisting in social encounters.

Contributors

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